

The Marriage Mystery

Design

Ephesians 5:21-33

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“. . . submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit 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 submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 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 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. “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband” (Eph. 5:21–33, ESV).

Marriage is a mystery. Sometimes it is the most glorious relationship you could possibly imagine. There is nothing on earth like the mingling of soul, heart, mind, and body in the context of marriage. But marriage can also be really challenging—even hard. When you put two independent people with sinful wills together and add a little stress, you have a recipe for conflict and challenges.

And yet this was God’s plan from the beginning.

Marriage is a revelation. It says something about God. Marriage, as we just read in Ephesians 5, says something about Christ’s relationship with the Church.

So that should tell us two things: (1) marriage is important, and (2) marriage is worth spending time talking about and fighting for. And that’s what we are doing during the month of August. We are trying to discover important biblical principles about what marriage is and how it should work.

Last Week: Foundations

Last Sunday, we started in the beginning with the book of Genesis in order to discover the foundation for marriage. In other words, we explored where marriage came from and what that means for us. Here are a few important points for us to remember:

- Marriage is God’s idea. He created men and women to be complementary, and he designed marriage to fulfill his creative purposes such that marriage reveals something about God.

- Marriage is good. God created marriage to be unlike every other relationship on earth.
- Marriage is special. To understand marriage, you have to be familiar with the term “one flesh.” It captures the oneness, harmony, and unity (in every way) that characterizes the triune Godhead.

In case you weren't here last week, I also want to emphasize that this does not mean that singleness is bad. On the contrary, we need to remember that Jesus was single, and the Apostle Paul elevates singleness as a unique opportunity to both honor the Lord and live on mission (see 1 Cor. 7:32-35).

Additionally, I want to recognize that there are some of you hearing this message who've had really bad experiences with marriage—either in your childhood or in your own marriage. I don't want to make your pain worse. But I do want you to know what God intends for marriage so that you can continue to heal.

The main point from last week was simply that God lays the foundation for marriage between a man and a woman. Marriage is more than an institution. It is a revelation.¹

How Should Marriage Work?

This week we are taking another step in our understanding of marriage by looking at how marriage should work practically. Next week we'll explore sexual intimacy. We want to build on the foundation of last week and examine God's design for husbands and wives in the context of marriage.

We are going to consider the roles for husbands and wives that we find in Ephesians 5. I want to identify some key principles or ideas from this text and then encourage you to figure out how to apply them in your life. There are lessons here for people who are married and for those who are single. There are lessons to be learned for men and women.

Let me encourage you to listen for application in your life regardless of whether the text is speaking directly to you. Ask yourself if this is a command that directly applies to you, if there are lessons for you to learn as the Bible is applied to others, and what the text tells you about God and the gospel.

Today we are going to look at our text through the lens of three key words: *Gospel*, *love*, and *submission*. Each of them is important. Each of them is applicable to everyone who hears this message. And each is also to be uniquely applied in the context of marriage.

Gospel

I'm starting with the gospel because it undergirds everything that is said in this text. It is the backdrop of marriage. It is the North Star of where marriage should be headed. It is the mold into which marriage should be shaped. The gospel is the flavor that makes marriage sweet. It's the “wind beneath your wings . . .” Okay, that's probably too much. But you get the point.

When you look at this text, you see the connection between the commands and the gospel, especially with the word “as.” Let me show you:

¹ Ray Ortlund, *Marriage and the Mystery of the Gospel*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 11.

*“Wives, submit to your own husbands, **as to the Lord**” (Eph. 5:22).*

*“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**” (v. 23).*

*“Now **as the church submits to Christ**, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands” (v. 5:24).*

*“Husbands, love your wives, **as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,**” (v. 25).*

This is an important reference point. It changes everything. Paul uses the work of Jesus, his relationship with the church, and the gospel as the motivation and the comparison for what roles in marriage should look like. Paul takes the gospel and applies it in the context of marriage.

If I were to say, something is “smooth as silk” or “dark as night” or “hard as granite,” you have to understand the reference point in order to know what is being said. The comparison breaks down if you don’t appreciate and value the connection to the “thing” behind the “thing.”

Behind both marriage in general and the roles of husbands and wives is the gospel. And before we talk about what husbands and wives are called to “do,” we need to remind ourselves what Jesus did. In fact, this is how Paul starts the entire chapter:

“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph. 5:1–2).

So, what is the gospel? I’ve summarized it this way: God is holy, I am not, Jesus saves, Christ is my life.

God is holy: God is the creator of the universe. He is sinless. And his glory is the most beautiful “thing” in the universe. God sets the rules for life, and violating his holiness is eternally dangerous (Isa. 6:3; Ex. 20:1-3; Eph. 3:21).

I am not: The problem with humanity is our rebellion against God. All of us have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory (Rom. 3:23). We are dead in our trespasses and sins even as we walk in them (Eph. 2:1). We lived apart from God and had no hope in ourselves (2:12). We are on a path towards spiritual and eternal death (Rom. 6:23).

Jesus saves: Oh, here is the good news! Jesus, the son of God, enters the mess of our world (John 1:14). He leaves the distant fellowship with the Father and the Spirit, becomes a man, humbles himself, and becomes obedient “to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:7-8). He who knew no sin became sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21). We have been saved by grace through faith. It is not our doing. It is the gift of God. As a result, no one can boast (Eph 2:8-9). Why? Because everything we have is a gift from God!

Christ is my life: This deliverance by Jesus defines us. Christ is now our life (Col. 3:4). We are a new people, and his workmanship is designed to show the world what Jesus is like (Eph. 2:10). We are filled with his Spirit (5:18). We bear the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). And everything I am, think, and do is

informed by the transforming work of Jesus in me (Rom. 12:1-2). My goal in life and in the context of the church is to grow more and more to look like Jesus (Col. 1:28).

So, when Paul says, “Be imitators of God . . . walk in love as Christ has loved us and gave himself up for us” (Eph. 5:1-2), he’s talking about the gospel.

This is the life-transforming message that is the foundation of everything in a Christian’s life, especially marriage. If you are a believer in Jesus, you need a regular reminder that this is the backdrop for everything that you are commanded to do and be. Marriage just happens to be one of the most critical applications of the gospel. But marriage is not the only place. Singles need to apply the gospel. Divorced people need to apply the gospel. Single dads and moms need to apply the gospel.

And it may be that the main problem in your life is becoming clear. Perhaps you are slowly coming to understand that without a reference point like this, without a changed heart, and without Jesus ruling in your heart, marriage is only going to continually reveal the deadly absence of God’s grace. Why not come to Jesus today?

You can’t know how marriage really works if you don’t understand the gospel. You can’t make marriage work if you don’t apply the gospel. And you can’t understand the next word: *love*.

Love

Those of you who are watching the text closely will notice that I’m skipping over verses 22-24 and jumping right to verse 25. I’m doing this on purpose, but we’ll come back to the other verses. Let me explain why. As a man and as a pastor, I want to lead with my responsibility. Before I give instructions to women, I want you to know what men are called to do. But I also want to acknowledge that often, teaching on marriage heavily leads with submission both in the flow of the text (because it’s first) and then in the tone of the sermon, which seems to be all about submission.

So, let’s start with God’s plan for husbands. The basic and compelling command is for husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church (v. 25). So, husbands when it comes to marriage, the primary way (not the only way) that you express your obedience to Jesus is by being like Jesus as it relates to your relationship with your wife.

Notice first that we are talking about a command with context. Husbands are commanded to love their wives in the same way that Christ loved the church. The word “love” often has an emotional definition connected to it. That’s appropriate at one level, but the Bible means something much more. This is a command. It’s hard to command emotions, but it’s conceivable to command actions. In this context love is a decision, a choice, something to be done. And it is done not in reference to what you feel about your wife or whether you feel like she deserves your love. This command flows from the way Christ loved.

Husbands, you are commanded to love your wives. Let me put some handles on that in the text. It looks like sacrificial and intentional care.

- **Sacrificial** – the text says “and gave himself for her” (v. 25).

- **Intentional** – your goal is to help her become like Jesus: “to sanctify her. . . in splendor . . . to be holy” (v. 26-27).
- **Care** – you are called to nourish and cherish her in the same way that you care for your own body (v. 28)

The love that a husband shows to his wife should have the aroma of Christ’s love for the Church. Ray Ortlund says this:

So when a woman is married to a lovingly Christlike man who cherishes her, she feels warmth in her heart at being valued by her husband and held dear above all others, second only to Christ himself. Her husband doesn’t compare her with others or find fault with her or treat her as a loser he is stuck with. That would break her heart. Instead, her husband delights in her and prizes her, and she feels it deep inside with a heart-warming glow.²

Husbands, does your wife feel like that? Do you know when she feels like that? 1 Peter 3 tells us that we are to live with our wives in an understanding way. Loving your wife means continually growing in your understanding of what sacrificial and intentional care looks like.

This is what spiritual leadership under the banner of Christ is like. And we need to be regularly reminding ourselves about this model. Men, both married and single, we need to embrace the servant-leader model of Jesus in every area of life, but especially in its application in marriage.

It’s true that verse 25 says that the husband is the head of the wife, but it also says “as Christ is the head of the church.” We need to see our God-given role as an opportunity to lead and love like Jesus. Here’s what Jesus said to his disciples about leadership:

“But Jesus called them to him and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many’” (Matt. 20:25–28).

Too often male headship, or leadership in its sinful expression, has marginalized and oppressed women. Biblical leadership, on the other hand, uses authority for the purpose of helping others flourish. It doesn’t include verbal threats, manipulation through guilt, name-calling/put-downs, using Scripture to coerce, using fear to intimidate, isolating from others and other abusive actions. Can you imagine Jesus acting this way?

Biblical leadership looks like this at all levels, but it is especially true of the way husbands provide leadership for their families and their wives.

Husbands, how well are you expressing servant-leadership in your marriage? When it comes to your desires, your schedule, your energy, your plans, your spending, your leisure, your ideas, and your words,

² Ray Ortlund, *Marriage and the Mystery of the Gospel*, 98.

what are you saying about sacrificial and intentional care? What steps could you take to improve your capacity as a servant-leader?

God designed marriage to work as husbands love and lead their wives like Christ loved the church. And that leads to the final word.

Submission

Unfortunately, this word doesn't immediately "feel" positive. And there have been many times when it has not been positively applied. It may have even been used as an emotional weapon. So, we have some work to do.

Let's start with the text and a definition.

"Wives, submit 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 submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands" (Eph. 5:22–24).

The word submission means to "arrange under" or the inclination to follow the wishes of another. It is a concept that is used throughout the New Testament for the disposition that characterizes Christ and should also characterize all believers. A few examples:

"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" (Eph. 5:20–21).

"When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28).

"Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you" (Heb. 13:17).

So, it's important from the outset that you understand that the command for wives to submit to their husbands is not an unusual one. It's no more uncommon than the idea of love. However, wives are uniquely called to apply this in the context of marriage. What does that mean?

A wife's submission refers to "the divine calling to honor and affirm her husband's leadership and help carry it through according to her gifts."³ Submission is God's plan for authority, order, and responsibility. It doesn't mean less in value. A woman is every bit as much of an image-bearer as a man. It doesn't mean less in talent. Every woman has unique gifts. It doesn't mean she should not think, speak, or share her opinion.

³ John Piper and Wayne Grudem, *An Overview of Central Concerns in Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991), 61.

Perhaps an illustration would be helpful. Think of marriage as a dance. Now (no surprise), I am not a dancer. I still can't figure out how to do the floss. But imagine marriage like the waltz. There are particular steps and movements that are required. But the dance requires someone taking the lead. As the dance progresses, both people work together in harmony. It's beautiful. But someone is leading.

In the same way, a wife is called to follow her husband's leadership as an expression of her obedience to Christ. She is to submit to her own husband as unto the Lord. The calling is not to submit to every man, but to offer her husband the worshipful gift of her willingness and disposition to follow.

This spirit and disposition are to flavor everything in her life. Verse 24 says "so wives should submit in everything to their husbands." Their oneness is expressed in the way that they dance together.

What do you do if you are a single woman? Well, verse 21 applies to you as a Christian. The only application you don't need to think about yet is in the context of marriage. Find ways to embrace Christian submission in other areas of your life. Don't make the mistake of thinking that you'll start being submissive after you are married. And if a man comes into your life, you need to carefully consider if he's the kind of man with whom you can do the "marriage waltz."

Finally, what do you do if you're a wife whose husband won't lead? We don't have time to walk through all the nuances of a complicated question like that. But let me suggest two things. First, ask yourself regularly what is the best way you can be like Jesus to your imperfect husband. How can you encourage, exhort, and follow him "as unto the Lord"? Second, I would suggest that you find a godly woman with whom you could lay out your challenges. I would think that together, you'd be able to find some godly wisdom.

One more thing. Some women are in marriages that are not just struggling, but they are dangerous. I want to encourage you to get help. Tolerating abuse is not good for you, nor is it helpful to your husband. Invite people into the challenges you are facing. Get some people to walk alongside you.

God designed something special with marriage. It has the potential to reveal what he is like. Marriage can platform the grace of God in powerful ways. Marriage is a mystery. But it can be glorious when the gospel informs how husbands and wives live out their relationship through love and submission.

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