

“The Apron of Christ” based on Ephesians 5:21-6:9 and Genesis 2:18-24

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on August 18, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

At our previous church, Claire and I lived in a manse, otherwise known as a parsonage. It was a nice house built by church members and located next to that church’s cemetery. When we moved in, they put up a nice fence, creating a backyard for our kids. As part of the arrangement, they asked if I would mow the lawn regularly. The church had a lawnmower we could use to get the job done.

One time after Sunday service, a church member came to me, wondering, “Are you overworked? Is everything ok?” I said there was always something to do, but that overall, I was settling in just fine. This confused him, and he asked, “Then why did I see Claire mowing the lawn?”

I don’t like mowing. The truth is: she actually likes to do it sometimes. At least back then she did. Not so much anymore. A few weeks later, I got a call from another church member. He oversaw cemetery maintenance, including the mowers. He said, “You know what, we’re going to mow the lawn for you, but would you mow the part inside the fence?” I said that sounded great, Claire and I would get it done.

At this point, he hemmed and hawed, wondering aloud if they should mow inside the fence. “We can do that if you move the toys,” he said. I had to assure him at this point – even though it would have been nice not to mow – that it was ok for Claire and I to split that task. It’s not simply men’s work. Thank you, I said, for mowing the outer lawn, but please, please, do not worry about whether it’s me or Claire mowing the rest. I assured him that we would work out those details.

Throughout history, there have always been distinctive social roles for men and women. As we’ve seen in Ephesians, we know human societies divide themselves along tribal, ethnic and political barriers. Paul referred to this divide earlier in Ephesians as “a dividing wall of hostility.” Still within each culture, there are differences that cannot be separated. A society requires both men and women to have children, and this generally necessitates a divide of young and old. In a political structure there is always someone who ends up being a ruler and someone who ends up being a subject. In the same way, we have business owners and employees.

Today, we see an impulse in our society toward equality in these areas. Thankfully, we almost universally consider across the globe slavery to be a violation of human rights. Thankfully, we almost universally consider children to be persons of value. Thankfully, women are afforded full rights as citizens in our country. Yes, there may be those who still view some persons as inherently meant to serve. There are still those who see and treat children as property. And women still face chauvinism and sexism, but we see continued improvements in these areas. I believe Christianity is the biggest reason why, including through the Apostle Paul.

As Beth Allison Barr points out in her book, “The Making of Biblical Womanhood,” her female students, and perhaps many of you even, get frustrated with Paul. I can understand that, but like her, I would argue that Paul is not the problem – his words are misused and wrongly interpreted against women. Still today, there are strong voices claiming societal gender roles as biblical gender roles. But make no mistake, the progress toward equality, has been made by citing Jesus *and* Paul.

I won’t go through all the potential misreadings of Paul, but I will address our Ephesians passage today. To do so faithfully requires an understanding of the ancient world and the influence of the

philosopher Aristotle. You see, the great philosopher considered women to be “deformed” men and inferior. The “great” philosopher and others justified ancient laws that put women under a man’s authority. Their bodies were property of a male guardian. Roman law and custom held this idea to be sacred.

In the hugely influential work by Aristotle, which is known as “The Politics,” the philosopher argues that society is divinely ordered with key hierarchies. In writing to men as his audience, he says, “Of household management, we have seen that there are three parts – one is the rule of masters over slaves...another of a father, and the third of the husband.”

Note the order here and the audience. Aristotle is addressing male citizens, and he puts their roles in order, first as master, second as father, and third as husband. Enslaved people, he says, are inferior and property simply by the fact that they are enslaved. If they were higher order people, the gods would not have allowed them to be subject to slavery.

As for children and women, he says, “the male is by nature, fitter for command than the female, just as the elder and full grown, is superior to the younger and more immature.” The male is supposed to have the virtues of temperance, courage and justice, but the free man is superior, because the lower classes have different attributes.

Aristotle writes, “the courage of a man is shown in commanding, of a woman obeying and this holds for all other virtues...if we look at them in detail.” He continues quote, “As the poet says of women, ‘Silence is a woman’s glory,’ but this is not equally the glory of man. The child is imperfect, and therefore, obviously his virtue is not relative to himself alone, but to the perfect man and to his teacher, and in like manner the virtue of the slave is relative to a master.”

To put it bluntly, for Aristotle, free men are on top, and for wives, kids or workers, if you have any value or glory, it comes from the man you’re attached to.

Beloved, throughout the first four chapters of Ephesians, we have seen time and time again, that Paul asks his readers NOT to walk, or live, as the nations, or Gentiles live. He says that the nations walk in darkness and in the emptiness of their mind, possibly referring to philosophy. However, we are to be children of the light who expose the sin of the world.

So then, I’ll ask you this: If we are to be different from the world, why do some say Paul mostly agrees with Aristotle? Why would Paul in the first half of chapter five, which we did not read today, say fornication, impurity, and greediness are not to be found among the saints. Why would he say that and then allegedly endorse the very foundation of Roman culture, its ethos of male superiority, which includes male sexual freedom, pagan idols, and the pursuit of conquest?

The answer is that Paul is not endorsing Greco-Roman ways. He is deliberately undermining them in today’s passage. First off, remember that Ephesus was a cosmopolitan city, a center of Greco-Roman culture. What’s more, the city of Ephesus was a philosophical center that knew the works of Aristotle very well. So, notice what Paul does here in his description of God’s household order. He starts by saying, “Be submitted to one another.”

Often, our English bibles, translators tag this to the sentence before about giving thanks. But the previous sentence has clauses starting with present participles. The clause on mutual submission starts with a middle/passive tense participle. Basically, this clause is not directly grammatically

compatible with the one before. I do not think it can be the same sentence, but it seems Paul is starting a new thought here.

What's mind blowing to me is that there is no verb in the sentence that is translated, "wives submit to your husbands." It just says, "wives to your husbands." So if that preceding clause is attached to the previous sentence and not this clause, why do translator steal the verb "submit"? The clauses are related and should not be separated. "Be submitted to one another" is the start of the passage. What becomes clear is Paul saying that men and women, should submit to one another in reverence to Christ, then he takes apart Aristotle's household codes.

Unlike Aristotle who writes to the men in power, Paul speaks directly to the wives themselves. He says that they should submit to the husbands as they submit to the Lord, because the husband is the head, just as Christ is the head, himself savior of the body. If we isolate this, it sounds like "head" means "the boss," but remember that earlier that Christ gave himself for church. Remember earlier, that Paul refers to the church as the body of Christ. We become heirs through Christ and this is something we do not deserve.

Paul then says the entire church – male and female – submits to Christ in everything, and likewise, the wife submits to the husband, but before you mishear this, notice that immediately, he presents what submission means for the husbands: They are to love their wives in the same manner as Christ loves the church. Remember, that means giving himself up for her, so that he might make the church holy or set apart.

In Christ, the eternal and co-equal Son of God, shared in our humanity, living completely as we live, and dying for us, not for God's own sake as if God needed it, but for our sake – to be our savior for the body, which is the church. In Roman law and culture, and in Aristotle, the free man conquers to earn his glory. Women, children, and slaves have no glory except that of the man they serve. But instead, Paul's message is the opposite: He says God shared in our flesh to die for us and share with us God's glory. That is a glory that does not depend on us, but which is shared with us, making us heirs in Christ.

Paul says husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. As I said before, remember that Paul uses the metaphor of the church as the body of Christ, which is loved by God. The church is one with Christ by his incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension. We are thus united with Christ, meaning we are united with God for our salvation. Then Paul drives this point home by referring back to Genesis, which we read today. He points to the mystery of uniting the nations being with the Jews in Christ. He makes marriage is a metaphor for this unity through the person and work of Jesus.

In Genesis, it literally says, that God took, "one of the sides," not "ribs." This word is used elsewhere in the Old Testament, and nowhere does it make sense to translate it as rib. It means side. It means God cut the earthling – or ha-adam which means the soil creature, earthling, human, or Adam – in half. Two halves become two distinct people, but they work side by side. The word *ezer* means "helper" but it's usually describing God. Here the helper is in front of, or alongside. Instead of a lowly "helpmate," as if we'd ever describe God that way, it's better to think of a partner here.

Man and woman are now distinct, but work side by side, and become one flesh. Paul says this is a metaphor for Israel and the nation – moving from distinct to co-workers in the gospel, and united

in one flesh as the body of Christ. Paul says the woman should revere the husband, as the church is to revere Christ, but not because a man is superior, but this is in response to the great love he shows for the wife. I'll get back to this, but let's jump quickly to the children and the enslaved. Notice Paul talks to the children, then the fathers. He says children are to obey, and they will be rewarded, and that Fathers should not anger, or enrage, their kids. Easier said than done.

The enslaved, given their subjugation, should obey, but not for praise or worldly reasons, but as a means of rendering service to the Lord, not their master. They are to do this knowing the Lord will make things right. This can still feel a little troubling in our minds, until we see the advice to Christian owners of enslaved people to exactly the same thing. Then they are not to "threaten" those who serve them, because before the Lord, they are completely equal. This is a far cry from Aristotle, and when we factor in, that in that time, the word for "slave," meant both someone "enslaved," and someone of no social status working as a paid servant. We can still see this apply to bosses, employers, and business owners, today, to see employees as equals before God.

Paul flips the style of Aristotle, who spoke to men first as masters, then fathers, then husbands. You see, he reverses the order in two ways, speaking first to wives, then husbands. He speaks to children before fathers, and then to the enslaved before the masters. But notice each category is flipped as well. I think it's clear that Paul knows Aristotle's Politics and household code here. For this educated Ephesian audience, he makes a point when he intentionally flips it over.

But if you're not convinced, I want to jump back to the middle section of the husband part, which I skipped over, but it is the reason I told the story about Claire mowing the lawn. Paul knows there are preconceived ideas of what constitutes a man's work and women's work. He knows what duties are considered a woman's job, both then and now. I've read this passage a lot and preached on this passage before, but it was only recently that I recognized something that was so obvious. New Testament scholar Lynn Cohick, director of the Houston Theological Seminary pointed it out and I've been kicking myself for never seeing this before, just sitting there in plain sight.

She points out the images Paul uses to describe how Jesus interacts with the Church. Notice first that Jesus cleanses, or purifies, the church by washing with water. Then Jesus presents the church to himself in glory without spot, or stain, and without wrinkle, so that it would be holy and without blemish. Then just as a husband feeds and keeps his own flesh warm, so then the husband is to feed and keep his wife warm, for this is what Christ does for the church.

In the household of God, the Messiah washes bodies, something that in ancient times was considered a woman's job. In the household of God, the Messiah cleans stained clothes, also, classically a woman's job. In the household of God, the Messiah removes wrinkles, another task usually assigned to women. Then, in the household of God, the Messiah, who is co-equal to the Father, feeds, or nourishes, the church and keeps it warm, two tasks that were also assigned to women in the ancient world who cooked and kept the hearth.

Beloved, Paul gets misused and it stinks. But it's because sin and death are still trying to wrestle power from God. But sin and death have been defeated on the cross. So, men and women and women and men are to mutually submit to one another.

We can lay down ideas of culturally defined gender roles, and instead look within our relationships for the distinct abilities and interests we have. I don't have to mow the lawn if Claire wants to. I can

cook and Claire doesn't have to. As a man, I can do laundry. We can split roles based on what we're actually interested in, rather than what the culture tells us. That way we use our distinct abilities alongside each other to serve God, just as God entered our flesh in Christ to serve, not to be served.

We are each distinct with gifts received by grace to work in tandem with one another, yet to summarize Paul here and elsewhere, let's say that in Christ, there is no man or woman, slave or free, Gentile or Jew, employee or employer, inferior or superior, for we are all are one in Christ Jesus, and God shows no favoritism.

You are loved by God for who you are as an individual, and wherever you are in life right now. God has called you to know you are loved so that you can be secure enough in that love, and not need the affirmations of this world. You can be empowered by that love to love others. Remember, that the Son who was equal to God, became one to us, and now all of us are equal to each other.

Next week, we will conclude Ephesians with the armor of God, but for now, let us put on the apron of Christ and be servants to one another throughout our lives in every aspect. Let us reject Aristotle and stop listening to him. He lays a foundation of victory and dominance being the highest order as though we are supposed to win in life. Instead, let us be filled with the Holy Spirit, loving and serving with the apron of Christ, without fear of this world and how we'll be judged by its standards. Instead, we can live in reverence to our God. Amen.

Ephesians 5:21-6:9 (Fresh Translation): Be submitted to one another in reverence of the Messiah –

The wives to their own husbands as to the Lord, because the husband is the head of the wife, as also the Messiah is head of the church, himself the Savior of the body. But even as the church is submitted to Christ, in this manner also the wives to husbands in everything.

The husbands, you are to love the wives, just as also Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, so that he might make her holy, having purified her by bathing her with water on his word. He did this so that he might present to himself the church in glory, not having a stain or wrinkle or any such things, but in order that it would be holy and without blemish. In this manner, the husbands also ought to love their own wives as their own bodies. The one loving his own wife, loves himself. For no one at any time detests his own flesh, but he feeds and keeps it warm, just as Christ also does for the church, for we are members of his body.

Because of this, a man will leave behind his father and mother and be joined to his wife and the two will be in one flesh. This is the great mystery, but I speak in regard to the Messiah and in regard to the church. Moreover, you also, according to each individual, let him then love his own wife as himself, but in order that wife may revere the husband.

The little children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is just. Honor your father and mother, which is the first commandment with a promise, "in order that you may become well, and you will be long lived upon this earth." Fathers do not enrage your children but bring them up in the training and warnings of the Lord.

The enslaved, obey the masters, according to the flesh with fear and trembling, in your heart's straightforwardness, just as to the Messiah. Do this not with service to be seen as people pleasers, but as servants of the Messiah, doing the will of God from out of your whole self, with a good mind, rendering service as to the Lord and not to people, knowing that each one, if whatever he might do good, this will be taken care of from the Lord, whether enslaved or free.

And masters, do the same things toward them, letting go of threatening, knowing that the Lord of them and of you is in the heavens, and with the Lord, there is no favoritism.