

Sermon - Ephesians 5.21-6.9

Acknowledging the abuse of Scripture

- Apart from celebrating the feast day of Mary last Sunday, we have been going through the whole of the letter to the Ephesians since 11th July.
- Today and next Sunday we look at the final two passages, and today's reading has some verses that have sadly been misused at times.
- So I'm going to start by simply acknowledging these verses, and the destructive baggage that has accumulated around them.
- And then we can look at the passage as a whole, and hopefully engage with the social context in which it was written.
- So the first few verses were written by way of instruction for married Gentile Christian women living in that culture at that time.
- Here is the New International Version of 5.22-24, and I'm reading it in order to provide a helpful contrast:

Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. (NIV 5.22-24)

- Many Bible versions use the word *submit*.
- Generally speaking, I prefer to use the NRSV - the New Revised Standard Version - which in this case uses the word *subject*, as in: *Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord.*
- This might be more acceptable - more nuanced - nevertheless, for too many people these verses have been used to excuse abusive attitudes towards women within the Church, and as a means to accept domestic violence by church-going men.
- Earlier this year the National Anglican Family Violence Research Report was released:
When asked "Have you been in a violent relationship with any partner", 22 per cent of Anglicans who had been in an adult intimate relationship said yes, compared to 15 per cent for the equivalent group of the Australian public. When given specific examples of abuse, 44 per cent of Anglicans said they had been victims of domestic violence, compared to 38 per cent of the general population.
[<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-06-11/domestic-violence-scripture-justify-abuse-anglican-church-report/100204552>]
- We don't know how these figures compare with those of other church communities, but how shocking that any national church community should have percentages greater than the general population, when it should reasonably be expected to be considerably less.
- So it is vitally important that, as one part of addressing this violence within our own faith communities, that we seriously review how we understand and engage with passages of Scripture that are misused to condone such abuse.

A more literal translation of the original

- Part of doing this is to go back to the original text, as well as the original context.
- I've been delighted to find a more authentic translation of the New Testament, translated by the world renown Wycliffe Bible Translators, called the Disciples' Literal New Testament.
- The translators have sought to follow the original Greek as closely as they can.
- Now this is not to knock the other versions, because each version usually helps to provide a further perspective on God's word.

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- Nevertheless, comparing them to the original Greek reveals the natural interpretive bias of each version's translators.
- It is the Disciples' Literal New Testament translation that we have heard today, and I will re-read the opening verses for the passage - noting that the sentence actually starts in verse 18 rather than verse 22:

Be filled with the Spirit ... giving-thanks always for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to our God and Father, subjecting yourselves to one another in reverence of Christ— wives— to your own husbands, as to the Lord. Because a husband is the head of his wife as also Christ is the head of the church, He being the Savior of the body. Nevertheless, as the church is subject to Christ, in this manner also let the wives be to their husbands in everything. (Ephesians 5.18c, 20-24)

- While this still uses the word *subject*, it makes it more difficult to separate out the instructions for the attitude of married Christian women from the context of instruction for the attitude of *all* the members of the Church, that is: '*subjecting yourselves to one another*'.

The context of the social status quo

- Now let's look at this passage as a whole, but with the context of the social norms of that society at that time.
- In that culture the reality was that adult men were the ones who were expected to carry the responsibility for their households.
- And Paul, like Jesus, does not challenge the status quo, and does not push for general social reform.
- Rather, he addresses people's own attitude within their context.
- Previously in this letter the focus has been on ensuring that the Gentile Christians should regard themselves as fully accepted - as much children of God as the Jewish Christians, and as equal inheritors of God's kingdom.
- The diversity that the Gentile Christians bring to the Church is regarded as a blessing, and this kind of diversity across the wider Church community is also to be valued within Church communities.
- The Gentile Christians are reminded not to revert to their pre-conversion habits, but to 'put on Christ' in their attitudes and behaviour towards God and each other.
- And now in today's passage Paul focuses more narrowly on Christian households.
- And he speaks God's word into that reality of the social status quo of that time.
- The status quo was that each married adult male was responsible for their household, and so Paul speaks to the relationships that are directly connected to those adult males.
- In this letter he doesn't bother with the relationships between children, between slaves, between mothers and children, or between the wife and the servants.
- Rather he addresses the men as husbands, and their wives.
- He addresses the men as fathers, and their children.
- And he addresses the men as masters, and their slaves.
- The men have much responsibility, and so most of the instructions focus on how they should exercise their responsibilities as Christians.
- Generally speaking, there are as many verses focused on the men as husbands, fathers and masters, as there are on the wives, children and slaves together.

Attitude towards slavery has changed

- Let's look briefly at the instructions for the slaves.
- They are exhorted to undertake their tasks as if they were serving Christ.

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- I'm reminded of ancient cathedrals where stonemasons and carvers put as much careful craftsmanship into the hidden details as they did into the visible details.
- Why? Because they were conscious of doing this for the glory of God.
- And so the Christian slaves are similarly exhorted:

Slaves, be obeying your masters according-to the flesh with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ— not by way of eye-service as people-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the soul, serving with good-will as to the Lord and not to people, knowing that each one, if he does anything good, will receive this back from the Lord, whether slave or free. (Ephesians 6.5-8)
- The thing is that times have changed, and as a result of the teachings of Christ, we no longer condone slavery.
- Isn't that strange? The Bible condones slavery - accepts it as the norm - doesn't try to overturn it - doesn't encourage general emancipation of slaves.
- And yet, as a direct consequence of the Spirit working through the teachings of Jesus, Christians have been led to abolish a social construct that was accepted as the status quo by Jesus and Paul and others.
- This is a really important perspective of how the Spirit works in us - through Holy Scripture - to address social injustices.
- We recognise that just because slavery is condoned in the Scriptures, that the social context has changed, and that the social justice which is at the heart of Jesus' ministry and teaching is now made manifest by the abolishment of slavery.

Households have changed, too

- And yet there are still some Christians today who will look at the social status quo of marriage at that time, and which Paul condoned, and they refuse to acknowledge that we are no longer living in first century Asia Minor - that the social context has fundamentally changed for us, and that there is now a diversity of household patterns.
- So it is vitally important that we engage with the underlying meaning of this Scripture passage - as with all Scriptures.
- One of the keys is verse 21, which introduces the attitudes that everyone in each household, whether wives or husbands, children or fathers, slaves or masters, is encouraged to have.
- In the NRSV it reads: *Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.*
- This provides the context for the whole of the passage: that each person within the household should have a regard for the concerns of the others, and respond to each other with respect and consideration.
- And that this consideration - this subjecting oneself to one another - should be done in the context that Christ is above all and in all, in the household of faith.
- Previously Paul has stated:

God has put all things under Christ's feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (Ephesians 1.22-23)
- And again Paul has written:

we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body ... promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. (Ephesians 4.15-16)

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- If we understand Paul's exhortation to husbands then to apply now to anyone in similar positions of responsibility for others, then the the most significant statement is in verses 29 and 30:

For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body. (Ephesians 5.29-30)

- The emphasis is on everyone being subject to Christ, since Christ is the head.
- And in the same way that Christ has given of himself, in love, so that others may be nourished and blessed, so too, out of reverence for Christ who is our head, every one of us is likewise called to give of ourselves, in love, so that others may be nourished and blessed.

So may you recognise that while different positions in our society have different responsibilities, such responsibilities are not to be abused.

May you support others in the right fulfilment of the responsibilities of their position.

May you fulfil your own responsibilities as if you were fulfilling them to our Lord, since he is the ultimate authority.

And may you exercise loving consideration for the concerns of others, regardless of their position.

In His name, amen.