

Celebration of Discipline: Training in Submission

Ephesians 5:21-6:9

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In August of 1999 in Landover, Maryland a 100 year old congregation, Holy Creek Baptist Church, split into four groups. The source of conflict was a piano bench which sat behind the 1923 Steinway piano to the left of the pulpit.

Each faction had its own separate service each taking one of the four pastors on staff. The services were spaced far enough apart that no group ever came into contact with another and between the services an outside party would move the piano bench to the appropriate location for the next service.¹

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Now I got this story off the internet and can't vouch for its authenticity, but I suspect most of us know similar stories of Christians who have been unable to give in to each other and have severed their relationships as a result.

Today we are on our third week in a series titled "Celebration of Discipline." Over the last two weeks our church has embarked on an adventure to give ourselves to the Biblical command to

"...Train yourself to be godly."²

These are the words of the Apostle Paul to Timothy, the young pastor of the church in Ephesus. Paul had given Timothy the job of correcting the Ephesians on the way they were pursuing godliness – they had lost focus of the Gospel and had devoted themselves to wives tales and godless myths.

And churches today lose their focus as well. Many get wrapped up in all sorts of secondary issues like *how* the end of the world is going to come about, or who is allowed to serve communion, or what styles of music are acceptable instead of focusing on the Gospel of salvation.

And so Timothy was placed in Ephesus to lead people to the truth – lead people to the fact that godliness doesn't comes just from what we believe, but from how we put into practice the grace we have received from Christ and do the will of our Father among our neighbours.

This is why at the end of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said:

Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 7:21)

¹ Illustration adapted from <http://www.sermoncentral.com/illustrations/sermon-illustration-craig-cramblet-stories-unity-12302.asp>

² 1 Timothy 4:7

Now just to be crystal clear this does not mean that we have to earn our salvation, but rather if we have been saved there will be evidence of this salvation in our lives. Does that make sense?

So the question then that we must all be asking is “what does it mean to do the will of our Father who is in Heaven?” And this is the question that our current series, Celebration of Discipline, seeks to answer.

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Fortunately knowing how to do God’s will isn’t a guessing game, the people of God asked this question thousands of years ago and the answer is clearly written all over the pages of the Bible. To give just one example when the people of Israel asked Micah this exact question he responded:

[God] has shown you, O mortal, what is good.

And what does the LORD require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy

and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8)

So for us as a church and us as individuals to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, we need to be people who not only talk about God but actually do the will of our Father.

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As we get started today I encourage you, take a look at your own life: When we all stand before our Creator our eternal destiny will depend on how we have lived out the grace we have received. So the question I have for you today is based on the biblical standards of doing justice and loving mercy and walking humbly with God, what evidence is there in your life that you are doing the will of your Father?

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[Pray]

Train yourself to be godly. When I hear words like these my first inkling is to feel a sense of duty or obligation like when my wife asks me to clean the bathroom because guests are coming over. Any men know what I mean?

Putting ourselves through training doesn’t sound like fun. And actually it isn’t. Hebrews tells us

No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. (Hebrews 12:11)

So really the question is are you hungry enough for the joy of seeing a harvest of righteousness and peace in your own life that you are willing to train yourself to be godly? Are you hungry for that?

Two weeks ago the training challenge was to join me in reading the New Testament in 60 days. Almost 20 of you have told me you are going to give it a shot and there is still time to get on board. If you want to give this a try you can pick up a reading plan in the foyer after church.

Now let me encourage you, if you started this plan but have missed a few days and have kind of stopped, don't beat yourself up, just pick up where you left off and keep going. No athlete who started training for the Olympics was good enough to compete on day one of training, so don't expect yourself to be perfect. But don't give up training.

Turn to the person beside you and say "You can do it, don't give up your training."

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And then last week we talked about prayer and meditation – quieting your heart to focus on Christ. And the challenge was to start your Bible reading each day with 30 seconds of silent focus.

Now I spoke with someone this week who warned me of how close some of the Eastern traditions of meditation come to what I was talking about. And I appreciate the warning and invite all of you if you ever have concerns with anything I say come and talk with me.

I also want to clarify that unlike Buddhist practices of meditation which involve things like emptying your mind or losing yourself, Christian meditation involves filling your mind with the things of God and finding yourself in Christ.

And actually the Christian tradition of meditation reaches back almost 1500 years before Buddhism even began with heroes of the faith like Isaac, Joshua and King David practicing it.³

But the warning stands, when you meditation, be certain that every message you receive lines up with Scripture and honours Jesus.⁴ If you have any more questions about that please come and talk with me.

Now why would you do either of these things?

We train ourselves because every discipline comes with a reward that is worth it. The reward we saw that training yourself in Scripture reading and prayer brings is that you put yourself in a place where you are able to hear God speak. And so I encourage you, if you want more of that, if you long to know God's will and hear Him speak then train yourself to be godly by reading your Bible and meditating every day. The reward is worth it.

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³ Gen 24:63; Josh 1:8; Ps 1:2; 63:6; 77:12; 119:15; 143:5

⁴ 1 Corinthians 12:3

We are now going to shift away from the inward disciplines – things you can do by yourself – and look at training ourselves to be godly in community with each other. And we are going to start with what is perhaps the least popular of all the disciplines – submission.

If you haven't already please open your Bibles up to Ephesians chapter 5 starting in verse 21. If you are using a pew Bible you will find that on page 829. Verse 21 says:

[Read Ephesians 5:21]

Now “submission” in our culture is a four letter word – would you agree? Submission is something you are made to do. It is something that is forced on the physically and emotionally weak to oppress them and keep them from causing any trouble. In wrestling there are submission holds that force the looser to “tap out.” But that is not the submission that I want to talk about today. Certainly Jesus was not a wrestler!

Just like there are two kinds of meditation – one bad and one good – so there are two kinds of submission: one kind that opposes God and forces itself on others, and one kind that the godly joyfully embrace themselves. And this submission finds its origin in Jesus and is what Paul refers to in Ephesians 5.

Unfortunately these two very different “submissions” have been confused, and many within the church have been guilty of perpetrating this confusion. What God created to be a blessing has been distorted by pastors and priests and made into bondage.

But it is in contrast to that evil distortion that my thesis today is “**Training ourselves in Christ-like submission results in joyful freedom.**”

Does that sound like a tall order? Let's start with the definition of godly submission and the first part of our thesis: **Training ourselves in... submission...**

Here is the definition: Godly submission is the discipline of not having to have your own way.

So what do I mean?

If you have ever had the unfortunate experience of being part of a church split you know that one of the saddest things is watching Christian brothers and sisters with different preferences be unable to **not get** what they want.

When you are in the middle of a situation like this it feels like your opinion is the only right one and to compromise is to give in to heresy but usually it turns out

the issue is more trivial – like the placement of a piano bench. Have you ever felt that you couldn't compromise but realized later that your position was less important than you thought?

If you have then you know that the inability to submit, having to have your own way, leads to pain and severed relationship for everyone.

Alternatively, the ability to submit, to let go of having to have your own way, actually leads to joy and freedom.

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But... you can't always compromise right? Especially when it comes to church – some issues are worth fighting for right? So how do we know when to submit and when to stick to our guns?

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When I was doing my internship in Vancouver the Pastor there was fond of referring to “Right hand and left hand truths.” His point was that in our right hands we must hold tightly the essential truths of Scripture: things like the divinity of Jesus, the sinfulness of humanity, the universal need for a Saviour and the fact that Jesus alone is the way to God. These kinds of things are worth fighting for and if we disagree on these matters they are worth dividing over. You are not a Christian brother or sister of mine if you do not put your faith in Jesus like I do.

But in the left hand are what are called the non-essential truths. Now while many of these issues are important, ultimately they are secondary in that they aren't matters of salvation.

For example I hope you would agree that people who believe Jesus is coming back before the great tribulation and those who believe He is coming back after the tribulation can both be Christians. Would you agree?

Would you also agree that people who prefer to sing hymns and people who prefer to sing modern worship music can both be Christians?

Would you also agree that those who attend church wearing a suit and those who attend wearing shorts and a T-shirt can both be Christians?

Now we all have preferences one way or the other in matters like these, but these are left-hand, non-essential issues. It is in situations like these that we must train ourselves in submission giving in to the preferences of others in order to preserve the unity of the body which is a right-hand, essential truth.⁵

So ask yourself, what passions and preferences and opinions do I have, especially when it comes to church, that are left-hand or secondary issues. We all have lots of them – things we prefer but that aren't matters of salvation. Ask

⁵ Ephesians 4:4-6

yourself am I willing to submit my preferences to those who feel differently in order to foster joy and happiness here at Fort George?

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Let's unpack our thesis one step further. **Training ourselves in Christ-like submission results in joy...**

Notice in verse 21 that Paul says we must submit "out of reverence for Christ." In other words we are called to submit because of Jesus.

Now why would reverence for Christ mean submitting to each other? To explain this we need to look at our context reaching back to chapter 5 verse 1. There Paul says:

Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Ephesians 5:1-2)

Our reverence for Christ involves following His example of submission. Jesus was God Himself, and yet He gave up His life for us – that is the ultimate submission. In the Garden Jesus prayed:

"Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done."
(Luke 22:42)

He gave up His comfort to submit to His Father's plan. And so our call to submission comes from the fact that we follow a submitting Christ. Jesus did not come as a conqueror but as a servant.

And that is fairly well known, but let me ask you how do you picture Jesus crying out to the Father, what demeanor do you see on His face? When you see Jesus praying so intensely that His sweat was like drops of blood⁶ falling to the ground what attitude do you picture Him having? Do you see Him forced into a corner, stuck between a rock and a hard place without any other options than to obey His Father's will? That's the way we usually read the word "submit."

But that is not where Jesus was. While there is no doubt that He was not having fun in that moment or on the cross. Remember Hebrews said "no discipline seems pleasant at the time."⁷ But just 9 verses earlier it tells us Jesus' motivation for submitting to His Father was the joy it would bring Him. Hebrews says:

For the joy set before Him He endured the cross, scorning its shame (Hebrews 12:2)

Jesus submitted to the worst event in the entirety of human history, the brutal killing of the purest soul ever to live, not out of some dog-eared, downcast depressed state of compulsion, but because the reward was worth the cross. While it isn't fun, training ourselves to do God's will always leads to joy.

⁶ Luke 22:44

⁷ Hebrews 12:11

So ask yourself, what do I want? Do I want the immediate gratification that fun or comfort promise, or am I willing to train myself in submission in order to gain the same joy that motivated Jesus to embrace the cross? Training ourselves in Christ-like submission results in joy. But it even goes one step beyond this.

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Finally, **Training ourselves in Christ-like submission results in joyful freedom.**"

When _____ got up and read this passage earlier you might have cringed and thought "coming from a man this passage just sounds terrible. Indeed Ephesians 5 and 6 are usually read as patriarchal, anti-woman words of oppression, but I want to show you how this is a misreading of what Paul is saying, and actually his words here are empowering words full of liberation and freedom. Are you ready to see it?"

Here goes. Verse 21 is an introductory verse where Paul urges submission of all people one to another. And then he unpacks three first century, culturally oppressive situations where, when embraced, Christ-like submission results in joyful freedom. First he talks to wives and husbands telling them to respect and love each other, and then in chapter 6 verse 1 he talks to children telling them to obey their parents and then in chapter 6 verse 5 he talks to slaves and urges them to obey their masters.

And in each of these three examples Paul explains what Christ-like submission looks like practically. But there is something here that we in North America miss every time that any reader in the first century would have heard immediately.

Let's take the examples backwards starting in chapter 6 verse 5 and leave the most contentious situation for last.

[Read Ephesians 6:5]

We live in a part of the world where legally there are no slaves (though some still exist). And so when most of us hear this we instinctively think of Western style employee/employer relationships instead – that is what we are familiar with. But what we miss is that employees today have infinitely more freedom than slaves in the first century ever had.

If your employer abuses you we have a legal system that can call our employers to task. And ultimately if you don't want to do what our boss says you can quit and find a new job. And so it sounds to us like Paul is saying "submit, give up your freedom, don't stand up for yourself, allow your boss to walk all over you." That's what we think Paul is saying.

But that is not what this meant to slaves in the first century. Their masters already walked all over them. In fact slaves were bought and sold and raped and killed by their masters without repercussion. The only choice a slave had was obey or die and so they obeyed.

And into that situation Paul urges them to submit implying they had a choice, and this is key. “Christ-like submission gave even slaves a freedom they never had before. Now instead of just doing what had to be done to survive look at verse 6.

[Read Ephesians 6:6-8]

By embracing Christ-like submission these slaves, who otherwise had no options, gained the freedom to do the will of God and gain Christ’s reward. And Paul gives the same empowering freedom to children.

Like slaves – we don’t understand this today – in the first century even legitimate children were seen as the possessions of their parents. They had no rights and no voice if they were being abused. And their “choice” was obedience or the strictest punishment.

And yet Paul speaks to them not as possessions, but rather as free agents with the ability to choose whether they wanted to work to earn God’s reward. Look at chapter 6 verse 1.

[Read Ephesians 6:1-3]

Again by embracing Christ-like submission – doing the same thing they were already doing but just with a different attitude – these children gained the freedom to live in an eternally meaningful way.

And this is the exact same thing that happens between wives and husbands. Like with both slaves and children wives in the first century were the possessions of their husbands. And unlike today women had no way out of a bad marriage. The choice was submit or become a prostitute or starve. And so wives in the first century were already submissive.

And into that situation Paul speaks to them as free agents and urges them to embrace Christ-like submission to gain a deep freedom in spite of their situation. This whole section of text is full of liberation, not oppression.

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On top of this Paul also challenges parents of children and masters of slaves to view their roles in light of Christ as opposed to how culture dictated. But of most significance is the fact that Paul spends more time addressing husbands than wives in chapter 5, making the submission between the two one of equal standing. Look at verse 33.

[Read Ephesians 5:33]

Far from being anti-woman, patriarchal words of oppression, Paul gave these words to wives and children and slaves not to keep them in submission – they couldn't get out anyway and there was no liberation movement to fight – but to help them taste the freedom Christ's submission had already bought them.

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So how does this relate to us?

None of us are slaves, some of us are children, and many of us are wives or husbands. Whatever situation you find yourself in today, whether good or bad, if you are a follower of Jesus you have the freedom to embrace Christ-like submission and experience joy in your work or your family or your marriage. Christ-like submission is the key to joy in your relationships no matter how bad your situation is.

So ask yourself, would a life of joy-filled freedom be worth embracing Christ-like submission in my work or to my parents or with my spouse? Brothers and sisters I would compel you it is. Train yourself in godly submission.

But there is one final thing to point out here and we will conclude with this. Please look with me at chapter 5 verse 31.

[Read Ephesians 5:31-32]

All of this talk about submission comes in the ultimate context of Christ and the church and this is Paul's main point. The ability of brothers and sisters in church to submit to one another in a Christ-like way is of utmost importance. It is a right-hand truth worth dying for.

Or to say this another way, if our faith is going to be legitimate as a church and as individuals we must practice the discipline of submitting to one another right here to preserve the one-flesh unity of the body of Christ.

So with all due respect, our personal preferences for modern music or hymns are not as important as this. Our ideas about what acceptable dress at church should be are secondary to this, and even our thoughts on all sorts of important but non-essential theological issues must be set aside.

Unless we are talking about matters of salvation, matters worth dying for, the legitimacy of our faith requires that we the people of Fort George submit ourselves to each other. This won't be easy, in many ways it will mean death to ourselves, but it will be worth it because **training ourselves in Christ-like submission results in joyful freedom.**"