

The Christian Home, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 2: Marriage as a Picture of Christ and the Church

Ephesians 5:22–33

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Ephesians 5:22–33 is one of the most important and most contested passages on marriage in all of Scripture, and the teacher should know clearly what is doctrinally at stake. Paul's central claim is breathtaking: human marriage was designed by God to be a living picture of the relationship between Christ and the church. This is not a sermon illustration Paul happens to reach for; he says it is the very mystery that marriage exists to display (v. 32). The passage therefore teaches two things at once. It teaches us about the gospel, that Christ is the loving Head and Savior who gave Himself to make His bride holy, and that the church is His body, joined to Him and responsive to Him. And it teaches us about marriage, that husbands and wives are called to roles that mirror this great relationship. The roles themselves (the husband's sacrificial leadership and the wife's respect and submission) will be treated in detail in Lessons 3 and 4. The aim of this lesson is the larger frame: what marriage is ultimately for.

Two errors press in from opposite sides, and the teacher should be ready for both. One error seizes on the word "head" and the call to submit and turns the passage into a charter for male dominance, ignoring that the husband's pattern is a Savior who gave Himself up and that the whole section opens with mutual submission "out of reverence for Christ" (v. 21). The other error, uncomfortable with any role distinction, empties the passage of its plain teaching and reduces it to vague mutual niceness. Steer between them by keeping Christ at the center. The husband is not pointed to a generic idea of authority but to the cross; the wife is not pointed to servility but to the church's glad trust in her Lord. Where Christ is the measure, both abuses fall away.

This lesson is also aimed squarely at the spiritual formation of the student. When a couple grasps that their marriage preaches, that their ordinary kindness and patience and sacrifice are a sermon the watching world can read, the daily grind of married life takes on eternal weight. And every believer, married or not, is part of the bride Christ loved and gave Himself for; the passage invites all of us to marvel at that love and to respond to it. Send students home not merely with a position on marriage roles but with a larger vision of the gospel and a sense that their homes have been enlisted in the great display of Christ's love.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul writes, "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord" (v. 22), and he introduces the whole passage with "submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ" (v. 21). How does

beginning with reverence for Christ set the tone for everything Paul will say about marriage, and why does he tie the way we treat our spouse so closely to our relationship with the Lord?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 22 cannot be read apart from verse 21. In the Greek, verses 21 and 22 are joined; the word “submit” in verse 22 actually borrows its verb from verse 21, “submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Paul has spent the preceding verses describing what it looks like to be filled with the Spirit (singing, giving thanks, and mutual submission), and the instructions to wives, husbands, children, parents, servants, and masters all flow out of that Spirit-filled life. So the passage does not begin with a power struggle; it begins with a roomful of believers reverently yielding to one another because they all answer to the same Lord.

The phrase “as to the Lord” is the key that unlocks the whole section. A wife’s submission is not rooted in her husband’s superiority or in some claim that women matter less; it is rendered “as to the Lord,” an act of devotion to Christ carried out in the home. This both dignifies the act (it is service to Jesus, not mere deference to a man) and limits it (it can never require anything contrary to the Lord she ultimately serves). The teacher should plant this early, because it guards against the abuse that imagines submission means tolerating sin.

Notice how thoroughly Paul ties our treatment of our spouse to our relationship with Christ. He does not give married couples a separate, lower set of motives (keep the peace, stay together for the children). He lifts marriage into the realm of discipleship. How you love your husband or wife is part of how you follow Jesus. This is bracing and freeing at once: bracing because it raises the stakes, freeing because it means the power to love well comes from the same Spirit who is at work in every other part of the Christian life.

For the disciple being formed, the takeaway is that the home is not a spiritual neutral zone. The marriage is one of the chief arenas in which reverence for Christ is proved real. A person can sing on Sunday and still betray the Lord by contempt at the dinner table. Paul will not allow that split.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The unbreakable link between verse 21 (mutual submission) and verse 22
- Spirit-filled living as the source of every instruction in the passage
- “As to the Lord” as both the dignity and the limit of a wife’s submission
- Marriage lifted into the realm of discipleship, not lowered to mere peacekeeping
- The home as a primary arena where reverence for Christ is tested

Discussion Prompts

- How does opening with “reverence for Christ” reframe the whole passage?
- Why does “as to the Lord” both honor and limit a wife’s submission?

- Where do we tend to separate Sunday worship from Tuesday marriage?

Question 2

Student Question:

Paul assumes that a Christian marriage will be visibly shaped by reverence for Christ. When an honest observer watches your marriage or your closest relationships, where would they see Christ clearly, and where would they see something that contradicts Him? Name one specific area where you want your relationship to point more truly to the Lord.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question puts the truth of verse 21 to work. Paul assumes a Christian marriage will look different, that reverence for Christ will be visible in the home. The question asks students to imagine an honest observer and to name both where Christ shows clearly and where something contradicts Him. The goal is loving honesty, not despair.

Help students resist two unhelpful responses. The first is defensiveness (“our marriage is fine”), which closes the door the Spirit is trying to open. The second is shame (“we are a disaster”), which forgets that the gospel meets us precisely in our failures. The aim is a clear-eyed, hopeful look: here is where grace is evident, and here is one place I want it to grow.

Press for one specific area. A couple might name harsh words, or a pattern of score-keeping, or coldness that has crept in. A single believer can apply the same question to family relationships and friendships. The point is to identify one concrete place where the relationship can be made to point more truly to the Lord, and to begin there.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Christian marriage as visibly shaped by reverence for Christ
- Loving honesty as the alternative to both defensiveness and shame
- The witness of the home to children, neighbors, and guests
- Grace as the answer where our relationships misrepresent Christ

Discussion Prompts

- What would a guest in your home learn about Christ this week?
- Where does your closest relationship clearly point to the Lord?
- What is one area you want to make point more truly to Him?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul says the husband is “the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior” (v. 23). Christ’s headship over the church is the love of a Savior who rescues and gives Himself, not the rule of a tyrant who dominates. What kind of headship, then, does this passage hold up, and what does it rule out?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The word “head” (Greek kephale) is where many readers tense up, so define it carefully from the text rather than from the culture wars. Paul immediately qualifies the husband’s headship by comparison: “as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.” The model is not a CEO or a commander but a Savior. Christ’s headship over the church is exercised through rescue, nourishment, protection, and self-sacrifice. Whatever “head” means here, it cannot mean less than that and must not mean anything contrary to it.

This single comparison rules out a great deal. It rules out domination, because Christ does not dominate His church. It rules out selfishness, because Christ gave Himself up. It rules out harshness and contempt, because Christ nourishes and cherishes His body. The teacher should say plainly, in the warm and non-combative tone this study aims for, that headship in Ephesians 5 is a weight of responsibility to love and to serve, never a license to rule for one’s own advantage. Lesson 3 will develop this fully; here it is enough to establish the pattern.

At the same time, do not erase the distinction. Paul does call the husband “head,” and he does so in a passage that distinguishes the husband’s calling from the wife’s. The point is not that headship is meaningless but that its meaning is defined by Christ. A key and a lock both matter; a Savior-shaped headship and a church-shaped response both matter. Equality of worth and distinction of role stand together here, as they did in the garden.

It helps to note the phrase “his body.” The church is not a possession Christ stands over at a distance; she is His own body, as close to Him as a person’s own flesh. So a husband’s leadership is leadership of those who are, in the deepest sense, part of himself. To harm them is to harm himself. This image alone dissolves the caricature of headship as cold authority.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- “Head” (kephale) defined by the example of Christ, not by cultural authority
- Christ’s headship as Savior: rescue, nourishment, protection, self-sacrifice
- Headship as responsibility to love and serve, not license to dominate
- Equality of worth and distinction of role held together
- “His body” as the closeness of the church to Christ and wife to husband

Discussion Prompts

- How does calling Christ “Savior” reshape what “head” can mean?
- What does Christlike headship rule out in a marriage?

- Why is it significant that the church is called Christ's "body"?

Question 4

Student Question:

Whether you are a husband, a wife, or preparing for marriage, whose example are you actually following in how you lead or how you respond, the pattern of Christ and His church, or some other model you absorbed along the way? Where do you see the contrast most clearly in your own home?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the doctrine of headship and response into honest self-examination, and it is deliberately addressed to husbands, wives, and the single alike. The issue is one of models. Every one of us absorbed a pattern of how to lead or how to respond, from our parents, from past relationships, from the culture, and those patterns run deep and often unexamined.

Invite husbands to ask whether they lead the way Christ leads (by giving themselves) or the way they saw modeled (by control, passivity, or absence). Invite wives to ask whether they respond the way the church is called to respond to Christ (with trust and honor) or out of fear, manipulation, or competition. The point is not to assign blame but to notice the pattern we are actually running, often without choosing it.

Keep the tone gentle and the focus concrete. Ask for one place where the contrast between Christ's pattern and our inherited pattern shows most clearly. Naming it is the beginning of change, because we cannot lay down a pattern we have never admitted we are following.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The unexamined relational patterns we inherit and run automatically
- Christ as the conscious model for both leading and responding
- Self-examination without blame as the door to growth
- The relevance of the question to the single and the engaged

Discussion Prompts

- Whose example most shaped how you lead or respond in relationships?
- Where does that pattern differ from the pattern of Christ and His church?
- What is one place you want to follow Christ's pattern instead?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul holds up the highest possible standard for a husband's love: "as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her ... so that she might be holy" (vv. 25–27). What does it tell us about the nature of married love that its model is Christ giving Himself on the cross, and that His aim was the holiness, not merely the comfort, of His bride?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Here Paul sets the husband an impossible-sounding standard: love "as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." The measure of a husband's love is Calvary. This is the strongest possible argument against any reading of the passage that imagines the husband as a privileged ruler. The one called "head" is called to the cross. The teacher should let the weight of this land before moving on; it reframes everything.

Notice the purpose of Christ's self-giving: "that he might sanctify her ... so that she might be holy and without blemish." Christ's love is not merely affectionate; it is purposeful. He loves His bride toward holiness. This tells us that married love at its best is not content to leave the beloved as she is; it seeks her good, including her growth in godliness. A husband who loves like Christ wants his wife to become more like Jesus, and he is willing to spend himself toward that end.

Be careful, though, that this does not become a license for husbands to appoint themselves their wives' reformers, nagging and correcting in the name of sanctification. Christ sanctifies His bride by giving Himself up for her, not by criticizing her. The means of this love is sacrifice, "the washing of water with the word," patient, cleansing, cherishing love. A husband sanctifies chiefly by laying himself down, as Christ did, not by managing his wife's faults.

For all believers, this verse is also pure gospel. Whatever our marriages, we are part of the bride Christ loved and gave Himself for, and His aim is to present us holy and without blemish. The same love that a husband is called to imitate is the love that saves us. Let students rest in being so loved before they are asked to love that way.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Calvary as the measure of a husband's love ("gave himself up for her")
- The purposeful aim of Christ's love: the holiness of His bride
- Sanctifying love expressed through self-sacrifice, not criticism or control
- The gospel comfort that every believer is the bride so loved

Discussion Prompts

- What does it do to the idea of headship to make the cross its measure?
- How is loving someone toward holiness different from trying to fix them?
- How does being loved by Christ free us to love others sacrificially?

Question 6

Student Question:

Christ's love for the church was costly and self-giving; He gave Himself up for her. Where in your home are you being called to give yourself up, to lay down preferences, comfort, or pride for the good of another? Name one specific sacrifice love is asking of you this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-application follows naturally from the cross-shaped love of the previous question. Christ gave Himself up; love in the home will always involve some laying down of self. The question asks students to name one concrete sacrifice love is asking of them this week.

Help them be specific and realistic. Self-giving in marriage is rarely dramatic; it is usually small and repeated: surrendering the remote, listening when you would rather talk, carrying a burden quietly, choosing the harder schedule so the other can rest, forgiving again. These small deaths to self are exactly where Christlikeness is forged.

Guard against two distortions. One is a martyr spirit that gives in order to collect a debt of guilt from the other; that is not Christlike love but manipulation. The other is the assumption that only one spouse is called to sacrifice; in a Christian marriage both are pouring themselves out, each according to their calling. The point is for each student to take responsibility for their own self-giving rather than waiting for the other to go first.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Self-giving as the ordinary, daily shape of love in the home
- The small, repeated sacrifices where Christlikeness is forged
- Giving freely versus giving to collect a debt of guilt
- Taking responsibility for one's own sacrifice rather than waiting

Discussion Prompts

- What small, daily sacrifices does love ask of you at home?
- How can you tell self-giving love from quiet manipulation?
- What is one specific thing love is asking you to lay down this week?

Question 7**Student Question:**

Paul reaches back to 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). How does this connect the one-flesh union we studied in Lesson 1 to the union between Christ and His people, and what does it mean that marriage was pointing to this all along?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul now quotes Genesis 2:24, the verse at the heart of Lesson 1: “the two shall become one flesh.” But he does something startling with it. He says this ancient word about marriage was, all along, speaking of Christ and the church. The one-flesh union of husband and wife is the earthly echo of a heavenly reality: the union of Christ with His people, who are members of His body.

This is worth dwelling on, because it reveals God’s intent from creation. When God designed marriage in the garden, He was not only providing for human companionship; He was building into the very fabric of creation a picture of the gospel that would not be fully understood until Christ came. Marriage was a prophecy acted out for millennia before anyone grasped what it foretold. That is why Paul calls it a mystery now revealed.

Connect this to the permanence and unity studied in Lesson 1. If marriage pictures the union of Christ and His church, then the closeness, faithfulness, and permanence of that union are not arbitrary rules but reflections of Christ’s own unbreakable commitment to His people. Christ will never divorce His bride. The indissoluble love of the Bridegroom stands behind the call to lifelong faithfulness in marriage.

The teacher can also note how this dignifies the daily, unspectacular work of staying married. Every act of faithfulness, every reconciliation, every ordinary Tuesday of patient love is participating in a picture God Himself designed to display His Son’s love for His people. There are no small marriages.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Genesis 2:24 reread as a picture of Christ and the church
- God’s intent from creation to embed the gospel in marriage
- Marriage as a prophecy acted out long before it was understood
- Christ’s unbreakable union with His bride as the ground of marital permanence
- The dignity of ordinary, daily faithfulness in marriage

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that marriage was picturing Christ and the church all along?
- How does Christ’s faithfulness to His bride speak to marital permanence?
- How does this raise the worth of an ordinary, faithful marriage?

Question 8

Student Question:

If your marriage (or your longing for marriage) is ultimately meant to point beyond itself to Christ, how does that free you from asking your spouse, or a future spouse, to be the thing that finally completes you? Where have you been placing a weight on a human relationship that only Christ can bear?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is among the most pastorally fruitful questions in the lesson. If marriage points beyond itself to Christ, then marriage was never meant to be the thing that finally completes us. A spouse is a fellow pilgrim, not a savior. The deepest ache of the human heart is satisfied only in Christ, of whom marriage is a sign, not a substitute.

Many marriages buckle under a weight they were never designed to bear: the demand that this person be my everything, meet my every need, heal my every wound, and complete me. No human being can carry that load, and the attempt to make them slowly crushes the relationship. Seeing marriage as a signpost frees the spouse from an impossible job and frees us to receive them as a gift rather than a god.

This question also speaks tenderly to the single and the longing. If marriage is a picture of Christ and the church, then the reality it pictures, union with Christ, is already fully available to every believer, married or not. No one is shut out of the substance because they lack the sign. Lesson 10 will develop this; here, let the unmarried hear that the thing their hearts most need is found in Christ, not withheld from them until a wedding day.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Marriage as signpost, not savior; the spouse as pilgrim, not god
- The crushing weight of asking a person to complete us
- Receiving a spouse as gift rather than demanding they be everything
- Union with Christ already available to married and single alike

Discussion Prompts

- What weight do people tend to put on a spouse that only Christ can bear?
- How does seeing marriage as a signpost free both people in it?
- How does this truth speak to those who are single or longing to marry?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul calls the union of Christ and the church a “profound mystery” and makes it the very meaning of marriage (v. 32). Why does it matter, both for how we honor marriage and for how we understand the gospel, that God built a picture of Christ and His church into the design of the home itself? What is lost when a culture treats marriage as something it is free to redefine, and what is lost when Christians treat their marriages as merely private arrangements?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, and it gathers Paul's stunning claim in verse 32: the union of Christ and the church is a "profound mystery," and it is the very meaning of marriage. The teacher should help students feel the magnitude of this. God did not borrow marriage as a handy illustration after the fact. He designed marriage, from creation, as the earthly picture of the gospel. Marriage and the gospel are bound together by God's own intention.

Two implications follow, and the question asks about both. First, this is why marriage cannot be redefined at will. If God built marriage to picture the union of Christ (the Bridegroom) and the church (His bride), then the distinction of the two parties and the permanence of their union are not incidental; they belong to what marriage is for. To redefine marriage is to blur the picture God painted of His Son's love. The teacher should state this as the study's settled biblical conviction, in a measured and non-inflammatory way: marriage is the lifelong union of one man and one woman, and that design carries gospel meaning.

Second, this is why Christians must not treat their marriages as merely private. If your marriage preaches, then a careless, contemptuous, or faithless marriage misrepresents Christ to a watching world, and a faithful, self-giving marriage proclaims Him. The stakes of how we treat our spouse are therefore far higher than personal happiness. We are stewards of a picture that is not finally about us.

Hold both truths together with warmth, not stridency. The point is not to arm students for argument but to fill them with awe that the God of the gospel wove His love story into the most ordinary of human institutions, and to summon them to honor that picture in their own homes. Where marriage is treated as a private arrangement to be made and unmade at convenience, the world loses one of God's clearest signs of Christ's unfailing love.

The teacher should also be ready to reassure the wounded. A broken or imperfect marriage does not disqualify a person from the gospel it pictures; the reality (Christ's love) holds firm even where the sign has failed. Teach the high calling of marriage without crushing those whose marriages have fallen short.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Verse 32: the union of Christ and the church as the meaning of marriage
- Marriage and the gospel bound together by God's design from creation
- Why marriage cannot be redefined without blurring the gospel picture
- The study's settled conviction stated in a measured, non-inflammatory way
- Why Christian marriages are never merely private but always a witness
- Pastoral assurance that the reality holds even where the sign has failed

Discussion Prompts

- Why does it matter that God designed marriage to picture Christ and the church?

- What is lost when marriage is treated as something we may redefine?
- How should the truth that your marriage preaches shape your daily life?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole passage, from reverence for Christ, to sacrificial headship, to glad submission, to the profound mystery of Christ and His church. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these verses. What is the single truth about your marriage or your home as a picture of the gospel that you most need to carry into this coming week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone gathers the whole passage: reverence for Christ, sacrificial headship modeled on the cross, glad and trusting response, and the profound mystery of Christ and His church. Ask students to name one specific way Jesus is forming them through these verses, resisting vague generalities.

Different truths will land on different hearts. A husband may be gripped by the call to give himself up as Christ did. A wife may be freed to respond with trust rather than fear. A single believer may be moved to marvel at being part of the bride Christ loved. A weary couple may be lifted by the news that their ordinary faithfulness preaches the gospel. Let the Spirit press the door He chooses.

Close by lifting students' eyes to the wedding at the end of all things, the marriage supper of the Lamb, toward which every Christian marriage and every longing heart is pointed. To build a Christian home is to live, even now, inside a picture of that coming joy. Send students out not only with a clearer doctrine of marriage but with a heart enlarged by the love of the Bridegroom who gave Himself for His bride.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Synthesis of reverence, sacrificial headship, glad response, and the mystery
- Formation as specific and personal rather than vague
- The marriage supper of the Lamb as the horizon of every Christian home
- Marriage and singleness alike lived inside the picture of Christ's love

Discussion Prompts

- What single truth from this passage do you most need to carry this week?
- How is Christ forming you as a spouse, a future spouse, or part of His bride?
- How does the coming wedding of the Lamb shape how you live today?