

Pentecost 13 / August 18, 2024

Ephesians 5:20-21

“Giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

Submitting to one another in Reverence to Christ

St. Paul’s letters follow a pattern. The opening chapters present the teaching about Christ, human sin and deliverance we receive through the sacrifice of His cross. Paul began this letter praising God for giving us every spiritual blessing in Christ. He writes, “In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace which He lavished upon us...” God doesn’t do anything half way. He completely redeemed sinful humanity through the giving of Christ Jesus. He declares us completely justified in forgiveness through faith in Him and baptism into His death and resurrection. He fills us with His Holy Spirit, so we may feast upon Christ the bread of life in word and sacrament, walk in newness of life and ultimately come to the fullness of Life in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The first part of Paul’s letters speak to the life God gives us in Christ. In chapter two he wrote, “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked. But God being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.” It is by His grace that we are saved.

Having taught the life God gives in Christ, Paul then speaks about the life God empowers us to live in Christ. He says in our text, “At one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of the light.” We walk as children of the light first by allowing the Holy Spirit to shine the light of Christ into our hearts; hearing the word, being cleansed by the word, returning to the washing of our baptism in daily repentance, being nourished by the bread of heaven, Christ Jesus, in the sacrament of His holy body and precious blood. We walk in the light by submitting our spirits to the will of God’s Holy Spirit as He expresses Himself in the word. We walk in the light by submitting ourselves to one another in love, even as Christ submitted Himself to the Father for us in love.

Submission is a dirty word in the world. It carries connotations of slavery, domination, patriarchal abuse and other forms by which the strong dominate the weak. It’s ironic that submission is a dirty word in the world, because it is the sinful world that made it a dirty word in the first place. In the world, submission is forced upon others by those who are in positions of power. In the world, people use power to their own advantage. That’s not the way God uses His power. God uses His power to bless us with life, with the good things of the earth needed to sustain our existence. He blesses us with family, friends and the whole human community that we would be nurtured, protected and loved from cradle to the grave. That this is not always or even often the case, is not God will or doing. Rather it is the result of fallen human nature that seeks its own benefit at the expense of others and seeks to dominate those for whom it has the responsibility of caring and nurturing.

A case in point is the verse following our text where St. Paul continues saying, “Wives submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.” How many people have thought that this means they are the boss and their wife is their virtual slave! That’s not God’s submission. That’s the submission of the devil, the world and our sinful nature. In Christ we have been set free from the domination of the devil. We have been set free from the domain of the devil. In Christ we are empower by the Holy Spirit to resist the desires of our sinful nature and walk, not in the ways of the world, but in the newness of Christ. The greatest submission was that of Christ, “who being in very nature God did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant...and being found in human form He humbled Himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross.” To submit in reverence to Christ is to give ourselves to others in love, even as Christ gave Himself for us in love. In reverence to Christ, who submitted Himself for us even to death on the cross, we submit to one another in love.

Our first submission is of ourselves to God for the sake of His love in Christ Jesus. In chapter three Paul said, “I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.” We submit ourselves to God as our Father, first as our Creator. He is the source of the life of all things living. In Him all things live and move and have their being. Most importantly we bow our knees before God and submit to Him as our Father in Christ Jesus. In Him, through baptism into His death and resurrection, we receive adoption as children of God and are incorporated into His body, the church of which He Himself is the head and husband.

In Christ, God has done the most remarkable thing. He expressed the length and breadth and depth of His love in redeeming us from our sins and calling us out of the darkness and death of sin and into the light of His righteousness and life through the gospel of Christ. Humans were not the only or the first of God's creatures to turn against Him. Before Adam and Eve were tempted and fell in the garden, many angels resisted God and rebelled against His will. God provided no redemption for the fallen angels. Yet, in love He gave His eternally begotten Son to redeem humans from sin and death, sharing our humanity and sacrificing Himself for our sins on the cross. The height and the depth and length of the love of God for us humans, is unfathomable and incomprehensible. It is no burden to submit to God's love in Christ. There is no greater freedom than receiving Christ as Saviour, no greater blessing than confessing Him as our Lord.

In Christ, God has set us free from sin. Freedom not simply from condemnation, but freedom from walking in the dark paths of sin that lead to death. Some people think grace is freedom to sin, since there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. There is no freedom in sin. Sin is its own curse and misery. There is no freedom in addiction. The addiction is its own curse and misery. Freedom in Christ is the power of the Holy Spirit to walk in a new life according to the righteousness of God expressed fully in Christ Jesus. Paul writes in chapter five, "Be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." Christ submitted Himself to the will of the Father for our redemption. We submit ourselves to God through faith in Christ, in whom we receive forgiveness of sin and its bondage that we may walk in the newness of life. We express the newness of life we have with God in Christ, by submitting to His will and by submitting to one another in love out of reverence for Christ.

We submit to God by receiving His love in Christ and by expressing His love in our relationships with other people, especially our fellow believers. Submission may mean slavery to the world, but in Christ submission is freedom. Freedom from slavery to sin, bondage to the devil and the condemnation of death. Submission to God in Christ is the forgiveness of sin, being translated from the domain of the devil who hates us, into the kingdom of the Son who loves us. Submission to God in Christ is the Holy Spirit incorporating us into the body of Christ and making us members of one another through baptism into the body of Christ. In the letter to the Galatians Paul writes, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free." In Christ we are free to submit ourselves to God as Father and to each other as sisters and brothers in love.

Submission to God in Christ, is to have meaning in time and hope for eternity. Submission to God in Christ, is to be able to love one another deeply from the heart. Submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ is live together in the forgiveness in which we live with God in Christ. God bless us to submit to Him in faith and to one another in love in reverence to Christ that together we may live in the words of St. Paul who said, "Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, giving thanks always and for everything," especially for Jesus our Saviour and Redeemer. In His Name. Amen