

“Submitting One to Another in the Fear of the Lord”

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Texts: Ephesians 5:21; Galatians 5:15

Submitting one to another could validly be rendered **servicing one another**. We remember Jesus’ declaration: **For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.** (ESV Luke 22:27) He said this as the paramount, the Lord’s Servant—meaning God’s servant. This text divides into two parts; because people struggle with both parts separately, we will deal with them separately. Following W. Gouge, we note his division of vocation into two subsets: 1. calling in general and 2. calling in particular. As regards the first, all people are called to duties such as knowledge, faith, obedience, love, justice, mercy and truth *as something required of us*. These are duties, not idle pursuits, or points of interest affecting all men everywhere regardless of station, or place. Our particular duties kick in depending on where God has placed us in a nation, church, business or family. God’s ministers are duty bound to instruct God’s people in their duties *of both kinds*. Paul follows this pattern in the present epistle: he instructs the church in general duties (Ephesians 4:1-5:21) and then proceeds to particular calling and conditions. (Ephesians 5:21-6:9)—as did the faithful Moses centuries prior to the entire household of God. Adding precept to precept in ascending order of complexity and challenge—a teaching method, a matter of pedagogy—which connects what went before with that which comes afterwards.

“The primary duty of Christians is to set forth the praise of God (the first thing) in order to be rendered so as to be serviceable to one another!” (Gouge, Vol. 1, p.2) It follows that the ten commandments (the first table of the law) spell out our duty to God. Then there is added to this the second table, the service/duty we owe our fellowmen (the second table of the law). By obeying the ten commandments we do our duty to God. “And to this is added the second table, which declares the service we owe one another. Jesus said, **You shall love the Lord your God with all thy heart, and with all your souls, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like unto it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.** (Matt. 22:37-39) Paul summarizes this thus: to give thanks to God, and to do good to man (Heb. 13:15-16) “***And the service we perform one another in the fear of God is an evident and real demonstration of the respect we bear God.***” This is actionable because by faithful service we may do much good which gives God much honor. Now, as a side note, I might point out that the whole of creation is stitched together in serviceability! And in nature, various species and phylum evidence symbiosis—complementary, or mutual benefit . . . mutuality and interdependence and balance are harmonious. The hydrological system, the changing of the seasons, and ecosystems all illustrate this reciprocity of serviceability

Consequently, those who make much of praising God, but are proud, scornful and disdainful to their brethren (which is a much more specific indictment of **lovelessness** than, say, racism or “phobic” reactions) also tend to be slothful in serviceability. Their religion is in James’ sights when he declares their religion dead, useless, or vain. (James 1:25-27) To proud, scornful and disdainful could be added stubborn, envious, jealous, unmerciful, unjust, slanderous, hateful and murderous. Profane hypocrites!

God has carefully instructed us about actions and attitude towards his majesty and toward one another as well. Refuse to leverage our duties against each other—doing one in order to neglect the other! Be serviceable to God and one another. This, I think, is the proper meaning go **be ye subject, or submit to one another out of the fear of the Lord**. There is an exhortation here, and a directive. We are much more familiar with the former than the later. But we cannot separate between the duty and the parties involved because to submit is a general mutual duty. Subordinates, of all sorts, are to submit to their superiors but *in Christ* even equals are charged to give honor and to prefer one another! (Rom. 12:10) But does that mean one's superiors are to submit to their subordinates? Perhaps not helps to distinguish between *submission of respect* and *submission of service*. The former quickens speech and actions and is demonstrated by “quickly, and cheerfully doing what one is commanded/ordered/asked/requested to do” —this is submission proper to subordinates. But there's more to the equation: “*Submission of service* is that whereby one in his place/position is ready to do what good he can for another. This is common to all Christians!” (Gouge, Vol. 1, p.5) This partially explains why high government officials are often referred to as “ministers,” those who are in high places for the good of all those under them. They are urged to rule with humility and meekness as is proper to public servants *and not as dictatorial tyrants—or regulatory bullies*. **Nothing should be done through strife or vainglory**. (Phil. 3:2)

A wonderful gauge to this humble and meek is this question: Are you as willing to be served as you are to serve? Some find it harder to receive than to give—true humility abolishes this false dilemma.

It is hard to see how such civil guidelines could ever engender civic degeneration—but that is precisely where certain anti-Christian philosophers have gone Edward Gibbon, Voltaire, Karl Marx, Freud and Nietzsche calling Christianity a slave religion, and charging it with the decline of various imperial regimes.

Anyway, “God has so positioned every one's place, that there is not anyone who is not in some respect under another. The wife, though mother of her children, is under her husband. The husband, though head of the family, is under public magistrates. Public magistrates are under one another and all are under the king”—as we are under the Lord Jesus. The worldly monarch is “under God and His word as delivered by His ambassadors, where even the highest are to submit themselves.” Why? “Because everyone is set in place by God, not for himself, but for the good of others.” (Gouge, Vol. 1, p.6)

The fear of God is the second clause of this exhortation. Let's define it positively for starters as “an awe-filled respect of the majesty/glory of God.” Sometimes it arises from faith in the mercy and goodness of God. When the heart of man has once felt a sweet taste of God's goodness, and found that all happiness consists only in His favor, he is **struck with such and inward awe and reverence, that it would not displease His majesty for anything**.” (Gouge, Vol 1, para. 3, p.8) Two effects arise from this kind of fear of God: 1. “A careful endeavor to please God” and 2. “A careful avoidance of such things as offend the majesty (holiness, purity, glory and goodness) of God.” That's the positive approach.

But doubting the mercy can lead to a distrust of God—such as imaging that only condemnation, vengeance and dreadful judgment comes from God—can result in a negative fear of God, a servile fear. What Paul has in mind here is a filial kind of fear of

God-as a child might harbor towards a loving and strong father, one who corrects and disciplines out of love and a concern for what is best for his dutiful children. Faithful Abraham feared God filially whereas faithless/doubting/rebellious Adam, falling from that estate, can only manage a servile fear, a cringing and slavish dread of God. A slave obeys out of *fear of punishment* whereas a son fears disappointing the father, reflecting poorly on the father—a better motive. Servile fear gives birth to certain heretical beliefs such as a rejection of hell, final judgment and dismissal of even the judge (unbelief expressed as moral agnosticism, or even atheism). A loved son cherishes the presence of the father, a terrified slave hides from his presence—is always a fugitive from justice.

The whole sphere of worship is under this filial branch of **fearing the Lord**. Thus **thou shalt fear the Lord your God** (in Deuteronomy 6:13) morphed into **thou shalt worship the Lord your God** (Matt. 4:10) where Jesus rebukes the Devil in His temptations. “All the duty which we owe God and our fellowman is included under this: **fear of the Lord**. (See Psalm 34:11.) So. Four conclusions: 1. Fear is awe-filled respect for divine majesty; 2. God is the proper object of this filial fear; 3. The scope, or extent of this fear of God is very large—it is freely added to many other duties; and 4. The Holy Spirit urges this fear to demonstrate the difference between that “integrity and perfection of God’s image which was first planted in man at creation and the renovation of that image while man lives in this world—human existence is probationary! “So complete and perfect was God’s image in man, that he (man) needed no other motive to provoke him to any duty but love! Love God and serve Him (Debt. 11:13) love the Lord, to walk in His ways, to keep His commandments (Deut. 30:16) “But by Adam’s fall, the corruption (of sin) whereby infected man’s nature, the love of God has grown cold in man.” (Gouge, Vol 1, p. 12) “Fear (filial) is laid down as a motive to stir up men to perform the duty required here”—namely service to our fellowmen. Fear of God moves men in good conscience to mutual submission and service.

Application: First, as we increase our awareness of “serviceability,” we should internalize that this is the essence of *mutual submission*. Our serviceability is also a dynamic, growing capability—allowing us to excel and expand. Then, we should be grateful for being served and serve out of that gratitude joyfully, gladly, happily—expressing that gratitude in attitude and action. Secondly, because we have been adopted (made and deemed acceptable to God) by Christ’s sacrifice through faith in God, by God’s mercy, kindness and goodness *full of respect/regard for divine majesty* should be the core to our relationship with God. Inner awe and reverence together with gratitude should characterize our spiritual affect and being as servants. We truly are essentially what He has declared us to be.

It occurs to me that we have to break through two walls in our Christian witness to the contemporary world. First is the wall of “social construction.” Behind the claim that everything is constructed by society—and therefore malleable, changeable and “relative”—is **sociological determinism**. (Assumption: Everything wrong with us is caused by society, our past, our parents and systemic dysfunction (!) and can be amended by more “education!”) No. We are who God declares us to be. The second wall is the subjective assertion that I am who I declare myself to be—with obvious implications for gender identity. No, again, we are who and what God created us to be regardless of our feelings.

Amen