

Ephesians: *Should Wives Submit to Their Husbands?*  
Ephesians 5:22-33

In the past few months our journey through Ephesians has led us to tackle hard subjects including sexual immorality, time management, and drunkenness. As daunting as those subjects were, they pale in comparison to writing a message on Ephesians 5:22-32 which begins with the infamous words, “Wives, submit to your husbands...”. It’s 2023...a man could be shot for saying such things.

Now, the natural inclination of some pastors is to immediately backpedal and apologize for these verses as though the Bible can be trusted to reveal timeless truth until that truth offends our cultural sensibilities, at which time we feel obligated to dismiss the teaching as a product of the first century culture--thus rendering it irrelevant for our modern, sophisticated lives. Nothing could be further from the truth. Everything that Paul writes about the Spirit-filled, Christian arrangement of marriage is radically differentiated from the Jewish, Greek, and Roman practices and views of marriage. What Paul writes here in Ephesians 5 about marriage is exclusively, expressly, unapologetically Christocentric. In fact, after we dig deeply into the historical and biblical context of Paul’s writings here in Ephesians 5, we will discover the most beautiful, mutual, God-honoring picture of marriage the world has ever seen. As NT scholar John Stott writes, “A greater, wiser, and more positive description of marriage has not yet been found in Christian literature.”

Now, I’m going to spend a few weeks in this classic text, but before we even read the text, let me make a few quick disclaimers. First of all, there is nothing in the text...and nothing in my sermon...that should serve as “ammunition” against your spouse! I expressly forbid you to take any quote from Ephesians 5 or my message and smack your spouse with it as a way of justifying yourself or condemning your partner. Second, please know that the very best sermon on the planet is no substitute for the long, hard, deep work of Christian counseling that most marriages require in times of crisis. And third, even if your marriage is not in crisis, I want to encourage you to take our Re-Engage class as a couple where you will have time and opportunity to discuss some of the truths we are covering today in a safe environment with practical applications that will enrich your marriage. I believe the next session begins in January, so plan now to make that investment in your relationship.

My job this morning is not to “fix” your marriage. Like every other Sunday, my job is to exposit the text...to help you understand what the Bible has to say about Christian marriage and our roles as husbands and wives...and to point you to Jesus. I hope and pray that you will resist offense and listen carefully because there is much to learn here, and I will need some time and grace to say what needs to be said to both wives and husbands. That means you need to make your plans now to be here or to tune in online next Sunday because there is no way I can cover everything that needs to be said in one message this morning. Deal? OK then, let’s stand and read Ephesians 5:22-32:

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. 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.” 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.

My message this morning will fall under four subheadings: 1) Marriage in the First Century; 2) The Proper Way to Read the Text; 3) Mutual Submission in God-Ordained Roles; and 4) When Christian Wives Should and Should Not Submit to Their Husbands.

### **I. Marriage in the First Century**

We must resist thinking that Paul’s perspective of marriage was a product of his ancient, patriarchal, oppressive culture. I’m sure you have heard of or read such notions but trust me when I tell you...nothing could be further from the truth. In order for you to appreciate the radically new and liberating picture of the Christ-centered marriage that Paul presents here in Ephesians 5, we need to step into the time machine and go back to the first century to gain some historical perspective.

Paul is writing in the midst of three dominant cultures in the first century: the Jewish culture, the Greek culture, and the Roman culture. In his commentary on Ephesians, NT scholar William Barclay<sup>1</sup> provides a vivid depiction of each culture regarding their view of women, marriage, and divorce. Let us first consider the Jewish context.

Barclay writes: The Jews had a low view of women. In his morning prayer there was a sentence in which a Jewish man gave thanks that God had not made him “a Gentile, a slave or a woman.” In Jewish law a woman was not a person but a “thing.” She had no legal rights whatsoever; she was absolutely her husband’s possession to do with as he willed.

Ironically, the Jews had the highest ideal of marriage in the ancient world...on paper. The Rabbis had sayings such as, “Every Jew must surrender his life rather than commit idolatry, murder, or adultery.” Another stated, “The very altar sheds tears when a man divorces the wife of his youth.” In practice, however, divorce had become far too commonplace by the first century. The law of divorce is summarized in Deut. 24:1: When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, he writes her a bill of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house. As you can imagine, the interpretation of “an indecency” became quite liberal. By the first century, a Jewish man could divorce his wife if she put too much salt in his food, if she walked in public with her head uncovered, if she talked with men in the streets, if she spoke disrespectfully of her husband’s parents in her husband’s hearing, if she

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<sup>1</sup> Most of the information about the first century context here and on the following page come from William Barclay’s *The Letters to the Galatians and the Ephesians*, pages 168-171.

was a brawling woman, or if she was generally troublesome or quarrelsome. In other words, a man could divorce his wife for just about any cause.

And the divorce process was super easy. The Jewish man could have a certificate of divorce written up and signed by a Rabbi, and once he placed that certificate in the hand of his wife in front of two witnesses the divorce was final. The only obligation for the man was to return the dowry to her family. Keep in mind that the woman had no legal right to divorce her husband unless her husband became a leper or an apostate or engaged in a disgusting trade.

Barclay concludes, “At the time of Christ’s coming the marriage bond was in peril even among the Jews, so much so that the very institution of marriage was threatened since Jewish girls were refusing to marry because their position as wife was so uncertain.”

The situation in the Greek world was even worse. Young women were given into marriage by their fathers as an exchange of property. Once married, the wife was secluded and expected to bear and raise children and manage the affairs of the home, knowing full well her husband was seeking his pleasure elsewhere. One of the most famous speakers, leaders, and influencers in Greek history was a man named Demosthenes. In his work entitled *Against Neaera*, he states “Mistresses we keep for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily care of our persons, but wives to bear us legitimate children and to be faithful guardians of our households” (59, 122). Wives, who were often under the age of 18 and married to men who were close to 30, were locked away in their own apartments and rarely allowed to socialize in order to ensure the purity of the husband’s lineage. The Greek philosopher Xenophon articulates the goal for secluding wives: “...that she might see as little as possible, hear as little as possible and ask as little as possible.” Greek wives had very little interaction with their husbands since their value was simply to provide land and riches through the dowry and to provide children to extend the husband’s line. Socrates writes: “Is there anyone to whom you entrust more serious matters than to your wife—and is there anyone to whom you talk less?”

If the wife failed to produce children, the husband could easily divorce her by taking her back to her father and returning the dowry. Again, the Greek wife had very little recourse and, once married, was essentially imprisoned in her own home. Barclay concludes of the Greeks in the first century, “Home and family life were near to being extinct and fidelity was completely nonexistent.”

In Rome, it was even worse. At the time of Paul, Roman family life was wrecked. Seneca writes that women were married to be divorced and divorced to be married. Divorce was so common that women dated the years by the names of their husbands. The Roman author Martial tells of a woman who had had ten husbands; Juvenal tells of one who had eight husbands in five years; and Jerome tells of a woman in Rome who was married to her twenty-third husband and she herself was his twenty-first wife!

Given the Jewish, Greek, and Roman contexts in the first century, Barclay concludes: It is not too much to say that the whole atmosphere was adulterous. The marriage bond was on the way to complete breakdown. It is against this background that Paul writes. When he wrote this lovely passage he was not stating the view that every man held. He was calling men and women to a new purity and a new fellowship in the married life.

It is impossible to exaggerate the cleansing effect that Christianity had on home life in the ancient world and the benefits it brought to women.<sup>2</sup>

Alright, with that historical context in mind, let's move to my second subheading:

## **II. How to Properly Read the Text**

If you recall our text from last Sunday, Paul has just written in Ephesians 5:18-21: But be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ...

You will recall that in that sentence, the main verb is “be filled with the Spirit,” and then the five resulting participles (addressing, singing, making melody, giving thanks, and submitting) are all associated with those who are being filled with the Holy Spirit.

Now, when we get to vs. 22, the word for word translation from the Greek is, “wives to your own husbands as to the Lord.” You’ll notice there is no verb in that phrase. We obviously need to tie vs. 22 to vs. 21 in order to know what Paul is talking about. Paul just said that Holy Spirit filled Christians will be those who are submitting to one another in reverence to Christ, and then he makes two applications: one to wives, the other to husbands. So, Paul’s whole thought that begins with “be filled with the Spirit” concludes with “submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ, wives to your own husbands as to the Lord...husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.”

We do an injustice if we separate Paul’s command for wives to submit to their husbands from the formerly stated principle that those filled with the Holy Spirit are to be always submitting one to another. And we miss the point if we do not see Paul’s application of this principle to the husbands in vs. 24 as a parallel application to the wives in vs. 22...both commands serving as a continuation and an application of “submitting to one another out of reverence to Christ.”

By the way, the Greek verb *upotassow* that the ESV translates as “submit” was commonly used of ordered relationships in a social structure.<sup>3</sup> It means a form of voluntary respect and deference for those in authority. This verb should be clearly distinguished from the word “obey” which is the Greek term *upakouow*. The word “obey” is obligatory. For example, children are obliged to be obedient to their parents. The word “submit”, however, is voluntary and describes a posture of respect and yielding to those entrusted with positional authority. The fact that Paul calls the church to submit to one another regardless of station is radical—it should remind us of the way Jesus defined “the greatest among you as the one who serves.” In other words, even though there are those who have authority in the church, the signature indicator of the Spirit filled community is mutual submission.

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<sup>2</sup> NT scholar Clinton Arnold agrees. He writes “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 patterns, 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 (*Exegetical Commentary on NT: Ephesians*; p 379).

<sup>3</sup> Arnold, p 356.

Now...I know that's a lot of Bible teaching, and I know it's a holiday, but I hope you can see that Paul's instructions to wives and then to husbands are the practical applications of the formerly stated principle...a principle that is always and inevitably associated the Spirit-filled community...and that principle is called *mutual submission*... "submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ."

### **III. Mutual Submission in God-Ordained Roles**

So, let us now consider Paul's application of mutual submission as it applies to wives in the Christian marriage. In vs. 22-23, the very literal Greek translation reads, "Wives [submitting] to your own husbands as to the Lord. 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. Now as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives to their husbands in all things."

OK...there's a lot here, but before I unpack it, let me be perfectly clear: these verses have been used for evil within the Church and within Christian marriages--we would be foolish to think otherwise. Women have been devalued, diminished, and demoralized as a result of men who used scripture to justify their control, manipulation, and subjugation of their wives. So, if you are concerned that I am unaware of that history...please know, I get it, and I soundly condemn such abuse of scripture and abuse of power. I will address that scenario in greater depth at the end of my message and in next week's message. That said, I think it's obvious that any reasonable Christian husband who reads Paul's commands for both wives *and* husbands will most certainly observe that the imperative for the husband eliminates any justification for controlling, domineering, abusive behavior against his wife. Again, more on that later.

For now, let's address the elephant in the room. Paul charges wives to submit to their husbands... why? Because, says Paul, "the husband is the head of the wife." Now, what does Paul mean when he writes that the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church? When Paul refers to the husband as the head of the wife, Paul is referring to God-ordained, delegated positional authority and responsibility.

Now, hang with me...don't shut down...listen to Paul's whole argument here. First of all, there is a pattern in what Paul writes. Even though the whole church is to mutually submit to one another out reverence for Christ, there is still the need to honor God's ordered creation. Wives submit to husbands. Children obey parents. Bondservants obey their masters. And we could go on...Christian civilians are to submit to local authorities, church members are to submit to the elders, and EVERYONE is to submit to God. Paul is appealing to God's ordained order in creation. Although all human beings are equal in that they bear God's image, and all believers are equal in that they are sinners saved by grace be they Jews, Gentiles, Greeks, slave, free, men or women, God has not called all people to be *identical*. By God's sovereignty He has delegated authority and responsibility to some people, and by virtue of God's delegation, we honor God when we submit to the delegated authorities that He has established.

In the Christian home, as well as in the workplace and in the state, there are those entrusted with authority and those who are called to submit to those with authority. As Paul writes in Romans

13:1-2, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore, whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.”

This is most easily understood when we look at the role of parents as they relate to their children. Children are to obey their parents...it is a means of honoring God because God established the family and has delegated authority, responsibility, and leadership to the parents. A home where the children do not obey the parents is a home of chaos and “disorder”.

This is the same line of thought that Paul appeals to here in vs. 23-24 when he writes of Jesus as the Head of the church and husbands as the head of their wives. God gave Jesus Christ the authority to forgive sins, to cast out demons, and to save our souls from destruction. Jesus alone occupies the universal, distinct role as “Savior.” Because of the authority given to Jesus, the church best honors the Father when we submit to the Lordship of Christ as the Head of the Church. His role as Head of the Church deserves our honor, respect, and submission, and His role was clearly the product of God’s sovereign choice. In the same way (according to Paul), God has ordained that husbands are to fill the leadership role in the home. Keep in mind, the actual man...the husband...is no greater than his wife. The two individuals in a Christian marriage are perfectly equal as human beings and as Christians; but *the role of husband* is different from the role of wife, according to Paul. God has ordained that the husband should be head of the wife, just as Jesus is the head of the Church.

Now, I know some of you ladies are about to lose your yogurt, but listen carefully to the “just as” qualifier that Paul very carefully and intentionally employs: the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church.

How is Christ the head of the church? How does Jesus exercise His God-given authority, responsibility, and position in relation to the church? Does He subjugate the church for His own pleasure or selfish gain? No. Does He passively sit around and watch football while the church goes to hell in a handbasket? No. Does He only think of His own comfort while neglecting the needs of His church? No. Does He dismissively ignore the pain and emotional well-being of His church? Of course not. On the contrary, we learn in Philippians 2 that though Jesus was (by nature and via delegation) equal to God, He did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped but voluntarily humbled himself, taking on the form of a servant, and he became obedient unto death on a cross...all to save and sanctify His church. We literally see the “head of the Church” get on His knees, don the towel of a slave, and *submit* to wash the feet of those who were, by definition, the very people who were supposed to be submitting to His authority and leadership. That’s what the “head of the church” did...so the husband, the delegated head of the household, is to humble himself and submit to sacrificially serve his wife in the same way that Jesus sacrificially served the Church, amen? We’ll unpack that part further next Sunday. But I hope you can see that the wife is to voluntarily submit to her husband as she would submit to the Lord even as the husband, who has positional authority, leverages his authority to submit and serve his wife. Paul has just described *mutual submission* within the context of God-ordained roles. The mutual submission is equal, but different based upon God’s created order.

Put the tomatoes away, ladies. Paul is not demanding involuntary subjugation to a tyrannical husband. That concept is completely, 100% foreign to the New Testament.

Now, keep in mind, Paul is not suggesting that Christian wives only submit to their husbands IF the husbands are ACTUALLY sacrificing and serving like Jesus. That's not what Paul said. Generally speaking, Christian wives are to submit to their Christian husbands as unto the Lord 'in reverence to Christ'...irrespective of the husband's performance. For Paul, the husband is due this respect because of his God-ordained position.

Now, I want to emphasize that Christian submission is ALWAYS voluntary. Nowhere does the Bible give permission to a husband to force his wife to submit. We are always free creatures who have the power to choose, and voluntary submission is exactly that...voluntary. However, when a Christian wife disregards or diminishes the role that God delegated to her Christian husband...when she refuses to honor his leadership...when she attempts to usurp the authority that is not hers to assume...Paul would say that is no different than a civilian blatantly disrespecting the civic authorities that God has established, or children blatantly attempting to force their will over and against the leadership and authority of their parents. Such disregard for God's ordained order as established in creation leads to predictable "disorder"—and once the Christian marriage is "disordered," it takes a lot of work to re-order the marriage to reflect God's created intention for marriage. I'll say a bit more about that here at the end of my message. Let's move now to my fourth and final subheading...

#### **IV. When Christian Wives Should and Should Not Submit to Their Husbands**

I'm sure many are wondering if Paul is suggesting wives should exercise *unconditional* submission to their husbands, since Paul includes the words "in all things."

Listen, the gold standard here is really captured at the end our text in vs. 33 when Paul writes, "...and let the wife see that she respects her husband." First and foremost, the Christian wife is to respect her Christian husband for the role he has been given by God. Ladies, let me be perfectly clear as a man and a husband: I FEEL LOVED by my wife when I am treated with respect for the weight and responsibility of leading our home as a Christian husband. I don't expect my wife to agree with or submit to every hare-brained idea I have or to keep her mouth shut while I give the orders! I profoundly value my bride's wisdom, ideas, and the many amazing gifts she brings to our relationship. And even though God made me "the head" of my wife, I delight in submitting to Christy in the oft repeated phrase, "Yes, dear." Let's be real: no reasonable Christian husband expects his Christian wife to defer or submit to his every idea, every decision, every investment, and every opinion as though her opinion or dissenting views are unimportant or irrelevant.

That said, as long as your Christian husband is not leading you to abandon your faith, dishonor God, compromise your well-being, endanger yourself or your children, or engage in immoral behavior, your voluntary submission and respect should be a regular posture that recognizes and values your husband's role and authority in your home. Sadly, however, there are times when a wife must absolutely NOT submit to a husband. Steven Tracy published an

article entitled, *What Does 'Submit in Everything' Really Mean?* In it he suggests a wife may actually need to resist her husband's leadership if acceding to him would 1) violate a biblical principle (not just a direct biblical statement), 2) compromise her relationship with Christ, 3) violate her conscience, 4) compromise the care, nurture, and protection of her children, 5) enable (facilitate) her husband's sin, and 6) subject her to physical, sexual, or emotional abuse.<sup>4</sup>

Remember...the scriptures do not call for women to "obey" their husbands; rather, Paul calls the Christian wife to voluntarily yield to her husband's *leadership*. Self-centered demands by a husband are not leadership. That said, the Christian wife needs to carefully evaluate her own heart and motives if she determines that she needs to resist her husband on an issue. What she determines to be "a violation of her conscience" may be a matter of her own personal preference or even a manifestation of her own self-centeredness.

And that brings me to the last thing that I want to say, particularly to the wife who is unhappy in her marriage. I have been listening to wives complain about their husbands for 35 years, and I would like to make an observation. When you chronically complain about your husband, two things tend to happen: 1) you tend to lose sight of your own sin and destructive habits in the relationship; and 2) you tend to petrify your husband's under-performing behavior and demotivate him to change. I mean no offense, but this is my observation over the past 35 years.

So, as I see it, you have two choices as you walk out of these doors. You can either continue to complain and hold your husband in contempt which will likely lead to more of the same, or you can obey the direct teachings of scripture and start treating your husband with respect and voluntary submission out of reverence to Christ. Remember, your submissive posture towards your husband is to be in reverence to Christ, not a reaction to your husband's performance. And here's what I truly believe: when we follow the teachings of scripture and we honor the order that God has ordained in our marriages, when we live out of obedience because we love Jesus with no regard for our personal pride or gain, we open the door for the Holy Spirit to heal our marriages. Mutual submission invokes the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit...and the Holy Spirit can accomplish what we cannot.

We'll pick up with the role of the husband beginning with vs. 25 next week. My message next Sunday is a critical complement to this message...there will be "balance in the force," so please commit to be here to explore the husband's role in the principle of mutual submission. Let's pray.

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<sup>4</sup> See Steven R. Tracy, "What Does 'Submit in Everything' Really Mean? The Nature and Scope of Marital Submission," TJ 29 (2008): 285-312, esp. 306-312.