

## The Grace of a Christ-Centered Marriage

### Ephesians 5:21-33

Every family has one.

Every family seems to have one relative who says some crazy things.

Maybe it's a cousin who's politics is on the fringe

Maybe it's the sibling who always manages to put their foot in it.

Everyone will be enjoying Christmas lunch

when all of a sudden a statement will be made that's just incredibly awkward.

Do you have someone like that in your family? Maybe *you're* that person!

Sometimes the Apostle Paul

sounds like an awkward uncle at a family dinner, doesn't he?

I mean, we love him and he always has some very encouraging things to say.

He's well travelled and has lots of great stories that he entertains us with,

but every now and again he drops what sounds like a real *clanger*,

"I'm sorry... Paul, did you just say what I think you said?"

"Is that what you *really* think?"

And in this passage of Ephesians we have one of those moments:

*Wives submit to your husbands.*

What is it about this statement that makes it so hard to hear?

I can think of a couple of things.

We know women are not less competent than men,

so why on earth would Paul order one sex under the other?

It feels like a recipe for mediocrity.

Another reason is that submission of any kind makes you very vulnerable.

We know that power can be misused,

and we know when power is misused in marriages

the consequences for the vulnerable party can be devastating,  
even deadly,

So why would Paul entrench such vulnerability?

It all just seems a bit unnecessary, perhaps even dangerous.

However, we can't just push Paul's words aside,

because in reality he's not a crazy uncle, he's the Apostle of Christ.

His words are words that have come from the Holy Spirit,

and so these are words that are *true*, and they are words that are *good*.

The challenge for us is to see the good while recognizing the danger.

The awkward word is right there at the beginning of verse 21:

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

I remember preaching on this passage at a wedding by request of the couple,

"We want you to tell everyone what it *really* means", they said. I said "OK!"

I never found out whether what I said matched up with their expectations.  
Perhaps they assumed that what we have in our English Bibles isn't original  
that somehow the message has become more harsh,  
that there word *submit* is a poor English translation of what Paul really said.

The difficulty of this passage isn't one of translation,  
the difficulty is one of application  
because the word *submit* is actually a pretty good translation.  
What Paul means is *put yourself under one another's authority*  
Without apologizing he's speaking about leadership within relationships.

Now it's a very common interpretation to look at verse 21  
and to think that what Paul means  
is that we should all be submitting to one another:  
Bill submits to Marge, and Marge submits to Suzan, and Suzan submits to Bill,  
that it's exactly the same relational dynamic for everyone.

I'm not sure that makes the best sense of what we have here.  
Paul's argument extends beyond husbands and wives to children and parents.  
Does it make sense for Paul to say to parents  
*Place yourself under your child's authority?*  
Probably not.

I think when Paul says *submit to one another* he means  
*Submit to those in your community who are meant to have authority over you.*  
*Within your community there'll be someone who has responsibility for you,*  
*So make sure you're submitting to that person.*

And so from verse 22 onwards he spends sometime thinking about  
what this dynamic of submission and responsibility means for marriage.  
Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord.  
Let's just take that last phrase for a moment, as you do to the Lord.  
Submission in and of itself is not an evil concept:  
every person is called to submit to Jesus,  
and Jesus himself submits to the Father.  
To gloss over submission is to gloss over a key Christian value,  
a value which Christ himself practiced.

Also note that Paul is speaking about *wives* and their *husbands* here,  
so everything that follows applies to men and women *in marriage*,  
and not to men and women in general.

So what particulars are involved in the wife's submission?  
Verse 24 gives us the model: Now as the church submits to Christ,  
so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.  
If you want to know what's involved in submitting,

then think about the Church's relationship to Jesus.

Paul has spent a bit of time speaking about Jesus and the church in Ephesians.

Here are just some of the aspects he's highlighted:

Ch 5:1-2 —The church is to learn from Jesus as she follows his example

4: 11-12—The church is to receive gifts and care from her Lord

6:10-11 The church is to partner with Jesus in the battle against evil.

And so this helps us fill out what Paul means by submission.

It means following the husband's example,

It means receiving care from her husband

It means partnering with him in the fight against the devil and his schemes.

Already you can hear that if submission is going to work,

then the husband has an important role to play too.

If his partner is going to learn from his example,

then it begs the question, doesn't it: what example is he going to provide?

And so our attention quite rightly turns to the husband and his role.

Paul has already mentioned the Husband in verse 23 when he says For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior.

There has been lots of debate over what Paul means

when refers to the Husband as the *head*.

Does he mean *head* in the way we refer to the *head of a school*,

the person who holds authority?

Or does he mean *head* in the way we might speak of a *riverhead*,

meaning the source of the river?

Christians will often focus on one definition over and above the other, thereby either promoting the authority of husbands or downplaying it.

Within Ephesians I think the word is used in both senses,

1:22 God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church. That's Jesus as the authoritative head for the church

4:15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. <sup>16</sup> From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. That's Jesus as the source of growth for the church.

So what does it mean for the husband to be the head of the wife?

The same as what it means for Jesus to be head of the Church.

He's the source of what's good for the church

as well as the one who holds authority.

The two ideas come together when we realize that this authority,

like all authority in the Bible,

is only to be exercised for the other party's benefit.

This is the focus of Paul's instructions to the husbands from v25.

Paul drops the headship language and speaks instead about sacrificial love; his focus is not on the power that the husband holds but on the role husbands have in working hard to help the wife flourish. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and *gave himself up* for her. We speak of Christ as the *Servant King*, don't we? The servant-leader. It's why we follow him because we know on the cross he gave his life for us, And so this is the model that Paul would have husbands follow: to love their wives *sacrificially*.

And why did Christ give himself up for the church? we're told in verse 26: to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, <sup>27</sup> and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In other words, he gave himself up for *her benefit*, the benefit of having her sins removed and becoming all that she was designed to be. In this same way, Paul continues, husbands ought to love their wives.

Here's an example of my own life. My first ministry job was an awesome job. I was working in a very big church in the suburbs, with lots of responsibility. As far as Assistant Ministry jobs went, there weren't many others like it. Jas and I got married after I started that job and when people get married two different lives come together. Because she's a lawyer, Jas worked in the city where most legal jobs are. Sometimes it was a two-hour commute each-way along the M2. For Jas it was tiring, and not really a time of great flourishing. So I had a decision to make: do I keep on with my job, or do I find another role which enabled my wife's life to improve? And it was while reading Eph 5 that the answer to my dilemma became clear. I was to give myself up for my wife, and so I found another job and we moved a bit closer to the city.

What would have happened if I had declared to my wife that we were staying put? I think Jas would have suffered, and if Jas suffered too much then my ministry may have ended completely.

This leads into another reason for the husband to love sacrificially, because even though it might not feel like it initially, sacrificial love will benefit the giver. Verse 28 In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. <sup>29</sup> After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church—<sup>30</sup> for we are members of his body. Caring for your wife is an act of caring for yourself.

Why is this so? Well, again the relationship between Jesus and his church is instructive. Even though Christ and the church share a Lord and servant relationship,

the Bible also teaches that Jesus and the church are unified as one body.  
Christ may be the head, but we are the limbs and everything else.

And when you hurt one part of your body  
—say you hit your thumb with a hammer—all of you gets upset.  
And so when the husband fails in his responsibility to love his wife,  
then he's inevitably damaging himself.

It's a good time for Paul to remind us that this unity of husband and wife  
goes all the way back to the Bible's first marriage  
He quotes Genesis 2 For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united  
to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.  
The unity that marks a marriage provides a good test  
as to whether the husband and wife are getting the roles right.  
If the marriage is so lopsided that the oneness of marriage looks under threat,  
then some recalibration is needed;  
is each party serious about their own role?

Some might say that if marriage is meant to be a union,  
then why not just say both sides are identical and work it out from there?  
I think if we were to do that  
then we loose the idea of marriage modeling Christ and his church,  
and loosing that marriage becomes less of what it's designed to be.

I think it's clear that for the model to work there's a lot required of the husband.  
If the wife is going to make herself vulnerable,  
then the Husband needs to make that vulnerability safe and worthwhile.  
Many husbands fail to do so. I don't really want to criticize the men too much  
but given the particular vulnerabilities that are being asked of women,  
then it's appropriate to highlight how men can let their wives down.

One way is for pride, arrogance and selfishness to stop you  
from truly considering what is best for your wife.  
"I know what's best", or sometimes  
"I know what I want, so let me take the decisions".  
I've seen men shut wives out of financial decision making,  
only to ruin a family's finances.  
Gentlemen, you may not be as competent as you think,  
so go slowly and seek advice—including the advice of your partner,  
because it's for her sake that you exercise leadership.

Another barrier is male insecurity.  
"I must be the head of this marriage, I must be the dominant partner,  
otherwise I'll look and feel weak."  
At the heart of this is a faulty understanding of Christ-like masculinity.  
To be a Christian husband is not to be dominant,

but it's to learn to is to say *no* to yourself in order to lift another up.  
 Jesus said he who wishes to be great must become a servant,  
 that's true generally but especially in marriage.

Basically a big failure is when men embrace headship but not sacrifice.  
 I've heard plenty of men say "I'm the head of the house",  
 not quite as many say "I'm the one who must say no to myself".  
 To have headship that dominates rather than gives and concedes  
 is a gross distortion of the Bible's teaching.

There's also another way to fail that's on the other end of the spectrum.  
 This is when you sit back and don't take any initiative;  
 when you abdicate your responsibilities  
 leaving everything in your wife's hands.  
 I think there are probably a few women  
 who'd like their husbands to be a bit more switched on  
 when it comes to providing some leadership for the family.

So our job is now to go out and do our best to reflect Christ and his church.  
 But as we do so, there are some practical matters to think about.

First of all, notice that Paul address both the wife and husband about *their own* roles.  
 Our task is to worry about what's required of us personally,  
 not to worry about what your partner is or isn't doing.  
 The commands are *wives submit, husbands love*,  
 not *wives make your husbands love*, nor *husbands make your wives submit*.  
 If in a fight you find yourself saying "You need to submit to me!"  
 Then beeerrrrmp! That's a foul!  
 The ref has blown his whistle and given you a penalty. Illegal move.  
 Worry about your own responsibility.

Another practical thing is that there is still great flexibility within marriage.  
 Leadership comes in many forms and is expressed in many ways.  
 A good head will always delegate roles and responsibilities,  
 recognizing the skill and value of those they're in partnership with.  
 Notice Paul doesn't spell out which tasks belong to which gender,  
 so who does what will look different from family to family.  
 Sometimes the division will be based on skill,  
 sometimes on who has the most time, other times on what's fair and just.  
 Good leaders recognize all these factors

Having distinct roles doesn't mean one party is more valuable than the other.  
 The captain of the football team isn't always the best player,  
 and the coach isn't always the best paid,  
 In many sporting teams we have leadership groups who work together.

There's room for us to be flexible and to use our imaginations here.

But it will take communication; families will have to work out the details.

How are these biblical truths going to be expressed in your marriage?

You're going to have to have a conversation.

Perhaps the best way to bring this up is to ask "How can I serve you better?"

That's a question which reflects the nature of Paul is writing about, isn't it?

Christ has served us and we serve Christ. "How can I serve you in my role?"

There's another issue we *must* speak about briefly,

and I'm going to address some of this at the end of our series,

and that's the "But what if..." questions. There's a lot of them, aren't there?

But what if my spouse isn't Christian? That's a tough situation.

I think marriage remains a reflection of Christ and his church

no matter the faith of the husband and wife.

so you still have a responsibility to put the Bible into practice.

The exception is when you're asked by your spouse to disobey Christ,

because our submission is out of reverence to him were told in verse 21,

so it makes no sense to obey him by disobeying him.

But what if my spouse is abusive?

Important question, because many people have labeled Paul's teaching as a factor in allowing men to abuse their wives.

I hope it's clear that Paul's instruction for husbands to love sacrificially leaves no room for violence or intimidation or mistreatment.

I think if there is abuse or violence then we can argue from the Bible that such violence provides a reason for divorce.

More about that in a few weeks time.

But what if my spouse is incompetent or foolish?

"My husband wants to lend money to a friend who is untrustworthy.

Should I submit?" Well you should speak up and state your case.

One way wives can get things wrong is if they equate submission with silence.

Again, think of Jesus and the church. Is the church silent in front of Christ?

NO! We seek to persuade God and argue our case, don't we? [David Loke eg]

And so it is when wives are unsure of the waters they are being led into.

Argue your case. And men, listen, because your power is meant to benefit your wife first and foremost,

and not some dodgy friend who gotten himself into trouble.

But on the smaller stuff, we may have to exercise patience and forbearance,

perhaps learn to live with a little bit of incompetence for our spouse.

Were called to live at peace with one another as much as we can,

so on some things we might need to let it go.

You know the marriages that are most on display are those of the royal family.  
Some of those marriages are impressive,

The Queen and the Duke have been together almost 72 years.  
Charles and Diana had a very different story.  
Although their two boys seemed to have turned out ok,  
the marriage itself was not a great model.

In her interview with Martin Bashir, Diana famously said  
“There were three of us in this marriage, so it was a bit crowded”.  
Of course she was talking about Camilla!

Christian marriages are a little bit like the marriage of Charles and Di,  
in that there is a third party.  
But this is a third party whom we welcome! The third wheel is Jesus.  
He is the model for the husbands love,  
and the church’s submission to him is the model the wife has for her role.  
Its not an easy path for a marriage to take,  
but it is a path which reflects something wonderful  
so it’s worth applying ourselves.

Pray.