

Remodeling Your Home  
Ephesians 5:1-2, 21-6:4, 10-17

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*Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Eph. 5:21*

You may think me foolish, tone-deaf, or both for having a passage like this read on Mother's Day of all Sundays! If you do, I hope to convince you otherwise before we are through with today's study.

This is one of the most misused passages of the New Testament and perhaps of all Christian scripture. The misuse happens when careless – maybe even nefarious – interpreters practice what one of my theology professors called “The Snip and Run Technique.” They snip a single phrase of the Bible out of its context and run off with it to build an entire system on it as though it were the only word of scripture.

So, in the case of the passage before us today, a male-dominated society, hierarchical, patriarchal, and misogynistic reads only a snippet of verse 22 – “Wives, be subject to your husbands” – and builds on that distorted fragment a system in which women are subordinate to men.

Tragically, misinterpretations like that demean women, make their lives miserable where they are taught to believe them, and turn others off scripture altogether for they find it repugnant.

But this is a good text and we shouldn't let it languish at the hands of patriarchal, misogynistic Neanderthals. We can rescue the passage from misuse by keeping its phrases in proper perspective. Scholarly circles, following Martin Luther, use a German word – *Haustafel* – to label what kind of passage this is. *Haustafel* means house table or household code.<sup>1</sup> (But it is more fun and you sound more profound and intellectual when you say *Haustafel*.) The main thought goes to how Christian households ought to be structured.

Many of you did some remodeling, or at least some shifting of things around in your house, to accommodate what was required under the pandemic's safer at home orders. You created at-home work spaces, at-home school spaces, increased your bandwidth, and so forth, to transform your house into office and classroom as well as living space.

Well, you are beginning now to venture forth in what we hope is going to be post-pandemic life. Let's make sure that we remodel our homes for this new stage and be as urgent and as conscientious about it as we were when refurbishing our homes heading into the pandemic. We can find the specs for the best kind of remodel in the *Haustafel* from Ephesians.

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<sup>1</sup> O. J. F. Seitz, “Lists, Ethical,” *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 3, ed. by George Arthur Buttrick, *et. al.* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), p. 137.

There are three remodeling specifications to note in particular in this New Testament blueprint for the Christian home.

*Make Christ your example.*

Christ stands out in our text as the example of Christian behavior. We are to act in the home and treat others in the home as he acted and treated others.

The example Christ set is one of sacrificial love. The love of Christ is repeated several times in the *Haustafel* and each time his love is mentioned the word translated for us as love is that special Greek word you all know by now: *agape*. *Agape* is not family love (the Greek word for that is *storge*). It is not sexual love (the Greek word for that is *eros*). It is not the love of friends (the Greek word for that is *philia*). *Agape* is different from those because it does not first see and then become drawn by something in the other person that it finds attractive, intelligent, charming, sensuous, or endearing. *Agape* originates as a decision to love before anything at all is ever known about the other. It originates as a decision to love and then moves out – it is not drawn by – it moves out toward the other completely for the sake of the other’s best interest. There is nothing selfish or self-serving in *agape*. The one who *agapes* another is not interested in getting anything in return; only in giving for the sake of the other.<sup>2</sup>

The love of Christ stressed in the *Haustafel* is sacrificial. The text is sure to repeat the fact that Christ gave himself up. That is how he showed his love. He gave himself up. He sacrificed himself in order to uplift people, to help them to be their best. Notice: he did not expect them to work and to sacrifice and to change to improve themselves; he sacrificed himself, he gave himself up, for their sake. He did not diminish or demean anyone; he strengthened them through his sacrifice.

The ideal home now is where this sacrificial love is put into practice by all concerned. *Agape* is to take precedence in the Christian home. There is *storge* – family love – in the Christian home, of course. There is *eros* – sexual love and playfulness – in the Christian home, of course. But these are all in the context of *agape*: respect for the other, desiring the best for the other, and acting without self-interest.

Now here is where we correct the wrongful interpretation of the passage I mentioned at the outset. There is to be in the home a mutual expression of this sacrificial love. The mistaken interpreters snip and run with “Wives, be subject to your husbands,” completely ignoring two important facts. The one is that before the text says, “Wives, be subject to your husbands” it says “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.” That first! Husbands are to be subject to their wives as well as wives to their husbands; they are to be submissive *to one another* under Christ. The other fact the snip-and-runners ignore is that the text, after it says “Wives, be subject to your husbands” says, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” And the word for *love* there is again *agape*. Husbands, *agape* your wives: love them unselfishly and sacrificially, just as Christ surrendered himself for the sake of the church.

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<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, *Basic Christianity*, audio CD (Edinburgh: Pathway Productions, 2001), track 5.

The example of Christ is the first specification everyone is to follow when giving our homes a Christian make-over: everyone is to treat everyone respectfully and unselfishly. I turn now to the second of the remodeling specs that are present in our long text for today.

*Make Christ your conversation.*

Howard Thurman (1899-1981), an African-American pastor, author, and influential thinker, was once in India on a speaking tour. I think his purpose was to speak about the black experience in the United States from Christian perspective as a way of touching upon the caste system in predominantly Hindu India. In any case, he spoke one day and he was immediately accosted afterwards by a young man who complained to him that he had spoken at length but had never once named the name of Jesus. How could he speak about everything except the one person who matters above all others?<sup>3</sup>

Could a young man or woman like that say the same about the conversations that take place in your home? Do you talk about everything except Christ? Do you go for a whole day and more saying nothing about Jesus, oaths aside? Do your children know what you think of Jesus? Or do they only know what you think about your favorite beer, your favorite make of car, your favorite sport and favorite team, your favorite work, your favorite whatever? Do they know what you think of Jesus? I am not saying Jesus has to be in every third sentence of your speech, but I am saying he should be talked about often in the Christian home so that everyone in the home knows that Jesus is real, that he is a friend, and that he is important.

That is what Paul is after in his Ephesians *Haustafel*. When he leaves off talking about how husbands and wives are to relate to one another as Christ relates to people, he takes up the question of how parents are to be with their children. The same *agape* as before prevails, but there is also this word – spoken to fathers in particular, but I think it applies to mothers as well – that parents are to bring their children up – nourish them – in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. Let there be real and deliberate and personal talk about Christ and Christianity in the home.

Folks sometimes wonder what is going to become of the church. I think the answer is this: the church will be what it is supposed to be under God when Christ is who he is supposed to be in your home.

That is the second specification toward giving our homes a Christian make-over following the pandemic. The first is to make Christ your example. The second is to make Christ your conversation. I turn now to the third spec present in our long text.

*Make Christ your strength.*

Our text commands strength. Verse 10 of chapter 6 begins, “Be strong in the Lord.” Paul knew the need for strength. We moderns aren’t the first people to live stressful lives. Paul knew all about life’s stress and strain and struggle. He said, “For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against rulers, against authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (v. 12). That is quite a list! It includes everything from contemporary politics to eternal issues to recurring nemeses.

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<sup>3</sup> Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), p. 187.

We could build our own list because we know the threats that make their way into every home and call for strength to meet them and master them. Our list would include fatigue, financial strain, and fractures in relationships. There would be a column for sickness and sorrow and suffering. And there would be pages about daunting decisions, difficult duties, and demanding days. Strength? We know we have to have it!

Our text not only commands strength it supplies us with the resources we need for strength. The strength that is at our disposal is the power of Christ himself (6:10). And thereafter it is what Paul calls “the whole armor of God” (6:11) to stand firm and strong against all that threatens to weaken. These resources that yield Christian strength include truth, righteousness, the preaching and teaching of the gospel, and scripture itself. They are not mentioned here, but Paul’s wonderful lists – he has a penchant for lists – are never complete; they are suggestive, pointing in the right direction. And so we can add to those things that supply Christian strength prayer, worship, the fellowship of the church, and the reinforcement of Holy Communion.

A man inspecting the church one day before we did our remodeling here looked in every nook and cranny and was thoroughly amazed by the concrete girders that hold this structure. Time and again he said, “This is where I want to be when the storm hits.” We can make our homes strong like that in the strength of the Lord. The *house* may fall; there is no guarantee against that; but the *home*, girded in the strength of the Lord, will withstand any storm, however severe.

There is an old word that I think has fallen largely into disuse. It is *homemaker*. Where the word is limited to women and to mothers as *homemakers* while the men and fathers are *breadwinners*, I think it is right that it has fallen into disuse.

But *homemaker* is a good word when it is applied to all. Men and women, fathers and mothers, boys and girls – we are all homemakers in Christ. We are to do all we can to make our homes fit for the living of these days. That calls for us to follow the specs of this blueprint for the Christian home: make Christ your example, make Christ your conversation, and make Christ your strength.