



The Ten Commandments

(24) The Fifth Commandment

(3) Authority in Marriage

Exodus 20:12

Genesis 2:18-25

1 Peter 3:1-7

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So far in the sermons on the Fifth Commandment we have considered the obvious application that children are to honor their parents and then we looked at the idea of authority itself and how it is related to the fact that we are made in the image of God and that God has given authority to mankind in order to fulfill their calling in the cultural mandate. So, authority is inherent in being human because we are all made in the image of God and we all together have the authority to pursue the task of having dominion over the earth.

But the Fifth Commandment has to do with some people having authority over other people and what we will do today is consider how we get from God giving mankind dominion over the earth to God giving authority to some people over other people in various ways.

The need for some people to have authority over other people is rooted in the fact that God has created human beings to live together in various groupings. We see this development in the biblical story as it unfolds and while God does not explicitly spell out what these groupings should be, they are a natural development and thus part of the nature of things in God's creation.

The first grouping that we observe is the family. First there is Adam. Then there is Eve. And then there are Cain and Abel. So, we see that God does not create a number of isolated individuals, but he creates the first couple and tells them to multiply and so you have the first family.

Clearly the family is the basic social unit of society. Clearly humanity is designed to live together in families as opposed to everyone living on their own and isolated from one another. That does not mean that everyone will be married and that every marriage will produce children. God has important roles for singles and for marriages that are not blessed with children, but clearly married couples producing children is an important way in which the human race is to fulfill its calling.

The family unit exists in order to fulfill the cultural mandate. The cultural mandate includes the ideas of being fruitful and multiplying and filling the earth and it includes the idea that the woman was created to be a helper to the man in fulfilling the cultural mandate. The purpose of the family unit is to serve God by having dominion over the earth. This is not a job for one person, but it is a job that will take many people and the family is at the heart of that.

But as soon as you have a number of people living and working together in a social grouping, you have to have some kind of organization and that means someone has to take the lead. And what we see happening as the history of mankind unfolds is that fathers are the head of the households and parents are the rulers of their children. This was a natural development which means that God has built this into the fabric of his creation. We do not see God spelling this all out at every turn, but what we do see is God affirming these arrangements as the way that things ought to be and thus as the way he had designed the world to operate.

We see the beginning of the distribution of authority already in the creation of Eve as a helper for Adam. That word “helper” and the ideas that it expresses is a very rich word which describes a wonderful mutually enriching relationship between husbands and wives, and part of that mutually enriching relationship is the leadership of the husband and the submission of the wife to that leadership. This is only hinted at in the Genesis passage, but it is developed further on in the Scriptures.

In connection with male headship in marriage, it is important to underscore the emphasis in the opening chapters of the Bible on the basic equality of man and woman. Both are equally made in the image of God. We also see that when Adam receives his wife from the Lord, he

is so thrilled that he sings a love-song. It is the first love song in the history of the world and so it does not sound very romantic to 21st century ears, but it is poetry and so we can legitimately consider it a love-song when Adam said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman because she was taken out of Man.” (Genesis 2:23). Adam is the head, but he also treasures his wife and cherishes her. And that love is the necessary context in which leadership is to function.

Anyway, you see evidence of male-headship right from the beginning as the story unfolds. The man takes the initiative in marriage. He leaves his father and mother and holds fast to his wife. When God comes to confront the first couple after they had eaten the forbidden fruit, he addresses Adam first and not Eve. Genesis 3:9, “But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, ‘Where are you?’” The footnote in the ESV tells us that the “you” is singular. Adam is being addressed as the leader of the couple and he holds the primary responsibility for what has taken place. Later on, when we learn about the doctrine of original sin, it is Adam who was our representative and not Eve.

When the curses for the original sin are pronounced, Eve is cursed in the area of her primary responsibility, the bearing of children, and Adam is cursed in the area of his primary responsibility, his work in the fields. Furthermore, part of the curse for both the woman and the man is that the headship relationship will be an area of struggle and tension. God says to Eve in Genesis 3:16 “Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you.”

The Genesis story shows that the whole idea of submission to authority is problematic for us human beings. The fall into sin happened because Adam and Eve were not willing to submit to God’s authority and one of the results of the curse is that wives will find it difficult to submit to the authority of their husbands. And of course, that follows through with all other authority relationships. Even in their sinless condition Adam and Eve were persuaded to rebel against God’s authority and that has been an ongoing theme in human relationships ever since.

As we see the history of the Bible unfold, we see the pattern of male headship over the family confirmed again and again. In the story of

Noah and the flood, Noah is the one who is addressed and who makes the decisions on a human level. In the story of Abram and his call and the institution of the covenant, Abram is the one who is addressed and who makes decisions for his family. This is what we see in that key text in Genesis 18 which is so instructive about God's intention for the family and how it is to operate. Genesis 18:19, God says, "¹⁹For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him."

And then we have the clear teaching of the New Testament. The key text is Ephesians 5:22–24, "²²Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. ²⁴Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands."

The biblical teaching is unambiguous. Husbands are the heads of their wives. The Fifth Commandment speaks to the husband-wife relationship because it speaks to the whole issue of authority among human beings and the first authority/submission relationship among humans that we find in the Bible is the authority of the husband over his wife.

I bring this up because it is part of the biblical teaching on the distribution of authority among human beings. We are tracing it from God to man and then between human beings. We have seen that we all share authority in the calling to have dominion over the earth, but when it comes to some human beings having authority over other human beings, the first step is the authority of a husband over his wife.

Now this is one of the many areas where Christianity is counter-cultural. The world does not admire this part of the biblical message – to say the least. Those who still hold to it are considered backward. Husbands who hold to it are considered to be oppressors. Women who hold to it are considered to be weak and oppressed. However, faithfulness to the word of God requires that we receive it as God's will for the authority structure of the marriage relationship. And having God's law written on our hearts means that we will love also this part of God's will for human life and see the rightness and the wisdom of it.

And as far as I can tell, this is the case among us. Christian wives look for and encourage godly leadership from their husbands and one of the things that godly young women are looking for in a potential husband is the strength of character and determination to provide godly leadership in the home. As far as I can tell, in most of our marriages the headship/submission dynamic works smoothly and it is seen and experienced as a blessing rather than as a relationship of oppression.

But we are all sinners and so can assume that we do not live out the headship/submission relationship in perfection. Furthermore, the pressure from the world and our own sinful hearts in this area is intense. Husbands are tempted to neglect their responsibilities as leaders or to abuse their authority and wives are tempted to resent the biblical calling to submit to their husbands. And so, we must be careful to embrace the biblical teaching and to seek to live it out with enthusiasm and thankfulness to the glory of God. We are to take care not to be “conformed to the world, but ... transformed by the renewing of our minds.” (Romans 12:2)

There are a couple of other points that must be understood to keep this biblical teaching in its biblical perspective. The first is that there is no superiority connected to having authority and there is no inferiority connected to being under authority when it comes to the god-ordained relationships between human beings. The thing that makes us valuable is that we are made in the image of God and that is something that all human beings share equally. Authority has to do with responsibility, not status. Submission is something that we are all called to do in one way or another. Husbands have to submit to their elders and to the civil authorities. This is about organization. It is about living life together in an orderly and efficient way. Authority/submission is not a status category. It is not a dignity category. There is no difference between husband and wife when it comes to value and dignity and status. And submission to those whom God has placed over us and ultimately to God himself is part of what it means to be godly, for all of us.

The second point that it important to put this into its biblical perspective is that Jesus is the model for the way in which the authority of husbands is to be exercised. Ephesians 5:25, "²⁵Husbands, love your

wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her," Ephesians 5:28–29, "²⁸In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church,"

This, of course, is the key to the whole authority/submission dynamic as it is supposed to work in God's kingdom. Authority must be exercised in love and therefore it is a form of service. Authority is not about status. It is not about being served. It is about serving others. It is to be used to bless and build up those who are submitting to it. God has so designed human organization that leadership is required for people to flourish. And so, a husband is to exercise his authority in order to nurture and build up and bless his wife. If authority is being used to serve the husband at the expense of his wife, that is a gross perversion of God's purpose for that authority.

1 Peter 3:7 gives further instruction to husbands and it shows again how authority is to be exercised in a loving and nurturing way. 1 Peter 3:7, "⁷Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered." This paints a beautiful picture of the way in which husbands are to treat their wives.

The reference to the woman as the "weaker vessel" is one that a feminist would take offense to, but in biblical thought this is not demeaning in any way; it is a reflection of the way God has created men and women for different tasks and callings. Men tend to be physically stronger than women and designed to take the lead and protect when danger threatens while women are usually not built for heavy lifting and designed to be led by their husbands and protected by them. This is something which is obvious in some ways, but it is dangerous to try to be too specific because men and women are pretty equal in most ways and there are plenty of ways that women tend to be stronger than men. For one, they tend to live longer. But even though precision in defining what "weaker vessel" means is a minefield, it seems to be quite natural for men to carry the heavy objects and slay the dragons and for women

to do the lighter but no less important work and look to their men to protect them.

I read a delightful article last week by Andree Seu Peterson of *World Magazine* who is a woman. The title of the article is “Thank God for men.” And the subtitle is “They’re great for lifting sofas and building societies.” It is funny and true, and I encourage you to find it and read it. Just google “World Magazine” and look for the article “Thank God for men.” She does a good job of describing the idea of woman as a weaker vessel in a delightful way from a woman’s perspective. And she is thankful for it.

Anyway, 1 Peter 3:7 is in a context where Peter is telling women to submit to their husbands and in verse 7, he turns to the husbands and tells them how they are to treat their wives. Husbands are to live with their wives in an understanding way and they are to show honor to their wives as the weaker vessel. If you allow your sensibilities to be shaped by the Bible rather than the spirit of our age, what Peter says here is a beautiful thing. The literal translation of husbands living with their wives in an understanding way is “according to knowledge” and here is how Wayne Gruden explains what that means in his commentary on this passage,

“The ‘knowledge’ Peter intends here may include any knowledge that would be beneficial to the husband-wife relationship: knowledge of God’s purposes and principles for marriage; knowledge of the wife’s desires, goals, and frustrations; knowledge of her strengths and weaknesses in the physical, emotional and spiritual realms; etc. A husband who lives according to such knowledge will greatly enrich his marriage relationship—yet such knowledge can only be gained through regular study of God’s Word and regular, unhurried times of private fellowship together as husband and wife.”

As most of us who are married know from experience, the biblical roles of husbands and wives in marriage is a beautiful thing and a rich blessing when both husbands and wives seek to fulfill them faithfully. Of course, none of us do it perfectly and so there are challenges, but through God’s grace most, if not all of us who are married, experience the biblical roles of husbands and wives as a blessing.

Now the passage in 1 Peter that I just quoted gives some insight into how wives are to live in situations that are less than ideal. And we will look at that briefly because it fills out the picture of what godly submission looks like.

Before we get into this, I want to make it clear that this is not describing a situation of abuse. But I'm not going to deal with that now because I want to preach one sermon on the whole area of responding biblically in situations in which authority is abused.

The situation that Peter is describing is one in which a woman is married to an unbeliever although the verses also deal with the attitude of women towards their husbands in general. 1 Peter 3:1–6, ¹"Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, ²when they see your respectful and pure conduct. ³Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear— ⁴but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious. ⁵For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands, ⁶as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening."

So, in a situation where a woman is married to a husband who does not obey the word, that is an unbeliever, she is to still be subject to her husband and she is to exhibit respectful and pure conduct in the hope that by that conduct the unbelieving husband may be won for Christ.

This verse is not recommending that believing women marry unbelieving men. The Bible explicitly commands us to marry only in the Lord. But sometimes women are converted after marriage or sometimes they disobey God and marry someone who is not a believer and so there are Christian women who have to deal with the difficult situation of being married to an unbelieving husband. They are still to submit the best that they can. And they are to witness to their husbands by their respectful and pure conduct.

The passage goes on to describe the kind of attitude of wives that is “very precious” ... “in God’s sight.” Verses 3-4 “Do not let your adorning be external – the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear – but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious.” Now if something is very precious in God’s sight, it is very precious. This verse is not saying that women should not care at all about their hair and their jewelry or their clothing; it is saying rather that they should be much more concerned to be beautiful in the way that is very precious in God’s sight – “the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit.” And the context here is submission to their husbands. Sarah is given as an example, even calling Abraham, lord.

Now I know that all of this sounds very strange in our day and age, but that is exactly why I take the time to bring it up and dwell on it briefly. This is one of the ways in which the Fifth commandment applies to married women and here we have in the word of God a very clear description of the kind of beauty that is precious to God.

Now I do not particularly want to be called lord. And sound faithful biblical interpretation does not require that women today express themselves in language that was fitting for Sarah to use but would sound ridiculous today. The point is that wives should respect their husbands and show that respect in how they address them.

The reason that I think that this passage is so important is exactly because it is so far removed from the spirit of our age. And the question that we must ask ourselves is whether we want our thoughts about what is beautiful in married woman to be shaped by our culture or by the word of God. The goal of our life and the purpose of our salvation is that we might be pleasing to God. There is no more important goal for any one of us than to please God. And this passage tells us in very tender language what kind of attitude in married women God finds beautiful and what kind of attitude is very precious in God’s sight.

I’m thankful that I’m preaching in a congregation where I can say these things knowing that everyone will agree with what I am saying because I am simply reminding you of what the Bible says. I’m thankful that I’m

preaching in a congregation where none of us is particularly interested in my opinion, but that I accurately explain and proclaim God's message as revealed in the Bible.

But the reason that it is so important to hear again the passages that we have heard this morning is that they are so different from the thinking of most of the people in our culture and faithfulness to God requires that we resist the thinking of the world in this area as well as so many other areas.

Our culture is descending into chaos and moral disintegration. If living according to God's laws and for God is life and living apart from God and in rebellion against God's law is death, our culture is a culture of death. If being truly and fully human is living under God's authority and living apart from God means being so much less than we were created to be, the people who have abandoned God and his ways are living a diminished human existence. In our culture we are seeing the meaning of what it means to be human redefined in fundamental ways. Of course, that is always the way of living in rebellion against God and so in one sense what we are seeing going on around us is nothing new. But we are seeing the logical outcome of rebellion against God in striking ways in our time.

The good news of salvation in Jesus Christ is that we are forgiven our sins and made right with God, but also that we are being renewed in our humanity. We are being changed to live as God designed us to live. We are being renewed to be all that God created us to be. Jesus' headship over us is guiding us to become a church without spot or wrinkle or any such thing – holy and without blemish. We are not there yet, but that is where Jesus, our head is bringing us. And quite clearly, a central concern in the passage that teaches us that is that marriage relationship reflect the relationship between Christ and the church.

And what we have covered today is part of that picture for those who are married. Husbands are the heads of their wives. Wives are to submit to their husbands. This is not about status. It is about living together as husbands and wives according to God's design and it is by following God's design that we flourish. This is pleasing to God. This is how we are saved to live if we are married.

For those who are not married, the same principle holds in your situation. If we are called to have authority, we are to use it to serve. Where we are called to submit to authority, it is pleasing to God that we do so, and it is the way of life and blessing. God's way is always the way of wholeness and blessing. And the goal of our salvation is that we experience that blessing to the glory of God.