

Submission: Living the “Cross-Life”

Philippians 5:1-11

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Perhaps you have heard the story of the young man who wanted to have some direction in his life, some sense of guidance. He was perplexed and confused, and decided that maybe if he just opened up the Bible and put his finger down on a verse, that maybe this would be God’s way of speaking to him. So he closed his eyes, flipped open his Bible, put his finger down, and read this verse: “And Judas went out and hanged himself.” Well, he was not very pleased with this verse, and said “Oh no, no, no; there must be some mistake.” So, he decided to try it again. He closed his eyes, flipped open the Bible again, put his finger down, and this time the verse read: “Go thou and do likewise.” Well, this was even more disturbing, and he said, “Surely this is not the right verse for me. I must be doing something wrong.” So, he decided that he would give it one more try. He closed his eyes, flipped open the Bible, put his finger down, and this last time, the verse read: “And what thou doest, do quickly.”

Perhaps just flipping through the Bible and lifting out certain verses is not the way to discern God’s direction in life. Perhaps it takes a little more study, and

prayer, and careful reading of lots of scripture, so that we don't fall into the trap of what is called "proof-texting", which is the art of finding scripture verses to support what we want to hear.

When I was in college, there were some friends of mine who used to engage in what I will call a "mock Bible study". Oh, it was lots of fun, and we would roll on the floor with laughter, as we would open up the Bible, much like the guy in my first illustration, and read aloud a verse like this: "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife...". Of course, we would quickly close the Bible shut, and say, "this is the word of the Lord", and then roll on the floor in more laughter. Now, we knew what the rest of the passage said, and we understood that we were twisting the true meaning totally around to say something it didn't mean at all, for if you look at the rest of the passage, it says: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her..." and there is no question that the passage is talking about a kind of mutual subordination which is not very highly practiced in our world. But we didn't care about that. It was just fun. The problem is that there are many people who choose to interpret scripture just like that. They don't want to look at the whole passage, or try to discover the meaning in the face of the whole context.

And that is the problem with the subject of “submission”. It is not a very popular subject, especially in our day and culture, although I suspect the idea of submission has never been high on the list of virtues to strive for, in any day or time. How many seminars have you read about that say, “Come and learn the art of submission.”? No, most of the seminars we hear about deal with “self-actualization”, or “How to assert yourself”, or “How to get ahead and stay ahead of everyone else”. Right?

Yet, as Christians, we are called to live a life that follows the life and teachings of Jesus. His was a life that exemplifies this concept of “submission”, of putting into practice what we might call a “cross-life.” Now, we all know that Jesus died on the cross, taking our sins upon Himself, and in so doing, offers to us the forgiveness of our sins, and the gift of eternal life. But it wasn’t just a “cross-death” with Jesus. His whole life was one where He practiced and preached about the value of giving oneself away, of putting others first, of learning how to deny oneself, and thus earn the Kingdom of God.

Here’s how Richard Foster puts it in his book, Celebration of Discipline:
“Jesus shattered the customs of his day when he lived out the cross-life by taking women seriously and by being willing to meet with children. He lived the cross-

life when he took a towel and washed the feet of his disciples. This Jesus who easily could have called down a legion of angels to his aid chose instead the cross-death of Calvary. Jesus' life was the cross-life of submission and service. Jesus' death was the cross-death of conquest by suffering." (page 116).

So, how do we get to a place where we might want to embrace this idea of submission in our own lives? Is there anything attractive about it? Is there any way to "advertise" for it that might make it something worth striving for? Once again, Richard Foster gives us a clue. He says that we will experience a "freedom" in the act of submission, and that this freedom "is the ability to lay down the terrible burden of always needing to get our own way." (page 111) Oh my! A little later he writes, "Do you know the liberation that comes from giving up your rights? It means you are set free from the seething anger and bitterness you feel when someone doesn't act toward you the way you think they should". (page 112). These are the same sentiments that we dealt with in the recent Sunday School class on "The Power of Forgiveness."

These are radical ideas, and not very popular in a culture like ours that believes quite strongly in the right for every individual to seek revenge, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. The only problem with that philosophy, as my Old

Testament professor from seminary said, is that if we follow that concept, we would all be blind and toothless!

Allow me to close by quoting Richard Foster one more time, for he says it so eloquently: “In submission we are at last free to value other people. Their dreams and plans become important to us. We have entered into a new, wonderful, glorious freedom—the freedom to give up our own rights for the good of others. For the first time we can love people unconditionally. We have given up the right to demand that they return our love. No longer do we feel that we have to be treated in a certain way. We rejoice in their successes. We feel genuine sorrow in their failures. It is of little consequence that our plans are frustrated if their plans succeed. We discover that it is far better to serve our neighbor than to have our own way.” (page 112). Perhaps a moment of silence is in order here. (be quiet).....Amen.

And now I would like to read our scripture passage, Philippians 5:1-11. Would you stand and follow the motions I will lead you in, as the passage is read. (read).....May God help us to take up our cross daily, and follow Jesus’ example. Amen, and amen.

