

WHEN YOUR SISTER WANTS THAT TOY

29th in a Series on Ephesians called, "Messages to the Misfits"

Ephesians 5:21

A young rabbi was assigned to take over leadership of an established synagogue. He quickly encountered a difficult problem. During the synagogue services half of the congregation would stand during prayers and half would sit. That would be confusing and distracting, but it was much worse than that. Both groups insisted vehemently that theirs was the long standing tradition in the synagogue and both would argue loudly with the other, usually ending in yelling matches. The rabbi tried everything he could think of to try to end the strife, to no avail. He couldn't think of anything else he could do. Then he had a moment of inspiration. He wondered if the founding rabbi was still alive. If he was, maybe he could relate what the tradition actually was, and that might settle the conflict. He diligently began searching for information and was thrilled to find out that the rabbi was long retired, but that he, indeed, was still alive. He was 99 years old and living in a nursing home.

Hoping the old rabbi still had his memory, the young man went to the nursing home and met with him. He told the old rabbi that he had a serious conflict on his hands about the traditions of the synagogue. He asked him, "Was the tradition to have the people stand during the prayers?" The old rabbi shook his head and said, "No, that wasn't it." "Ah," said the young man, "So the tradition was that the people should sit during the prayers?" The old man said, "No, that wasn't it either." The frustrated young rabbi cried out, "Then what am I supposed to do? Right now half the people stand and half the people sit and they all argue and shout at each other." The old rabbi smiled, nodded and said, "Ah, yes, *that* was the tradition."

Sadly, everywhere you go in the world you find conflict. In our little neighborhood we had at one point recently a big fight over, of all things, leadership of the home owner's association. Typically the annual meeting for the association has to be postponed because they can't get enough people to attend. No one is interested. Yet a small group of people became convinced that the board of the HOA was a powerful clique that had to be removed, and this resulted in some ugly innuendo and a bitter fight. Some neighbors have had such deep disagreements they would not speak to each other. We've seen neighbors even sell their houses and move to a different neighborhood just to get away from someone in our neighborhood. Carissa had a co-worker who quit her job because she could not get along with her boss and decided she could no longer abide her. Do you think that was an aberration? That's the norm. I was just reading an article about Jalen Ramsey, one of the most talented players in the NFL. He has demanded a trade because of issues with his coach. I've seen conflict blow up business partnerships, friendships, families, marriages, schools and churches.

Unfortunately all of us have had to deal with conflict, and often we have suffered loss because of it. Where does all this conflict come from? At some level all of us are asking, “How can I get satisfaction out of life? How can I be fulfilled?” We want to know how we can get the maximum from life.

That is reasonable, and in a way God built us with that desire. Unfortunately it has been distorted by our fallen nature. That nature puts a self-focused spin on everything. So in our hearts, at some level, every conflict eventually gets approached from an angle based on the question, “What’s in it for me?” Every person has that happening inside them, and so inevitably there are going to be collisions. Lots of them. We all end up competing with each other to get what’s “in it for me.”

When our kids were young we often would go out for lunch on Sundays after church. Sunday mornings for us were long and stressful, so it was easiest to go out for lunch and relax a bit. In retrospect I am amazed at how long it took me to stop repeating the same mistake. I would be driving, totally spent, with the kids in the back seat. I would ask, “Where do you guys want to eat?” Both kids would have an idea, and amazingly they would never agree. Just hearing their sibling’s preference caused them to dig their heels in deep. Quickly warfare broke out with each side deeply entrenched. We were into the “What’s in it for me?” zone, and often bordered on the “Don’t make me stop this car” neighborhood. Eventually I got smart enough to just tell them where we were going with no input from the backseaters.

At a societal level groups of people do the same thing. Groups fight for power in order to get what they want. They come up with political solutions to problems only to find that every solution somehow creates other problems. And all too often they actually make the initial problem worse.

While some Christians try to say otherwise, the interesting fact is that there is a complete absence in the New Testament of any appeal for corporate action in dealing with this most basic problem of society. Such corporate actions always end up in conflict and power struggles. The scriptural solution is always aimed at individuals. Ephesians 5:21 gives us a crucial component to the resolution of this problem.

GIVE YOURSELF A DEMOTION

Paul tells us in verse 21, “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Submit is not anyone’s favorite word in our culture. What we hear about in our society today is “rights” and assertiveness. The buzzword now, practically the national motto, is “empowerment.” The core of that is “power,” and power is about not having to submit to another. Asserting ourselves is at the opposite end of the spectrum from submitting. Demanding our rights comes right out of the “What’s in it for me?” mindset.

Rights are a bit problematic. When I graduated both with bachelors and masters degrees I remember that the certificate stated that I was awarded the particular degree “and all the rights and privileges” that came with it. I still am not clear just what those rights were, but as the documents stated, whatever they were, they had to be granted to me. Where do rights come from? Someone has to give them to you. I am somewhat amused by the animal rights movement. I am fully in favor of being kind to creatures. But take a look at nature. Do you see anything remotely resembling rights in nature? There are no rights. It is purely survival of the fittest. It is the hierarchy of the food chain, and that’s it. In other words, it is about the raw exercise of power.

Our culture tells us we are the product of random chance, that humans are nothing but the most highly evolved animals on the planet. If that’s true, then what’s true in nature should be true among us. There are no rights. There is only survival of the fittest. Oh, but society grants rights to us. But society is just people. What gives some people the “right” to grant rights to other people? Once again, that comes down to power. Society, a group of people, has the power to force its will on other people, to grant rights as it decides. But that means we are living by the frightening philosophy that might makes right. That means there really is no such thing as unalienable rights. There is only power.

We need to pay close attention to the Declaration of Independence, one of the most profound documents ever written. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.” That was a radical departure from the way the world worked prior to that time. People did not believe generally that all men are created equal. The average serf was not equal to the Lord of the manor. The commoner was not equal to the noble. To say all are created equal, that common people have the same value that nobles have, was an utter revolution in thinking about people. That was a seismic shift in how people should be seen and treated. The massive size of the implications of that cannot be measured. It also says humans are fundamentally different from animals. All animals are not created equal. As we waited for our flight home in the Maui airport yesterday I heard a man telling a story about being in the ocean and seeing a fish jump out of the water right next to him because it was being chased by a much larger fish who wanted seafood for lunch. The small fish is not equal to the big fish and has no right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

But observe where the Declaration says rights come from. They are granted by the Creator. That is the only way they can be unalienable rights. Remove God from the equation and there are no more rights. There is only power. We force our way on others as we have the power to do so because they have no inherent rights. The upshot of that discussion is that we only have rights that are given to us by God, so we ought to pay attention to what he says about rights.

Oddly, he doesn't say much about us demanding our rights. Rather, we get this command, which is light years from us focusing on our rights. It calls on us to forget about our "rights" and focus instead on service of others.

The Greek word Paul used that is translated "submit" is *hupotasso*. It means to arrange under, in order. One of the most common uses of the word had to do with the military. In order to have an effective military it has to be arranged. It has to have organization. The worst thing is to have an armed mob set loose with its members doing whatever they want. The result of that is always violence and chaos. So a military needs people organized or arranged. You have a General at the top with officers underneath him, Non-Commissioned Officers under the officers and enlisted personnel under them.

There is an important grammatical feature of this word. In Greek there were verbs that had something called middle voice. Active verbs are something you do. When you say, "I understand you," that verb is active. You are the one doing the understanding. Passive verbs express that something that is done to you. "I am understood by you" means you are doing the understanding to me. I'm passive in the process. Middle voice verbs weren't active, they weren't passive, they were... middle. A middle voice verb was something you do to yourself. So what Paul said was that we should arrange ourselves under others.

This is something we choose for ourselves. Our son-in-law, Michael, is no longer an active duty Marine. However, he is still considered part of the Marine reserve. We were surprised last month when he told us he has been promoted to Major. The thing is, that did not happen because he said, "I think I will be a Major now." He was passive. The Marines decided where he would be ranked. But we are not assigned to be arranged under other people. The message is not, "Here's the organizational chart of the human race. This microscopic box way down here at the bottom is you. You are a peon, with everybody else ranked above you, so you are worthless and have to do whatever everybody else tells you." This command is that we choose of our own volition to rank ourselves under other people. It does not mean we are somehow less valuable than others or that we don't matter; it is something we choose to do.

This is not about value or equality. Neither is submission about weakness. It requires great security and strength. It comes from being filled with the Holy Spirit, from finding our peace, life, wholeness, security and joy in Christ. As we do this we will have the resources to submit ourselves to others.

The Theological Dictionary of The New Testament says to submit means, "to lose or surrender one's own will for the sake of others." It is about choosing to love and serve another person. It is saying, "I don't care about my rights, my desires or my will. What I care about is loving

you.” The NIV Application Commentary on Ephesians says, “mutual submission is love in action.”

It would be fair to say that if you do not submit yourself to another person, you do not love that person. Love is seeking that person’s good even at the cost of your own good or your own desires, and that is the definition of submission.

Truly submitting ourselves to others is essentially a whole new, radically different value system. What is important in this system is not getting what we want, but loving other people. This is a revolutionary way to live. It is actually, to us fallen humans, a nearly inconceivable way to live.

Laurie and I recently took care of our little granddaughters for about five days. Ella is now three and a half and Cara is a little over two. Cara has gotten old enough now that she is much more aware of what is going on around her, and especially she pays attention to what her big sister is doing. She has reached that stage that all younger siblings get to at some point, the stage where she wants to do whatever sister is doing and have whatever sister has. But we all know that two-year olds have two favorite words, “no” and “mine.” So if she sees Sister playing with some toy, she wants to play with it. Since it instantly is in the category of “mine” as all things are for a two-year old, she just tries to take it. Ella typically grabs it back and pushes Cara down. Ella is irked because she wants the toy and is offended just because she doesn’t like Cara taking things away from her. This typically produces howls of protest from Cara, because she didn’t get what she wanted and because she’s offended by being pushed down. We adults, in our mature wisdom, observe these interactions and intervene, stepping in to teach the children about sharing and respecting each other. We can clearly see the blatant selfishness of young children.

We think we’ve grown out of that. But the truth is if you pay attention to how people often interact, you will see that same thing happening in better disguised, more subtle ways. Conflicts happen because one person wants one thing and the other wants something different, and the pushing begins. This command is a lot deeper than sharing. It’s about serving. It’s not merely fair play, but about preferring the good of another person rather than one’s own.

Imagine trying to teach two- or three-year olds the principle of submitting ourselves to one another. To submit is to say, “I am more concerned for your welfare, for your desires and will, than I am for my own. I want you to be pleased and happy regardless of what happens to me.” So, “Oh, you want this toy I’m playing with. By all means, take it, for I only want you to be happy.” Teaching that is a tall order. Ella is not going to like that approach to her sister because she can envision what will happen. Whatever she is playing with, Cara will want it. So Ella submits and gives it to her. Then Ella finds something else to play with. But she

knows Cara will want that, too. So Ella will have to give that up also. She will end up never getting to play with anything because she will always have to give it to Cara.

That's what this life of submitting looks like to us as adults, too. We envision that other people will constantly take advantage of us, will walk all over us. We will never get what we want and our lives will be an arid desert of lack, and of being used by other people. Our hearts can't stand the vision that we see before us, so we must stand up for ourselves. We must protect ourselves and fight for what we want. And at that point the fight, indeed, is on. And yet, this is what God calls us to. Part of the reason, you will see shortly, is that this is the only way for there to be peace among us.

BE AWE-FULL

There are some questions this command raises. There is a question about how in the world we can live that way on a consistent basis. Doesn't it mean that we are going to get taken advantage of? Aren't people going to walk all over us if we are submitting ourselves to everyone? How are we going to have the strength to live this way? Then there's a question of why we should choose to do this. Paul has some wisdom for us on those questions in the clause, "out of reverence for Christ."

Let's start with the question of why we should live submitting ourselves to others. First, if we have reverence for Christ we will want to live this way. Literally, Paul wrote that we should submit ourselves to one another in the fear of Christ. The word he used was *Phobos*, from which we get "phobia." They didn't translate it "fear" because they knew the point was not that we should be afraid of Christ. The idea of reverence gets closer to Paul's point. Unfortunately in our culture we don't do reverence. We are an irreverent culture, and we have a hard time really comprehending and experiencing true reverence.

Reverence is that sense you get that something is sacred, that you need to just keep your mouth shut and show respect. Reverence includes that element that is a kind of fear. It's not fear in the sense of being scared, but of being almost overwhelmed by the greatness, goodness, power and majesty of something. It's the kind of thing Jesus' disciples felt when he told a violent storm that threatened to swamp their boat and kill them all to calm down, and it did. They said, "Who is this that he can do something like that?" They were stunned. I think maybe the best word for that is awe, but it also includes a deep desire to not ever let down the one revered.

If we have that kind of reverence for God, we are going to want to honor him and reflect his glory. It is going to be a passion we have that is more important than any of the things we typically pursue in life. Plus, if we have that kind of reverence we will believe that God wants

the best for us... which leads us to be confident of the other two reasons why we would live submitting.

Second, submitting like this is the solution to human conflict. Remember that the source of all the conflict in our world is this dedication we all have to approach life with the “What’s in it for me?” philosophy. It shouldn’t require a rocket scientist to see that this attitude is the only way to fix that problem. Any other approach will end up being nothing but selfishness disguised, thus will actually exacerbate the problem.

Let’s imagine this in the political realm. Envision what might happen: Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of the House, a staunchly determined opponent of President Trump, asks for a meeting with the President. He sharpens his knives, preparing for what he knows is sure to be an explosive and difficult meeting. Ms. Pelosi quickly gets down to business. She says, “Mr. President, I disagree with most everything you are and you stand for. However, I also recognize that you are my President. You are in a position of authority and respect. I want you to know that while I disagree with you vehemently, I also want to love you. I choose to submit to you as our nation’s chosen leader. So I want to know what I can do to help you be a better leader. How can I enable you to serve our country more effectively?”

What do you think would happen? Well, they’d have to swear Mr. Pence in as the new President after Mr. Trump died of a heart attack. But seriously, I suspect Mr. Trump would be grateful and would feel humbled by that act. Maybe he would be a jerk and just run all over Ms. Pelosi. But I suspect he would thank her and in turn say, “I appreciate your attitude, and I want for us to work together. I would like to understand what your positions on some matters are and I also want to help you.” In other words, there is a chance that they would draw toward each other and actually begin to work together for the good of the country.

Any other approach Ms. Pelosi takes will end up in a power struggle. It will produce conflict and animosity. And the same thing is true for us on the personal level in all of our dealings.

Finally, this approach to relationships is the way to experience true life. This is a truth that is almost incomprehensible to fallen human beings. In Matthew 16:25 Jesus said, “Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.” Think about being in Ella’s position and seeing that if we serve our little sister we will never get what we want and will have a lifetime of unhappiness. But Jesus said that when we seek to save our happy life, when we go to war to take care of ourselves, we actually lose life. We end up with the very unhappiness, the loss of life, that we wanted to avert.

He said we should lose our lives for his sake. In other words, give up all that self-protection and self-service and seek only to serve him. Living in awe of him, we only want to serve him

and honor him, and we do that by serving others. It is only then that we find life. The late Ray Stedman wrote that this “is a fundamental law of life...It is only when I forget myself and devote myself to another’s fulfillment that I will find my own heart running over with grace and glory and satisfaction.”

We stayed at a hotel this week where the staff did a cool thing. Every night maids would come to our room, turn down the bed, put cookies on the pillows, and leave a slip of paper with a saying in Hawaiian then translated into English on it. Most of them were a bit shallow, but one said “ua ola loko I ke Aloha.” The translation was, “your bill is due at the front desk.” Just kidding. It actually means, “love gives life within.” That is absolutely true. Joy and life come from loving, which is to say it comes from giving up oneself to serve.

This is a radically counterintuitive truth, so radical it is scary to attempt to live by it. It feels death defying. There is a familiar scene in the old classic movie *Indiana Jones and The Last Crusade*, when Indiana is looking for the Holy Grail and is following clues. His dad has been shot and only the Grail can save him. He comes to the last obstacle, and it is a seemingly bottomless chasm that he must get across. The clue says only the one who makes the leap is worthy. But he realizes it is impossible to leap across this wide chasm. And then he realizes the true meaning of the clue. It’s a leap of faith. He looks down into the depths of that chasm and steps back in fear. His dad is saying, “You must believe, boy, you must believe.” Fearing the worst, he takes a breath, then steps out into the void, and discovers there was a bridge there that he could not see. For us, this command is like that. To submit to others always is like a bottomless canyon. It seems like certain death. It would be foolish to take a leap of faith like that.

That’s where our awe of God comes in. When we see him for who he really is, we understand that we can never lose by trusting in him. David wrote in Psalm 25:1, “In you, Lord my God, I put my trust.” I put trust in you, Lord, not my ability to protect myself and get what I want. In verse 3 he says to God, “No one who hopes in you will ever be put to shame.” No one who hopes in you will ever lose. Oh they might look like they’ve lost to the world, because the world looks at the wrong things. Those who hope in the Lord might appear to lose, to be taken advantage of, to not get the things the world wants. But what they will get is joy, peace, love and life. They will get what the world wants, but always lacks.

So, Rick, you are saying we always have to submit. So the woman who is being physically abused by a man is just supposed to submit and take it? No, I’m not saying that. Paul is not giving us a law here, an ironclad rule that is the final say in every situation. What he is giving us is a new mindset, a new approach to life, a new way of thinking that completely alters how we relate to people. But it doesn’t mean that in even the most extreme of situations this is the only thing one must do.

In Acts 16 Paul and Silas were in Philippi and a mob dragged them before the local magistrates, who ordered them to be beaten and then thrown into jail. The next day the magistrates sent some officers to let them out of jail and kick them out of town. Verse 37 says, “But Paul said to the officers: ‘They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out.’” Verses 38-39 say, “The officers reported this to the magistrates, and when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed. They came to appease them and escorted them from the prison.” Paul did not just submit to the mistreatment. He stood on his rights as a Roman citizen. Likely he did that because he felt it would provide a measure of protection for the local believers. The magistrates knew now if they mistreated them they could report what the leaders had done to Paul. It was illegal and could have caused them a lot of trouble. The point is, Paul is not teaching us a rule, but a mindset.

APPLICATION

REMEMBER THE EXAMPLES

I will remind you of two examples. The first is David. For years he was unfairly hounded by King Saul, who used every resource available to him to try to kill David. Not once did David strike back at him, though he had every reason to do so. He had the attitude that Paul instructs us to have. In 2 Samuel 16, David was again on the run, this time escaping from the murderous intent of his own rebellious son, Absalom. As he was leaving a man named Shimei who was from Saul’s clan came along. Verses 6-8 tell us, “He pelted David and all the king’s officials with stones, though all the troops and the special guard were on David’s right and left. As he cursed, Shimei said, ‘Get out, get out, you murderer, you scoundrel! The Lord has repaid you for all the blood you shed in the household of Saul.’” He ended with “you have come to ruin because you are a murderer.” In verse 9 one of David’s best buddies said, “Let me go over and cut off his head.” That seems to me like a good solution. David was God’s chosen king. He had the right to smack Shimei down with extreme prejudice. But in verse 10 David said, “If he is cursing because the Lord said to him, ‘curse David,’ who can ask, ‘why do you do this?’” In verse 11 he said, “Leave him alone; let him curse, for the Lord has told him to.” That’s remarkable. David essentially said, “Let God decide. If this is what God wants, so be it.” He was in awe of God, so he trusted him.

The supreme example, of course, is Jesus Christ. In 1 Peter 2:23 the apostle reminded us, “When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.” What happened to Jesus was the most unfair thing that has ever happened in the history of the world. But he trusted his father, submitted, and let it happen, even though he had the power to stop it in an instant if he

wanted. In verse 21 Peter said, “Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.”

Did David and Jesus lose in the eyes of the world by having the attitude they did, by submitting the way they did? Indeed they did, at least in the short run. Both suffered. Jesus, of course, most of all. But in the far larger sense did they win or lose? They both won big time. So will we.

FEAR GOD AND PURSUE LIFE

Live in awe of God. Live with reverence. If you do that you will desire to obey his command, and you will have confidence that it is the best thing you can do. And remember the fundamental law of life. You only gain life by giving up self. Repeat that to yourself every day. I only gain life when I give up self. Instead of living by, “What’s in it for me?” We need to go by, “What’s in it for you?” That really is about what’s in it for *God*.

In his book, *Jesus, Hero Of Thy Soul*, Jim McGuigan tells the story of a friend of his who was a professional soldier. He was a sergeant, a tough, hard-drinking, brawling kind of guy. All the guys in his unit were like that. At one point a corporal in the unit informed the other guys that he had become a believer in Jesus. The transformation that followed was dramatic. He quit drinking and fighting, quit using crude and foul language, quit all the dirty stories. All the guys figured the change would be temporary, but as time passed and he didn’t revert they were impressed by his life. But after a while his life began to serve as a reproach to them, not by what he said, but just by his example. They began mocking him, trying to provoke him, making life miserable for him, but he just stayed faithful. One day they had a long and arduous march. They returned to the barracks muddy, sore and exhausted. McGuigan’s friend, the sergeant, collapsed on his bed, then he noticed the corporal. He was praying. For some reason it just enraged the sergeant. He picked up one of his boots and with a foul curse fired it at the corporal, hitting him on the shoulder. The man didn’t react, which made the sergeant even madder, so he picked up his other boot and threw it at him, hitting him in the head. The corporal grunted, rubbed his head, then went on about his business. At that point the sergeant was so tired he just gave up. He rolled over and went to sleep. He slept for several hours. When he woke up the corporal was gone, but the sergeant’s formerly muddy, filthy boots were there by his bed, now cleaned and polished perfectly. It was the last straw for the sergeant. He gave in and put his faith in Jesus Christ. He did it because one man considered him more important than himself.