

“Christian Marriage”
Ephesians 5:22-33
May 24, 2015

INTRODUCTION:

With today’s passage, Paul begins to address three key relationships in society and instructs Christians about their attitudes and behaviors in these three relationships. The three are the marriage relationship, the relationship between parents and children and finally that of slave and master, which in our day applies to the employer-employee relationship. The fundamental nature of these relationships can be seen simply in the amount of time and energy we devote to them. If you removed from your schedule everything related to marriage, work, and relationships with either children or parents, there wouldn’t be much left for you to do. These relationships provide the basic structure of our lives, and it is normally through these relationships that God works out his purposes in our lives. We begin today with the one that is more fundamental than the other two, that of marriage between a man and a woman.

I don’t need to tell you that marriage is under great pressure in our day. Divorce rates have increased dramatically since the advent of no-fault divorces several decades ago. The last ten years have seen a decrease in the number of divorces per one thousand population, but only because there has been an even bigger decrease in the number of marriages per one thousand population. There can’t be a divorce where there has been no marriage. There are strong currents in our culture that make good marriages more difficult. One of those is the emphasis given in our culture to self-fulfillment. Many people enter marriage for what they think they will get out of it, rather than seeing it as God’s call to give oneself to another. For the same reason, many people leave marriages when they conclude that the marriage is an obstacle to self-fulfillment. I heard an interview this week with Terri Gross, host of an NPR show called *Fresh Air*. She was speaking about her decision to leave her first marriage, saying that she did so in order to give herself some space to discover who she was.

We in the church know about troubled marriages, too. Becoming a Christian doesn’t guarantee a happy, trouble-free marriage. I would go even further and say that there is no such thing as a trouble-free marriage, whether inside the church or outside. Let me point out that the next section after Paul’s instructions about these three fundamental relationships is an extensive section about how to fight the devil. Why did Paul make the connection between these relationships and the work of the devil? He did so simply because he knows that Satan’s work is to destroy these relationships, particularly the marriage relationship. So all marriages are troubled marriages

in one sense—troubled by Satan. But we don't despair, because we have the presence of God's Spirit to help us. So let's turn now to Paul's teaching about Christian marriage, and let these words give you hope for your marriage.

I. The Wife's Submission

Paul's command to wives to submit to their husbands would not have been very controversial in Paul's day. That's not the case for us, because our culture has a very hard time with submission to authority. As a result, some have tried to make the case that this command was culturally specific, applying in Paul's culture but not our own. Given the number of times this command appears in the Bible, and given the fact that it is sometimes based on the creation account, I think it misguided to dismiss this command by saying it was culturally specific. Others go to the opposite extreme and say that this submission removes from a wife any significant voice in a marriage. I have heard of husbands who use this command to attempt to control everything in the lives of their wives, including how she dresses and when she is allowed to speak. That, too, is a misreading of this text.

So what does it mean for the wife to submit to her husband? It includes an action and an attitude. The action is that of obedience. That's the basic meaning of the word "submit." But what if the husband is not worthy of his wife's obedience? Paul says that she is to submit **"as to the Lord"** (v. 22). At least two things are taught by that. First, her primary submission is to be to the Lord over her husband. So she is not to obey her husband if he asks her to do something that would require her to disobey the Lord. Second, it teaches that her submission to the Lord is not based on the husband's merits but on the Lord's worth. She is to look behind her husband and see the Lord standing there. In her heart, she is to say, "I am submitting to this man for your sake, Jesus."

Submission also involves an attitude, and we can see what that attitude is in Paul's summary of the roles of both the husband and the wife in verse 33. The wife is told there to respect her husband. Again we need to ask the question, "What is a wife to do if her husband is not worthy of her respect?" Though a wife can't be expected to respect what is unworthy of respect, she can find those things that are worthy of respect. For example, she can respect the office of headship God gives to her husband. She needs to see him as God does, as a man who will have to give an account to the Lord for his marriage and his love for his wife. That is a terrifying thing, and worthy of her respect, even if her husband doesn't respect his office of husband.

I believe that verse 33 addresses men and women at their place of greatest vulnerability. That is, just as wives need the love of their husbands like plants need water and sunshine, so husbands need the respect of their wives.

Proverbs 14:1 says, **“The wise woman builds her house, but the foolish tears it down with her own hands.”** Disrespect of your husband is the foolish tearing down of your own house. Bryan Chapell tells of a time when he and his wife lived in an apartment building with very thin walls, so much so that they could hear the fights of those around them. He reports how the couple below them, a minister and his wife, often fought over who was the “better witness.” The Chapells would try to ignore the fights until they could hear them turn violent. They noticed over time a pattern in these conflicts. It was usually the wife’s attempts to control her husband through shame that prompted his abusive behavior. While a husband’s abuse of his wife is inexcusable no matter what she does, it is also true that a man is most vulnerable at this area of respect. The wise woman builds up her husband through learning to respect what is worthy of respect in him and in his office as husband.

II. The Husband’s Love

Paul spends most of his time here on the husband’s role as head of his house, and the primary way in which he is to work that out through Christ-like love for his wife. Again, though this is an unpopular idea in our culture, the meaning of headship is not difficult to discern. It means to have authority and to take responsibility. The husband is responsible before God for the spiritual direction of his household. Let that sink in for a moment. That means that God holds husbands responsible to help everyone in the family get a hold of the grace of God and mature in that grace.

Some people have difficulty accepting headship because they fear its misuse in the form of domineering leadership. Others, usually men, have difficulty with it because they don’t want to lead, preferring instead a more passive role. Speaking from my own experience as a pastor and as a husband, the most common headship error in our day is passivity instead of domineering leadership. Abdication of authority and abuse of authority are both sins.

A Christian husband has an example in how he is to go about exercising this headship in the way Jesus has loved his bride, the church. Paul spends some time unpacking that. He says first that just as Christ **“gave himself up for her,”** husbands are to sacrifice themselves for their wives. The husband’s headship is to be used not to make him happy, but to make his wife happy. He is to sacrifice his time, his interests, his money and anything else he might have, to see his wife flourish. Then in the next verse Paul points out how Jesus sanctifies the church, **“having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word”** (v. 26). Though we can’t bring about the sanctification of our wives, we can take leadership in leading in prayer and bringing focused attention to God’s word in our marriages. We can make sure our families maintain an active involvement in a good church. Husbands are also told to model their leadership on Christ’s actions in presenting **“the church to himself in**

splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such things, that she might be holy and without blemish” (v. 27). It is the husband’s job to build up his wife, to help her become all that God created her to be. Some husbands lead in such a way that their wives lose confidence. The leadership of Christ-like husbands has just the opposite effect, building the confidence and strength of their wives.

Paul sweetens the deal for husbands by reminding them of the “one-flesh” nature of marriage. Since in marriage the two become one flesh, it is in the husband’s best interests to love his wife well, since he is loving himself by doing so. One of the implications of that is that a wife completes her husband. He needs her to become fully who God has created him to be, just as the wife needs him to be fully what God intended for her. Unless you have the gift of celibacy, your spouse is needed for your sanctification. To regard as an enemy the one God gave you to be your ally is to hurt yourself.

Robertson McQuilken served for a time as the president of Columbia International University, formerly Columbia Bible College. He had served as a missionary and wanted to finish his career by investing in the lives of the next generation. But shortly after his appointment, his wife, Muriel, took a significant turn for the worse in her battle against Alzheimer’s. He hired sitters to watch her, but she became extremely anxious and agitated in everyone’s presence except that of her husband. So Robertson McQuilken resigned from his presidency to care for his wife. There were those who questioned his decision. They thought it a waste for a man of his experience and gifts to spend his days changing diapers and caring for a woman who would never get better. McQuilken explained himself, “It’s not that I *have to*; it’s that I *get to*.”

III. The Stakes

It is often the case in sermons about marriage that what is described as being at stake is the happiness of marriages. People are urged to follow the guidelines of the Bible so that they might have happy marriages. It is true that happy marriages are at stake in following the Bible’s directions. But there is more at stake than that. Paul teaches here that it is also the glory of God at stake, because marriage is designed to portray the love of Christ for his church. If you think about the roles Paul assigns to husbands and wives, they are both to be focused on the needs of the other. That is what God is like, with each member of the Trinity focused on the needs of the other. Paul began this chapter by telling us to be **“imitators of God”** (5:1), and he now explains how that happens in a marriage.

Bryan Chapell begins his book on marriage by telling the story of a wife who steals from her husband in order to feed her gambling addiction. Though the husband does the best he can to protect the family’s money from her, she still manages to get her hands on it, and then proceeds to lose it all to her

addiction. This husband makes good money, but it's not enough, and the family has been on the edge of bankruptcy numerous times. The world tells him to divorce her, but he will not do so. His courageous words give the reason. "My wife is a good mother most of the time. My children need her. But more than that they need to know their Savior. How can they know of a Father in heaven who forgives them if their father on earth will not forgive their own mother? How can my wife know the love of God if the spiritual leader in this home will not love her despite her faults?" (*Each for the Other*, p. 22).

IV. The Hope

I began this sermon by saying that we all have troubled marriages. They are troubled by Satan and by our own sin nature. What hope is there for troubled marriages? Several weeks ago, I asked Wendy if there was something she could change about me, what would it be. She answered that I needed to love both her and other people better. She was right. What hope is there for someone like me, someone who has brought trouble to his own marriage by failing to love my wife as God calls me to? My hope is in Christ alone. Through his sacrifice I am forgiven. But that is not all. Because I am part of his bride, I am loved fully by him. I don't need to act selfishly in an attempt to meet my own needs because the love of Jesus deeply satisfies. It is the love of Jesus that frees me up to love my wife. Women, it is the love of Jesus alone that will free you up to respect your husbands even when they don't love you.

If you are here today, and you are part of a marriage that is in critical condition, I want you to know that there is hope for your marriage in the love of Jesus. You can make a fresh start today in your marriage. It requires your repentance, your readiness to confess that your heart is much darker and more self-centered than you realize. And it requires the readiness to receive the love and forgiveness of Jesus.

CONCLUSION:

I was stopped in traffic this week behind an elderly couple in the car just ahead of me. They were well into their 80's, if not 90's, and I'm assuming they were married. The husband was so short that he could barely see over the steering wheel. While we were all stopped at the red light, he realized that he needed to move one lane to the right. So his wife rolled down her window, and I saw a shriveled arm waving frantically to the car next to them to let them over when traffic started moving again. It was a simple thing, but it spoke powerfully to me of God's call to a husband and wife to work together as they journey on the road God has set out for them. They are not enemies, but allies who imitate God by giving of themselves to bring life and joy to the other.