

Ephesians 5:25-30

Introduction

Last week, Paul said to the wives: “Wives [be subject] 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 is subject to Christ, so also wives [must be subject] to [their] husbands in everything.”

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

I. Ephesians 5:25a — Husbands, love your wives...

If the husband is the “head” of the wife, shouldn’t he be diligently and faithfully “exercising” this headship? We assume that this headship is not at all something for which the husband should apologize or feel in any way embarrassed. The real question is: Why has the husband been *given* this headship? To what end? It’s with this question in mind that we pay special attention to the fact that Paul doesn’t actually *say*, “Husbands, exercise your headship”; Instead, what he *says* is, “Husbands, love your wives.”

But couldn’t Paul also say to the wives, “Wives, love your husbands”? If subjection is not mutual, then isn’t “love,” of all things, entirely mutual and reciprocal? Paul wrote 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 *husbands specifically* to love their wives? Is this partly in order to help keep the husband’s headship “in check” and “under control”? In other words: “Yes, you’re the head, but this is something of a necessary evil, and so I don’t want to emphasize that when I’m talking to you. *You* don’t need to be thinking about your headship; *you* just need to be focusing on loving your wife.” What this commentator says is representative of many: “Paul does *not* here, or elsewhere for that matter, exhort husbands to... ‘*Exercise [their] headship!*’ *Instead*, they are urged repeatedly to *love their wives*” (O’Brien). Do you see the separation that’s being made between headship and love? So, husbands, what is the *point* of our headship (cf. authority)? Is it really just a last resort in cases of a stalemate? Do we really not need to be exhorted to diligently and faithfully exercise our headship?

I drew a distinction between what Paul chooses to *say* and what he doesn’t *say*. Paul chooses to say, “Husbands, love your wives,” and not, “husbands, exercise your headship.” But what exactly is the relationship between headship and love — between the husband “exercising” his headship and the husband actively loving his wife? The key here is to see that the husband *exists* in the marriage relationship as the head (cf. authority). Not for a single moment can he ever escape *being* the head. Insofar as headship is a position relative to another, then the husband

exists in this position perpetually. He doesn't step into this position at certain times. He doesn't suddenly—and momentarily—become the head when a stalemate arises. Instead, in the context of the marriage relationship, he lives and breathes headship in the sense that the “head” is who he is.

What this means practically is that every interaction that I ever have with my wife takes place within this context of a relationship of authority (headship) and subjection. How could it be otherwise if I am the head of my wife and my wife is called to be always adorned with that meek and peaceable spirit that enables her to be subject to me in everything? Of course, because of our sinful fallenness we do have to work hard to wrap our minds around this, and be careful to understand what this means and what this doesn't mean. This doesn't mean that we (husbands and wives) don't also spend our days just enjoying one another's company as friends and as lovers. This doesn't mean that my wife isn't managing and directing the household with complete “freedom” (under my headship and authority; cf. Prov. 31:13-27; 1 Tim. 5:14) because my heart trusts in her, and because I know that she will deal bountifully with me for good and not evil all the days of our life together (cf. Prov. 31:11-12). This doesn't mean that I don't seek my wife's counsel or that we don't always work together to attain agreement in all things. And yet!—given these realities—still every single interaction that I have with my wife takes place within the context of a relationship of authority (headship) and subjection. This just *is*—or *should be*. We've seen what this doesn't mean. Now let's try to understand more positively what this does mean. This does mean that within the context of the husband-wife relationship the words that I speak to my wife, and the way that I speak them, carry a certain destructive power that my wife's words to me (even if they are sinful) do not carry. I may want to be able to speak to my wife only as the equal that she truly is, but I can never escape the reality that my words to her will always (or should always) be heard within a certain context of *inequality*. This helps to explain why in Colossians Paul exhorts *husbands* not to be “harsh” with their wives (Col. 3:19; cf. ESV; NIV; NRSV; NLT; Beale, BEC), and why Peter exhorts *husbands* to live with their wives “according to knowledge, as with a weaker [or, ‘the more delicate’] vessel, since she is a woman” (1 Pet. 3:7). Paul's point is not that men are more prone to being harsh than women are, but rather that in the context of a relationship of authority and subjection it's the one in authority (it's the husband) whose words and actions can have an especially destructive power. But if this is so, then the opposite is equally true!

Headship and authority is given to the husband in order that it might be the uniquely empowering context for loving his wife. Paul has just said two times that wives should be *subject* 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 hear is this: “You heads, leaders, and authorities in the marriage relationship, love your wives; which is to say, exercise your headship (the authority that you've been given) for all its worth.” If the wife is to be always adorned with that meek and peaceable spirit which enables her to be subject to her husband in everything, then the husband is to live and breathe headship. We are not to think of love as that which qualifies our headship or keeps our headship in check (love keeps our sin in check [cf. the sinful abuse of headship]), but rather as that which is empowered—as that which is given a unique character and effectiveness—*by* our headship. Headship and love are—in this context—intimately bound up together.

So what does this imply for the wife, who is to be subject to her husband in everything? The wife is also to sacrificially love her husband as she has been loved by Christ (5:1-2). There's a very real sense in which the wife—as a Christian—is always to be laying down her life for her husband. Nevertheless, the wife has not been given the same unique context for the expression of this love, and so her love for her husband doesn't have the same unique character or nature as her husband's love for her. By God's design, there is something uniquely wonderful and effectual about love in the context of headship. And so we see that there's a *sense* in which even love, in the marriage relationship, is not entirely a mutual thing.

II. Ephesians 5:25b — *Husbands*, love your *wives*, as also Christ loved the church...

Paul repeatedly emphasizes this comparison between Christ's love for the church and the husband's love for his wife: "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" (vv. 25, 28, 29). So how has Christ loved the Church? And how has Christ's headship provided the unique and empowering context for His love?

III. Ephesians 5:25c — Husbands, love your wives, as also Christ loved the church **and gave himself up for her...**

How has Christ loved the church? By giving Himself up for her. By offering Himself up for her as a sacrifice and bearing the full curse of the law in her place. Every husband is called to love his wife "as also Christ loved the church." Wives, too, should love their husbands sacrificially (5:1-2). But again, when this kind of love is exercised in the context of headship, something changes. Something is different. And we come to "*understand*" (cf. Eph. 5:17) what this difference is when we meditate further on Christ's love for the church. When Christ gave Himself up for the church, He wasn't "checking" or limiting the exercise of His headship. He was exercising His headship to the fullest. He was making the fullest possible use of His headship. It was his headship which made the expression of His love so uniquely and powerfully effectual. "Husbands, love your wives, as also Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her..."

IV. Ephesians 5:26-27 — ...*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.

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 has just said emphatically that "[Christ] *Himself* is Savior of the body"—of husbands and wives together as part of Christ's bride (v. 23). The wife's relationship with God is not mediated through her husband, but through Christ alone. She comes to God directly as an heir together with her husband of the grace of life. The husband is not the "priest" in the home. But there is still a real comparison that's being drawn here.

When Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her, he did it so that she might be His own glorious and beautiful bride. *He* "cleans[ed] her with the washing of water... *that He* might present the church *to Himself*, glorious, 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 husband (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 (perhaps with the assistance of attendants). But here we have a picture of the groom Himself providing his bride’s wedding “dress” and ensuring that she has no spot or wrinkle (no physical blemish or sign of aging). This picture of Christ’s love for the Church is meant to remind us of a similar picture in the Old Testament when Yahweh 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 Yahweh, 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.

We see here how it was Yahweh who cleansed, and clothed, and beautified His bride. But instead of subjecting herself to her husband, Israel prostituted herself to other lovers (Ezek. 16:15-34). Because of this, Yahweh said that He would abandon Israel 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 Yahweh.

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 by prostituting 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 is the Groom, and the church is now the cleansed, clothed, and beautified bride—a new and restored Israel. And now the bride will never again 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 again is the husband’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.

We could say that the Church is Christ’s glory and joy—His treasured possession. 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 explains how Christ’s sacrificial love can accomplish these things for His bride? It’s His headship. At all times assumed and required in the description of Christ’s *love for the church* is His *headship over the church*. Apart from this headship and authority, the description of His love for the church could never make sense. It would be stripped of all its efficaciousness. In a similar manner, because the husband is the head of the wife, he is uniquely empowered to love his wife so that she thrives under this love and becomes always more and more his joy—the one he treasures more than anything else on earth. As Paul says:

- 1 Corinthians 11:7b — Woman is the glory of man [the wife (being the woman) is the glory of her husband (being the man)].

The man is not the glory of the woman. We read in Proverbs:

- Proverbs 12:4 — An excellent wife is the crown of her husband.

An excellent husband is not the crown of his wife.

Maybe now we can see more clearly how it’s only as the wife subjects herself to her husband that she’s enabled to fully enjoy her husband’s love, empowered as that love is by her husband’s authority and headship. Husbands, are we beginning to see the purpose and initiative and diligence that our headship requires of us? The husband is commanded to love his wife so that she might thrive under this love, and in so doing become always more and more his “crown,” his glory, his joy. This helps us to make sense of what Paul says next:

V. Ephesians 5:28–30 — 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*.

If the husband's love for his wife is in some sense a love for himself ("his own body... his own flesh... 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 crown and joy—does this make his love self-serving? We could say this is so only if we're willing to say that Christ's love for the church is also self-serving. And yet for Christ, the path to presenting the church to Himself glorious, and without spot or wrinkle, was one of suffering and 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* as you love her sacrificially.

Paul uses the words "nourish" and "cherish," each of which is used only one other time in the New Testament. Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians:

- 1 Thessalonians 2:7 — But we were *gentle* among you, *like a nursing mother taking care of* [cherishing] her own children.

And in Ephesians:

- 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 everything" (in every area of life), then the husband is to seek to make provision for his wife (as far as he is able, and in dependence upon God) "in everything" (in every area of life), empowered as he is by his headship.

Conclusion

Rare is the book where the husband's headship is celebrated as something good and wonderful rather than being always qualified as something awkward and/or potentially embarrassing. Husbands, is there a part of us that wants it this way? When we spend all our time qualifying our headship, it really does let us off the hook. But when we celebrate our headship by striving to "exercise" it to the fullest, this is the path of self-sacrificing love—love empowered by headship, a headship (an authority) that is ours as a gift and stewardship from God.

How far away from this picture of the husband is the picture that our culture has given us? And yet how many of us have in subtle or even in blatant ways been influenced by our culture's militant and pervasive egalitarianism? If the wife's temptation is to subtly manipulate and attempt to rule (or simply refuse to be subject to her husband in everything), then the husband's temptation is to be lazy—at times even childish—and fail to diligently make the most of his headship. (When a person with headship and authority fails to exercise that headship and authority, it is easy for him to look childish. Because the wife does not have headship and authority, she does not have the same opportunity for "childishness.") 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 be subject 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 cherish her as her head) whether or not she subjects herself to you.

Marriage, like every other part of this temporal and earthly life, has a goal beyond itself. This is what enables even an unloved wife to be subject to her husband. And this is what enables even a husband whose headship is ignored and disregarded to love his wife—because we’re pointing, always, to that wonderful “mystery” of Christ and the church (Eph. 5:32). After addressing first the wives and then the husbands, Paul (*who was single*) is 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—much less have a perfect marriage—to know and experience the fullness of that to which marriage points. Even without marriage, he could know what it was to be loved, nourished, cherished, and rejoiced over by Christ, as a part of His bride.

But if I do have “my own” wife, then I must always be asking myself 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 expression of my love *for my wife*? Am I pointing to Christ, who is the only perfect husband?