

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor  
Swift Creek Baptist Church (swiftcreekbaptistchurch.com)  
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## Ephesians 5:21-24, 33 “How to Be a Good Wife”

Intro. Tonight we begin Paul’s section dealing with the Christian family. Notice that Paul begins by discussing the role of the wife. Clearly, he begins with her as a continuation of the thought of v.21. Today, the biblical teaching regarding the role of the wife is not easy to preach about. Most of what I will say goes against secular thought. But I’m just the messenger. What I am teaching tonight is the plain teaching of Scripture. God has spoken. So let every woman keep her mind and heart open regarding our topic tonight. Marriage was designed and created by God, as we see in Genesis 2-3 and affirmed by Jesus in Mt. 19:4-8. In Scripture, God assigned responsibilities to man and wife, understanding the created natures of both. When we follow His design, we are much better off, and our marriages should endure for a lifetime. When we ignore God’s plan, our marriages are more likely to face trouble, including more conflict. So listen to God’s wise counsel on how to have a good marriage and family.

Wives, how do you relate to your husbands? Do you try to dominate him? Do you manipulate him? Do you express words of criticism more than words of admiration and respect? If you answered “yes” to *any* of those questions, you especially need to listen to my message today.

It is significant that throughout this section husbands and wives are reminded of their duties and not their rights. It is interesting that the first duty of the wife mentioned here is that of submission. There are at least 4 other New Testament Scriptures that call upon wives to submit to the leadership of their husbands (1 Cor. 11:3; Col. 3:18; Titus 2:5; 1 Pet. 3:1-6). The Old Testament certainly teaches the same thing. After Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden, God said to Eve: “Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (Gen. 3:16).<sup>1</sup> So this is a clear teaching of Scripture, and not just an isolated text or a command simply to meet the requirements of an ancient social setting.

Don’t imagine that Christian teaching will cause women to be oppressed. Christian teaching has done the opposite, lifting women from cruel and unloving oppression for the past 2,000 years. The New Testament throughout emphasizes the dignity of womanhood, and it is an indisputable fact that the example and teaching of Christ have lifted women in one country and society after another to a position that she did not occupy before. Women had a significant and major role in the early church.<sup>2</sup> You just compare the role of women before Jesus came and transformed society. The ancient world was a man’s world, and in no place was this more apparent than in the home. The Greeks confined the women of the household to their own quarters and did not even permit them to eat their meals with the men. In many great religions, especially Islam, women have a far lower place than men to this day. So women should delight in the teaching of the Word of God.

Now let’s look into our text and see how a woman is to be a good Christian wife. The starting place is for her to have a sweet and submissive spirit to her husband’s leadership within

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<sup>1</sup> One of the Hebrew verbs meaning “to marry” is *ba’al*, lit., be lord (husband) over, rule over (Dt. 22:22; 24:1; Isa. 54:1; 62:4-5; Jer. 3:14; etc.)

<sup>2</sup> The Greek word for woman is used 214 times in the New Testament, 104 of these times in the Acts and Epistles.

the home. So to follow this important command, let's see first of all:

## I. THE MEANING OF SUBMISSION

Paul says in v.22, "Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands." There may be many modern women who just cringe when they hear those words. But I think part of the problem is a misunderstanding of the meaning of submission. So let me share with you:

### A. What It Does *Not* Mean:

1. It Does Not Mean that the Wife Is Inferior to the Husband - The word deals with function and position, not essence. Woman is not inferior to man. In fact, she is in certain ways superior. She is certainly much better at being a woman than any man I know, including these transgender men who try to look and act like a woman! Furthermore, women are usually better at talking, better at nurturing and caring for people, and so forth. On the other hand, men tend to be superior in upper body strength, in bravery, providing protection and most tend to be more analytical in their thinking and reasoning. So women are superior in some ways, and men are superior in some ways. But that's not the point. Rather, it is clear from creation that God made man to be the leader of the home.

Now there can be inequality of authority, and yet equality of essence and personhood. To illustrate, in 1 Cor. 11:3 Paul says, "But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God." Note that Christ is under the authority and the headship of God the Father. Yet we know that there is no inferiority on the part of Christ. Christ specifically said on one occasion, "I and the Father are one" (Jn. 10:30). Even so, a wife is equal to her husband in essence, and certainly in spiritual standing before God, according to Gal. 3:28. However, in terms of function, she is under the headship of her husband.

2. It Does Not Mean that the Wife Becomes Her Husband's Slave – Clearly, Paul does not mean that the husband is to be a domestic despot. At least, that is not God's will for marriage. He doesn't say, "Husbands, *make* your wives submit," or even, "Wives, obey your husbands." Instead, he says, "Husbands, love your wives." A loving husband would not subject his wife to a marriage that feels like slavery.<sup>3</sup> The context clearly shows that the wife's submission is prompted by and warranted by the husband's unselfish love, as well as God's creative order.

Furthermore, the husband/wife relationship is a partnership, not a master/slave relationship. That because the Bible says that the two become one. Thus, husbands and wives should strive toward unity and agreement. A wise husband seeks his wife's input as they make decisions together.

### B. So What Does It Mean?

1. Submission Is a Functional Term – At times the Greek word was used of soldiers lining up under the command of an officer. Any military operation would totally fail without a recognized system of authority and submission. If each soldier does his own thing, that army will meet with disaster. Ladies, God wants the best for us, and He knows that a home also

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<sup>3</sup> It also does not mean that women must be in subjection to *all* men. They are instructed to be in subjection to their own husbands. "Your own" is *idios*, "one's own private, peculiar, unique possession." I don't think Paul would have added the words "your own" unless he wanted to clarify this point. This is not to say that you are not to submit to other men who are in a rightful position of authority over you, in the realm of their rightful authority.

needs to have a leader, and God has appointed the husband with the responsibility of leadership within the home. And I believe the *proper* exercise of authority primarily has to do with leading your family to obey *God*. As God directs you through His Word and by His Spirit, you are to lead your wife and family to obey God.

Over 33 years ago I felt that God was calling me to Swift Creek Baptist Church to serve as pastor. Even though it meant moving 550 miles away from her parents, my dear wife was willing to follow me as I followed the Lord. She submitted to me, as I submitted to the Lord. Men, you are not to use your authority selfishly, but to lead your family to obey God..

So submission is a functional responsibility. It is a matter of recognizing God-given authority, and yielding to that authority.

Ladies, if your husband directly asks you to do something for him or the family, do you typically do what he asks?

Furthermore:

2. Submission Is a *Christian* Responsibility - In v.21 we see that *all* Christians should practice submission.<sup>4</sup> Submission is not a command only for women, but for all believers. Based on v.18, being submissive to authority is a characteristic of the Spirit-filled Christian. If you rebel against authority, and insist on having your own way, you are not filled with the Spirit. Again and again we are taught in the Word of God that we should submit to authority. For example, we are taught to submit to God, to church leaders (Heb. 13:17), to government officials (Rom. 13:1), and to our parents (6:1). 1 Peter 5:5 says, “Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for ‘God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’” Again, because v.21 says “submitting to one another,” there are times when a wise husband submits to the wishes of his wife. Paul wrote in 1 Cor. 7:33, “But he who is married cares about the things of the world—how he may please his wife.” If you are going to please your wife, then you will need to yield to her wishes at times. Furthermore, in vv. 3-5 of that chapter, Paul instructs husbands and wives to exercise mutual submission in marital intimacy. It’s clearly not one sided.

We husbands should also consider to what extent we should exercise our God-given authority. You should delegate decision-making authority to your wife as you divide domestic responsibilities. Don’t try to micromanage all of her affairs, and demand that she get your approval for every little thing she does. Many of the responsibilities of raising the children are typically best delegated to the wife and mother. Those areas in the home where the wife and mother are better equipped should be fully delegated to her authority. In fact, 1 Timothy 5:14 says, “Therefore I desire that the younger widows marry, bear children, manage the house...” It’s interesting to me that the single Greek word translated “manage the house” (*oikodespoteo*) literally means “to rule a house.” This coincides with what I am talking about here. Furthermore, wives are *traditionally* best suited to be in charge of the kitchen. If she’s willing to accept that responsibility, then don’t try to tell her what to do in the kitchen.

That reminds me of the story of a businessman who took an efficiency seminar. He presented a case study on his wife’s routine for cooking breakfast. After a few days of observation, he determined what was slowing her down and suggested ways how she could speed up the process. The teacher asked if it worked. He said, “Well, in a way it did. Instead of taking *her* 20 minutes to cook my breakfast, it takes *me* only seven.”<sup>5</sup>

So I hope you have a better grasp of the meaning of submission. Now let’s consider next

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<sup>4</sup> Paul doesn’t actually repeat the verb in v.22 according to some of our oldest manuscripts.

<sup>5</sup> “Laughter, The Best Medicine,” *Reader’s Digest*, Jan. ‘05, p. 132.

of all:

## II. THE REASONS FOR SUBMISSION

Why is it that God, in His wisdom, said that the husband is to be the head, and the wife is to submit to his headship? Paul gives two reasons for this command. We will look at these and then two other reasons. If you understand the reasons for submission, it will help you do so willingly and graciously. First of all, wives should submit:

A. Doing So Is Yielding to the Lordship of Christ – Notice in the last of v.22 that Paul says that wives should submit “as to the Lord.” Paul is comparing your submission to your husband with your submission to the Lordship of Jesus in your life. Now you see that lifts submission to the highest possible level. When you submit to your husbands, you are submitting to the Lord, since the command to do so came first from Him. In Col. 3:18 Paul writes: “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.” Such submission of a wife to her husband is part of her obedience to the Lord. He goes on to say in v.23, “And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men.” When you’re upset at your husband, it may help for you to just say to yourself, “I’m doing this for Jesus!” Furthermore, when the Christian wife submits herself to Christ, and lets Him be the Lord of her life, she will have no difficulty submitting to her husband.

By the way, if both husband and wife are living under the Lordship of Christ, there will be harmony.

A second reason for submission is:

B. Because of the Headship of the Husband – I have already alluded to this truth. Paul says in v.23, “For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church...” (See also 1 Cor.11:3). Every institution has got to have a head. There has to be a pastor of a church. There has to be a principal of a school. There has to be a president or king of a nation. An army needs a commanding General. A home without a head is an invitation to chaos. Even so, God in His wisdom knew that a home needs a leader. And from the creation account we can see that God intended that the husband and father should be the leader in the home. He was created first, and men tend to be stronger and have other qualities to equip him to be the leader.

Yet someone may ask, “Why can’t the wife be the head of the home?” In some cases it is quite evident that she is! One husband said, “My wife may be the head of the house, but I get the last word, ‘Yes, Mam!’”<sup>6</sup>

Or someone may ask, “Why can’t husband and wife both be heads?” Well, look around. Do you see any two headed people? That would be a monstrosity. Even so, a household with two heads cannot stand. There must be one head, and the head should take the lead, not the body. If a body doesn’t respond to its head, that is degrading. On the other hand, the body that obeys and follows the head is a well-coordinated, functioning body. In such a case both the body and the head are honored. So to promote order and unity, there must be leadership, and the authority of the husband and father should be accepted.

Paul has given 2 reasons for submission in our main text. I want to add 2 more. You should also submit to your husband:

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<sup>6</sup> Francisco Mazzeio, *Readers' Digest*, June '09, p.28.

C. Because It Meets a Need in His Life - The last of v.33 gives another, related responsibility of the wife, and that is that she “respect” her husband.<sup>7</sup> Your husbands need to know that you respect him as a man, and as the leader in the home. This meets the greatest psychological need of his life, and that is a sense of significance. If he feels that you look up to him and respect him, he feels significant. So you need to honor and respect the leadership of your husband. In a similar vein, Willard Harley, the author of *His Needs Her Needs*, says that one of the top 5 needs of a man is to be admired by his wife.<sup>8</sup> A wife needs to remind her husband of his value and achievements, and help him build and maintain his self-confidence. She should be his biggest fan, and he should be her hero.

But if you do not respect his leadership by refusing to submit to his leadership, you are damaging his self-esteem. So be very careful about the extent and tone of your disagreements and criticisms. Don’t make him feel incompetent or dumb. Show respect and admiration. A husband and father who is treated with honor and respect is more likely to rise to the calling and be more of the man he needs to be.

By the way, the current trend to weaken the place of men in society and the home is detrimental. Likewise, the feminization of men is detrimental. Mark my words. It will further break down the home, which is the foundation of any society.

Finally, you should submit to his leadership:

D. Because It Meets a Need in Your Children - A father’s headship is very important for the proper development of the children within the home, especially for your sons. When I was a child, just about all the kids in my neighborhood were being raised by both parents, and the father was recognized as the head of the home. Kids were better behaved, and better off psychologically than kids today. In fact, a major factor in avoiding juvenile delinquency is the presence of a father in the home, and that the wife and children respect his headship. In the October, 1999 issue of *Focus on the Family Magazine*, they had an article on the prevention of homosexuality. Researchers discovered that 100% of homosexuals surveyed stated that their father or father figure in the home was absent or uninvolved in their upbringing, or frightening and unapproachable. 87% spoke of a mother who was close, controlling, and overbearing. Your children need an involved father who is respected as the head of the home.

Furthermore, you cannot exercise authority unless you are under authority. The man cannot exercise authority rightly in his home unless he himself is under the authority of the Lord Jesus. And wives, if you are not under the God-given authority of your husband, then you are going to have a hard time getting your children to be submissive to *your* authority. The wife should set the example in the home.

But some may say, “What about the times when my husband doesn’t deserve my respect?” Well let’s just suppose that your husband does something that you think is dumb or detrimental to the family. Do you look at your children and roll your eyes, silently communicating your disappointment? Or worse, do you talk down to your husband, and patronize him in front of the children? Well guess what will happen to your children as they grow older? They will fail to respect their father, and that will lead to all kinds of problems when they get to be teenagers. Such a wife has trained her children well in the folly of disrespect. Of

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<sup>7</sup> Though the Greek word used here (*phobeo*) is often translated “fear,” here “respect” is probably the best translation. It is this kind of “fear” that the Bible so frequently calls on every individual soul to show before God.

<sup>8</sup> Willard F. Harley, Jr., *His Needs Her Needs: Building an Affair-proof Marriage* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1994), 12.

course, fathers should not lead their children in disrespecting their mother. Work out your disagreements alone, not in front of the children.

I must add a word about what happens when you do *not* submit your husband. He will do one of two things. He will either rebel or he will retreat. Both are detrimental. If he rebels, then you have war in your house. If he retreats into his shell, you probably have a greater problem. At that point in time, *you* become the leader in the home. You will be more of a mother figure to him than a wife. That will cause resentment on his part. His self-esteem will be damaged. He will be more likely to abandon the home altogether. Then you will discover that the only person you have to lean on is yourself. Furthermore, your children will suffer as a result.

I hope I have convinced you that obeying the biblical teaching of submission is the right thing to do. It is the best way to have a marriage that God will bless. Now if I have convinced you, then you should also consider with me:

### III. THE MANNER OF SUBMISSION

Husbands and wives are to see their relationship as following the pattern of the relationship between Christ and His Church. The last of v.22 says that you should submit to your husband the way you submit to the Lord. Likewise, in v.24 Paul wrote, “Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands....” How should we submit? From those verses we see the proper manner of our submission. That being the case, our submission should be:

A. Voluntary – I want to say to you that no husband delights in involuntary, grudging submission. We delight in voluntary, sweet submission out of love. The Greek word uses the middle voice, which is best translated “submitting yourselves.” It is not in the passive voice, as if the husband forces submission. After all, Christ does not force you to submit. There are consequences if you don’t, but submission is not forced against your will. So if you truly love your husband, submission will be voluntary. Submit with a good attitude, not grudgingly.

Secondly, submission should be:

B. Complete – Paul says in the last of v.24 that submission should be “in everything”. Submission must not be partial, so that the wife only submits to her husband when his wishes coincide with her own. That hardly can be defined as submission. But what do you do when he leads in a direction you don’t want to go? What if he says you can’t make that purchase you want to make? Well some women have developed ways to get around their husband’s desires with certain manipulative techniques like moodiness, scheming, sexual bargaining, or even lying. That is not right. You are to submit to your husband even when you don’t like it. But you say, “If I submit to my husband in everything, my husband will take advantage of me.” Some will to a point. But in 1 Pet. 3:5-6 Peter spoke of the holy women of old who trusted God, and who thus did not fear. They willingly put the issue in God’s hand. Trust God, and let Him take care of your husband. He will answer to God if he is being unfair.

Now there is one exception to Paul’s statement that we find in Scripture. If a husband tells his wife to do something that would cause disobedience to God, then she has to say what Peter said in Acts 5:29, “We must obey God rather than men” (cf. 4:19-20). When an authority figure in our lives asks or demands that we do something immoral, illegal, or clearly contrary to Scripture, we must obey God instead. However, before you use this exception, you should

consult with a mature Christian to make sure you are doing the right thing. Our selfish desires may cloud our thinking at times.

Conclusion: Now what I have been sharing today applies first and foremost to the *Christian* home. But much of this teaching applies to the Christian wife who is married to a non-believer. Read 1 Peter 3:1-6 and you will see this brought out. Christian submission is one way to win your husband to Christ if he is an unbeliever. How do you get the gospel to your lost husband? Well you don't do it by constantly nagging, criticizing, or fussing about the fact that he doesn't go to church. You don't win them by pasting scripture verses on his beer can. In this situation, the most important means of winning your husband to Christ is by your lifestyle. Just be faithful to follow God's plan, and show respect to your husband, and submit to him lovingly. Then, it will be much more likely that the day will come when you husband says to you, "I have been noticing your life, dear, and there is something different. What is it all about?" And then at that point you can give them the Gospel.

Liz Curtis Higgs was at one time one of the best-known disc jockeys in America, and she lived a really wild lifestyle without God. In fact, Howard Stern was the a.m. show, and Liz Curtis Higgs was the p.m. show. And one day Howard Stern said to Liz, "You know, you need to clean up your act." Now, that really says something if Howard Stern is saying it! And because Liz Curtis Higgs had been burned by so many men and her heart had been broken so many times, she became a militant feminist. But she had a Christian girlfriend who kept inviting her to church. So one day after a long, long time, she said, "Okay, I will go to church one time and ONE TIME ONLY." So she went to church with her friend. And that week, the pastor just happened to be teaching on the Bible verse that says, "Wives submit yourselves to your husbands." Now, that's not exactly a good verse to start with a militant feminist! And she got a little uptight, a little ticked, a little angry. But she continued to listen and she actually heard the second part of the text, which says "and husbands love your wives just as Christ loved the church, and gave Himself for her." Who is asked to give their life up? The husband or the wife? The husband. Well, when Liz heard that part, she leaned over to her friend and said with a little cynicism, "Well, shoot, I'd gladly give myself to any man if I knew he loved me so much he would die for me." And her friend leaned over and said, "Liz, there is man who loved you enough to die for you. His name is Jesus Christ." And it was not long after that that Liz dropped her guard, surrendered her life to Christ in love, and became a believer. Today she is a well-known Christian author and speaker.<sup>9</sup>

Is there someone here who needs to submit to God? Is there someone here who needs to give your heart to Christ? He loved you enough to die for you. Come to Christ today!

Ladies, think about how should you respond to this message today. Perhaps some time this evening you need to go to your husband and tell him that you affirm and appreciate his leadership in your life. And if you have been dominating or manipulating him, then perhaps the first thing you should do is confess that as sin to the Lord and ask forgiveness from the Lord. Then, you can work on your relationship to your husband. The more you acknowledge and respect the leadership of your husband, the more he will look to the Lord for help in carrying out this God-given assignment.

Sources: Francis Foulkes, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963); William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Galatians and Ephesians* (Grand

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<sup>9</sup> Told by Rick Warren in his sermon, "Planned for God's Pleasure."

Rapids: Baker, 1967); Tim Lahaye, *How To Be Happy Though Married* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1968); Lightner-Laing, *Success in Family Living* (Denver, CO: B/P Publications, 1977); John MacArthur, Jr., *The Family* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1982); John MacArthur, Jr. *Family Feuding: How To End It: Study Notes on Ephesians 5:21-6:4* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1981); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 5 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Debi Pearl, *Carnal Husbands, Cranky Wives, and Cantankerous Kids* (magazine article, source unknown); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); Lehman Strauss, *Galatians and Ephesians* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1957); Charles R. Swindoll, *Strike the Original Match* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1974); Curtis Vaughan, *A Study Guide Commentary: Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977); Dr. Jerry Vines (notes from his sermon on this text); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Rich: Ephesians* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1977); Kenneth S. Wuest, *Word Studies in the Greek New Testament*, Vol. I, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), including vol. 3, pp.103-113; Ed Young, *Romancing the Home: How to have a Marriage that Sizzles* (Nashville: Broadman & Hollman, 1994). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982). Ironside read, not nothing significant to add.