

**Who's the Boss?**  
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church  
May 2, 2021-AM Service  
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Ephesians 5:21-6:9

I'm going to go out on a limb and say, that's probably not a text you associate with the installation of elders and deacons. Most of us know this passage. But we don't think of it as a passage about the church, we think of it as a passage about the relationship between wives and husbands. We know it as the place where Paul says that really controversial thing: '*wives submit to your husbands.*' It's so controversial that most ministers avoid this text. We don't want to get emails after the sermon. Despite that risk, I think it's the perfect passage for today and I hope that by the end of the sermon you will agree.

Why do Christians fight about this passage? Because we read it as a 'who's the boss' text. We come to the text with the question, who's the boss in a marriage? Who gets the last word? Who gets the highest place on authority mountain?? I remember in college and seminary getting in vigorous debates about this text that revolved around this question. I had friends and colleagues who said, "Look, in a relationship, in a business, on a sports team, someone has to make the final decisions about how things will go. There's got to be a person who makes the decision and that person is the husband." According to them, Paul is saying that when husbands and wives have a disagreement, they should both state their cases, but ultimately the husband makes the decision and then the wife must accept that decision. That's what Paul means when he says, "wives submit to your husband."

Some people push back on this interpretation. Remember the movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*? Toula is a young Greek girl who's about to get married and, as a way to help her get ready for marriage, Toula's Mom explains how she sees authority in a marriage. 'Toula always remember the husband is the head of the family. But the woman is the neck! And she can turn the head any way she wants!' That line gets a big laugh in the theater. Toula's Mom is wrestling for power in the marriage relationship. Which means that both Toula's Mom and my college friends are treating the text in the same way. They are fighting about who's the boss. She gives a different answer than my college friends, but for her too, this passage is all about, 'Who gets the last word?' You might even say that Toula's Mom and my college friends are fighting a battle about who's the greatest in the kingdom of marriage.

But that's not the debate Paul wants us to have, that's not the question at the heart of this passage. Let me try to explain why. In our passage, Paul addresses three sets of everyday relationships, or what would have been everyday relationships in those days. Husbands and wives, fathers and children. Masters and slaves. Paul wants to speak to the Ephesians about each of these household relationships. But before he does he lays out an opening statement which is like a theme statement for everything that follows. That's verse 21. What's Paul's theme sentence for the section? "*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*" So before we say anything else, let us recognize that whatever Paul means by submission, it's not just something for wives. Submit *to one another* out of reverence for Christ. It's something I'm supposed to do for you, and you're supposed to do for me, and we're supposed to do for each other. That's the heading for the section. The theme statement. Paul then goes on to describe what that would look like in each of these three areas.

In those days, each of these 3 relationship areas would have been characterized by a strong authority structure. In Roman times, in each of these relationship areas, there was one party who was very clearly on top of authority mountain. In his relationship with his wife, the husband was the boss. He was the *pater familias*. He was the lord of the marriage. Here's a little bit of Aristotle giving advice to wives which gives you a sense of paternal authority in a Greco-Roman household. "Let [a wife] refrain from all complaint, nor charge [her husband] with wrong, but rather attribute everything of this kind to sickness or ignorance or accidental errors. Therefore, she will serve him more assiduously than if she had been a slave bought and taken home. For he has indeed bought her with a great price." (from *Oikonomios*) "He has bought her with great price." You even hear a little bit the notion that the wife is the husband's property, to dispose of as he wished. In marriage, the husband was on top of authority mountain.

The father was also the boss of the children. They too were under the control of the *pater familias*. The father had the right to expose newborns. If the child was deformed or if she was the wrong gender, he could leave the child out in the wild until they died. Post-partum abortion. Rodney Stark tells us that exposure was common in ancient Rome and the decision of whether or not to expose "rested entirely with the father." Did you notice that Paul only addresses the father in his parental instructions? When he tells children to obey, he calls them to be nice to both mom and dad. But when he gives instructions to parents he speaks only dad because the father was on top of authority mountain at that time.

As for slaves, the master's rights over the slave were absolute. If you were a slave, your master was literally your lord. The Greek word for master here is *kurios* which is also the word for lord. In his Nicomedian Ethics, Aristotle wrote that it was improper to speak of issues of justice in the relationship between a master and his slaves because slaves were "living tools." You wouldn't demand justice for hammers and saws if a master had mistreated them, so why would you demand justice for slaves? The slave is just a tool, that's all. In the master-slave relationship, the master was the boss, firmly ensconced on the top of authority mountain. This gives you a sense of how the people of Ephesus expected these household relationships to run. This is the household structure they were used to. One partner with oodles of power, the other partner with almost no power at all.

Now watch what Paul does as he speaks to these relationships. For each of the three relationships, Paul begins by talking to the person with lower power in the relationship. So he starts by talking to the wives, the children and the slaves. And for each of these three, he has advice that is fairly conventional. He says stuff that sounds like he fits with the Roman status quo. Wives submit to your husbands. Children obey your parents in the Lord for this is right. Slaves obey your earthly masters with respect and fear. Paul tips his hat to the existing social order. So far he sounds very conventional.

But then he gives a word to the powerful partner in the relationship, and here's where things start to get interesting. Paul pushes against the social order. He gives women, children and slaves more status, more regard, more significance than they would have had in Roman society. *But more than that, he changes the terms of the argument.* Paul does not push for status in the conventional way. He doesn't tell the weaker party to fight for a place on authority mountain. "You wives need to rise up against patriarchy man, and slaves you need to fight against the man, and you kids don't let dad abuse you!" Instead he turns to the partner with power in each relationship and gets them to see their power in a totally new way.

"Husbands, here's how you treat your wives: you love her like Christ loved the church and you give yourself up like Christ gave himself up for the church. Your headship—whatever

that is—doesn't mean you get to have the last word and be the boss, it means that you get to take the lead in sacrifice. You give yourself up! You set yourself aside for the sake of your wife! Like Jesus laid down his life for the church." "And fathers, don't exasperate your children. Bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord. These children belong to me, not you. I want you to train and instruct them so that they will follow me, not so that they will serve you. Use your power to guide them and lift them up." "And masters, you think that on authority mountain that your way is above your slaves? Think again. There is no favoritism with God. From God's perspective, both you masters and you slaves are on the same level. You are all sinners in need of redemption. So not only do I not want you to beat your slaves; I don't even want you to threaten them!" This is not about who's the boss. This is not about climbing to the top of authority mountain. This is about getting under people and lifting them up. This is about submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Verse 21, that theme statement, tells you what's at the heart of Paul's words. Submit to one another. In the Greek, the word submit is *Upotasso*, which literally means put yourself under one another. Upo means below or beneath. Tasso means arrange. Arrange yourself below others. Insofar as you have power, that power is not about staying on top and getting above people, in the kingdom of God your power is about lowering yourself, getting under each other, and lifting others up.

So in marriage, Paul's not particularly interested in who's the boss, Paul envisions a marriage community where a husband and wife are submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. In a Christian marriage, husband and wife aren't really thinking about who's the greatest in the kingdom of marriage, because they are too busy using their power to lift one another up. The husband isn't thinking about being the boss, he's deeply attentive to his wife. Listening to her stories, noticing her needs, recognizing when she's discouraged. Once that need is recognized he takes his power and moves towards that need, he arranges himself under that need, and he lifts her up. He upotassos for her. He gives himself up for her. And wives, same thing! Insofar as you are empowered by your husband, use that power for lifting your husband. Find out where he is needy and upotasso to that. Get under that weak spot, pour out a little sacrificial love, and lift him up. "*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*" A good marriage is meant to be this dance of mutual submission where husband and wife make loving sacrifices for each other every day. Two people who are deeply attentive to each other's needs, two people who listen to each other's stories, two people who take turns lifting each other up with acts of kindness, love and sacrifice. When a marriage catches that rhythm, when it is a dance of mutual submission, it becomes this strong beautiful thing. It becomes something that reminds people of Jesus.

Because this is Jesus' rhythm. This mutual submission isn't a one off command; it's what Jesus taught throughout his life. Paul wants mutual submission because mutual submission flows from the heart of Jesus. When Jesus gave his disciples instructions about which seat to take at a dinner party, which one did he tell them to seek? The lowest one. Upotasso. Arrange yourself under. And when his disciples wanted to be leaders and accomplish great things, what did Jesus tell them to become? A servant. "The leaders of the gentiles lord it over each other, spend time trying to climb authority mountain. Not so with you. Whoever wants to become great must become a servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all." And when Jesus, being in very nature God, carrying the power and privileges of divinity, turned and saw you, saw you struggling with your sin, with your fear and your hurt, saw you crying out for help, what did he do? He emptied himself. He upotassoed. He came down to earth for you, he entered into your

pain, he took the weight of your fear and anger, he got underneath all your stuff, he went all the way down to death so that he could lift you up to the heights of heaven.

*“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”* This is all rooted in him. This dance of mutual submission started with him. It’s the pattern he established on the cross. It’s the pattern the Spirit is pressing into all of our hearts—not just husbands and wives, but also parents and children, friends and colleagues, all of us.

Which brings us back to you elders and deacons. You’ve just been given a kind of authority. You’ve just been installed into the council, the ruling body of this congregation. You know how this power is exercised? Upotasso. This power, this authority is for moving toward your brothers and sister’s need, getting under that need, and lifting them up. Honestly today standing here in front of the congregation is probably the most honor you’re going to get. This is the highest you’re going to get on authority mountain. Most of what’s ahead will be upotasso stuff. Reading meeting minutes. Scheduling visits. Fielding emails from congregation members, not all of which will be emails of encouragement. Listening to stories of hurt and loss from fellow congregation members. Praying for them. Sending lots of cards. Coming to church early to help with communion. Leaving late because you were helping with clean up. Your work on council is made up of hundreds of little submissions. Hundreds of little upotassos, taking your strength, breaking a piece of it off and sharing it with others, lifting them up. Letting the rhythm of Christ’s death and resurrection fill you so that it can fill the church.

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