SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES 5. SUBMISSION. Lent 5 2012

“Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Ephesians 5:21

This is week 5 in our Lenten series on the Spiritual Disciplines. Today’s topic is something of a hot potato. It’s a hot potato, because it is so often misunderstood and so often abused. The discipline I’m talking about is the discipline of submission.

A few decades ago when Christian communities abounded, Jay & I and another couple visited some friends who had joined a Christian community in Qld. In conversation over lunch, they told us all about their church and community. One of the things their community insisted on was absolute obedience to the pastor and elders, because they believed that they had been given that authority by God. Therefore it was the members’ Christian duty to submit to them. Our friends at the time were rather stressed, because they were putting together a written request to the elders. They needed a new car but they weren’t permitted to just go out and buy one. They needed the elders’ express permission to make a purchase like that.

That, friends, is *abuse* of the discipline of submission and nothing could be further from the life-giving freedom that this discipline can bring!

**Discipline is freedom**

Every discipline has a corresponding freedom and our aim in pursuing the spiritual disciplines is to experience the freedom they bring. We should never try to make the disciplines an end in themselves. Unfortunately, people can sometimes become so hung up on the importance of the disciplines themselves, that their benefit is not only never realised, but completely negated.

“What possible freedom could there be in being submissive?” you might ask.

That word conjures up awful pictures, doesn’t it? Henpecked husbands, abused wives, bullied children - right through to military takeovers and human trafficking. We tend to link the term submission with oppression. But that is a warped view of submission. Let me read to you a paragraph from Richard Foster’s book:

“What freedom corresponds to submission? It is the ability to lay down the terrible burden of always needing to get our own way. The obsession to demand that things go the way we want them to is one of the greatest bondages in human society today. People will spend weeks, months, even years in a perpetual stew because some little thing didn’t go as they wished. They will fuss and fume. They will get mad about it. They will act as if their very life hangs on the issue. They may even get an ulcer over it.”

He goes on to make the point that in the discipline of submission we are released to drop the matter and get on with our lives. Most things in life are not nearly as important as we think they are.

It’s often this issue of needing to get our own way that causes marriages to run aground. Jay & I sometimes turn on the TV for 15 minutes or so while we have lunch. A couple of days ago we turned it on and there was a program on called ‘Marriage Meltdown’ with Dr Phil. He was sitting with three couples whose marriages were on the rocks. He’d pre-recorded each individual saying what they thought the problem was in their relationships. Almost without exception, the bottom line was, “If so and so would only do this reasonable thing I want them to do, there’d be no problem!”

I want.

Those two little words are at the root of broken marriages, they’re at the root of fractured families, and they’re at the root of every war the world has ever engaged in.

The discipline of submission frees us from the discontent, tension and anger that result from being chained to what we so desperately want. When we recognise that most things in life are not major issues and when we can ‘let go’ of something we think we absolutely must have, the tension melts away, and we can begin to see the value in the other person and their point of view.

**The biblical teaching**

1. Focus of the teaching is not the hierarchical structure

The biblical teaching on submission focuses on how we view and relate to other people. It doesn’t set out a hierarchy of relationships, and give us rules about who should submit to whom. Instead the Scriptures communicate to us the value of “being subject to one another out of reverence to Christ” – which is Paul’s injunction in Ephesians 5:21.

Let’s unpack this a little more.

In Colossians 3, we do have an injunction to wives, children and slaves to submit to those who, in their culture, had authority over them – that is, husbands, parents and masters. However, it is not the cultural hierarchical structure that is the focal point in Colossians 3. What is central is the teaching on submission.

What’s really interesting here is that Paul would suggest that the wives, children and slaves should submit at all. Wouldn’t they already be submitting? After all, that was their place in that culture. What is so revolutionary about this New Testament teaching is that these people who in their culture were seen as mere possessions, were actually addressed as people who had free choice. They were given the same consideration as those who were masters over them in their own culture.

And then, also in complete opposition to the expectations of the time, the *dominant* party in that culture – that is, the husbands, parents and masters, were also called to behave counter-culturally and give those who were socially under them love, respect and consideration.

To quote Foster again, “The Epistles did not consecrate the existing hierarchical social structure. By making the command to subordination universal, they relativised and undercut it. They called for Christians to live as citizens of a new order, and the most fundamental feature of this new order is universal subordination” As Paul put it in Ephesians 5:21 – we are to ‘submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.’

What’s important to remember is that when the New Testament teaches on submission, it is not recommending a particular hierarchical structure, but pointing us to an attitude of heart. As Paul counsels in Philippians 2:3 “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves”.

1. Focus of the teaching is Christ’s example.

The revolutionary teaching on submission in the epistles is grounded in Jesus own radical teaching and example. The crux of his teaching on submission is found in Mark 8:34. Where he says, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.” What an uncomfortable statement!

This is one of those verses which many Christians find disturbing. If that is so for us, perhaps it’s because we fear losing our identity, or self-respect; perhaps we fear having to grovel or become some sort of doormat to others. Of course that is *not* what Jesus meant.

Self-denial is not the same as self-contempt. Self-contempt says we have no sense of worth, whereas self-denial indicates the opposite. Jesus tells us to love our neighbour *as we love ourselves.* So a positive opinion of ourselves is actually a *pre-requisite* to being able to love and serve others. When we know our own worth, and then willingly deny ourselves for another’s benefit, we truly find life.

The Message translation of v 24-25 from our Gospel reading this morning says this: “Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal.” This one of the great paradoxes of the Christian faith – death brings life!

The most radical aspect of Jesus’ teaching was the total reversal of the common understanding of greatness. He said that leadership is found in becoming a servant of all; that power is found in submission.

Jesus exemplified this on the cross. Paul tells us in Philippians 2 that Jesus “humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross.” Jesus – who willingly set aside the glory of heaven, who at any time could have called down legions of angels – allowed himself to die a criminal’s death on a cross – for us. What an example he has left his followers!

And this concept wasn’t just exemplified in Jesus’ death. It also permeated every aspect of his life. He lived counter culturally by taking women seriously, by talking to children, by associating with lepers and beggars, by washing his disciples’ feet. He laid aside everything that he could have had in human terms – to humble himself and serve a humanity he loved.

**Our call to submission**

Jesus calls his followers to live as he did. Self-denial is not an easy road.

Letting go of what we want is not easy.

Letting someone have the last word is not easy.

Giving way in an argument is not easy.   
Counting other people better than ourselves is not easy.

Submitting to someone out of reverence for Christ is not easy.

The Christian life isn’t for sissies, is it?

But this is was the way of the life and death of our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, and he calls us to follow him – to take up our cross, deny ourselves and follow him.

But we do it in his strength, and as we follow him in this discipline of submission, we’ll find new life in our relationships and a new freedom in our lives.

This lent, may we embrace the discipline of submission.

Let’s pray…