

Marriage: Christ's Redemption – Eph. 5:22-33

Pastor Jason Van Bommel

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. 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. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

– Ephesians 5:22-33, ESV

Introduction: Traditional, Progressive, Redeemed

A young couple was planning their wedding and began the process of interviewing bands to play at their reception. One band's frontman was exceptionally enthusiastic and the band seemed to have a lot of experience and was relatively inexpensive. The groom wasn't sure, so he asked, "Can you guys play a variety of music? We'll have lots of people from different backgrounds at the reception and we are hoping for a band who can play a variety of styles of music. Can you do that?"

The frontman quickly responded, "Yes, sir, We can. We play both kinds of music, country *and* western!"

Sometimes discussions about marriage can feel as restricted as this band's playlist. When discussing marriage, it's easy to fall into the traditional vs. progressive dichotomy, as through we have to choose between two and only two models for marriage: the traditional model where the man gets his way and the woman has to go along, and the progressive model where – under the guise of "equality" – the woman gets her way and the man has to go along with it. Such a dichotomy is clearly false. We all know the woman always gets her way in any marriage!

But seriously, both of these models depend on a view of the marriage relationship as a power-struggle. Last week, we discussed how marriage was cursed by God in the fall so that instead of a loving partnership, marriages have devolved into a power struggle, with each spouse trying to control, possess, manipulate or oppress the other into doing his or her will. This is the reality of marriage in a fallen world.

Thankfully, this false power-struggle-driven dichotomy – where someone has to win and someone has to lose – is not the only option for Christian couples. Christ can and will redeem marriage, so it becomes something much more beautiful, powerful and loving than a power struggle. In these verses, Paul paints a portrait of what that redemption looks like.

I. Redeemed Wives (vv. 22-24)

Paul begins by addressing wives briefly in verses 22-24 and then addresses husbands in verses 25-30 before summarizing his teaching and grounding it in creation and the mystery of Christ in verses 31-33.

A. The Call

Verse 22 is very hard to translate accurately because it follows so closely the flow of thought from verse 21, while it is also beginning a new section. In the original Greek, the word submit is not found in verse 22, but is implied as a carry-over from verse 21. So, a more literal translation of verses 21-22 would be: “submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ, wives to your own husbands as to the Lord.”

It’s important to understand this strong connection between these verses because it ties the call to the wife back to God’s call upon all believers and also makes it one of the manifest fruits of being filled with the Holy Spirit, which ties together verses 18-22.

So, a wife’s submission to her husband is the same kind of submission that Christians are called to exercise toward one another and is evidence of being filled by the Holy Spirit. This strong connection also helps us understand “as to the Lord” – it connects back to “out of reverence for Christ.” So, with this stronger connection and context understood, what is God calling wives to do here in the redemption of marriage?

Here is another place where grammar makes all the difference! You may be tired of hearing me say that, but follow me for a moment and I’ll try to make this very clear because it is vital. “Submitting” in verses 21-22 and “should submit” in verse 24 are both in the middle voice, not in either the active or the passive voice. This is important because this verb in the active voice means to make someone subordinate or subject to you, while in the passive voice it means to be made subject or subordinate to someone. So both the active and passive voice of this verb describe subjection or subordination. The middle voice is different. It depicts the willing and voluntary act of a free person, to choose to submit, to be submissive.

So, in a marriage, what is the difference between submission and subjugation? It is literally the difference between the middle voice and the passive voice. Wives are not to be subjugated by their husbands, but they are to willingly and voluntarily submit themselves to their husbands, and really in the same way that all Christians are supposed to do toward one another.

So, how are we called to submit to one another? We are to support, encourage, help and uphold one another. We are to serve one another in love. We are to be for one another, putting each other’s needs and concerns ahead of our own.

Remember that Jesus said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35, ESV)

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:12-13, ESV)

Or consider what Paul wrote to the Philippians in Philippians 2:3-4: *“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” (ESV)*

Or Galatians 6:2: *“Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” (ESV)*

This is what submission looks like- loving, supporting, encouraging, helping and considering others.

And then “as to the Lord,” when connected back to “out of reverence for Christ,” means that the wife’s willing submission to her husband is an act of worship and service to the Lord Jesus.

B. The Husband

In verses 23-24, Paul explains why wives are called to willingly submit to their husbands. It is because the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church. This means that husbands are given the responsibility of authority, protection and leadership within the marriage. Wives are called to support and encourage their husbands in this role.

This role relationship makes the wife’s submission to her husband different from other Christian submission – different in role but not in character. All Christians submit to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, as fellow members of the same body, as fellow servants of the same king. But within that broader context, God has established the husband as the head of the wife in the Christian marriage, just as Christ is the Head of the Church.

When Paul says that wives should submit to their husbands “in everything,” just as the church should to Christ, this is a call to affirm, support and encourage your husband’s leadership in all aspects of your marriage. It doesn’t mean that you have no say in anything, because expressing your opinion and offering helpful advice and encouragement is part of being a good support for your husband.

You might wonder when you’re crossing the line between offering helpful advice and encouragement and starting to nag or manipulate. Well, I think it’s helpful not to think of there being a line between advice and nagging, but rather to think of them as opposite directions, opposite trajectories of conversation. Advice is sincerely intended to support and encourage, while nagging is meant to control and even manipulate. It’s a question of the heart attitude and intention.

Of course, Christian wives can easily and rightly say, “But my husband is not Christ. If I’m supposed to submit to him just as the church submits to Christ, it’s not so easy. He’s not Jesus.” And as true as that is, willing and gracious submission provides wives with an opportunity to grow in patience, grace and love. And wives need to remember that their submission to their husbands is unto the Lord, an act of

worship and service to Christ.

C. The Boundaries

But submission has boundaries, clear and important. God's law still trumps any human authority, so wives should never submit to their husbands if their husbands are asking them to sin, to break God's law. And it is also not loving support for your husband to enable him to sin by your submission. So, if husbands cross the boundary from leadership to abuse, then a loving and supportive wife will not submit and enable or encourage this behavior.

Also, we should be clear about another boundary here: God calls wives to submit to their own husbands. This is not a statement that women should submit to men. Leadership within the home and the church is entrusted to certain men, husbands and elders, but this does not mean that all women need to submit to and obey all men.

II. Redeemed Husbands (vv. 25-33)

In verse 25, Paul turns his attention from wives to husbands.

A. The Call

Unlike Paul's teaching for wives, his teaching for husbands opens with a clear command: Love your wives. The standard for the husband is Christ: "*Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.*"

If a Christian marriage is to reflect the beauty of the redemption of Christ, then husbands must love their wives as Christ loves the church. So, what does it mean to love?

We can use the word love in two different ways: "I love you" can mean "you please me" or it can mean "I'm for you." Understanding what we mean by "love" helps clarify love's demands. If we mean "you please me," then you have to work hard to keep my love – keep yourself attractive, responsive, submissive, available. If we mean "I'm for you," then my love will remain strong and unwavering whether or not you meet all of those conditions.

The love Jesus shows for the church is definitely a "for you" kind of love:

"but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." - Rom. 5:8

"By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers." – 1 John 3:16

The love a husband has for his wife should make her feel safe in submitting to him because she knows that his leadership and authority in the family is exercised for her, to bless, protect, provide and cherish

her. Leaders lead, which means taking the initiative. The church's submission to Christ is her response to His loving self-sacrifice. Christ loved the church long before the church ever submitted to Christ.

B. The Husband

And now here's where husbands can interject with the same objection wives can have: "But I'm not Jesus! How can I love my wife as Christ loves the church, if I'm not Christ?" No, you're not Christ and neither am I. But Christ in you is the hope of glory, and Christ in you in the hope of true love for your marriage.

Paul has been emphasizing the importance of being "in Christ" throughout Ephesians and this section on husbands and wives is really part of the explanation of what it looks like to live "filled with the Holy Spirit." Being a faithful, loving Christian husband and Christ-like leader of your family is as impossible for you to do in your flesh and in your own strength as is being a faithful, supportive wife. We fall into a trap when we think, "I've got this. I understand it and I can handle it." We can't. We need Jesus. We need the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit every day and every moment of every day.

C. The Wife

Another objection Christians husbands can raise is not about themselves but about their wives. They may object that their wives are not being very submissive, so that makes it hard for them to love them as Christ loves the church. This objection is off-base for a number of reasons:

1. Christ's love for the church was self-sacrificing long before the church ever submitted to Him.
2. The church often fails to submit to Christ as we should, but He never stops loving His church.
3. A "for you" love doesn't stop when the loved one is not pleasing you any more (in this case, by her submission).

For both husbands and wives, marriage is ordained by God as one of the chief vehicles of our sanctification, of growing us to be more like Christ. For both husbands and wives, growing more Christ-like means growing in love, in patience, in grace and in mercy. In other words, we need to grow in treating others the way Christ treats us. If we're married to a perfect spouse – a husband who never fails to love us well or a wife who never fails to support us well – then our opportunities for growth in becoming Christ-like are more limited.

III. Realities

I am well aware that for some marriages, what has been said so far this morning is not sufficient. Specifically, marriages that are in trouble from years of conflict and marriages between a believer and an unbeliever require special consideration.

A. My Spouse is an Unbeliever

So, what do you do if you're married to an unbeliever? In a sense, you shouldn't do anything differently, except that your expectations of your spouse should be even lower. But the real key to a good, Christ-honoring and Christ-redeemed marriage is not to focus on your expectations of your spouse anyway. Even Christian couples should focus all of their time and energy on God's expectations of them and not on their expectations of their spouses. Whenever we focus on our expectations of our spouse, we are putting ourselves in the place of being the judge and we are always going to be disappointed and end up hurt. So, let go of your expectations of your spouse and instead focus on God's call on your life and your role in the marriage.

If you're a Christian husband married to an unbelieving wife, love her as Christ loves the church. Serve her as Christ serves the church. It is not any husband's job to make his wife submit to him. It is your job to love her.

If you're a Christian wife married to an unbelieving husband, graciously submit to his leadership and lovingly encourage him. You can't expect him to live and lead based on biblical principles, so don't expect it. Don't try to spend all of your time trying to convert him, either. It's not your job to be his Savior or his judge. Support, encourage and submit as you are able. Peter says to you, in 1 Peter 3:1-2: *"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 they see your respectful and pure conduct."* (ESV)

You should pray faithfully daily for the salvation of your spouse, but remember that salvation belongs to the Lord.

B. Getting Outside Help

Some marriages, Christian or mixed, need outside help to navigate difficult times or to overcome bad patterns that have settled into the relationship over the years. If your spouse is suggesting outside help, please don't treat this as an attack on you but as an invitation to grow together in the Lord.

Be careful in the outside help that you seek. Secular psychologists and counselors will not seek to apply biblical principles and to help you grow to be Christ-like. They are invested in the model that sees marriage as a power struggle, whether they would acknowledge it or not, and they see the goal as having a power-balanced, 50-50 marriage. They would view submission and selfless sacrifice as psychologically damaging and inhibiting on your personal freedom. Sadly, even many Christians psychologists and counselors are more guided by secular humanism than they are by Scripture.

Instead, I would encourage you to seek help from one of the elders within the church first, or even from an older, more seasoned couple in the church. That's one of the benefits of having a multi-generational church and is what Scripture directs us to do.

Conclusion: Our Heavenly Husband & Older Brother

Finally, let's remember the title of this message: "Marriage: Christ's Redemption." We all need to look to our heavenly husband, the Lord Jesus Christ, to be both the model and the center of our marriages. Or, if you're a husband and you feel uncomfortable thinking of Jesus as your heavenly husband, think of Him as your older brother who knows much better than you do how to be a good husband. He is able and willing to teach you, as you take His yoke upon you and learn from Him.

We can only have marriages that reflect the love, grace and power of Christ as we seek His face together and ask Him to be the center of our marriage and family life. In Christ and in Christ alone, we have the redemption, the grace and the power to love and respect, to support, encourage and lead in such a way that our marriages are transformed and God is glorified in our homes.