

Good morning everyone. Welcome to you all.

It is great meeting together today as one big family - God's family.

It is great to worship together, to pray together, to support each other in both the good and the difficult times.

This morning I will be answering another one of those questions that I have been asked and this one is tricky.

And it is - What is the role of men and women, particularly around submission and that passage in Ephesians 5 that looks at wives being subject to their husbands.

A good question, but a tricky one.

So we will start with reading the passage. Ephesians 5 verse 21 to 33.

*Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.*

*Wives, be subject to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.*

*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband.*

The word of God.

One of the most difficult things with interpreting scripture is that there are two different things that are mixed together.

There are the eternal truths - the things that are always true no matter what the circumstances or the culture. Things like the rules for new life as a follower of Jesus that start in Ephesians 4:25, that mention things like not lying or stealing and being kind to one another. Those things are always true no matter what culture or circumstances we are in.

And then there are truths that have been written mainly for a particular culture and circumstance. Things written for the original readers, in this case the followers of Jesus in Ephesus. Things that they would have read in a particular way because of their culture and circumstances. Things that would have contrasted with what other people were saying, what other people were doing.

They are still truths, it is still the word of God, there is still richness, but to appreciate it fully we need to understand what it meant to those who first heard it and then work out what it means for us today in our culture.

It is a bit like having instructions to go somewhere. They can be based on a GPS reading, something that is always true and no matter where we are the GPS reading will get us to the same place. But if we have instructions that say go North West 200 km. To get to the place where the person who wrote those instructions intended, we need to know where the person thought that we were. If we go north west 200km from Flaxmere we would get to a different place than if we go north west 200 km from Port Villa.

Now working out which is which can be difficult and sometimes people disagree. But that is what I have done this morning as I have looked at this passage and what it means for us today.

You see the role of men and woman changes in different cultures, and it has changed over time. We are a church of many cultures, people have grown up in different times and places. We learn things from our home environment when we are growing up, from what we see, from the culture around us. That influences us. My mother is fond of saying that she was born in Khartoum in the Sudan and her birth certificate is in Arabic. My father was born in the Netherlands, his birth certificate is in Dutch. And then they met in New Zealand and their marriage certificate is in English.

We are a mix of different cultures, and culture changes over time. When my father came to New Zealand and found men doing the dishes he thought they must have been bossed around by their wives. It was different where he came from.

In some cultures women work in the fields, in others that is men's work. For us in New Zealand it is men who need to tend the kumara. That is our culture.

I started work as an engineer in the 1980's in a workplace where probably around 80% of the people were men, and the women were mostly secretaries. But things change. I have worked with male engineers, some brilliant and others not quite as good. I have also worked with female engineers, some brilliant and others not quite as good. Things change. Roles change.

Sometimes people look at this passage in Ephesians 5 and say. Well that shows men are always to be the boss and women are always to follow them. But that is reading far too much into the passage and what it means. That is applying something outside of what it was written for.

Since this passage when it was written was really radical. It was different to what people thought and did.

The passage is part of what is called a code of household conduct, that means that it shows how people in a household are to conduct themselves, how they are to behave. And there were other codes of household conduct that other people, not Christians, had written around the same time.

Now the bit in this one in Ephesians where it says to wives to be subject to their husbands. That was in those codes as well.

But in those codes there was nothing about being subject to each other.

And instead of husbands being told to love their wives, those codes said things like husbands rule your wives.

There was nothing at all about husbands loving, nourishing, showing compassion, and tenderly caring for their wives like there is in the passage I read from Ephesians. Instead it was wives obey and husbands rule.

And in that culture at that time women had very few rights at all. They were regarded as being part of a man's property. So this passage saying that when you marry, the two become one, that was totally different and it was empowering for women. And to say to husbands, love your wife and take care of her as you take care of yourself, that was really radical as well.

So this passage spoke into that culture. Showing what a difference it made to be a follower of Jesus.

And when we think of the way that Jesus interacted with women we see compassion and care.

We know that women as well as men are made in the image of God.

Things that we might describe as feminine characteristics are part of God's character as well. Scripture talks about God wanting to shelter us like a mother hen

shelters chicks under her wings.

As I have looked and observed over the years, I have found that women are just as wise, gifted, intelligent and foolish as men are.

There are differences.

Men and women are not the same.

But one is not better than another.

Now when two people are married, they bring together all of who they are. They bring their stories, their similarities, their differences, their upbringing, everything together.

And sometimes there are huge differences, there are things that need to be worked out.

But marriage, is the two becoming one, it is becoming a team. A partnership.

The two working together to strengthen each other and their relationship.

Now in New Zealand today we live in a world of independence. That is what our society is like. It is about finding out what we want for ourselves, and then working out how to get it. Other societies would call us selfish.

But that is an attitude, a wind in society that influences us.

And it influences our marriages and what we do. People often wonder how do I get my partner to do what I want them to do. I know, in the past I have wondered that myself. I have thought, well if I do this, then maybe Jo will do that.

And sometimes people bring that attitude into looking at this passage and say well there is a trade happening here.

Wives, be subject to your husbands. Do that and then you will get what you really want and that is a husband who loves you.

And husbands, love your wives. Do that and then you will get what you really want and that is a wife who will do what you ask her to do.

But that is wrong. It is not what this passage is about at all.

It is not about working out how to get what we want.

It is about laying down what we want. It is about considering the other person first.

Compared to being selfish and independent and just wanting what we want and trying to find a way to get it.

That is why the passage uses Jesus as an example.

Marriage is about loving each other as much as we love ourselves.

It is about submitting to each other.

It is about each of us considering our partner, rather than thinking only about what we want, what we desire. It is about not putting ourselves first, but also not being a door mat and just giving in to what the other person wants all the time. Instead it is working together to find new ways of doing things, compromising, finding solutions together that work for everyone.

In marriage, the two become one. Together they become a team. A partnership. And both can work together to make the team stronger.

And to do that, we need to love each other, respect each other, listen to each other, nourish each other, forgive each other and to work together.

We will hurt each other over time. That will always happen, we are not perfect.

So we need to forgive each other as well, and learn from the past so that the future can be different. If every time something happened that I didn't like, I picked up a pebble and I never let go of any of them, over time I would have more and more of them, and there would come a time when I would not be able to walk or move, I

would have so many pebbles that they would just weigh me down. We need to release things, to forgive rather than holding onto hurts and times when we have been wronged.

Since things can change, people can change, we can change, God can change us, that is part of the good news of the gospel.

So what does working as a team look like?

Well there are some tasks that are better suited to one partner than another. It depends on who has the skills, abilities and time, as well as what is appropriate in a family culture.

There are some things that Jo does that she is much better at than I am. It would take her 1/4 of the time to do compared to how long it takes me. There are other things that I am better at than she is.

There are different tasks that we enjoy doing. She doesn't mind weeding, I prefer to spray with weed killer. I can easily change a light bulb, she can put things away in low cupboards. Those are tasks and it doesn't matter who does what.

It just depends on what works best. There is no right way or wrong way.

But forgiving each other, listening to each other, loving each other, working together as a team, those are the really important things. Those are the things that it is important to spend time working out how to do together.

So who takes the lead or who has the casting vote.

Well, when a horse race is really close, we say that it is won by a nose, if it is almost as close then it is won by a head. And when I think of men being the head, taking the lead I think of it as being really close like that and it can change

according to the circumstances. If Jo is leading worship and I am playing my trumpet I follow her lead. That is what I can do to support her. I do not have a problem with that. And there are other times and circumstances where she will follow my lead. I enjoy driving long distances, she doesn't. So I do that.

It is a partnership, it is being a team. It should be a very rare thing for someone to say - well this is the way that it is going to be, follow me, and even when that happens then all decisions must come out of love, care and concern for each other.

Now all of this is much more difficult when one of the partners is not a follower of Jesus. That is not something that I am looking at today, but there is good advice about that in other places in the bible.

It is also tricky when one person wants to work on things and the other doesn't. But when that happens, we need to Jesus as our example. He loved us even when we didn't love him. Do things as if you were doing it for Jesus. That is what the "as to the Lord" bit means in the passage that I read. So start there, do what you can, show that selflessness on your part and see what happens over time. Remember, it isn't about doing something in order to get something else in return. And it is not doing something because our partner deserves it. It is following Jesus example in his love for us.

It is also important for everyone to be in a safe place. Family violence is wrong. And there are some situations that people need to escape from. Everyone needs to be in a safe place.

I am also aware that this morning there are single people here, widows, widowers. People who have lost a partner.

Now there is something special about marriage, there are some things that God has designed just to happen within the marriage relationship, but not everyone is married.

I love the saying that we are all part of one family, God's family. We are all connected, part of a community a family. And while it is good for marriages to be strong and secure, it is also good for marriages to be outward looking as well. For us to do things together as God's family compared to couples just doing things by themselves all of the time.

We need to help each other, to support each other. To be family to those who have no family living nearby. That is what it means to be a healthy diverse church family that shows its love for each other.

That is what it means to be the people of God and for us to make God's kingdom visible here on earth.