

Ephesians 5:25-39

Introduction

Last week, Paul said to the wives:

“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.”

If wives are to submit to their husbands as the authority and head in everything, then husbands, Paul says, are to love their wives.

“Husbands, love your wives”

This is surprising, really. If Paul exhorts the wives to submit to their husbands, then when he comes to the husbands, what would we naturally expect him to say? “Husbands, exercise headship over your wives”? Wouldn’t that be the other side of the coin (submission and headship; headship and submission)? Yes, it would be the other side of the coin – and it is! But what does Paul say? “Husbands, **love** your wives.” Why does Paul say this? Shouldn’t wives also love their husbands? Aren’t we *all* supposed to be characterized by mutual love for one another? Didn’t Paul just write to *all* Christians at the beginning of this chapter:

- ✓ Ephesians 5:1-2 — Therefore be imitators of God as beloved children, and walk in love, just as also Christ loved us and gave up Himself for us, an offering and sacrifice to God, for a fragrant aroma.

So why does Paul tell the husbands specifically to love their wives? Is he afraid that the husbands might be selfish tyrants, and so this is just a special reminder to help keep their headship “in check”? In other words, “Yes, you’re the head, but I don’t need to tell you that do I! Most important of all is that you love your wife.” O’Brien says this:

“Paul does not here, or elsewhere for that matter, exhort husbands to rule over their wives. *They are nowhere told, Exercise your headship!* **Instead, they are urged repeatedly to love their wives.**”

So does this mean that husbands are *not* expected to actively exercise their headship over their wives?

Most importantly, **what is the relationship between headship and love**? Some think Paul’s point is that sacrificial love is actually the way the *husband* “submits” to his wife. (cf. Snodgrass; quoted in O’Brien). So we have to ask again: Why, after just telling the wives to submit to their husbands as their head and authority, does Paul now tell the husbands to *love* their wives? Should we think of the husband loving his wife in the *same* way as we think of the wife loving

her husband? What is the relationship between headship and love? – or for that matter between submission and love?

Paul has just said two times that wives should submit to their *husbands*, and once that the *husband* is the head of his wife. So when the next thing Paul says is, “*Husbands*, love your wives,” what we should really hear is this: You heads, leaders, and authorities in the marriage relationship... *love* your wives. Headship and love go *together*! The point of the husband’s love for his wife isn’t that this is his way of “submitting” to her. And it’s not that this love is the way he keeps his headship “in check.” When Paul tells husbands to love their wives, this is his way of telling them to exercise their headship. The whole *point* of headship is to provide a *unique* and *powerful context* for love. So what does this imply for the wife, whose role is to *submit* to her husband in everything? The wife is also to sacrificially love her husband as she has been loved by Christ – the wife is also to lay down her life for her husband – but she hasn’t been given the same unique and powerful *context* for the expression of that love. In other words, there is a sense in which the wife cannot love her husband as her husband can love her. So what does this actually look like and mean? “Husbands, love your wives...”

II. “as also Christ loved the church”

The husband’s love for his wife is to be like Christ’s love for the Church – and as we’ll see, this explains *everything*. Paul makes a pretty big deal out of this comparison between the love of Christ and the love of a husband (see outline on last page): “Husbands, love your wives AS also Christ loved the church... JUST SO ought husbands to love their own wives... JUST AS also Christ does the Church.”

So how has Christ loved the Church? And how has Christ’s *headship* provided the context for a very *unique* and *powerful* expression of His *love*? “Husbands, love your wives as also Christ loved the church...”

III. “and gave himself up for her”

How has Christ loved the church? By giving Himself up *for her*. How has Christ loved the church? By offering Himself up *for her* as a bloody sacrifice on a Roman instrument of torture. How has Christ loved the Church? By offering Himself up *for her* to bear the unspeakable torments of God’s holy wrath in her place. How has Christ loved the Church? By sacrificing Himself and giving Himself up *for her*. And *every* husband is called to love his wife as also Christ loved the church. But couldn’t we say the same for the wives? Aren’t wives to love their husbands sacrificially “just as also Christ loved us and gave up Himself for us, an offering and sacrifice to God”? The answer is “yes!” But when this kind of love is exercised in the context of headship, something changes. Something is different. And we see what this difference is in Christ’s love for the church. When Christ gave Himself up for the church, was He “submitting” to the church? No! When Christ gave Himself up for the church, was He “checking” or limiting the exercise of His headship? No! When Christ gave Himself up for the church, what was He doing? What was He actually working to accomplish? What did Christ’s self-sacrificing *love* have to do with His *headship*? “Husbands, love your wives as also Christ love the church and gave himself up for her...”

**IV. that He might sanctify her,
cleansing her with the washing of water in the word,
that He might present to Himself, glorious, the Church,
not having spot or wrinkle or any such things,
but that she might be holy and blameless.”**

We have to be careful here. It's not the husband's job to sanctify his wife, or to cleanse her with the washing of water in the word that she might be holy and blameless! Paul just said in verse 23, “[Christ] *Himself* is Savior of the body.” The wife looks not to her husband for salvation, but to Christ alone. Wive's, your relationship with God is not mediated through your husband, but through Christ alone. You come to God *directly* as an heir together with your husband of the grace of life. Husband's, you are not the “priest” in the home.

But there's still a comparison here (it's not just a “digression” as some call it, or an unrelated tangent). This description of Christ's love for the church is still meant to tell us something about the husband's love for his wife. When Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her, he did it so that she might be *His very own* beautiful and glorious bride. *He* “cleans[ed] her with the washing of water... that *He* might present *to Himself*, glorious, the Church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such things.” In Jewish weddings there was a customary bath for washing and cleansing before the wedding (one for the groom and one for the bride). But here we have a picture of the groom (Christ) cleansing his own bride with the washing of water. Normally, the bride was presented to the groom by her own family. But here the bride is presented by the groom – to Himself. Normally, it's the bride who clothes and beautifies herself – or else she is clothed and beautified by her attendants. But here we have a picture of the groom Himself providing his bride's “glorious” wedding garments (cf. Luke 7:25) and ensuring that she has no spot or wrinkle (no physical blemish or sign of aging).

I know a groom (I performed his wedding) who took his fiancé out wedding dress shopping – paying for the dress and helping to pick it out. This groom was by no means a “controlling” person. It was just his way of loving his bride and modeling Christ's love for the church. Talk about seeing your bride in her wedding dress before she walks down the aisle! He didn't go so far as to apply her makeup, but imagine if he had. For most grooms, when their bride first appears at the back of the sanctuary, her beauty is something with which the groom has had nothing whatsoever to do. That's to be expected, and there's nothing wrong with it. But can you see how very *different* this is from the picture we see in Ephesians chapter five! This picture of Christ's love for the Church is actually meant to remind us of a similar picture in the Old Testament when God took Israel to be His “wife.”

- ✓ Ezekiel 16:8–14 — “When I passed by you again and saw you, behold, you were at the age for love, and I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness; I made my vow to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord GOD, and *you became mine*. Then *I bathed you with water and washed off your blood from you* and anointed you with oil. *I clothed you* also with embroidered cloth and shod you with fine leather. *I* wrapped you in fine linen and covered you with silk. And *I adorned you* with ornaments and put bracelets on your wrists and a chain on your neck. And *I* put a ring on

your nose and earrings in your ears and a beautiful crown on your head. Thus you were adorned with gold and silver, and your clothing was of fine linen and silk and embroidered cloth. You ate fine flour and honey and oil. You grew exceedingly beautiful and advanced to royalty. And your renown went forth among the nations because of your beauty, for it was perfect through *the splendor that I had bestowed on you*, declares the Lord GOD.

See how here it is the groom (God) who *cleanses*, and *clothes*, and *beautifies* His bride. But instead of submitting to her husband, Israel prostituted herself to other lovers (Ezek. 16:15-34). The Lord said that He would abandon His bride to wrath and judgment (Ezek. 16:35-59), but He also made this promise:

- ✓ Ezekiel 16:60–61, 63 — I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish for you an everlasting covenant. Then you will remember your ways and be ashamed... and never open your mouth again because of your shame, when I atone for you for all that you have done, declares the Lord GOD.

God promised that He would take His people again to be His bride, but this time with a new and a better covenant – a covenant that His bride would never break in order to prostitute herself to other lovers. God would once again cleanse His bride, but this time through the washing of water “*in the word*” (Eph. 5:26; “*en rhema*”) – the word of the *Gospel*; the word of forgiveness through the shedding of Christ’s blood. And so in the New Testament, *Christ* becomes the Groom, and the *church* is now the cleansed, clothed, and beautified bride—a new and restored Israel. And this time the bride will never prostitute herself to other lovers, but will one day be presented by Christ to *Himself*, holy and blameless.

- ✓ Revelation 19:6–8 — Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude... crying out, “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure”— for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.
- ✓ Revelation 21:2 — And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.
- ✓ Revelation 21:9–11 — Then came one of the seven angels... and spoke to me, saying, “Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.” And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.

In all of this, what we see over, and over, and over again is the groom’s *delight* in His bride. Isaiah writes:

- ✓ Isaiah 62:5 (cf. 65:19) — As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

Perhaps it’s not too much to say that the Church is Christ’s *pride and joy* – His treasured possession – and so He *gave Himself up for her* to cleanse her, and clothe her, and beautify her,

and then present her to Himself. And what is it that enables the Husband's sacrificial love to accomplish these things for His bride? It's His headship. At all times assumed in the description of the Husband's love is His headship. Apart from Christ's headship and authority, the description of His love for the church wouldn't even make sense. **Because** he is the **head**, the husband is uniquely empowered through His expressions of sacrificial love to cause his wife to grow and thrive and flourish, thus becoming always more and more his pride and joy – what he treasures and prizes above everything else on earth. As Paul says:

- ✓ 1 Corinthians 11:7-9 — Man... is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.

Maybe now we can see more clearly how it's only as the wife **submits** to her husband that she is enabled to know and benefit from her husband's sacrificial love, *empowered as that love is by her husband's authority and headship*. The husband is commanded to love his wife not primarily in order to meet a "felt need," but in order that as his wife grows and thrives and flourishes, she might be always more and more his pride and joy – what he treasures and prizes above everything else on earth. And this also is love! – A part of the picture of Christ's love for the church. This also helps us to make sense of what Paul says next:

V. "Just so ought husbands to love their own wives as their own bodies. The one who loves his own wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as also Christ [does] the Church, because we are members of His body."

We'll come back to these verses again next week. Right now, we just ask this question: If the husband's love for his wife is in some sense a love for himself – if the husband's love for his wife has as one of its motives and goals that she might be *more and more* his own greatest pride and joy... does this make his love self-serving? I suppose so – if we're willing to say that Christ's love for the church was also self-serving! And yet for Christ, the path to presenting the church to Himself glorious, and without spot or wrinkle, was one of ultimate suffering and even death. "Husbands, love your wives AS also Christ loved the church... JUST SO ought husbands to love their own wives... JUST AS also Christ does the Church." Yes, there is something "in it for you." But what's "in it for you" is your increasing joy *in her* – that she is more and more your glory. And this requires that you're daily willing and ready to be always sacrificing your all – even your life – for your wife. Paul uses the words "nourish" and "cherish." Only one other time are they ever used in all the New Testament:

- ✓ 1 Thessalonians 2:7 — But we were *gentle* among you, *like a nursing mother taking care of* [cherishing] her own children.
- ✓ Ephesians 6:4 — Fathers, *do not provoke* your children to anger, but **bring them up** [nourish them] in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

If the wife is to submit to her husband in *every* area of life, then the husband is to tenderly and lovingly make provision for his wife in *every* area of life (not just financially). He is to nourish and cherish her as the "weaker vessel," (1 Pet. 3:7) with the goal that she might always be

growing and thriving and flourishing in *every way*. So this principle has application physically (including in the sexual relationship), emotionally, mentally, and spiritually.

Conclusion

Husband, are you delighting in your wife and rejoicing over her? Is your wife your pride and joy? Is she your glory? Is she thriving physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually as a result of your love – empowered as that love is by your headship and authority? Husband, is your wife becoming always *more and more* your pride and joy? That’s the *reason* for your headship. In other words, you weren’t given your headship just so there’d be a “tie-breaker” for those occasional differences of opinion. You were given your headship so that it might be the constant, ever-present, unique and powerful *context* for the expression of your love.

How many *universes* away is this from the picture of the husband that the world gives us? And yet how many of us have even in subtle ways compromised and been influenced by the world’s ideas of “equality” – of an unbiblical “give and take” philosophy? If the wife’s temptation is to manipulate and attempt to rule (or just refuse to submit in everything), then the husband’s temptation is to be lazy and fail to biblically exercise his headship.

Last week I cautioned the young women to be careful who you marry. This week, I caution the young men to be careful who you marry. Just as the wife is commanded to submit to her husband in everything whether or not he is loving her as he should, so also you will be commanded to love your wife (to sacrifice yourself for her, and to nourish and cherish her as her head) whether or not she ever submits to you. And that’s no easy thing to do. Young men, be careful who you marry.

But now we’re reminded again 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. And this is what enables even a husband whose headship is ignored and disregarded to go on loving his wife. If marriage has a goal beyond itself, then this is what should guide every young man as he thinks of being prepared for marriage. And this is what enables the single person to still find fulfillment in Christ apart from marriage. After directly addressing first the wives and then the husbands, Paul (*who was single*) feels moved once again (cf. Eph. 5:2) to include himself:

“Husbands, love your wives as also Christ loved the church... just so ought husbands to love their own wives... just as also Christ does the Church, because *we* are members of His body.”

Paul understood that for all the beauty of marriage, he didn’t need to be married to know and experience the fullness of that to which marriage was only a pointer. Even without marriage, he could know what it was to be loved, nourished, cherished, and rejoiced over by Christ. So in the absence of having his own bride, Paul gladly gave himself up all the more fully and completely for the sake of *Christ’s* bride – for the *Church* (cf. 1 Cor. 7:32-24).

But if you do have your own wife, then you must constantly be asking yourself this question: “Am I loving my wife as Christ loved the church?” Is my headship over my wife the constant,

ever-present, empowering context for the fullest expression of my love – for the laying down of my life for hers?

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cleansing her with the washing of water in the word,
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