

The Mystery of Marriage

Scripture Text: Ephesians 5:22-33

Introduction

Two weeks ago, we looked at God's design for human relationships, primarily marriage. God saw that it was *not good* for man to be alone, therefore, He made a helper suitable for man. We learned from that passage that God did not make a servant or footstool, someone for Adam to boss around. God also did not make Adam a boss, someone to order him around. God gave Adam work to do, which Adam needed help to accomplish it, so God made him a helper. We also learned that when a man and a woman marry, they are still individuals, but there is such a commitment and bond between the two, that they function as one person, one flesh. Last week, we looked at the beauty of marriage, primarily the passionate love between a man and a woman in the covenant of marriage. God created us and He put within us the sexual desires for each other, and they are good, in the context of marriage. Today, we are looking at another passage about marriage, where the Apostle Paul described the roles of husband and wife and the mystery of marriage. Human marriage points to a greater, spiritual truth.

A Spirit-Filled Marriage

Before we go forward, we probably need to address what I think may be an important concept in this passage. In fact, many who come to this passage begin with the preceding verse and use it as the main idea for understanding this passage. Some will just use the preceding verse and forget the rest of the chapter. Then again, there are those who want to focus on verses twenty-two through twenty-four and ignore the rest. I will not do either, but I will say that I do not think some people go back far enough in this passage. Paul wrote something earlier that I think is helpful to understand our roles in marriage, in the Church, and our relationship with God. Look at the following verses.

Ephesians 5:18–21 ¹⁸ *And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, ²⁰ giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.*

Verse twenty-one is the verse many people want to quote when discussing the roles of husbands and wives. That verse actually connects the previous section of the letter and what follows. That verse says we ought to *submit to one another*. That seems pretty simple, does it not? Unfortunately, submitting to one another is not the main idea of this passage. It is only part of a much larger idea and is actually dependent on a verb in verse eighteen. Paul was describing how we can walk as wise people and not as foolish people. Obviously, this means that we ought to never drink alcohol, right? No, Paul wrote that we ought to not get intoxicated with alcohol. Instead of becoming impaired and losing oneself in drinking, or anything else for that matter, Paul said that we ought to be “filled with the Spirit”. That is the larger idea here — *being filled with the Spirit*.

Just as a person drunk with wine gives control of his or her life to alcohol, so does a person who is filled with the Spirit gives control of his or her life to God. Paul explained being “filled with the Spirit” in four ways such as speaking in song, singing in your heart, giving thanks to God, and yes, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. A Church or a family that is full of the spirit will exhibit these behaviors.

Therefore, there are several things we ought to do to lead a Spirit-filled life. Of course, the one that many people focus on is “submitting to one another”. We could end there and everyone would be happy. Paul does not allow that, though. Paul stated a general principle of submission and then described it in various family relations such as between wives and husbands (5:22–30), between children and parents (6:1–4), and between servants and masters (6:5–9). Not everyone submits to everyone else in the same way, but all are called to submit to someone in their lives. We all are called to submit to God first and foremost. It is likely that submitting to one another means that we show the Spirit is leading us by *willingly* following someone God has placed in our lives out of reverence for Jesus Christ. Jesus perfectly submitted His life to the will of God, even to the point of death. Thus, “submitting to one another” is represented in the examples Paul gave in the rest of this chapter and the first part of chapter six. We will focus only on one group in this passage, the relationship between a husband and a wife.

A Wife’s Respectful Submission to Her Husband

Now, here is where things get interesting. Paul’s first example of a general submission to one another is the right ordering of the marriage relationship. Unfortunately, many have misunderstood or perverted this idea of submission. Men have abused their wives and claimed this passage meant something that it does not. On the other hand, some have chosen to either avoid this passage altogether or interpret it as something that was for Paul’s culture but not for ours. I do not think this way as Paul refers to the creation account later for support to his argument, something that transcends all cultures. Paul addressed wives first, so that is what we will do. Let us look at this passage and try to understand what it says to us.

Ephesians 5:22–24 ²² *Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.* ²³ *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.* ²⁴ *Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.*

First, we ought to notice to whom Paul was addressing this statement. He did not say, “Husbands, make your wives submit to you.” It is not the husband’s job to make his wife submit to him. What Paul wrote was that wives are to *willingly* submit to their husbands. They are not to be coerced or beat into submission. Secondly, the passage also does not say that women are to submit to every man. Paul was not implying that women in general or wives specifically are somehow inferior to men. They are to follow their *own husbands*. Wives should follow their husband’s leadership. Thirdly, wives are to submit to their own husbands *as they would to the Lord*. This does not mean her husband is

her lord and she owes him complete obedience. If the husband loves, cares, and protects his wife as Christ does the Church, she would willingly follow his leadership.

The submission of wives is not like the obedience children owe parents, something Paul addressed in the next chapter. Both male and female are equally created in God's image (Genesis 1:26–28) and are heirs together of eternal life (Galatians 3:28–29). The submission of wives to their own husbands is in deference to the husband's leadership in the marriage relationship. The husband is the head of the wife. Just as Christ's position as head of the Church and its Savior does not vary from one culture to another, neither does the headship of a husband in relation to his wife and her responsibility to follow her husband. But, what if a husband is not following the Lord and asks her to do something contrary to scripture? What if a man is abusive to his wife? A woman does not owe complete submission to a man who is leading her away from God or who is abusive to her. A wife has the greater duty to follow Christ when her husband does not.

A Husband's Sacrificial Love for His Wife

It is worth noting that Paul addressed the wives in three verses (vss. 22-24), but he spent more than twice that amount addressing the husbands. Do husbands need more instruction? Do they need to be reminded of their responsibility more than their wives? Maybe the husband's role sets the tone for the rest of the marriage and how his wife will respond to him. Paul now turns to the duty of husbands. Like he did with the wives, Paul addressed the men here and did not tell the women to beat their husbands into shape. Paul also did not command the husband to submit to his wife but instead tells the husband that he must give himself up for her. Let us look at the next few verses.

Ephesians 5:25–31 ²⁵ *Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,* ²⁶ *that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,* ²⁷ *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.* ²⁸ *In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.* ²⁹ *For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church,* ³⁰ *because we are members of his body.* ³¹ *“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.”*

Paul told the husbands to love their wives. This might seem strange on some level. Why would Paul not say the same thing for the wives? Should they not love their husbands, too? Yes, they should, however, Paul did not tell wives to do what is natural for them to do — to love their husbands. It is natural for a woman to love her man. It might not be as easy for men to do this, or at least to do this rightly. Husbands are to love their own wives in a self-sacrificial manner. Husbands are to follow the example of Christ, who "gave himself up for" the Church in loving self-sacrifice. This picture of a husband laying down his life for his wife is directly opposed to any kind of male oppression. Since husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the Church, they are to give up their

personal rights for the good of their wives. Any husband who puts aside his desires and sacrifices for his wife will not lord over his wife.

Paul reiterates a husband's calling to self-sacrificial love for his wife by comparing this love to caring for his own body, loving himself, and then to Christ's love for His body. Most of us love ourselves enough to preserve our lives or to do what will keep ourselves safe. Husbands are told to love their wives like they should love their own bodies. This command for a husband to love his wife as he loves "his own flesh" ought to sound familiar. It is similar to what God told Adam and Eve, that husbands and wives join together to "become one flesh." This selfless love means that the husband ought to love his wife as Christ loves the Church even when she does not fulfill her role perfectly in the marriage relationship. Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her even when she was sinful, imperfect, and rebellious. If a husband really loves and cares for his wife in the way Christ cares for the Church then she will submit to his leadership by virtue of his sacrificial love. Think of Jesus washing the feet of His disciples. When Christ did that there was no doubt among any of his disciples who was leading them.

Wives need love like they need air to breathe. A husband who fails to properly love his wife makes it very difficult for her to follow his leadership. How should a man love his wife? He should be willing to sacrifice everything for her like Christ sacrificed Himself for the Church. A husband should make his wife's well-being of primary importance. He should care of her as he cares for his own body. A husband should also love his wife with a love above all other human relationships. On the other hand, husbands need respect. When wives do not show her husband respect, she makes it difficult for him to sacrificially love her as he should. It is a dynamic that goes both ways. I would say, however, the burden of getting this right rests mostly on the husband. Why else would Paul spend more time on the husband? No wife should ever fear submitting to her husband if he loves her the way Christ loves the Church.

A Gospel-Centered Marriage

One other thing to note about Paul's description of the husband and wife roles in marriage is that they are not a result of God's curse on mankind. In verse thirty-one, Paul quoted from Genesis 2:24 when there was no sin in the world. The headship of a husband and the submission of a wife are thus not a result of the Fall of mankind. What the Fall did was distort God's intention for headship and submission within the family. I think this reference to Genesis also shows us that God was trying to explain something about marriage all the way back in the beginning of time. In fact, Paul's point at the end of this passage is to compare human marriages to the relationship between our Savior Jesus Christ and His Bride, the Church. Look at the following verses.

Ephesians 5:32–33 ³² *This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.* ³³ *However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.*

Paul refers to marriage, or at least his explanation of marriage, as a mystery. Mystery refers to the hidden plan of God that has come to fulfillment in Christ Jesus. What was hidden before about marriage is now made known through Jesus Christ. Thus Paul's quotation about marriage from Genesis 2 ties in to the relationship between Christ and His Church. Paul interprets the original creation of the husband-and-wife union as a foreshadow or a model of Jesus' forthcoming union with the Church as his Body. Therefore, marriage from the beginning of creation was created by God to be a reflection of and patterned after Christ's relation to the Church. Paul's commands regarding the roles of husbands and wives do not merely reflect the culture of his day but they are God's ideal for all marriages at all times.

In Christ we see the full extent of God's love and marital faithfulness. We see Jesus as the loving Husband of His Bride, the Church, who sacrificed Himself for her in order to protect her and care for her. Our marriages should point to the same. They should reflect the relationship between Christ and the Church. God does not exist to make much of marriage; marriage exists to show the world the glory of Christ and His Church. Just as a man and a woman become one flesh in marriage, so the members of the Church become one in the Body of Christ. When a marriage is working properly it is a beautiful picture of Jesus and His Church. However, it is not an exact comparison. There should be no doubt that a husband, no matter how good he is, will never be Jesus. There should also be no doubt that our obedience and submission is first to Jesus Christ and then to others.

Conclusion

In closing, no marriage is perfect — we are all fallen and sinful people, even those who are saved! I know on the wedding day everything is seen through rose colored glasses with a happily ever after ending. Many people find their worth in other people or their relationships. Being single or married seems to define who they are. Our ultimate worth, however, is not found in our relationships with one other, even our spouse. Our worth is found in Jesus Christ. Marriage involves a man and a woman becoming united in commitment where they become dependent and responsible toward one another. The key to marriage is not who cooks or cleans, who takes out the trash or who submits to whom. The key to marriage is having a spirit-filled life with Christ-like love that makes us more like Jesus. A husband and wife's relationship towards one another in submitting to each other and loving one another is a picture of the relationship between Christ and His Church. What does your marriage represent? Can others see Jesus in your marriage? May it be so!