



# The Ten Commandments

## (26) The Fifth Commandment

### (5) Submit to One Another

Ephesians 5:1-21  
(Text: verse 21)

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This evening we continue our study of the Ten Commandments. This is sermon 26 in this series. That is fairly long for a series, but I don't see that as a problem in a series about the Ten Commandments because there is a great variety of subjects to be covered and it is very practical because it is all about how God wants us to live. The Ten Commandments are all about the Christian life and so the ground to be covered is vast. Furthermore, by being fairly thorough in covering the commands we end up in places that are less familiar. I hope you agree.

Anyway, we are currently working on the Fifth Commandment. To put it more accurately, we are listening to God's word expressed in the Fifth Commandment and so, it is not so much a study; it is listening to God speak to us about what he requires of us as his people saved by grace. We do not hear the Ten Commandments and their exposition as a study of an impersonal law. Rather as a Christian church made up of professing believers and their children, we hear the law of God as the gracious will of our Lord and Saviour for a life that is pleasing to him and the way of life and blessing for us. We do study the law, but it is important to keep in mind that we do not study as scholars trying to master a subject, but as the loving and thankful people of a God who has delivered us from our sins and adopted us as his children and who has given us his law as the way of flourishing and as the way of pleasing him. Hearing the law and seeking to understand it better is (or ought to be) a personal thing. God himself addresses us through his word and we hear that word not as an impersonal text, but as the living word of the

living God who is present, who speaks, who is glorious and who is for us in and through Jesus Christ.

So far in hearing the word of God as expressed in the Fifth Commandment, we have considered the obvious meaning that both adult and young children are to honor their parents. We have considered the nature of human authority which has to do with being made in the image of God and our task of having dominion over the earth. Then we began to trace authority in human relationships as that is unfolded in the biblical story, which authoritatively defines our world and our place in it, and we saw that husbands have authority over their wives.

That is an idea which grates on modern western sensibilities, but it is the clear teaching of the word of God and maintaining it belongs to living to the glory of God and not being conformed to the way of death which is the way of living apart from submission to the word of God. But dealing with the authority of husbands over their wives cries out for a biblical response to the terrible reality of domestic abuse and so in the last sermon we dealt with that issue and we got some sense of how grossly dishonoring to God and destructive it is when husbands abuse their authority over their wives or fail to reflect the love of Christ for the church in the way in which they live with their wives.

I'm not sure what we will all cover in the rest of the sermons on the Fifth Commandment. I could do authority in workplace, authority in the church, an authority in the state, but I'm thinking of dealing more with issues of authority/submission that apply to all of the different ways that we are to live together under God. We will touch of the various spheres of authority/submission along the way, but what I am most interested in at this point is exploring the biblical teaching on our relationships with other people in the light of the authority/submission dynamic of the Fifth Commandment.

What strikes me as being tremendously significant is the way in which the Fifth Commandment and its broad application in the Scriptures addresses one of the defining themes of our culture which is individualism or as it has sometimes been called, expressive individualism. Our culture is all about the freedom of the individual

from anything that is external to the individual and thus freedom from authority. This has a long history going all the way back to Adam and Eve and the fall, but it has a particular history and development in our society going back to the Enlightenment when people began to reject the authority of the Bible and of the Church. In the history that followed, the individual got more and more emphasis and anything external to the individual got less and less emphasis. Today we are seeing the fruits of 4 or 5 centuries' development of these ideas. It is not all bad. Individual freedom is a good thing to some extent, but when individual freedom becomes the dominant value in a society, we end up with the kind of disintegration of society and of individual lives that we witness in the world around us today.

There are many aspects to this, but the general idea is that individuals must be as free as possible from any constraints outside of themselves. Clearly, we need some restrictions on our freedom to be able to live together in some kind of peace and order. It would not be good if we were all free to choose what side of the road to drive on or if we were all free to keep up on our correspondence on our phones while driving our cars. There is no way freedom can be absolute when people live together in society.

But beyond that, the ideal in our society is that people should be free to believe what they want and live as they please as long as they are not hurting anyone else. And even that is consistent with biblical teaching if it is carefully qualified. The Bible does not advocate that we try force people to believe what we believe, and it does not teach us to try to force people to live as we think they should live. But our society has taken the idea of freedom much further so that freedom has come to mean that the way to flourish in life is to have as many choices as possible and the ideal life is a life where you follow your heart, or express your inner person, or be whomever you choose to be with as few constraints as possible from outside of your own heart.

This last idea is a major theme in our society about experiencing the fullness of life. It is thought and taught that the best and most satisfying way to live is to be whatever you want to be and do whatever you want to do. Charles Taylor is a Canadian philosopher who has written a

number of influential books describing our secular age and how we got here, and he calls our age, the age of authenticity. Here is a summary of this thinking on this matter from a book discussing his contribution to our understanding of our time. “We’re committed to personal human flourishing, and we find that flourishing within ourselves. So, our spirituality must be driven by “authentic” emotions that come from within, never from mere obedience or “theological correctness.” Our sexuality, likewise, is faithful primarily to internal desires, not to cultural or moral expectations. To put it differently, our modern secular culture disciplines our hearts to be true to ourselves, to reject all outside intrusions.”

Listen to that last sentence again: “[O]ur modern secular culture disciplines our hearts to be true to ourselves, to reject all outside intrusions.” This is the creed and the confession and the inerrant truth of our modern secular culture. This is the message of most of the TV programs and movies and advertising that are available for our consumption. This kind of thinking is around is like the air that we breathe. And we do breathe it in. It influences us.

Now the reason that I bring this up is because the message of the Bible and the requirement of the Fifth Commandment is exactly the opposite of the message of our culture. The Fifth Commandment is about authority and our submission to authority that comes from outside of us. God himself is the great “outside intrusion” who speaks to us with absolute authority and he tells us that the way to flourish is not to follow our hearts, but to conform our hearts to him and his will and his law.

And an important part of that is the idea that flourishing as human beings includes submission to legitimate authorities whom God has placed over us. And that idea even goes further in God’s word to include submission even to people who do not have authority over us. And that is what I want to focus on in the rest of this sermon. We will focus on the idea that Christians are to submit to one another. This message is exactly opposite the dominant theme of our culture that we flourish by following our hearts. The Bible says we flourish by not following our hearts and instead by submitting ourselves to demands that come from

outside of us. This does not mean that there is no place for following our desires and expressing what is inside of us, but these impulses are changed through the renewal that we have in Christ so that the things that truly satisfy our hearts are no longer self-indulgence, but pleasing God. There is more joy and satisfaction in that than there ever can be following our heart as the world thinks of that.

So, we will look at Ephesians 5:21 which tells us to submit “to one another out of reverence for Christ.” We will focus on this, but we need to hear it in context, so we need to back up to verse 18. I will emphasize certain words to try to make the structure of the passage clear. <sup>18</sup>“And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but **be filled with the Spirit**, <sup>19</sup>**addressing** one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, **singing** and **making melody** to the Lord with your heart, <sup>20</sup>**giving thanks** always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>21</sup>**submitting** to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

So, the main exhortation is “be filled with the Spirit.” And then four things are mentioned that we should do by means of being filled with the Spirit: addressing one another, singing and making melody, giving thanks and submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. For our purposes this evening we consider the exhortation that we are to “be filled with the Spirit ... submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

It is significant that we are being exhorted to be “filled with the Spirit.” This is one of those things that we can do by the grace of God in the gospel and the ways to be filled with the Spirit include participating in the means of grace, such as, receiving the word and sacraments, engaging in prayer and also through faith and obedience. And one of the things that we are to do as a result of being filled with the Spirit is to submit “to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

So, we are to submit to God and submitting to God includes submitting to those whom he has given authority over us and now we learn that submitting to Christ’s authority includes submitting to one another.

Now in the verses that follow, Paul gives three specific ways that we are to submit to one another. Wives are to submit to their husbands, children are to submit to their parents and servants are to submit to their masters. And no doubt submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ includes submitting to those authorities that God has placed over us. But it seems clear that Paul here is also referring to a general submitting of believers to one another.

This is very interesting and significant and, I think, profoundly relevant in the light of the individualism which is around us like the air that we breathe and which does influence us. We are to submit even to our fellow believers who are at the same level as us authority-wise. We are to submit to people who have no authority over us. We are all to submit to one another.

I want to get at what this means by contrasting it to where the obsession with the individual and the freedom of the individual has brought us as a society. One of the things that happens as individual freedom is emphasized is that our responsibilities and commitments to other people is de-emphasized. This is behind the high divorce rate and the breakdown of the family. It is a factor in the decline of the church. It is a factor in the fact that many people confess that they believe the Bible, but they refuse to be members of a church. It is a factor in the fact that the connection of many church members to the church is very superficial. These things are all the result of people not submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Here are a few quotes from a book by one of my new favorite authors, Mark Sayers called *Disappearing Church*. "The challenge faced by the church in the West is not the rise of unbelief, but rather the rise of a belief that is detached from an idea of belonging." No doubt, it is an overstatement to say that "The challenge faced by the church in the West is not the rise of unbelief...", but Sayers is saying something that is very important and very profound. One of the outcomes of the individualism of our time is this reality that "belief" is often "detached from the idea of belonging." The more the freedom of the individual is emphasized, the less the obligation of the individual to other people is emphasized.

Sayers discusses this subject under the heading of the decline of institutions in our society. An institution in this context is a form of social organization to which people belong – like a family or a church. Here is some more of what Sayers says on this subject of individualism vs belonging. “[I]nstitutions require discipline, compromise, conflict and conflict resolution, and a limit on our will.” (128-129) He also uses the phrase, “binding relational commitments.” (128) Describing the ideal of the Old Testament people of God he writes, “It was a world of commitments and connections, a universe of relationships and responsibilities.” Further he says, “Each of us has been given an area by God within which to work. We are placed in a context, in a community, in institutions and webs of responsibility.” (136)

All of this helps us to understand what Paul means when he tells us to submit “to one another out of reverence for Christ.” The individualism of our time stresses the freedom of each person to follow his own desires and find satisfaction in life by expressing his individuality. The biblical idea of submitting to one another stresses the obligations and responsibilities that are part of belonging to each other in various ways. It includes ideas such as commitment, accountability, and thus limiting our freedom in order to contribute to the wellbeing of others and the wellbeing of our families and church and also the world – although Paul’s focus in this passage is clearly on the church.

Submitting to one another means limiting our freedom in order to fulfill relational obligations and responsibilities. We submit to one another when we put the wellbeing of others before our own desires at least some of the time.

To put this into perspective, this does not mean that there is no place for self-interest and satisfying legitimate desires. As we have seen a number of times in our study of the book of Ecclesiastes, the enjoyment of life is an important part of being human and of living to the glory of God. This idea of submitting to one another does not mean that all self-interest is suppressed. God does not call us to a life of asceticism, which is the denial of all legitimate pleasures. But he does call us to restrict the fulfillment of some of our desires and wants in order to fulfill the

responsibilities of belonging – that is to submit to the obligations of belonging – particularly in family and church, but also to society.

Belonging to a family or the church limits our freedom if we belong according to God's idea of belonging. We submit to one another in various ways as we live in relationship with other people. By belonging to family and church we have obligations and so we must limit our own desires and wants in various ways in order to fulfill those obligations and commitments. We are not unattached. And attachments to other people involve limiting our freedom to follow our own desires.

Let's look at a number of texts that demonstrate what it means to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. There are texts in the New Testament which teach that believers are accountable to one another and that they are to correct one another and encourage one another to faithful obedience. So, we read in Galatians 6:1, "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness." And 1 Thessalonians 5:11 & 14 says, "Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing." "And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all."

Believers are to help one another to live the Christian life. That involves speaking the truth into one another's lives and in order for that to work it will require believers to submit to one another. When we belong to the Church, we give up some of our independence. We give up some of our freedom and accept accountability for the way in which we live our lives. And the New Testament makes it clear that that requirement is broader than accountability to the elders of the Church – although that too is an important part of what it means to belong to the Church. Followers of Jesus Christ are to be invested in one-another's lives. We are called to help each other to grow in Christ-likeness and that means that we are also called to submit to one another.

When we think of this, it is easy to detect the influence of the individualism of our time upon us. This scriptural teaching about our accountability to the other members of the body of Christ exposes the tendency to independence that is in each of our hearts. The idea of submitting to correction from others is not something that the spirit of

our time encourages, nor is it something that comes easily to us. And again, it shows how radically different the biblical way of viewing life is from the way that our culture thinks of life. This is part of what Paul is getting at when he tells us to be filled with the Spirit, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Then you have a verse like Philippians 2:2 where Paul writes, "complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind." Paul is speaking here about unity – "being of the same mind – being in full accord and of one mind." That involves submitting to one another. There cannot be unity and harmony in the church without compromise – without submitting to decisions with which one does not agree – without allowing the views of others to prevail. That does not mean that there is no place for discussion and trying to persuade others but living together in unity involves not always getting your own way and that is one of the ways that we submit to one another.

Paul continues in Philippians 2:3-4, "<sup>3</sup>Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. <sup>4</sup>Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others." Here Paul is telling us to submit to one another by counting others more significant than ourselves and by putting the interests of others before our own interests. It is our natural inclination to count ourselves first and to be self-serving in the way that we live. Putting others before ourselves is a way of submitting to them – we submit to the obligations of love and service that belong to living together as followers of Jesus Christ. Submitting to Jesus, involves submitting to one another by denying ourselves some of our freedom in order to follow the example of Jesus who submitted himself to the obligations of love.

You get the picture. The law of God is the law of love. We are to love God and we are to love our neighbor. We are to love our fellow members of the body of Christ and we are to love the world. Love is a form of submission, not in the sense of submitting to authority, but rather in the sense of submitting to putting the wellbeing of others before at least some of our own wants. It is submitting to the

obligations that come as a result of being a part of the body. It is being interconnected with others and thus limiting our freedom and some of our desires in order to contribute to the life of the body.

You can see how different this is from the individualism of our time. But the individualism of our time is just the outworking of the rejection of God's authority. And that is something that lives in each of our hearts. Jesus came to free us from individualism. In biblical thought the freedom of individualism is really bondage and the submission to God and to the obligations of belonging to the body of Christ is really freedom. True freedom in biblical terms is not freedom to express ourselves and to do whatever we want to do, it is living as God has designed us to live and that involves a significant dose of self-denial and submitting to the demands and constraints of our relationships with other people.

Jesus is our great example in that he submitted himself to the obligations of love by becoming a man and going to the cross for our salvation. But Jesus is more than our example. He is also our saviour if we are following him. And thus, he makes it possible for us to begin to live in a way that is not natural to us in our fallen condition. When Paul calls us to submit to one another he sees it as the outflow of being filled with the Spirit and it is possible for us to be filled with the Spirit because Jesus ascended into heaven and from there, he poured out his Spirit upon his church.

The individualism of our culture is the natural outworking of the sinful nature that we all share. It is the way of sin and it is the way of death. And that is very clear when we see the brokenness of our society and the alienation and isolation of so many people. There is a problem with belonging in our society and that problem of belonging is the result of individualism. This is what we are being saved from when we believe in Jesus. The Christian life is very counter-cultural. And nowhere is that more evident than in the biblical teaching summarized in the Fifth Commandment. The way of life and the way of flourishing and the way of living to the glory of God includes submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.