
The Bible: Love, Faith, Wisdom and Grace

**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
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Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.

Ephesians 5:21-24

Every three years, the Episcopal Church reads this passage on Sunday morning. It is part of our assigned readings. It is Holy Scripture. We hear it, and the reader says "The Word of the Lord." We respond, "Thanks be to God."

And internally, we think to ourselves. Did I just hear what I thought I heard? Did the Bible just say that wives should be subject to their husbands in everything? Do I want to say "Amen" to that? Isn't there another point of view that should be heard here? Is that the only way that husbands and wives should order their marriage relationship?

Many Christians claim that Ephesians chapter 5 describes the only way that husbands and wives ought to order their marriage relationship. After all, scripture declares it! The husband is head of the wife; wives, be subject to your husbands. Many Christians claim that this arrangement ought always to be true, no matter what else may be going on.

But other Christians, before making such an absolute claim, visit a wider range of scripture. Surely, they say, the relationship of husband and wife is complex enough that there are various ways that husbands and wives make decisions or set up a household.

I am of this second group of Christians. I believe the Bible. I love the Bible. I need the Bible. It is the inspired Word of God. In these pages, I find Jesus, whom Peter rightly says has the Word of Life (John 6.68). I find here the Word of Love, of Faith, of Wisdom, and of Grace. In these pages, I also find puzzles and mysteries. Those puzzles and mysteries do not deter me from further scripture study; instead, they compel me to study further.

In our search for Godly wisdom, the Church uses many sources. The Bible is one; it is our primary source. Our history and tradition are other sources. God-given reason is a source. Our experience is another.

We use those sources to develop our moral and social lives. Those sources help us, for instance, to be married. The estate of marriage has always been holy in the Christian Church, and that will never change. The marriage of husband and wife is sacred and good and life-giving. We need it.

But the particularities of each marriage are always different. Take a look around. The way that Mary and John commit themselves to each other, the way they structure their marriage, is surely different from the way my wife and I structure our marriage. The Bible informs both of us couples, but we interpret it differently.

Bible interpretation is a careful and sacred art. It is not served well by absolutists and litigators.

Many of our historical controversies have been about the interpretation of the Bible, not about reverence for the Bible! When Henry the Eighth struggled to have an heir to the throne of England, he thought his wife's miscarriages were a result of God's judgment. After all, that wife (Catherine of Aragon) had been, first, his brother's wife! When his brother had died, Henry had married his deceased brother's wife, Catherine. Folks had used the bible to justify that marriage.

It is right there at Deuteronomy 25.5 : "If brethren dwell together and one of them die, and have no child, the wife of the dead shall not marry unto a stranger; her husband's brother shall go in unto her, and take her to him as wife, and perform the duty of an husband's brother unto her." (That is certainly a scriptural injunction if I have ever heard one.)

But when Catherine did not have a male child, Henry began to sense that another section of scripture took precedence. Maybe Leviticus 20.21 was correct. Leviticus 20.21 says that "if a man shall take his brother's wife, it is an unclean thing; he hath uncovered his brother's nakedness; and they shall be childless." Maybe, thought Henry, that was why he was childless.

You know, as well as I, how often certain verses of the Bible have been used to justify our arguments. The Bible was certainly used to justify the continuation of slavery. Read one chapter later today in this very Book of Ephesians, chapter 6, verse 5: "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ." Read the 1856 sermon by the Reverend Thornton Stringfellow, entitled "A Scriptural view of Slavery."

The Bible has been used to deny women leadership roles in the Church. I Corinthians 14, verse 34 clearly says "As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says."

Do you disagree? Does God's spirit of grace and truth prompt you to cite another biblical source? Many of us sense that direction, and there begins our disagreement. There begin certain controversies. How do we get through them?

Well, we get through them by loving one another with faith, wisdom, and grace. We get through them by arguing with another, but by clinging, cleaving to one another. (This is why I personally attended a certain meeting this past Thursday night.) Indeed, it is like a husband and wife -and their family- having a bona fide controversy. He said, she said. These are not pleasant times for the couple, but they are inevitable. They are inevitable if each partner wants to be open to God's Spirit and Wisdom.

We can love one another, with faith, wisdom, and grace. We can cling to one another even in disagreement.

How else can we get through the controversies? There is another way, too. It is by searching the scriptures, the scriptures in which we know we will find the Word of grace and truth. It turns out that in this very passage we have read today, Ephesians, chapter 5, I find a key verse right next to our controversial one. Ephesians 5:21 says, "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ." That verse, in a strict sense, contradicts verse 24, three verses later, which says "Wives be subject to your husbands." If you take verse 24 absolutely, there is no room to also accept verse 21. Is it "be subject to one another," or is it "only wives be subject to your husbands?"

The Church is in danger when we take individual verses absolutely. Instead, we take the entire Word of God absolutely. We take the entire message of God's grace absolutely. We do not take individual verses absolutely. This is what our Anglican ancestors tried to claim in the Thirty-Nine Articles, in 1571: "Neither may the Church so expound one piece of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another."

How can we rest when there are so many scriptures? How do we find a home in all these scriptures? How do we get home? Can we be at the same home together?

Yes, I believe with all my heart that we can. I believe that God calls us together during these household moments of controversy. Another way of saying that is, simply, that I do not believe in divorce.

God is not opposed to our disagreements, but God is certainly opposed to our division, or our divorce. Our disagreements can be ways that we learn from each other. Our disagreements can be ways that we acknowledge our mistakes and errors and learn from each other. I have certainly made mistakes. I hereby acknowledge and bewail them.

But, finally, I believe in God's grace. If we do not have room for grace, then we will not get home. The place where we can rest is the place where God's grace resides. Where is grace? It is that place we find when we follow the key verse in our passage today. There are other verses, yes; but the key verse today is Ephesians 5:21. "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ."

That means wives be subject to husbands; but it also means husbands be subject to wives. The principle of grace is "be subject to one another." Every healthy and honest relationship needs mutual submission in order to experience the grace of God.

I close this morning with a story, a simple parable if you will, which was sent to me this past week, by a close friend. He is a person who has disagreed with me on issues. But I need him; and I would like to think he needs me. Of all the mail I've received recently, always divided between support and condemnation, this is the message I have enjoyed the best.

For those of you who do not know, one reason I've enjoyed the following story is because I love baseball. For me, baseball is the most traditional and inspiring sport in our time. It teaches patience and grace, persistence and teamwork. It knows daily success and daily failure. The difference between winning and losing in baseball is always very, very close; but true players always succeed, whether they win or lose.

It is the story of the Lord's baseball game.

THE LORD'S BASEBALL GAME

Bob and the Lord stood by to observe a baseball game. The Lord's team was playing Satan's team. The Lord's team was at bat, the score was tied zero to zero, and it was the bottom of the 9th inning with two outs.

The next batter at the plate for the Lord's team was a player whose name was Love. Love swung at the first pitch and hit a single, because Love never fails.

The next batter was named Faith, who also got a single because Faith works with Love.

The next batter up was named Godly Wisdom. Satan wound up and threw the first pitch. Godly Wisdom looked it over and let it pass: Ball one. Three more pitches and Godly Wisdom walked, because Godly Wisdom never swings at what Satan throws.

The bases were now loaded. The Lord then turned to Bob and told him He was now going to bring in His star player. Up to the plate stepped Grace. Bob said, "He sure doesn't look like much!"

Satan's whole team relaxed when they saw Grace. Thinking he had won the game, Satan wound up and fired his first pitch. To the shock of everyone, Grace hit the ball harder than anyone had ever seen. But Satan was not worried; his center fielder let very few get by. The center fielder went up for the ball, but it went right through his glove! In fact, it hit him on the head and sent him crashing on the ground; then the ball continued over the fence for a home run!

The Lord's team won! The Lord then asked Bob if he knew why Love, Faith, and Godly Wisdom could get on base but could not win the game. Bob answered that he did not know why.

The Lord explained, "If your love, faith, and wisdom had won the game, then you would think you had done it by yourself. Love, Faith and Wisdom will get you on base but only My Grace can get you Home.

I like that story. It is another parable of amazing grace. Grace has brought us safe thus far, and grace will lead us home.

AMEN

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