

Manifesting the Manifold Wisdom of God
The Spirit of Submission (Ephesians 5:18-24)
Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on April 24, 2016

Introduction

- ❖ I think one of the hardest things for a pastor to do is to help people not just see the truthfulness of Scripture but the goodness of Scripture. To not just agree that what a passage says is true but to see what it says as beautiful. That's what concerns me the most.
 - ▶ Now I realize some of you heard the passage read and you're having a hard time getting past that word *submit*. "Wives, submit to your own husbands." Does that mean what it says? Does that word *submit* have some alternative meaning other than what I'm imagining? I guess that depends on what you're imagining.
 - For me, growing up, submission would've made me think of wrestling, as in a submission hold. You put someone in a choke hold or arm bar and make them submit. Well if that's what you have in mind, then no that's not what this means. One of my goals is to help you interpret this passage correctly.

- ❖ **But like I said, you might end up agreeing with the proper interpretation but still not see its inherent goodness and beauty.** And that means you likely won't live it out in your own life, your own marriage.
 - ▶ Perhaps you've been with us for some time and have already heard us teaching on this. And maybe you agree it's true. But it doesn't feel good. **So that's my bigger burden, to help you not just agree you need to submit to the proper authorities that God's placed in your life – but to gladly submit to them.**

- ❖ Growing up I was told that brussels sprouts were good for me. I believed it. I never had any reason to think it wasn't true. But I never ate them. I thought they tasted gross. But then I ate at Uchi. Have you had their brussels sprouts? Once I tasted how brussels sprouts are supposed to be cooked, everything was different. Now I think they're delicious. They're not just good for me, they're good *to* me!
 - ▶ **There's a difference between knowing something is good for you and actually trying it and coming to realize it tastes good to you.** You've come to appreciate its goodness. That's what I'm hoping for. That's what I've been praying for. **For wives to see the goodness in gladly submitting to their husband's leadership.** As well as for children to see the goodness in gladly submitting to their parents and employees to their employers. Because that's where Paul goes in this passage.

- ❖ So let me explain where we're going in this sermon. We've got two halves. In the first, we're going to consider what a Spirit-filled person looks like, and in the second half, we'll consider what Spirit-enabled submission looks like, specifically in marriage.

What a Spirit-Filled Person Looks Like

- ❖ I think it's typical for us to jump right into v22 about wives submitting. We treat this as a new section in Paul's letter because our English translations usually put some sort of header here dividing it from vv18-21. But it was all meant to be read together. **Paul never intended for you to read and attempt to interpret and apply v22 apart from vv18-21.** That's why this passage is often misinterpreted and misapplied, leading to controversy and confusion.

- ❖ In the Greek, v22 doesn't even have its own verb. The verb *submit* is actually inferred from v21. The English translations added it because "Wives to your own husbands, as to the Lord" doesn't read well. So the point is we can't jump right into v22. I think we should start in v18.
 - ▶ **In v18, Paul is contrasting the difference between being filled with alcohol and filled with the Spirit.** Let me read it again, "*And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit*".

- ❖ There's some confusion over this idea of being filled with the Spirit. **You might of heard people speak of being a Spirit-filled believer.** And some people treat that as a separate category of Christian. You start off as a believer, but one day you receive a second blessing and from then on, you're a Spirit-filled believer on a higher plane of holiness or spirituality.
 - ▶ But that interpretation fails to recognize that the command "be filled with the Spirit" is a present tense imperative, which in Greek grammar means this is a continuous action. This describes every believer. **Every Christian is to continually filled with the Spirit every day.**

- ❖ **The focus on being filled with the Spirit is not on what's inside you but on what it does to you.** That's why Paul compares it with being filled with wine. He's not just concerned with the presence of alcohol in you but the power of what alcohol can do to you. The focus is on the controlling influence of spirits (wonder why strong liquors are called spirits?).
 - ▶ Think about it. When you're **under the influence of alcohol**, it affects your thinking, your emotions, your behavior. It causes you to do things that don't come natural. **You're no longer acting like your natural self.** Drunk people act more like animals than dignified creatures made in the very image of God. **Being filled with alcohol has a dehumanizing effect on you.**

- ❖ But compare that to the Holy Spirit. When you're **under the influence of the Spirit** (if you're comfortable putting it that way), he also affects your thinking, emotions, and behavior. **The Spirit causes you to do things that don't come natural.** You're no longer acting like your natural self. But now in supernatural ways.
 - ▶ **And rather than dehumanizing you, being filled with the Spirit of God makes you even more human.** Because you're becoming more like our Lord Jesus, the epitome of what it means to be human. He is the one perfect human. And when the Spirit has a hold on your life, he's trying to shape it more into the image of Christ.

- ❖ **But I realize for some people, the idea of being filled with the Spirit, being under his controlling influence, sounds restrictive and repressive.** It seems like an affront to our free will. Is the Spirit of God trying to make us robots? Does becoming a Christian mean giving up free will and becoming a robot who does the will of another? Who's controlled by God?
 - ▶ That doesn't sound very appealing. And maybe some of you have resisted becoming a Christian for this reason. But I hope you see that having the Spirit of God in your life, filling it and controlling it, is far from repressive. It's actually freeing!

- ❖ **A fish is only free when you restrict it to water.** It was made for water to be in it, through it, and all around it. You can try to liberate it by letting it live on land but that won't turn out well. A fish was made to be filled with water.
 - ▶ **In the same way, you and I were made to be filled with the Spirit, to be under the influence of the Spirit of God.** I know you cherish freedom. But I hope you realize this freedom is not found by shedding all restrictions (God included), but by finding and submitting yourself under the right restrictions according to how you were made. And the Bible says you were made by God for God. You were made to be filled with the Spirit. You don't know true freedom until you are.

- ❖ Now Paul goes on to describe what a Spirit-filled person look like. Start in v19. **Someone continually filled with the Spirit will be characterized by a heart of worship.** Singing may come naturally to you but worship is not. Worship is something that spills out of your heart as you're filled more and more with the Spirit.
 - ▶ **Notice how the first clause has a horizontal dimension to it.** "*Addressing one another in psalms and hymn and spiritual songs.*" What Paul has in mind is mutual instruction, mutual edification through our songs. So in a sense we're singing to each other. We're reminding ourselves of gospel truths as we sing them. Of course that assumes our songs have enough substantial content to actually teach each other.
 - So worship has a horizontal dimension, but of course it's **primarily vertical**. Notice the second clause in v19, "*singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart.*" We're not just singing to each other or to the air. We're singing to Christ from the heart.

- ❖ So one of the characteristics of a Spirit-filled person is a heart of worship. **The second characteristic is an attitude of thankfulness.** Look at v20, "*giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*"
 - ▶ Now you might be thinking thankfulness is something a non-Christian without the Spirit can just as well feel and express. Why is this uniquely an outflow of the Spirit's filling? Because we're talking about thankfulness *always and for everything*. Not just being thankful to God when things are going well in your life, when everything is going according to plan, but even when things are tough, when things are not happening, when they're falling apart. Always and for everything. That takes Spirit-enabled power. You can't do that on your own.

- ❖ **And lastly another characteristic of a Spirit-filled person is a spirit of submission.** Look at v21, "*submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.*" For the natural person submission is degrading. It's so hard. It doesn't come natural. **But for the Spirit-filled person, a person under the influence of the Spirit, it's different, submission becomes possible.** It starts to feel natural.

- ❖ Do you see why I said you can't just jump into v22? **If you're a wife trying to submit to her husband and you're trying to read and apply v22 in isolation, that's a heavy yoke that'll likely crush you.** If you focus on trying to submit, you'll probably end up relying on your own strength to change the way you think about your husband, to change the way you feel about him, and the way you speak to him.
 - ▶ But if you start with v18 and focus on God – focus on being filled and led by the Spirit of God – then he'll progressively change you into the kind of wife whose thoughts, feelings, and speech towards her husband is marked by a glad submission.
 - **If you're trying to change yourself or your marriage, don't just focus on what you need to do.** Focus on what on what God has done and is doing to change you, and then as you're overfilled with his Spirit, the desired attitude or behavior will flow out. That's the connection.

- ❖ Now before we move into the next few verses, **let me try to clear up a common misconception that says v21 is teaching mutual submission when it says to submit "to one another"**. That interpretation basically overturns the normal use of the term and suggests a flattening of roles between husband and wife where wives submit to husbands and husbands submit to wives – in exactly the same way.
 - ▶ I don't think that's a good interpretation. **It assumes the phrase "to one another" always implies a symmetrical response**, but there plenty of places in the NT where that's just not the case (cf. Rev. 6:4, Gal. 6:2; 1 Cor. 11:33). And besides, if you're going to argue that v21 says husbands should also submit to their wives, then by extension you have to argue that parents should submit to their children and masters to their slaves.

- ❖ I think a better interpretation is not to see v21 as teaching mutual submission, but **rather as a general command to submit to whoever God has placed in your life as a proper authority**. So for wives, that means your husband. Children, your parents. Employees, your boss. If he wanted, Paul could've included church members to elders (1 Cor. 16:15-16; 1 Pet. 5:5) or citizens to rulers (Rom. 13:1; 1 Pet. 2:12).
 - ▶ So I think Paul is basically saying, **"A Spirit-filled person is characterized by submitting to one another, and by that I mean wives will willingly submit to husbands, children to parents, and slaves to masters."** That's what you'd expect from someone filled and under the influence of the Spirit.

What Spirit-Enabled Submission Looks Like in Marriage

- ❖ Now let's narrow our focus and consider the first relational pair that Paul looks at. My question is: *What does this Spirit-enabled of wives to their own husbands look like?* I'm going to offer six observations, each one explaining what it's not and what it is.

- ❖ **First, Spirit-enabled submission is not a question of worth but of role.** This is the biggest misconception – that to tell a wife to submit to her husband communicates that she's of less worth. That she's the less important of the two, since he's the leader and she's just the helper.

- ❖ **But when the Bible speaks about the worth / dignity / value of men and women in the eyes of God, it couldn't be more clear that they are equally cherished.** Genesis 1:27 speaks of male and female both sharing in the image of God. A man does not reflect more of God's image than a woman. In terms of worth, they're co-equals. But even Genesis makes a distinction between worth and role. Soon after in Genesis 2:18, the woman is called a helper to the man. She's her husband's helpmate. **They're equal in worth but different in role.**
 - ▶ There's no question that the Bible teaches the full equality of men and women (cf. Gal. 3:28). **The real question is whether this equality is compatible with the call for wives to submit to their husbands.** Based on what we've seen in this letter, the answer for Paul is yes.

- ❖ **Remember, up to this point, his letter has been focused on the theme of unity and oneness.** Chapter 1:10 says God's entire plan of redemption is aimed at uniting all things in Christ. Chapter 1:22 says all things will be put under Christ's feet and he'll be the one head over all things. Chapter 2:15 says that Christ created in himself one new man in the place of two distant peoples, tearing down the dividing wall of hostility. Chapter 4:3 urges us to maintain the unity of the Spirit that Christ has established. There is one body and one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all (4:4-6).
 - ▶ **After spending that time celebrating our oneness in Christ, it would make no sense if Paul were to construct a new dividing wall between the genders.** Give him some credit. He's not contradicting himself. He can celebrate marital oneness, and at the same time call for wives to submit to their husbands. **It's because he makes a distinction between the dignity of persons and the difference of roles.**

- ❖ And when it comes to marital roles, **Paul's teaching that husbands are called to lead their wives with Christ-like sacrificial love, and wives are to support the leadership of their husbands with Church-like glad submission.** We're going to unpack this further in next week's message. But one point I need to stress here. This is all in the context of marriage. **Note that it's addressed to wives in relation to their own husbands – not to women in general in relation to all the various men in their lives.**
 - ▶ Wives, we're talking about a submission that is uniquely given to your husband alone. No other man in your life – be it your father, your brother, your boss, your pastor – has this unique authority over you and your household. And unmarried sisters, know that you are not called to submit to your boyfriend as you would to a future husband. Be careful not to overlook context in your urgency to apply Scripture.

- ❖ **Second, Spirit-enabled submission is not to be forced but to be willing and glad.** Note how Paul doesn't speak to husbands and tell them to make sure their wives are submitting to their leadership.
 - ▶ Brothers, if you ever find yourself pulling out the "*But the bible says to submit*" card in an argument with your wife, you probably already lost that one. That's not how this works. **This is a command for wives to obey, not for you to enforce.**

- ❖ Some people are going to argue that Paul is just accommodating to the cultural norms of his day. He trying to maintain the gospel's credibility within a highly patriarchal society, so he's conforming to Greco-Roman standards for the household.
 - ▶ But that overlooks the fact that Paul is actually bucking the norm by directly speaking to wives, children, and slaves. All of whom, in Greco-Roman society, were never treated as autonomous moral agents. In that culture, if you had a word for a wife, you'd bring it up to her husband. You'd never address her directly. **But here Paul is treating wives as equally capable of instruction and equally responsible for their own discipleship to Christ.** That's pretty radical!

- ❖ Here's also where learning a bit of Greek grammar helps. Greek verbs have different voices. There's the **active voice** where the subject performs the action (i.e. the wrestler submitted his opponent). There's the **passive voice** where the action is performed on the subject (i.e. the wrestler *was* submitted by his opponent). Then there's the **middle voice** where the subject performs the action upon him/herself (i.e. the wrestler submitted himself).
 - ▶ **What we have in v21 (which is inferred in v22) is the verb *submit* in the middle voice.** We're talking about a voluntary submission where the wife submits herself to her husband. She is accountable to God for her own actions, for her own obedience to his commands. And as she is continually filled by the Spirit of God, she'll gladly choose to submit.

- ❖ In v24 it says she's to submit just as the Church submits to Christ, which is supposed to be a willing and glad submission. But maybe that's the problem. **Maybe one reason we stumble over the idea of wives submitting to husbands is because, in our own walks as members of the Church, we're not very familiar with glad submission to Christ.**
 - ▶ If we're struggling in our obedience, submitting with a begrudging spirit, without joy and merely out of duty – then of course that'll color our interpretation of this passage. We'll project our struggles to submit to Christ onto wives. **Only until we learn to willingly and gladly submit to Christ ourselves are we ever going to see the dignity and the goodness of wives submitting to their husbands.**

- ❖ **Third, Spirit-enabled submission is not conditional but wholehearted.** That means a wife's submission is not contingent on a husband's performance. Sisters, you might be thinking you'd have no problem submitting to him as the church submits to Christ *if* he proves to be a good leader. But if he's lazy and selfish, then no deal.
 - ▶ But think about it. What if your husband were to say, "I'll love her sacrificially like Christ loves the church *if* she proves to be a submissive wife"? That doesn't feel right. **Love shouldn't be conditional, especially if it's modeled after the love of Christ.** Jesus loves us even when our performance is lacking. So a husband's love should not be conditional. I agree. But neither should a wife's submission. Think about it. **The church doesn't submit to Christ conditionally but wholeheartedly.**

- ❖ **A wife's submission is not conditioned on how well her husband loves – just as his love is not conditioned on how well she submits.** A wife gladly submits and a husband sacrificially loves because it's all part and parcel of our overall wholehearted obedience to the Lord – who we trust has designed marriage to function in this way. And when you do things God's way, you can be sure of God's blessing to you and your marriage.
- ❖ **Fourth, Spirit-enabled submission must not be compartmentalized but comprehensive.** What I mean is that a wife's submission should not be compartmentalized to only certain areas of home life – like the spiritual life of the home. We often speak of husbands being the spiritual leaders of the home, and that's true and right. **But if you're always adding the adjective *spiritual* to leader, there's a danger of compartmentalizing his leadership to that realm only and allowing him to capitulate on the rest.**
 - ▶ So the husband will lead and the wife will submit when it comes to spiritual issues like family devotions and church involvement, but when it comes to finances or raising and disciplining children or just managing the family calendar, the husband is completely hands off or the wife demands to take charge.
- ❖ But read v24 again, "*Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.*" In everything. Not just in the areas of home life where the husband feels competent or shows competence. ***In everything* means the husband is responsible – not to do everything and make every decision in the home – but to exercise godly leadership and responsibility over everything.** And the wife is to offer glad submission and support to his comprehensive leadership.
- ❖ But here's where I need to offer another important qualifier. **The submission of a wife to her husband is comprehensive, but it's not absolute.** Remember, v22 tells wives to submit to their husbands "*as to the Lord.*" The point is he's your husband, not your Lord.
 - ▶ **So your submission to your Lord Jesus and his demands always take priority over any ungodly demand of your husband.** If he tries to lead you and your family onto the path of sin, you must not follow for the Lord's sake (and your husband's), but you can still do that while maintaining a spirit of submission.
 - **And please hear me, there's nothing here to suggest that biblical submission would require a wife to submit to physical abuse.** If you're a victim of abuse, you have to speak up and seek protection from proper authorities, especially if you have children under your care. This beautiful concept of biblical submission should never be used to justify such ugly, cowardly, sinful behavior.
- ❖ **Fifth, Spirit-enabled submission does not ask for silent acquiescence but humble respect.** Some husbands feel strongly that their wives should never correct them because they consider that a sign of disrespect and a lack of submission. Now I think there is something to be said about not correcting your husband in public, but that would apply equally to husbands not doing that to their wives.

- ▶ **But when you're in private, and when done with the right motives, correcting your spouse *is* loving your spouse.** In chapter 4:15, we're called to speak the truth in love, and in v25 to speak the truth with your neighbor. Your obligation to your husband is certainly not less than your obligation to your neighbor!
 - Wives, your duty to offer humble, loving biblical correction to the man you love was not cancelled when you took your marriage vows. If anything it was reinforced with even more at stake.

- ❖ **Sixth, Spirit-enabled submission in Scripture doesn't spell out all the details but it does lay out a vision.** I know some of you wish there was a list of responsibilities laid out in Scripture delineating what the husband does and what the wife does. What decisions she can make and what decisions are for him.
 - ▶ I'm certain most of the day to day questions you have are not answered and spelled out in any passage. The Bible doesn't answer the question of whether the wife should earn more or work more than the husband. Or if she should even be working when the kids are young. It doesn't tell us who should cook and who should do the dishes.
 - We're not given a list of chores. Instead we're given a beautiful picture. **A grand vision of a godly husband sacrificially loving like Christ and a godly wife gladly submitting like the Church.**

- ❖ It was a vision offered 2000 years ago to first-century Christians, but it's still just as relevant today since it's a vision rooted in God's good design for creation (5:31; Gen. 2:24). Even more, it's rooted in the Gospel, in the relationship between Christ and the Church (5:32).
 - ▶ **But of course I'm not suggesting that cultural expressions of marriage have not and should not change over the centuries and between cultures.** Brothers, these days it'll take a lot of courage (more like foolishness) if you're a husband and you're not pulling your own weight in household chores or in the care of your children.
 - Maybe your dad just came home after a long day of work, sat on the couch, propped up his feet, and watched TV for the rest of the night – while mom fed the kids, helped them with homework, and got them washed up and in bed. Don't try that at home. Times have changed and sometimes for the better.

- ❖ **But what hasn't changed is God's design and vision for marriage. And what else hasn't changed is your need for the Holy Spirit to live out this vision in your respective roles.** You need his filling. You need his controlling influence, his enabling power. So before you pray for more resolve and strength to carry out your role, pray first for more of God. For more of his Spirit to fill you and move you in obedience to his will.