

The Fifth Word (Part 2)

Deuteronomy 5:16

Something struck me as I prepared for last week's sermon on the fifth commandment. I've studied the ten commandments for many years, and I have preached through these commandments several times, but last week I sensed the need for an additional emphasis and decided to preach a second sermon on this particular commandment.

I have emphasized in this commandment the different relationships that we have with one another, those relationships with regard to authority that our Westminster Shorter Catechism identifies as superiors, inferiors and equals. Let me be clear to stress that those words refer to the exercise of authority, not to inherent worth or value. Authority has to do with power, or the right to exercise a measure of influence and even control over someone else's life. It's not that some people are superior to others, or inferior, but that they carry out their authority with reference to those words. We use those words most commonly in a military context, with reference to "superior officers." There is a chain of command in the military, and those above you in that chain are your "superiors," those below you are your "inferiors." Emphasis, again, on the idea of chain of command.

Sadly, much to the harm of God's people, we often emphasize in this command ONLY the duties and responsibilities of those under authority, and stress ONLY that God has ordained certain people to have that authority. Other people are ordained to live under authority, in other words, to submit. And we ignore or fail to emphasize the restraints that God places on those who have responsibility, restraints upon father's not to exasperate children, husbands to lay down their lives for their wives, and elders to lead by example.

But even with that good emphasis, there is a third way in which we relate to one another. This command is not just about parents and children and husbands and wives. More broadly, this commandment addresses all of our relationships with everybody. This commandment addresses the whole subject of all of our human relationships. Some of them, to be sure, are specifically characterized by the sort of chain of command regarding authority that is so often identified in that way. But I would suggest that most of our human relationships fall into the third category. Namely, equals.

Now, sometimes the evangelical church is afraid of talking about this category because we fear it might eliminate or even just diminish the importance of the other categories. There is a fear of being perceived as an egalitarian, where everyone, in every situation, has equal authority. And there is a fear of undermining that basic structure of authority which God has set up in the home, in the church, and in the civil government.

So let me say at the outset that I don't want to minimize those things. I focused the sermon last week upon those relationships that are characterized by the exercise of authority and the corresponding submission to authority that the Bible prescribes. Fathers and children. Husbands and wives. Elders and church members. Government rulers and citizens of our earthly kingdoms. But there is more to it than that, and one of the significant problems we often face with the abuse of authority is not simply those in authority being overbearing, but also those who are trying to exercise authority when they are really equals.

Let me explain what I mean. I am your pastor. I am an elder in the church, and when our Session meets, I exercise authority as a member of that session. Indeed, Jesus talks about the exercise of the keys of the kingdom of heaven.

Mat. 18:18 “Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

That’s authority. But in my interactions with you, day by day, week in and week out, I am not exercising that authority without interruption. I am not ALWAYS relating to you as one in authority, you are not ALWAYS relating to me as one under submission.

Similarly, within my family. Every interaction I have with my wife, or with my adult children, is not a conversation defined by my superior authority. Yet there are men who think that way. And Elders. And ministers. For those of your familiar with some of the things that have frustrated our session regarding our presbytery, I think this one of the root issues. There are men, ministers especially, who simply think that whenever they have a personal interaction with anyone else, they are in authority and the other person must be in submission. By definition. They don’t know how to relate as equals. I have known some husbands who think that way, too. And the results are disastrous.

The root error is the failure to fully recognize and appreciate the types of relationships which our catechisms label as equals. So,

I. WHO ARE OUR EQUALS?

I’ll begin with that as a question. And let me answer that question, again, in the broadest sense by beginning the answer this way—most of our relationships are ones as equals. There is a particular phrase used in the Bible to describe those relationships, the words “one another.”

A. The Bible emphasizes our relationships with “one another.”

Let me give you just a few examples.

Rom. 12:5 “...so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.”

Rom 12:10 “Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; ...16 Be of the same mind toward one another.”

1 Cor. 12:24 “But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that part which lacks it, 25 that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. 26 And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.”

1 Cor. 16:20 “Greet one another with a holy kiss.”

Gal. 5:13 “For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. 14 For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” 15 But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!”

Eph. 4:1 “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, 2 with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, 3 endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

Eph. 4:31 “Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. 32 And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.”

Eph. 5:21 "...submitting to one another in the fear of God."

Col 3:9 "Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds...12 Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; 13 bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. 14 But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection. 15 And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord."

1 Thes. 3:12 "And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we do to you."

1 Thes. 4:9 "But concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another."

1 Thes. 5:11 "Therefore comfort each other and edify one another, just as you also are doing."

Heb. 10:24 "And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, 25 not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching."

1 Pet. 3:8 "Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous; 9 not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling,

but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing."

1 Peter 4:9 "Be hospitable to one another without grumbling."

1 John 1:7 "But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin."

1 John 3:23 "And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment."

1 John 4:11 "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us."

And that's not all of them. So who are our equals? Those people, those relationships that can be adequately defined by the words "one another." And I would propose to you that that definition is the primary definition of our human relationships. One another. Equals.

The exercise of authority is important. It is necessary. God has established it for the well ordering of life in the home, the church and the state. The reality of human sin makes that authority structure necessary, and helpful. But I propose to you that it is not the primary definition of our human relationships. I believe that falls to this category of one another. The category and the relationship of equals.

Before I move on to attempt to describe those relationships as equals, let me make one other helpful point. I'm going out on a

limb here, in the sense that I didn't get this from any book or any commentator. I've not heard this from any teacher or in any seminar. But I have come to the conclusion that it is very helpful to acknowledge that there are,

B. Overlapping categories.

In other words, it's not one or the other. Either you are in authority, or you are equals.

Take, for instance, the marriage relationship of a husband and a wife. Clearly the Bible defines male headship. The ultimate governing authority of the husband. But the Bible also says this,

1 Peter 3:7 "Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered."

"Heirs together of the grace of life." Joint heirs. Co-heirs. In other words, equals. When it comes to standing before God, when it comes the gift of grace offered to us in the gospel, husbands and wives are equals. And woe to the husband who never figures that out, who interacts with his wife, and children, always and exclusively from the position of authority.

One of the points of counsel I consistently give to young men as they prepare for marriage is the admonition, "Don't play the authority card very often." And that's how I put it. A husband has a trump card, to use the the analogy of a card game. The trump card always wins the hand. But a husband who always plays the trump card, who always insists that he rules his wife and his children solely and exclusively from the vantage point of a superior officer will not have a very happy family. He will breed rebellion.

Same thing with a minister or an elder. There are times when authority has to be exercised. When decisions have to be made. And there is a necessary responsibility that falls upon leadership. But woe to the church who leaders always relate to people from that position of superior authority.

Same thing could be said of a father, or a mother, with children. And surely an employer or supervisor at work. The reality is that the exercise of authority and the obligation of submission do not cancel or obliterate the category of equals.

Ephesians 5 is the clearest example of these overlapping categories. Beginning at,

Eph. 5:18 "And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, 19 speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, 20 giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, 21 submitting to one another in the fear of God. 22 Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. 23 For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. 24 Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything."

Submitting to one another is in verse 21, and verse 22 reads, "Wives, submit to your own husbands." So which is it? Both. They are not contradictory. And with biblical wisdom and godliness, they are not even in tension. They overlap.

I could also make application of that of parents and children as well. Especially as children grow up and mature, as they approach and enter adulthood, there is a transition in the parent-child relationship. The authority of a father and mother doesn't go away, but it is altered. And the relationship of equals begins to

find its rightful place. Ultimately, we read that a man leaves his father and mother. That's the necessary first step before getting married. Leave. In the context of this sermon, make the transition from a position of inferior authority to the position of equal. And again, they overlap. But there is a transition.

And a woman is given in marriage, given by her father, representing the rightful exercise of authority. But a father who doesn't permit his daughter to experience something of that relationship as equals before she gets married hasn't prepared her to know what it means to have this relationship as an equal within a marriage. Again, I'm not denying the structure of authority God has established. I'm simply making the point that our human relationships are not simply one or the other.

I have known men who believe even more broadly that a man should exercise authority over a woman in every situation, always. Every man, as a man, over every woman. Therefore, a woman should never vote in a congregational meeting, or should never hold public office, in his view. I knew a man who wouldn't allow his daughter to have a job, since that would put her under the authority of another man, even in the context of the workplace. I've seen parents that teach their children that sons should rightly exercise authority over their sisters. Or that older children, even if it is just a year, should exercise authority over younger children in a pecking order of authority that I believe the Scripture knows nothing about. I'm not talking about temporary responsibilities like babysitting, I'm talking about the essential, absolute and consistent position that creates relationships of superiors and equals in EVERY relationship of life. And that is just very, very dangerous.

So it is with me as a minister or an elder, as I emphasized before. My relationship with you is not simply and exclusively in

the role of a superior authority. As I wrote in the most recent newsletter, I am conscious that my relationship with you must also be identified as a friendship, a relationship defined by this notion of equals. It is noteworthy all of the different names and titles that the Bible gives to the elders of the church. The word often translated bishop or overseer is the word identifying the exercise of power and authority. Then there is the word elder or presbyter, which refers to age and maturity. Then there is the word pastor, which means shepherd, one who cares for the needs of the sheep. And with all of that, Peter exhorts such leaders in the church to rule by example! Not in a domineering or overbearing way, defined only by authority. Much more to it than that.

The church as a whole is characterized by our relationship as "one another," not merely by the definitions of authority.

Having said all of that, what does that mean in practical terms.

II. WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP WE SHOULD HAVE WITH OUR EQUALS.

Let me provide you with three answers. I don't present them as exhaustive, but more representative of the teaching of the whole Bible. Three ways in which we observe the fifth commandment in relationship to one another by interacting with each other as equals. First, as I've already mentioned,

A. Mutual submission.

Eph. 5:21 "...submitting to one another in the fear of God."

It seems almost a contradiction of terms, and I believe that's Paul's point. That we have to learn to live with this—not with a contradiction but with the overlapping categories. There is a definition of the structure of authority in the family and the home, according to Ephesians 5. Those verses are read at the great majority of wedding ceremonies, and form the basis of much pre-

marital and marital counseling. But there is more to it than just “wives, submit,” and “husbands, rule.” There is more even if you recognize that the duty given to the husband is not to enforce his authority but to serve the one whom he rules, by laying down his life for her.

Still, there is more. Submit to one another. I believe that is simply a positive way of putting what is often said negatively, “Don’t be overbearing.” Don’t be domineering. Don’t demand that you get your own way. That’s mutual submission. The willingness to accept the fact that you won’t always get your way. And the root of that really comes from my second point here, the attitude at the heart of this sense of equals in a relationship with one another. Namely,

B. Mutual honor.

Rom. 12:10 “Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another.”

There is emotion there, even tenderness. Be kindly affectionate. There is love there, brotherly love. And there is a very useful definition of what it means to give honor—give preference to one another. Let someone else have their way! Listen and respect their opinion. Give way, give ground, rather than putting your foot down in stubbornly demanding everything to come out according to your desires and intentions.

Give preference to one another. Or, as you read in,

Rom. 12:16 “Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion.”

That’s the relationship God would have us to enjoy among equals. And that definition of mutual honor is stated even more clearly in,

Phil. 2:3 “Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. 4 Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.”

So if you want to “be of the same mind toward one another,” that means you have to have a “lowliness of mind” yourself. That means humility. That means you consider others better than yourself. You ascribe to others a place of prominence and importance above yourself. That’s mutual honor. And we are all called to do that in all our relationships with one another as equals.

Such mutual honor has obvious practical implications, namely the responsibility for,

C. Mutual servanthood.

Again,

Phil. 2:4 “Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.”

The perfect example is given to us.

Phil 2:5 “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, 7 but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.”

Let the mind of Jesus be in you. It was the mind of a servant. It was a man willing to be a bondservant. For him, it meant humbling himself in terms of the exercise of his authority to take the form of that bondservant. "He humbled Himself." Despite the authority he rightly possessed as the son of God and second person of the trinity. He submitted himself to others by his willingness to be their servant. He humbled himself.

That's the key. That's the inescapable key. Humility. The humility to be willing to view others as equals. And in that humility, the willingness to let yourself assume the role of a servant.

That's the key in our relationship to one another. That's the key to the success and happiness of our church and our homes. And, for that matter, our civil government and our places of employment. Not just the proper exercise of authority in those relationships where God defines it, but the more broad applications of this fifth commandment to our relationships to one another as equals.

So please, as you study the ten commandments, as you seek to relate to all of those people with whom you cross paths in this life, learn the virtue of being equals.

Phil 2:5 "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, 7 but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross."