

*Christ's Marriage to the Church: Ephesians 5:22-33*  
 Ben Reaach, Three Rivers Grace Church  
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We're coming close to the end of our marriage series now, and this morning we come to a passage that I've been referring to repeatedly throughout this series. Ephesians 5 is such an important marriage text. And it's about much more than marriage, as we'll see. Marriage is about Christ and the church. So this passage is about wives and husbands and has a lot of weighty implications for wives and husbands. The text is also about Christ and the church. So it also has a lot of weighty and wonderful Gospel truth.

**Ray Ortlund, Jr.** has a very intriguing book with a provocative title as it relates to the topic of idolatry and adultery – idolatry being spiritual adultery. The Old Testament book of Hosea is one place where those themes are very apparent. The title is, *Whoredom: God's Unfaithful Wife in Biblical Theology*.<sup>1</sup> Ortlund makes the point so well that marriage is about God's marriage to His people. It's about Christ's marriage to the church. Here's one quote, "Human marriage has always been only penultimate. No marriage is or can be a final experience. And every human marriage is truest to itself when it points beyond itself, representing something of Christ and the church in their perfect union" (159).

That's the point I want us to see very clearly in Scripture. For those of us who are married, our marriages are meant to be a reflection of that glorious, eternal marriage between Christ and His bride, the church. Therefore marriage should take on a whole new significance in our minds and hearts. And it's important for all of us to get this. Not only married couples, but children and youth and single adults. This is about Christ and the church, and so it's important to all of us.

The main point in our passage this morning is verse 32, "This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church." This is the all-important truth about marriage, that it was designed by God from the very beginning to be a parable of Christ and the church. Paul calls this a mystery (*mystērion*). In the Vulgate this was translated with the Latin word *sacramentum*, and thus the Roman Catholic understanding of marriage is that it is a sacrament which conveys grace. That's not Paul's point, though. His main point isn't even about human marriage. The mystery is something that was previously concealed and has now been revealed. That's how Paul uses the word "mystery." And what mystery is he referring to in this verse? He's referring to the profound mystery that human marriage as

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<sup>1</sup> Eerdmans, 1996.

described in Genesis 2:24 was intended by God from the very beginning as a picture of Christ and the church. Through the Old Testament that fact was not plainly visible. It was foreshadowed in places like Hosea, but not until the New Testament and the coming of Christ is this mystery now clearly revealed.

So as we look at the specific instructions in this passage, I want to make sure that this is at the center of everything. This is not simply a how-to manual for marriage. It is much more than that. Husbands and wives have specific roles, and we are to act toward one another in certain ways, because we are living out the drama of Christ's love for the church and the church's glad submission to Christ.

Here's another quote from **Ray Ortlund Jr.** He says of this verse that "Paul's foremost interest does not lie in human marriage as such, for its own sake. He is not a family therapist; he is a steward of the mysteries of God (1 Cor 4:1). Human marriage claims his personal attention primarily because it speaks of Christ and the church, and he longs for the married people reading his letter to honour Christ in their marriages" (158). That's exactly what I want the focus to be as we delve into these instructions. Our desire should be that we honor Christ in our marriages. Here's how we are to do so.

### **Wives, Submit to Your Own Husbands (verses 22-24)**

This section starts with 3 verses addressed to wives and then a longer passage addressed to husbands. The wife is to submit to her husband as to the Lord, and the husband is to love his wife sacrificially as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. This is how our marriages are to reflect the Gospel.

Many people stumble over these verses about submission. Especially in our culture that applauds autonomy and even rebellion, it seems un-American to command someone to submit to someone else. So I just want to acknowledge up front that I know this may be a difficult teaching for some of you here. My prayer for you is that God will give you eyes to see that there is something even better than certain American ideals. In fact, there may actually be something here that is so counter-cultural but at the same time so wonderful and fulfilling. I hope that you'll listen with an open mind and consider what God's Word is saying here about how husbands and wives are to relate to each other. After all, this is the authoritative and good Word of God to us. This deserves our attention and our obedience.

### **Submission is NOT . . .**

Let me start by trying to define submission in terms of what it is not, and then positively what it is. First of all, **submission**

**does NOT mean that you follow your husband into sin.** This command to submit to your husband in everything does not cancel out the other commands in the Bible. If your husband wants you to lie or cheat or engage in some kind of sexual immorality, you must refuse. Your ultimate allegiance must be to Christ, and you cannot forsake Christ out of submission to your husband.

Secondly, **submission does NOT mean that the wife is a doormat** and is so passive that she never expresses her opinion. Submission doesn't mean silence or servility. Submission is something that a wife must do voluntarily and willingly, and it's not at odds with having strong opinions and creative ideas and taking the initiative.

Thirdly, **submission does NOT mean that wives should subject themselves to abuse.** It's a very sad thing that some men will misuse verses like this and use them to justify abusive behavior toward their wife.

And some women may feel trapped in that predicament and may even feel like they're supposed to endure abuse out of obedience to this command. But if you're in an abusive relationship, you need to seek refuge. You need to get out of that situation and find protection for yourself and your children. If you're in danger you need to physically separate at least for a time.

So submission does NOT mean that you follow your husband into sin, it does NOT mean that you're a doormat, and it does NOT mean that you allow yourself to be abused.

### **Submission IS . . .**

So what *does* submission mean? **The essence of submission is recognizing that God has put your husband in a position of authority over you, and you are to respect him and encourage him and follow him as you recognize that God-given authority.** There may be certain decisions about money, or time or where to live or where to send the kids for school, or whether you (the wife) should work outside the home or not. And the husband and wife should talk through those big decisions, and pray together, and seek one mind on what to do. Wives need to resist the temptation to be divisive and quarrelsome. Wives, you should share your opinions and your feelings in a humble way, and if you sense your husband leading in a different direction than what you personally desire, you need to submit to his leadership and support him.

Stacy and I were recently making some decisions about holiday plans. Of course the holidays can be lots of fun and can also be super stressful. Even making the plans can be both fun and

also stressful. A couple weeks ago I brought up the subject and Stacy just said, “I’ve had a really rough day, and I don’t want to talk about it.” And I respected that. End of conversation. This past week I brought it up again and we had a good conversation about it. Stacy shared her thoughts on how this scenario might work out but how this other scenario would probably be difficult. And she also said, “Whatever you think we should do, I’ll support you.” That meant a lot to me. And do you know what that made me want to do. It made me want to accommodate her desires as best as I possibly can. And as I seek to love her and care for her, she’s more likely to say things like, “I’ll support whatever you decide.”

This biblical model of the husband leading and loving and the wife submitting and respecting, it’s a two-way street. The husband does have the ultimate responsibility to lead in a godly way. And when he does, it makes it a lot easier for the wife to respect him and submit to him. But some women may say, “Well my husband doesn’t lead the way he should! He’s not the leader he should be, therefore I’m not going to submit.” In this way the wife tries to justify her dominance in the marriage and in the family. “If he won’t lead, then I will,” is her attitude, whether she ever says that out loud or not.

Now it’s absolutely true that the husband needs to step up and lead. But just like the husband’s godly leadership makes it easier for the wife to respect him and submit to him, the wife’s submission and respect for her husband makes it easier for him to lead. It also makes him feel the weight of his leadership responsibility.

You know how it makes me feel when Stacy says things like, “I’ll support whatever you decide”? I don’t go off and say, “Cool, I’ll just do whatever I want then” . . . like it’s a license to be selfish and stupid. No, not at all. When I know that she is trusting me and ready to follow me, that makes me all the more serious in my desire to do the wise thing, the godly thing, the thing that’s going to most benefit my wife and family, even if it means sacrifice on my part.

Wives, here’s a homework assignment for you. Some of you probably already excel in this, but maybe some of you need some encouragement to do this better. I want to exhort you to look for qualities in your husband’s life that you admire. He’s not perfect, of course. He’s a sinner, just like you are. But by God’s grace there are some admirable qualities that you can point out in his life and make a big deal about. Be a cheerleader for him. Give grace to your husband by overlooking the imperfections, and rather focus on the good things, and you may find that your

encouragement of him and your willingness to submit to him changes him far more than your criticism ever could. Give it a try.

### **Husbands, Love Your Wives (verses 25-33)**

The role of the husband in the marriage is to be the sacrificial leader. People may recoil at the notion of wifely submission. But I think that if we call men to this standard of sacrificial leadership, then wifely submission becomes a delight rather than mere duty.

Think of our relationship to Christ. Is it a duty to follow Christ? Yes, of course. But it is a delightful duty. He laid down His life for us. He gave up everything for us. He suffered the punishment for our sin. And then He rose victorious from the grave, He ascended to heaven, He sits at the Father's right hand, He is head over us and deserves our full allegiance. Who else would we want as our leader and head?

This is what our marriages should reflect. The husband leading sacrificially and lovingly, for the good of his wife. And the wife joyfully following her husband, knowing his love for her and enjoying the protection and provision of being under his headship.

### **Headship**

Notice again in verses 23-24 that “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.” Do you see the relationship between headship and submission? The wife submits to her husband, because he is the head. And the church submits to Christ, because He is the head.

As Paul draws this analogy between Christ's relationship to the church and the husband's relationship to his wife, the meaning of this word “head” becomes very clear. It means authority. It means leadership. As Christians who make up the body of Christ, the Bible is very clear that Christ is our authority. He is our leader. He is the One we look to for guidance and direction, and it is a joy to do that, because we know He loves us.

Similarly, God has ordained that the husband be the authority over his wife. He is the head of the home. He is the leader of the family. And the wife can find much joy in submitting to her husband, especially when she knows he loves her and is not leading selfishly, but sacrificially and in a godly manner.

### **Sacrifice for the Purpose of Sanctification**

A significant aspect of this headship (leadership) is sacrifice for the purpose of sanctification. We see this in verses

25-27, in which the model is the sacrifice Christ made in order to sanctify the church.

This is the Gospel, brothers and sisters. Christ loved the church and died on her behalf. For those who are repenting of sin and casting themselves on the mercy of Christ, we are forgiven, redeemed, saved from God's wrath and heirs of heaven. Christ saves us, and He sanctifies us. This is the nature of His loving leadership, and this is the model for how husbands are to love their wives. Again, our marriages are to be a display of the Gospel. Husbands, we must be willing to sacrifice ourselves for the sake of our wives.

Greek history tells of a poignant display of this kind of love. There was a woman who was condemned to die because she had been accused of treason. Her husband was a general of King Cyrus, the ruler of Persia. And when this general found out what was going on, he rushed into Cyrus' throne room, threw himself on the floor and said, "Oh, my Lord Cyrus, take my life instead of hers. Let me die in her place." The King was moved by the man's willingness to sacrifice himself for his wife, and the King responded, "Love like that must not be spoiled by death." So he let them go. As the couple walked away joyfully, the man said to his wife, "Did you notice how kindly the king looked at us when he gave you the pardon?" The wife replied, "I had no eyes for the king. I saw only the man who was willing to die in my place."<sup>2</sup> That's powerful. Men, do you want your wife to view you like that? Look for ways to make sacrifices on her behalf. That's the kind of leader we are to be.

Notice, by the way, that Paul does not begin the section addressed to husbands by saying, "Exercise your headship!" He doesn't say, "Wives, submit to your husbands, and husbands, make sure your wives submit." No, there is no instruction to the husband to demand submission or demand respect. The command is not to exercise your authority by demanding submission, but the command is to love your wife, "as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." This is not an authority that says, "serve me, meet my needs, fulfill my selfish desires." On the contrary, this is an authority and a leadership that is sacrificial for the purpose of benefiting your wife.

Many of the men in this church just had a great time at our men's retreat the past couple days. Bruce Bickel spoke on leadership, and we learned a lot of great things. A lot of things that are so applicable in living out this passage. Bruce had a very simple definition of leadership, that it is influencing the behavior of other people. We talked about this at the dinner table last night

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<sup>2</sup> This story is recorded by James Montgomery Boice in *Ephesians: An Expository Commentary*, page 200.

when I got home. If one of the kids says, “Oh, I don’t like this meal,” and then Micah, our 2 year old, echoes, “Oh, I don’t like this” . . . that’s leadership. The 2 year old has been influenced / led by one of the older kids. It’s negative leadership, but it’s leadership. Then we tried to give some positive examples, too. Like doing the right thing in your class at school, and your example being a positive influence on others. Leadership is influencing the behavior of other people.

Bruce also had a definition for servant leadership, which made me think of our passage here in Ephesians 5, especially since I knew I’d be preaching this sermon today. He said that servant leadership is the quiet quest for anonymity. You know what anonymity is? To be anonymous means you are not named. You don’t get the recognition. A quiet quest for anonymity means it’s not about you. You are calling attention to what you represent, not calling attention to yourself. For a husband, servant leadership means you are all about honoring Christ in your marriage and family. It’s not about you. It’s about Christ. You make sacrifices for your wife. You serve her, in order to help her sanctification process, in order that Christ may be honored in her life, and your life, and your relationship with one another.

The benefits that these verses are talking about are spiritual benefits. Christ loved us and gave himself up for us in order to sanctify us (vs. 26), that is, set us apart. And he washed away our sins, and he is going to perfect us in the end (vs. 27). So just as Christ sacrificed himself in order to bring His bride, the church, into an everlasting relationship with Himself, husbands need to be utterly committed to their wives’ spiritual well-being. We need to make sacrifices in order to encourage our wives in their relationship with Christ. We need to protect our wives from evil and from temptations and from spiritual apathy.

It has to start with us, men. We must take the initiative in sanctifying our marriages. And to do that we must begin by giving attention to our own personal sanctification. Husbands, what are you doing to foster a greater love for Jesus in your own heart? Before we even think about how to encourage our wives or children, we need to think about how we’re growing personally. Are you spending time in prayer? Are you studying the Scriptures? Are you seeking godly counsel from mature men?

As we do these things we then need to step up and become the spiritual leaders in our homes. This will involve things like initiating prayer times of family Bible study. This could happen around the breakfast table or around the dinner table or at bedtime. And this doesn’t mean that you always have to be the one who reads to the family or leads the devotion. Maybe your wife knows more about the Bible than you do, and you’re kind of intimidated

by that. That's OK. What you can do, though, is be the one who gathers the family together and says, "Let's read God's Word." We also need to make sure our family is part of Sunday school and worship services on a regular basis. It's about taking the initiative. It's about leading in a godly way. It's about having that influence on your family that's pointing them to Christ. It's about setting a holy example for our wives and children.

We should pursue spiritual conversations with our wives. You should share with your wife what you're learning from God's Word, and ask her what she's learning. You should share about the sins you're struggling against, and how you're fighting to resist temptations, and you should ask her how she's doing in her fight against sin. This may be uncomfortable and difficult if you're not in the practice of talking about these things, and especially if you're not giving appropriate attention to your own spiritual walk. But it might begin just by confessing to your wife that you know you're not leading the family as you should, but you want to change. And then you need to follow through with some very concrete and consistent things.

### **Love Your Wife as Yourself**

In the next section, verses 28-30, Paul continues the analogy of Christ's love for the church, but he also draws an analogy to the husband's love for himself. This could be seen as an application of the second greatest command, "love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev 19:18). Or the Golden Rule, "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them" (Matt 7:12). There is an assumption that we all care for our own bodies. We may not always do that very well, but we do have that inherent self-interest. And in this sense, it's not necessarily a bad thing. It's just neutral. We feel hungry, and we want to find food for our bodies. We feel sleepy, and we give our bodies rest. We show love for our own bodies in all kinds of ways, and Paul says that husbands should treat their wives in the same way.

We nourish and cherish our own bodies, just as Christ nourishes and cherishes the church, because we are members of his body, and husbands should nourish and cherish their wives. Because just like we are members of Christ's body, husbands and wives have become one flesh, as the next verse reminds us. We are one flesh, so to neglect your wife is to neglect yourself.

So how do husbands nourish and cherish their wives? I've already talked about this some in terms of spiritual leadership in the home. But physical provisions (like food and shelter and clothing) are also an important responsibility that the husband needs to accept. The husband must be a leader and a protector and a provider. He needs to work in order to care for his wife and



children. Just like stepping up and leading your family in Bible reading and prayer, it's also important for you to be the leader in providing for your family in the practical needs of life.

We need to make sacrifices in order to love our wives the way we should. This will happen in big ways and small ways. We need to be ready to lay down our lives in order to protect her. And we also need to be willing to lay down our hobbies in order to be attentive to her needs and desires. Most of us will never have the opportunity to express our sacrificial love by giving up our very life. But I read of a woman who said to her husband, "Dear, I know that you are willing to die for me; you have told me that many times. But while you're waiting to die, could you help dry the dishes." There are countless ways that a husband can provide for and protect his wife.

Also, in terms of cherishing, we need to be intentional about nurturing and demonstrating a romantic passion for our wives. C. J. Mahaney, in his book *Sex, Romance, and the Glory of God*, has a lot of very practical suggestions for how you can cherish your wife. Things like having a regular date night, calling your wife during the day just to tell her you love her, sending her cards or writing letters, giving her gifts, surprising her with a romantic date or getaway. Take the lead in making your marriage a priority. Even with young kids at home (don't let that be an excuse), we need to make the effort to find a babysitter, plan an outing, and get away for a little while to focus on the marriage relationship and be reminded that we're lovers not just parents or business partners.

A couple weeks ago I stopped by Trader Joes to get Stacy some flowers. She was having kind of a tough day (I think it was the same day I was talking to her about those holiday plans), and I was thinking of how to lift her spirits. So I decided that getting some flowers might be a simple way of showing my love for her and encouraging her. I also decided to get some Australian licorice, for myself, because I really like it. When I got to the counter the lady commented on the nice flowers. I said, "Yeah, I hope my wife will like them." Then she said, "Oh and licorice, too, that's a nice touch." I didn't tell her that the licorice was for me. But then she said, "I won't ask what you did wrong." She was assuming I was in the doghouse and trying to earn back my wife's favor. I have bought flowers on those occasions, too. But this wasn't one of them. I was actually just trying to do something nice for Stacy, and it was very well received. And I enjoyed the licorice too and even shared some of that with Stacy.

I would encourage all of us who are husbands here to be proactive in your acts of kindness and romantic gestures toward your wife. Don't just do nice things when you're trying to recover

from something stupid or insensitive you did. Remember how you pursued her when you were dating her. Keep pursuing her. Think of ways you can go out of your way to communicate your love in memorable and meaningful ways.

### **Reversal of the Curse**

There is much more that could be said about this passage, both in terms of exposition and application. And I hope that you'll be thinking about the many ways that these truths apply to your own marriage.

I want to close by highlighting the way that these instructions are a reversal of the curse. A few weeks ago we looked at the beauty of marriage before the Fall. Then we saw the devastating effects of sin on the marriage relationship and the curse that came upon the man and the woman. In Genesis 3:16 the Lord says to the woman, "Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." The desire that He's talking about there is a sinful desire, a desire to control and manipulate. That's how God's good design for the woman degenerates in the Fall. And the man will rule over her, and because of sin this often turns into a domineering type of rule.

Ephesians 5 gives us a picture of marriage redeemed. We've seen marriage in creation, and then in the Fall, and now we see what it can become in light of Christ's redemption. The wife submits to her husband and respects her husband. And the husband loves his wife sacrificially. I hope that you see the glory of this picture, because it's the picture of Christ and the church.

God's design for marriage is truly a beautiful thing, and it saddens me that so many men and women rebel against this beautiful picture that reflects Christ's relationship to the church. Men deny the responsibility of their leadership role, and women usurp that authority, and then the Gospel is distorted and the husband and wife miss out on the joy of their God-given roles. I pray that for those of you who are married that you will pursue the joy of God's plan for husbands and wives. And for all of us, I pray that we will see the beauty of Christ's sacrificial love for us and our delightful duty to submit to His leadership.