

The Body of Christ

Lesson 12: The Glorious Church: Christ's Bride -- Ephesians 5:25-32

Every wedding has a moment when the room turns to watch the bride. The music swells, the doors open, and everyone rises to their feet. But the face worth watching is not the bride's; it is the groom's. Watch him as he sees her coming toward him. There is a look that crosses a man's face in that instant, a mixture of wonder and joy and disbelief that this one is his, that takes your breath away. The Bible tells us that Christ looks at the church like that. With that love. With that joy. We are the bride He is coming for.

We have spent eleven lessons looking at the church from many angles: the church Christ built, the body with many members, the family of God, the flock under shepherds, the gathered worshipping community. Now, in this final lesson, Paul lifts the curtain on the deepest truth of all. Writing about marriage between a husband and wife, he suddenly says he is really talking about something greater: "This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church." Behind every true marriage stands the marriage that explains them all, Christ and His bride.

And what a love it is. "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word." He did not love the church because she was already beautiful. He loved her in order to make her beautiful. He gave Himself up for her, washed her, and is preparing to present her to Himself "in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish." The church you sometimes find frustrating and ordinary is the bride Christ died to make glorious.

This is where our whole study has been heading. The church is not a human institution to be evaluated and consumed. It is the beloved bride of the Son of God, bought with His blood, washed in His word, and destined for glory. To love Christ is to love what Christ loves. To despise or neglect the church is to slight the bride the Bridegroom gave Himself for. As we close, Paul invites us to see the church through the eyes of the One who is coming for her, and to give ourselves wholly to the bride He so loves.

Group Discussion: We have all heard people speak of the church with disappointment or cynicism, sometimes for good reasons. How do you hold together an honest awareness of the church's flaws with the truth that she is the beloved bride of Christ? Does seeing the church as Christ's bride change the way you would speak about her?

Personal Reflection: As this study ends, look back over how you have thought about and treated the church. Where have you related to her as a consumer or a critic rather than as part of the bride Christ loves? What would it mean to love the church the way Christ does?

Read Ephesians 5:25-32

Study Questions

1. Paul commands husbands, “love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (v. 25). What does it reveal about the church that the supreme example of love Paul can point to is Christ giving Himself up for her, and how should knowing you are part of what Christ died for change the way you see the church?
2. Paul presents Christ’s self-giving love as the pattern for how we are to love. Where is God calling you to lay down your own preferences, comfort, or rights for the good of His church and His people, the way Christ gave Himself up for her?
3. Paul says Christ gave Himself for the church “that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word” (v. 26). What does this teach about how Christ makes His church holy, and how do the washing and the word point us back to how a person enters and is cleansed in Christ?
4. Christ loved the church not because she was already beautiful but in order to make her beautiful. Where do you need to receive that truth personally, that Christ set His love on you not because you had cleaned yourself up, but in order to cleanse and transform you?
5. Paul says Christ’s goal is “to present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (v. 27). What does this tell us about the church’s future and destiny, and how should the certainty of the church’s coming glory shape the way we view and invest in her now, despite her present imperfections?

6. It is easy to focus on the church's present flaws and grow cynical or detached. How does fixing your eyes on the church's certain future, glorious and presented to Christ without blemish, change the way you would speak about her, serve her, and stay committed to her now?
7. Paul says, "no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body" (vv. 29–30). What does it mean that Christ nourishes and cherishes the church as His own body, and what does that teach us about how we, as members, should treat one another and the body as a whole?
8. Christ nourishes and cherishes His church; He does not neglect or despise her. Where have you been neglecting rather than nourishing the body of Christ, and what would it look like to begin cherishing the church the way her Lord does?
9. Paul quotes the creation account of marriage and then says, "This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church" (vv. 31–32). Why is it so significant that the union of Christ and the church is the great reality behind marriage itself, and how does seeing the church as the beloved bride of Christ, bought with His blood and destined for glory, confront both the cynic who despises her and the consumer who merely uses her?
10. Look back across Ephesians 5:25–32, and across this whole study of the body of Christ. Having seen that the church is the beloved bride for whom Christ gave Himself, name one specific way Jesus is calling you to love and give yourself to His church from here forward, and what is the first step?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Revelation 19:6–9, the marriage supper of the Lamb and His bride made ready; Revelation 21:2, the new Jerusalem as a bride adorned for her husband; 2 Corinthians 11:2, betrothed as a pure virgin to Christ; Acts 20:28, the church purchased with His own blood; Titus 2:14, Christ gave Himself to purify a people for His own possession.