

If you've ever said something poorly, you know you may never hear the end of it. Once St. Paul said, "Wives, be subject to your husbands," it's hard to pay attention to anything else he said or did. Today's second reading expresses some glorious thoughts for the Christian life -- practice compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. This coming from a guy who persecuted Christians, physically dragging men and women away from their homes into jail. Now he's saying bear with one another, forgive as God forgives. You've been called to peace, Paul says, dedicate yourselves to thankfulness. Fathers, don't nag your kids; how many teenagers would like to tack that verse of scripture onto the living room wall. Admonish one another, Paul says; let people know when they've done something wrong.

Then he says "Wives, be subject to your husbands." And that's not all. "This is your duty," he says. And that's not all. "This is your duty in the Lord." Not the text I wanted to preach on as soon as I got home. But it is a text that makes me grateful for being single. Well, if you want to know what I think, I think, since Paul says admonish one another, we should admonish St. Paul.

Women already suffer enough submission in society; their salaries are lower; positions of leadership are closed to them; they often do not carry decision-making force in families or businesses. They are more frequently victims of physical and verbal abuse than men are. In the last several decades our culture has awakened to the gifts of women. We're better at recognizing those now than we were a generation ago, but we still have a long way to go. I think this text from St. Paul sounds especially harsh in the context of the struggles women are making in society, harsh in that it has become part of the inspired word of God, and harsh because it's proclaimed by a church that does not accept women in positions of leadership. Theologians who study the problem of women in ministry sometimes turn to passages like this to justify the Catholic exclusion of women from ordained ministry.

What Paul is reaching for here is the importance of people getting along. But he made his point with a request that has accomplished anything but that. I'd like to let Paul off the hook by saying the term "be subject" isn't as strong as it seems to be, but it is; it's just how Paul expressed his honest feelings, and I'm not going to defend him. Put in the context of everything else he says in this passage he certainly has a bigger goal in mind. It's not a passage about the subjection of women; it's a passage about a Christian community acting with respect for one another. We hear it on Holy Family Sunday not because of what Paul says about women but because of what he says about the Christian community; our families should act like a good Christian community; and a good Christian community should act like a family. It's a great concept that we often don't hear because of one high-voltage verse. Say one thing poorly and you'll never hear the end of it.

There are passages in the Bible that never get read on Sunday with good reason. We don't hear the parts about arcane dietary restrictions; we don't hear the parts condemning usury; we don't hear the parts that tolerate slavery. They don't integrate well with the whole Christian

message, and quite frankly, this one doesn't either. But the general context is good and bears repeating: Practice compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. And don't nag the kids.