

"The Husband-Wife Relationship" Ephesians 5:22-24

Introduction

- Ever since this series on Ephesians began, I have been eyeing this date on the calendar. Sometimes dreading the thought of preaching on this issue sometimes excited about speaking God's words on the subject. So I stand before you this morning with great humility and seriousness regarding the task at hand. In the words of [George Bernard Shaw](#), "*There is no subject on which more dangerous nonsense is talked and thought than marriage.*"¹ And the reason is because the vast majority of people are confused, utterly perplexed about what marriage is; Christians included. We all remember what happened on February 6th of this year, when the Massachusetts Supreme Court upheld same-sex marriage. Gay couples flooded Cambridge square later that week to be married. Then, six days later, the same scenario all over again as San Francisco's newly elected Mayor Gavin Newsom allowed the distribution of marriage licenses to same sex couples. Thousands of gay and lesbian couples descended on City Hall for wedding ceremonies. How do you sum up the national consciousness in the wake of these events? Confusion.
- But even within the Christian subculture, there is great confusion about what marriage should look like. Many Christian couples get married and drive off into a fog, not really sure how get from point A to point B, not really sure how to live out their vows. Even the labels Christians use to describe marriage are confusing. Buzzwords like complementarian and egalitarian. Along with words like submission and headship, they are lobbed like missiles, often dividing churches. Scripture passages are debated or ignored or misinterpreted all the while marriages within the church and outside of it continue to crumble. Why? Confusion. Yes, there are many good marriages, but because of confusion, there simply are too few of them as well. Too many marriages are wracked with abuse, pain, guilt, despair and anger. Too many are lifeless, listless, unsatisfying—complete drudgery. Why? Confusion. People simply know no other way to live.

Transition

Honestly, if someone were to sit down with you and ask, "What is God's design for marriage? What is a Christian marriage?" How would you respond? I believe we can confidently answer these questions, not because I have all the answers, but because I believe God has spoken and his word is clear. One of God's great purposes for his church is that we build strong Christian marriages. What is God's design for marriage? What is a Christian marriage?

Proposition

- **A truly Christian marriage will mirror the relationship between Christ and his church.**²

¹ **George Bernard Shaw** (1856–1950), Anglo-Irish playwright, critic. *Getting Married*, Preface (1908). *The Columbia Dictionary of Quotations* is licensed from Columbia University Press. Copyright © 1993, 1995 by Columbia University Press. All rights reserved.

² Wording taken from Peter O'Brien's commentary on Ephesians, p. 408.

Transition

Let me say that again because if we assimilate this truth into our understanding of marriage the fog surrounding it will dissipate. A truly Christian marriage must mirror the relationship between Christ and his church. If you scratch the silver off the back of a mirror, you're not going to be able to see what you want to see. In the same way, if you scratch Christ's relationship to the church from the discussion of marriage you won't get an accurate picture of marriage. This morning, as we bow our hearts and minds to the authority of God's word, may we see God's design for marriage as outlined in Ephesians 5.

Organizational Sentence

- **Ephesians 5:22-33 explains in two sections, first to wives then to husbands, the ways in which marriage must reflect the relationship between Christ and his church.**

Transition

If the husband-wife relationship patterns itself after Christ's relationship to the church then you've got a Christian marriage. Otherwise, it's just smoke and mirrors. Now let me say right up front, that today we are only going to get through the section that deals with wives. I want to slow our study down a bit because this is such an important subject. So in all fairness, you must realize that today's message is balanced by next week's address to husbands. Be here for both. Today's message is incomplete apart from the second section, verses 25-33.

Background/Setting

- Okay. When we were last together we spoke of the Spirit filled life. One of the results of walking in the Spirit is submitting to one another as verse 21 of chapter 5 describes. *Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.* Some Christians have understood that the word submit in this passage means "to be thoughtful and considerate; or to act in love toward one another."³ They then imply that the command given in verse 22 for wives to submit to their husbands means that wives must be thoughtful and considerate to their husbands. This is certainly appropriate to do, but not what verses 22-24 teaches; this is not a legitimate meaning of the word. If you'll remember from last week, the word for submit finds its origin in the context of "military soldiers submitting to their superior. The word has primarily the idea of giving up one's own right or will, to subordinate one's self."⁴ It means to voluntarily yield. What's more, every single time this word is used in the New Testament, it always implies a relationship of submission to an authority. As [Wayne Grudem](#) reminds us, "It is used to describe the submission of *Jesus to the authority of his parents* (Luke 2:51); *of demons being subject to the disciples* (Luke 10:17-clearly the meaning act in love, be considerate cannot fit here); *of citizens being subject to governing authorities* (Romans 13:1, 5; Titus 3:1, 1 Peter 2:13); *of the universe being subject to Christ* (1 Corinthians 15:27; Ephesians 1:22); *of unseen spiritual powers being subject to Christ* (1 Peter 3:22); *of Christ being subject to God the Father* (1 Corinthians 15:28); *of church members being subject to church leaders* (1 Corinthians 16:15-16; 1 Peter 5:5); *of the church being subject to Christ* (Ephesians 5:24); *of servants being subject to their masters* (Titus 2:9; 1 Peter 2:18); *and of Christians being subject to God* (Hebrews 12:9; James 4:7). And in our passage this

³ Grudem, p. 465.

⁴ Reinecker, p. 538.

morning, wives submitting to their husbands. Submission means submission to an authority. Why am I belaboring this point? Because our understanding of this word affects our interpretation of this passage and our picture of marriage.

- Consider this as well. Whenever this word is used to describe a relationship between two people and one of the parties is commanded to submit, *not one of these relationships is ever reversed*; that is, husbands are never told to be subject to wives, nor the government to citizens, nor masters to servants, nor the disciples to demons, etc.”⁵ In other words, submission is not always mutual. The submission of verse 21 doesn’t always go both ways; it is not always reciprocal. If it were, should we then conclude that in 6:1 parents are to be submissive to their children? Hopefully, you can see the weakness of this logic.
- Now before you write me off thinking you know where I’m heading with all of this, hear me through to the end. Let me also say that the word submission has taken on, like so many layers of old paint, many negative shades of meaning so that the word is misunderstood by both men and women. It’s a dirty word in today’s culture. And so one of the goals this morning will be to strip the word of its accumulated cultural meanings, disinfect it, and provide a biblical alternative.

Transition

I really believe the key to understanding submission in light of Paul’s command to wives is Christ’s relationship to the church. This relationship, which marriage is supposed to mimic, should not only make submission palatable but desired. That brings us to the section addressed to wives. Look at verses 22-24. In this section, we learn that **the wife’s responsibility is to submit to her husband’s leadership as the church submits to Christ’s leadership**. That’s the first point on your outline. Let me say it differently. The way in which a wife mirrors Christ’s relationship to the church in her marriage is by submitting to her husband.

Main Points

I. The wife’s responsibility is to submit to her husband’s leadership as the church submits to Christ’s leadership (5:22-24)

A) Validation

- i) The idea of “Christian marriage” cannot survive as a two headed beast. There can only be one head. Men and women each have clearly defined roles in marriage. The husband’s role as head of the wife is not to rule his wife as a king rules a subject. Nor is it the wife’s responsibility in submitting to her husband to blindly obey her husband’s every wish. Is submission difficult to understand and live out? Yes. Only by living a Spirit influenced life is it possible. Is it a bad thing? Definitely not. How do I know? Because the church’s submission to Christ is a good thing. In fact, it’s incredibly good; there are great benefits and blessings when the church submits to Christ’s leadership. In the same way, it’s incredibly good; there are great benefits and blessings when wives yield to their husband’s leadership. The problem is that we don’t properly understand Christ’s relationship to the church and so we misunderstand what it means for a wife to submit to her husband. **A truly Christian marriage will mirror the relationship between Christ and his church. The way a wife mirrors this relationship is by submitting to her husband’s leadership.**

⁵ Grudem, p. 465-6.

B) Explanation

- i) Listen to [verses 22-24](#). *Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.* Whenever you come to a difficult passage of scripture, instead of jumping ahead to what it means, it's best to nail down what it actually says. Paul seems to be saying that God has laid responsibility on wives to submit to their husbands, to yield to their authority and leadership. He makes it a point that wives are to submit to their own husbands "not to everyone in the church or to all husbands!"⁶ He seems to imply that "the wife's submission to her husband is one aspect of her obedience to the Lord."⁷ That's why the phrase *as to the Lord is there*. Paul also seems to say that the reason behind submission is the theological principal of Christ's headship over the church; in other words, the two are analogous. As the church submits to the direction and leadership of Christ, wives are to submit to the direction and leadership of their husbands. Lastly, wives are to submit *in everything*. Not just the sphere of the husband-wife relationship. "The wife is to be subordinate to her husband in every area of life."⁸ "No part of her life should be outside of her relationship to her husband and outside of subordination to him."⁹ That's what the text says.
- ii) Now to the larger question of what it means. We've already talked about what the word submit means. Submission to authority. Let's spend a moment talking about what it means for Christ to be the head of the church and for the husband to be the head of the wife. If there is resistance to the idea of submission, there is equal if not more resistance to speak of headship in terms of having authority over someone. In the movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, [Maria Portokalos](#) assures her daughter, [Toula](#), that she can change her husband's mind about allowing Toula to go to college and leave the family business by boldly exclaiming, "*The man is the head, but the woman is the neck, and she can turn the head anyway she wants.*"¹⁰ As Maria implies, some Christians believe authority does not factor into the idea of headship at all. They make the case that as rivers have heads or sources, in the same way, husbands are the head or source of the wife; in other words, they come first—and that's all. However, twice before in Ephesians 1:22 and 4:15, the word for head was used. Flip back to 1:22. In this verse, Christ is called the head of the cosmos. One day, all things in the universe will be placed under Christ's feet. The image clearly implies rule and authority. Now look at 4:15 where Christ is called the head of the church. What this verse seems to say is that the church, as the body of Christ, is directed by Christ, by the Head, which leads the body. The head has the authority to guide the body. In other words, in both cases previously in Ephesians, the word means authority, not something else. That's huge. What's even more interesting is that in over 2,000 uses of the word *head* in classical Greek, head is always used in the context of authority. It never means anything different. Authority is always in view.

⁶ Grudem, p. 466.

⁷ Bruce, p. 384.

⁸ O'Brien, p. 417.

⁹ O'Brien, p. 417.

¹⁰ Citation: *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (Playtone Pictures, 2002), directed by Joel Zwick, written by Nia Vardalos; submitted by Jerry De Luca, Montreal West, Quebec, Canada

- iii) At this point some Christians jettison Paul's teaching claiming that it's culturally bound. This is one of those things that was true in a 1st century patriarchal culture but should not be foisted on 21st century culture today. The problem with this view is that the principle behind submission and headship is not the culture. Paul doesn't say wives submit to your husbands because that's what the culture does and it's one of the ways you'll have a witness in the world around you. Rather, he points to the enduring supracultural relationship between Christ and the church; something that's true irrespective of culture. The church always submits to Christ's leadership. There's never a time when it's appropriate for the church not to submit to Christ. It's because of this relationship that wives are asked to submit to husbands. In other words, according to Paul, **a truly Christian marriage must mirror the relationship between Christ and his church.** In the context of what we read in Ephesians 1:10, this is actually quite profound. What this means is that as the wife submits to her husband she is actually living out and fulfilling God's ultimate intentions to bring all things into unity under Christ's headship. Christ's relationship to the church is where it starts. And it's the wife's role to mirror this aspect of the Christ-church relationship.
- iv) That brings us to the church's submission to Christ's authority. If the wife is supposed to pattern her role in the marriage relationship after the church, then how does the church relate to Christ's rule? In other words, what does the church's submission to Christ look like? Let me briefly remind you of a few things based upon our earlier studies. The church gladly submits to Christ's rule in 1:22 because it rejoices in God's plan to subject everything under Christ. As the church submits to Christ's leadership it grows as 2:20-21 describes. As head of the church, Christ indwells the hearts of his people establishing them so that they may be able to comprehend God's great love; Ephesians 3:17, 19. The church receives Christ's gift of grace so that the body might be enriched, 4:7. The church grows in maturity and receives all things necessary for growth from Christ; 4:13, 15, 16. The church is shaped by Christ's teaching; 4:20. The church is deeply loved by Christ; 5:2. It seeks to please the Lord by its conduct; 5:10. The church sings praises to Christ in 5:19 and lives in godly awe of him in 5:21."¹¹ The picture of the church's submission to Christ is painted in glowing terms. Submission is for the church's benefit and brings great glory to God. In the words of Peter O'Brien, "There is no suggestion that this exhortation is intended to stifle the wife's thinking or acting. She should not act unilaterally, but rather submit willingly to her husband's leadership. 'Just as the church should willingly submit to Christ in all things and, if it does so, will not find that stifling, demeaning, or stultifying of growth and freedom, so also wives should willingly submit to their husband in all things and, if they do so, will not find that stifling, demeaning, or stultifying.' As with other admonitions, God sets for these instructions for our good."¹² You see, the problem is not with the biblical idea of submission. In light of the church's submission to Christ, submission is a wonderful thing—a great privilege and blessing. Christ's headship expresses itself "as care rather than control, responsibility rather than rule."¹³ And so there is nothing demeaning whatsoever in a wife submitting to her husband. "To quote Markus Barth..."The

¹¹ O'Brien, p. 416.

¹² O'Brien, p. 418.

¹³ Stott, p. 225.

submission to and respect for the husband to which the wife is specifically admonished is by no means the submissiveness of a pussycat or a crouching dog; Paul is thinking of a voluntary, free, joyful and thankful partnership as the analogy of the relationship of the church to Christ shows.”¹⁴

C) Illustration

- i) Have you ever had to take a pill, some medication, that was so revolting you could barely choke it down?
- ii) Why does submission seem like such a bitter pill to swallow? It's not meant to be that way. As much as we try to make it, the biblical idea of “authority is not synonymous with tyranny.”¹⁵ Wives, it is meant for your good in the same way that the church's submission to Christ is always meant for its good.

D) Application

- i) Again, to reinforce the idea that biblical submission is a good thing; let me clarify what submission is not through some helpful guidelines proposed by Wayne Grudem and John Piper in their book *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*. As application, here's what they suggest.
 - (a) *Submission does not mean putting a husband in the place of Christ.* Christ comes first. A wife's relationship to Christ is of greater importance than her relationship to her husband.
 - (b) *Submission does not mean giving up independent thought.* Wives have minds. The commands in these verses are given to them specifically. They can think and reason and study and respond to God's word independently of their husbands.
 - (c) *Submission does not mean a wife should give up efforts to influence and guide her husband.* Wives should influence their husbands to become Christians or become stronger Christians.
 - (d) *Submission does not mean a wife should give in to every demand of her husband.* We are called to obey God first. And if what a husband asks of a wife is contrary to Scripture, the wife is obligated before God to disobey her husband. We must obey God rather than men. The great reminder in this passage is that husbands can be wrong in their leadership, but Christ never was, nor is in his leadership.
 - (e) *Submission is not based on lesser intelligence or competence.* To read these ideas into Paul's teaching on submission is adding to what scripture teaches.
 - (f) *Submission does not mean being fearful or timid.* The church doesn't cower before Christ, nor should a wife before her husband.
 - (g) *Submission is not inconsistent with equality in Christ.* As difficult as it is for our western, American, modern minds to believe, it is possible to speak of a difference in role while maintaining equality. The most obvious illustration of this is Christ himself, who being in his very nature God-fully equal to God-subordinated himself to take on the role as Son. In the same way, a wife's submission to her husband does not imply inequality.
- ii) Having made these clarifications, how do wives and husbands know if their behavior steps beyond the pattern of submission and headship outlined in this passage? Grudem and Piper go on to suggest that “*When husbands begin to act in selfish, harsh, domineering, or even abusive and cruel ways, they should realize that this is a*

¹⁴ Stott, p. 226.

¹⁵ O'Brien, p. 412.

result of sin, a result of the fall, and is destructive and contrary to God's purposes for them. To act this way will bring great destructiveness in their lives, especially in their marriages."¹⁶ "Similarly, when wives feel rebellious, resentful of their husband's leadership in the family, or when they compete with their husbands for leadership in the family, they should realize that this is a result of sin, a result of the fall. They should not act that way, because to do so will bring destructive consequences to their marriages as well."¹⁷ They continue by saying, "If tyranny by the husband and usurpation of authority by the wife are errors of aggressiveness, there are two other errors, errors of passivity or laziness. For a husband, the other extreme from being a domineering tyrant is to be entirely passive and to fail to take initiative in the family. In this distortion of the biblical pattern, a husband becomes so considerate of his wife that he allows her to make all the decisions and even agrees when she urges him to do wrong. Often such a husband is increasingly absent from the home (either physically or emotionally) and occupies his time exclusively with other concerns. The corresponding error on the part of the wife, opposite of attempting to domineer or usurp authority over her husband, is becoming entirely passive, contributing nothing to the decision-making process of the family and being unwilling to speak words of correction to her husband, even though he is doing wrong. Submission to authority does not mean being entirely passive and agreeing with everything that the person in authority says or suggests."¹⁸

- iii) So, when headship and submission are working right, when these two components mirror Christ's relationship with the church, there is great health and harmony in a marriage. When it works right, "there will be large elements of mutual consultation and seeking of wisdom, and most decisions will come by consensus between husband and wife. For a wife to be submissive to her husband will probably not involve obeying actual commands or directives (though it will sometimes include this), for a husband may rather give requests and seek advice and discussion about the course of action to be followed. Nevertheless, a wife's attitude of submission to her husband's authority will be reflected in numerous words and actions each day that reflect deference to his leadership and acknowledgement of his final responsibility-after discussion, whenever possible-to make decisions affecting the whole family."¹⁹
- iv) So what do you do if as a wife you do not want to or have not submitted to your husband in the ways we have talked about this morning? First of all, I would ask you if you have a problem with the church submitting to Christ. If not, then in the quietness of your heart before God, ask him show you what's behind your beef with submitting to your husband. Is it because you know your husband doesn't love you the way the next section talks about? Let me just say that the "The wife's response to her husband is to be rendered gladly, irrespective of whether the husband will heed the injunctions explicitly addressed to him or not. There is no suggestion that wives are to be submissive to their husband only if their husbands are loving."²⁰ Is the distaste for submission because we live in a climate that curdles at the thought of

¹⁶ Grudem, p. 467.

¹⁷ Grudem, p. 467.

¹⁸ Grudem, p. 467.

¹⁹ Grudem and Piper, *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood*, p. 194-5.

²⁰ O'Brien, p. 418.

anything that might smack of oppression—even though the biblical idea comes nowhere near this? This week, go back to this text, read it some more, study it, pray about it. Husbands, give your wife time to think and pray about this. Don't in the car on the way home turn to your wife and say, "boy, you got a lot to work on." Just wait guys, our time is coming next week.

Conclusion

- As we close this morning, I'm reminded of a quote by the English novelist [George Eliot](#) who said, "*There is a sort of subjection which is the peculiar heritage of largeness and of love; and strength is often only another name for willing bondage to irremediable weakness.*"²¹ Wives, as you contemplate this passage, I hope and pray that you see the largeness, the excitement, the adventure, the grandness of God's design for marriage; the kind of submission with the heritage of largeness and love as Eliot puts it. And husbands, also be reminded that there is a kind of strength in marriage, a kind of headship, that is cowardly; pure weakness. **A truly Christian marriage will mirror the relationship between Christ and his church.** May God bring clarity to our roles as husbands and wives this day. Let's pray.

²¹ George Eliot (1819–80), English novelist, editor. *Felix Holt, The Radical*, ch. 5 (1866). *The Columbia Dictionary of Quotations* is licensed from Columbia University Press. Copyright © 1993, 1995 by Columbia University Press. All rights reserved.