

# ME from me to we WE

Is life all about Me? A Me lifestyle is about the isolated individual—my ideas, my agenda, my concerns alone. From this vantage point, life is about making Me the best I can be. But faith in Jesus Christ draws us into We, where there is a relationship with God and others. We means setting our opinions aside and submitting in faith to Jesus Christ. We means being part of a family—a community of faith, united across racial and social lines. Journey with us from Me to We as we study the book of Ephesians this summer.

## FROM ME TO WE • EPHESIANS 5:21-6:9 • John Goodale • August 5, 2018

One of my favorite stories is of three men who were stranded on a deserted island: a doctor, an attorney and a pastor. After they'd been there for some time, a bottle washed up on the shore one day; when opened, a genie appeared and announced that each man could have one wish.

The doctor said, "Before I ended up here, I was on the verge of a cure for cancer. I'd like to go back and finish my work—I wish I was home." With that, the doctor was gone.

The attorney then said, "I told myself that if I ever got off this island, I'd devote my skills and knowledge to helping those less fortunate. I also have a family I miss greatly—I wish I was home." With that, the attorney was gone.

The pastor looked around his now deserted beach and said, "I sure miss those guys. I wish they were here!"

This story reminds us that community can be messy and inconvenient at times. After all, each of us bring into it our own values, opinions, practices and temperaments; it's easy for us to rub each other the wrong way. In fact, I wonder if we truly appreciate how the Holy Spirit unifies us, who are different in so many ways, into one body called First Pres?

Community dynamics were especially challenging for early church. Paul wrote earlier in Ephesians that Christ united into one body Jews and Gentiles, who'd been divided for centuries. Imagine the adjustment of worshiping with those you'd previously wanted nothing to do with! But the challenges to a unified church in Ephesus, and elsewhere in the first century, went even deeper than this. Relationships in those days were ruled by a hierarchical structure, to the detriment of many. The powerful in society would now worship with those who were powerless and unvalued by that same culture. It wasn't easy or natural for people from such dramatically different social standing to become one body.

Paul knew the church's ability to shine Christ's light in the world was linked to how its members treated each other. He also knew that community could only truly happen to the degree people were willing to place the needs of others ahead of their own. So Paul flattened any social inequality within the church with these words: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5:21).

If we're honest, many of us instinctively bristle if we're told to submit to someone. We tend to view submission as passive and weak, unnaturally giving up a part of who we are. But moving from "me to we" actually requires strength; it takes strength to voluntarily give up our own rights for the good of another. Paul doesn't say that we do this out of the goodness of our heart, or because the other person is worthy; he tells us to do so "out of reverence for Christ." We're called as members of Christ's body to reorder our relationships from our way to Jesus' way. If He's the Lord of our life, He needs to be Lord of our relationships.

Elsewhere in Philippians, Paul says more about what this looks like: "In humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your

own interests, but also the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (Philippians 2:4-7).

This opening verse provides the guiding principle for all that follows in today's text. After this general statement, Paul moves on to specific instructions for three household relationships that contributed to relationships in the church. If you're a single adult, it may feel you're not part of the picture in the next few verses; single adults were a much smaller percentage of the population in Paul's day than they are today. If that's the case, don't miss Paul's call in this initial verse to voluntarily yield in love to those with whom you're in relationship.

Before we go on, let's note that these next verses have been a great source of tension and pain over the years—and that may be the case for some of you this morning. Words about submission and headship have been misused and misinterpreted to keep a wife under her husband's thumb. With the momentum of the Me Too movement this past year, this passage may sound like another archaic mindset whose time is past. Or it may seem like Paul's words create yet one more glass ceiling for women that keeps them subservient to their husbands. So it's important that we understand two things around Paul's words before we explore them.

First, when Paul was writing this, marriage relationships tended to be broken and dysfunctional. Husbands had few obligations beyond providing food and shelter; they were free to do as they pleased—and they usually did. Listen to Greek orator Demosthenes' description of husbands: "We have courtesans for our pleasure, concubines for daily cohabitation, and wives for the purpose of having children legitimately and of having a faithful guardian for our household affairs." That doesn't sound like much of a deal for a wife! Women were beaten down both by society around them and a husband's treatment at home.

In light of this, we also need to understand that Paul and the Christian faith elevated the value of women far above how they were treated by society. In Galatians, Paul went so far as to declare women equal to men, as well as slaves to masters: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). This was so contrary to the values of that day, the church was viewed by some as a dangerous threat to the social order.

Into this context, Paul writes "Wives, submit to your husbands as 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 Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything" (Ephesians 5:22-24).

In those days, wives were expected to submit to their husbands; they didn't have a choice. Paul wasn't calling them to maintain the hierarchical status quo. He was addressing the internal dynamics of a relationship. A wife would submit outwardly because she was required to—but what she was feeling inside could have been quite another matter. Paul said to voluntarily elevate the good of a husband not because a wife had to, but because she chose to do so as if doing it for Christ.

Again and again we see the linkage to Christ: “submit to your husband as to the Lord” (5:22); “the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church” (5:23); “as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything” (5:24). We can get stuck on multiple references to a wife submitting, and Paul's statement of the husband as head—so please remember: there's nothing in this passage about power and control. The focus is upon love, and how we can better share it with each other.

Later in this chapter Paul states that “wives must respect their husbands;” I think this provides a clue to what Paul was asking. A wife was to help her husband be the best he could be in his role, through respect and building him up. Scholar Markus Barth notes, “The submission to, and respect for the husband . . . is by no means the submissiveness of a pussycat or a crouching dog . . . Paul . . . is thinking of a voluntary, free, joyful and thankful partnership, as the analogy of the relationship of the church to Christ shows.” That's not always easy or natural—but that's true for each of us who respond to Paul's call to submit to each other.

Two weeks ago I performed my niece's wedding in Seattle. During the ceremony, the bride and groom both promised to elevate and attend to the other's needs. Making these vows is the easy part; the challenge is to live this out in marriage over a lifetime. These words were intended to help do just that.

Paul's next instructions are to husbands: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (Ephesians 5:25-27).

Husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her. Does anyone remember what that cost Jesus? Paul was radically redefining a husband's responsibilities to his wife. The Greek word for “gave Himself up” is “*paradidomi*,” which means surrendering power to another. John Stott notes, “Paul was calling for care, rather than control; for responsibility rather than rule.” In the same way Christ sacrificed Himself for the church, that it could be everything He longs for it to be, a husband is to never crush or stifle his wife, but always seek her well-being.

Perhaps because Paul knew we may not fully grasp

Christ's love, he offered a second example: “In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body” (Ephesians 5:28-30). Loving ourselves is a bit more tangible, something high-up in our order of priorities. Paul calls a husband to love his wife no less than himself. Once again, Christ's care for the church is our model.

Then Paul turns to God's original design for marriage: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church” (Ephesians 5:31-32). Paul is offering a reminder that marriage was created for unity and partnership, not a hierarchy between the powerful and powerless. In the same way, Christ and the church have that unity and partnership.

Paul then concludes this section with a different word for each partner: “each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband” (Ephesians 5:33). Love and respect each point to the same selfless giving up of oneself for a spouse. It's not about me and my rights, but about we; how can I build you up to become more fully who you are?

Now we need to move quickly through the other household relationships in this passage, beginning with parents and children. Don't miss the significance of Paul speaking directly to these children; he was validating their presence in the church. One purpose for our children's sermons is that our children will grow up knowing they're an important part of the body. Again, Paul's lifting up of children was in sharp contrast to how unvalued children were in the world at that time.

After instructing children to obey their parents, Paul moves on to the father's or parents' role in Ephesians 6:1-4. They're told to not provoke their children, relying on the power and authority of, “Because I said so!” Instead, parents are to ensure a child's character and life was shaped by the Lord's values and instructions, as well as the parent's love.

Then Paul concludes in 6:5-9 with a third set of household relationships, between slaves and masters—and these words introduce another tension. Why didn't Paul speak out against the practice of slavery here or in his other writings? Why was the New Testament church silent about this subject? Let me respond in two ways.

First, the Roman Empire wasn't a democracy, and Christianity was unlawful and politically powerless at the time. Slavery was an indispensable element in Roman society; in fact, it's estimated that a quarter of the population in Ephesus may have been slaves. Paul focused on the relational dynamics within the church that would eventually infiltrate society. That said, let me also add that once the church did have power and influence, it was centuries too

slow in calling for an end to slavery.

Once again, Paul's words were a direct confrontation to "the way it was" in that society.

He addressed slaves directly as valued and equal members of the church; Paul also called for their service to Christ to influence how they served their master. In return, masters were to treat their slaves as if they were Christ's. They were also to remember that He is ultimately the master of both.

On the night Jesus was betrayed, He shared a table with His disciples. Before He took the bread, and before He took the cup, Jesus took a towel. He got down on His knees and washed each of His disciples' feet, declaring, "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet" (John 13:14). Friends, we submit to each other in faithful response to what Christ's done for us; we follow His example.

So here are the test questions (didn't know there'd be a test at the end, did you?). Husbands: would your wife say you love her as Christ loved the church, or at the very least as you love yourself? Are you bold enough to ask her? What practical acts of love would this require of you in this relationship?

Wives, would your husband say you respect him? Are you bold enough to ask him? How is your respect lived out and conveyed in this relationship?

If you're not married, don't think you're off the hook! Think of your closest relationships; where is Christ calling you to voluntarily serve their needs as if doing so for Him?

And then for all of us: are there any in this family of faith we need to be more loving towards, putting them ahead of ourselves for the sake of our Lord? When we hear Paul's words to serve wholeheartedly, as if serving the Lord, would Christ be pleased with the effort we're giving Him in our jobs or in other responsibilities?

These are hard questions on a hard topic, and it would be easy to leave here discouraged today. But our relationship with God is not only our motivation for how to love, it also fuels that love. We can't do these things well or consistently without the love of Jesus in us; without the influence of the Holy Spirit, whom Paul writes about a few verses before today's text.

Know today that Christ can and will give you the love He longs for others to receive from you. What God calls us to do, God will empower us to do.

Jesus says to us, "I've given Myself to you so that you could be full. Now love, serve, give, bless, pour out in submission to each other."

When we're willing to do this, and when we allow Christ's love to flow through us, God's Kingdom will be enlarged in our homes, in our church and world—and in our hearts.

## STUDY GUIDE

### FROM ME TO WE • EPHESIANS 5:21-6:9

#### **UP:** Connect With God Through Spending Time in God's Word

Read the passage for the week: Ephesians 5:21-6:9. Allow a few moments to silently reflect on what you heard. Underline or note words or phrases that seem meaningful. Pray for your study of God's Word.

- Imagine you are one of the Christians in Ephesus who initially received Paul's letter. You live in a patriarchal society where women, children and slaves are powerless. How would Paul's words and instructions have struck you? In what ways would they have been shocking?
- Re-read verse 21. In your own words, what does it mean to "submit to one another?" What does it mean to do this "out of reverence for Christ?"
- Read Galatians 3:28. How does the Apostle Paul describe the new reality in Christ? How does this new reality impact how we treat one another?
- In what ways are Paul's words from our passage in Ephesians challenging you right now? What do you think the Lord is saying to you about your relationships?

#### **OUT:** Connect With the World Around Us by Joining God in God's Mission

Jesus says in John 13:35, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." In what ways do our relationships as brothers and sisters in Christ provide a witness to the world around us? Spend some time praying for our witness as a church in Colorado Springs. Pray that God would use our love for one another to reveal His love!

#### **IN:** Connect With the Family of God

How do you sense the Lord prompting you to take a step from "Me" to "We?"