

The Book of Ephesians

Lesson 11: Wives and Husbands: Christ and the Church -- Ephesians 5:22-

33

Most of us have a complicated relationship with the word submission, and an equally complicated relationship with the word authority. We have seen both abused. We have watched headship twisted into the right to bully, and we have watched submission turned into the silencing of the weak. So when we come to a passage about wives and husbands, many of us arrive with our guard up, braced for something heavy. Paul understands the weight of these words, and what he actually writes is more beautiful and more demanding than anything we feared.

Here is the surprise at the heart of this passage. Paul is not really giving a lecture on marriage. He is showing us a living picture of the gospel. The relationship between a husband and a wife, he says, was always meant to be a portrait of something greater, the love between Christ and His church. This mystery is profound, Paul says, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. Every Christian marriage is meant to put the gospel on display, a husband loving as Christ loves, a wife responding as the church responds to her Lord.

And notice where the weight of this passage falls. Paul gives the wife three verses and the husband nine. The longest and most demanding word is to the husband, and it is not a word about ruling but about dying. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. The model of headship is not the tyrant who dominates but the Savior who lays down His life. Christlike headship is the responsibility to love, to serve, to nourish, and to sacrifice, never a license to control or to demand.

Held together, the picture is stunning. A wife of equal worth and dignity, joint heir of the grace of life, freely honoring her husband's leadership as the church honors Christ. A husband pouring himself out for her good as Christ poured Himself out for the church. This is not the world's power struggle, where each spouse fights to win. It is two people, equal before God, each seeking the other's good, together painting a small picture of the greatest love the world has ever known. Submission here never means tolerating sin or abuse, and headship never means harshness. It means a home shaped like the cross.

Group Discussion: Paul says marriage is meant to be a living picture of Christ and the church. How does seeing marriage as a display of the gospel change the way we understand the roles of husband and wife, and why is it significant that Paul gives the husband the longer and more demanding instruction?

Personal Reflection: Whether you are married, single, or hoping to marry one day, this passage holds up self-giving love and humble honor as the pattern. Which of these do you find harder in your closest relationships, and why?

Read Ephesians 5:22–33

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Genesis 2:18–24, God's design for marriage and the two becoming one flesh; Colossians 3:18–19, wives submit and husbands love your wives and do not be harsh with them; 1 Peter 3:1–7, husbands honoring wives as fellow heirs of the grace of life; Galatians 3:28, male and female are one and equal in Christ; Philippians 2:3–8, the humility of Christ as the model for all our relationships.