

## Introduction

One of the great benefits of being an elder is getting to do weddings. Some of my friends in vocational ministry disagree. They say weddings are extra work and add stress to an already busy week. I agree with them. The real disagreement is I think weddings are absolutely worth the added work and stress. I work hard at weddings to try to make them the memorable occasions they're supposed to be, first for the bride and groom, and then for the family and friends.

I really and truly love being married. God has used my marriage to Dawnae to sanctify me, to cause me to become more like Jesus. Because marriage is so significant, not only in my life but in the broader world, I work to help the couple getting married understand fully what it means to be husband and wife. I want to help them follow Christ fully in their marriage. I want *them* to become more like Jesus.

This is one of the reasons I only do weddings for those who are part of New City. I've had old college friends reach out to me to ask me to do their weddings. Um, no. Weddings and all that happens leading up to weddings and all that happens after weddings are part of the process of making disciples. I am called to make disciples at New City so I limit the weddings I do to New City folk. I may do a wedding for an extended family member, but that is because I still have some role in making disciples. I can't do that with someone I don't have a relationship with.

If you haven't figured it out yet, today we're looking at Paul's instructions for marriage. I suspect you fall into one of two camps. Either you're not married and so you think this text isn't really for you, or you are married and you think you know what the text is actually saying. Hopefully I can challenge both of these ideas. My aim is for us—all of us, whether married or single, widowed or divorced—to better understand what it means for us to follow Jesus. Even more, my aim is for us to better recognize who he is and what he has done for us.

We're in Ephesians 5. Because Ephesians was intended to be read straight through and because of how we tend to teach and read through the Bible in smaller portions, certain words may be added in translation that are only implied in the original; I will read our text more closely to how the Ephesians would have heard it, leaving out certain words normally added in English that are only implied in Greek. I'm also including a bit of the context so that we can hear Paul's flow more clearly.

Eph 5:18 But be filled with the Holy Spirit...

Eph 5:21 submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ...

Eph 5:22 Wives, ~~submit~~ to your own husbands, as to the Lord. <sup>23</sup> For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. <sup>24</sup> Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should ~~submit~~ in everything to their husbands.

<sup>25</sup> Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, <sup>26</sup> that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, <sup>27</sup> so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. <sup>28</sup> In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. <sup>29</sup> For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, <sup>30</sup> because we are members of his body. <sup>31</sup> “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” <sup>32</sup> This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. <sup>33</sup> However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

Ephesians 5:22–33

### Submitting To One Another

We must recognize the context of these verses, for they cannot be understood apart from the context—at least not in a way that honors the true meaning of what the apostle is saying. Remember, this letter was intended to be read straight through to the church in Ephesus. Paul understood he was writing holy Scripture and he understood future generations would be reading and studying this letter, yet it is a letter and his words are meant in the context of the letter.

The context is life in the church! He’s been writing about the work of God in Christ through his Spirit in uniting diverse peoples into one body, the church. He applies the gospel to their lives beginning in chapter 4 verse 1 by telling them to walk in a manner worthy of that calling. This requires humility and gentleness and patience with one another. This requires they bear with one another. Living in community is not always easy, yet they must bear with one another and strive to maintain the unity of the Spirit.

He tells them to look carefully how they walk and to be filled with the Spirit by submitting to one another. We do not like the idea of submission, assuming it is an indicator of value or importance, yet we all submit all the time.

When you see a fire truck with flashing lights, you pull over. When the doctor says, “Turn your head and cough”, you turn your head and cough. When the government says, “File your taxes by April 15”, you file your taxes by April 15. When the sign says, “Ten items or less”, you, well...you laugh at the poor grammar on the sign, but you have *roughly* ten items or *fewer*. When the teacher says to put away your books and get out a pencil, you whine and complain about a quiz, *but you do it*. You aren’t being *forced* to do it. (Maybe with taxes....) You *submit* to the right ordering of relationships in this world.

In none of these examples would we ever assume submission implies inferiority. We don’t use the word submission to describe doing these things, but when you pull out a pencil for a quiz you are most certainly *submitting* to your teacher and when you pull over you are *submitting* to the emergency vehicle.

Paul indicates a way we are filled with the Spirit is by submitting to one another in the church. As we saw last Sunday this is a posture toward one another, not a jumbled up mess of a hierarchy. We treat one another as though the other were more important than

ourselves. We must conduct ourselves as though we are not the most important person in a room.

In our text Paul adapts common “household codes” to define for the church in Ephesus what it looks like to be filled with the Spirit in the home. The context is the whole church being filled with the Spirit by, at least in part, submitting to one another, and this mutual submission extends to the home. The context remains: life together in Christian community, which extends into the home.

The instruction is to submit to one another. This means verse 22 is not a new topic; it doesn’t even have a verb! In v. 21 he says, “submitting to one another”, and then says, “Wives, to your husbands”—there is no verb. Most English translations break up the text by making smaller sentences and in order for this verse to be a complete sentence they insert the implied verb.

Just as Paul does not actually use the verb submit with wives, so he doesn’t use it with husbands. However, husbands must also submit to their wives by loving them. Children submit to their parents by obeying them and parents—especially fathers—submit to their children by disciplining them *properly*—in love and tenderness and firmness, not in harshness. Then Paul tells bondservants to submit to their earthly masters and for masters to submit to their bondservants. (I would remind you that we have an excursus on slavery in the Bible that you may find helpful; we will deal with it again in a couple weeks.)

What we see in this mutual submission is not a hierarchy. Mutual submission doesn’t eliminate normal social relationships—children must still obey their parents. Instead, mutual submission looks a lot like normal, healthy, *loving* relationships and not at all like power and authority being wielded over other people.

If you see a marriage relationship and think, “Oh, wow...he’s clearly the boss of that family” you are not seeing mutual submission. If you think, “Oh, wow...*she’s* clearly the boss of that family” you are not seeing mutual submission. If you see children repeatedly disobeying their parents or if you see parents refusing to discipline their children for that disobedience, you are not seeing mutual submission. I shared this insight from New Testament scholar Clinton Arnold last week:

...mutual submission does not obviate the truth that we live these relationships out in a set of socially structured relationships—and this by God’s design.

Clinton Arnold, ZECNT

We must, each one of us and all of us together, be filled with the Spirit by submitting to one another. This will not be seen in a hierarchy of enforced authority but in mutual love and care determined by our particular roles in the community.

## **Wives to Your Husbands**

In verse 22 he directly addresses wives, indicating he believes they are free agents who are responsible for their own conduct and demeanor. He does not tell husbands to control their wives; he tells wives to be filled with the Spirit by submitting in a particular way: in their demeanor toward their husbands. There is no implication of inferiority. He does not tell wives to *obey* their husbands. To submit is to follow the leadership of another—willingly,

just as a child takes out a pencil for a quiz or a driver pulls over for an emergency vehicle to pass. You must *choose* to do this for there is no one forcing you. Forced submission isn't truly submission, but control. We are called to submit.

Paul gives the reason wives should submit to their husbands—again willingly following their leadership. In verse 23 he points to Christ. The husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church. There are some scholars who try to argue the word head here means “source” since Eve came from Adam, but the word is simply not used in this way. In the ancient world we never see cows said to be the “head” of milk or of Egypt being the “head” of grain. It means what we think it means.

The question is how Christ is the head of his body, the church. The head gives guidance and direction. The head gives strength and help and provides sustenance to the body. This is what Christ does for us! Notice carefully how Paul roots a wife's submission to her husband in who Christ is and what he has done.

I need to add something important here. Paul is not advocating abuse. This text has been misused by bad and evil men for a very long time. Some have contributed to this by insisting that a woman must submit even to an abusive husband. Paul tells a wife to submit to her husband, *as to the Lord*. This doesn't mean submission is only when her husband is perfect, but hear me: Jesus would never lay a hand on his bride. Jesus would never manipulate his bride. Jesus would never force his bride. Jesus would never mistreat his bride in any way. Nowhere does Scripture say a wife must remain in a marriage that brings her physical, emotional, mental, or sexual harm. That is not what this text is saying.

This becomes more clear when you realize that Paul offers just 47 words of instruction to wives and 143 to husbands (in Greek). That's three times the instructions to husbands than to wives. By the way, I would suggest that if a sermon on this text doesn't have a similar emphasis by word-count, that sermon is not really saying what the text says.

Because the context is *mutual submission*, Paul is, essentially, giving husbands more than three times the amount of instruction in submitting to their wives than he gives wives for submitting to their husbands, indicating where the greater responsibility lies. If husbands even *remotely* do what Paul says to do, the issue of abuse would simply disappear. Sadly, this is often not the case and most often it is the wife who suffers. Paul is not saying here that you must suffer and continue to suffer. A wife is to submit to her husband in the way the church submits to the Lord. The bride of Christ submits to Jesus, but never submits through abuse.

To submit to her husband means a wife follows the leadership of her husband. It doesn't mean she does his laundry and cooks his meals and brings him a cold beer when he gets home from work. A wife may do that! That is not what it means to submit, however. It doesn't mean she cannot have input into decisions and it doesn't mean she must just “do what she's told”. At the end of verse 33 he summarizes what it means: “let the wife see that she respects her husband”.

A wife is to submit to her husband and Paul summarizes this by saying she must show respect for her husband. This means, at a minimum, not putting him down or complaining about him to others. I've often said that the gift my wife is to me is this: she's utterly supportive of me, but she's also utterly unimpressed. This is what Paul means. A husband needs his wife to show him respect, for he really is that fragile. He also needs his wife to not be impressed by him but willing to call him out in the ways he needs to be called out. A

wife submits to her husband by showing him respect and by following his leadership but as one who is equal to him, one who therefore has input into decisions.

## Husbands to Your Wives

After brief instructions to wives as responsible agents able to make decisions for themselves, he turns to husbands with a much harder command. He tells them in verse 25, “Husbands, love your wives”. I mentioned earlier this section of the letter is a “household code”. These were quite common in the ancient world. Many authors provided such a code, with instructions for folk in every walk of life. Clinton Arnold helpfully clarifies something about Paul’s household code.

Paul’s remarks to husbands and wives are counter to every cultural pattern represented in that society. His vision for marriage is not a concession to any cultural pattern, but substantially challenges them all. His plan is rooted in the creation design and profoundly informed by the relationship that Christ has with his church.

Clinton Arnold, ZECNT

Some insist that in this household code Paul is simply copying what the broader world would have found socially acceptable. The only problem with that argument is it’s not true! If you were a typical Roman in the first century and you read verse 25 where Paul says, “Husbands, love your wives”, your immediate response would have been, “*Why?*” A typical Roman man, being told to love his wife, would not have understood why he must love her.

In the first century men had incredible freedom to do as they pleased and if they were heads of households, they could do what they wanted with whom they wanted. Marriage was regarded as the means for providing legal heirs. Love and intimacy could be found elsewhere. Even Paul’s instructions to wives are counter-cultural. It was expected for wives to submit to their husbands, but that sort of submission was more on the order of *obedience*, and nowhere does Paul indicate this is what he means for wives. There is a reason women tended to flock to the Christian faith with its male-only eldership and its instruction for wives to submit to their husbands in the first century: it was counter-cultural. Women found the Christian faith *liberating*.

Women in the first century did not have the same level of freedom and opportunity that women today have. It was increasing, however, particularly among the elite in society. In the first century there was no such thing as the middle class. You were either in the top ten or twenty percent, meaning you owned land or a business, or you were among the poor and slaves. Mobility for women was limited, yet it was increasing. Women heard the Christian message, including texts like this one, and found it liberating and flocked to the church.

What was liberating? Notice *how* husbands are to love their wives: as Christ loved the church. Don’t stop there, though! Husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church *and gave himself up for her*. To understand the manner in which a husband must submit to his wife we must look to Christ, just as we look to Christ for how a wife is to submit to her husband.

The Lord Jesus gave himself up for his bride by not insisting on his rights. Rather, he took on the form of a servant, Paul writes in Philippians, and being found as a servant, he became obedient—husbands, hear this carefully!—he became *obedient*. That doesn't exactly sound like a guy who takes charge and bosses people around, does it? Don't stop there, though. He became obedient to the point of death, and not just any death—death on a cross. Only the lowest of the low were killed in such a manner. Only those who have no rights were killed in such a manner. Husbands, love your wives in this way: love as those who have no rights. Those who have no rights can make no demands.

The way in which Christ loved the church is he did not insist on what he wanted, but on what he could give. He became a servant for the sake of his bride and gave his life up for her. At a minimum, this means husbands must be willing to die for their wives. I don't know many men who would not jump in front of a bus in order to save their wives. Paul means more than this, however.

He tells us Christ loved the church by dying for her with an intended outcome: that she would be sanctified, having been cleansed by the washing of water with the word, with the result being that he would present her to himself as a bride who is now holy and without blemish. Paul is not saying a husband has a role in saving his wife. The model of Christ's love for his church is what he means. Christ's love is sacrificial, seeking what is in the church's best interest though it would cost him everything.

Husbands, this is how you must love your wives. Young men who want to get married someday, this is the standard you must aim for in marriage. Your wife's needs must always be placed above your own. Her standard is to show you respect. Your standard is to lay down your life for her both ultimately and *daily*.

In the same way that Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, husbands must *love their wives as their own bodies*. This is a clever image. The church is the body of Christ and is the bride of Christ. In the same way that Christ loves his body, a husband must love *his* body—his bride. Don't make an object out of her; this doesn't mean her physical body exists entirely for you and your selfish desires. That's not the imagery here. She is your body in the same way we are the body of Christ.

Let me explain. We—the church—are the locus of Christ's love and affection. A locus is the place where a given thing happens or is located or centered. The church is the locus of Christ's love and affection, so a wife must be the locus of a husband's love and affection. We are the locus of Christ's self-giving sacrifice, so a wife must be the locus of a husband's self-giving sacrifice. Do you understand what this means? The center of a husband's life must be his wife. To love your wife, Paul says, is to love yourself, your body. Look again at verse 29.

Eph 5:29 For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it,  
just as Christ does the church...  
Ephesians 5:29

Christ nourishes and cherishes his body and so husbands must nourish and cherish their bodies—their wives, the center of their love and affection. Notice this point in verse 31: therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. The husband leaves behind everything in order to pursue his wife. Sound

familiar? *That's what Jesus did!* “Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.”

He left everything behind and gave it all up, that he might present himself as the sacrifice that saves his bride. Husbands cannot save their wives, yet husbands can give themselves for their wives' benefit. Husbands can love their wives sacrificially despite their imperfections. The center of their love and commitment and desire and service and sacrifice must be their wives. Paul says to husbands: be filled with the Spirit by submitting to your wives through sacrifice and self-denial.

Christ's love for us is an initiating love. Peter says we love *because* he first loved us. His love initiates the relationship. How does Jesus initiate the relationship between God and his people? He sacrificed himself for their benefit. Husbands, submit to your wives by loving them the way Christ loves his church. That is, love your wife by being the first to sacrifice for her.

Yes, there is a structure to the marriage relationship. Yes, Paul says the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church. Paul also clarifies what this leadership looks like, and if your marriage doesn't look like you sacrificing for your wife, husbands, you're doing it wrong. Indian scholar Idicheria Ninan explains:

The use of the word “head” here does not mean that the husband is intrinsically superior to the wife but merely that he is the one who society regards as responsible for the family unit.

Idicheria Ninan, South Asia Bible Commentary

It isn't that the husband is the boss who gets his way. It is that the husband has the greater responsibility to love and sacrifice for his wife. In this way husbands submit to their wives as Paul instructs us all to submit to one another.

## **This Mystery**

In verse 32 Paul makes an unexpected declaration. He says, “This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.” Paul says the mystery that is marriage, namely, that marriage is the union between a man and a woman, was always intended by God to illustrate for us what the relationship between Christ and the church is.

I quoted NT Wright last week. He wrote, “...when you're ready to throw yourself at the feet of your beloved, what you desire, above all, is union”. We desire that intimate connection. Marriage is what unites a man and woman together. Marriage illustrates for us what God intends for us with him. In some mysterious way a husband and wife become one flesh through marriage. We experience union with Christ. We are united with him in his death, burial, and resurrection. Peter says we become partakers of the divine nature.

I don't know what that even means, but I want it! We have a glimpse of what it means through marriage. African scholar Yusufu Turaki writes,

The biblical model for marriage presented here applies to marriages across all cultures and ages, including African marriages.

...

Wives are neither possessions nor totally separate individuals. Rather, marriage brings about a *union* between a husband and a wife, who leave all other relationships and become *one flesh*. The husband and the wife are no longer two, but one. What exactly this means was a mystery until it was explained in the relationship between Christ and the church. Marriage, then, can fully be understood in the light of what Christ does and is to the church and what the church does and is to Christ.

Yusufu Turaki, Africa Bible Commentary

In marriage a husband and wife become more than what they were. They become one flesh together and this nature of being one-flesh shows us all what it means to be united with Christ. It shows us the intimate union Christ desires with us. Paul has already mentioned this mystery. In chapter 3 he shares the mystery that was revealed to him, namely, “that Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel”.

He said he was given grace “to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God”. It wasn’t until Paul reveals this mystery that we understand God’s purpose in marriage from the beginning. This purpose, he says in that same passage, is God’s “eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord”.

The question that arises is why was this mystery only revealed at that time? Why was the truth of Genesis 2:24—they shall become one flesh—only revealed to Paul and therefore to us in the first century? The mystery Paul refers to is the mystery of Christ. It doesn’t mean “mystery” in the sense of a mystery novel or Sherlock Holmes. It was a mystery in that it could only be known through divine revelation. Why was it only revealed at that time? It could only be revealed in Christ, for it is the *mystery of Christ!* Think back to chapter 3.

Eph 3:7 Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God’s grace, which was given me by the working of his power. <sup>8</sup> To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, <sup>9</sup> and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, <sup>10</sup> so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. <sup>11</sup> This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, <sup>12</sup> in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.

Ephesians 3:7–12

In Christ we have boldness and access with confidence to God. The author of Hebrews makes this point again and again. Christ has taken us into the most holy place, into the direct and immediate presence of God. Whereas the old covenant sacrifices had to be repeated daily by a distinct priesthood, when Christ offered himself as a sacrifice, he sat down for his work was finished. He therefore ushers in a better covenant, one that is dependent on him and his faithfulness rather than on us and our faithfulness.

In Christ we have the intimacy with God that marriage reveals to us. Just as a husband and wife become one flesh, so we become partakers of God’s divine nature in Christ. This



is why it is so very important for us to heed Paul's instruction in verse 33, which he offers in summary:

Eph 5:33 However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

Ephesians 5:33

However, or nevertheless, or even though marriage is a picture of Christ and the church, it remains an important picture. Therefore, let each husband love his wife sacrificially, and let each wife respect her husband. The very picture of Christ and the church is at stake.

The truth is even the best marriages are only a hint of what is to come. We have many here who have experienced the rending of divorce. Even in this we see hope, for something deep within us recognizes how a marriage that failed was *meant* to point us to something greater. Because marriages are always between two sinners the picture it paints can be an inaccurate picture, but even in this there is hope.

Whether you have gone through divorce or you know someone close who has, you can recognize the terrible rending that takes place. This illustrates the importance of marriage. If it were no big deal, divorce wouldn't hurt the way it hurts, even when it is necessary. Even in a failed marriage we see the faithfulness of Christ, for this will never be the outcome of his union with *his* bride.

## Application

Marriage is a promise. God created marriage to show us what the fullness of the gospel would be: God with us. Union with Christ is our salvation, for God unites us with him in his death, burial, and resurrection. For this reason we will be with him forever. As Paul indicates in chapter 1 of Ephesians, we were chosen in Christ *before the foundation of the world*. God created marriage to point us to this reality. Tim Keller explained it well.

When we turn from 1 Corinthians 7 to Ephesians 5, with its seemingly more exalted view of marriage, we actually get even more support for the idea of the goodness of singleness. How? As we have seen, Ephesians 5 tells us that marriage is not ultimately about sex or social stability or personal fulfillment. Marriage was created to be a reflection on the human level of our ultimate love relationship and union with the Lord. It is a sign and foretaste of the future kingdom of God.

But this high view of marriage tells us that marriage, therefore, is penultimate. It points us to the Real Marriage that our souls need and the Real Family our hearts were made for. ... Even the best marriage cannot by itself fill the void in our souls left by God.

Tim Keller, "The Meaning of Marriage"

Whether you are married or unmarried, whether you wish you were married or wish you were not, whether you are happy to be married or happy you are not, marriage is at its core a promise. It is the promise of union with Christ, for he created marriage to be a hint, a glimpse, a peek at what the future holds for us in Christ.

For those of you who are married, submit to one another—wives to your husbands, as to the Lord, and husbands to your wives by giving yourself for her. For those who are not, recognize the picture that marriage gives us of the intimate union we have with Christ. For all of us, let's recognize that our hope is in Jesus and in Jesus alone.

Our hope is not in marriage. It is not in being in charge or having a nice title or getting that promotion. Our hope is not found in retirement funds or in possessions. It is not in our reputation. It is not in our physical appearance. Our hope is not in our marital status, for marriage is not a better status than singleness and singleness is not a better status than marriage. While marriage is supposed to be a source of joy and wonder, it serves to point us all to the greater reality of being in Christ and our union with him. This is where our hope is found.

In the book of Revelation we see the end of this present age and the arrival of the new heavens and new earth. It begins with a wedding feast as Christ and his bride will forever be united. We, his bride, will gladly submit to the one who is our head and we will walk with him forever.

What we do now in submitting to one another is meant to be a foretaste of what we get to do forever.