

When someone is born again things begin to change. And so they should. After all, we used to be sinful by nature. We sinned continually because that's the way we were, selfish and rebellious through and through. We were born that way and we were unable to do anything about it¹. Now it is different. God has given us a new nature and our greatest desire is to please Him. Isn't it?

Yes, I know we don't get it right all the time. The old sinful nature still has its influence and there are times — many of them — when we do sinful things and think sinful thoughts. But the fact remains that our nature is now different. Deep down we hate sin and we long to be done with it. We want to be pure. We want to be like Jesus.

God helps us. He brings us into circumstances that reveal old sinful ways that have not been faced and when we read His word he shines light into the dark corners of our hearts that need to be cleaned up.

What a wonderful and gentle Father God is. He does not light up every murky recess at once — that would be overwhelming. Instead, little by little he brings new areas to light, He shows us the changes that must be made and then He works quietly away within us² helping us to win the ensuing battle, for often it is a battle to conquer that old sinful nature.

All this is part of being a Christian because God's purpose in saving us is not just to set aside our guilt and get us into heaven. God has a higher purpose than that. God saved us to make us pure: to make us holy: to make us like Jesus.

When Paul wrote to the Christians in Ephesus he let them in on a secret: a secret that had been revealed to him by God. He told them that God is working on a plan. His plan is to take people from all kinds of backgrounds, save them and bring them together in a new society that will stand as an example of His wisdom for all eternity.

Angels look on and see God taking the strangest collection of people; people from different families; people from different cultures; people of different political persuasions; rich and poor; clever and not so clever; people who have only one thing in common and that is that they are sinful, selfish, rebellious and foolish. They see God taking this collection of people and building a society known for its love and purity and so beautiful that it is worthy to be called the bride of Christ. They see God building His church.

I don't know about you, but when I think about that it causes me to marvel at the wisdom of God. Especially when I think that I am part of that church. You are too, if you belong to Christ. There is still some changing to be done, is there not?

After writing about these things (you can read about them in Ephesians chapters 1–3) Paul reminds the Ephesian Christians, and us, that we should be careful to co-operate with God. We should live in a way that is worthy of people with such a glorious future³ and be careful to put off our old sinful ways and put on new, righteous ways of thinking and behaving.⁴

It is not surprising, in the light of what he has said about God's plan that Paul has a lot to say about relationships in the next part of his letter. Read through chapters 4, 5 and 6 and pick out all the things that have a bearing on the way God's people should relate to one another.

¹ Ephesians 2:1–3

² Philippians 2:13

³ Ephesians 4:1

⁴ Ephesians 4:20 – 32

There are comments about relationships in general and there are directions for specific kinds of relationships: relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children and employees and employers, but there is one over-riding principle that is meant to govern every relationship. It comes in Ephesians 5:21.

"Be subject to one another in the fear of the Lord."

The word "subject" is taken from the language of the army in Paul's day. It defined the relationship between a soldier and his commanding officer: a relationship of obedience and respect. When a man joined the army he relinquished his rights. If his commander said, "jump", he jumped. If he said, "lie down", he lay down. If he said, "let me jump on you," he let him do it. That is how it was in the army and that is the word Paul used to describe the way we should relate to one another in God's new society. Wives are to be subject to their husbands. Husbands are to sacrifice themselves and their desires for their wives. Children are to be obedient to their parents. Parents are to be motivated by desire to do what is best for their children. Servants are to submit to their masters. Masters must show respect for their servants.

Take a few minutes and think about some key relationships in your life. Considering each one in turn, ask the question, "If I were to be obedient to this command what difference would it make?" Write your answers down — you will find it helps to concentrate the mind. I cannot comment on your relationships specifically but here are some general observations which may help to stimulate your thoughts.

If you enter a relationship with someone resolved to be subject to him or her:

- You will never behave in a dictatorial or bossy manner.
- You will never be intolerant of the opinions of others.
- You will make no expression of pride.
- You will never act as if you are superior, not even to foolish people.
- Self-assertiveness will not be part of your thinking or vocabulary.
- You will never insist upon rights. In fact you will not even consider yourself to have any.
- You will never act thoughtlessly.
- In conversation you will listen and understand what the other person wishes to communicate.
- You will not act out of selfish interest.
- You will put the other person first.
- You will give way to his or her demands.
- You will seek to fulfil his or her desires.
- You will respect the other person even if his or her behaviour is not worthy of respect.

Strong teaching? Indeed it is; strong and radical, and for that reason we must be doubly sure that we have properly understood it by looking to other passages of Scripture for confirmation. Here are some you could consider.

- Matthew 20:27-28
- John 13:14
- Romans 12:10
- Philippians 2:3

People can be subject to others for different reasons. Soldiers are subject to their officers because the rules say they must be and they know they will be punished if they are not. Some employees are subject to their bosses because they hope to win their favour and gain promotion. Some wives are subject to their husbands because they depend upon them so much and they are afraid of having their love withdrawn. Ultimately these are selfish reasons. The subjection they produce is not real subjection at all: it is manipulation. It says, "I will do what you want, but only so that I can get what I want out of our relationship." God sets a higher standard.

Read Paul's letter to the Ephesians carefully and try to follow his train of thought. He begins by listing many of the blessings we have in Christ. He tells us about God's plan to build His church. He tells us we should live in a manner worthy of those who have received such blessings and who are part of that church. It is for these reasons, Paul says, that we should be subject to one another.

Christian relationships are giving relationships. Christians put others first. Christians give freely to others out of lives that have been blessed with all spiritual blessings and out of hearts that are satisfied and secure in the love of Christ. If our motive is anything else we will be disappointed because selfishness and self-seeking will destroy even the best relationship sooner or later.

But how far do we go? Surely there has to be a limit? Do we let people walk all over us?

Paul defines the limit of subjection when he says "Be subject to one another in the fear of the Lord." In other words, we are to be subject to others up to the point, and only up to the point, where they demand that we do something that would cause us to be fearful of God. In short, where they ask us to disobey Him. Subjection to God must take precedence. That is the only limit.

Some Things For You To Do

In preparation for this series of studies read Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians with your family over the next week. You could read one chapter a day and have a day off! Talk about what you read together and try to help one another to get a good grasp of Paul's message. You may find it helpful to discuss the following questions.

- Chapter 1 What does Paul mean when he says that God has "blessed us with every spiritual blessing" (verse 3)?
- Chapter 2 Once you were lost and without hope (verses 1–3) but now you are saved. What made the difference (verses 8–9)? What made it possible (verse 13)? What do you think would be an appropriate response for you to make in the light of that?
- Chapter 3 What is the mystery Paul talks about in verses 3 and 9?
- Chapter 4 List all the commands you can find in this chapter that could have a bearing on the way you behave toward one another in your family.
- Chapter 5 What does it mean to be filled with the Spirit and how would you recognise someone who is (verses 18–21)?
- Chapter 6 How can the armour of God (verse 11) help you to build and maintain a strong family unit?



Thinking about your relationships with others in your immediate family (dad, mum, children, brothers, sisters), in what ways does your behaviour toward them show that you are more like Jesus now than you were this time last year?



Still thinking about your relationships with others in your family, list five ways in which you would need to change in order to be more obedient to God's command, "Be subject to one another in the fear of the Lord?"