

What is a Woman? The Marks of Biblical Womanhood, Part 1

Genesis 2:18–23 and Selected Scriptures

Introduction

Well, a long time ago, in what seems like a galaxy far, far away, I began a sermon series entitled *Confronting the Culture*, in which, I have taken aim at equipping you, as the people of God, to be salt and light in the midst of the decay and darkness of this dying culture—so that you will (a) withstand the attacks of a vehement secularism that demands you surrender your Christian worldview, and so that you will (b) confront the lies of that culture with the truth.

And that series began by vindicating the concept of truth against the culture’s lie that there is no such thing as truth. Soon after, we turned to the Bible’s teaching on the identity of man, because no category of Christian theology is more under attack by our present culture than the biblical doctrine of man. And to understand the fundamental nature and identity of man, we went back to the beginning—to Genesis chapter 1—and learned that, most fundamentally, man is a *creature*, that man is an *image-bearer*, and that man is *gendered*. “God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”

And from there, we confronted the Satanic deception of the transgender movement—demonstrating that though men and women are alike in their humanity—unified as equal image-bearers of Almighty God, yet they are distinct in their gender—complementing one another as a harmony of praise to the God who created them. And on the basis of that distinction, we found that men and women honor the glory and beauty of God’s good design by presenting our physical appearance in accordance with the distinctiveness of our biological sex. And that led to the following conclusion: Men ought to carry themselves in a masculine way and not an effeminate way. Women ought to carry themselves in a feminine way and not a masculine way. And so, not only does that rule out transgenderism, it also means that men glorify God when they look and speak and behave like men, and that women glorify God when they look and speak and behave like women.

But then we asked: What does it mean, according to Scripture, to behave like a man, or like a woman? Aside from the obvious biological differences, what does it mean to *be* a biblical man and not a woman? What does it mean to be a biblical woman and not a man (Piper, *WTD*, 17)? And that launched us into a study of biblical manhood and womanhood. If there is glory in our distinctiveness—if God’s pre-fall, before-the-curse, very-good design of male and female differentiation is not just true, but beautiful—then it’s fitting for us to devote ourselves to understanding the beauty of those distinctions, preeminently so we can order our lives according to the Bible’s prescriptions, and thereby bring honor and glory to God.

I've said it a couple of times, but it's like an orchestra. It's one thing to hear skilled musicians all play in unison. But there is a higher strain of beauty that you behold in music when each musician plays distinct notes which nevertheless harmonize perfectly with one another. As men and women who follow Christ, we need to learn to play our parts, so that we harmonize in a way that brings glory and honor to the beauty of God's design.

And before our Sundays in July break, we had three sermons exploring **nine marks** of biblical manhood. And I won't review those here, except to state them. We found that the biblical man is a leader, a lover, a provider, and a protector. He is strong, sensible, dignified, sound in doctrine, and sound in speech. Today, we begin a series on **nine marks of biblical womanhood**.

And before I jump right in, I want to say—as I did when we began with biblical manhood—that these **marks of biblical womanhood** relate most often to how a wife relates to her husband. But that doesn't mean that you are less of a woman if you're not married. Being single puts you at no disadvantage to living out the calling of your womanhood, no more than Jesus' singleness put Him at a disadvantage to living out the calling of His manhood. There are biblical, appropriate expressions of femininity from single women even toward the men in your life who are not your husband. And I'll seek to make application along those lines as we go.

But I also want to reiterate that marriage *is* the norm for mankind. As soon as we hear, “male and female” in Genesis 1:27, we hear about being fruitful and multiplying in Genesis 1:28. As soon as we see that woman is man's suitable helper in Genesis 2:22–23, we hear about the two becoming one flesh in Genesis 2:24. And so, marriage is the norm. And because of that, much of Scripture's teaching on masculinity and femininity speaks to how we conduct ourselves in the marriage relationship, or how we are to prepare ourselves for that relationship. And that means: much application will have to do with marriage.

And so, ladies, these **nine marks** describe what you ought to aspire to be as a woman seeking to live biblically. Single guys: this is the kind of woman you ought to desire to pursue for marriage. Married guys: this is not a sermon to beat your wife over the head for the ways she doesn't measure up. It's a sermon that will reveal how you can pray for her, and wash her with the water of the Word, and labor for her growth, as you work with her to see that you both become all that God is calling you to be.

I. A Helper

Well, with all that said, let's come to our **first mark** of biblical womanhood. And that is, number one: a biblical woman is a **helper**. She is a **helper**. And we find this in Genesis 2, at the very inception of the woman's creation. After God has created the man, after He has placed him in the

garden to cultivate and keep it, after He has given man His law prohibiting him from eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, “Then,” Genesis 2:18 says, “Yahweh God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make a **helper** *suitable* for him.’”

That’s the first time in the creation narrative that God has said something is not good. All throughout chapter one, we have the refrain “And God saw that it was good, and God saw that it was good.” Into chapter two, every tree is “good for food” (v. 9); “the gold of [the] land is good” (v. 12). But all of a sudden, verse 18 arrests you with the declaration that there is something about the Paradise of Eden that is not good! It is not good that the man has no helper. And so God brings every animal, one by one, to the man so he’ll name them. But of all these other creatures, verse 20 says, “for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him”—no one corresponding to him as his equal and counterpart. But then, he puts the man to sleep, takes a rib from his side, and makes the helper suitable for Adam: the woman.

I don’t know if there’s a greater honor that can be bestowed upon women than to realize that God Himself declared that His own perfect created Paradise was not good until she was created to complement the man. Women are not unimportant! Women are not second-class or inferior! Women are so essential that Paradise itself is in a sense incomplete without her! *Man* is incomplete without her! He needs someone to be a **helper** suitable for him in the way no other creature was—someone who will bring unique gifts, and talents, and strengths to the human race that will enable mankind to glorify their God in obedience to His commands.

Dear friends, don’t miss this. God’s design in creating the woman is that she would be a **helper**, suitable for the man to carry out the divine mandate given in chapter 1 verse 28 to “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.” The foundation of what it means to be woman is to be one who can suitably help a man to walk in obedience to the calling that God has placed on his life. And that helpfulness—the wife’s putting herself at the disposal of her husband, yielding her gifts and strengths unto his benefit—that is at the heart of what Scripture often refers to as **submission**, in complementarity—in beautiful, glorious harmony—with the man’s headship. Two image-bearers, equal in status and dignity before God, but with distinct roles. The husband leads, and the wife **helps**; the husband initiates, and the wife responds in **submission** to the husband’s leadership.

And we mentioned, when we studied it then, that at the heart of biblical leadership is the concept of responsibility. Not license to lord it over those allotted to your charge, but responsibility. Leadership is a stewardship to lead in a way that honors God and benefits those under one’s charge. A biblical man takes responsibility, eschews passivity, and provides a general pattern of initiative (Piper, *WTD*, 31). Well, corresponding to that, a biblical woman submissively responds to the pattern of initiatives established by mature masculinity (*ibid.*, 49), in a way that honors and affirms—rather than usurps or challenges—his leadership.

Now, in a culture dominated by expressive individualism, where the chief virtue is to vent every thought and desire you've ever had—where fighting your basest impulses is derided as inauthenticity—submission has been turned into a four-letter word. But Christians should have no problem with the concept of submission. Our entire worldview is grounded upon submission to the Lordship of Jesus. We're not singling out wives, here. We want *everybody* to submit to the Lordship of Christ! We want *everybody* to be brought into willing subjection to the will of God! Citizens submit to the governing authorities in the civil sphere. Church members submit to elders in the ecclesiastical sphere. Children obey their parents in the familial sphere. And, so also, according to the Word of Christ for life in His church, so also do wives submit to their husbands.

There is much to say about woman's fundamental identity as a **helper**—much to say about **submission** as a defining **mark** of biblical womanhood—so much so that I'm going to spend the rest of this sermon exploring the Bible's teaching on just this one point. And we'll have to move quickly, because we're going to see no fewer than **nine features of biblical submission**.

A. Its Divine Design

First, let's consider **the divine design** of submission. We hit on this when we spoke about male headship, but it bears repeating. This beautiful harmony of the roles of male headship and female submission was the **divine design** of our holy, sovereign, and wise God from the beginning of creation. We see that already in Genesis 2:18, which speaks of woman being created to be a helper, before the fall.

But we also hear of it in the categorical statements of the New Testament as well. In Ephesians 5:22–24: “Wives, *be subject* to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the *head* of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything.” And in 1 Corinthians 11:3, which speaks even more broadly than the husband-wife relationship, Paul says, “But I want you to understand that *Christ* is the head of every *man*, and the *man* is the *head* of a woman.” A few verses later in 1 Corinthians 11:9, he says, “For indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake.” God created the woman for the man, to be His helper.

And this **divine design** of submission is evident even in the events of the fall of man. The man's abdication of his headship, and the woman's unsubmitive usurpation of headship, are what mankind's first sin consisted in. God addressed the man first and gave *him* the command not to eat from the tree before Eve was even created—which was one of many indications of man's headship in the Garden. But Satan, Genesis 3:1, shows up in the Garden, and “he said to the *woman*, ‘Indeed, has God said...’” “The serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field,” and

he put that craftiness on display when he spoke to the woman first, inverting the God-ordained design of headship and submission. He asks Eve, “Has God said, ‘*You* [plural] shall not eat from any tree of the garden?’” And Eve answers, verse 2, “*We* may eat.” What’s happened? Satan has made Eve the spokesman and representative of the family. “*You* decide, Eve! *You* lead the way!” (Ortlund, *RBMW*, 108). This was an immediate, subtle subversion of the very-good created order of God, defined in the loving headship and sweet submission of man and woman in marriage. Isn’t it something that mankind’s fall into sin itself was an occasion of contravening the **divine design** of headship and submission? How fundamental to the identity of man and woman must these realities be!

These texts—and the many others we went to when we spoke on manhood—communicate the truth of the complementary roles of male headship and female submission. And because these roles originated with the creation of man and woman, they do not have their origin in the fall, as is so often alleged. They are not the result of sin’s corruption of our relationships. No, they are rooted in God’s very-good creation of man and woman. And so, fundamental to the identity of man and woman—from the very beginning of their existence, before their corruption and fall into sin—is that the biblical man is a **leader**, and the biblical woman is a **helper**.

B. Its Cursed Difficulty

Secondly, consider not only the divine design of submission, but, number two, **the cursed difficulty of submission**. Given submission is the design of God for woman from the very moment of her creation—given that it’s fundamental to her identity—it’s fair to ask, “Why is it so difficult for women to embrace that role?” And it is, isn’t it? Just as men struggle to embrace their role of loving, sacrificial headship and either (a) passively neglect responsibility or (b) cruelly assert authority, so also women struggle mightily with the temptation to seize the role of leadership for themselves and exercise authority over men. We see this played out especially in the marriage relationship. As pastors, we’re constantly exhorting men to step up and embrace the responsibility of being a leader, and exhorting women to step back and embrace the responsibility of yielding to their husband’s leadership, rather than seizing it for themselves.

Why is that such a common thread in human relationships, when God created us to do just the opposite? Well, it’s because we fell from that state of blessedness in which God originally created mankind. In fact, Genesis 3:17 tells us that it is precisely because Adam “listened to the voice of [his] wife,”—precisely because he abdicated his leadership and submitted to Eve’s leadership—the curse of God comes upon the serpent, the woman, the man, and the creation itself. And we read of the curse of God upon the woman in Genesis 3:16: “To the woman [God] said, ‘I will greatly multiply Your pain in childbirth, In pain you will bring forth children.’” Then notice this phrase: “Your desire will be for your husband, [but] he will rule over you.”

Now, what does that mean? Well, the same two words—*ʿshuqah*, “desire,” and *māshal*, “to rule,” or “to master”—appear in the next chapter, in Genesis 4:7, and the context of that passage makes plain the meaning of these two words when they’re coupled together like they are in Genesis 3:16. In Genesis 4, Cain’s countenance has fallen because God had no regard for his offering, and God responds to Cain’s anger and sadness by urging him to battle temptation. Middle of verse 7: “And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you [*ʿshuqah*], but you must rule over it [*māshal*].” What’s God saying? He’s saying that sin is like a roaring animal, waiting to strike Cain at the proper time. Sin’s desire is to exert mastery over Cain, to rule him, to reign in his life; and if he passively refuses to withstand it, it will overtake him. But instead of that, the Lord exhorts Cain that he must rule over sin. Cain must exert mastery over sin.

Well, if we apply the sense of “desire” and “rule” gleaned in Genesis 4:7 to the interpretation of the same terms back in Genesis 3:16, we find the meaning becomes clear. Part of the curse on Eve is that a woman’s desire would be to exert mastery over her husband—to rule over him the way sin wanted to rule over Cain. But instead of man yielding to woman’s desire, he would withstand it in the same way that Cain was to resist sin’s desire to reign over him. Where God had designed the beauty of headship and submission to *sing* together in glorious, peaceful harmony, now the curse of dissonance and conflict would reign in the relationship between man and woman. One commentator writes, “God gives the woman up to a desire to have her way with her husband. Because she usurped his headship in the temptation, God hands her over to the misery of competition with her rightful head” (Ortlund, *RBMW*, 109).

And so, we may say—without irony or sarcasm—that the feminist movement is Satanic. The philosophy and worldview of second- and third-wave feminism seduces women into eschewing submission and casting off the role of helper, and into seizing authority and asserting their dominance. Feminism confuses equal rights with identical roles. And in that, feminism is nothing more than the recitation of the Tempter’s deception of the first woman. So, my dear sisters, that inclination that you have wherein it seems almost natural to buck against the loving authority of your husband, that is not a trifling matter. To reject the glorious, beautiful role of submission that God has ordained for you is to follow in the footsteps of Eve in the commission of the sin that plunged the human race into condemnation. And it is to live consistently with and yield to the curse of sin that plagues the entire creation. And so, ladies, if you would live in a godly way—in a manner consistent with the blessedness of Genesis 1 and 2 rather than consistent with the curse of Genesis 3—you will resist sin’s mastery over *you*, and therefore resist your inclination to usurp headship over your husband.

C. Its Gospel-Shaped Motive

In the **third** place, consider **the Gospel-shaped motive of submission**. And for this we turn to Ephesians chapter 5, verses 22 to 24. Paul writes, “Wives, be subject to your own husbands, *as to the Lord*. For the husband is the head of the wife, *as Christ also* is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But *as* the church is subject to Christ, *so also* the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything.”

In this text, the Apostle Paul calls upon wives to submit themselves to their own husbands “*as to the Lord*.” Now, that term “*as*” expresses similarity, not identity. Paul is not teaching that a husband is the lord over his wife in the same way that Christ is Lord over them both. Christ’s authority is absolute; a husband’s is not. Christ is a perfectly sinless leader who never needs to ask forgiveness and who is always worthy of our trust. A husband is not.

Nevertheless, while the term doesn’t communicate identity, it does communicate similarity. A wife ought to be voluntarily yielding to her husband in love in a way that it can be compared to the way she voluntarily yields to the Lord Jesus in love. Because it is ultimately the command of the Triune God for wives to submit to their husbands, a wife’s submission to her husband *is* her submitting to the Lord. Conversely, a wife’s rebellion against her husband’s legitimate authority is rebellion against the Lord Jesus.

And notice that nothing in the passage makes the command for wifely submission contingent upon the husband’s *deserving* submission. The text doesn’t say that a wife is to submit to her husband only when he does his part to love his wife like Christ loved the church—not anymore than it says that a husband ought to love his wife as Christ loves the church only when she submits to him as the church does to Christ. That, of course, is the ideal. And when that happens, you see the beauty of biblical complementarity: the husband gives his life away to lovingly and sacrificially provide for and protect his wife, and the wife gives her life away in joyful, eager submission to her husband’s leadership. But we know that the standard for a wife’s submission is not lessened when her husband fails to love her well, because the Apostle Peter issues this same call, in 1 Peter 3:1–2, for wives to be submissive even to their husbands who are unbelievers. And so wives are called to submit to their husbands even when they don’t deserve it.

Why is that? Because loving headship and joyful submission in marriage is designed by God to be a picture of the Gospel—of the covenant-keeping grace of Jesus Christ toward *His* bride, the church. Paul says the husband pictures Christ and the wife pictures the church. And so when a wife submits to her husband’s leadership, she displays to the world what a joy it is for the church of Jesus Christ to submit to the leadership of her Lord. When she follows her husband’s leadership with the gentle and quiet spirit of a respectful and supportive wife, she preaches to the watching world that Christ is so glorious, so satisfying, that His bride, the church, is happy to follow Him anywhere.

Do you see how this **Gospel-shaped motive** sweetens the duty of **submission** into a delight? Is it not a joy for you, ladies, as members of the bride of Christ, to submit to Christ your bridegroom? Is He not a loving leader? Is He not full of wisdom to lead you into paths of righteousness and blessing? Is He not worthy of the joyful, eager submission of every person in the world? Of course He is! And Paul says, when you submit to your own husband, you display that truth to the world! Oh, fight the temptation to rebelliousness like that! When it's difficult to follow your husband, when he is proving unworthy of your submission, ask yourself if *Jesus* is worthy of your submission. Ask yourself if *Jesus* is worthy of *His church's* submission. There you'll find the gloriously feminine strength to obey.

D. Its Pervasive Extent

In the **fourth** place, just briefly, consider **the pervasive extent of submission**. We see that also in Ephesians 5, and verse 24: "But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands *in everything*." This means that all we have talked about concerning submission applies to every area of life. Some have contended that Paul's call to wifely submission is to be read as extending only to certain wifely duties. But the **pervasiveness** of the phrase "in everything" in Ephesians 5:24 won't allow for a narrow view of submission. Just as there is no aspect of the church's life that she may reserve from the Lordship of Christ, neither is there any aspect of a wife's life that she may reserve from her husband's authority.

E. Its Biblical Limits

Having said that, though, we must observe, **fifthly**, the **limits of biblical submission**. You say, "What are you talking about? You just told me she has to submit in everything!" Yes, but as Charles Hodge observed, though this does not mean that "the wife is...subject as to some things, and independent as to others, ... [neither] does [it] mean that the authority of the husband is unlimited. It teaches its *extent*," Hodge says, "not its degree. It extends over all departments, but is limited in all,—first, by the nature of the relation; and, secondly, by the higher authority of God" (*Ephesians*, Geneva, 230).

And so in the **first** place, by calling a wife to submit to her husband "in everything," Paul does not mean to include those thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors that are sinful. A wife must not follow her husband's leadership into sin (Piper, *WTD*, 52). That goes without saying. We see that same pattern when Paul calls for Christian submission to the government in the civil sphere. In Romans 13, Paul calls "every person...to be in subjection to the governing authorities," and he includes no qualification. However, if civil authority commands a believer to disobey God, their response must be what Peter and the apostles answered the high priest in Acts 5:29: "We must obey God rather than men." Paul himself defied the governing authorities in Acts 16:35–40, when he disobeyed the chief magistrates' orders to leave the jail in Philippi. And so, even where

there is an unqualified command for pervasive submission, that does not give any Christian under any form authority the license to follow their authority into sin.

And so, a wife not only may, but must, refuse to submit to her husband if he were to demand that she do something that God forbids—like engage in deception or dishonesty, or get drunk with him, or watch pornography with him, or engage in any sort of illegal activity (Piper, *WTD*, 52). Similarly, she must refuse to follow his leadership if he were to forbid her to do something God commands—like read her Bible, or go to church, or evangelize. She will have to say no to that kind of headship, because the authority of Christ over her life supersedes the authority of her husband.

However, it's worth saying here that even when a wife must obey God rather than her husband, she must still express her inability to follow him in a spirit of submission, rather than in a spirit of rancor and rebellion. You *could* say, "I'm not doing that! And it's disgusting that you would ask me to!" But instead of using the opportunity to demean your husband's authority and rejoice in your disobedience to him, you ought to speak to him in a way that shows you're grieved that you have to disobey him because he's making you choose between submitting to him—which ordinarily you love to do—and obeying Christ, which you also love to do, and must do above all else. One writer gave voice to that kind of submissive disobedience like this. A wife could say, "It grieves me when you venture into sinful act and want to take me with you. You know I can't do that. I have no desire to resist you. On the contrary, I flourish most when I can respond joyfully to your lead; but I can't follow you into sin, as much as I love to honor your leadership in our marriage. Christ is my King" (Piper, *TMM*, 102). That kind of respectful attitude shows the disposition of submission, even where particular acts of submission are not permitted.

In the second place, neither is a wife called to submit herself to being physically or sexually abused by her husband. If a husband is so distorting and perverting the authority which he's been given to protect his wife into harming and even abusing his wife, so that her physical safety is legitimately in danger, she is under no obligation to just sit there and take it. That is not what biblical submission means. No, in such a case where there is legitimate imminent danger, she needs to call the police, notify the elders of her church, and get to a place where she is safe. That may mean that a temporary separation is warranted. It may even mean that divorce is permissible, though that would depend on the details in each case and would need to be worked through under the oversight of her elders. But in no way is she under any biblical warrant to subject herself to physical harm.

And then, a third limit to biblical submission is that Scripture limits a wife's submission to her own husband. The Bible does not teach that all women are to submit to all men—except perhaps in the sense that all Christians are to "be subject to one another in the fear of Christ," Ephesians 5:21. Instead, Scripture is explicit in calling wives to submit to their own husbands. Ephesians

5:22: “Wives, be subject to *your own* husbands, as to the Lord.” Titus 2:5: “...being subject to *their own* husbands, so that the word of God will not be dishonored.” First Peter 3:1: “In the same way, you wives, be submissive to *your own* husbands.” Pastor John put it this way: “Women as a group are not made serfs to men in general, and men aren’t automatically elevated to a ruling class over all women” ([source](#)).

Having said that, though, that’s not to say that the only arena for a woman’s submissiveness is in marriage. Just as there are appropriate ways for a biblical man to express his responsibility to lead and provide for and protect women who are not his wife, so also are there appropriate ways for a biblical woman to express her responsibility to affirm and nurture those expressions of worthy, biblical masculinity. There is a submissiveness that marks a woman’s character in a general sense, even beyond the husband-wife relationship. Though she is not to submit to all men in the same sense she would submit to her husband, she ought to have that prevailing disposition of affirming and supporting godly male headship in whatever sphere it is encountered.

And we see that, for example, in 1 Timothy 2:11. In that letter, Paul is instructing the church at Ephesus how they ought to conduct themselves as the Lord’s church—what life in the household of God is to be like. And there, Paul says, “A woman must quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness.” That, again, is not because a woman is essentially inferior to a man; she’s not. It is not because she may not be gifted to teach; many women are. It is simply because the design of God, rooted in His created order, is that there be equal image-bearers functioning in distinct but harmonious roles to the praise of His glory. And here we learn that extends not only to the home but also to the church. The prevailing disposition of a biblical woman is to affirm worthy male headship in ways appropriate to her varying relationships (Piper, *WTD*, 89).

And so, if a young man’s responsibility to be a provider leads him to pay for his date’s meal or movie ticket, or walk his friend to her car after dark to ensure her safety, mature femininity isn’t offended by those things as if they were an attack on her independence. It gladly, gratefully, and humbly receives those gentlemanly courtesies as appropriate expressions of masculine provision and protection.

F. Its Practical Outworking

In that vein, then, number **six**, let’s consider **the practical outworking of submission**. What does submission look like? Well, the term itself—used in all those passages we’ve quoted: Ephesians 5, Colossians 3, Titus 2, 1 Peter 3—is the Greek word *hupotassō*. It literally means to place oneself under another. It is the idea of putting yourself at the disposal of someone else—yielding your desires, your will, your abilities and efforts to the service and benefit of another. It’s precisely what we saw it meant to be a helper, which Genesis 2:18 identifies as most fundamental to a woman’s identity.

And so, as we said before, the foundation of what it means to be woman is to be one who can suitably help a man to walk in obedience to the calling that God has placed on his life, by placing herself at the disposal of her husband's leadership, yielding her gifts and strengths unto his benefit. Submission is a biblical woman's response to the pattern of initiatives established by mature masculinity (Piper, *WTD*, 49) in a way that honors and affirms—rather than usurps or challenges—his leadership. In their excellent book, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, John Piper and Wayne Grudem put it this way. They said, “Submission refers to a wife's divine calling to honor and affirm her husband's leadership and help carry it through according to her gifts” (61). Elsewhere, Piper explains, “A mature woman is glad when a respectful, caring, upright man offers sensitive strength and provides a pattern of appropriate initiatives in their relationship. She does not want to reverse these roles. She is glad when he is not passive. She feels herself enhanced and honored and freed by his caring strength and servant-leadership” (*WTD*, 56).

And so in terms of **practical outworking**, a submissive wife uses all of her unique gifts and strengths to make her husband the best leader he can be. If mature masculinity takes the initiative to be the spiritual leader, mature femininity:

- actively supports their family's meaningful (and punctual) participation in their local church;
- eagerly participates in family devotions, Bible reading, and prayer together;
- responds enthusiastically to her husband's suggestions about books to read or sermons to listen to together;
- engages undistractedly in spiritual conversations;
- invites her husband's spiritual oversight and humbly receives the correction he might bring;
- happily encourages him with words of kindness when he leads, protects and provides for her well, and when he makes discernible progress in his own sanctification;
- genuinely seeks his input on how to address behavioral issues with the children, and comes alongside him in implementing God-honoring discipline;
- disciplines her own heart in the midst of conflict, so that if he outdoes her in showing honor and seeks forgiveness first, her heart is eager and ready to grant it, as well as to seek forgiveness for her part;
- defers with enthusiasm to his suggestions for date nights, family vacations, or fun weekend activities;
- readily offers her prayerful and thoughtful input on any decisions that he brings to her for consideration;
- and, if after patient discussion and prayer together a husband and wife disagree over the direction to take the family—and the choice isn't between sin and righteousness but which is the wisest of two lawful alternatives—submission means that the wife will

humbly yield to her husband's leadership and affirm his decision, knowing that God will hold *him* accountable for the rightness or wrongness of the decision, but will hold *her* accountable for submitting to the authority that He has placed over her.

And as an aside, guys: good leaders don't pull rank like that as a habit. If you're *often* calling your wife to submit to you amid unresolved disagreement, something is amiss, and it's likely that you're not leading well. Good leaders *lead*; they do not *drive*. I asked Janna this morning if she could remember a time when we had discussed something and couldn't come to an agreement, and I asked her to follow my leadership even though she wasn't convinced that the way I was going was best. She said, "Maybe once?" in 15 years. And neither of us could remember what it was about. So, this kind of thing *may* happen, but it's not license, men, to run over your wife.

Now, none of that is to say that submission means shutting off your brain and mindlessly agreeing with everything your husband says. It can't mean that, because in the same breath that Peter calls wives to submit to their husbands in 1 Peter 3, he says that they might win their husbands to faith in the Gospel by their chaste and respectful behavior. A submissive wife can't mindlessly agree with her unbelieving husband in everything. So, submission doesn't mean that a woman ceases to have her own thoughts and opinions. It means that she will employ those thoughts and opinions in the service of her husband's leadership. It doesn't mean that you acquiesce to every word your husband says. That wouldn't serve him well, and you are given to him to help him. It simply means that you place your gifts and talents at his disposal to make him the best leader that he can be, and to follow him in the decisions that he makes and the direction that he takes for your family.

That's also not to say that a wife can't appeal to her husband to change his mind about a decision she's uneasy about. She can. But the way she expresses her concern ought to communicate that, though she doesn't agree, she nevertheless endorses his leadership and affirms his role as her head. For example, if he wants to invest a sizeable portion of the family's savings in a particular venture that she doesn't feel comfortable with, she can say, "Nope! You're not doing it! We're equal partners in this marriage, that is *my* money too, and I'm not going to let you bankrupt this family with your foolishness!" *Or*, she can say, "Hey, I know you've thought a lot about this, and I'm so thankful that you're taking the initiative to plan for our future and care for us financially, and I know we've talked a lot about it too. But I still can't shake this feeling of uneasiness, and I'd really like to talk about it again before we move forward. Could we set aside some time to do that?" Do you see how different those are? The one belittles, demeans, and usurps headship. The other encourages, edifies, and honors headship.

G. Its Respectful Posture

And that leads me to a **seventh feature**: namely, **the respectful posture of submission**. Back in Ephesians 5, at the end of that great passage on marriage, Paul brings the most extended New Testament instruction on the marriage relationship to a climax in verse 33. He says, “Each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself, and the wife must see to it that she *respects* her husband.” When he summarizes all that he’s been teaching in this marvelous paragraph, the conclusion he wants ringing in Christians’ ears is: Husbands, love your wife as yourself; and wives, respect your husbands. Similarly, in Peter’s instructions on this in 1 Peter 3, he urges wives to submission even to unbelieving husbands, in the hopes that their gracious behavior would win their disobedient husbands to the truth. Listen to how he says it: “In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, as they observe your chaste and *respectful* behavior.”

I mean this is really an astounding passage. Peter says that a biblical wife will win over her disobedient, unbelieving husband not by confronting him, not by arguing with him, not by nagging him or badgering him or needling him, but by **respecting** him—by being a living monument to the truth you profess to believe; by demonstrating in actions that the grace of Christ is powerful to subdue sin, because it’s empowered you to actually mortify that self-righteous, unmerciful, speck-picking spirit that constantly finds fault. And to put on in its place a life of encouraging words that build up instead of tear down, kind service that never returns evil for evil, and an attitude and demeanor of respect. One of the greatest gifts a wife can give her husband is the sure and certain confidence that he has her respect—to know that she trusts him, and that he makes her feel safe as he leads their family.

You say, “But what if he *doesn’t* lead my family? How can I be submissive and responsive to my husband’s leadership if he doesn’t lead?” Well, that certainly is a trial. And men, don’t any of you in this room give your wife a reason to make this objection. But ladies, the way to help a man embrace his role as leader is not to usurp his leadership by complaining and being contentious. You don’t communicate that you desire to follow him by haranguing him to be a better leader. In that case, you would be “leading” him—and doing a bad job of it at that, because nagging and haranguing is not good leadership. Your pleas for godlier leadership have to sound like, “I want *you*,” not, “I can’t stand you until you change!” You say, “Honey, it is a delight for me to follow your leadership. The great longing of my heart is to follow you as you follow Christ. I really desire to place my own giftedness at your disposal in order to maximize divine blessing in our lives. And one area specifically where I would love to see us make progress is…” fill in the blank. That communicates, “I want *you*! We’re on the same team! I’m in your corner! I’m ready to follow where you lead!”

H. It’s Beautiful Attitude

And the **eighth feature** of biblical submission is closely related to that. I think I'm going to make it its own point in our next sermon, so here I'll only mention it. But that is, number eight: **the beautiful attitude of submission**. And what is that? We find it in the next verses of 1 Peter 3, verses 3 and 4: "Your adornment must not be merely external—braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses; but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of *a gentle and quiet spirit*, which is precious in the sight of God." A submissive woman is not abrasive or loud. She is gentle and quiet. Her character, attitude, demeanor, and speech are marked by the inward, imperishable beauty of gentleness and quietness. More to come on that next week.

I. Its Beautifying Purpose

But finally, we'll consider **the beautifying purpose of submission**. And we see that in Titus chapter 2 and verse 5, where Paul instructs the older women to teach the younger women to be "subject to their own husbands, *so that* the word of God will not be *dishonored*." The Word of God is so shot through with the truths of male headship and female submission—those truths are so integral to the very design of God in His creative purposes—that for a professing Christian woman, someone who claims to trust in and obey the Word of God, not to be subject to her own husband, would be to bring dishonor upon the Word that she professes to believe in.

When any Christian proclaims at the top of her lungs that the grace of Christ is powerful to transform lives, but then does not herself *live* that transformed life, what's that give cause for the unbeliever to say? "Some sanctifying Word you've got there! You say the Bible is true and authoritative and lovely and powerful. Why don't you do what it says? You talk a big game, but when it comes down to it, the Bible says you're supposed to submit yourself to your husband, be chaste and respectful, be gentle and quiet, and you run roughshod over him more than I do *my* husband!" You see, that's a *dishonor* that your behavior brings upon the Word of God.

But on the other hand, just a few verses later, as Paul urges Christian slaves to be subject to their masters, he appends this purpose clause to his exhortations, Titus 2:10: "...so that they will *adorn* the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect." What he expresses negatively in verse 5—that the Word not be dishonored—he expresses positively in verse 10: that the doctrine of God will be adorned. *Kosméō*, from which we get the term *cosmetics*. It means to beautify. Paul is saying that when a woman devotes herself to cultivating a disposition of free, glad, willing submissiveness, rather than *dishonoring* the Word of God and making it look *less* glorious than it actually is, she *adorns* the doctrine of God. She *beautifies* it! She makes it look as glorious as it actually *is*!

My dear sisters, which one do you want to be marked by? Isn't it glorious to think that there's something *we* can do to make the precious Word of God and the doctrine it teaches look beautiful in the eyes of believers and unbelievers alike? Indeed it *is* glorious. Let that thought,

along with all we've spoken about today, strengthen your resolve to live your life in that distinctively feminine way, of cultivating the beautiful disposition of glad submissiveness.

{Refer to audio for closing comments.}