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Script of Season 2. Episode 6. Ephesians 5:32-6:9, Mutual Submission in the Family, by Bruce C. E. Fleming

Intro:

Welcome to **The Eden Podcast** where we think again about the Bible on women and men and we start with a correct understanding of what happened in the Garden of Eden back in the beginning.

I'm Bruce C. E. Fleming, founder of the Tru316 Project and a former Academic Dean and Professor of Practical Theology.

The focus of this episode is:

Ephesians 5:32-6:9. Family members submitting one to another

Have you ever been in a conversation like this? Maybe you're talking with a lovable old uncle, or you're in conversation with a friendly neighbor. You've been talking about one thing and then you get off the track and start talking about something else. Finally, comes a moment when one of you says, "Let's get back to what we were talking about." And you pick up with that earlier train of thought right where you left off.

That's something like what we find at the start of Ephesians 5:33. Paul uses a Greek word that is usually translated into English as "nevertheless" or "however." This Greek word, "nevertheless" refers to something said earlier and picks up the train of thought that was left off for a moment.

In this case, with "nevertheless" Paul is referring back to verse 21 where he redefined the vertical act of submitting and turned it into the horizontal relationship of reciprocally submitting. This was the new way Christian believers were to be getting along in the Spirit.

Even though "nevertheless" is Paul's first word in the Greek sentence of verse 5:33, some English translations omit the word all together. I think it is important to include it, because it alerts us that Paul is linking back to the subject of verse 21.

Paul not only redefined the verb "to submit," he also used the word "fear" at the end of the verse 21. Paul said we mutually submit one to another in the fear of Christ, or in respect of Christ.

By using the word "fear" Paul signals a second time in verse 33 that he is linking back to verse 21. In verse 33, after he says a Christian husband should demonstrate agape love toward his wife, Paul says a Christian wife "fears" her Christian husband.

How does she do that? Not in the way of a frightening fear. Not that kind of fear. But of a fear in the way of a serious and profound respect because of the ties that bind us to Christ.

Because we are united in Christ how do we then live as a married couple? Paul says (1) we love our spouse – that’s an idea from verse 25 and (2) we respect our spouse – that’s an idea from verse 21.

If a man is to love his own wife the same as himself, does a wife also love her spouse? Of course! If a wife is to respect her husband, does a husband also respect his spouse? Of course!

Our underlying status as members of the body of Christ enriches our relationship with one another as husband and wife. As Christian spouses, each being filled with the Spirit, we reciprocally love and respect one another.

Taken out of context, people misuse the words in this verse. They think wives aren’t supposed to love their husbands. That husbands don’t need to respect their wives. They even claim that wives are to fear their husbands in what is basically a wrong way. These ideas misuse the words in this verse.

Recognizing that verse 5:33 has hooks and references back to the previous verses of 32, and 25, and 21, helps us to clear away these misconceptions. And we see again the idea Paul introduced in verses 22-24. We see that the Christian couple is a wonderful example of Christians in a reciprocal relationship.

Ephesians 5:32 is the middle point of a pattern that Kenneth E. Bailey called elsewhere a “prophetic rhetorical template.” This modified seven-point prophetic rhetorical pattern runs from Ephesians 5:22 to 6:9. All of it illustrates how believers submit reciprocally one to another. Recognizing this pattern is being used here is a big help to us in understanding what is going on in verses 5:33 and following. [Study Guide note will talk about “the high jump,” as labeled by Bailey, used elsewhere in biblical literature - several smaller sections that give a running start before the major arcing template is presented. This running start begins in verses 15-18. A second step is taken in verses 19-21. And the 7-point chiasm begins in verse 22 and runs through 6:9.]

The first three segments of the rhetorical template begin at verses 22, 25 and 28. The middle part is in verse 32. The last three segments of the rhetorical template begin at 5:33, 6:1 and 6:5.

As Paul’s readers digested what he had just written in verses 22-31, they were coming to understand that Christians should be submitting one to another in church. But was it possible to practice this behavior in the home?

That’s what Paul addresses in 5:33-6:9. He takes up, one by one, the three basic relationships that could occur in the household of believers in his day. He discusses each category in turn:

1. Husbands and wives (5:33)
2. children and parents (6:1-4)

3. servants and masters (6:5-9)

Try not to pay attention to the chapter break that occurs here. It is important to remember that Paul wrote this section on “walking” in the Spirit hundreds of years before chapter breaks and verse numbers were added by other people to his writings. There were no chapter and verse breaks when Paul wrote Ephesians.

The big fat number 6 we see in our Bibles standing as the start of chapter 6 should not have been inserted where it now is. It would better have been inserted after the end of verse 9, at the end of this fifth “walking” section of the second half of the Book of Ephesians.

Paul uses the word “fear” in 5:33 to link back to verse 21. Paul also uses the word “fear” to tie together all three pairs of relationships that he gives us in 5:33-6:9.

Here’s how he uses “fear” in each set of relationships.

1. In verse 33, Paul uses “fear” when he talks about wives and their husbands.
2. In 6:1-4, the word “fear” is implied in the verses that are addressed to children and parents.
3. In 6:5-9, “fear” is part of servant-master relationship.

Verse 33 deals with married adults in the household. Theirs is a horizontal and reciprocal relationship. In 6:1-4 and 5-9, Paul focuses on two other pairs of relationships in the household. These are relationships in which the individuals are in a position of inequality – as child and parent, and as servant and master.

Family Circus! In these 10 verses Paul provides us with a rhetorical three-ring circus. In each ring, Christian family members defy normal expectations and live in Spirit-filled relationships that portray living scenes demonstrating life together in the body of Christ.



As a child, I was taken to the final outdoor three-ring performance of the Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey Circus. It was the last one ever held under their enormous tent, called the Big Top. And it was tremendous! Plenty was going on in the center ring! There were trapeze artists flying high overhead while clowns and animal acts performed underneath. To one side in another ring there was an animal act with a lion tamer and plenty of threatening beasts. But wait. There was more! In a third ring there was the noise of a wild west scene with horse riding tricks and cracking pistol displays of incredible marksmanship. Could I follow all that at one time? I sure tried!

In these verses there are three rings of activity too. Can we follow all that is going on in them? We can sure try!

Readers of ancient literature were used to asking, “How does this apply to life in the household?” These verses sound and feel something like other household lists that were in

circulation in Paul's day. Those other lists on "how to" organize a household reflected the value systems of the pagan religions of the day, and of Judaism. These are called "domestic codes."

Paul provides something like a domestic code of his own, except that he modifies the typical literary forms and their content. This has frustrated a number of scholars who have tried to squeeze this section of Ephesians into an outline typical of other ancient domestic codes.

Surprisingly, many claim to see a household code in Ephesians starting back in verses 22-31 of chapter 5. But as we have demonstrated those verses are about a household only tangentially. The focus there is on Christ's sacrificial love for the church.

When Paul takes up the subject of the Christian household from 5:33 on, he breaks almost every rule in those other domestic codes. He reverses the usual order they use in the way he names the members of the family and he advises family members to relate to one another in ways that are quite revolutionary when compared to the established patterns of his day.

Ephesians 6:1-9. Let's look at the Christians who are in unequal positions in the household. Starting with Ephesians 6:1, "obedience" enters the picture. For Paul, there are relationships within a Christian household where obedience is appropriate: between children and parents, and between slaves and masters.

These unequal relationships can be limited in duration. They exist only as long as the child is obligated to obey, and only as long as the slave is obligated to serve.

By the way, the word "obedience" is never used in Ephesians 5:22-31 for how Christians interact with one another. And "obedience" is not required of either Christian spouse to the other in 5:33. Some people hold up verse 33 as a proof text that wives are required to obey their husbands. But verse 33 does not say this. The word "fear" is used in verse 33 but it is not used as a synonym for "obedience."

Children and parents. In Ephesians 6:1-3, Paul exhorts children to obey their parents. In verse 4, he addresses their parents. His comments apply to individuals living in a Christian household. Paul specifies this in verses 1 and 4 by adding the words, "in the Lord" and "of the Lord."

In verses 1-3, four reasons are given for children to be obedient. Paul makes his appeal in terms that are appropriate to children who already old enough and know the Lord. The four reasons are instructive and encouraging. Children are to obey because:

1. They are "in the Lord"
2. They are expected to do what is "right"
3. They have a "commandment" of God
4. They are given a "promise"

In verses 2-3, Paul quotes the Fifth of the Ten Commandments. It is in Deuteronomy 5:16 and reads as follows: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right." To this familiar commandment, the Jewish mind was trained to associate the parallel statement in Leviticus 19:3, "Each of you shall fear his mother and his father"

The phrase "in the Lord" is reminiscent of Ephesians 5:21. And the idea of "fearing" also refers back to 5:21. Thus, believing children actively and fully enjoy all the rights and privileges of reciprocally submitting members of the body of Christ.

Christian children are, nevertheless, called on to obey. Disobedience to parents is not something taken lightly by Paul (see Romans 1:30, 2 Timothy 3:2).

In verse 4, Paul turns from Christian children to their Christian parents. The Greek word he uses to refer to them is *pateres*, a word frequently translated as "fathers" in English Bibles. However, *pateres* should be translated "parents."

In Ephesians 6:1-2, both parents are specifically named. In the reference to Leviticus 19:3, mothers and fathers are both mentioned. Mothers are mentioned first. There is no preferential treatment given to fathers by Paul in Ephesians 6:4, as if in some special way he is writing to them to the exclusion of mothers.

The Greek word for "parents" used in Ephesians 6:4 is the same Greek word used in Hebrews 11:23. There, it designates the "parents" of Moses who hid him for three months.

In his commentary on Ephesians, F. F. Bruce explained that Ephesians 6:4 denoted not just fathers, but both parents. He pointed out how this fit with the parallel passage correctly translated in Colossians 3:20-21.

Hand washing. One day, many years ago, after Sunday morning church we greeted everyone as we left in the usual way by shaking hands all around. This day we had been invited for dinner at the home of an older member in that church. It was our first time in his home. As soon as we were in the door of his house he pointed us to where we could go wash our hands. With a playful smile and a comment about germs he encouraged us to "go wash off the brethren." By brethren he meant both the brothers and sisters we had just greeted.

In a similar way, in his letters, Paul often referred to all believers, both male and female, as "brothers." Galatians 1:2, is an example of this.

Thus, in verse 4, Paul forbids both Christian parents from "embittering" or "provoking to wrath" their children. Both parents are to be respectful in their dealings with their children. In Christ, their children are members together with them in one shared spiritual joint-body.

Similarly, according to the Greek of verse 4, both parents are responsible for their children, to "nurture them in the discipline and admonition of the Lord." Paul teaches that nurturing children includes both "discipline" and "admonition." The word "discipline" Paul uses here

is a general term. It means “discipline in general” (as used in 2 Timothy 3:16, and Hebrews 12:5). “Admonition” means “special admonition” as in Titus 3:10. Some Bible versions translate this into English as “the training and instruction of the Lord.”

Thus, honorable parents, worthy of obedience, are to model righteous and measured living. Both the mother and the father are to instruct their children in biblical doctrines, clarifying for their children the motivation behind their acts as parents. In this way their children will come to know that the loving care and discipline they receive from their parents is the outflow of the will of their loving God, who inspired the commandments they and their parents are putting into practice.

Servants and masters. In Roman households in and around Ephesus in Paul’s day, often there were many servants. It has been estimated that in some of the cities and towns where Paul preached a large percentage of the population was either enslaved or worked as servants. What word does Paul have for these Christian members of the household? What equivalent truth does he have for today’s members of the household?

In verses 5-9, Paul illustrates how, even in the context of the obedience required in the servant-master relationship, submitting reciprocally can still be practiced in everyday life in the context of Christian households.

In verse 5, Paul again uses the words “fear” and “as Christ,” reminding readers of the connection with 5:21 and verses 22 to 31. In life, the distinction made between servants and masters is not a spiritual distinction. It is only a social and a temporary one. Paul exhorts servants to be thoroughly Christian in all they do (verse 5). They are to work “as servants of Christ” (verse 6) and serve “as to the Lord” (verse 7) because their ultimate master is the Lord (verse 8).

It is from the Lord that payment would come. In this way, vertical relationships of servants with their earthly masters are overlaid with the priority of spiritual relationships. This being the case, Paul makes a bold application to Christian masters in verse 9. He tells them to act as do their Christian servants!

In addition, masters are to hold themselves back from threatening, remembering that they too share a master in heaven. Their heavenly master is no respecter of person or rank, whether male or female, young or old, slave or free.

Completing the “walk.” In sum, according to the two three-part strings of illustrations that Paul uses to explain the meaning of Christian submission in Ephesians 5:21, “walking carefully in the Spirit” means every believer is to be submitting reciprocally to every other member in the body of Christ. Above all, Christ sets the example for us to follow.

This kind of behavior is possible in the church and at home. Each one is to practice this reciprocal submitting with other believers at church. And where the case applies, each Christian is to practice this reciprocal submitting to others in the household, whether as spouses, as children and parents, and even as servants and masters.

What this passage does and does not say

In Ephesians 5:15-6:9, Paul explains how to walk carefully and successfully in the Spirit. In verses 15 through 21 he introduces in broad strokes how to do this. The culmination of these verses presents the dramatically transformed behavior of Spirit-filled believers reciprocally submitting one-to-another in Christ.

Then, in verses 22 through 6:9 Paul presents a modified seven-part prophetic rhetorical chiasm that illustrates in detail “how to” practice this kind of mutual submission.

- In parts one through three in verses 22-31, he gives three “as Christ” examples.
- The middle of the chiasm is the high truth that believers united are one in a joint-body with Christ himself.
- In Ephesians 5:33-6:9, he gives three “in the household” examples.

In this passage, from Ephesians 5:15-6:9, Paul does *not* teach that man is ‘head’ of the woman. He does *not* teach that a man is ‘head’ of the house. He does *not* teach that a husband is responsible for the spiritual health of a wife. He does *not* teach that a father is more responsible than a mother for the upbringing of their children.

Such ideas are “leadership” heresies based on misunderstandings of the passage. I wrote an entire book discussing how these “leadership” heresies are not part of seven major passages in the Bible. They are not biblical. In fact they are counter-biblical. Trying to practice these non-biblical teachings has damaged the Christian experience, poisoned home life and weakened the church.

This passage *is* about walking carefully as Christians filled with the Spirit. From verse 21 on this passage is not primarily about marriage. An individual may know Christ yet never marry. Or, an individual might know Christ as a single before marrying, as a spouse during marriage, and as a single again after the death of a spouse.

According to Ephesians 5:15-6:9, the great mystery now revealed is that believers enjoy a relationship with Christ that goes beyond even that enjoyed by the first humans with God in the Garden of Eden. **Walking together, filled with the Spirit, our relationship with Christ, goes even beyond Eden.**

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