

Ephesians 5:21, et al., on subjection

©2026 James D. Nickel

Paul says in Ephesians 5:21:

be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.

Subjection ... a word often misunderstood. In this essay, I hope to show the background behind Paul's use of this word. In summary, he commands us to recognize the Father's sacred presence in each other; we arrange ourselves under this reality and perspective. Therefore, we respect and honor each other. We have some ground to cover to justify these summary statements.

First, notice how, in a similar passage in Colossians 3, Paul sets out his instructions to wives and husbands in vv. 1-17. We quote vv. 12-17:

So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, *put on* a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things *put on* love, which is the perfect bond of unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father." [Note: For the words in *italics*, the first "put on" is in the Greek text, the second is not.]

The command to "put on" comes from a fascinating Greek word. The verb ἑνδύσασθε (from ἐνδύω, transliterated *endýō*) means "to clothe or be clothed with, in the sense of sinking into a garment." The word does not mean to "act as if" as when we use the English phrase "*put on* a show" or "*put on* a happy face." This type of "put on" is to pretend. No, the reality behind the command is for us to "sink into the garment," to fall into the robe of the *person* Jesus Christ. Through His Spirit in us, Christ enables us to express a heart of compassion, kindness, etc., for *He is* compassion, kindness, humility, etc. We do *not* attempt by our own independent willpower, to produce compassion, kindness, etc. We fall into the person of compassion, kindness, etc., within *us*. Christ is our life (Colossians 3:1-4). We are in union with the living Christ. Through His incarnation, we are united to His birth, life, death, and burial, as well as to His resurrection and ascension. In the incarnate Son's ascension life with the Father, He lives the eternal life (αἰώνιος ζωὴ—*aionios zōē*) of His relationship with His Father through us (Galatians 2:20). The prophet Isaiah saw this blessed life coming:

I will rejoice greatly in the Lord, my soul will exult in my God; for He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness, as a

Ephesians 5:21, et al., on subjection

©2026 James D. Nickel

bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. (Isaiah 61:10)

What beauty of vibrant relationship is expressed by “sink into!” The life of Christ in us is the necessary reality that enables us to live a life of jeweled relationships.

Paul next addresses the marriage relationship a little differently from Ephesians 5, but complementarily. In the brackets, I insert my understanding of what Paul means. The justification for these insertions comes next.

Wives, be subject [arrange yourself under] to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord (i.e., recognize the sacred presence of the Father in them for this is the fit thing to do in union with the Lord.). Husbands, [likewise, recognizing the sacred presence of the Father in your wives] love your wives and do not be embittered against [*pros*—in the face of] them. [Note: to be embittered against your wife, to be in her “face,” is a failure to recognize the sacred presence of the Father in her.] (Colossians 3:18-19)

The Greek verb translated in our English Bibles as “be subject to” comes from *hypotássō*, where *hypó*, means “under” and *tássō*, means “arrange.” The word translated literally means “under arrangement.” This word is an ancient term originally used for a military general *arranging* soldiers in:

the best order, to accomplish the strategic objective; hence, ‘to arrange under one’s authority,’ in order to execute a mission. The word speaks of an economy, a system of administration. (Kenneth Wuest, *Word Studies*, Vol. 2, “Hebrews,” 54).

Let’s compare what Paul does in Ephesians 5 with what he does in Colossians 3 as an immediate preface to these marriage commands. After exhorting believers to admonish each other in the singing motif (Colossians 3:16), Paul states:

Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father. (Colossians 3:17)

In Ephesians 5:18-20, Paul commands us to keep on being filled with the Spirit, followed by the same Colossians-style singing motif and a call to give thanks. Then comes this word:

and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ. (Ephesians 5:21)

Think for a moment about how Colossians 3:17 and Ephesians 5:21 complement each other. Far too often, in my lifetime of listening to sermons or reading books, speakers/writers either bypass this verse or act like it doesn’t exist. Without a proper understanding of verse 21 and Colossians 3:17, we will not clearly understand Paul’s subsequent marriage commands.

Ephesians 5:21, et al., on subjection

©2026 James D. Nickel

Living under, or better yet, within the fear of Christ, within the economy of His administration, is the necessary arrangement for growth and experiencing His presence in the fullness of the Holy Spirit.

The verb/participle is present tense and passive voice. It carries the idea of “subject for yourselves,” i.e., “choose to subject yourselves”—not “*be* subject.” Also, this type of subjection cannot imply any type of inferiority because Jesus, the incarnate Son who is in the Father, and the Father who is in Him said, “I and the Father, one we are” (John 10:30; 17:11).¹ And He was subject to the Father every day of His life on earth.² Furthermore, we know from Paul that everyone is one in Christ:

and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him—a renewal in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew [racial], circumcised and uncircumcised [extension on the difference between Greek and Jew], barbarian [foreigner—outsider], Scythian [the wildest of the foreigners, the most decrepit of states], slave and freeman [social, economic], but Christ is all, and in all. (Colossians 3:10-11)

There is neither Jew nor Greek [racial], there is neither slave nor free man [social, economic], there is neither male nor female [gender]; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)

We should always understand subjection by context. Subjection, in Ephesians 5:21ff and Colossians 3:17ff, speaks to our yielding honor one to another, to our giving of ourselves fully to another.

Henry Alford, *The Greek New Testament*:

¹ What Jesus said in John 10:30 unfolds the meaning of Deuteronomy 6:4 (“Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one ...”), a meaning that revolted the hardened Jewish mind of some His hearers. The Greek text states: ἐγὼ καὶ ὁ Πατήρ ἐν ἑσμεν. (I and the Father, one we are.) The Greek word ἐν (*ben*) translated “one” is neuter, not the masculine εἷς (*heis*). ἐν means one essence. The Greek text emphasizes this unity of essence between two persons as paramount.

² Ergo, to say “being subject to” means “being inferior to” states that Jesus Christ, the Incarnate and eternally begotten Son, who is one with the Father, is inferior to the Father, a heretical notion that rejects the import of the *homoousios to patri* (of one being with the Father) clause in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (325, 381). In John 14:28, note what Jesus says: “You heard that I said to you, ‘I go away, and I will come to you.’ If you loved Me, you would have rejoiced, because I go to the Father; for the Father is greater than I.” In the Nicene-Constantinopolitan debates where the presbyter Arius was the chief antagonist, he knew better than to use this verse to justify his position that Jesus was a created and thereby inferior being when compared with God. When we read these words of Jesus in context with Philippians 2:5-11, we understand them first to reflect the self-emptying of the Son, His determined and passion-filled subjection to our fallen state, via the Incarnation (enfleshment—John 1:14), i.e., His stooping low in love to our level to transform and convert us when He dwelt inside our sinful flesh to condemn it (Romans 8:3), and second, the immediate John 14:28 context for the “greater than I” phrase is referent to current location, i.e., position—the Father is in the dimension of heaven, and the Son is on earth in incarnate form. Note: Because Jesus is the incarnate Son of the Father, one with the Father, the respective dimensions of heaven and earth intersect in Him.

Ephesians 5:21, et al., on subjection

©2026 James D. Nickel

As we are otherwise to be filled [Eph. 5:18-20], otherwise to sing and rejoice, so also we are otherwise to behave—not blustering nor letting our voices rise in selfish vaunting, as such men do,—but subject to one another.

Kenneth Wuest:

Subjecting one's self to another is the opposite of self assertion, the opposite of an independent, autocratic spirit. It is the desire to get along with one another, being satisfied with less than one's due, a sweet reasonableness of attitude.

This attitude of subjection is *the way of loving one another* because Paul begins his exhortation in Ephesians 5 with these words:

And walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma.

Paul envisions marriage as the celebration of two people where both initiate love one to another, wife to husband, husband to wife, both as to the Lord (Ephesians 5:22ff). In Ephesians 5, Paul gives the husband more instructions about his subjection to his wife than the brief command in Colossians 3:19 to love his wife. Ephesians 5:23-33 expands on the nature of that *agape* love. As her head³ and following the Lord's lead, he gives himself up for her, consecrates her, and cleanses her by the water of the spoken word (*rhēma*). He is to nourish and cherish her like his own body, honoring her, as the Apostle Peter instructs, as a fellow heir of the grace of life (1 Peter 3:7). In summary, the husband leads his wife by sacrificial/servant love. The wife, in response, is to see that she fears, i.e., respects, her husband *inside*, as we shall shortly see, the fear of Christ (Ephesians 5:33).

This reciprocal commitment goes far beyond mere duty. Through mutual subjection, both acknowledge the Lordship of Christ in each other. What is the biblical milieu for this acknowledgment, this recognition, of subjection?

In the Greek phrase Paul uses in Ephesians 5:21, ἐν φόβῳ Χριστοῦ [in (*en*) the fear (*phobos*) of Christ (*Christou*)], Χριστοῦ is in the genitive case. In English grammar, that case is called the possessive. We say, “Steve’s book,” or more crudely, “the book of Steve,” meaning the book is owned, possessed by John. In the Greek, the genitive includes that meaning, *but much, much more*. The two nouns, φόβῳ and Χριστοῦ (fear and Christ), are combined so that the second noun, Christ, is both the object of the energy of the first noun, fear, and the source of that energy. The

³ English translation of *kephalē* meaning “the source of her life.” The primary referent is to Eve as coming out from (*ek*) Adam, but not excluding that man exists through (*dia*) the woman (1 Corinthians 11:12). We draw from the reasoning of Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 that neither husband nor wife can “lord” it over the other. Marriage is a relationship of mutuality and reciprocal authority.

Ephesians 5:21, et al., on subjection

©2026 James D. Nickel

object of fear, i.e., Christ, is the very source and empowerment of fear.⁴ This fear is a vital living quality, a quality engendered by Christ Himself, who engenders in us,⁵ by His Spirit, *that same recognition* of the Father's presence in all things around us. When we speak of the vicarious humanity of Christ, we mean that He imparts to us, in our humanity, His relationship to His Father through His incarnate humanity. What He knows of the Father, He knows *in us* by His Spirit.

The servant songs of Isaiah clarify what was on the mind of the incarnate Son as He lived on the earth. One of those songs is Isaiah 11, a most revealing text. We quote only the first three verses:

Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge (*yada*—*intimate* knowing) and the fear of the Lord. And He will delight (*ruah*—quick to smell) in the fear of the Lord. (Isaiah 11:1-3a)

The Spirit of intimate knowing (cf. Matthew 11:25-27) and the fear of the Lord will rest upon the incarnate Son. The Holy Spirit will settle on the incarnate Son in His humanity, giving Him a spirit of intimate recognition of the Father's presence, a "quick to smell" (*ruah*) recognition of that presence in all things around Him.⁶ The repeated testimony of John's Gospel affirms this reality:

... the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner. ... I can do nothing on My own initiative. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. (John 5:19, 30)

For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. (John 6:38)

When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me. And He who sent Me is with Me; He has not left Me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to Him. (John 8:28-29)

⁴ Samuel Green, *Handbook to the Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: Revell, 1912), 218, "The fundamental meaning of the Genitive is very apparent, the object of a sentient being, in another view of it, the source or occasion of its existence."

⁵ "Christ in you, the hope of glory!" (Colossians 1:27).

⁶ Compare Isaiah 11:3a with Psalm 40:8, quoted as the words of Christ in John 4:34 and Hebrews 10:5-7, "I delight to do Your will, O my God; Your Law is within my heart." The Hebrew word in this case, translated into English as delight is *hāpēs*, means "to delight in with pleasure, to give delighted attention to."

Ephesians 5:21, et al., on subjection

©2026 James D. Nickel

For I did not speak on My own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me a commandment as to what to say and what to speak. I know that His commandment is eternal life; therefore the things I speak, I speak just as the Father has told Me. (John 12:49-50)

Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works. (John 14:10)

Do you see the connection between Isaiah 11, the Gospel of John, and this phrase Paul used? In John 14:20, Jesus says that in the day of the Spirit, we shall know (knowledge of *intimacy*) that “I am in (*en*) the Father, and you in (*en*) me, and I in (*en*) you.” To be “in” Christ is to be “in” His recognition of the Father’s presence.

Regarding the phrase “fear of Christ,” do we subject ourselves one to another because we fear Christ, or do we subject ourselves one to another inside the fear of Christ, inside Christ’s fear in us, inside His recognition of the Father in us? Recall the genitive form. Christ engenders His fear in us through His Holy Spirit. The genitive makes this distinction critical.

Regarding fear (*phobos*), we can interpret it as terror, as it was commonly understood in the Greek world of Paul’s day. But perfect love casts out fear (*phobos*), the fear of punishment (1 John 4:18). Then, 1 John 4:19 affirms, “We love because He first loved us.” Paul used fear in Ephesians 5:21 as the Hebrew Old Testament used it as “reverent acknowledgment” (Proverbs 1:7). The Hebrew word *yirah* is used as a *positive* quality in Isaiah 11. Here, fear carries a sense of recognition, of a quick acknowledgment of who the Father is, of an *intimate* knowing of the Father’s presence in the perfection of self-giving love.

We conclude where we started. Being subject to one another inside the fear of Christ is recognizing in each other, indeed, in every person, even those in the most decrepit states, the sacred presence of the Father. In our union with Christ, we arrange ourselves under this reality, and thus generate a life of respect and honor, not only in the husband-wife relationship, *but toward every person we meet*. The Christ who transformed and converted us will certainly do the same to those we encounter.