

Ephesians 5:21-33
Good Relationships

21 Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

22 Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. 25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her 26 to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, 27 and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. 28 In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church – 30 for we are members of his body. 31 ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ 32 This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church. 33 However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

What does God’s family look like? We’ve been asking that question for a few weeks now. It is a family that is united in love, patience and kindness; it is a work-in-progress family, putting off old ways and learning new ways; it is a family-likeness family, learning to be like God. Today it is a good-relationships family. Today is Remembrance Sunday, the day when we remember the events of two world wars and so many other conflicts, remembering the stories of people who went off to war and didn’t come home; it is a day when we pray for a better world, a world without conflict, a world where people learn to live in peace and harmony. The church as a good-relationships family has a lot to offer a world like ours: so often relationships are based on conflict, and are at heart adversarial relationships. How can we be better? How can we show the world a better way?

“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” (verse 21) That is the headline! I nearly made that verse my whole Bible reading this morning, but that is the headline, the big issue. That is how to build good relationships anywhere, certainly in a church, and in the three examples that follow, in marriage, in family life and at work. “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” (verse 21) How different this is! In our world, the question so often is “how can I get one over on someone else? How can I get my own way all of the time? How can I get my own back on the person who has done me wrong? How can I exploit the people around me for my own advantage?” That’s not the way by which we build good relationships! That way lies war! “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” (verse 21)

To submit to one another went against the grain in first century culture. At the time when Paul wrote this, husbands had enormous power over their wives, fathers had the power of life and death over their children, and masters could buy and sell slaves and have them killed. All of the power was vested in the husbands, fathers and masters. Paul challenges that. The

Church family is to turn that upside down; everyone is to submit to one another. “To submit” means thinking about and caring for someone else; it means counting other people’s interests as important as your own; it means thinking “how can I help...?”

“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” (verse 21) Paul gives three examples of how that should work in the church. He writes about the marriage relationship between husband and wife; about the family relationship between parent and child; about the work relationship between master and slave. Jesus is Lord of these relationships; our relationships are to be shaped by Jesus in one way or another; we can’t just do what we like in our relationships, but the church is to be a good-relationships family because Jesus is Lord. In all of these relationships we are to love, to submit our own interests to the interests and needs of others.

The first of these examples, of husbands and wives in marriage, is the trickiest to navigate our way through, partly because of the language that Paul uses. He begins by saying “wives, submit yourselves to your husbands” (verse 22) You can just see smug men smiling at that; “keep the women in their place”; it’s what they’d be used to and what they’d expect. But if you’re thinking that, you’re not reading the Bible properly. “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” (verse 21) This is not an excuse for men to force women in to submission and anyone who has used these verses as justification for forcing something on women against their will should really be ashamed because that is a total misreading and misunderstanding of the Bible. My question for men who think like that is this: how did Jesus love His Church? Wives, care for your husbands.

Husbands are to follow the example of Jesus. “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved His church.” What is the measure of Jesus’ love for the Church? He died for us. Jesus was totally devoted to us and our wellbeing; He was totally given to love us and to save us, so He sacrificed Himself. That is the measure by which husbands are to love their wives, totally devoted to their well-being, totally devoted to care for their wives, just as wives are to be totally devoted to caring for their husbands and give themselves to their well-being. It’s mutual! Husbands and wives given to caring for each other in a spirit of love – that’s the good relationship that marriage is to be. That same sense of mutual care, love and respect is to be seen in the family parent-child relationship and in the work, master-slave relationship.

Today is Remembrance Sunday. War comes about when good relationships break down. Nations go to war to gain power or to resist; that’s far too simplistic, but there is more than a grain of truth in it. War sees the breakdown of relationships. Nations are not very good at submitting to one another: nations and governments tend to look out for their own interests, to the point of going to war. It is the essence of human nature in its sinfulness to look after ourselves, to only care for number 1; pride kicks in and our instinct is to make sure that “my own interests are protected and preserved”. Human instinct wants to get the most for me, the most that I can possibly get and if that means trampling others down to get there, then so be it. The Church has to hold our hands up and say, “we’ve been there too” with greed, gossip and selfishness, and we need to repent of our faults and mistakes!

The Church as the good-relationships family – that’s what we are to be. The Bible challenges us to “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” (verse 21), to be devoted to the care and well-being of others, just as much as we care for ourselves. The Church is God’s family: we are to care for each other with the same measure by which Jesus cared for us; the bar is set high! But, when we do that, we show the world what good relationships look like; we show the world what can be done; we show the world a better way than pride, conflict and war.