



Ephesians – Your Best Life

Date: Sunday 15th April 2018

Speakers: Becky Stamps, James Hill

Key Verses: Ephesians 5:22 – 6:9

Summary

Authority has been used badly in our society, meaning that people today often struggle to trust authority figures and institutions. The three institutions Paul talks about - marriage, family and work - are all relatively well-known. Many people will have had positive and negative experiences of authority within these structures. Each of these three also has a relationship to how we think of God – as husband to his people (as in the Bible books of Hosea and Revelation), as Father and as Lord.

Two overarching themes of Ephesians are what God has done for us 'in Christ' and the unity and mutual love of believers 'in Christ' that flows out of that. In 5:21, Paul encourages believers to 'submit to one another out of reverence for Christ', as part of serving and sharing the God who loves them in Christ and as a way to promote unity.

Paul then goes on to talk specifically about the three institutions mentioned earlier, encouraging submission to authority figures in these situations out of a desire to demonstrate who God is and what Christ has done, as well as in order to promote unity between believers. He is culturally radical in his demands on husbands, fathers and masters or lords, advocating an authority which is very different to that we often experience in the world. Those with authority are to be servants of those they lead, sacrificing themselves to build up those who submit to them, just as Jesus does for his church, ultimately giving up everything for them and their welfare, as Jesus did through his death. Those who submit are to do so in a way which demonstrates who the Church is to Christ, serving and loving him as he submitted to God the Father during his ministry and ultimately on the cross.

This picture of authority and submission turns conventional notions of power on their heads. It should provide an antidote, a corrective story for a world that badly needs loving, servant-hearted, trustworthy authority and joyful, generous submission. When we begin to move in this direction, we can heal our own churches and the culture beyond them – we can also be a living picture of what God is doing in Christ, in reconciling the whole world under Jesus' lordship.

Paul ends with a joyful, and sobering, thought: there is no partiality with God, in any of these areas. God sees no difference in value between people of different gender, age, social status or any other human divide. Eventually, each of these structures will come to an end – there will be no marriage in the Kingdom of God and there will be only one Master, Jesus. While Paul does not throw out marriage, family or work (we are still to live within them) we do so as people of another culture, radically servant-hearted, seeking unity, using them to point to Jesus, as a shadow and a taste of what God's done and what will come when Jesus returns.

Questions for Small Groups

- How has the notion of authority and submission been undermined in our culture? (James used the example of Oxfam's recent negative press over abuses of power in Haiti).
- How does the gospel/life of Jesus help us understand what Christian authority and submission should look like?
- This passage has been used to justify abuses such as domestic violence and slavery. How would reading this part of the Bible in such a way undermine the gospel and even our understanding of God? How could we as the people of God address such abuses in a Christ-like way?
- Take some time to pray together for one or more of the following areas. As you pray, think about how we can stand with people in each situation:
 - Pray for marriages, especially those in which authority and submission is a difficult issue (perhaps because one partner is not a Christian or because of other difficult circumstances).
 - Pray for families, for parents and children who may be at odds with each other or just be looking to bring more unity and peace to their homes.
 - Pray for workplaces, for employers and employees to deal with each other in positive, God-honoring, servant-hearted ways, and for a change in business culture more widely.
 - Pray for the leaders of world nations, that God would bring a change in how power and authority are used in our cultures that would be more in line with the coming Kingdom of God.

To ponder or pray about this week...

Where are you in an authority relationship with somebody? How easy do you find it to be Christ-like in that situation? Take time to pray for that person and ask God to help you serve them well, whatever situation you're in.