

THE LIFE OF FAITH Chapter 9 Christian Submission

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Transcript

THE LIFE OF FAITH

Chapter 9

Christian Submission

"submitting yourselves one to another, in the fear of God" (Ephesians 5:21).

This is a general exhortation which sums up much of what has been set forth in the fourth and fifth chapters of this epistle. It is founded upon the grand truth of the unity of the mystical Body of Christ, being addressed to the saints in whom, as living members of that Body, in the building up of which they are both individually interested and personally responsible, according to the measure of grace bestowed upon each (4:1-7, 16). When bidding them "speak every man truth with his neighbor", it was at once added "for we are members one of another" (4:25). Holding firmly to the head by faith, they were to walk in the power of that Spirit who secured them in Christ for salvation and joined them to each other in his love (5:18-20). Above all, it was to be kept in their remembrance that corporately they were God's "temple" (2:19-21) and individually his "children" (5:1), and so were exhorted to "walk in love" (5:2) and "in the fear of God". Therefore they should submit themselves not only to God in their individual relation to him, but also to one another. Ephesians 5:21 is also to be regarded as standing at the head of that section of the epistle which runs on to the end of 6:9, enunciating the general principle which is illustrated by the details of the verses that follow. "Submitting yourselves one to another" certainly does not signify that true Christianity is a species of spiritual communism, which reduces all to one common level. So far from breaking up the ordinary relations of life and producing disorder, lawlessness and insubordination, it confirms every legitimate authority and makes each just yoke lighter. Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God... Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute, custom to whom custom, fear to whom fear, honour to whom honour (Rom. 13:1, 7). Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves, for they watch for your souls, that they may give account, that they may do it with joy and not with grief (Heb. 13:17). Fear God, honour the king (1 Pet. 2:17). "Submitting yourselves one to another": according to your different situations and relations in the church and in the community, and that subjection which is established by God's Word and ordered by his providence. This call to mutual subjection then, not only crowns the series of precepts going before, but is also made the foundation of an exposition of Christian deportment in those natural and

social relations to which special obligations belong, and in which Christians are likely to find themselves placed. The gospel does not abolish civil distinctions, but binds the believer unto a keeping of the order set up by God. In the light of what immediately follows, where wives are enjoined to be in subjection to their husbands, children to their parents, and servants to their masters, some have concluded that "submitting yourselves one to another" signifies nothing more than "render obedience unto whom it is due". But it is an unwarrantable narrowing of its scope to restrict it unto the duty of inferiors to superiors, for the terms of this injunction are not qualified. Nor does such a limitation accord so well with other Scriptures. But more: such an interpretation is not in keeping with what follows, for husbands, parents, masters, are also addressed and their duties pressed upon them. While the duty of the wife's subjection to her husband is insisted upon, yet the obligations of the husband to his wife are also enforced. If children be there required to render obedience to their parents, the responsibility of fathers is also stated. While servants are instructed how to conduct themselves unto their masters, the latter are taught to treat their employees with due consideration and kindness. There too the balance is blessedly preserved. Power is not to be abused. Authority must not degenerate into tyranny. Law is to be administered mercifully. Rule is to be regulated by love. Government and discipline must be maintained in the state, the church, and the home; yet governors are to act in the fear of God, and instead of domineering over their subjects, seek their good and serve their interests. Christians are not to aspire after dominance but usefulness. Self-denial rather than self-assertiveness is the badge of Christian discipleship. Saints are likened unto sheep and not goats or wolves. Submitting yourselves one to another means mutually serving one another, seeking each other's well-being and advantage in all things. "Sin is the transgression of the law" (1 John 3:24): that is to say, sin is a revolt against God's authority, a defying of him, a species of self-will. Sin chafes at any restraints, determined to have its own way. Sin is self-centered, imperious, indifferent to the welfare of others. Yokes and restrictions are intolerable unto sin, and every attempt to enforce them meets with opposition. That resistance is evinced from earliest infancy, for a thwarted babe will cry and kick because not suffered to have its own way. Because all are born in sin the world is filled with strife and contention, crime and war. But at regeneration a principle of grace is communicated, and though sin be not annihilated, its dominion is broken. The love of God is shed abroad in the renewed heart to counteract its native selfishness. The yoke of Christ is voluntarily assumed by the believer and his example becomes the rule of his daily walk. Made a member of Christ's body, he is henceforth to lay himself out in promoting the interests of his brethren and sisters. He is under bonds to do good unto all men, especially to those who belong to the Household of Faith. It is because sin indwells the Christian, he needs to have this injunction "submitting yourselves one to another" frequently pressed upon him. Such is poor human nature that when a man is elevated to a position of honour, even though it be a regenerate man who is called to serve as a deacon, he is prone to lord it over his brethren. A most solemn warning against this horrible proclivity is found in Luke 22:24. "And there was also a strife among them, which of them should be accounted the greatest." That strife was among the twelve apostles, while they sat in the Saviour's presence, after the Supper! Alas, how little has that warning been heeded! How many since then have aspired for the same precedence. How often a spirit of envy and strife has been engendered by those who strove for superiority in the churches. How few realize that doing good is better than being great, or rather, that the only true and noble greatness consists in being good and doing good - to spend and be spent in the service of others. Greatness is not being toadied unto, but ministering to those less favored. Nevertheless, there is a subordination and condescension appointed by God which we are required to observe. This is true of ecclesiastical power. God has ordained that there shall be teachers and taught, governors and governed. He raises up those who are to have the supervision of others, and they are required to subordinate themselves to their authority (Heb. 13:17). But their rule is administrative and not legislative, directive

more than authoritative, and "managed by a council rather than a court" as Manton expresses it. Here too there must be mutual submission, for in both governors and governed there is mutual service. The governors themselves are but "ministers" (1 Cor. 4:1): they have indeed an honorable office, yet they are only servants (2 Cor. 4:5), whose work is to feed the flock, to act as directors or guides by word and example (1 Tim. 4:12). Though they "are over you in the Lord" (1 Thess. 5:12), yet not "as being lords over God's heritage" (1 Pet. 5:5) but as motivated by love for souls, seeking their edification, gently endeavoring to persuade rather than compelling and tyrannizing. There is also a political power, or governmental authority, in the civil state, which is God's ordinance and unto which his people must yield for his sake. "Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king as supreme; or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well" (1 Pet. 2:12, 13). Thus there is an obligation of conscience to submit unto our civil governors, both unto the supreme and the subordinate magistrate, the only exception being when they require something from me which clashes with God's Rule, for to act contrary to that would be defiance of Divine authority, and therefore would be for the Devil's sake rather than the Lord's. Honour, subordination, obedience is due unto the ministers of state, nevertheless they in turn are under the Divine dominion, "for he is the minister of God to thee for good" (Rom. 13:4). The magistrate, the member of the cabinet (or senate), the king himself, is but the servant of God, to whom he must yet render an account of his stewardship; in the meantime, he must perform his duty for the good of the commonwealth, serving the interests of those under him. So too of the economical power, that of the husband. parent, master. There are not only duties pertaining to those relations, but mutual obligations wherein the power of the superior is to be subordinated to the interests of the inferior. The husband is the head of the wife and she is required to own him as her lord (1 Pet. 3:6), but that gives him no right to act as a tyrant and make her the slave of his lusts. He is under bonds to love and cherish her, to give honour to her as unto the weaker vessel, to seek her happiness and do all in his power to lighten her burden. Parents are to govern their children and not to tolerate insubordination, yet they must not provoke them to wrath by brutal treatment, but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, teaching them to be truthful, industrious, honest, looking after the good of their souls as well as bodies. Masters are bidden to give unto their servants "that which is just and equal, knowing that they have a Master in heaven" (Col. 4:1) who will sanction no injustice and condone no harshness. God has so tied us one to another that everyone is to do his part in promoting the common good. Power is bestowed upon men by God not for the purpose of their self-exaltation but for the benefit of those they rule. Power is to be exercised with goodwill and benevolence, and deference is to be rendered by the subordinate - not sullenly, but freely and gladly, as unto God. "Brethren, ye have been called unto liberty: only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another" (Gal. 5:13) interprets for us "submitting yourselves one to another". It is the mutual submission of brotherly love which is there enjoined, of that love which "seeketh not her own", but ever labours for the good of its objects. It is that mutual subjection which one Christian owes to another, not seeking to advance himself above his fellows and domineer over them, but which is selfless, bearing one another's burdens. It is in the exercise of that spirit we please God, adorn the gospel, and make it manifest that we are the followers of him who was meek and lowly in heart. It is by mortifying our pride and selfishness, by the exercise of mutual affection, by discharging the office of respect and kindness unto the children of God, we show forth that we have passed from death unto life. "Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love, in honour preferring one another" (Rom. 12:10). The Greek word there for "preferring" signifies to take the lead or set an example. Instead of waiting for others to honour or minister unto me, I should be beforehand in deferring unto them. Where Christian love be cultivated and exercised there is a thinking and acting respectfully unto our brethren and sisters. "In lowliness of mind let each

esteem other better than themselves" (Phil. 2:3). That does not mean the father in Christ is to value the opinions of a spiritual babe more than his own, still less that he is to feign a respect for the spirituality of another which he does not honestly feel; but it does signify that if his heart be right, he will so discern the image of Christ in his people as to make deference in love to them both an easy and pleasant duty, putting their interests before his own; and judging himself faithfully, he will discover that "the least of all saints" suits no man better than himself. The exercised and humble believer will rather put honour on his brethren than seek it for himself. If then God has called you into the ministry, it is not that you may ape the peacock or set yourself up as a little pope. You are not called to lord it over God's vineyard but to labour in it, to minister unto his people. The greatest of the apostles declared, "Though I be free from all, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more" (1 Cor. 9:19). But one infinitely greater than Paul is your pattern. Behold him humbling himself to perform the most menial office, as he girded himself with a towel, stooped down and washed the feet of his disciples! And remember it is unto the ministers of his gospel that he said: "If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his Lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him" (John 13:14-16).

A haughty and arrogant spirit ill becomes his servants. That holy balance between "call no man your father upon the earth" and "submitting yourselves one to another" was perfectly exemplified by the Lord Jesus, who though God incarnate was also Jehovah's Servant. If on the one hand we find that he refused to be in bondage to the doctrines and commandments of the Pharisees (Luke 11:38; Matthew 15:2), and overrode their traditions with his authoritative "I say unto you" (Matthew 5:21,22 etc.), on the other hand we behold him submitting unto every ordinance of God and perfectly exemplifying every aspect of lowly submission. As a child he was "subject unto" his parents (Luke 2:51). Ere he began his ministry he submitted to be baptized of John, saying "thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15). He sought not his own glory (John 8:50) but rather the glory of the one who sent him (John 7:18). He denied himself food and rest that he might minister to others (Mark 3:20). The whole of his time was spent in "going about doing good" (Acts 10:38). He bore patiently and tenderly with the dullness of his disciples, and broke not the bruised reed nor quenched the smoking flax (Matthew 12:20). And he has left us an example that we should follow his steps. Submitting ourselves one to another means according to each the right of private judgment and respecting his convictions. It imports a readiness to receive counsel and reproof from my brethren, as David did when he was king (Ps. 141:5). It connotes a cheerful denying of self as I seek their good. It signifies doing all in my power to minister unto their holiness and happiness. As one of the old worthies put it, "The saints are trees of righteousness whose fruit is to be eaten by others; candles, which spend themselves in giving light and comfort to those about them". To obey this precept we require to be clothed with humility: it is the proud who cannot endure subjection, and who consider it beneath them to lend a helping hand to those less favored. Love must be warm and active if superiors and inferiors are to treat one another with kindness and respect. Where love reigns none will be disdained or slighted. "In the fear of God" this submission is to be rendered: in conscience to his command, with a regard for his glory.

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