

“Subjection and Sacrifice”

Ephesians 5:21-33



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Mothers had their Day last month. Today it’s dad’s turn.

Our Scripture, however, is about wives and husbands. If this seems a bit odd on *Father’s Day*, here is my reasoning. I have long believed the best thing any father can ever do for his children is love their mother.

So this morning, I’d like to talk with fathers about being good husbands. Wives are encouraged to listen in! A stable marriage has always been God’s plan for effective parenting. But today, the biblical foundation of marriage is fractured.

For example, when I began ministry 48 years ago, one marriage in four ended in divorce. Today, every other marriage is coming apart.

Disturbing as are these statistics, they are not unique. Before we bemoan our age too much, let’s take a moment to see Ephesians 5 against the backdrop of its own time – marriage and family life in the first century.

The Context

Jewish marriage was in disarray. At his prayers, a Jewish man always thanked God that he was not born “a Gentile, a slave, or a woman”! He had reason to be grateful! Like lands, house and sheep a wife was considered another possession of her husband. Her legal rights were meager to nil.

Only the husband could sue for divorce, never the wife. He needed only a cooperative Rabbi to draw up a Bill of Divorce, which read:

“Let this be from me thy writ of divorce and letter of dismissal and deed of liberation, that thou mayest marry whatsoever man thou wilt.”

When two other *men* witnessed the disgruntled husband's signature the wife's dowry was returned, the marriage was over and she was out.

Jesus railed against this practice! "*It was because you were so hardhearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so*" (Matt 19:8). Marriage was eroding in the Jewish world of the first century.

Greek marriages were even less stable. A wife had legal status but little else. She was excluded from public life in order that, as Xenophon the Greek historian put it, "she might see as little as possible, hear as little as possible and ask as little as possible."

Socrates with his typically disarming questions asked, "Is there anyone to whom you entrust more serious matters than to your wife, and is there anyone to whom you talk less?"

Marriage had become a mere social convenience and divorce a matter of masculine caprice. Greek wives had few rights and were granted no appeal.

Roman family life was worse still. Seneca explained that people married to get divorced and divorced to get married. Marriage became a joke and divorce was trivialized. St. Jerome told of a woman in Rome who had married her 23rd husband, while she became his 21st wife!

The moral atmosphere in the Roman Empire was lecherous and adulterous from top to bottom. A thoroughly disgraceful 'husband/father-role model' was projected upon an impressionable next generation.

This was the state of marriage all across the board in the first century. When read against the historical backdrop of its own time, Ephesians 5 glows like a jewel, flows like pure water in a desert, freshens like a breeze on a becalmed sea.

Just imagine. In the cultural chaos of marital disintegration Christian husbands and wives actually lived in mutual fidelity and purity! "It is impossible," writes William Barclay, "to exaggerate the cleansing affect Christianity had on ordinary, everyday home life in the ancient world."

The Text

So, let's examine the cleansing power found in our passage. Notice first the obvious. Ephesians 5 is addressed to *Christians* – not atheists or pagans. Our text offers guidance to Christian husbands and wives, each of whom is “*filled with the Spirit*” of Christ (Eph. 5:18).

Always begin your study of this marital teaching with verse 21. This verse functions as both the conclusion of Paul's preceding teaching about Christian worship and as the introduction of his present teaching about the Christian family. This is the reason verse 21 stands alone in our translation.

“Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

‘Subjection’ is a scary word. Let's be certain we understand what it means and *does not* mean. In Greek, the verb ‘to subject’ is *hupotasso*.

Tasso is a military word meaning ‘to marshal or arrange troops in order for battle.’ The prefix *hupo* is a preposition meaning ‘under.’ So the verb translated ‘to subject’ literally means ‘to arrange in order under.’

Allow me one further grammatical clarification. In English we have something called the ‘voice of the verb’ meaning, the action is either active or passive. But the Greeks also had a ‘middle voice’ which is reflexive. It is *this* voice that is found in our text. It means, ‘I subject *myself*.’

In his *New Testament in Modern English* J. B. Phillips has caught this nuance quite nicely. He writes, Christian husbands and wives are to “*fit in with each other.*” In a Christian marriage no one is being pushed around. Wives and husbands *voluntarily subject themselves to each other.*

Christian marriage practices the grace of fitting in with each other. Just as a wife is subject to her husband, so a husband is subject to his wife. Where does this passion for “*fitting in with each other*” come from? It comes, Paul says, from our “*reverence for Christ.*”

The Bible says Christ subjected himself, that is, he ‘*fit in with*’ God's purpose and will. “*Not what I want but what You want,*” Jesus

prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mt. 26:39). “*Reverence for Christ*” means husbands and wives also adopt a spirit of subjection – “*fitting in with each other.*”

The Husband

In Ephesians 5, Paul begins by addressing wives. His counsel to them covers three verses. Then Paul turns his attention to husbands and addresses them in the next *nine* verses!

Do the math. Paul has three times as much to say to husbands as to wives! You can decide for yourself why this may be so. In part, I suspect, the apostle recognized that many of us men are ‘maritally challenged.’ As husbands we are slow learners and need all the help we can get!

So Paul reminds husbands in the clearest terms, “*love your wives.*” Good counsel! Domestic distress deepens when partners fail to nurture the love that first brought them together as husband and wife.

Dr. Page Williams was the former pastor of the Indian River Presbyterian Church in Fort Pierce, Florida. Several years ago he wrote a helpful book on Christian marriage. His title alone was provocative: *Husbands, Do Yourself a Favor, Love your Wife!*

Handsome dividends await the husband who loves – and keeps-on-loving! – his wife. To borrow language found in the Letter to Ephesus in the Book of Revelation, problems in marriage occur when “*you abandon the love you had at first*” (Rev. 2:4).

Love nourishes all domestic life – the marriage bond, the responsibilities of parenting, even sibling relationships. Husbands are expected to model Christ’s love in and for their families. Everything gets focused in this single clear call, “*Husbands, love your wives.*”

Alas, some women have taken umbrage at this. They complain that wives are expected to “*be subject*” to their husbands. But husbands are required ‘merely’ to “*love their wives.*”

Limit this counsel to a worldly setting and the admonition ‘to love’ could indeed be trivialized. But this is a biblical context. Know quite certainly, love is never trivial in the Bible! According to Paul, husbands are to love their wives with the very same kind of love Christ showed.

If any husband plays dumb at this point, claiming he isn’t sure how this kind of love works, Paul paints a vivid picture. “*Love your wife,*” he says, “*just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.*”

For years, I allowed my over-familiarity with these biblical sounding words to shield from me the raw and central meaning of the text itself. Then I read C. S. Lewis’ *The Four Loves* and it hit me! Listen to the way the great apologist put it.

“The husband is the head of the wife just in so far as he is to her what Christ is to the church. He is to love her as Christ loved the church – read on! – *and gave his life for her.* This headship, then, is most fully embodied...in him whose marriage is most like a crucifixion; whose wife receives most and gives least...

“This terrible coronation is to be seen not in the joys of any man’s marriage but in its sorrows, in the sickness and sufferings of a good wife or the faults of a bad one...The sternest feminist need not grudge my sex the crown offered to it either in the pagan or in the Christian mystery. For the one is of paper and the other of thorns!” (chapter V, paragraphs 26 and 28).

The point is as Christian husbands we are not only to be *subject* to our wives, we are to *sacrifice* our lives for them! Following the example of Christ’s sacrificial love for the church, husbands are to love their wives – *to death!*

Still today, some women resent Ephesians 5, misreading the text as saying wives alone are to be ‘in subjection.’ But if language conveys any meaning at all, it is husbands who might be expected to get up-in-arms over this text. Christian husbands are called both to *subjection* and to *sacrifice*.

Such humble behavior and sacrificial living is not motivated by your wife’s beauty or charm. Just like you, she may have “spots and

wrinkles and blemishes.’ No one is perfect. But love produces its own beauty. God’s love for you is beautiful and beautifies all your domestic relationships.

The Love

So, at least, George Matheson learned. He was a Scots Presbyterian pastor – a brilliant scholar and a stirring preacher. But the fact best known about his life is that he was blind, went blind at the age of nineteen.

All his higher education and pastoral ministries were accomplished without benefit of sight. But what he ‘saw’ and cherished with perfect clarity was the inner life of faith and devotion.

He is best known to us as the author of the beloved hymn “O Love that Wilt Not Let Me Go.” The 125th anniversary of the writing of this hymn occurred on June 6, just a week-and-a-half ago. Back in 1882, June 6 was the day of his sister’s wedding.

That evening Matheson found himself home alone as the words to this hymn began springing to life spontaneously. He later explained it flowed, “like a dayspring from on high,” almost as if it was “dictated to me by some inward voice...the whole poem being completed in five minutes.”

He confessed that the spiritual energy for the hymn grew out of an undefined period of “severe suffering.” Many believe he meant by that phrase the memories of a terrible pain he experienced when a young woman he had loved years earlier jilted him upon learning he was going blind.

Matheson never married. But he did know love – God’s “love that wilt not let me go.” So may it be for us as well. Accept God’s love! Then, as a father and a husband, show Christ’s love to the mother of your children.



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