

Theme- **A Call to Worship and Commitment**

Let me share a popular story from the Eastern Philosophy,

A doll made of salt, after a long pilgrimage on the dry land, came to the ocean and discovered something she has never seen and could not possibly understand. She stood on this firm ground and she looks at another ground that was mobile, insecure, noisy, strange and unknown. She asked the ocean, what are you? And it said, I am the ocean, the doll asked, what is the ocean, and the answer was it is me. The doll couldn't understand and expressed its perplexed doubts to the ocean. The ocean answered- Touch me, So, the doll shyly put forward its foot and touched the water. When she withdrew her leg, to her surprise, the toes were gone. She asked the ocean, what have you done? Where is my toe? The ocean answered- you have given something in order to understand. Gradually, the water took every bit of the salt doll. Finally when the waves dissolved the rest of the doll, the doll realized that Oh I am the ocean!

Now, this is a positive story in an Eastern philosophy tradition where one loses their individuality and realize that they are part of the ultimate reality. Therefore, they stop seeking pleasure of their own.

Losing self, losing individuality have been one of the most stated fears in our modern society.

One of the most popular way to combat this fear has been to resort to individualism. The fear is real- The tyrannical and abusive structures in the past has intensified this fear in our societies.

We express this fear of losing individuality in our relationships. To those who are married, (if you had this feeling), do you remember the moment where you pondered how your life is gonna change forever after the wedding ceremony. Apparently, pre-wedding jitters are a real thing.

Deep down, there is always a sense of fear in losing our individual selves to others. Sometimes the fears are so dominant that it starts affecting the health of our relationships.

The passage that we read today is popularly known as the household codes among the Biblical scholars. The understanding of a household is different in different cultures and different time-periods across history. A typical household in Paul's time would be a large one where a big group of people living together in one roof which also includes the slaves who are very much part of the household.

The dominant person in a typical household during Paul's time was a man who was the leader of the household whom Paul depicts as a husband, a father and a master. This also meant that the women, the children and the slaves were potential salt dolls who could be dissolved in the relationship to the man by losing their selfhood. Paul writes this letter by encouraging these vulnerable groups towards commitment to the relationship and commands the man with responsibilities that reflects the new identity in Christ. How does he do that?

He highlights different relationships within the household, invites them to worship, and asks them to be committed to each other.

So, the theme for today's meditation is **Call to Worship and Commitment**

Let us look at both of these aspects with the different relationships that Paul highlights here in this passage.

1. Relationship between a wife and husband

Vs.18 and 19 says, wives submit to your husbands as is fitting in the lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.

To start off, Paul encourages the wives to submit to their husbands. The word “submission” means to subject oneself or to put oneself under to a set order. The basic assumption that this speaks out is that the husband is portrayed as an authority to whom the wife has to submit herself. This sounds very foreign to our modern society. That too in an age where the term “authority” has a lot of negative overtones. Now, before we arrive at conclusions on what does Paul mean by submission, we need to look at what does he instruct husbands? He instructs husbands to love their wives and ask them not be harsh with them.

We get to see a similar passage in the book of Ephesians where Paul provides more description on this responsibility of love that husbands should show their wives. He says, “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her”. He does not say that here; instead the Greek word that he uses for love is *agape* which is a word used for Godly love. This Godly love can be understood by the love of Christ that is sacrificial in nature and is self-giving. The definition of love defined by Christ is a suffering love which He exemplified in the cross. Husbands, we are called to demonstrate that love to our wives where we put their needs above ours, where their interest becomes the priority and we can do that when we consider them better than ourselves. Paul says, do not use harsh words. The harsh words has a bit more stronger tone in Greek as it is described in terms of bitterness towards the wife. These harsh words are associated with the consequences of ill temper. It is very interesting to note that our actions that follow ill temper (in our right mind) is often directed to people who are related to us in a state of vulnerability. Husbands, let us not exploit that state of vulnerability by showing our ill temper. Instead, love our wives the way Christ loves the church. Let their need be our priority, let us treat them with love and respect by considering them better than ourselves.

In response to this Godly love, Paul encourages the wives to submit. By submitting themselves to their husbands, they recognize the God given role of their husbands in their lives and treat their husbands better than themselves. So, in this sense, we have a set of two people who are devoted to seek the better for each other. This devotion is not based on who has a higher status in the relationship, or by seeking individual benefits. Instead, it is purely driven by the love of Christ.

This is the model of marriage that Christ summons which Christ Himself models for us in His relationship to the Father. Christ submits Himself to the Father, which does not make Christ the lesser God. Instead, Christ is equal to the Father and to the Spirit. The same love that exists within the Trinity is given to us through Christ to live in unity. That is why Paul encourages submission with reference to “as it is fitting in the Lord”. This phrase means to be conformed to the patterns of Christ. We see the pattern of Christ is to be in the loving submission to the Father. For Jesus, the will of the father superseded everything. In the similar manner, Paul invites the wives to seek the interest of their husbands and to treat them better than themselves.

Wait a second, how does this make sense in a toxic or an unhealthy or an abusive relationship. Few Biblical commentators help us understand that submission is different from obedience. In “obedience”, the party has a lesser say in the relationship. Whereas, there is freedom in submission. It is a call to a willful submission to a loving spouse. This doesn’t encourage any kind of toxicity, domination, abuse or control in marriage. That is why worship needs to take a centre-stage in marriage and sin should not be tolerated. Any kind of ungodly behaviour by either of the spouse needs to be addressed and dealt with Godly counsel. Nobody is a salt doll in a relationship. We are self-respecting individuals who are called to ultimate submission to Christ.

In a world that we live in fear of being dissolved or losing our individual selves, the new self in Christ defines our relationships through the love of Christ. Often, in social circles, there is a talk about a dream partner to get married to and we describe these dream partners using several checklists. But if you look at the Gospel truth here, it is not about who you get married to. Instead, it is who you are as a married person.

If you are married, may the love of Christ define your marriage. If you are considering marriage, may you be the person who grows deeper in the love of Christ and be willing to submit and demonstrate love to whoever God brings in your life.

2. Relationship between a Parent and a Child

Vs. 20-21- Children obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.

There is a world of difference to be a child today and to be a child in Paul's time. A child is considered as a property and their status was as similar as of the slave except they had inheritance. They did not have any rights and privileges. Their situation was like a salt doll.

Paul looks at these children and asks them to respond to their fathers in obedience in everything.

This is based on the assumption that the parents are instructing and teaching them the Gospel truth. Then he asks the fathers not to provoke the children. If they do so, the children may get discouraged.

Let us focus the lens mostly on the fathers or the parents as it involves both;

First, Parents, God has entrusted you with the task of teaching God's word, the Gospel truth to your children. The Gospel truth is not a set of do's and don'ts. It is about knowing who God is

cognitively and experientially. And to children, we are called to obey that Gospel truth that comes from our parents.

Second, Parents, God has entrusted you to nourish the children in not only providing good food, clothes and toys. It is also to nourish them with self-respect. They are a child of God as you are a child of God. We are equal in the sight of God. Treat them as your fellow brother and sister in Christ. This sounds very odd but that is how it plays out in God's economy.

When Paul says, do not provoke them, he literally ask them not to irritate them or drive them to resentment where they are in a position to react in a way as if they have accepted the challenge but not able to react. He is basically saying- do not push the buttons! If you are a parent, you may say- well! They are ones who are pushing the buttons. I am sure that is true. But what Paul says here is that children are in a vulnerable position in their relation with their parents. Do not take advantage of that vulnerability so much so that they discouraged and continue their lives with a sullen frame of mind. This does not mean that you say yes to everything and make them happy. You are called to instruct them in Gospel truth but at the same time be aware of the attitude that takes advantage of the children just because they are children.

3. Relationship between a master and a slave

Follow the verses 22-4:1 here.

The slaves were the most vulnerable set of people during Paul's time. The slaves were considered as a property where their worth was mostly understood in monetary terms and not in human terms.

When we read this, there could be many questions. Did Bible encourage slavery? Did Paul support slavery?

The straight answer is no. The scripture attributes human dignity to all human beings and does not discriminate between a slave and free.

What is then Paul doing here? We need to understand that Paul is not writing a policy letter to the government to bring a revolution to the slavery system.

Instead, he is writing a letter to a church that is part of an existing system. The goal of his writing is to see how this community lives out using this new identity in Christ.

So, what does he tell the slaves?

He asks the slaves to be obedient to the masters. He demands them to be sincere in what they do. He asks them not to work only to please their masters but with complete sincerity. He asks them to work whole-heartedly as if they are working for the Lord and not for men. There are zillions research that prove that leadership matters and how the culture of a company changes based on the leader. Paul reminds us that our ultimate boss is Jesus Christ and we should work in the manner that we are working for the Lord. It doesn't matter what work we do, we report to Christ. Our vision of work gets aligned with the vision of Christ. If the vision of Christ is to redeem the creation to Himself, we as His creation, partake in that redemptive activity of Christ. No matter what we do, we do it for Christ and the vision that He has for the world. Therefore, work is sacred and we worship God through what we do.

Then, he reminds them of the Christian hope they have in Christ by pointing out to the reward of inheritance. The word "inheritance" means a lot to a slave because they can never ever receive inheritance on this earth. The inheritance was only for the free and for the sons. The new identity in Christ gave a new meaning for their life's existence. They might be a slave, but in Christ they have hope and hope changes everything. It gives a new purpose for living; it transforms our

attitude. It brings freshness in our spirit, it gives us this belief that there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

Most of the time when we look at the never ending tiresome work, we tend to feel, what's the point! What if, we dwell on the promises of God that our labor in the Lord is not in vain. We don't know how God will use our work and redeem it for his purposes. But we do know that we believe in the eternal God whose plans and purposes are not limited in space and time. So, the call is to trust Him and reorient our work in the hope that we have in him.

Paul goes on to remind the slaves that they worship a God who is just and doesn't tolerate anything wrong. By saying that he asks them to be ethically responsible. Their circumstances does not give them the liberty to justify their acts. Instead, they are accountable to God in what they do. We worship a God who holds the highest ethical standards. He expects us to be faithful in all that we do and be ethically responsible workers. He does not distinguish between a workspace and a place of worship. He calls us to be worshippers in all spaces and calls us to demonstrate high ethical standards.

Paul, then turns to the masters and instructs them which was very counter-cultural. He tells them to treat the slaves with justice and fairness. Now, if you consider treating your property, you don't think of treating it with justice. It is your property, you treat it well but you don't seek justice for the property. What Paul is indicating here is that slaves are not supposed to be treated like properties, they carry intrinsic human worth. You treat them with justice.

He also tells them that you treat them with fairness which also means to be fair with them. You treat them the way you treat yourself. In fact, he exemplifies this by writing another letter to the slave master, Philemon. He asks Philemon to treat Onesimus his runaway slave to treat equally.

He tells him that Onesimus is your brother in Christ. It is the same Onesimus who was with Paul in the prison and is carrying this letter to Colosians and to the letter to the Philemon. In the light of the whole scripture and Paul's writing, he is asking the masters to treat the slaves better than themselves. He reminds them that they also have a master who is in heaven to whom they are accountable to.

The dynamics of relationships drastically change with Christ in the frame;

On the one hand, we have the perspective of the pre-modern world that informs us that there are standards that qualify certain group of people higher than the others. The standards could be gender, race, ethnicity, economic status, education, human display of power etc. On the other hand, we have the perspective of the modern and post-modern world that embraces equality and equal rights. It brings in human dignity and encourages us to demonstrate our individual rights. Well, this feels great and liberating. But what Christ does is even better. He asks us to treat others better than ourselves. In this perspective, I grow as a human being from being concerned about my individual rights to be committed to the flourishing of the others. I am thinking less of my rights and more of my responsibilities.

But here is the obvious reality- sometimes these standards are too lofty and beyond human to be consistent. It is practically difficult to be a loving person or keeping others as a priority all the time.

Here is the good news- in Christ, we are able to come to him with our broken work ethic, with our broken relationships, with our broken marriages and He reaches out to us with His healing hands. He not only heals our brokenness but also gives us freedom. In the freedom given by Christ, we do not pursue our relationships and work in order to seek his acceptance but we do it

because He has accepted us and given us hope. May we pursue our relationships and work with this encouragement that Christ loves us, he understands our situations and in Him, we have hope.