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Season 2 Episode 3. Ephesians 5:19-21 – Teaching & Submitting to One another, 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 5:19-21. The First 4 Steps in Spirit-filled Walking!

Let's get started.



On a major 8-lane highway near our home there are four lanes going each way. Two of these lanes are “through lanes.” Two are “local lanes.” If you plan to exit the highway you need to take the local lanes that are connected to every exit and entry ramp. The traffic runs slower than on the through lanes because people have to adjust for vehicles that are slowing down to exit or gaining speed as they enter. Forget to get into these local lanes and you might miss a neighborhood exit coming up. Train and bus routes are laid out in much the same way. You have to understand how traffic is routed and navigate accordingly.

Sadly, the chapter numbers and verse numbers that were added to help readers navigate their way through Bible translations hundreds of years after it was inspired by God have misled many of us. The Apostle Paul laid out clear lanes for the flow of our understanding in the complex highway system of his passage in Ephesians 5:15-6:9. But the numbering systems of chapter breaks and verses have led us to impose a linear interpretation on ideas even though Paul did not write in a linear 1-2-3 way!

In his book, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, Kenneth E. Bailey looks at word patterns in the Bible using the tools of rhetorical analysis. Let me quote Bailey,

“Rhetorical analysis delivers the reader and listener from the tyranny of the number system. The text is permitted its own ordering of ideas. The numbers however useful they are for finding one’s place, subtly dictate to the reader or listener “you will see these ideas as a straight line sequence which follows the numbers.” Rhetorical analysis frees us from 1,650 years of dominance by chapter headings and 450 years of subtle control by verse numbers.”

Bailey also says, “Rhetorical analysis exposes the *smaller sections* which allows them to maintain their integrity rather than to be neglected or broken up into separate verses.”

This applies to what has been numbered as only three verses in Ephesians 5:19-21. There are actually four ideas in this part of the passage but they are crammed into just three verse breaks.

Is this important to recognize? Yes! But it is disappointing to see how many people simply look at these three verses and treat them as if each verse presents just one more idea from Paul. They see only three ideas coming from these verses. This is incorrect.

I was looking for four ideas in these verses when I came to them because I started analyzing the passage from its beginning point in verse 15. A “pattern of fours” used by Paul, emerges clearly when one starts with verse 15 instead of using some random later starting point. In verses 19-21 we see the “pattern of fours” is continued and this helps us escape what Kenneth Bailey refers to as “the tyranny of the number system.”

The Layout. So let’s look with fresh eyes at the layout of verses 19-21. There are four parts to this section. And they are laid out using a non-linear design which is called a chiasm. A chiasm is a mirror pattern that is much like a rainbow. If you note the pattern on one side going up you can anticipate the pattern you will find on the other side coming down.

These verses are written out as a simple four-part chiasm. Its parts are A and B going up with B prime and A prime coming down afterwards. A and B are both found in verse 19. B prime is in verse 20. A prime is found in verse 21.

Another part of the traffic pattern of a chiasm to remember is that the parts that mirror one another comment on the same subject. Usually the prime portion gives a bit more information on what was introduced in the first paired portion, and so on. So A is mirrored in A prime. B is mirrored in B prime.

What we learn in the A portion of this simple four-part chiasm in the first part of verse 19, or 19a, is mirrored in the A prime portion that is found in verse 21. It is really helpful to our understanding to recognize this traffic pattern of Paul’s thought in these verses.

We should be expecting four parts to be found in Paul’s thoughts at this point in Ephesians 5:15-6:9. Remember the illustration I used last time of a tall building laid out in sections of four? There are four points to Paul’s teaching as he tells us how to walk and apply the fourth and major point of the verses in the 15-18 section. This point that he now gives us details for is “How to be walking filled with the Spirit.”

Here are the four points for Spirit-filled walking in Ephesians 5:19-21. Each point in Greek starts with an -ing verb.

- The first one, or part A, is “speaking.” In verse 19a we read, “speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.”
- The second one, or part B, is “singing.” In verse 19b we read, “singing and making melody with your hearts to the Lord.”
- The third one, or part B prime, is “giving thanks.” In verse 20 we read, “giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to our God and Father.”
- And the fourth one, or A prime, is “submitting.” In verse 21 we read, “submitting yourselves to one another in the fear of Christ.”

The first and last of these four points, A and A prime, go together. These are “one another” activities. And the middle two, B and B prime go together. These two are directed “toward God.”

Notice that two of these activities *must* be done in the Body of Christ? A person can’t do the A and A prime “one-another” activities all alone! This is one reason to make sure you’re involved in a local group of believers, a local church. How can you do “one another” activities alone? How else can you do “one other” activities?

As part of a local church body of believers you know the names of who Paul has in mind in these verses for you. These would be the names of all the other believers with you in your local church. Treating “one-another” in these mirrored ways leads to good health in the body of Christ.



A Visit to Monkey Mountain. One day our friends in Strasbourg, France, heard that my sister Debby had come to visit us for a few days while we were doing our doctoral studies. We were planning to take her for a drive to visit the sites just to the south of us in France. They directed us to make a stop we hadn’t planned to take. Make sure to go to Monkey Mountain, they said. Monkeys in France? Yes! So we did. We would see that we weren’t the only ones monkeying around that day.

What did we see? The most striking thing I noticed the monkeys doing on the mountain hillside was grooming one another. They all found time to do it. One would patiently sit with its back to another. And the other one would run its “fingers” down its back. Whenever it found a stick or a thistle in the other one’s fur, it would comb it out. Whenever it found a bug or a critter of some kind, it would comb that out too, and then it would put it to its mouth and gobble it down!

The way the monkeys cared for each other is not the way believers are to care for one another. It’s just a story I wanted to tell.

But the idea is there. It takes two to care for one another. Picture pairs of monkeys perched on benches, sitting on the hillsides, carefully grooming one another’s fur especially where the other one couldn’t see or couldn’t reach for itself.

So, how are we to care for one another? According to verse 19 we are to be “speaking to one another.” This kind of “speaking” has two dimensions.

First, this “speaking” involves *teaching*. Second, this “speaking” involves *correcting*. We get these details from the parallel passage over in Colossians 3:16 in which Paul writes about “speaking” in greater detail, “... teaching and admonishing one another....”

Teaching. This teaching involves giving those who didn’t know before new information that is important for them to know. Teaching also involves reminding those who heard before but need to be reminded of what they heard before. Teaching allows new and positive change to be implemented in one’s life and behavior. Teaching gives new tools to the individual.

Have you been doing things the old way up to now? Here’s the new way to live life and here’s how to love it.

Paul was that kind of teacher. He was paving a new road for others to travel with his teaching. Others had been plowing through the rubble of ritual and works trying to earn their way to heaven. No! No! Paul taught them. Not that way! Here’s the new way in Christ Jesus! Be being filled with his Spirit. Teach one another what Jesus taught here on earth. Learn and practice what Jesus correctly pointed us to that was taught all through the Old Testament. We all, everyone of us, young and old, can teach one another the new things Paul taught and reminded us of.

Correcting. The flip side to teaching and reminding is *correcting*. Colossians 3:16 says, teaching and admonishing, or correcting. If people don’t put into practice the new things they are learning, or the old things they are being reminded of, they obviously are involved in doing wrong things in one way or another. They need to be corrected. Who is to correct wayward believers. We are! Every other believer is to correct one another.

Have we been waiting to be corrected only by some super saintly spiritual spy somewhere who figures out when we are doing something wrong? Who would that person be? A sharp-eyed church staff member of some kind? Only a paid person working for the church?

Far too many of us need correcting for just a staff person somewhere to get around to us! But, if every other believer in our lives lovingly and humbly was ready to nudge us back into the right way, then we’d get the care and attention we need. And that’s the first part of Paul’s message found in Ephesians 5:19a.

The second part to this Spirit-filled speaking to one another is mirrored in verse 21. That’s the part that is paired up with verse 19a in the chiasmic rainbow-type pattern of this section in Ephesians 5. This second part **MUST BE READ** as part two of the two-part pattern that is made up of verse 19a and all of verse 21.

This insight, based on the structure of this passage, has a huge impact on our understanding. The whole passage that runs from verse 15 all the way down to 6:9 focuses

in on verse 21. So if we take verse 21 out of context, if we unlock verse 21 from its pairing with verse 19a, we will miss the meaning of this huge and vitally important passage!

Here are the two parts of the passage read together, verse 19a and verse 21. See how they go together and complete the idea of each part.

verse 19a. Teaching and correcting one another
verse 21. Submitting to one another

That's it. Let me read it again. Pay attention to what we are to be submitting to.

19a. Teaching and correcting one another
21. Submitting to one another

We are to be submitting to the teaching and correction we are getting from one another. When we pay attention to the pattern in the passage this becomes clear, is relatively simple, is doctrinally sound, is not radical and is practical.

We are to be submitting ourselves to the teaching and correction we are receiving from one another, correction and teaching that is based on the psalms and hymns and spiritual songs most or all of which we get from the Bible.

I recently went to the 400-page commentary of a scholar I respect and have read with benefit over the years. When I looked for his comments on this chiastic pattern in 19a to 21 he had completely missed it. He had even jammed the content of these verses together and had come up with creative but irrelevant comments about how to put them into practice. Have you been disappointed like this like I was?

In verses 19b and 20 we find the second mirrored pair of the passage. Here he points all of us to God. He says,

19b. **singing** and making melody with your hearts *to the Lord*;
20. always **giving thanks** for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ
to our God and Father;

Most of us have an understanding of parts B and B prime of the chiasm. We are called to worship the Lord in our hearts. And we are to be thankful for all things to God, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul considers Jesus and the Father to be one unity whom we are to worship.

But what of the incorrect meaning people tell us is the meaning of verse 21? And are they in error because they fail to connect verse 19a with 21?

Submission redefined. People reading their translation of the Bible into English miss the fact that in the Greek words in which he wrote Ephesians Paul is giving a **completely different meaning to the practice of submission for believers** in verse 21. Not only are

believers to submit to the verse 19a teaching and correction received from fellow believers as they speak to one another with Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. But believers are to submit in a whole new Christian way that is nothing like the world's way of demanding submission from someone who is under and submits to a superior who is over them.

The old way of submission always involved hierarchy in some way. But it didn't for one-another believers in Christ!

Telling a new truth in verse 21

In Ephesians 5:21, when Paul wants to complete his description of how Spirit-filled Christians should act toward all the other believers who are teaching and gently correcting them. Since no available Greek word fits the behavior he wants to describe he takes a common Greek verb, which everyone knows means one thing, and he modifies it so that it means a *new* thing – a Christian way of acting. Here are the ways Paul accomplishes this.

Paul takes the verb “to submit” (a “vertical” verb) and turns it into “mutually submitting” (a “horizontal” verb). Grammatically speaking, he makes the verb “to submit” into a participial, or “-ing”, verb, and then he makes the verb reflexive. This kind of submission is something one does of his, or her, own accord – “submitting oneself.” Then, Paul adds to this modified *verb* the reciprocal *pronoun* “to-one-another.” Each one must intentionally behave this way toward others.

In this way Paul takes a familiar Greek action word and fills it with new meaning. Let's look again at the steps Paul took in making this new verb: “*Submitting yourselves to-one-another*”

- First, he makes the verb an “-ing” verb. This is a lifestyle verb – something that Christians are doing continuously, *being* filled with the Spirit.
- Second, he makes the verb *reflexive*. This means that it is an action taken because one chooses to do it, as in “I am submitting myself.”
- Third, the verb is a *plural* reflexive participle, meaning “*we* are submitting *ourselves*.” Thus each Christian is choosing to submit to every other Christian. Making this a plural verb means this behavior is a reciprocal one. As Foulkes describes it (*Ephesians*, Eerdmans, 154), “There must be a willingness in the Christian fellowship to serve any, to learn from any, to be corrected by any, regardless of age, sex, class or any other division.”
- Fourth, Paul modifies this verb with a *reciprocal pronoun*. The one another meaning is already included in his redefined action word, but Paul makes his meaning unavoidably clear by adding to-one-another. This pronoun is one word in Greek but is usually translated into English using the three words, “to-one-another.”

In this way Paul creates a new verb with a uniquely Christian meaning to describe the reality of the Christian life. He breathtakingly gives believers in Christ a whole new way to

get along with one another. And this new behavior in the Spirit spills over from church into home life as well.

Did the people of Paul's day grasp right away this new idea? I don't think so. He needed to spell it out for them and give examples of this way of behaving over and over. Otherwise they weren't getting his meaning and they weren't doing what they were supposed to.

That's why Paul lays out for them and for us verses 5:22 through 6:9. Here he focuses on the heart of the matter – the great revelation that *all that* believers attempt to do can fully be done because they are joined with Christ in one spiritual joint-body. And Paul lays out Christ's own example in the next verses saying over and over again in verse 23 "as Christ," in verse 25 "just as Christ" and in verse 29 "as Christ." Christ showed us how to live this new way by his example. And Christ empowers us to live this same way today by his Spirit.

This is the message of Ephesians 5:21 and following! It is a wonderful message! But this is not what most people are teaching about this verse! Because they don't start reading this passage from its start in verse 15, because they fail to see the connection between verse 19a and verse 21, and because they miss the rest of the passage is about Christ and the church as spelled out in verse 31 and instead claim that this passage is about hierarchical marriage practices (!) they pollute the true meaning of Ephesians 5:21 and following. This has caused great harm in the church and in Christian homes. This pollution must be cleaned up and the fresh water of the true meaning of God's word in these verses must be released to flush out the pollution and refresh our souls!

With the clear meaning of Paul's new action word for believers firmly in mind, namely, "submitting ourselves one to another," we can go on to study the rest of this great passage in Ephesians 5 that spills over into Ephesians 6. We can come to understand and fully experience *life* with Christ *continually* filled with his Spirit.

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