**Submit to one another**

Text: Ephesians 5:18-21

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**Scriptures:** John 13:1-15; Phil 2:3-7; Isaiah 53:1-7; Ephesians 5:1-21

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 65, 468, 292, 344, 525

**Series:** The ‘one anothers’ of Scripture (#6)

**Theme:** Being filled with the Holy Spirit is characterized by mutual submission to one another out of reverence for Christ.

**Proposition:** Brothers and sisters, submit to one another out of reverence for Christ

**Introduction**

Training our new puppy Ruth is challenging because she definitely has her own will. She naturally wants to go her own way and do her own thing – even though often this would not be good for her or for others. Our desire is that Ruth would be like her namesake who said to Naomi: “*where you go I will go*” (Ruth 1:16).

There are two broad approaches to dog training:

1. Dominate the small puppy and bend her to your will by forcing her to submit to your greater strength, superior knowledge and your control of her resources like food, water, play and affection.
2. Mentor the small puppy to rely on you to guide her, keep her safe and provide for all her needs. This is the way we are training Ruth.

At the heart of both these methods is submission. The first method forces submission like a winning wrestler pinning his opponent to the ground in a vice-like grip. The second method encourages voluntary submission.

We are obviously not puppies being trained by a dog owner, rather we, brothers and sisters, are children of God being trained by our Heavenly Father (Heb 12:10). In our text, the Apostle Paul, having exhorted the Ephesian Christians to be ‘filled with the Holy Spirit’, reveals some aspects of the Spirit-filled life, including in verse 21 ‘*submitting to one another*’. As we’ll see shortly, the call here is to voluntary, willing, submission.

Our text comes in the second half of book of Ephesians which reveals how those who have been saved through faith in Christ are called to live in the light of God’s grace. The call to submit to one another comes to each one of us, brothers and sisters in the Lord, without exception. This is not a mere suggestion made by the Apostle Paul, but a command of Christ in His Word. Submitting to one another is one aspect of loving one another as Christ has loved us (John 13:34). We’re going to look at this ‘one another’ command under three headings:

1. Being filled with the Spirit
2. Submitting to one another
3. Worshipping Christ as Lord
4. **Being filled with the Spirit**

Some of us enjoy a glass of wine or a beer from time to time. The Bible does not prohibit drinking alcohol, but consistently warns of the dangers of consuming too much (Prov 20:1; 21:17; 23:32-35; Isa 28:1-4; Luke 21:34; 1 Cor 6:9-10). Being drunk on wine and beer causes people to stumble, both physically and morally (Isa 28:7-8). Too much alcohol on a regular basis leads to dependence that erodes self-control.

In the Greco-Roman world of the 1st century AD, the cult of Dionysus (Bacchus), the ‘god of wine’ taught that worshipping this deity was through a drunken state. The god was believed to enter into the intoxicated bodies of his worshippers to inspire them. It is against this background that the Apostle Paul writes to the Ephesian saints “*And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit*” (5:18). The word translated ‘debauchery’ means ‘reckless living’. It is used to describe the lifestyle of the ‘prodigal son’ who went to a country far away from his father and ‘*squandered his property in reckless living*’ (Luke 15:13).

In contrast to careless living, those who believe in Christ are to ‘*be filled with the Spirit*’. There is much confusion in the wider Christian church about what it means to be filled with the Holy Spirit, especially in Pentecostal and Charismatic circles. All those who have been chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, predestined for adoption as sons and daughters of God in Jesus (Eph 1:4-5) are ‘*sealed with the promised Holy Spirit*’ (1:13). The Holy Spirit is given to believers as a down payment, or guarantee, of their future glorification in Christ (2 Corinthians 1:22; Ephesians 4:30). Jesus spoke about the permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit in these words: “*I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you* ***forever***” (John 14:16). All those who are saved are born again by the Holy Spirit (John 3:3). This is a one-off event which, in theology, is called ‘regeneration’.

Whereas the ongoing filling with the Holy Spirit is a repeated work of God in co-operation with the Christian. It is this work which enables our sanctification; our growth in godliness; our Christlikeness. What happens to a person who is filled with the Holy Spirit? Some say the sign of this is being able to ‘speak in tongues’; by which they mean words and sounds that are unintelligible. In contrast, Christ says that to be filled with the Spirit is to be filled with Him and His Word: “*The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you*” (John 14:26). “*When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you*” (John 16:13-14).

Notice in our text that those who are filled with the Spirit, speak the truth of God by singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (v19). Being filled with the Holy Spirit results in a life of thankfulness for everything (pleasant and unpleasant) to God the Father (v20).

It is possible for us, brothers and sisters, to grieve the Holy Spirit (Eph 4:30) who dwells within us. When we sin, we act like those who do not have the Spirit and this causes Him sorrow. His divine activity in sanctifying us in truth (John 17:17) can be quenched (1 Thess 5:19). When we chose not to follow the Spirit’s guidance into all truth, we quench the fire of the Spirit and act like unbelievers. We grieve and quench the Holy Spirit when we prevent Him from occupying every part of our lives, and thereby guiding and controlling us.

Sin in our lives is what hinders the work of the Holy Spirit within us, whereas willing obedience to God enables us to be filled with Him. Willingly and wholeheartedly practicing the one-another’s of Scripture evidences that a person is being filled by the Holy Spirit. So should we be praying ‘Fill me up to the brim Holy Spirit’? That’s not an unbiblical prayer, but it is clearer and more helpful to pray along these lines:

* Show me, O Lord the sins that I am blind to, so that I may repent, turn to you and have you control all of my life.
* Help me to obey you in all things, but especially those that I struggle with.
* Guide me in the truth of your word so that I may glorify and please Christ Jesus in my life.
* Remind me of the riches of Christ in my life so that I can be thankful in all circumstances (1 Thess 5:18).

There is great mystery in the spiritual reality of being filled with the Holy Spirt, but the ways in which we can cooperate with Him are not mysterious, but are plain and clear from Scripture. In the words of Deut 30:14 “*The word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it*”. Let’s now turn to the Word of God which calls those who have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit to be filled with Him and to submit to one another.

1. **Submitting to one another**

In the ancient Greek world, this word translated ‘submitting’ was used of army troops who were subject to the orders of their military commander. This word is used this way in Romans 8:20 to refer to this fallen creation which has been forcibly placed under God’s control being ‘*subjected to futility, not willingly*’.

In our text, this word is in the passive (middle) tense. It therefore does not mean that Christians are to force one another to submit to them, like an over-powering wrestler. Rather in the passive sense, it means to voluntarily subject oneself to the will of another person. This has been helpfully described as ‘*learning to bend yourself around what someone else needs from you*’. To submit yourself to another is not to press your own rights, but instead to lay your own entitlements aside in order to lovingly serve someone else.

This is exactly what Christ Jesus has done, as we were reminded earlier from Philippians 2:6-7: “*Though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men*”. Christ Jesus did not look only to his own interests, but also the interests of others (cf. Phil 2:4). In fact, He put the interests of others ahead of His own, laying aside the entitlements which were His right as the Divine Son of God. He willingly subjected Himself to be the Suffering Servant both of His Heavenly Father and of God’s people. At the end of the years of teaching and training his twelve disciples, He voluntarily submitted Himself to them in the upper room, before going to the cross. Here we see the submission of Christ to twelve men who were not worthy of the honour that He bestowed upon them. He knew that one of them, to whom He submitted Himself, would soon betray Him (John 13:11).

During supper He tied a towel around his waist, poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and then wiped them dry with the towel. He did this to give them a vivid example to remember, saying ‘*you also ought to wash one another’s feet*’ (John 13:14). See how closely His command to ‘wash one another’s feet’ is to the one before us today ‘submit to one another’. The reason that our English translates has ‘submitting to one another’ is that the verb form, as well as being passive is also what is called in language grammar a ‘present participle’. This means, brothers and sisters, that submitting to one another is to be a continuous pattern of our lives.

* We are called to be regularly willing to be inconvenienced for the sake of one another.
* We are called to regularly voluntarily bend our own will around the needs of others.
* We are called to regularly serve one another, not as we please, but in order to please others – as Jesus did by washing His disciples’ feet.
* We are called not to be self-assertive, and not to insist on getting our own way.

This is a universal command for all who are filled with the Holy Spirit, that is all who are being sanctified in the truth. In short, no Christian is exempt from this good instruction of Christ. As you may know, the next section in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians reveals how submission works out in marriage (5:22-33), family (6:14) and the workplace (6:5-9). However, these detailed instructions do not negate the overall mutual submission of every child of God to one another.

* There is to be a mutual submission between husbands and wives, who both look to the interests of the other whilst still fulfilling the particular role God has assigned to each in the marriage.
* There is to be a mutual submission between parents and their children, who all look to the interests of the others whilst still fulfilling the particular role God has assigned to each in the family.
* There is to be a mutual submission between employers/supervisors and the employees under them, all looking to the interests of the others whilst still fulfilling the particular role God has assigned to each in the workplace.

It has been said that submitting is the most difficult of the “one another’s” in Scripture. I don’t know if that’s true, but it is certainly far from easy to willingly submit to another person. Pride so often gets in the way of wholehearted obedience to this good commandment. Instead of submitting to one another we can tend to be stubborn and act out the internal mantras “it’s my way or the highway!”, “I’ll bend you to my interests”, “I’ll never give in”. What can motivate us to be doers, and not merely hearers, of the Word to willingly submit to one another? The answer leads us to our third point:

1. **Worshipping Christ as Lord**

Gently motivating a puppy is a combination of giving tasty treats, warm affection and fun play times. This helps the young dog to put in the work to learn a set of commands and acceptable behaviours. The way of Christ is **not** like this. God does not dangle the ‘treats’ of health, wealth or even His love before His children to motivate them to submit to one another. Instead He has given His only Son (John 3:16) that we may desire to worship Him who is the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15).

The Biblical motivation to submit to one another is ‘*out of reverence for Christ*’ (v21). The Greek word here translated ‘reverence’ literally means ‘fear’. It is the word from which we get our English term ‘phobia’. For example: Claustrophobia – fear of confined or crowded spaces; Acrophobia – fear of heights; Arachnophobia – fear of spiders. As you may know I have ophidiophobia – fear of snakes. It’s a good reason to live in New Zealand!

The word ‘fear’ is translated in our text in the ESV as ‘reverence’. Reverence is **not** the terror of eternal condemnation but a healthy fear of Christ’s displeasure at the choices we make. ‘Fear of the Lord’ is the ‘beginning of wisdom’ (Ps 111:10; Prov 1:7, 9:10). To live without this fear, this holy reverence, is foolishness. Our reverence for Christ is our worship of Him as our Lord.

So what is the connection between submitting to one another and willingly doing this out of reverence for Christ? Firstly, we are imitating the character of Christ, having the mind of Lord and Saviour (Phil 2:2). Secondly, we are treating our brother or sister in the Lord as a person who is themselves Christlike. We are treating them with honour, respect, love and affection – as a reflection of our Lord.

So in mutual submission there is a beautiful modelling of Christ. The one who submits is the willing, loving, ‘servant’. The one who is submitted to is the gentle, loving, ‘Lord’. There’s a song by Richard Gillard that expresses this well:

“*Brother, Let Me Be Your Servant, Let Me Be as Christ to You*

*Pray That I May Have the Grace, To Let You Be My Servant Too*”

Notice the two-fold willing submission: a) Let me be as Christ to you. b) Let you be my servant.

As we’ve already seen, stubborn pride can make it very difficult, if not impossible, to willingly submit to others. This is because pride, rivalry, and conceit (Phil 2:3) are sinful and result in grieving and quenching of the Holy Spirit, thereby making us less full of Him. Alternatively, we can obstruct others in their willing submission to us. This is what Peter did when he said to Jesus ‘*You shall never wash my feet*’ (John 13:8). We reverence Christ, worshipping Him as Lord, when we submit to others and allow others to submit to us; remembering both the willing submission of our Saviour and our willing submission to Him.

He submitted Himself to those would take His life ‘*like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth*’ (Isa 53:7). Christ’s willing submission is at the heart of the gospel.

Submission is not natural for a fallen human being. This is why we often struggle to display the character of Christ to one another in the church, as well as in our different roles in marriage, family and the workplace. When we are filled with the Holy Spirit, He convicts us concerning sin and righteousness and judgement (John 16:8). He is pleased to do this as He guides us into all truth.

Is your habit in life to willingly submit to the interests and needs of your brothers and sisters in Christ? Do you willingly ‘bend yourself around what someone else needs from you?’ Opportunities to practice submitting to one another are present in every aspect of our lives together; when we serve together in church ministries, in where we choose to sit in this auditorium, in how we talk about matters upon which we may disagree.

I doubt if any of us are completely obedient to our Lord in this command to love one another by submitting to one another. Today is the day to accept the reality of our failures, to come to Christ in repentance and faith and to submit ourselves to Him as our Lord. Today is the day to commit to strive for a lifestyle which is characterised by willingly submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. Having heard this, will you do it? (James 1:22).

AMEN.