

## WIVES, OBEY YOUR HUSBANDS!

~Other Speakers S-Z: Valsan Thampu:

It is significant that Paul addresses wives first. This is not a clever strategy to appease husbands; nor should it be misunderstood as yet another instance of Paul's male chauvinism! It is, instead, an acknowledgement of the crucial importance of the role of the wife, and by extension also of the mother, in safeguarding the health and wholeness of the family. This also corresponds to a practical truth. For all the self-importance men arrogate to themselves, wives and mothers are, comparatively, far more important in shaping and sustaining the culture and health of their families. This crucial truth was obvious to Satan. So he targeted Eve first. For God and for Satan, woman is the priority! There is no suggestion at all in the Bible that Eve was weaker than Adam mentally, morally or physically. Nor was Satan looking necessarily for the line of least resistance. He was making a strategic and decisive move and was keen, hence, to penetrate the pivotal point. This pattern is paralleled by the salvation story. God chose a woman as partner to inaugurate His redemptive engagement with our species. Mary was a far more sustained and substantial presence in the life and ministry of Jesus than Joseph. So it makes good spiritual sense that Paul addresses wives first, in recognition of the key role they can play in healing families both by ministering to their husbands and by nurturing their children in a spiritually sound manner.

Why is it desirable, let us ask, that wives submit to, or obey, their husbands? Wouldn't it have been more polite, instead, to instruct them to 'love' their husbands? The spiritual paradox is that it is the strong who need to submit and can do so without feeling humiliated. The submission of the weak is involuntary and smacks of helplessness. The submission of the strong is safe from submissiveness and has an empowering value. It was at the point of submitting himself to his heavenly Father to the point of submitting himself to the will of God, to die on the Cross, that Jesus attained the zenith of power. To the world, however, submission suggests defeat and humiliation. Two things are difficult for the weak. The first is to resist the mighty. The second is to be meek towards the weak. It is not because they are weak that wives are to submit to their husbands, but precisely because they are strong. And it is not just to purchase domestic peace that they need to so submit. Submission that is spiritually valid is not a strategy but a sacrament. Its purpose is sanctification, redemption and healing, all of which result in empowerment.

The hallmark of a spiritually empowered person is that she empowers. Submission is the medium through which a wife ministers to, and empowers, her husband. Submission, with any other intent, has no spiritual merit or validity. Submission of the spiritual kind does not come naturally to anyone, male or female. This has to be learned from Jesus who perfected obedience (Phil. 2: 5-8). A husband who coerces his wife into submission, presuming male superiority, excludes himself from the empowering scope of his wife's submission. This means, among other things, that only one who has, first, submitted himself to God can understand and honour the scope of spiritual submission. Submitting to those who do not could be like casting pearls before the swine (Mtt. 7: 6). A husband has to earn the spiritual submission of his wife by submitting himself, first, to Jesus Christ. Coerced submission is a sin and an insult to human dignity.

This spiritual model of submission has nothing to do with humouring one's husband, or aiding and abetting his aberrations. The shaping goal for the discipline of family life, as we have seen already, is the fullness of life, which all members of the family are entitled to, equally; for in Christ there is neither male nor female (Gal. 3:28). The wife is, therefore, required to submit to her husband 'as to the Lord'. This does not mean, as you would submit to the Lord. It means, submit to your husband as gladly and wholehearted as you would to the Lord, provided that the substance and goal of your submission are Christ-oriented. Through this redemptive and self-emptying submission, the wife ministers to her husband in his need to be more and more like Jesus. A rebellious wife is a spiritual stumbling block in the life of her husband.

Emotional insecurity, as we have seen, nags the most confident-looking male in the world, because of the power-orientation inherent in the nature of man. The rebelliousness of the wife aggravates this disease and mortally infects the relationship between them. Power cannot be detoxified by power. The crucial revelation in the Garden of Gethsemane is that submission is the only antidote to the paroxysm of power. It is this saving truth that shines through the prayer of Jesus, 'Not my will, but thine be done'. The characteristic symptom of the male sickness of power-induced insecurity is the inability to love. The wife has a duty to enable her husband to shift from the foundation of power to that of love not only because that way alone lies the prospect of her being loved by her husband, but also because it is the will of God for her in her vocation as a wife. Submission is the godly investment she makes into enabling her man to be Christ-like in his vocation as a husband. Just as no man can become a husband without a woman, so also no husband can become an ideal

husband, or do justice to his vocation as a husband, without the help of his wife.

As against this, the usual temptation is to fight and frustrate the male will-to-dominate through a prolonged war of attrition. Power confronts power. Sparks fly. Wounds and pains multiply. Families, not less than individuals, need salvation. But it is not easy to submit. The exaltation of power, and the consequent cultural allergy to meekness, stigmatize this option. In such a context, the people of God have to rise above the 'patterns of the world' and to be transformed after the culture of the Kingdom (Rom. 12:2).

The need to submit, not less than the will to power, is basic to human nature. As a matter of fact, lusting after power is itself a form of submission, the capitulation to the lust of power, and the neurosis that results from it. Submission of this kind is innate in human nature. That being the case, the choice is between submitting to true authority and submitting to its false counterparts. Teenagers who defy their parents, for example, deify their peer-group. Women who slight the authority of their husbands submit meekly to alternative forms of authority or influence, often irrespective of their merit. The cultural allergy to submission amounts in practice to the willingness to be enslaved by illicit embodiments of authority. Rebelliousness is much more than mere disobedience. The problem with Eve was not only that she disobeyed God. Her disobedience resulted from an alternate 'obedience': capitulation to the insinuation of the Evil One.

Obedience or submission is, thus, not a simplistic issue. And it does not come spontaneously to human nature, located as we are in a tradition of radical rebelliousness inaugurated by the Fall. One of the major factors involved in such rebelliousness is ignorance, or rejection, of the basic purpose of a relationship. The wife's duty to submit to her husband must be seen as integral to her calling to be a "proper help," as God envisaged her to be. What is "proper" in this context needs to be understood in relation to the nature of man as husband. Given the dynamics of family life as well as male nature, the quality of being 'proper' has to include wifely submission in order to help the husband to become a 'proper' husband, which nobody is at the beginning. It is important to remember that the wife's submission is to be received as "help," not as a "right," by the husband or offered as a domestic tax by the wife. Both wife and husband have a shared and sacred duty to ensure that this remains "proper" help. Especially the husband must have the maturity to know that if improperly received and exploited, the submission that his wife offers will cease to be 'proper' help, for which he will have only himself to blame.

What is proper about this submission needs to be also understood in relation to the shared mission that underlies the husband-wife relationship. God constitutes relationships not just as the means for private privilege or pleasure, but also as resources for His purposes. It is in this sense that marriages are made in heaven and lived upon this earth. Outside of this purpose, or in indifference to it, the discipline of man-woman relationship stands on unstable grounds. The proper submission of the wife to the husband 'as to the Lord' calls for spiritual strength and wisdom. The might that creates misery is a cheap one. The strength to hurt and humiliate is only another form of weakness. True or godly strength is that which empowers the weak to be strong (1 Cor. 1: 27-28). God takes the weak of the world to make them strong; the foolish, to make them wise. A 'prudent' wife, says the writer of the Proverbs, is a gift from God. Wifely prudence involves not only shrewd resource-management; it also includes constructive, even redemptive, human resource management, especially in respect of "the one talent" that God entrusts to every wife: her husband.

It is through holy submission that Mary became the mother of the Lord, the most blessed among all women. She submitted herself to the will of God saying, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." (Lk. 1: 38). It is this spirit of purposive submission that we see in her again in the context of the miracle at Cana of Galilee. Despite the rough response from Jesus, she goes and instructs the servants: "Do whatever he tells you." (Jn. 2: 5). She exemplifies the same strength all through the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus. We do not see her protest or rebel against the plan of God, according to which a sword had to pierce her heart also (Lk. 2:35).

Rather than feel aggrieved that Paul, in a spirit of accommodation to the prevailing culture, constrained them to obey their husbands, wives should welcome this practical guideline for making their homes a haven of peace, harmony and fulfillment. Surely, there is something worse than godly and pro-active submission. No one should have to live in a home built on sand, assailed daily by the rain and storm of inter-personal squabbles that make the roof leak, allowing insecurity and exasperation to rain on the children.