



SEEING
WITH
NEW EYES

COUNSELING AND THE HUMAN CONDITION
THROUGH THE LENS OF SCRIPTURE

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3 **GODLY ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS: EPHESIANS 5:21-6:9**

How should we understand and structure the primary human relationships? Marriage, family, and workplace—the “domestic” issues that Ephesians 5:21-6:9 addresses—are hot topics. Should a wife submit to her husband, or is that a throwback to primitive patriarchy? Is a husband “the boss,” whose home is the castle where he calls the shots? Must a teenager get parental permission regarding birth control or abortion? What does “family” mean in a society of divorce, remarriage, cohabitation, homosexuality, prolonged singleness, and out-of-wedlock births, where the “nuclear family” is no longer typical? Can a mother spank her child in the supermarket for throwing a tantrum? Is the chief purpose of schools to discipline and instruct children *in loco parentis*, or is their core mandate to foster self-expression, while medicating those who get out of hand? Can one party in the parent-child relationship “divorce” the other? Can an employer fire an employee for shoddy work? Both the legal system and popular opinion are perplexed by such questions. Rights, responsibilities, and authority are all up for grabs. While the believing church is not dancing on the ragged edge of such issues, Christian people are still deeply affected by the climate of uncertainty. We are too often confused and divided.

Ephesians offers sanity and wisdom to enable the people of God to grow up into oneness and maturity. But its answers might surprise you, whether you tend to be “traditionalist” or “egalitarian” about role relationships. Most of those who assert that Christ’s grace *establishes* proper authority and role distinctions cite Ephesians 5:21-6:9—end of discussion. They say that the commands are clear and consistent with the rest of Scripture. But a closer look at this particular passage and its context puts a radical spin on submission and authority, pressing us with complementary truths that are often overlooked.

Meanwhile, most of those who assert that Christ’s grace *eliminates* authority and role distinctions use other parts of the Bible to trump Ephesians 5:21-6:9. For example, both Galatians 3:28 (“there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus”) and the prominence of “one anothering” commands (in Eph. 4, and elsewhere in Scripture) override the embarrassingly hierarchical language of Ephesians 5-6. But an honest look at this passage shows how the message of role differences is inextricable from the message of mutuality.

This chapter will look at three interlocking truths that make us wise. First, we all have a common call from God, defining us as peers with each other. Second, we each have a particular focus within our primary relationships, as servant-leaders and servant-submitters. Third, most of us wear multiple hats, sometimes called to lead and other times called to submit. If we hold these three things together—teaching ourselves and others to live them—we will live our life together with clarity, grace, and confidence, to the glory of God.

And be subject to one another in the fear of Christ. Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, because we are members of His body. FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND SHALL BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH. This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church. Nevertheless, each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself, and the wife must see to it that she respects her husband. Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER (which is the first commandment with a promise), SO THAT IT MAY BE WELL WITH YOU, AND THAT YOU MAY LIVE LONG ON THE EARTH. Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ; not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. With good will render service, as to

the Lord, and not to men, knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free. And masters, do the same things to them, and give up threatening, knowing that both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him.

—Ephesians 5:21-6:9

OUR COMMON CALLING

You have a common calling in all relationships to walk worthy of your identity as the Wife, Child, and Slave of the Lord. The Lord calls you to please him by humility, forbearance, candor, generosity, and tender-heartedness to all others. This common calling operates irrespective of the social roles you fill. It establishes a core attitude of mutuality that threads through every single relationship. We are one with each other and we are equals, leveled before God, whether apostle or new-hatched convert, four-star general or buck private, CEO or custodian. We live as peers before him who is no respecter of persons. Differences of competence, power, wealth, intelligence, achievement, opportunity, sex, age, and ethnic background vanish. All of Ephesians 1:1-5:20 and 6:10-24 applies always, to every Christian, in every relationship.

You have been given God's grace, and commanded by your Lord Jesus to give grace to all others. Whether married or single, male or female, child or parent, employee or boss, you live within a mutuality: one church, members of one body, brothers and sisters to one another.¹ You are a *we*. You are called to be patient and constructive in every relationship. A husband and wife, or a parent and child, ought to communicate openly, drawing on each other for help and perspective, seeking to understand and encourage each other, repenting of the sins that interfere. No superiority, no double

standards. If kids should not backtalk parents, then parents should not yell at kids. If wives should not be shrewish and domineering, then husbands should not be brooding and domineering. The common call applies equally to all.

More pointedly, when you think about the core of your identity, you are first and foremost *Wife*. You are one part of the body of Christ in union with her one Husband (Eph. 5:25-32).² Whether you are male or female, married or single, you are Wife to Jesus Christ, called to fear Christ and live subject to him. Similarly, at the core of who you are, you are essentially *Child*, beloved of the one Father (1:2; 1:5; 5:1). Whether you are a parent or a child, you are Child to God, called to obey and honor him. Furthermore, you are essentially *Slave* to the Lord (5:8-10; 6:5-9). Whether you are in authority or under authority in your workplace, you are Slave to Christ, called to obey and fear him. You may be a man, but you *are* a Wife. You may have kids, but you *are* a Child. You may have people answering to you, but you *are* a Slave. Each of us in our core identity is meant to live as a subordinate.

We all receive the love, provision, attention, mercy, protection, and upbuilding grace of our Husband, Father, and Lord. Christ is head, leader, master, and dominant partner. He is our “superior” and we are his “inferiors,” in the good, old sense of the words. We are subjects, followers, and dependents. We stand under him. This subordinate relationship with the God who rules us and cares for us must color every aspect of our lives.

Growth in Christ, then, has a striking double thrust. First, maturity deepens submission. You increasingly learn to serve Christ, to please him (Eph. 5:8-10). But, second, this maturity makes you a leader. Submission heightens your likeness to him (4:32-5:2), and you increasingly picture the essence of leadership. You say No to selfwill and self-serving. You say No to the world and the devil. You

say Yes to a purposeful life for God that embodies clarity, conviction, integrity, wise counsel, forgiveness, generosity, patience, and self-giving love. So as any Christian submits to Christ's leadership, he or she becomes more of a leader in the best sense of the word. Good subjects grow masterly. Whatever the particulars of your calling as a husband/wife, parent-child, or boss-worker, they never override your core identity and common call as Wife, Child, and Slave. The common call conditions every detail.

YOUR PARTICULAR FOCUS

Your calling to “walk worthy” has a particular focus within each primary relationship in marriage, family, workplace. The Lord calls you to please him by emphasizing either submission or love within the spheres of your particular domestic relationships. The particular focus operates within “your own” domestic circles: with your own husband or wife, your own children or parents, and your own boss or workers. Within the various roles you fill, Christ says, “Pay particular attention to *this*.” Your particular foci and the common calling do not override and cancel each other.³ We might liken this to an orchestra and choir, assembled to perform a symphony in praise of the glory of God's grace. The common calling defines the key, rhythm, melodic themes, and lyrics which all performers and instruments hold in common as they submit to the conductor. The particular focus defines the distinctive parts performed by each instrument and voice, the timbre and harmony of bassoon and violin, of soprano and baritone.

THE PARTICULAR FOCUS OF SUBORDINATION

Are you a Wife, Child, and Servant of Christ who is also a *wife*, *child*, or *servant* to other human beings? You must particularly

aim to submit, fear, respect, obey, honor, and serve. In doing so, not only do you do good to your own husband, your parents, and the persons over you in the workplace,⁴ but you particularly serve Christ by standing under those God has placed over you. Your interactions with those persons should be continually shaped by a series of life-centering questions. “How can I consistently demonstrate—with my words, actions, and attitudes—the respect, honor, and submission due the person God has placed over me? How am I disrespectful, contrary, headstrong, lazy, or manipulative?” Ephesians takes hold of you: if you would fear Christ, fear your husband; if you would obey the Lord, obey your parents; if you would serve the Lord, serve your master.⁵

In these self-assertive times it is not popular to speak the language of subordination. But the Bible is consistent in the way it speaks of obedience, submission, and fear. First, we do all such things to God, but God never does them back to us. The common call presses all of us to obey, fear, and submit to the Lord. The only alternative? Serve the world’s agenda, your own sinful flesh, and the devil. Second, the particular focus consistently presses wives, children, slaves, citizens, and the flock to serve those over them. But husbands, parents, masters, rulers, and pastors do not do the same back; they are to serve the welfare of those in their care. Both parties repent of self-will, but in different ways. Will you be headstrong and rebellious, or will you be consciously subject? Will you be headstrong and rebellious, or will you consciously love? (See also Col. 3-4; 1 Peter 2-3; Titus 2; Rom. 13; Hebrews 13; and 1 Tim. 6.)

The anarchistic, liberationist point of view contradicts what the Lord says about these things.⁶ It must dismiss or twist the words Jesus has spoken through his messenger. The grain of truth—our common humanity—turns perverse when one asserts one’s

own will against God's will to submit. Many who would defend the Lord's clear words also weaken their force. Some, in effect, only pay lip service to God's will. They give so much attention to the *exceptions* to the rule that they fail to establish the relevance, beauty, and authority of the rule. "Yes, God calls a wife to submit, but of course if a husband is harsh, or asks her to sin, or does not consider her point of view, or won't lead spiritually, or is irresponsible financially, or..." But Ephesians lists no exceptions. Paul camps out on the rule only, because the rule of submission so directly challenges our instinctive craving to get our own way.

Others weaken the force of the Lord's words by making the Bible sound as if it demeans and squelches humanity. They view submission and obedience as slavishness. They forget the common calling, and misunderstand the particular focus. They make submission look like "put up and shut up." They don't see how obedience leads to freedom from sin, and to freedom for love, courage, and purposeful living. The rule of submission, rightly understood and rightly lived, makes beauty, freedom, joy, and the glory of God shine forth.

There are, of course, exceptions. In every situation where you are called to stand under another, you must always "obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). Because of this overarching common call, a wife may need to admonish her husband for his attitude, a daughter challenge her mother's tone of voice, an employee dispute the boss's unfairness. In each case, the attitude of submission both to God and the person lends persuasiveness to the confrontation. There may be a time to call in the elders or even the police. There may be a time when a wife, child, or employee must say, "I want to honor you, but in conscience I can't participate in that because it's wrong." The particular focus never calls you to sin in violation of the common call to serve Christ.

But consider the immense quantity of gossip, sniping, covert and overt rebellion, stubbornness, disrespect, nagging, laziness, rolling of eyes, manipulating, grumbling, and domineering done by wives, children, and employees. These things are *never* right. That long and ugly list of contrariness does not need the occasion of someone else's wrongdoings—such things happen regardless. But even when a husband, parent, or boss is doing something terribly wrong, *never* pay back evil for evil to *anyone* (Rom. 12:17). Even when a person who ought to look out for your welfare is looking out only for his or her self-interest, let *no* rotten word come out of your mouth, but *only* what is good for edification according to the need of the moment (Eph. 4:29). The sin of another never cancels out either the general call or the particular focus. When godliness must challenge or resist human authority, it does so in a godly way, respecting both the human being and the office, even while opposing the sin of the human being who holds the office.

Is Christ's will difficult? Yes. Is it utterly contrary to the way the world acts and reacts by nature and habit? Yes. Is it contrary to the way you act and react by nature and habit? Yes. Is it contrary to what we most often hear and think? Yes. But is it right? Yes. And will Jesus Christ himself help you? Yes and amen! If you aim for submission when Christ calls you to submission, your life will thrive.

THE PARTICULAR FOCUS OF NURTURE

Christ calls other people to particularly develop nurturing intentions and actions. A Wife, Child, and Servant who is also a *husband, father, or master* particularly aims to love, provide, care for, value, bless, bring mercy, give grace, purify, build up, teach, and treat fairly. In doing so, you do good to your own wife, your children, and the persons under you in the workplace. You partic-

ularly image Christ by looking out for the well-being of those God has placed within your care.⁷ Leaders are to model themselves on Christ's way of leading: "Christ loved and gave himself up for us" (Eph. 5:2; 5:25).

It is striking that the common call tells each of us to follow his example (5:2), pursuing a merciful and redemptive agenda toward all others. His same example of self-giving is then particularly pressed upon husbands (5:25) and, by implication, upon parents and supervisors. Your interactions with your wife, children, and workers should continually be shaped by crucial questions. "How can I—by my words, actions, and attitudes—nourish, protect, care, and treat fairly the person God has placed under my care? How am I unfair, self-serving, harsh, neglectful, irritating, discouraging, or domineering?" Ephesians takes hold of you: if Christ loves you, love your wife; if your Father nourishes you, nourish your children; if your Master does you good, do good to those who serve you.

The chauvinistic, authoritarian point of view contradicts what the self-giving Lord says here.⁸ The grain of truth—the necessity and propriety of authority relations—turns perverse when one asserts one's own will against God's will to give love. The submission of others to one's imperial will becomes the goal. This tendency weakens Christ's words by emphasizing the *rights* of an authority and the *responsibilities* of subordinates, rather than the responsibilities of those in authority. "I am the principal of this school, and I've learned to win by intimidation in my dealings with students, parents, teachers, and staff." "I am the parent, and what I say goes. Try me, and you'll regret it." "I've had a hard day at work, and when I get home I expect to kick back with the TV remote in my hand." But Ephesians does not list rights. Paul camps out on the rule only, because the rule of love so directly challenges the instinctive craving to get our own way.

Christ makes a devastating indictment of the normal habits of leaders, and he lived out a dramatic alternative. Yes, “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). He served our best interest, but he did not serve our will, just as he did not come to indulge himself. Where we are called to lead others, we do so on his pattern. Husbands, parents, and managers, repent from self-will and from serving the other’s will, so that you can serve the other’s *well-being* before God. Paul is only reiterating Jesus’ teaching: “Those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all” (Mark 10:42-44). Look out for those whom God has placed under you. The rule of love, rightly understood and rightly lived, makes beauty, freedom, joy, and the glory of God shine forth. Husband, pursue your wife’s well-being. Parents, nurture your children. Bosses, be fair and do good to those who work for you.⁹

There are, of course, rights. In every situation where you are called to look out for another’s welfare, you must always lead. You cannot let your own desires rule. But you also cannot reverse roles, so that the desires of wife, child, and employee rule. There is a time to call someone on the carpet, to put an employee on probation, to discipline a child. There is a time when a husband, parent, or boss must say, “I love you and I want your best, but this is what we are going to do even if you don’t like it.” There is a time to take charge of a situation and frankly assert authority. The particular focus of showing tender consideration does not allow you to sin by shirking the responsibilities of leadership. The sins of others never justify ducking the particular focus on pursuing others’ well-being, or forgetting the common call.

Consider the immense quantity of hostility, inconsiderateness, laziness, violence, self-serving, ingratitude, sheer neglect, favoritism, capriciousness, and bull-headed domineering done by husbands, parents, and bosses. These things are *never* right. That long and ugly list of self-serving tyranny does not need the occasion of someone else's wrongdoings—such things happen regardless. But even when a wife, child, or employee is doing something terribly wrong, *never* pay back evil for evil to *anyone* (Rom. 12:17). Even when a person under you acts out in rebellion, let *no* rotten word come out of your mouth, but *only* what is good for edification according to the need of the moment (Eph. 4:29). The sin of another never cancels out either the general call or the particular focus. When godliness must challenge another's wrong, it does so in a godly way, communicating the grace of God in word, deed, and attitude. It respects both the human being and the obligations of patient, redemptive authority, even while opposing the sin of the human being who is opposing authority.

Is Christ's will difficult? Utterly contrary to the way the world acts and reacts? Contrary to the way you act and react? Yes. But is it right? Yes. And will Christ himself help you? Yes and amen! If you aim for nurturing love when Christ calls you to nurturing love, your life will thrive.

Notice that in each case, you stand under or look after "your own." This is very important to keep straight. If you are a wife, you have a particular responsibility to submit to "your own" husband (Eph. 5:22; cf. Titus 2:5; 1 Peter 3:1), not to all other husbands, or males in general. If you are a husband, you are responsible to pursue the particular welfare of "your own" wife (5:28), not of every wife or females in general. As an employee, you owe obedience and service to "your own" master (Titus 2:9), not to all masters. The

same pattern applies between parents and children, and to bosses with their workers.

A SYMPHONIC CALLING

The common call and the particular focus do not override each other. They work in symphony. This is crucial to timely and appropriate counseling ministry. For example, the mutuality between beloved children called for by Ephesians 4:1-16 and 4:25-5:2 *always* applies between husband-wife, parent-child, and master-slave. Many counseling problems are resolved when both parties tackle the common call to mercy, forgiveness, speaking the truth in love, and so forth, before their particular foci are even on the table. When a couple exchanges angry words or harbors bitter attitudes, the solution naturally begins with the common call to both.

Communication problems and conflict resolution usually have a certain temporal and logical priority: “How will each of you repent of bitterness and hostility, and of the demands and expectations that drive you? How will you learn Jesus, and so learn mercy, humility, and generosity? How can you communicate constructively?” Similarly, each person’s knowledge of Christ and vital faith (3:14-21), each person’s call to a lifestyle of change (4:17-24), and each person’s walk of either folly or wisdom (5:3-20) will come on the table early and often. Two saints growing up out of their sins can learn to communicate with grace, as each party heeds the common call.

Ministry naturally proceeds to the particular focus of each person, to basic role failings that breed trouble. As husband and wife, they sin, and they can learn either to look after the other or to stand under the other, respectively. Many counseling problems are resolved as each party individually focuses on either the requisite submission or the requisite love. When counseling a wife, always

explore, “How are you respectful toward your husband? How will you learn to actively pursue honoring your husband, rather than nagging him, ignoring him, resentfully going along with him, or despising him?” When counseling a husband, always consider, “How are you self-sacrificing, constructive, initiating, and constant in love toward your wife? How will you learn to actively pursue her well-being, rather than neglecting her, being preoccupied, or getting irritated?” Analogous questions operate in family and workplace conflicts.

Grasp the common call and the particular focus and you will be able to counter both liberationist and authoritarian tendencies. Each seizes onto one good thing and misses balancing truths. Liberationists are alert to grievous sins of tyranny and abuse, to inequities of power, and to unfairness. They aspire to maximize mutuality and humility, and to protect the weak. But they lose sight of the importance our Husband, Father, and Lord places on submission to husbands, parents, and masters, and his reproof of insubordination as a primal sin (see also 2 Peter 2:10).

Meanwhile, authoritarians are alert to grievous sins of anarchy and disrespect, to headstrong individualism, and to disorder. They aspire to respect duly constituted authority, and to protect the order within which human life thrives. But they lose sight of the importance Christ places on patient love for wives, children, and workers, and his reproof of authoritarianism as a primal sin (see also Mark 10:42-45). The Bible presses God’s people to a third way, alert to the gamut of sins and aspiring to the gamut of righteousness.

YOUR MULTIPLE ROLES

Because you inhabit multiple roles, most of you will hear yourself addressed by Ephesians multiple times, from different an-

gles. The common call addresses every one of us. But the particular focus addresses us in our unique situation, “your own” domestic relationships. As many as five of the six particular emphases might come with your name attached. If your parents are alive, and you are married with children, and you answer to a supervisor and have others answer to you in the workplace, then you are both boss and worker, both parent and child, and either husband or wife. A few people—for example, a retired, single person without children or parents—are only addressed by the general call. Ephesians 5:21-6:9 will not speak directly to their situation. Of course, the general principles that drive the passage do apply: we are Wife, Child, and Servant. Such persons still have plenty to occupy them, as the *rest* of Ephesians works into their heart and works out into their lifestyle! They will always be embedded somewhere in church and state, the two sets of submission-love relationships that Paul does not treat in Ephesians.

Single adults sometimes wonder, “Why does Paul leave me out of Ephesians? He only focuses on marrieds.” But unmarried people are not left out by this single adult, Paul, who was sent on a mission by another single adult, Jesus. If you are single, you are directly addressed by Ephesians 1:1-5:20 and 6:10-24: the one flesh relationship between Jesus and his body. And much of 5:21-6:9 may apply. You are Wife. Though you do not have a calling as husband or wife, the background truths and specific exhortations will enrich your common call. You are Child. If you have living parents, you are addressed by 6:1-3; if you are a single parent, then 6:4 has your name on it. You are Slave. If you are an employee, you are addressed by 6:5-8 regarding your supervisor; if you are the boss, or have other leadership responsibilities, then 6:9 applies.

FIVE ILLUSTRATIONS

The net effect is that all of us are called to major on submission within some relationships and to major on initiating love within others. Imagine the following situation. Five members of your church work for a company that manufactures electronic equipment: a salesman, the sales manager, a secretary, the president, and a custodian. All five are called to live out the attitudes and actions of the common call. These will saturate their lives inside and outside work: how they treat each other, how they treat customers, how they reconcile conflicts, and so forth. But each of them also has a unique configuration of responsibilities to submit or to nurture.

The *salesman* is a single, twenty-eight-year-old man who lives with his parents. Ephesians 5:21-6:9 particularly addresses him three times. He is a child, servant, and master. He is called (1) to honor his parents, (2) to respect and serve his sales manager, and (3) to show kindness and consideration to his secretary. He naturally has no particular responsibilities to a wife or children. Notice how his submission to Christ gets channeled into submission to authority in some relationships and loving headship in others.

The *sales manager* is a married, forty-eight-year-old woman, with three college-age children and an elderly mother. Paul addresses her no less than five times, as a wife, child, parent, servant, and master. She is called (1) to respect and submit to her husband, (2) to honor her mother, (3) to nourish and lead her children, (4) to serve the higher-level management of the company, and (5) to treat the salesman and secretary with kindness and fairness as she leads them. She is challenged in two places to learn how to lead others, and in three places to learn how to respect others.

The *secretary* is a fifty-eight-year-old woman, never married, without children, whose parents have passed away. Paul's letter addresses her only twice, as servant and as master. She is called

(1) to respect and serve the president, the sales manager, and the salesman, and (2) to show a master's kindness to the clerk and the custodian who answer to her. She has no particular responsibilities to a husband, children, or parents. But, like all of us, God has placed her in a situation where she must learn both how to stand under others and how to look out for others.

The *president*, a thirty-five-year-old married man with two elementary school children, inherited the company when his parents died. The Lord addresses him three times with the call to exercise leadership responsibly and constructively. As husband, father, and master, he is (1) to love and provide for his wife, (2) to nurture his children, and (3) to treat his employees in ways that do them good. Learning to live as Christ's Wife, Child, and Servant places him entirely in the leadership role in his domestic relations. He will learn submission elsewhere—in relation to his church elders, and in relation to the government authorities with whom he interacts regarding occupational safety, taxes, and legal disputes.

Finally, the *custodian* is a newly married, childless, twenty-two-year-old woman, whose parents are alive. She is addressed three times. She pours her energies into the roles of wife, child, and servant. She is (1) to submit to her husband, (2) to honor her parents, and (3) to serve all the others in her workplace. For her, submission to Christ places her entirely in the helper and subordinate role in domestic relations. She learns to image the loving authority of Christ only as part of the common call to build up brothers and sisters in Christ.

It is worth noting that all five persons are embedded in two other spheres. The exact same pattern described above holds for relationships within the church and with government authorities. First, in the church we are all Sheep of the great Shepherd. Those Sheep who are also *undershepherds* have a particular responsibility

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to shepherd the other Sheep in their charge. The Sheep who are also *sheep* in a local congregation have a particular responsibility to serve, honor, and submit to their undershepherds. In our example, all five persons are sheep called to submit to their elders.

We are also all Subjects of the great King. Those Subjects who are also *kings* or *other rulers* have a particular responsibility to provide, protect, and maintain justice for their subjects. Subjects of God who are also *subjects* have a particular responsibility to submit to those who govern them: pay taxes, obey laws, treat with respect. In our example, all five persons are called to stand under local, regional, and national government.

CHANGING ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Notice that a person's roles usually change over time. Leaving one's parents to cleave to one's spouse changes the forms of honor shown to parents. The death of a husband or parents cancels obligations of submission. Abandonment by a wife or the marriage of a child cancels or greatly alters obligations for loving provision and guidance. In our example, if the custodian becomes a mother, she will gain a new role. If she gets involved helping with the church's youth ministry, she will gain two new obligations: to love and lead the teenagers, and to submit to the youth pastor.

Responsibilities also modulate as circumstances change. The sales manager treats her college-age children in a different way than the president treats his elementary school children. Both remain parents, but the appropriate kind of nurture evolves. Similarly, the salesman now expresses honor to his parents with "less" obedience than when he was a young child, and with "more" obedience than if he were to marry and move out. His parents no longer tell him when to take a shower, but he lives by the rules of the house, rather than setting his own.

Sometimes roles do not evolve: if one of the sales manager's children is mentally handicapped, she will exert a great deal of control as long as they both live. On the other hand, sometimes roles almost completely reverse. If the sales manager's aging mother suffers from dementia, the daughter will have to take charge of her affairs, imposing decisions on the mother who nursed her, led her to faith, and set her curfew. The call to honor her mother will remain until death as a core attitude affecting her manner and emotions, though in much of the business of life she must now act as a loving authority.

Finally, it is important to note that God is "no respecter of persons" (Eph. 6:9; KJV). Some people tend to favor persons in authority. They tend to look down on "little" people. They see sins of rebellion more clearly than they see sins of control and domineering. Other people tend to favor persons who are in traditionally subordinate roles, and tend to despise authority in subtle or overt ways. They are soured toward "big" people. They see sins of domineering more clearly than they see sins of rebellion and self-will. But God shows no favoritism. Paul tells both *masters* (Eph. 6:9) and *slaves* (Col. 3:25) that there is "no partiality" with God. God does not play favorites. Don't think you can drift, wriggle, or run away from his revealed will for you.

This short letter to the Ephesians, along with the rest of Scripture, gives us the wisdom to find our way amid life's many variables. Trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord, we learn the "fruit of the light" that consists in all goodness, righteousness, and truth (Eph. 5:9). God's pattern for relationships is exquisite and consistent.

Learn and live these three truths: First, we must all obey the general call to treat one another with redemptive love. Let it saturate every relationship at all times. Treat everyone the same.

Second, every person in a subordinate role must focus on standing under those placed over him or her. Every person in an authority role must focus on looking out for the welfare of those placed under him or her. Treat people differently.

Third, life is so arranged that all of us must submit to Christ by standing under some people, and almost all of us (barring only the severely disabled) must image Christ by looking after other people. "Must" in all three of these truths is not a given, of course, but the agenda of the light.

Those who do not submit to Christ follow the desires of body and mind instead, and they walk in darkness. Wherever they are called to whole-hearted submission, they will either usurp or play doormat. Wherever they are called to persevering nurture, they will either tyrannize or abdicate. They are blind to the radiant, wise lifestyle taught by the fear of Christ. But those who follow the Messiah Jesus, in whom the nations find both hope and God, will live in this light.