

Ephesians 5:21-24

Introduction (Refer to the outline below)

As Christians who have been loved and redeemed by God, we are to watch carefully how we walk – how we act, and speak, and think every moment of every day. We shouldn't live as unwise people, but as wise, buying up the time, because the days are evil. We shouldn't be foolish, but rather understand what the will of the Lord is – how His gracious, saving will is to work itself out in our lives every moment of every day. We shouldn't get drunk with wine, but instead be filled in the Spirit – filled with all the fullness of God, in Christ Jesus, through the Spirit. When we're filled with all the fullness of God in the Spirit, we have a *deep experiential* understanding of His gracious saving will, and this then overflows in *constant* praise, and thanksgiving, and celebration (*speaking* to one another with psalms and hymns and songs that are spiritual, *singing* and *psalmodizing* in your heart to the Lord, *giving thanks* always for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even to the Father). Now this morning, Paul adds to this list of “ing's” a fourth:

¹⁵WATCH CAREFULLY THEREFORE HOW YOU WALK,

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**NOT** as unwise

***BUT*** as wise, <sup>16</sup>buying up the time, because the days are evil.

<sup>17</sup>Because of this, do **NOT** be foolish,

***BUT*** understand what the will of the Lord is.

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¹⁸And do **NOT** get drunk with wine, in which is dissipation,

BUT be filled in the Spirit,

(1) ¹⁹*speaking* to one another with *psalms* and hymns and *songs* that are spiritual,

(2) *singing* and *psalmodizing* in your heart to the Lord,

(3) ²⁰*giving thanks* always for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even to the Father,

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(4) <sup>21</sup>*submitting* to one another in the fear of Christ,

<sup>22</sup>*wives* to your own husbands as to the Lord...

<sup>25</sup>(Husbands, love...)

<sup>6:1</sup>*Children, obey your parents...*

<sup>6:4</sup>(Fathers, do not provoke...)

<sup>6:5</sup>*Bondservants, obey your earthly masters...*

<sup>6:9</sup>(Masters... stop your threatening...)

### **I. “submitting to one another in the fear of Christ, wives to your own husbands as to the Lord”**

This definitely changes the tone. The first three “ing's” were all related (joyful praise and thanksgiving), but this “ing” goes off in a new direction. This “ing” actually sets the stage for the next twenty-one verses (see outline). So we see that submitting to one another is one of the signs of being truly filled in the Spirit (see outline). Submission is one of the ways that we live out our growing understanding of God's gracious, saving will. But what does submission have to do with

God's gracious, saving will? It certainly doesn't sound as "glamorous" as songs of praise and thanksgiving! In fact, submission sounds like *anything but* glamorous at first.

"Submission" in our day (submission of any kind) is a bad word. It's equated with words like "inferior," and "doormat." And *why* is this? It's because of our sinful lust for independence. It's because of our craving for "freedom" – the right to do as we want, or even just what we sincerely believe to be best. It's in the face of such a powerful drive within us that submission becomes such a horrible and repulsive thing.

But now we are God's workmanship – a new creation. Our sinful lust for self-autonomy has been replaced by a glad *submission* to God, and an obedient surrender to His will. We've given up our craving for "freedom" and become instead "slaves to righteousness." (Rom. 6:16-19) From a time when submission was wholly repugnant to us, now glad submission to God has come to define each one of us as followers of Jesus. That's a pretty amazing transformation! It's *within this much bigger Gospel context* that the Apostle Paul commands us to submit *to one another*: "Submitting to one another *in the fear of Christ*, wives to your own husbands *as to the Lord*."

For many of us, submission to God is one thing, but submission to another human being is something else entirely. But what Paul wants us to see is that *in the very act* of submitting to the human authorities in our lives, we are actually submitting ourselves *to the Lord*. We can't separate between the two. We are to submit *to one another*, Paul says, "*in the fear of Christ*." No, we're not terrorized or "intimidated" by Christ (cf. Rom. 8:15; 1 Jn. 4:18). But we do *tremble* before Him as the one who will come and judge the whole world in righteousness. (cf. 2 Cor. 5:11; 7:1) And so it's in this very real and genuine *fear of Christ* that we submit *to one another*. In fact, Paul says in verse 33 that "the wife should *fear* [not just respect, but *fear*] her husband." The Greek word is much stronger than our English word "respect" and is never translated anywhere else with the English word "respect." So the wife should actually reverence and fear her husband as an expression of her ultimate reverence and fear of Christ – the coming Judge. Here we see the flaw behind some of the teaching in the Church today. Often times, respect for the husband is viewed as the way to meet the husband's "need" to "feel" respected. This may fit well with secular psychology, but it doesn't have any basis in the Scriptures. As we've seen, the point is not "respect" or "honor," but fear. And yet the husband should not be operating out of any *need* to feel that he is "feared." In the same way, the husband should not be operating out of any *need* to feel that he is an authority figure. So then, why should the wife submit to, and fear her husband? – As an expression of her submission to, and fear of Christ.

But our fear of Christ is the kind that results in our willing and glad submission to Him – not a grudging submission. And so Hodge can say that when wives submit to their own husbands "*as to the Lord*," "This makes the burden light and the yoke easy, for every service which the believer gives *to Christ* is given with alacrity and joy." The main point here is that submission to each other (to the God-ordained authorities in our lives), can only be sustained *in the true fear of Christ*. We can only truly submit to another human being when we are submitting to that person *as to the Lord*.

"Wives," Paul says, "submit to your own husbands." "[Submission] means to take a subordinate role in relation to that of another." (Lincoln) It means to place oneself underneath another. Paul

will tell children to “obey” their parents and slaves to “obey” their masters, but he tells wives to “*submit*” to their husbands. Obedience is *included* in submission. Wives are to obey their husbands (1 Pet. 3:5-6), but the relationship of the wife to her husband is so much more “nuanced” than the relationship of the child to his parents or the slave to his master. What we might think of as “obedience” is only one part of what a wife’s relationship to her husband really looks like. And so Paul calls on the wife, uniquely, to “submit” to her husband – to defer always to him as the one for whom she was created – to be his helpmeet.

- ✓ 1 Corinthians 11:8-9 — For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.

The wife’s relationship to her husband is to be characterized by a spirit, an attitude, and a whole lifestyle of submission. Peter exhorts wives:

- ✓ 1 Peter 3:4-5 — Let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a [*meek*] and [*peaceable*] *spirit*, which in God’s sight is very precious. For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by *submitting to their own husbands*.

The traditional translation of a “gentle and quiet spirit” might imply a certain kind of personality (and so therefore all women should have the same personality). But personality isn’t the point. Meekness and peaceableness are virtues that in some sense all Christians should be characterized by – men as well as women (Mat. 5:5; 1 Tim. 2:2). And yet *in the context of marriage*, these are the Christian virtues that especially *enable* a wife to live in submissiveness to her husband. The wife’s relationship to her husband is to be characterized by a *spirit*, an *attitude*, and a whole *lifestyle* not simply of obedience, but of genuine submission to her husband.

Notice now that Paul is speaking directly *to* the wives: “*Wives* [submit] to *your* own husbands.” As I always point out in my wedding homily, submission is the tool of the wife, and not the tool of the husband. The husband *must not* (and really *cannot*) force submission and he is never told to “control” his wife. Submission is a choice that only the wife can make out of obedience to *God’s* word, and not to the word of any man. “Submitting to one another in the fear of Christ, wives to your own husbands as to the Lord...”

## **II. “because the husband is the head of the wife as also Christ is the head of the Church”**

Why is the wife to submit to her husband? – *Because* the husband is the *head* of the wife as also Christ is the head of the Church.

- ✓ Ephesians 1:20-22 — [God] raised [Christ] from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come; and He *subjected all things under his feet* and gave Him as *head* over all things to the church.
- ✓ Ephesians 4:10, 15 — He who descended is himself the one who also ascended far above all the heavens that he might fill all things... We are to grow up in every way into him who is the *head*—Christ.

The husband's headship here doesn't just mean that he is the *source* of the wife's security and well-being. The husband's headship refers to his role as the *authority* over his wife just as Christ is the *authority* over His Church. O'Brien writes very boldly, but I believe very truly and biblically:

“Here the headship of the husband, in the light of the usage at 1:22, the general context of the authority structure of the Graeco-Roman household, and the submission of the wife to her husband within marriage in vv. 22-24, refers to his having authority over his wife; thus he is her leader or ruler.”

When Paul says that the husband is the head of the wife *as also Christ is the head of the Church*, his main point isn't to qualify or limit the husband's headship, but rather to emphasize and establish the husband's headship. His main point isn't to explain why submission should be a good thing for the wife and bring her many benefits, but rather to explain why submission is such a required and necessary thing. His main point isn't to caution the husbands about exercising their authority in wrong ways, but to strengthen his exhortation *to the wives* in light of the God-given authority of their husbands. Why is it necessary that the wife submit to her husband? Paul answers: “*Because* the husband is the *head* of the wife *as also Christ is the head of the Church*.”

But even as Paul strengthens His exhortation *to the wives* by reminding them that the husband is head of the wife as Christ is head of the Church, he does also imply that the husband's headship is to be patterned after the headship of Christ. And we already know from the whole book of Ephesians that Christ exercises His headship over the church always as the expression of His *love* for the church. So what might the wife's submission to her husband's headship have to do with her husband's love?

“The husband is the *head* of the wife *as also Christ is the head of the Church*.” And then Paul adds rather abruptly:

### III. “—(He Himself the Savior of the body)”

There are two opposite ways to understand this. Some people think that Paul is starting to think of the husbands now. So this is a “subtle” reminder to the husbands that just like Christ uses His headship for the salvation of the church, so they should use their headship for the ultimate good and salvation of their wives. But once again, Paul is very much addressing the wives here, and not the husbands. So is Paul encouraging the wives to see submission to their husbands' headship as something that will ultimately benefit them and perhaps even bring them “salvation”? (cf. Calvin) If that's so, then Paul's way of saying it seems very vague (“He Himself the Savior of the body”; cf. Lincoln).

Paul emphasizes the word “Himself” to show that *Christ* (“*Himself*”) is very much the *focus* of attention here – “The husband is the head of the wife as also Christ is the head of the Church—*He Himself* the Savior of the body.” In other words, if anything, the point seems to be that while the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church, the husband is *not* the

savior of the wife as Christ is the Savior of the Church (cf. Braune). The wife looks not to her husband for salvation, but to Christ alone. When Paul says later, “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25), he’s thinking of a love that’s equally directed to both husbands and wives. When Paul says later that Christ sanctified His bride, “having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word” (Eph. 5:26), this bride includes both husbands and wives equally. When Paul says later that Christ will “present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:27), the wife will not be presented on that day by her earthly husband, but by Christ *Himself* and Christ *alone*. In other words, the wife’s relationship with God is not mediated through her husband, but through Christ alone. “The husband is the head of the wife as also Christ is the head of the Church—*He Himself* the Savior of the body [of husbands and wives equally!]” And so it’s as though Paul would say to the wives: Even though your husband is head over you as Christ is head over the church, Christ *alone* is your Savior, and so you must look not to your husband for sanctification and cleansing by washing of water and the Word, but directly and only to Christ, and to Christ *alone*. This reminds us of what the Apostle Peter says:

- ✓ 1 Peter 3:7 — Husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are *heirs with you* of the grace of life.

“The husband is the head of the wife as also Christ is the head of the Church—*He Himself* the Savior of the body [of husbands and wives equally!]...”

#### **IV. “But as the Church submits to Christ, so also wives [should submit] to [their] husbands in everything.”**

See how Paul comes back now to the subject of submission? The “*but*” tells us that Christ’s uniqueness as the *only Savior* does not mean that the wife has no other *head* but Christ, or that she is called to *submit* to no man, but only to Christ. “*But*,” Paul says, or “*nevertheless* as the Church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands *in everything*.” When it comes to husband and wife, there is complete *equality* in worth and in value before God, but very much *inequality* in *role and in function*. This can be hard for our sinful hearts to grasp, and yet we can come to believe it and understand it by *faith*.

Hendriksen comments on the words “in everything”: “[The wife’s submission] must not be partial, so that the wife [submits to] her husband when [his] wishes happen to coincide with her own, but complete: ‘in everything.’” “In everything” means *in every area of life* (cf. O’Brien). In the church’s relationship with Christ, Christ is Lord not just in the “spiritual” areas, but truly in *every area of life*. *Therefore*, “No part of [the wife’s] life should be outside of her relationship to her husband and outside of subordination to him.” (Clark; quoted in O’Brien) And it’s in pursuit of this calling that the wife will especially need to enlist the *Christian* virtues of a meek and peaceable spirit. It should be *obvious* that this doesn’t mean the husband should micromanage every part of his wife’s affairs or that the wife must rely on her husband to do her thinking for her! It should also be obvious that this doesn’t mean a wife should obey her husband even if this would mean disobeying the Lord. But that’s not the point here, and so Paul never even entertains the possibility.

First, Paul said that “the husband is the head of the wife *as also* Christ is the head of the Church.” Now Paul says that “*as* the Church submits to Christ, *so also* wives should submit to their husbands in everything.” We already know from the whole book of Ephesians that Christ exercises His headship over the church always as the expression of His *love* for the church. We also see throughout the whole book of Ephesians that the church’s *submission* to Christ always *brings about* the greater *experience* of His love (cf. Lincoln; O’Brien).

- ✓ Ephesians 1:22-23 — And He subjected all things under his feet and gave Him as head over all things *to the church*, which is His body, *the fullness of Him who fills all in all*.
- ✓ Ephesians 3:14-19 — For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that he may grant you according to the riches of His glory to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—You have been rooted and founded in love(!)—that you may prevail to lay hold of, together with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, *and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled to all the fullness of God*.

Throughout the whole book of Ephesians, the church’s *submission* to Christ’s headship always *brings about* the greater experience of His presence and love. So what might we assume about the wife’s submission to her earthly husband? Here’s what I’ve said in the past to the bride on her wedding day: If your husband is called to love you just as Christ has loved His bride, then your *responsibility*, and your *privilege*, is to enjoy being loved by your husband for the rest of your life. And so it’s with the goal that you might be *empowered* to *enjoy* your husband’s love *to the fullest*... it’s *toward this end* that God calls you to live in submission to his headship. May your submission to your husband always be the context for the greater enjoyment of his love. And may this “momentary” enjoyment of his love point us to the everlasting joys and pleasures of *Christ’s* love for His bride, the Church.

That may sound idealistic in a fallen and sinful world like we live in – and it is. But Paul makes no apologies for setting before us nothing less than the ideal of perfection. Paul never suggests that the wife should submit to her husband only if her husband is loving her as he ought to. The Apostle Peter wrote this:

- ✓ 1 Peter 3:1 — Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives.

When your husband is not loving you as he should, you can still submit to him in everything “*in the fear of Christ*” and “*as to the Lord*” – *knowing that His* love for you as your only Savior is perfect and never ceasing. When your husband is not loving you as he should, you can still do *your part* in reflecting the relationship between Christ and the Church.

“We have already seen that the church’s submission to Christ leads to blessing, growth, and unity for God’s people. Similarly, the wife’s submission to her husband, as she seeks to honour the Lord Jesus Christ [even when he is being unloving], will *ultimately* lead to divine blessing for herself and others.” (O’Brien)

Here especially we're reminded that marriage, like every other part of life, has a goal beyond itself. This is what enables even an unloved wife to submit to her husband. This is what enables the single person to still find fulfillment in Christ apart from marriage. And this is what should guide every young woman as she thinks of being *prepared* for marriage, and also of choosing the man she will marry.

## Conclusion

In the end, submission to your husband is just one way that as a Christian wife you are putting off the “old you,” and putting on the “new you” – *the one created according to God in righteousness and holiness of the truth* (Eph. 4:20-24; cf. 2:10). In other words, far from degrading a woman, the wife's submission to her husband is one of the evidences of her exalted status as one who is being remade into the very image of God. The wife's submission to her husband is actually one of the evidences that she is a full and equal member of that *single* new humanity that God is creating through Jesus (Eph. 2:14-16; cf. O'Brien).

In the church, Gentiles are no less privileged than Jews when it comes to access to God Himself in the very Holy of Holies (Eph. 2:17-18). And so also, women are no less privileged than men – and children no less privileged than their parents. Paul says in Galatians:

- ✓ Galatians 3:28 (cf. Col. 3:11) — There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

So Peter can say to husbands:

- ✓ 1 Peter 3:7 — Husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are *heirs with you* of the grace of life.

The Gospel has leveled all distinctions and barriers when it comes to our access to God in the holy of holies, and so the Gospel truly elevates women to their full and glorious dignity in Christ.

And yet even as the Gospel levels every imaginable distinction in terms of our access to God through Christ, it is this *same exact Gospel* that sanctifies and reaffirms the beauty of a wife's submission to her husband in everything. That's something of a mystery, and yet it's a mystery that we can come to understand and experience by faith. For Christians, submission is no longer a “bad word,” but something that points us at all times and in every way to Jesus – who is Himself our Savior.

“Submitting to one another *in the fear of Christ*, wives [submit] to your own husbands *as to the Lord* because the husband is the head of the wife *as also Christ is the head of the Church—(He Himself the Savior of the body)*. But *as the Church submits to Christ*, so also wives [should submit] to [their] husbands in everything.”