

The Book of Ephesians, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 11: Wives and Husbands: Christ and the Church

Ephesians 5:22–33

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This passage requires the teacher to handle a doctrinally and pastorally sensitive subject clearly and warmly, in the manner of a sound study of the Christian home. Paul teaches distinct roles in marriage: the wife's loving submission to her husband's leadership and the husband's Christlike, sacrificial love. The teacher should present these plainly, without apology and without harshness, and should anchor them where Paul anchors them, in the relationship between Christ and the church. Marriage is a living picture of the gospel, and the roles make sense only in that light.

Several guardrails are essential. First, equal worth. Distinct roles never imply unequal value; husband and wife are equally made in God's image and are joint heirs of the grace of life (1 Peter 3:7; Galatians 3:28). Headship is about function and responsibility, not superiority. Second, the nature of headship. Paul defines it by the cross, not the throne. The husband's authority is the authority of one who lays down his life, who nourishes and cherishes, who leads by serving. It is responsibility to love, never license to dominate. Third, the limits of submission. A wife's submission is as to the Lord and within reverence for Christ; it never requires her to follow her husband into sin, and it never means enduring abuse. Submission is honoring a godly leadership, not surrendering conscience or safety. The teacher should state this plainly so no one weaponizes the text.

Formationally, the aim is to lift the class's vision of marriage and of love itself. Paul gives the husband the longer and harder word, and it is a call to die to self. Whether students are married or single, the passage forms them in self-giving love and humble honor, and it calls every Christian home to display the love of Christ. Teach it so that wives are honored, husbands are summoned to sacrifice, and Christ is seen.

Question 1

Student Question:

In verses 22 through 24 Paul instructs wives to submit to their own husbands as to the Lord, comparing the husband's headship to Christ's headship over the church. What does biblical headship and submission mean in this passage, and just as importantly, what does it not mean?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul instructs wives to submit to their own husbands, as to the Lord, for the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church (vv. 22–23). The teacher must define these terms carefully, because both are widely misunderstood and often abused.

Headship here means a God-given role of loving leadership and responsibility, patterned on Christ's headship over the church. Submission means a voluntary, willing honoring of that leadership, offered as to the Lord. Note that it is to her own husband, within the covenant of marriage, not a general subjection of all women to all men.

Equally important is what these do not mean. Headship does not mean the husband is superior, smarter, or more valuable; nor does it license him to control, demand, or dominate. Submission does not mean the wife is inferior, voiceless, or without dignity; nor does it mean blind obedience that follows a husband into sin or endures abuse. Paul frames everything as to the Lord and, from verse 21, in reverence for Christ.

Help the class see that this is a matter of role and function within a relationship of equals, modeled on Christ and the church, not a ranking of worth. The world hears submission and imagines oppression; Paul means something closer to the trust and harmony of a body gladly following its head.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Headship as God-given loving leadership and responsibility, not superiority
- Submission as willing honoring of that leadership, as to the Lord
- Equal worth and dignity of husband and wife
- What submission does not mean: inferiority, voicelessness, following into sin, enduring abuse
- Marriage roles patterned on Christ and the church

Discussion Prompts

- What does biblical headship and submission mean in this passage?
- What does it clearly not mean?
- How does the phrase as to the Lord shape and limit a wife's submission?

Question 2

Student Question:

Submission and humility run against the grain of our self-asserting culture. Where in your relationships do pride and the desire for control make it hard to honor God's design and to yield to others, and how does trusting God help?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question broadens the theme of humility to all relationships, since not everyone in the class is married, and since the surrounding verse (5:21) calls all believers to mutual submission. The cultural air we breathe prizes self-assertion and resists yielding to anyone.

Help students locate where pride and the desire for control make humility hard, in marriage, but also with parents, employers, elders, or fellow believers. The instinct to win, to have the last word, to insist on our own way, is deeply rooted.

Point to trust in God as the key. We can yield and honor others because we trust that God is sovereign and good, that we do not have to seize control to be safe. Humility flows from confidence in God, not from weakness.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- A culture of self-assertion versus the call to humility
- Pride and control in many relationships, not only marriage
- Trust in God as the ground of humble yielding
- Humility as strength rooted in confidence in God

Discussion Prompts

- Where do pride and the desire for control make humility hard for you?
- How does trusting God make it possible to yield to others?
- Where might God be calling you to honor someone you find it hard to honor?

Question 3

Student Question:

In verses 25 through 27 Paul commands husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her. What kind of love is the husband called to, and what does it tell us that the pattern for his leadership is the self-sacrifice of Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul turns to husbands with the longer and weightier command: love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her (v. 25). The standard is staggering. The husband's love is to be measured by Calvary, by Christ's self-sacrifice for His bride.

This redefines headship entirely. Whatever authority the husband has, it is the authority of one who dies for the good of the other, not one who is served by her. The head Paul describes leads the way to the cross, spending himself for his wife's good.

Notice the aim of Christ's love in verses 26 and 27: to sanctify and cleanse the church, to present her holy and without blemish. Christ's love seeks the holiness and flourishing of His bride. So a

husband's love is to seek his wife's good, her growth, her flourishing, her walk with God, not merely his own comfort or convenience.

Mention the cleansing by the washing of water with the word (v. 26), language that points to baptism and the word of the gospel, by which Christ cleanses His church. It reminds us that the church Christ loves is the church He washes and makes holy.

Help the class, husbands especially, feel the weight. This is not a soft sentiment but a daily dying to self for the good of another. It is the hardest and highest calling, and it is the true meaning of headship.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Husbandly love measured by Christ's self-sacrifice
- Headship redefined as dying for the other, not being served
- Love that seeks the holiness and flourishing of the beloved
- Cleansing by the washing of water with the word (baptism and the gospel)
- Daily dying to self as the true meaning of headship

Discussion Prompts

- What kind of love is the husband called to in verse 25?
- How does the cross redefine what headship means?
- What does it mean that Christ's love aims at the holiness of His bride?

Question 4

Student Question:

Christ's love seeks the holiness and flourishing of the one He loves. Where does your love for those closest to you fall short of self-giving, and what would it look like to love them more as Christ loves the church?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question applies sacrificial love to all the students' closest relationships. The measure, Christ giving Himself up, exposes how much of our love is self-serving, conditional, or convenient.

Invite each person to consider where their love falls short: a spouse, a child, a parent, a friend. Self-giving love seeks the other's genuine good, even at cost, even when it is not returned, even when they are difficult.

Encourage one concrete act of Christlike love this week, chosen deliberately for the good of another. Love of this kind is not mainly a feeling but a decision to seek another's flourishing, modeled on the Lord who gave Himself for us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Exposing self-serving and conditional love
- Seeking the genuine good of the other at cost
- Loving the difficult and the unresponsive
- Love as a deliberate decision, not merely a feeling

Discussion Prompts

- Where does your love for those closest to you fall short of self-giving?
- What would loving them more as Christ loves look like?
- What is one sacrificial act of love you could offer this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

In verses 28 through 30 Paul says husbands should love their wives as their own bodies, nourishing and cherishing them as Christ does the church. What do the words nourish and cherish add to our picture of this love, and why does Paul appeal to how we care for our own bodies?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul presses the point: husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself, for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church (vv. 28–29). The argument is from the natural care we give our own bodies.

The words nourish and cherish are tender and telling. To nourish is to feed, to help grow, to provide for; to cherish is, literally, to warm, to keep close and tender. This is not cold provision but warm, attentive care. Christ does not merely tolerate His church; He nourishes and cherishes her, and husbands are to do the same.

The appeal to our own bodies makes the standard concrete. We instinctively feed, protect, rest, and tend our bodies. Paul says love your wife with that same instinctive, attentive care, treating her good as bound up with your own.

Help the class hear the gentleness of this. Biblical headship, rightly understood, produces a husband who is the most tender, attentive, nourishing presence in his wife's life, as Christ is to the church.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Loving the other as one's own body
- Nourish and cherish as warm, attentive, tender care

- Christ nourishing and cherishing the church as the model
- Headship producing tenderness, not coldness

Discussion Prompts

- What do nourish and cherish add to our picture of this love?
- Why does Paul appeal to how we care for our own bodies?
- How does this picture correct harsh or distant ideas of leadership?

Question 6

Student Question:

Paul pictures a love that nourishes and cherishes rather than neglects or wounds. In your closest relationships, are you more often nurturing the other person or quietly neglecting them, and what would tender, attentive care look like this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns nourishing and cherishing into self-examination. In our closest relationships we drift easily into neglect, taking the other for granted, giving them the leftovers of our attention and energy.

Help students assess honestly: are they nurturing the people closest to them, actively tending their good, or quietly neglecting them while attending to everything else? Neglect is rarely dramatic; it is the slow withdrawal of attention and care.

Encourage concrete, tender care this week, attentive listening, practical help, warm presence, expressed affection. Cherishing is shown in small, consistent acts that say you matter to me.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The drift toward neglect in close relationships
- Taking loved ones for granted
- Attentive, tender care as the alternative
- Cherishing shown in small, consistent acts

Discussion Prompts

- Are you nurturing those closest to you, or quietly neglecting them?
- Where have you been giving them only your leftovers?
- What would tender, attentive care look like this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

In verses 31 and 32 Paul quotes the creation account, the two shall become one flesh, and says this mystery refers to Christ and the church. What does it mean that marriage is a picture, or mystery, pointing to Christ and the church, and how does that raise the dignity and purpose of marriage?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul quotes Genesis 2:24, the two shall become one flesh, and then says, this mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church (vv. 31–32). From the beginning, marriage was designed to be more than a human arrangement; it was meant to point beyond itself to Christ and His people.

A mystery, in Paul's vocabulary, is a truth once hidden and now revealed. The hidden meaning of marriage, revealed in Christ, is that the one-flesh union of husband and wife is a living picture of the union between Christ and the church. Marriage is a signpost pointing to the gospel.

This enormously raises the dignity and purpose of marriage. It is not merely about companionship or family, good as those are; it is a God-designed display of the greatest love in the universe. Every faithful Christian marriage preaches a small sermon about Christ and His bride.

Help the class see both the honor and the weight of this. To marry as a Christian is to be entrusted with a picture of the gospel, to be lived out before children, neighbors, and the watching world.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Marriage as a God-designed picture of Christ and the church
- The mystery of marriage revealed in the gospel
- The heightened dignity and purpose of marriage
- Every faithful marriage as a display of Christ's love

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that marriage is a mystery pointing to Christ and the church?
- How does this raise the dignity and purpose of marriage?
- How should this shape the way Christians approach marriage?

Question 8

Student Question:

Paul says Christian marriage is meant to display the gospel to the watching world. If others looked closely at your marriage, or your relationships and the way you treat others, what would they conclude about the love of Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question makes the display personal. If marriage is meant to show the gospel, then the way spouses treat each other, and more broadly the way we love those around us, either commends or obscures the love of Christ.

Be inclusive of the whole class. For the married, the question is what their marriage reveals about Christ's love. For all, the way they treat others, with patience, faithfulness, kindness, and sacrifice, testifies to what they believe about the love of God.

Encourage honest reflection without shame, and one step toward making the display clearer, repairing a strained relationship, softening harshness, renewing tenderness, so that those who look closely see something of Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Relationships as a display, for good or ill, of Christ's love
- Marriage as a public testimony to the gospel
- Patience, faithfulness, and kindness as witness
- Repairing what obscures the display

Discussion Prompts

- If others looked closely at your relationships, what would they conclude about Christ's love?
- Where might your relationships obscure rather than display the gospel?
- What step would make the display clearer?

Question 9

Student Question:

Taking the passage as a whole, Paul teaches equal worth, distinct roles, headship as Christlike sacrificial responsibility rather than domination, and submission that is honoring but never a tolerating of sin or abuse. How should we understand and guard this teaching rightly, both against a culture that rejects the very idea of these roles and against those who would twist headship into control or use submission to excuse mistreatment?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal and pastoral center of the lesson, and the teacher should handle it with both clarity and care. The whole passage teaches four things together, and they must be held together: equal worth, distinct roles, headship as Christlike sacrificial responsibility, and submission that honors but never tolerates sin or abuse.

Equal worth and distinct roles are not in conflict. Husband and wife are equally made in God's image, equally redeemed, equally heirs of the grace of life (1 Peter 3:7; Galatians 3:28). Distinct

roles within marriage no more imply unequal value than the different roles within the Godhead imply that the Son is less than the Father. The teacher should refuse the false choice between equality and order; Scripture affirms both.

Headship must be defined by the cross. Paul gives the husband the longer command, and it is a command to love sacrificially, to nourish and cherish, to give himself up as Christ did. A man who uses this passage to demand, control, or dominate has inverted it; he has claimed the title of head while refusing the cross that defines it. Christlike headship is responsibility to love and serve, never license to rule for self. This corrects those who would twist the text into a charter for male tyranny.

Submission must be defined within reverence for Christ. A wife's submission is offered as to the Lord (v. 22) and flows from the mutual reverence of verse 21. It is the honoring of godly leadership, not the surrender of conscience, dignity, or safety. It never requires a wife to sin, and it never requires her to endure abuse. The teacher should say this plainly and pastorally, because the text has sometimes been misused to keep people in danger. A husband who abuses has utterly abandoned the role Paul describes; submission to godly headship was never meant to mean enduring such treatment. Where there is abuse, the loving response is to seek safety and help, not silent suffering.

Finally, guard the teaching against the culture's wholesale rejection of it. Many today dismiss any distinction of roles as inherently oppressive. The answer is not to abandon what Scripture teaches but to display it rightly: a leadership that looks like Christ laying down His life, and a partnership of equals in which each seeks the other's good. Taught this way, with both its clarity and its guardrails, the passage is not a threat to women but an honor to them and a high and humbling calling to men.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Equal worth and distinct roles held together (1 Peter 3:7; Galatians 3:28)
- Headship defined by the cross: sacrificial responsibility, not domination
- The inversion committed by those who use the text to control
- Submission as honoring godly leadership, within reverence for Christ
- Submission never requiring sin and never meaning the toleration of abuse
- Seeking safety and help where there is abuse
- Answering the culture's rejection by displaying the roles rightly, not abandoning them

Discussion Prompts

- How do equal worth and distinct roles fit together without contradiction?
- How should we answer someone who twists headship into a right to control?
- Why is it vital to say clearly that submission never means tolerating sin or abuse?

Question 10

Student Question:

Verse 33 sums it up: let each husband love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. Looking back over this whole passage, name one specific way the Lord is forming you through it, and one concrete step toward Christlike love or humble honor in your home and relationships.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone rests on verse 33: let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. Paul distills the whole passage into two words, love and respect, each fitted to the role he has described.

Note the fitting pairing. The husband is summoned to love, the harder thing for many men, and the wife to respect, the harder thing in a culture that often disdains the very idea. Each is called to give what the other most needs and what may be hardest for them to give.

Press for a personal response. Ask each student, married or not, to name one way this passage is forming them, perhaps a higher view of marriage, a resolve toward sacrificial love, a softening toward humble honor, or a clearer conviction about both the dignity and the guardrails of these roles.

Then ask for one concrete step toward Christlike love or humble honor in their home and relationships. End on the note Paul sounds throughout: the goal is not to win a role-debate but to display the love of Christ in the way we treat one another.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Love and respect as the summary of the passage
- Each spouse called to give what may be hardest
- Forming all believers in self-giving love and humble honor
- Displaying the love of Christ as the true goal

Discussion Prompts

- Which truth from this passage most needs to shape you this week?
- What is one concrete step toward Christlike love or humble honor in your home?
- How can your relationships better display the love of Christ?