

# Focus on the Family

## Spirit-Filled Wives

*Ephesians 5:22-24*

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November 25, 2018

## Spirit-Filled Wives

### Scripture

Today we continue our sermon series in Ephesians 5:21-6:9 that I am calling, “Focus on the Family.”

Paul’s letter to the Ephesians explains what God has done in Christ—and continues to do today through the Holy Spirit—in building a new society (of Christians) in the midst of the old society (of non-Christians). Paul describes our union with Christ, and the resulting unity of all Christians, regardless of ethnicity, gender, age, background, or status.

The section of Paul’s letter we are studying in this sermon series is Ephesians 5:21-6:9. The governing command is really back in Ephesians 5:18, where Paul instructed Christians to “be filled with the Spirit.” Then Paul said being filled with the Spirit would have four consequences, or evidences (that correspond to the four participles in verses 19-21): fellowship (5:19a), worship (5:19b), gratitude (5:20), and submission (5:21).

This final consequence, or evidence, of *submission* (in Ephesians 5:21) then became for Paul the command for all that follows. Paul’s command of mutual submission is in fact the necessary foundation for the three sets of relationships (of wives and husbands, children and parents, and bondservants and masters) in Ephesians 5:22-6:9.

In the next few weeks we will examine these three sets of relationships. Today, however, we begin by examining Paul’s direction to Spirit-filled wives.

Let’s read about Spirit-filled wives in Ephesians 5:22-24, although for the sake of context, I shall also read verses 18b and 21:

<sup>18</sup> ...be filled with the Spirit,...<sup>21</sup> submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

<sup>22</sup> **Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.** <sup>23</sup> **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.** <sup>24</sup> **Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.** (Ephesians 5:22-24)

## Introduction

In his commentary on Ephesians, Bryan Chapell tells the story about when Sarah Ferguson (Fergie) married Britain's Prince Andrew. The world marveled at the days of pageantry surrounding the wedding. But what more remember is the moment when their vows were taken. Fergie was supposed to say to her groom, "I promise to love, honor, and *obey*...." She did say the phrase, but not without a sideways grin at the prince that said much more. Her look could hardly have articulated more clearly the new duchess's thought: "You've got to be kidding. Nobody really believes those anachronisms about wifely submission anymore, and you had better not!"<sup>1</sup>

Fergie said her vows, but her entire demeanor communicated that she did not mean what she said. Sadly, her attitude is common today of many, if not most, in our western culture.

Martin Luther called Ephesians 5:21-6:9 Paul's Ephesian *Hauptstafeln* (which literally means "house table"). It indicates the household table of duties for three sets of relationships: wives and husbands (5:22-33), children and parents (6:1-4), and

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<sup>1</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Ephesians*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 290.

bondservants and masters (6:5-9). Today, I want to examine the household table of duties for wives (5:22-24).

## Lesson

The submission of wives in Ephesians 5:22-24 shows us Spirit-filled wives.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Duty of Submission (5:22a)
2. The Motive for Submission (5:22b)
3. The Rationale for Submission (5:23)
4. The Model of Submission (5:24)

### I. The Duty of Submission (5:22a)

First, let's look at the duty of submission.

Paul said in verse 22a, **“Wives, submit to your own husbands.”** The word **“submit”** is not actually in the text of verse 22a. The Greek text literally reads, “Wives, to your own husbands.” The verb, **“submit,”** is supplied from verse 21, where Paul said, “...submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.” So, in God's new society, the duty of Christian wives, who are filled with the Spirit, is as Paul said, **“Wives, submit to your own husbands.”**

Now, I would like to note several points.

*First, Paul's instruction is given to Christians living in God's new society.* Non-Christians do not obey what God has commanded Christians to do. The first thing a non-Christian must do is repent of his or her sin and trust in Jesus. In other words, God's primary command to non-Christians is to become Christians. Only then will they begin to obey God's commands. So, Paul's

household table of duties is intended to guide Christians in what God expects of them in God's new society.

*Second, Paul's instruction to wives has been perverted and abused by sinful men.* In fact, I would say that the traditional statement of the vow by the wife to "promise to love, honor, and *obey*" is in fact incorrect. Paul does *not* tell wives to obey their husbands. In his household table of duties, children and bondservants are commanded to *obey* their parents and masters (6:1; 6:5). However, wives are not commanded to *obey*, but rather to **submit** to their own husbands. Sadly, far too many sinful husbands have abused this text. They order and boss their wives around as if they are children or, worse, bondservants, to do their every bidding. And that is a wicked perversion of this glorious text. As Kent Hughes says, "God's holy Word in the hands of a religious fool can do immense harm."<sup>2</sup>

*Third, a Christian wife submits only to her own husband and not to every man.* This text is sometimes abused to say that women should submit to men. But that is not what Paul says. He says, **"Wives, submit to your own husbands."** Yes, there is a mutual submission of all Christians to one another, as Paul said in Ephesians 5:21, "...submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ." But, here in verse 22a, Paul teaches that wives have a particular duty of submission only to their own husbands. So, a Christian husband has no authority over any other wife. And a Christian wife does not submit to any other husband other than her own husband.

*And fourth, any Christian woman entering into marriage does so voluntarily.* When a Christian woman agrees to marry a man, she does so voluntarily. And when she marries, as a Christian, she

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<sup>2</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 179–181.

must understand that she is voluntarily committing herself to the duties of a wife, one of which is to submit to her own husband. No Christian woman should be surprised when she gets married to learn that she now has to submit to her husband.

## **II. The Motive for Submission (5:22b)**

Second, let's notice the motive for submission.

Why would a Christian wife want to submit to her husband? What in the world would motivate any Christian wife to submit to her husband? Paul said that the motive for submission, in verse 22b, is **“as to the Lord.”**

Remember, Paul is writing about how Spirit-filled Christians live in God's new society. Marriages in Paul's day were radically different than today. Wives had no status and were treated very poorly. So, Paul is giving instructions about how Christian wives and Christian husbands, Christian children and Christian parents, Christian bondservants and Christian masters relate to one another.

Spirit-filled Christian wives relate to their husbands by submitting to them. And the motive for doing so is because they want to honor the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave them new life in himself. The motive for Christian wives is part of their discipleship. A Christian wife is not submitting to her husband because the church tells her to do so, and it is not because her husband tells her to do so. It is because she wants to honor Christ. A Christian wife submits to her husband because she loves Christ and wants to honor him in her life.

## **III. The Rationale for Submission (5:23)**

Third, let's observe the rationale for submission.

Paul said in verse 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.”** There has been an attempt to interpret **“head”** to mean “source” or “origin” rather than “authority over.” But that is not what the word **“head”** means.

One of my New Testament professors was Dr. Wayne Grudem. During a course I had with him, he told us that he had just finished a careful study of the word **“head”** (*kephale*). In fact, he had examined all 2,336 instances of *kephale* in all of classical Greek literature. He concluded, “No instances were discovered in which *kephale* had the meaning ‘source, origin.’”<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, in the context of verse 23 the word **“head”** refers to authority because Paul goes on to say that it is **“even as Christ is the head of the church, his body.”** In a similar way that Christ has authority over his church, a husband has authority over his wife.

Commentator Kent Hughes notes that a husband’s headship carries immense responsibility. In May 1943 Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote his famous *Wedding Sermon from a Prison Cell* to his close friend Eberhard Bethge and his fiancée Renate Schleicher. As he came toward the end, he said:

Now when the husband is called “the head of the wife,” and it goes on to say “as Christ is the head of the church” (Ephesians 5:23), something of the divine splendor is reflected in our earthly relationships, and this reflection we should recognize and honor. The dignity that is here ascribed to the man lies, not in any capacities or qualities of his own, but in the office conferred on him by his marriage. The wife should see her husband clothed in this dignity. But for him it

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<sup>3</sup> Wayne Grudem, *The Role Relationship of Men and Women*, “Does *Kephale* (‘Head’) Mean ‘Source’ or ‘Authority Over’ in Greek Literature? A Survey of 2,336 Examples,” ed. George W. Knight III (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 50.

is he who is responsible for his wife, for their marriage, and for their home. On him falls the care and protection of the family; he represents it to the outside world; he is its mainstay and comfort; he is the master of the house, who exhorts, punishes, helps, and comforts, and stands for it before God.<sup>4</sup>

Hughes notes, “Indeed, both husband and wife bear mutual responsibility, but he, by his position, stands in the way of greater judgment. Headship is a fearful thing! When a husband makes difficult decisions, he should do so with the full counsel of his wife. And he should do so with great humility and dependence on the Lord, realizing his fallibility and responsibility.”<sup>5</sup>

#### IV. The Model of Submission (5:24)

And fourth, let’s look at the model of submission.

Paul said in verse 24, **“Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.”** The model for marriage is Christ and the church. The model of submission is the church in her relationship to Christ.

There is nothing demeaning about this. We do not hear Christians chafing under submission to Christ. We do not hear people saying that the church and Christ are co-equal. No, Christ is the head and the church is the body. Christ has authority, and the church submits. In the same way, the husband is the head of the wife. The husband has authority, and his wife submits to his authority. John Stott quotes Markus Barth, “The

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<sup>4</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers From Prison* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 45.

<sup>5</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*, 183–184.



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.”<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the submission of wives in Ephesians 5:22-24, let wives submit to their own husbands, as to the Lord.

John Stott notes that a wife’s submission to her own husband is but another aspect of love. The essence of Paul’s instruction to wives and husbands is, “Wives submit, husbands love.” There is a recognition in this relationship that God has designed headship for the husband. “Yet,” says Stott, “when we try to define the two verbs, it is not easy to distinguish clearly between them. What does it mean to ‘submit’? It is to give oneself up to somebody. What does it mean to ‘love’? It is to give oneself up for somebody, as Christ ‘gave himself up’ for the church. Thus ‘submission’ and ‘love’ are two aspects of the very same thing, namely of that selfless self-giving which is the foundation of an enduring and growing marriage.”<sup>7</sup>

Bryan Chapell says that wives are to submit to their husbands (and husbands are to love their wives) out of reverence for what Christ has done for us. Ultimately each of us is to be continuing Christ’s sacrificial work in each other out of love for him. Just as Jesus’ sacrifice was a fragrance of love that

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<sup>6</sup> John R. W. Stott, *God’s New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 226.

<sup>7</sup> John R. W. Stott, *God’s New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, 235.

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pleased God, so our ultimate desire to fulfill our marital responsibility comes from the knowledge that it, too, brings pleasure to the God of grace. He illustrated this truth as follows:

I sensed a bit of this divine pleasure when an elderly couple sat before me in church. They have been lifelong in the church and wed for more than sixty years. The husband's Bible should be collected for a museum of the saints. He has taken and cross-indexed sermon notes in that Bible for most of the sixty years of the marriage. It is a masterpiece of Bible love and knowledge. Yet, despite that legacy of love for the Lord's Word, the man has faced health challenges in recent years that have sometimes challenged his memory. On that particular Sunday that the couple sat before me, he could not find the book of Esther when the pastor announced the text for the sermon.

I watched him flip pages, look confused, and then turn more pages with a look of desperation growing on his face. His frantic motions caught his wife's attention. And with a movement of her hand as subtle as a whispered kiss, she reached over and turned his Bible to the appropriate page. Then, without looking at him she smiled and patted his knee in reassurance.

The gestures were so simple, but they well demonstrated a love that had matured in the Lord for more than sixty years. She used the gifts and abilities that were hers to help her husband, to support him in his worship, and to show respect for him even when his limitations meant that he may no longer have deserved such honor. The gestures would have been easier if she had not strained to be so subtle, but her goal was his glory. In preserving that, she dignified herself, and surely brought pleasure to God.

Who witnessed this wife's giving of herself in that caring

touch? Perhaps no one on earth beyond my wife and me witnessed this dear woman's reverent care for her husband. Yet I pray that on that day she sensed heaven's regard for the beauty of her service. And I pray that she, along with all Christian wives, will know and claim the eternal value and scriptural glory of every wife who so submits to her husband out of reverence for Christ.<sup>8</sup>

May God help every Christian wife submit to her own husband, as to the Lord. Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Ephesians*, 304.

# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church  
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and membership in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike maturity,  
equip them for their ministry in the church  
and life mission in the world,  
in order to magnify God's name.*

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