

Part 10: Submitting to Jesus in Marriage

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If you had to think of what might be the most visible evangelistic effort in your life, what would that be? If you had to think of which portion of your life might be the greatest benefit to the church, what would that be? If you had to think of the part of your life best suited to proclaim Christ in an increasingly sinful world, what would that be?

In writing to our church today, and the church in Ephesus, Paul says that the answer to all these questions are: your relationships. Let's look together at the way in which Paul transitions into our relationships in: **Ephesians 5:15-21**.

Did you see Paul's logic here: The days are evil, be wise, don't be foolish, be filled with the Spirit. What does this look like: encourage one another, speak, sing to one another, and lastly be submitted to one another out of reverence for Christ. As we often say, our goal as believers is to glorify God and love others, but what does it look like? What does it look like to glorify God as we love others?

Paul is going to take this theme and answer it over the next few weeks as he speaks to husbands and wives, parents and children, and employers and employees. Paul's point in the closing portions of his book is that churches must realize the influence their relationships have in light of the gospel.

Over the next few weeks you will see that Paul speaks to each relationship by first speaking to the party who is under authority and then speaks to the party which is in authority. But in all three messages we are going to see the principle of verse 21 applied, that everyone is under submission to Jesus. Submission is universal towards God but distinct in human contexts.

This idea of submission and worship looks different depending upon who God made you to be, and where God has placed you in life. Paul will show us that at any point in time you might have different responsibilities in different places.

For instance a Christian woman might have a responsibility to her husband which is different than her responsibility to her children, and still different to the responsibility she has to her employees. Or a Christian man might have different responsibility to his boss than he would to his wife. Who you are, and where you are changes the role and responsibilities you might have.

Over the past two weeks my wife and I have been to five weddings, which means that I am prepped and ready to look at this first sphere today: marriage. What we are going to see in our text today are two truths: **Wives sacrificially submit to another** and **Husbands sacrificially love another**.

But before we get into the text I'm going to extend this already long intro just a bit. The truth is that everything Paul is going to talk about for the next few weeks includes counter cultural ideas. However, none of them are more counter cultural in our day and age than a Biblical view of marriage.

And in thinking of this I'm reminded of the story of Naaman in 2 Kings 5. In this story, Naaman, who is the commander of an army which opposes Israel, has leprosy (a nasty and unbearably painful and

contagious disease). However in his conquests, he took a Hebrew girl as a slave who said to him, "Master if only you would go see Elisha, prophet in Israel, then he would heal you."

So Naaman goes to Elisha, and Elisha says to him, "Go and wash yourself in the Jordan river seven times and you will be healed." The wild thing about this is that Naaman becomes furious. He walks away from the prophet saying, "I thought he was going to do some crazy prophet thing and wave his hand over my skin and heal it. But instead he wants me to go wash in the Jordan River: the nasty brown river that flows through Israel. Are not the rivers in my homeland of Syria better than all the rivers in Israel, why couldn't I be washed in one of them!" And it says he went away full of rage.

But his servants came to him and said, "Master didn't you hear what the prophet said? He said wash and you will be healed. This is a great and good word. This is what you wanted wasn't it? Why not try it?"

So Naaman goes to the Jordan, washes seven times, and his skin is made as healthy as a child's skin. And at this moment not only does Naaman get what he wanted, but he begins to sing the praises of the God of Israel. He says, "Now I know that there is a no other god but the God of Israel."

What does this story have to do with marriage? Well, as you probably heard when the scripture was read earlier, there are commands from God himself in this passage which might seem offensive to us. We might hear God's call to wives and husbands and we might think them to be absolutely horrific when compared to the rivers of culture. We want good marriages, we want marriages which love each other well, we want marriages which last, but often times we reject the rivers of Israel for the rivers of Syria.

But there is a difference. As counter-cultural as this may sound, this is the river that heals. This is the word of God alone which promises everything you are looking for and promises it in full. And it might be that when you bathe yourself in this word that not only do you find the relief you were looking for, but you find God more beautiful and faithful than you ever imagined.

You see our culture has redefined, reimagined, and refurbished marriage according to its own understanding. But God is the one who not only created us as male and female, but his is also the one who invented the first marriage between the two. God defines marriage because God designed marriage.

And because God designed it, hidden in our marriage is the very heart of the gospel itself. To those who are married in here today, Paul is telling you to pay attention because the gospel is at the heart of marriage. You can't understand your marriage without understanding the gospel.

To those who are single in here today, Paul is telling you to pay attention because marriage is at the heart of the gospel. You can't understand the gospel without understanding marriage.

With that said let's dive into Paul's exhortation to wives: **Ephesians 5:22-24**.

Here we see our first point to wives today: **Wives sacrificially submit to another**.

And before we get too far in I want to remind us of what Paul is saying in verse 22. There are three important parts of that verse, "wives submit," "to your own husband," "as to the Lord."

First "*wives submit*." This is a word borrowed from the verse immediately preceding it and it means to organize one's life in submission to someone or something. Meaning, it is not a statement of value, it is a statement of order and structure.

This is often hard for us to understand in our world because we are merit based in everything we do. We have flattened occupation and role and equated it to value and worth. While we would never say it, we value the personhood of a cashier differently than we do the personhood of a doctor. We value the personhood of a child in the womb differently than we do a child outside of the womb based off their utility and role.

But in God's wonderful creation, role is not equal to dignity. To be in submission to something is not to be any less valuable or any less capable than anyone else. We know this because in verse 21 Paul makes this action universal, but also because Jesus submitted to his Father while he was on earth.

Children in submitting to their parents, employees in submitting to their employers, wives submitting to their husbands are no less valuable, dignified or image bearing than Jesus was when he submitted to his Father during his earthly life.

But submission, ordering your life under someone or something else, is a posture which carries with it obedience, sacrifice and respect. And wives if you think this is hard, wait till you see what Paul calls husbands to next. Both the husband and the wife incur costly roles inside of marriage.

Wives submit, "*to your own husband*." The Bible doesn't call all women to submit to all men. The Bible is calling a single wife to submit to her single husband. Who you marry matters. There are few things as important to consider as who it is you will marry.

Wives are called to willingly and intentionally come under their own husband, and lastly, they are also to do so as an act of worship to God. Wives submit to your own husbands, "*as to the Lord*."

Your understanding of God and your worship of him is the fountain head out of which your married life flows. For any of this to be possible in your heart, your heart must be submitted to God. The truth, for husbands and for wives, is we can't do any of this without God's help. But God has promised to help us.

And because it is an extension of your understanding and worship of God, it means that you husbands cannot muster gospel-based submission out of your wife. Gospel-submission is not driven by fear, applied by a husband, but fostered in the home through worship. A husband must lead his wife with a compelling picture of gospel-centered marriage.

And this is what Paul begins to do almost immediately for you ladies: **Ephesians 5:23-24**.

One of the biggest questions you will probably have as a Bible-loving wife is "What does submission look like?" And it might seem really unfortunate that Paul doesn't tell you here. But the truth is he has spent the previous three chapters telling you what this might look like. Since chapter 4, Paul has been showing how the church is to submit to Jesus in light of his incredible love for her.

Paul has painted this beautiful picture of what the life of the church looks like: the church uses all of her gifts and all of her life to labor joyfully and willingly for the eternal plan of God shown in Jesus Christ.

The church is called to willingly set aside her own aspirations and to joyfully embrace the aspirations of God's glory. This is what every believer, male or female, married or not is called to embrace. And like that, Paul says, the wife is to look to her husband as the head and say "Wherever you lead us, I'm all in."

For instance when I started dating my wife two things were clear: she wanted to live in California and she didn't want to marry a pastor. This was unfortunate because I felt called to pastoral ministry and I love Montana. Yet without me saying anything, she knew that to love me was to go all in on me pursuing pastoral ministry. She supported me, she incurred the cost of me doing seminary early in our marriage and parenting. This was costly and yet easy for her because she loved me and realized that this was what God was calling her to at this point in her life.

This doesn't mean that wives can't share concerns. Jesus himself shared his concerns with the Father in Gethsemane. It doesn't mean that husbands don't need to listen to their wives, for God listens to us, and Jesus saw the needs of his disciples. In fact we husbands need to not only lead like Jesus led, but we need to be willing to hear our spouses as Jesus hears the prayers of his church. It doesn't mean that wives aren't as gifted as husbands, for my wife is more gifted in many ways than me. But it does mean that God has placed the husband in such a position where the responsibility to lead, love and cherish falls on him.

Now I want this section to be practically helpful to the wives and potential wives who are in here today, but I also know that Paul didn't leave detailed instructions as to what this looks like. In one sense submitting in everything with respect is more of an art than a science. So here are some diagnostic questions for you to wrestle with:

First, *what is your definition of happiness?* Paul has gone out of his way to show us in this book that our greatest happiness is in serving the eternal plans of God. If your happiness is ultimately tied to things less than this it will be impossible for you to willingly delight in anything else.

Second, just as husbands are called to consider costly acts of love towards their wives, wives, *what are some costly acts of submission which God might be calling you to make?* Where might God be calling you to serve his glory and your husband in loving ways?

Before we move on I want to speak briefly to believing wives with unbelieving husbands. God has not forgotten you. You might see what God demands of husbands in the verses which follow and think: "If my husband led like that it would be easy to submit. I see how a believing husband can lead be to flourish, but not mine." The truth is no husband, believer or not will meet this level of love personally. There is no husband who is at face value worthy of this kind of submission except for Jesus. And Jesus, that faithful husband is with you even with your imperfect husband.

Now, wives are not called to submit to their husbands if their husbands are calling them to sin, or to become an accomplice in their sin, or a tool used in their sin. This is true for anyone under authority in any sphere.

But in such a circumstance as an unbelieving husband, God is still calling you to submit to himself. To trust him. In times where you might not trust the wisdom of your husband, you can trust the wisdom of God. Actually you will be surprised at how many men are in this room today because of the faithful and submissive witness of their wives when they were unconverted. This is exactly what is needed because of the evil in our age. This is the beautiful and redemptive role of gospel-focused relationships.

Now if left on its own, or if left with an unbelieving spouse, this might seem like an incomplete and difficult task. And to a degree it is, but it is able to be done with God's help. But what we are going to turn to now is the second half of this equation which really completes the whole picture of marriage. This is the call to the husbands.

Paul opens with this to you men: **Ephesians 5:25-31**.

So here we begin to see the full and beautiful picture of marriage. As wives are called to lay down their authority in submission so husbands are called to lay down their lives in love. This is our second point today: **Husbands sacrificially love another**.

This actually helps us understand submission a bit more doesn't it? Submission is not pandering to the superficial wants and desires of the husband because a godly husband is more interested in loving his wife than meeting his own superficial needs.

This is important to note in contrast to how our world talks about love. You experience with love is important, you should want to be happy and cared for. But we have taken something important and made it ultimate. We have come to a point where if love fails to satisfy us, fails for a moment to make us happy, or fails to meet our needs, we move on to what's next. And this creates a paranoia in the lives of the beloved, it actually rules people by fear.

How opposite are these two pictures that God paints of love. The loving wife gives her life in joyful submission to someone who is not herself, and loving husband lays aside his own benefit for the eternal benefit of his beloved.

This really is a truer picture of love isn't it? It's not a love that derives from merit but a love that derives from true covenant. It's not a love that says perform this way and I'll love you. Instead it's a love that says, I love you and I'm going to continue to love you even when it's difficult. Notice the point Paul makes here. The wife doesn't belong to the husband as property to be consumed as you see fit. Your wife belongs to the husband as his own body to be cared for as God himself demands.

Which means, church, that it is no Biblical view of marriage which sees a wife's submission as a tool to be weaponized for your own pleasure or utility. We are in a crisis in western evangelicalism where God is working across the country to expose men who have used the verses we have just looked at to sin against women in harmful ways. God must continue this revealing work. But I want to make it very clear as Paul is making it clear here: the problem behind this crisis is not too much headship, it's too little headship.

When these verses are used to harm women it is not because men are too strong or too firm, or that they lead too much. It's that they lead so very little and are so very weak. No one out leads Jesus, and his leadership was not detrimental. You can't out headship Jesus, but you can settle for headship which is less than Jesus.

How do we know this? Because the gospel leadership of Jesus is at the very heart of it.

One of my favorite albums I listened to throughout High School was the live recording of a concert Led Zeppelin did in LA called "How the West Was Won." And on the second disk of that concert there is a song called "Moby Dick" and the song starts off just like the recorded version, and ends just like the

recorded version. But in the middle their drummer, John Henry Bonham, goes on a massive 17 minute drum solo. And he keeps progressing and he keeps progressing so much so that you've almost forgotten how the song begun, but then at the end he seamlessly picks up mid melody and the song continues just as it had started.

And you realize that all that rhythm and all those fills were actually included in the nature of the song all along. This is what Paul is doing with this text in Ephesians. This text is certainly about marriage, but there is a degree in which this text resolves the very tension at the heart of Ephesians.

So what I want to do now is read again the passage written to the husbands and I want you to see how clearly he starts, how clearly he ends, but how in the middle there is this wonderful solo on the gospel itself: **Ephesians 5:25-33**

Did you hear the melody? In this text you see how deeply and profoundly Jesus loved his church. Before Paul returns to marriage he wants us to first see how richly the gospel dwells inside of it.

Do you remember the kind of things that Paul has been calling Christians inside the church to do? Paul in Ephesians 4 says, "walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called," later he says, "you must no longer walk as you used to in the futility of your mind," and also "put off your old self which belongs to your former manner and is corrupt through deceitful desires and instead put on the new self, created after the likeness of holiness," "speak truth, build up, do not be bitter, imitate God, give up sexual impurity, slander, drunkenness, expose the sin that kills, come into the light of Jesus, seek peace, be thankful, glorify God, submit to one another out of fear for Christ Jesus."

Then, as if we weren't burdened enough he calls wives to serve like the church and husbands to love like Jesus. Any reasonable person should look at the weightiness of all Jesus has called us to and say: "There's no way!" "I'm too weak." "I'm tired of failing."

But look at this husband-savior Jesus Christ. Look at what he has done for you. Put aside for a moment the ideas of husbands and wives and look as a Christian. Jesus has come for you, he has given his life for you. And he has promised to not leave you, but to wash you, to clean you, to day by day build you up in his Spirit, to work in your life through repentance and growth so that one day, one beautiful day you will be presented blameless, holy, in glory and splendor.

The commands of God would be so unbearable to us if God had not wed us to Christ as our husband. Dear church, Jesus has wed himself to you. You by grace through faith are part of his body and he will not leave you apart from him. He will grow you, he will stand by you, he will help you and he will never abandon you.

This water is the water that heals! Come to this husband join yourself to his love.

Just as wives are called to submit even if their husband is not innately worthy of it, so too husbands are called to love their wives even if their wives are less than loveable.

How and why might we do this? Because this is where our savior-husband found us. We were not loveable when Jesus found us, we had no compatibility or attraction that he would desire us. But he did.

I ran into a sermon on this passage from a pastor who lived a few hundred years after Paul wrote this letter. I tried to put the idea into my own words, but I'm just going to share it with you because the pastor who preached it was a guy named John Chrysostom which means: John the Golden Tongue. Meaning, I can't really say it better:

"If you must give your life for your wife, yes, even to be cut into pieces ten thousand times, yes, even to endure and undergo any suffering whatsoever--refuse it not. Even if you have done all of these things, even then you have not done anything like Christ. For you would do it for the one to whom you are already knit; but he for the one who turned her back on him and hated him...The church was unclean! So then she had blemishes, so then she was unsightly, so then she was worthless! Whatever kind of wife you take, you shall never take a bride such as the church when Christ took her. Nor will you take one as removed from you as the church from Christ. Yet in all this, he did not abhor her, nor loathe her in her surpassing deformity. Do you remember her deformity described? Hear what Paul said, "for you were once darkness." What is blacker than darkness? But look again at her boldness, "living" he said, "in malice and envy." Look again at her impurity; "disobedient, foolish."...so many were her blemishes, yet did he give himself up for her in her deformity, as for one in the bloom of youth, as one dearly beloved, as for one of wonderful beauty. And it was in admiration of this that Paul said..."In that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." And though such as this, he took her, he arrayed her in beauty, and washed her, and refused not even this, to give himself for her."

Dear believer, do you realize that this is what Jesus did for you? This is the wedding which saves you and the wedding which will one day await you in eternity. You see the Bible began with a creation and a wedding, and in Revelation the Bible ends with the promise of a New Creation, and the Wedding Supper of the Lamb.

Have you taken this Jesus as your husband? If so trust yourself to his love. Cherish his word, give yourself for his eternal glory as the church was created to do. And Paul himself reaches all the way back to Genesis and quotes the first marriage ceremony saying: marriage refers to Christ and the church. You can't understand the gospel without this marriage.

But he says, even though there is one church and one Christ, you many husbands and you many wives must learn to apply this beautiful truth to your own lives.

If you are considering marriage, does this cause you to pause in how you view it? Remember marriage was so weighty that Paul himself willingly chose to abstain from it, and yet he is at no loss to simultaneously sing the beauty of it.

In closing Paul says this: Husbands love your wives as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

So I have one quick point of application from this text for the husband. What does your love look like?

It's easy for us to go by our own understanding of love in our marriages. We can say that it is loving for us to provide enough money for our spouse to have the home she wants, and she might very much appreciate that. We can say that it is loving for us to give our spouse quality time, and she might very much enjoy that. We can say that love is being kind and gentle, and she will certainly benefit from that.

But here Paul describes love in terms of its contribution to her spiritual growth. Jesus' love wed us to his power and promised to change us day by day. Now you aren't Jesus, and you can't change your wife. But you can consider what that kind of love looks like.

What does it look like for you to love your wife in a way which prioritizes her spiritual state? Maybe praying together each morning? Instead of a date night out, maybe it's a date night in listening to a sermon series or Christian podcast together? Maybe it is intentionally arranging your schedule so that your wife can use her gifts to serve the church or share the gospel?

Husbands test this kind of love this week in the simplest ways. It is one thing for someone to say that they would die for their wife. We love that masculine ideal. But it is wildly out of sync with this passage to think you would die for your wife in life but not die for your wife in daily ways. In many ways it's easy to say I'll die for you. It's harder to say, "I'll change that diaper." But this kind of gospel love includes both the grand and the gritty.

That's what leadership is. This is what Jesus is holding you responsible to foster by his grace. And don't forget that it will be costly. It was costly for Jesus and it's going to be costly to you, but he who loves his wife loves himself. Take joy in the sacrifice.

Marriages matter because the gospel matters. My guess is that many of us need to repent of hearts which are less than what Paul just showed us. But the beauty of this very passage is that it is through repentance the Jesus works his wonderful washing on his church. As we apply this text, even in broken ways, Jesus is perfecting his bride and making us a wonderfully distinct witness.