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**Ephesians 5:21-33, Tree of Life Version, edited for brevity.**

*<sup>21</sup>Submit yourselves to one another out of reverence for Messiah — <sup>22</sup>wives to your own husbands as to the Lord. <sup>23</sup>For the husband is head of the wife, as Messiah also is head of His community—Himself the Savior of the body. <sup>24</sup>But as Messiah's community is submitted to Messiah, so also the wives to their husbands in everything.*

*<sup>25</sup>Husbands, love your wives just as Messiah also loved His community and gave Himself up for her <sup>26</sup>to make her holy, having cleansed her by immersion in the word. <sup>27</sup>Messiah did this so that He might present to Himself His glorious community—not having stain, but in order that she might be holy and blameless. <sup>28</sup>In the same way, husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.*

*<sup>29</sup>For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it—just as Messiah also does His community, <sup>30</sup>because we are members of His body. <sup>33</sup>In any case, let each of you love his own wife as himself, and let the wife respect her husband.*

**Ephesians 5:22, ESV.**

*<sup>22</sup>Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. <sup>23</sup>For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. <sup>24</sup>Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.*

**– wives to your own husbands.**

I sometimes compare different translations of the Bible in order to focus on what the original Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek literally says. Today, I won't create a mystery. I'm going to start right off with the translation issue I want to focus on.

Here is a literal, word for word, translation of verse 22 of Chapter 5 of Ephesians, from the earliest Greek versions of Ephesians that have been found. “the wives to your own husbands as to the Lord.” Notice that the word “submit”, which we find in virtually every English translation of Ephesians is not there. The only published, but still hard to find, English version of the Bible that I know of and that does not have the word submit in this verse is the Tree of Life version, published by the Messianic Jewish Bible Society, an organization dedicated to providing extremely literal translations of both the Old and the New Testament. The argument is not as simple as it might seem, however. It’s not the case that the word “submit” was wrongly inserted by later translators. The truth is a bit complicated, but I think by looking at it, we can develop a much more accurate idea of what the Bible means when Christians are told to “submit”.

Consider this abbreviated version of Ephesians 5:21-33, from the Tree of Life Version of the Bible:

*<sup>21</sup>Submit yourselves to one another out of reverence for Messiah — <sup>22</sup>wives to your own husbands as to the Lord. <sup>23</sup>For the husband is head of the wife, as Messiah also is head of His community—Himself the Savior of the body. <sup>24</sup>But as Messiah’s community is submitted to Messiah, so also the wives to their husbands in everything.*

*<sup>25</sup>Husbands, love your wives just as Messiah also loved His community and gave Himself up for her <sup>26</sup>to make her holy, having cleansed her by immersion in the word. <sup>27</sup>Messiah did this so that He might present to Himself His glorious community—not having stain, but in order that she might be holy and blameless. <sup>28</sup>In the same way,*

*husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.*

*<sup>29</sup>For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it—just as Messiah also does His community, <sup>30</sup>because we are members of His body. <sup>33</sup>In any case, let each of you love his own wife as himself, and let the wife respect her husband.*

Let's start with this concept of submission. The idea for this message came to me because recently someone told me that she didn't like the Christian focus on "degrading oneself". I asked where she got the idea that Christians felt this way. She quoted this passage, saying that Christianity was particularly demeaning to women. Of course, she was referencing a more commonly used translation, one where the word "submit" appears in verse 22. I tried to explain the following. Jesus himself was seen as someone who submitted to God the Father. All four Gospels quote Jesus as saying something like the following, where he asks God the Father if it is truly necessary for him to suffer and die on the cross: "*My father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.*" Jesus believed that even though he was God, it was his responsibility to bend to the will of God. We are all taught, as believers, that we should submit to the will of God, just as Jesus did. That's part of walking in the footsteps of Jesus, of emulating the life of Jesus, of following those two great commandments of Jesus: to love God and to love other people. I explained that submission to a Christian isn't humiliating at all.

For one thing it does not say that we necessarily submit to other people. We do not submit to evil people, even if they are otherwise legitimate authorities.

Here is something about Greek in the New Testament. It's not strange to leave a verb out of a sentence. When that happens, it is generally assumed that the author is carrying over the verb from the previous sentence. This is the rationale that translators over the centuries have used to get the version of verse 22 that we get in the ESV: <sup>22</sup> *Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.* But the issue is more subtle than this. Many have argued that Paul deliberately chose to not repeat the verb. He knew that it was grammatically correct to not do so. But he also, the argument goes, took advantage of the grammatical rule to be subtle, to be respectful. He lived in a culture, a Greek/Roman culture, where wives were indeed expected to be submissive to their husbands. He didn't want to rock the boat, but he also didn't want to insult the female members of the church in Ephesus. Some of these women were probably well off, prominent women, members of powerful families. The argument goes on to suggest that Paul was trying to pay lip service to the surrounding culture, but his real focus was on having all people submit to Christ. After all, he immediately goes on to say:

<sup>25</sup> *Husbands, love your wives just as Messiah also loved His community. Husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.*

*<sup>29</sup>For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it—just as Messiah also does His community, <sup>30</sup>because we are members of His body. <sup>33</sup>In any case, let each of you love his own wife as himself, and let the wife respect her husband.*

Notice that he ends up using the word “respect” at the end, not “submit”.

But there is more. Consider the ESV version of verses 22 through 24:

*<sup>22</sup>Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. <sup>23</sup>For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. <sup>24</sup>Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.*

Notice that in the ESV, as in most translations, the verb “submit” has been added to verse 22. In one sense, you can’t blame the translators: English demands a verb there. We don’t have the structure that exists in biblical Greek where the verb can be left out. But it shows the problematic nature of translating the Bible: meaning gets subtly and sometimes not so subtly changed. Paul wasn’t trying to emphasize that verb, “submit”. However, there is something else here. Consider verse 24 from the ESV: *<sup>24</sup>Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.* Now consider the same verse from the Tree of Life version, the one that more accurately matches the original Greek manuscripts of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians: *<sup>24</sup>But as Messiah’s community is submitted to Messiah, so also the wives to their husbands in everything.* In the ESV, they have added “should submit”, when the original only has an implied

“submit”, but not the word “should”. Many translations, like the NRSV, the one used in many or perhaps most Methodist churches go so far as to say: <sup>24</sup> *Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives **ought to be**, in everything, to their husbands.* That “ought to be” was added - just plain added. All Paul was doing here was drawing a parallel between our submission to God and the existing societal rule of his time that women are subject to their husbands. He was just noting the way things happen to be and then using it as a metaphor: in his day, women were subject to their husbands, and likewise, Christians are subject to God. He wasn't saying that he personally thought that in order to be a good Christian a woman must be subject to her husband. That was not his purpose in writing this passage. There is no question that translators of the Bible deliberately altered the meaning of this entire passage, shifting the focus from humans being subject to God to women being subject to their husbands.

So, let's get back to what Paul was really writing about. Here is my informal version of what these verses actually say:

*Christians, you should submit yourselves to Christ in the same way that today, women submit to their husbands. Just as the husband is the leader of the wife, our Messiah is the leader of His Church – because he is our Savior. The Messiah's Church submits to the Messiah in the same way wives submit to their husbands.*

*Husbands, love your wives just as the Messiah loved His Church and gave Himself up for the Church to make it holy, having cleansed the church by immersion in the*

*Word of God. Messiah did this so that He could present His glorious community, without the stain of sin, but rather holy and blameless. In the same way, husbands must love their wives as much as they love themselves. For he who loves his wife also loves himself.*

*For no one should hate himself, but rather nourishes and cherishes his body, just as the Messiah nourishes and cherishes His Church – because we are all members of the Messiah's Church body. At any extent, every man should love his wife as himself, and every wife should respect her husband.*

This woman who told me that the Bible was demeaning to women was amused when I pointed out to her that the original version of the passage that she found degrading to women was changed in part unintentionally because of the differences between Greek and English syntax, and in part intentionally by later translators. I admitted to her that the net result is that almost every translation of the Bible that is in common use among Christians today causes the focus of this passage to be altered. And yes, over the centuries men have used this mistranslation as a way of arguing that God demands that a woman always submit to her husband, no matter what the crazy idiot is up to. I stressed to her, though, that there is an aspect to the Christian faith that is, by modern American standards, demeaning to all people. We do submit to God. There is someone who knows better than we do. There are rules that take precedence over our worldly desires. We have a way of life that supersedes the way of life that television, the Internet, and celebrities preach to us. We are not number one.

Consider this passage, from the Gospel of Matthew, from the Tree of Life version of the Bible. Note that in order to exactly match the original Greek version of the Gospel, the author uses the Hebrew version of Jesus' name, which, by the way, means "salvation":

*<sup>25</sup>But Yeshua called them over and said, "You know that the rulers of the nations lord it over them, and their great ones play the tyrant over them. <sup>26</sup>It shall not be this way among you. But whoever wants to be great among you shall be your servant, <sup>27</sup>and whoever wants to be first among you shall be your slave— <sup>28</sup>just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."*

This is key to our notion of submission to God. In regular life, in secular life, powerful people are the ones that lord over average people. The population around us is controlled by tyrants, most of whom are quite wealthy. We envy them while at the same time resenting them. And seemingly, the greatest thing a person can aspire to is to be one of those tyrants. But that's not how Christians should live. If one of us thinks that we're great, that we're one of those tyrants, then we need instead to be a servant. In doing this we are modeling the way that Jesus came not to be served, but to serve. Jesus served by giving his life. When we have wronged someone, we set it straight. We serve in very worldly ways, by offering love, forgiveness, and grace to the people whom we encounter.

There's more to this notion of submission in Christianity. When we serve each other, we let ourselves be subject to others. That's why Christians have no

problem with treating proper authorities with respect, people like police, firefighters, or our bosses at work. We know that one of the key things that God asks of us is to treat people with respect – and that often means that we respect the position they have obtained in society. We don't, on the other hand, submit to or even respect people who are doing evil. Here is Proverb 8:13. Remember that in Old Testament language, to fear God means to respect and to honor God:

*<sup>13</sup> The fear of the LORD is hatred of evil.  
Pride and arrogance and the way of evil  
and perverted speech I hate.*

This woman who found that Christianity was demeaning to women and to people in general wasn't particularly swayed by my argument. It does take a lot to truly accept what Paul is teaching us, what the Gospels teach us, what runs through all of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, and that is this: the way to true freedom in life, to a sense of release and joy, and to the removal of the burden of living in a chaotic, violent, selfish, hedonistic, and consumer-oriented world is to stop and just submit ourselves to God. Please pray with me.

*God, guide us as we study your Word. Let us be informed as to what you want us to learn, not what people want us to learn. Let us in all ways submit ourselves to you, so that we live in a way that honors all that we find in our Book of Faith. Let our Bible, interpreted properly, be our guide always. Amen.*