

Ephesians: *Husbands, Love Your Wives*
Ephesians 5:22-33

We are working our way through Paul's letter to the Ephesians, and this morning we return to the apostle's imperatives for Christian wives and husbands. Our text is Ephesians 5:22-33, please stand and let us read the Word of the Lord:

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 will fall under three subheadings: 1) The Measure and Motivation of a Husband's Love; 2) Love Your Wife as Yourself; and 3) Final Words.

I. The Measure and Motivation of a Husband's Love

Those of you who caught the message last Sunday know that we first began our treatment of this text by identifying the historical and biblical context of Paul's teaching. We then concluded our time unpacking Paul's application of "mutual submission" as it pertains to Christian wives. If you have not heard that message, I would ask that you take some time later today or during the week to review that message because it provides important context for the message this morning.

Part of that context is remembering that we must always keep in view the original principle articulated by Paul in vss. 18-21 for which our text serves as practical application...and that principle is "mutual submission." Remember that in vs. 18 Paul calls the church to be filled with the Spirit, and then in vs. 21 Paul articulates one of the key attributes of the Holy Spirit-filled-Church: "submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ." What follows, then, in vss. 22-33 are two applications of this principle of mutual submission. The first application is to Christian wives who are called to submit to their husbands as unto the Lord. The second application is to Christians husbands who are called to love their wives as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her.

Remember that the call for wives to submit to their Christian husbands refers to a voluntary posture of deference, respect, and honor for the husband's God-ordained role of leadership and responsibility in the marriage and family. The Christian wife is to practice this voluntary submission irrespective of the husband's performance. Her posture towards her Christian husband is the wife's opportunity to honor her husband out of reverence for Christ.

Now...as hard as the imperative to "submit" may sound to those who are Christian wives, I would suggest that Paul's imperative to Christian husbands is far more daunting!

Paul has already stated that the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the Church. Now, in vs. 25, Paul begins to unpack what that responsibility entails.

In vs. 25 Paul writes, “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her...”

The measure of a husband’s love for his wife, as well as the motivation for that love, is the sacrificial love that Jesus demonstrated in His relationship with His bride, the Church. Let’s take a minute to make a few observations.

First of all, as we observed last Sunday, there was no expectation in the first century culture that husbands would “love” their wives. In fact, the very notion of husbands “loving their wives” is almost completely absent in ancient literature. Marriages were largely arranged by the families. Neither the groom nor the bride typically had much say as to who they were getting married to, and almost always the ancient marriage involved the transfer of property. As such, the bride was part of that property exchange. She served as the means of extending both family lines by bearing and rearing children; and she served as a household manager. Love in a first century marriage was optional, if not unusual. That’s not to say that people didn’t wax on about their lovers; but those songs, poems and stories are almost exclusively about mistresses...not wives.¹

So, before you jump to the end and try to apply this text to your 21st century marriage, please take a minute and hear the teachings of the Apostle Paul as a first century husband. Paul’s imperative here in vs. 25 is RADICAL in every sense of the word. Instead of teaching husbands that they were entitled to leverage their wives as property and to satisfy their sexual appetites with extra-marital pleasures (which was the order of the day), Paul instructs that men converting to Christianity must *love* (the Greek word is “agape”) their wives. Many of you might remember that in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul beautifully articulates the very essence of *agape* love in vss. 4-8: Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. 7 Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 8 Love never ends. To make sure the husbands get the point, Paul points to Jesus and essentially says, “Love your wife with the same kind of love with which Jesus loved YOU...the Church. Love her without condition; love her sacrificially; love her for her flourishing at your expense; love her with a love that never ends and never gives up.”

There is no parallel to Paul’s description of God-like, unconditional love in any ancient poetry, religion or philosophy. The world came to know this new *agape* love in Jesus Christ alone.²

¹ Only the Stoics had literature suggesting that husbands should “love” their wives in the first century, but even then they employed the Greek term “phileow” which was a congenial, friendly relationship as opposed to the Greek term “agape” which points to a powerful, sacrificial, unconditional kind of love.

² By the way, the pre-Christian Greeks did not think of *agape* love in this way. The Christians hijacked the term and redefined *agape* love because they needed a term that represented the unique, unprecedented, unparalleled way that God loves humanity as demonstrated in the way that Jesus sacrificially and unconditionally loved the Church.

And now, says Paul, this powerful, unprecedented kind of love that Jesus demonstrated to the Church is the measure and the motivation for how Christian husbands are to love their Christian wives. This is what the principle of mutual submission looks like for the role of a Christian husband: it looks like Jesus loving the Church and giving Himself up for her.

Now, notice that the husband's posture toward the wife is not to be her pandering lapdog. The husband is not called to orbit around the wife; nor is the husband expected to abdicate his role and hand over the 'headship' of the marriage to his wife. As C.S. Lewis noted in *Mere Christianity*, both men and women alike are quick to despise the marriage in which the woman diminishes her husband and the husband passively obeys her orders as though he were a man-slave. Lewis writes:

As far as I can see, even a woman who wants to be the head of her own house does not usually admire the same state of things when she finds it going on next door. She is much more likely to say 'Poor Mr. X! Why he allows that appalling woman to boss him about the way she does is more than I can imagine.' I do not think she is even very flattered if anyone mentions the fact of her own 'headship.' There must be something unnatural about the rule of wives over husbands because the wives themselves are half ashamed of it and despise the husbands whom they rule.

Lewis's point is significant. God has appointed 'headship' to the role of the husband, and it's precisely because of the husband's role as "the head of the wife" that she can know herself to be loved with *agape* love by her husband. Why? Because for love to be known and received as truly sacrificial, the Lover must voluntarily give up something of great value.

Let us once again look to Jesus. What is it that really captures our hearts when we look to the cross? What is it that convinces us of the love of Jesus so much so that we are changed as a result of that love? Is it not what Jesus gave up in order to demonstrate His unconditional love for us? Prior to the incarnation, Jesus lived in unfettered glory. He left that glory to be born into poverty...He did that for us. While on earth, Jesus, God's only Son, had no place to lay His head. He was falsely accused, betrayed, and sentenced to death. He did that for us. Jesus had the power and the authority to summon a legion of angels to destroy His enemies; yet He set aside that power to go to the cross in hopes of saving a corrupt people who were not worthy to be saved. He did that for us. Church: what wins us to Jesus is precisely the fact that HE DID have positional power and authority; and though we, His enemies, deserved to be destroyed, Jesus set aside his power and authority and sacrificed Himself to save us out of love. This is exactly what Paul writes in Romans 5:8: "—but God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Again, in Romans 5:10 Paul acknowledges that while we were "enemies" we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son.

So let us assume for a moment that the husband is, by God's design, the "head of the wife." In most marriages the husband is taller, bigger, and stronger than his wife. It is a well-known and sad fact that husbands can and often do subjugate, dominate, and diminish their wives. This was, by the way, the norm in the ancient world.

But then Jesus came along, and He showed us what true love and true leadership looks like when He said, “The greatest among you will be as one who serves.” So, according to Jesus and Paul, the Christian husband, who is the ‘head’, is to demonstrate Christ-like love in the way he *sacrifices* for the sake of his wife’s flourishing. And this is essentially the point that Paul makes in vss. 25-27. Paul writes: 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.

In vs. 26-27, Paul explains the motivation behind the sacrificial, *agape* love of Jesus. His sacrifice was not simply the means of proving His love for the Bride. Jesus did not simply save us from Hell. Jesus gave Himself up for the Church to sanctify her, to cleanse her, and to finally present her to Himself ‘in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.’

Let me take just a minute to unpack some of this language. First, Paul states that Jesus gave Himself up for the Church that he might “sanctify” her. There are two ways to understand this idea of “sanctification.” The first is that Jesus died to set apart a people for Himself. Those comprising the Church are the set-apart people by virtue of Christ’s atoning work on the cross ...and that work is already accomplished. Such is why Paul can refer to the Church as “saints.” We are already those adopted as children of God...we are *already* the set apart people of God. But there is also a “*not yet*” nuance to this idea of sanctification. We are still being “purified” by the cleansing work of the Holy Spirit who removes the stains and impediments that keep us from flourishing as the Bride of Christ. That cleansing work began when we heard The Word—the proclamation of the Gospel—and we believed. That work will continue until we go to be with Jesus or until the end of the age. Now, it’s possible that Paul is pointing back to the “washing with water” as the baptism that accompanied the Church’s belief in the proclaimed Word, but we should also think that this reference regarding “washing with water” goes even deeper than baptism.

It is likely that Paul sees Christ’s sanctification of the church as the fulfillment of prophecy dating back to Ezekiel 16 where Israel is likened to a young girl who, on the day of her birth, was unwashed, covered in blood and filth, ‘cast out on an open field’, abhorred by all and pitied by none. God says to Israel, “I made you flourish...I made my vow to you and entered into a covenant with you...I bathed you with water and washed off your blood from you...you grew exceedingly beautiful...your beauty was perfect through the splendor that I had bestowed on you...” Of course, Israel, the bride of God, then goes on to betray her first love. She plays the whore, and the language of her unfaithfulness is graphic and heartbreaking. God goes on to articulate the pain of Israel’s rejection and the horrible consequences of her idolatry, and yet...at the end of chapter 16, God promises to remember the covenant He made with Israel, and He announces that He will “atone for all you have done.”

Paul, as a former Pharisee, would have known well the prophecies of Ezekiel, and it's likely that Paul is now hailing back to this imagery, reminding the Church that through His sacrificial death on the cross, Jesus has atoned for their sin. He has sanctified and cleansed His Bride by the washing of water with the Word to the end that He may once and for all be united with His Bride...only in part now, but "holy and without blemish" at the end of the age. There is so much beautiful imagery in these two verses, and there is more we could observe, but let us return to the point Paul is driving home for Christian husbands.

The point is that Jesus 'gave Himself up' to help the Bride become who God intended for her to become. In the same way, the Christian husband is to sacrificially love his wife to the end that she flourishes in her femininity, her gifts, her call, and her identity as a child of God. As Christian husbands, our behavior should never hinder or diminish our brides; on the contrary, our loving leadership should serve to remove obstacles and impediments to the end that the glory of God will shine brilliantly through our wives, just as Jesus sacrificed Himself so that the glory of God might shine brilliantly through His Church.

I am married to a remarkable, amazing, beautiful woman who I love more today than the day of our wedding. Many of you know Christy, but you don't know Christy like I do. Nobody does...not her parents, not her best friends, not even her children. I am her husband...I see her challenges, I see her dark side, I see her struggles—I see those things that hinder her from flourishing. That is the privilege and the burden of a Christian husband. Sadly, however, for far too many years, I thought first of my own desires, particularly when it came to how I spent my time. Consequently, my failure to sacrifice for the sake of my wife's flourishing left Christy in a very dark hole of depression. That's what happens when Christian husbands fail to honor their role. I wasn't leading or serving Christy well. I wasn't devoting my best energy, my best thinking, and my best hours to helping her get free of lies she had believed or destructive patterns of thinking or behavior that inhibited her growth as a woman and as a Christian. Because of my failure to lead well and to place her first, Christy became critical of me and, like I mentioned last Sunday, her critical spirit actually pushed me even further away...and that led me to be in a very dark place as well.

Thanks to an anonymous friend who was prompted by the Holy Spirit to invest in our marriage, Christy and I had the opportunity to spend five days in a residential, intensive counseling environment in Colorado where we spent six hours a day with a gifted therapist listening to each other with the intent to truly understand and to be reconciled. Following that experience, I realized that I needed to step up and play my role as a Christian husband...which meant I needed to lead and to devote myself to the flourishing of my bride, regardless of the cost. It took some time to figure out how to do that...and I'm still learning how to do that...but I can tell you that our relationship has been completely transformed. Not only am I leading better, but Christy has also been intentional about honoring my role and treating me with respect and honor. I no longer feel like a failure or a fraud when I am with her, and I have delighted to see my bride flourish as a woman, as a Christian leader, as a mom, and as the love of my life. When I see something that I think is hindering Christy or threatening her ability to flourish, I am no longer passive. I am

committed to her flourishing, even when that is costly. Sometimes that means I need to give up time pursuing my hobbies; sometimes that means I need to do all the grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning, taxi service and other duties to buy her some much needed time and space; sometimes that means I need to risk confronting her with a truth she doesn't want to hear, even when I know we will experience conflict; sometimes that means investing time and money for the two of us to simply get away and remember how much we love each other by spending uninterrupted time together. Most of the time, at a minimum, it means some time on the couch each evening listening and sharing about our day...no matter how tired I am or what game is on TV! Am I loving my wife as Jesus loved the Church and gave Himself up for her? Sometimes...not often enough...but more than I was even one year ago; and by God's grace, I pray that every day I will love, lead and serve my wife better than I did yesterday.

Husbands...listen to me: leadership means we lead...not react. Our role demands intentionality, sacrifice, and a willingness to place the needs of our brides before our own. Here's what I can tell you, and I suspect every Christian wife in this room will agree with me: more than your gifts, more than your words, more than your good looks and warm embrace, your wife will feel and know that she is loved by the sacrifices you make on her behalf. She will feel loved when you place her first over your friends, your hobbies, your easy chair, your job, your kids, and just about everything else. You won't place her first if you don't first come to understand the way Jesus first loved you and gave Himself up for you. Only the gospel empowers us to love our wives the way that Jesus loves. That's goes for wives as well. You won't love and respect your husbands until you love and respect Jesus for what He did on the cross to redeem our broken souls. To put it plainly: Christian marriage is impossible without Christ, amen? OK, we must move on to Paul's second point for husbands...

II. Love Your Wives as Yourselfs

In vss. 28-30 Paul writes, "In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body."

We've all heard that we are to "love our neighbors as ourselves" right? Have you ever wondered what that actually means? Well, Paul just fleshed it out for us. The assumption here is that we inevitably, naturally, without any real thought or effort take care of, nourish, cherish, and generally "love" our own bodies. When we are hungry, we eat. When we are tired, we find a comfortable place to sleep. When we are sad, we treat ourselves to ice cream. When we are stressed out, we go *shopping*! Tending to the needs and desires of our bodies or "our selves" comes naturally for all of us, so Paul draws upon this assumption and states, "Husbands, you should love your wives as members of your own body. When you love her, you are actually nourishing and caring for yourself."

Paul then hails back to Genesis 2:23-24 to establish why a man should think of his wife as his own flesh. You might remember that when Adam first sees Eve, perfectly created and perfectly naked, he bursts out in the first ever recorded love song, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman because she was taken out of Man."

Therefore, a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

According to a biblical worldview, a husband and his wife leave their families of origin and become one flesh. Now, it is perfectly reasonable for us to acknowledge that sexual intercourse within the context of marriage is literally a merging of the husband and wife into a physical act of oneness, but as any loving Christian couple will tell you, the oneness experienced in Christian marriage is far greater than the physical or sexual union. The husband and wife share one name, one home, they create a new family, they usually come together and give birth to children, and they form a new reality both socially and even spiritually. In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis likens the marriage union to a bow and a violin that have finally been united. The bow and the violin are both part of the same instrument, but until they are joined together, there is no music. And as any musician can tell you, it's the relationship between the bow and the violin that creates music, and that music is greater than the sum of the parts. When placed in the hands of a Master musician, there is a beauty from the union of bow and violin that brings hope and joy to the world. This is a beautiful picture of the Holy Spirit-filled Christian marriage.

With this image in mind, we can understand that the union in our marriage is so deep, so permanent, so binding, so intimate, that to care for your spouse is to literally care for yourself, just as tuning the bow or restringing the violin are both means of caring for the one instrument for the purpose of making beautiful music. Unfortunately, the opposite is also true: to neglect the bow or the violin would be to compromise both.

Paul points to this oneness in marriage and writes, “This mystery is profound, and I am saying it refers to Christ and the church.” What is “this mystery” that Paul is referring to? Paul has already referred to “the mystery” five times in Ephesians, and every time “the mystery” points to the revelation of God’s plan to unify the Church through the cross, overcoming the hostility between Jews and Gentiles, Greeks and barbarians, slaves and masters, and *men and women*. So, here’s his point: just as the cross of Jesus abolished hostility between races and people of different genders and from various socio-economic backgrounds to create a unified church called “the Body of Christ,” so Christ makes it possible for a husband and wife to be so unified that they are one flesh. In the same way, then, that Christ cares for His body, the Church, for which He is the head, so the husband, who is “the head of the wife,” is to love his “body” . . . which consists of “one flesh” in two persons . . . husband and wife . . . who now live in a physical, social, spiritual oneness. The third person in this marriage is the Holy Spirit who indwells the husband and the wife . . . let us not forget that all of this teaching on Christian marriage assumes that both spouses are being filled with the Holy Spirit and practicing mutual submission.

III. Final Words

Paul concludes his instruction for Christian marriages in vs. 33: “However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.”³

³ A good friend reached out this week to question me about “the roles” of husbands and wives, and I will admit that the Bible says very little about the specific roles. In fact, this passage in Ephesians 5 is the most specific treatment of that subject, and aside from identifying the husband as “the head of the wife,” Paul does not make commands about who does what in a Christian marriage. Clearly many of the roles we

This final verse is a simple and clear summary of the Christian marriage. Husbands...love your wives as Jesus loved the Church. Wives, respect your husbands with a spirit of submission and deference out of reverence for Christ. I know that seems overly simplistic for many of you. If that is the case, I encourage you to pick up Tim and Kathy Keller's book, *The Meaning of Marriage* or any number of outstanding resources that are out there. However, I would also suggest that before you overthink the complexity of your relationship, it would be wise to seek the presence of the Holy Spirit and practice what Paul has plainly taught us here in Ephesians 5. You may be amazed to discover that marriage does not have to be as complicated as it currently appears.

Now, as I mentioned at the end of my message last Sunday, I have spent many hours counseling couples over the course of 35 years, so I would like to make a few observations as they pertain to husbands, and then a final word to Christian couples. This may hurt a bit, but I want to be as candid as possible given my experience as a pastor and a counselor.

When it comes to marital conflict, I find that many husbands have lost hope in ever being the kind of husband that their wives desire. Their hopelessness usually hails back to the early, disillusioning days of their marriage when they quickly realized that being a husband was way harder than they ever dreamed it would be. Having made several unsuccessful attempts to "fix" their marriage and appease their wives, many husbands have simply moved on to something they feel more competent in doing...such as work, or a hobby, or even parenting. Sometimes that "moving on" may also be to another woman in the hopes of getting better reviews.

The truth is that many husbands have little to no clue how to meet the needs of their wives, and they are pretty sure that even if they did know what to do, they would fall short in actually doing it, so "what's the point in trying?" Far too many husbands have checked out, and now their marriages are little more than civil co-habiting until the kids graduate, then the marriage is over. To be fair, both the wife and the husband are quite capable of "checking out" of the marriage, and I've seen a fair sampling of both.

On the other hand, some husbands in marital conflict have dominated their wives with their strength, temper, and financial leverage, leaving their wives feeling completely devalued, diminished, and alone. Inevitably these domineering husbands are frustrated and confused as to why their wives reject them sexually, which inevitably increases their hurtful and neglectful behavior towards their wives.

The scenarios are varied, but one common observation in most cases where Christian marriages have broken down is that the husband is not leading as the Christian head of the household. In most cases, the husband has abdicated his leadership role, and the wife is either frustrated by his passivity or disheartened by his domination.

assume to be true about wives and husbands are culturally informed, but we should take very seriously the teaching that Paul gave us regarding our roles in light of Christ's example. If we were to get the love and respect parts right, I think a lot of the other "role" issues would then naturally fall into place over time.

So, Christian husbands, please take this to heart: you will win your wife and reclaim your rightful place as her beloved husband when you step into your role as a Christ-like leader who lives sacrificially for the sake of your wife's flourishing. Again, your commitment to serve and sacrifice for her flourishing can never be dependent upon her performance or what you are "getting" out of the relationship. Our leadership can never serve as a means to a selfish/sexual end. Our commitment to love our wives like Jesus loved the church means we love out of obedience to God, regardless of how our wives respond or fail to respond. The imperative for husbands to love their wives like Jesus loved the church is not conditional. By its very nature, our love is to be unconditional...which is way harder than it sounds. Finally, our job is to lead--that means the opposite of passivity and avoidance, particularly when there is work to be done to be reconciled. Jesus did not wait to be asked or invited into this broken world...He loved us first; He sacrificed first; He forgave first. As Christian husbands, we are to do the same.

Now, let me conclude with four suggestions for both spouses. First, please remember that The Prince of Darkness hates you...he hates your Christian marriage, and every resource of Hell is employed to destroy your marriage, your faith, and your family. We'll look into the reality of that battle when we get to chapter six, but know that 1) the battle is real, and if your marriage is going to survive and eventually thrive, you must begin the battle with prayer. Then, literally for God's sake, 2) give your Christian spouse the benefit of the doubt. Talk about the changes you are willing to make to be obedient to the teachings of scripture regarding your role in your marriage; and then, if possible, it would be most effective if you would each simply work to be faithful to honor Paul's imperative for your individual role. I encourage you to spend less time grading your spouse and more time grading your own efforts at being obedient to Christ as a Christian spouse. Remember that *mutual submission*, which is what Paul has been articulating, pleases the Holy Spirit and invokes His presence in your lives as individuals and your relationship as a couple. 3) Practice the Gospel regularly. That means the confession of sin, asking for forgiveness, and extending forgiveness...just as Christ forgave us. Forgive quickly and cheerfully because you can! And 4) Lighten up! Marriage is a gift, and our time is short...make the most of the time to laugh, learn, and love each other well. Do these things, and your Christian marriage will bring glory to God and hope to the world. Let's pray.