

Imitate God to Serve Family

Ephesians 5:21-6:4 (NIV)

²¹ Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. ²² Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do 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 Savior. 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. ¹ Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ² “Honor your father and mother”—which is the first commandment with a promise—³ “so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.” ⁴ Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

Today, all of our Bible readings are about family. Frankly, it’s a little overwhelming how much could be said. We are on the 13th week of our adult Bible study examining the shared and unique callings of men and women and we have more weeks to go. And the conversation won’t end there; we’ll just have a good basis from the Bible to talk about how to apply God’s Word into our modern lives. I could spend all year with different sermons applying God’s Word into our familial relationships. But I can also sum it up with one sentence like Paul did in the letter to the Ephesian Christians: Be imitators of God. (Ephesians 5:1 NIV84)

In natural progression, Paul teaches how we are to be imitators of God in our family. He wrote, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” (verse 21) What does it mean to submit? It does not mean that you are a slave or that you aren’t as valuable or honored, but that you will not insist on your own way; you will follow someone else’s lead, bend your will to theirs. We do this in service to Christ, just as he bent his will to serve us.

Paul goes first to wives to apply this bending of our wills into all our family relationships. “Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior.” (verses 22-23)

Does that sound antiquated to you, that God really needs to catch up to the 21st century and be more progressive? We live in a culture that prizes freedom and individuality, breaking away from the established order, to not bend our will to those in authority over us. God gives us a counter-cultural mindset. We, as Christians, have to fight harder to be imitators of God when it comes to submitting to others out of our faith in Christ.

Christ lived this for us. In his humility, while being God, Christ did not consider himself better than us, but instead took on human flesh to be one of us. He did this not for himself, as if to purely to gain a different perspective, to know what it was like to live in our skin, but to serve us. As God, he did not defiantly exercise his own will over God the Father’s; he humbly submitted in order to bear the sins of the world, that the Lord would crush him and cause him to suffer, especially on the cross, to serve all of us with the forgiveness of sins. Jesus prayed that this cup of suffering would be taken away from him, but he also submitted and bent his will to the Father’s when he said, “Not my will, but yours be done.”

Wives, seeing that Christ lived submission for you, that he already did this, be an imitator of Christ in living your calling to your family, bending your will to God’s as you follow the lead of your husband. “But what if my husband isn’t a believer?” God still calls you to this so that you can show your unbelieving husband Christ in the way that you live and love. “What if he doesn’t have my best interests in mind?” Certainly, living in a sinful world, this’ll happen, and it’s never okay for your husband to sin against you. But if we are being imitators of God in our families, we remember that Jesus still submitted to the will of the Father and served us knowing that many would reject him and not accept his sacrifice for us. “What if my husband leads me to something sinful?” Be imitators of God and bend your will to God’s, which will never lead you to sin, to act contrary to God’s will.

This submission, this bending of the will by wives, will go well and be a blessing and be a beautiful relationship when husbands are fulfilling their calling from God. Paul continues, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” (verse 25)

God has called husbands to be the head of the family and love their wives. What does that mean? It means God directs husbands to lead, guide, and direct his family to the Lord for the Lord and for the benefit of his family. He does this first and foremost by loving his wife just like Christ loved the church.

We hear the word love, and again our culture would often tell us that this is a feeling of attraction or of appreciation. But love as God defines it is not really what you feel for the person but what you do for the person. What did God do for us that was love? “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.” (verses 25b-27) Christ’s love for the Church was to give himself up for all people in order to purify and cleanse us, to make us right with God, to present us as we are now holy and blameless, perfect. His love was serving us by living his life for us, not for himself.

Husbands, be imitators of God. Serve your wives as Christ served us. This is also done while submitting, yielding and bending it to God’s will. Voluntarily yield your life to your wife. Consider her interests and not only your own. Value her opinions and recognize them as sometimes being better and wiser than yours. A husband loves his wife as Christ loved the church when he honors and values and treats his wife as being equal in status and worth in God’s eyes as well as being a coheir with him of eternal life. The husband will put the needs of his family ahead of his own since that is what God did for us.

“I do put my wife first, but she doesn’t put me first.” Again, imitate God. When his people had been sinful and faithless in their relationship with him, God remained faithful. He still cared for his people, provided for them, made them members of his body as their Savior. “I try to lead, but she won’t follow.” You can’t change your wife’s behavior, but you can continue to imitate and show her God and his love in how you treat her, how you listen and respond to her, by humbly serving her to elevate her as the holy and blameless person God has made her. “But she’s better at leading.” That may be, but that doesn’t mean you should give up your calling from God. Instead, value the gifts God has given your wife and utilize them as a blessing for the whole family. Continue to put her first, get her thoughts and opinions. Continue to lead and guide as God has called you to while also appreciating and utilizing the gifts God has given your wife.

There are more members of the family. Paul moves the conversation on for children to imitate God. “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.” (verse 1) It’s part of the Ten Commandments: “Honor your father and mother”—which is the first commandment with a promise—“so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.” (verses 2-3) Yes, children, bend your will to God’s and obey your parents when they tell you to do something. Obeying your parents are opportunities for you to serve your family while imitating God.

“But what if my parents are being unfair?” The last verse will address this a bit more to parents, but, children, you are called as a child of your parents. Remember who you are really serving when you obey them; it’s God. I know it can be hard, but your parents might see or know something you don’t. Trust that they are bending their will to God’s while trying to do what’s best for you. They parent you to serve you, not to serve themselves. “What if they don’t deserve honor?” You don’t control them, but God has clearly told you what to do. You are to imitate God. Jesus honored and obeyed Mary and Joseph, his earthly parents, and you know that Jesus is perfect and his parents weren’t. Yet he served them as their child. As children, we are called to the same obedience and honor and respect for the parents God has given us.

Parents, Paul doesn’t leave you out, especially fathers. “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.” (verse 4) Your parenting will go better if you are doing it with the mindset that you are parenting in service to God and your children, instead of serving yourself. This again is imitating God. Now, this doesn’t mean that you let your kids do whatever they want and just always give in to them. Instead, you will lead and guide them according to God’s will and for their benefit. This might stop you from yelling, from discipline that is too harsh, and thus also stop the accusations from your kids of being unfair. Instead, you will lead and guide your children to the Lord, serving them with the same forgiveness of sins and purification that you have received from him.

Everything we do within our families flows from what God has done for us and isn’t contingent on whether or not the other family members fulfill their callings. It works best that way, but, nevertheless, we always imitate God in our family callings. He submitted and bent his will to serve us. He put us first, above himself, so that we would be saved. He lived in obedience as a child for us, substituting his life for us. He washed us clean and presents us now before God as holy, blameless, and without sin. He has made us a member of his body, the Church, because we were baptized. Since Christ has served us in these ways, we imitate him and serve our family in our specific callings – whether husband, wife, parent, or child. We serve our family because Christ first served us and made us holy. Amen.