

Marriage Material

Ephesians 5:22-33 December 6, 2023

Maybe it's the cynic in me, but at the end of romantic comedies I often find myself thinking, "That couple isn't going to make it." I hate to break it to you, but Danny and Sandy in *Grease*, Johnny and Baby in *Dirty Dancing*, Joel and Clementine in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, Ariel and Prince Eric? They're *not* going to live happily ever after. These are stories of selfish people who are motivated by *feelings*, not by a real love that puts others first.

Rome had a marriage problem. It was so bad that Caesar Augustus passed laws making marriage *mandatory*.¹ The result was the opposite of what he intended. *More* people divorced. Seneca, writing around the same time Paul wrote Ephesians, described divorce as "rampant."²

Of course, not everyone in the Roman Empire was *Roman*. In Ephesus, you'd find people who followed the Roman culture, some the Jewish culture, Hellenists, and pagans. There were different types of marriages, legally speaking. Most wives stayed under the legal authority of their father, even after marriage. Some were transferred to the husband, almost like a slave or piece of property. Jewish couples did things a little differently.

Now here's Christianity. What would marriage be in the Church? Paul has been talking about God's unfolding, cosmic plan - a new way to be human. What form would marriage take? The answer is given in our text tonight. It was *shockingly* countercultural at the time.

The truth is, it's *still* countercultural today - controversial, even. Whole denominations go their separate ways at this crossroads. This passage is often misunderstood or ignored or misapplied. Even those of us who take a conservative approach to the doctrine here squirm at how some of the words sound. But, let's remember what Paul has been talking about for 5 chapters now: God's incredible, powerful, world-changing grace filling us up and flowing out of us to put Christ on display. We're in a long, inner section where Paul teaches us how to walk worthy of this grace, how to walk with Jesus and experience all He desires for us. He has been talking about our relationships with others *generally*. Now he will move to *specifically* address husbands and wives, then parents and children, and finally masters and slaves. We take the first pair this evening.

Ephesians 5:22-33 - ²²Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord, ²³because the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church. He is the Savior of the body. ²⁴Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives are to submit to their husbands in everything. ²⁵Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her ²⁶to make her holy, cleansing her with the washing of water by the word. ²⁷He did this to present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or anything like that, but holy and blameless. ²⁸In the same way, husbands are to love their wives as their own bodies. He who

¹ Jack Gibson *Ephesians 5:21-33 And The Lack Of Marital Unity In The Roman Empire*

² *ibid.*

loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ For no one ever hates his own flesh but provides and cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, ³⁰ since we are members of his body. ³¹ For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. ³² This mystery is profound, but I am talking about Christ and the church. ³³ To sum up, each one of you is to love his wife as himself, and the wife is to respect her husband.

If we read that and feel uncomfortable or offended, then we either do not understand correctly what God is communicating or we are allowing rebellion to rattle in our hearts. Because we know that God is good, we know that God is right, and we know He has our best interests in mind.

I want to be careful when a text is controversial, so let me get a few disclaimers out in the open. First, here at Calvary, we are *complementarian*. That means we believe the Bible teaches that men and women are absolutely equal in the eyes of God concerning His love for them and their value in His plan, but we recognize that God has established distinct roles for men and women in the family and in the Church. The other side of that debate is called *egalitarianism*. That view says there are *no* distinctions between men and women when it comes to roles in the home or the Church.

Second, this doctrine is a non-essential issue. It's *important*, but salvation doesn't hinge on whether you interpret Ephesians 5 the way we do.

Third, if you are in an abusive relationship, even if that person claims to be a Christian, you need to remove yourself from that environment, call the police, get safe and seek help. Submission does not include victimization.

In verse 21, Paul told *all* Christians: "submit[ting] to one another in the fear of Christ." *How* do we do that? This is what Paul is going to explain. He begins by giving specific direction to wives.

Ephesians 5:22 - ²² Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord,

So, verse 21 says, "submit to one another," and then Paul says, "Wives, here's how you do that." In fact, the word 'submit' isn't actually in verse 22. It's supplied by translators for clarity.³

The word means to place yourself under authority. This does *not* mean "blind obedience or docile servility."⁴ Paul will use the word "respect" in verse 33. We might also say, a woman is to recognize the husband's leadership in their relationship. It's *not* just about doing whatever the husband says. That's the way this term is often interpreted by egotistical men who *do* want to control women. But Paul didn't say, "obey your husbands," as if the wife is a child. She is *not* a slave. She is *not* a child.

The *spirit* of submission is demonstrated for us in the story of Jonathan and his armor-bearer. They were in it together. They moved together. They each had a role but it was a partnership. There was communication and cooperation. They were *both* walking by faith. The armor-bearer advised but,

³ Klyne Snodgrass *Ephesians*

⁴ Thomas Neufeld *Ephesians*

ultimately Jonathan was the one responsible for their actions. Jonathan was in the lead and the armor-bearer said, “*Do what is in your heart. Go ahead! I’m completely with you.*”⁵

Now, in the Roman empire, *most* married women were *not* subject to their husbands, legally. *Most* were still legally under the authority of their fathers.⁶ On the other hand, *some* of these ladies had probably won the legal emancipation that Augustus offered to women who had at least three children. Either way, they would have to turn from the cultural norm and choose *God’s* design. And if your husband wasn’t a Christian, that was a hard ask. Roman husbands were not the kind of husbands you want. Adultery was normalized. Men weren’t expected to care about their wives. In fact, wives were supposed to manage things to such a degree that the men could just be out doing what they wanted, enhancing their own social prestige.⁷ Among Jewish couples things weren’t much better. Some rabbis advised, “*Do not talk much with a woman...not even with one’s wife.*”⁸

But that’s not how a Christian marriage was going to be. Paul presents husband and wife as equals in worth, equal in agency. Marriage would be a *partnership*. Husbands and wives are a special relationship. It was *not* that all women had to submit to all men. It was *wives* to their *husbands*.

But notice: Paul does not say, “submit to your husband *as long as he does his part.*” Instead, the commands to both husband and wife are disconnected from whether the other person is walking worthy. Paul said, “submit...as to the Lord.” They had a *voluntary choice* to accept this special purpose. And, even though it seems counter intuitive to the human mind, and even though our culture still today says this kind of arrangement is oppressive, God says this is how a husband and a wife can be elevated to something beyond human understanding.

Ephesians 5:23 - ²³because the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church. He is the Savior of the body.

Egalitarians work hard to strip any sense of authority out of the word ‘head,’ but it’s clear that Christ’s headship includes authority. But, what does Christ *do* with His authority? Does Christ act in selfish ways? In arbitrary ways? In harsh ways? As Head, Christ is totally gracious, totally kind, totally understanding, totally tender. Men have authority, not to reign with swagger. It’s a responsibility to serve. *That’s* what you’re authorized to do.

The problem is, many Christian men are asleep at their post - disengaged from their duty. Or, instead of mimicking Christ, they imitate some teapot tyrant. You’ve heard a man say, “I’m the king of my castle!” Well, ours is a *Servant King*. One Who *left* His throne on behalf of those He loves.

These verses are *not* a license for Christian husbands to demand wives do whatever they want or to force submission. This is presented to *ladies* as a choice. At the same time, it is a line in the sand for Christian wives. You see, way back in the Garden of Eden, which Paul is going to reference, after

⁵ 1 Samuel 14:1-14

⁶ Gibson

⁷ Frank Thielman *Ephesians*

⁸ Snodgrass

Adam and Eve sinned, the Lord said that one of the consequences was that Eve's "*desire will be for your husband, yet he will rule over you.*"⁹ We understand that to mean that, generally speaking, Eve and her daughters would "contend with [their husbands] for leadership in their relationship."¹⁰ So now, Christian wives have a choice to go God's way and to recognize God's established order and trust that His way is the best way for individuals and families and the Church and society.

Ephesians 5:24 - ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives are to submit to their husbands in everything.

This doesn't mean every command a man might give. After all, no wife needs to obey a husband who asks her to ignore God's commands. It means in all spheres of life. Paul really wants us to understand the husband/wife relationship by looking at the Christ/Church relationship. The Church has a great deal of freedom and opportunity and agency. Yet, we are to be led by the Lord and in constant communion with Him.

Now Paul turns to the husbands. And, let me say from the start, he has *three times as many verses* to husbands as he does to wives.

Ephesians 5:25 - ²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her

Husbands, you have been put in a position of leadership in your marriage and family so *that* you can protect them, provide for them, help them thrive and grow in the Lord and become what God has made them to be. You are to use your authority, your power, your strength, for your wife.

So, the wife is to submit to her husband. But where we might expect Paul to say "husbands, *rule* your wives," or "Husbands, *manage* your wives," he says, "Husbands, *love* your wives."

In the Roman culture, a husband didn't have a duty to his wife.¹¹ Men lived for themselves - for their own greatness and their own pleasure and their own whims. Not so the Christian. *We* are commanded to fulfill our wives - to build her up the way Christ builds the Church. Romantic love isn't enough. We're called to *agape* love, which is a continuing, deliberate attitude of care and affection that goes beyond words into action.¹² It's not enough for you to bring home a paycheck. It's not enough to just be a good man or to not be a bad man. God calls His disciples to be husbands who give themselves for their wives, just as Christ gave Himself for the Church.

This is a *total* commitment. In Isaiah 54 the Lord says, "Though the mountains move and the hills shake, my love will not be removed from you." Paul says to husbands, "Love your wife *like that.*"

⁹ Genesis 3:16

¹⁰ Susan Foh *What Is The Woman's Desire? WTJ 37:3 (Spring 1975)*

¹¹ *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 11: Ephesians Through Philemon*

¹² *CSB Study Bible Notes*

It's interesting: There are teachers and churches that really major on wives needing to submit. I've never heard them ask whether the husbands are properly *loving* their wives.

Christ is the model. Can you imagine Jesus saying, "I don't need to say 'I love you.' I do that by going to work every day!" Can you imagine Jesus Christ complaining about dirty dishes? Or failing to *help* with the dirty dishes? Can you imagine Jesus Christ being excited to spend all His free time away from His Bride?

Now, remember, in verse 21 Paul said we submit to one another. *This* is how husbands fulfill that calling. Both husband and wife are called to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the marriage, the husband taking the lead in duty and responsibility.

Ephesians 5:26 - ²⁶to make her holy, cleansing her with the washing of water by the word.

Paul takes some time to describe how Christ loves the Church, so husbands can better understand *how* to properly imitate Him. Now, husbands do not make their wives holy. But God wants us to have more than a day-to-day view of our marriage. Husbands should have a comprehensive concern for their wives' physical, emotional, and *spiritual* well-being.

Paul does something interesting when he says *by the word*. There are a couple of terms used in the Bible for the Word of God. This is *rhema*, which means a *spoken* word.¹³ Jesus does a great work of cleansing through personal, active communication. Men, as we follow our Lord's example, we must be husbands who actively communicate with our wives. Sitting in silence will not do.

Ephesians 5:27 - ²⁷He did this to present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or anything like that, but holy and blameless.

Take a moment to be relieved by this promise. Because of Christ's love, because of His faithfulness, one day you and I will be absolutely blameless before God. The tenderness of Christ is on display here. The image is of Him choosing His Bride, and then paying a ransom fee to save her from captivity, then paying all that was necessary so that He could marry His Bride and bring her to a home He made Himself. Then, on the day of the wedding, *He* goes and gets her dress prepped. *He* does her hair. He readies the party. He puts everything in order, then delivers His Bride to Himself. It's an amazing portrait of care and affection and gentleness.

Jesus does not *compete* against His Bride. He does not harbor grudges or resentment toward her. He doesn't demand we do certain things to keep Him from leaving. His love is constant. And His value of you does not change depending on how you look on a given day. You are lovely because Christ loves you. And He will *never* stop loving you. He will never fall out of love with you.

¹³ EBC

When it says He “presents” the Church to Himself, the term means “to place beside.”¹⁴ So, again, even though Christ is the Head, there’s no oppression or subjugation here. After all, Christ says we will reign *with* Him. The inheritance that belongs to the Son has been shared with us!

Ephesians 5:28 - ²⁸In the same way, husbands are to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.

Husbands, you and I are to examine the methods Jesus uses and apply them to your marriage. Your wife is not a subject to be ruled. She is part of who you are. You are *one* flesh. God carved Eve out of Adam’s side. There she was, beside him, and then they spend their lives together as a new thing: Two who became one.

Researchers have proven that heart rhythms synchronize when couples in long-term loving relationships are close to each other.¹⁵ This is what the Lord desires. a fusing of two into one, physically and emotionally and spiritually. A special unit, purposefully ordered for best results.

By the way: Where my version says “husbands are to,” yours may say, “ought to,” or “must.” The term refers to a debt you owe or a moral requirement.¹⁶

Ephesians 5:29-30 - ²⁹For no one ever hates his own flesh but provides and cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, ³⁰since we are members of his body.

Provision is more than a paycheck. God calls husbands to nourish and cherish his wife.

At this point, one may ask: “Ok, so if I’m not married, am I some kind of second-class citizen? In God’s plan?” A single person was second-class in Augustus’ Rome. But no, not in God’s Kingdom. Paul elsewhere explained that *sometimes* it’s better *not* to be married. If you’re single, you need to seek the Lord and ask Him whether He is calling you to marriage or not.

Meanwhile, we’re reminded that the Lord is thoughtful of you. You’re not just a cog in a machine. You’re not just a number on a report. He cares for you individually and personally. *Every* member of His Body matters.

Ephesians 5:31 - ³¹For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.

Paul quotes Genesis 2. This has been God’s plan all along. He established these relationships and designs on purpose for our good *and* so that we can reveal the glory of God through our lives.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2021/11/211117211605.htm>

¹⁶ *The Dictionary Of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)*

Christian marriage is meant to *illuminate* Christ's love for the Church.¹⁷ It's meant to be a visible Tabernacle, modeling the realities of heaven.

The joining of husband and wife is meant to happen on the deepest level. Canadian scientists have developed what they're calling "hyper glue." It's glue that bonds things at a molecular level.¹⁸ Materials that can't bond with other glues can now be fused together. This is what God wants to do between one man and one woman for life.

Ephesians 5:32 - ³²This mystery is profound, but I am talking about Christ and the church.

Paul admits that this is a hard topic to understand. It's not easy to apprehend and it's not easy to carry out. But, what are mysteries in Ephesians? They are things God wants to reveal to and through His people. Back in chapter 3, Paul said God was revealing mysteries so that God should shine light in the world and make His wisdom known through the Church. So, as we *believe* God and trust that He is telling us the truth, as we *walk* with Him by faith according to His design in our marriages, God makes His power and grace and wisdom known to the world and to the authorities in the heavens through our example.

Because this is one of God's mysteries, what we're learning here cannot be totally reconciled by human logic or strategy.¹⁹ How can I be elevated by humbling myself to serve my wife or by submitting to my husband? How can *lowering* lead to my *increase*? It doesn't work in the human mind, but it works through the power of God's grace. That's power that moves mountains.

Ephesians 5:33 - ³³To sum up, each one of you is to love his wife as himself, and the wife is to respect her husband.

That's the deal. If you're a Christian, *do it!* A critic might say, "*Oh the Bible just promotes the patriarchy.*" No, the Bible is promoting Christarchy. And here Paul has detailed the *ideal* arrangement between a Christian husband and Christian wife.

Of course, not everyone *has* a Christian husband or Christian wife. And those who do don't always have a spouse who is walking the way God asks us to walk. The Lord understands that. There's no condemnation. This text is an *invitation*. The bids me to come and die and find that I can truly live. If you're a Christian and you're married, you have a part to play. Now, *culture* wants to dismantle part of this. The world around us wants women (in particular) to reject God's design. Some Christians today would say, "*Yeah, women submitting isn't a thing anymore.*" One wonders if they would then turn and say men *loving* their wives isn't a thing anymore?

God's desire is that His people experience power and grace and fulfillment and ministry in their marriages. And He has revealed a mysterious truth that *this* is the way to do it. Love and respect.

¹⁷ Neufeld

¹⁸ <https://newatlas.com/materials/hyper-glue-adhesive-molecular-level-bonds/>

¹⁹ Darrell Bock *Ephesians: An Introduction And Commentary*