

08.07.07 Coromandel Baptist 10:00 a.m.

Christian Household Love

Bible Readings = Eph. 6:1-9 and 1 Pet. 2:13-25

Introduction:

- (1) Last week we were considering the fact and nature of the authority and submission of love that belongs to the functional nature of the creation.
 - a. We saw that submission does not imply inferiority, any more than we can say that the Incarnate Son of God is 'inferior' to the Father. The authority and submission of love exalts the other, and obeys with thankfulness, as the expression of joyful delight in the other's honour.
 - b. We saw that in the current situation where we are wedded to the Flesh (in all its self-seeking and self-serving pride) the matters of authority and submission are always 'issues' for us. We all have mental reservations of why we are excused from such demands, or why other people should pay particular attention to them!
- (2) But we saw that, finally, we are not under the hand of any man or woman, principality or power. We are all under the hand of the Father, in union with the Son, filled with the Spirit.
 - a. The whole of this section of Ephesians is governed by the imperative found in Eph. 5:18. Submitting to authority is only possible because we stand in relation to the Father in Christ, who has subdued our wills, and given us his Spirit (of love, peace, joy, patience, etc.)
 - i. Our problems of authority are all related to our love and submission (or otherwise) to the Father.
- (3) But in the New Testament communities, the 'household' life did not consist merely of (what has been come to be called) a nuclear family. Households were extended, which children, other relatives and slaves being all part of 'households'. So if Paul is going to speak about the Church as the Household of God (Eph. 2:19), he addresses not only the public worship of the Father's family (Eph. 5:18ff.), but the life of the households which make up the household of God.
- (4) The marriage relationship is one sphere for the fullness of the Spirit to be lived in, so also that of children and parents, slaves and masters...the picture is of households in which the gospel has ordered the relationships (cf. 1 Pet. 3:8 'to sum up...').

This week we see that Christian households were to be places where the authority and submission of love was to be exercised in the fullness of the Spirit.

1. A Small but Important Fact.

(1) We notice that here and in other places in the New Testament there are exhortations addressed to mixed communities of men and women, slaves and free, masters and servants, parents and children (e.g. 1 Cor. 7:21f.; Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-4:1; 1 Tim. 6:1-2; 1 Pet. 2:18-21; etc.)

- This is significant for a number of reasons:
 - In the days when letters were read in the congregations, it means that all would be present to hear. Slaves would hear instructions to masters,

masters to slaves, children to parents, parents to children etc. This means the New Testament letters were written to whole household communities, or better, the community of households which made up the Household of God. They together received instruction, which meant the whole household was already under the authority of a new Master! They knew themselves to be the household of the Father (Eph. 2:17ff.); before whom they bowed the knee (Eph. 3:14ff.) and from whom they were filled (Eph. 3:18ff.).

- We also know that within those households there was already a different dynamic at work than that in the world...the dynamic of the unity of love was present through their unity in Christ (Gal. 3:28 and Col. 3:11 cf. 1 Cor. 12:13)

§ This means that slaves and masters, parents and children, husbands and wives had already been placed in a new relationship with one another in the Lord, and they all lived in and under the authority of the Father (so 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1; Jude 1:1 cf. 1 John 1:3). They all were possessed of the same Spirit which taught them to cry Jesus is Lord and Abba, Father!

- In addition, they all recognised the diverse gifts of the body, and they were to use them for love and in mutual honouring of one another (e.g. 1 Cor. 12-14; Rom. 12:1-13 cf. Rom. 12:10; Phil. 2:3; 1 Pet. 5:5).
- And they had already heard about (and experienced!) the joy of being in the fullness of the Spirit together, and therefore knew that this did not belong to rank, social class, relative wealth or gender.

§ Thus husbands and wives, children and parents, masters and slaves were all part of the one Christian community.

(2) This means, therefore that the letters were read and heard in a living way...not as items of doctrinal reflection, but letters to bring refreshment to existing communities of the Spirit.

- And they needed to address questions that their newfound status raised. For example, if citizens of the kingdom of heaven do we pay taxes to the kings of this world? What about our relation to the law of the lands in which we live? Or to existing institutions of marriage and family? Or slavery...when the masters and the slaves were in fact brothers in one family!
- One example of the difference in status is seen in Paul's letter to Philemon.

2. The Same, But Different

(1) This means that when we look at the New Testament communities, in many respects they would have looked the same as other families, but at their heart was a different dynamic.

- All relationships were now the expression of the authority and submission of love. For the whole Household of God, grace preceded law...i.e. the instructions are given to a saved community. So also with the households within the household of God. Instructions about how to live in marriage; as a parents or children; or as masters and servants, are given in the context that each (and all) is under the grace

of God. All lived under the authority of Christ who had died for them! Thus in submitting to one another, they were submitting to Christ.

- As one example, we see the exhortation to the fathers in Eph. 6:4...they are to bring the children up into the discipline and instruction of the Lord...not their own discipline and instruction.
- Children are to honour the parents and obey them *in the Lord*.
- Slaves and Masters are likewise to operate towards each other in the Lord (Eph. 6:5f.; 4:9). The 'fear and trembling' of the slaves is a sign of their submission to the Lord (cf. 2 Cor. 7:15; Phil. 2:12).

(2) In the matter of children we know that the parents are the first arena of authority they meet. Parents have the necessary responsibility to discipline them, but the final matter of the child's subjection to authority can only be settled in the child's subjection to the Authority of the Father.

- Cf. the comments about Jesus' childhood in Luke 2:51-52.
- Also cf. the description of sin and disobedience to parents in Rom. 1:30, which stands in contrast to the law of God (as in Ex. 20:12; Lev. 19:3; Deut. 5:16).

3. The Slavery Question

(1) When we come to passages like this one, we are tempted to import questions to the passage which are foreign to the cultural, social, and familial settings of the Greco-Roman world in which the Church lived.

- For example, the only model of slavery that many of us have in mind is that terrible and bloody traffic in human life and misery which marked some of the worst excesses of the West's colonial period, or which marks still the trafficking in human life found in parts of the world today. We hear the word 'slave' and we immediately think of these images...but this would not have sprung to mind in the 1st century Greco-Roman world.
 - In the history of the Roman Republic (i.e. before the rise of the emperors such as Augustus Caesar) the lot of slaves was considerably harsher than at the time of Paul's writings a century or so later.
 - § During this period there were slave rebellions (known as the three Servile Wars)...all unrelated and under different leadership. The largest and most powerful was under Spartacus c. 73BC, but even then the motives and reasons for the rebellion are unclear. It seems unlikely that they were rebelling against the concept and institution of slavery per se, but rather against the harshness of some treatment (let by Gladiators)...but also seems that they were motivated by the desire for plunder.
 - § However, even in the earlier period domestic/household slaves were generally well cared for.
 - Estimates vary (ranging from about 1/3 to over 3/4 of the populations of Greece and Italy) were either slaves or freed slaves.
 - While there were slaves who had to work in very oppressive conditions (e.g. in the mines, on roads), the majority of them were domestic/household slaves.

§ Not only labourers, but artisans, craftsmen, physicians, teachers, administrators, builders etc. They were trusted agents of the household, and many were manumitted before they reached the age of 30. Many then formed business partnerships with their previous owners. For the most part they were far better off than free peasants, who worked on vast agricultural estates on rented land.

(2) So is Paul just saying that it is 'same old...same old' in relation to slaves, masters; parents and children? Answer is not by any means, though outwardly things might look pretty much as they were. In other words, there was not structural change, but a change in relationship, status and mutual honour which rendered a different set of outcomes possible.

- Question sometime asked: Why did Jesus, Paul, apostles not condemn/outlaw/overthrow slavery? Answer...they did!
 - Mark 10:35-45; Gal. 3:28; 1 Cor. 12:13. In other words, there was a theological shift that really meant slavery for those in Christ was abolished...all were slaves of one another, and all together servants of Christ.
 - The slave imagery in the Bible is quite pronounced (e.g. redemption; justification...and being declared free from slavery to the law, sin etc; and slavery to God/Christ)...which means that all are slaves to the true Master.
- So things might look outwardly the same, but inwardly it was completely different. It was the theological shift which ultimately paved the way for the legislative abolition of the exploitative slavery of the colonial era.