

## **XI. Lesson 11 The Husband-Wife Relationship – Ephesians 5:22-33**

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Stuart chapter 11

**Aim:** To see how the husband-wife relationship pictures the relationship between Jesus Christ and the church.

The second half of Ephesians (4-6) deals with the Christian life. The second half of the second half of Ephesians deals with relationships, which is a way of showing that applied Christianity is never merely a matter of the individual and God but that it always involves other persons. Christians are to live differently from other people. When they are together, their behavior contrasts sharply with the social behavior of the unconverted (4:1-16). When they are surrounded by men and women of the world in daily life, their conduct remains distinct (4:17-5:21). Paul is now going to tell us that they also live in a radically different way at home (5:22-6:9).

The family household should exemplify God's new society. It is fairly easy to live the Christian life at church. It is much more difficult to do so in the world. But the hardest place of all to live as a Christian is at home. Home is where we are known the best, misunderstood the most, and are constantly open to scrutiny and criticism. But it is supremely here that the Christian life has to be lived, because it is here that the gospel is put to its severest test. If the gospel is unable to transform people at home, we must conclude that it is unable to transform people at all.

In this passage (through 6:9), Paul does not talk about privileges or rights, but responsibilities. Each person in the family must clearly understand what are his or her responsibilities and duties. The way for a Christian home to operate is not for me to ask what God expects of him, or of her, or of them, but to be clear what He expects of *me*. Homes are ruined when everybody criticizes everybody else's behavior.

### **A. Submission of Wives (5:22-24)**

- *What does Paul call for wives to do (5:22, 33)? How can this be accomplished?*

#### **1. The Tension in Marriage**

Marriage is the first and foundational institution, which means that all other institutions are in one way or another built upon it. Education, health care, human government – all start from marriage and the family. If marriage is allowed to decline, then these other institutions will inevitably decline with it. And whoever contributes to the decline of marriage sins against God. It is no coincidence that Paul places his discussion of marriage and family relationships before his discussion of the Christian soldier's defense against Satan (6:10-20). It is on the battleground of our relationships that this battle is fought and a lasting victory for God and His righteousness is either lost or won.

In Genesis 3:16, God told Eve that her 'desire shall be for her husband.' The Hebrew word for desire is *tishuka*, which does not connote lust or even love toward her husband. The word derives from *shoq*, which means to run or have a violent craving (*cp.* Gen. 4:7). The 'desire' is a hungering, lurching, and covetous carving. Not content with what it has, it will manipulate and seek to control in order to get its way. God said that Eve would now have a craving to control

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her husband. She would not be content with her subordination to the man. Originally created as a responder, a woman becomes a manipulator outside of Christ.

Although the wife seeks to control her husband, God says that ‘he shall rule over her.’ In this context, the Hebrew word *mashal* does not mean a kindly or benign rule. It connotes a domineering attitude. The man was first created to be an initiator, the one who would assume leadership responsibilities in the family and in the community. Because of the tension now placed upon marriages, a woman’s manipulation will surface in her initiating various schemes to appease and satisfy her own selfish appetites. The man, in his unloving rule, will rebel against the woman’s attempt at control by retreating from the situation. Or he will either give in to the persistent control techniques or wield his authority in a manner that drives him further away from his wife. The roles have been reversed; women in order to satisfy themselves have become initiators, and men in order to assert their rule have responded to the women’s tactics of manipulation.

### 2. Submission as to the Lord (5:22)

Paul starts out with wives (*gunaikes*), although he spends more time talking about husbands. Why does he address wives first? Because the female aspect of humanity is primary. All of us are the Bride of Christ as the church. Therefore, all of us are wives and it touches all of us. Men are also called to be husbands and thus have a dual role.

The keyword for wives is *submit*. This is taught in 5:22-24, 33. Verse 21 is a general introduction to submission. In order to live the Christian life, each one of us has to manifest subjection to other people at certain points. Everybody at some point has to learn what it means to submit to authority that is over us in any capacity, whether parents, teachers, bosses, police officers, government officials, etc.

Submission is the major concern of the apostle, not only in these verses, but in the entire passage leading up to a description of the Christian’s spiritual warfare in chapter 6. He offers three examples of submission: 1) the submission of wives to husbands; 2) the submission of children to parents; and 3) the submission of slaves to masters. This is not to say that the submission is identical in each case. All three of these examples occur here after the topical sentence ‘Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.’ They are examples of what Paul means when he talks about submission.

Paul is talking about mutual subjection. He will go on to give instructions to wives, husbands, children, fathers, servants, and masters. But the overall view here is not a pagan view where the one on top commands, the one on the bottom obeys, and that’s it. Instead, it is based on mutual subjection – the rulers have to submit to the subjects, just as the subjects have to submit to the rulers. The reason is because of the fear of the Lord. We are all servants of the great King. Husbands are servants of Christ, and they are to serve their wives. In each of the relationships, there is not equality, but there is mutual service. The only proper way to rule is by being a servant.

Now how do we flesh that out? Paul says that there is a certain structure which God has ordained, by which wives have to be in submission to their husbands, children to their parents. Paul knew of God’s curse on the marital relationship. Therefore, he commands wives to submit to their husbands. The words ‘be subject’ do not appear in verse 22, but are supplied from the

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previous verse in which we are all to be subject to one another (*cp.* Col. 3:18). To be subjected to her husband, the wife must first choose to do so; submission is voluntary.

What does it mean to submit? It means that the wife puts herself entirely at the disposal of her husband. This is not something forced upon her. It is something which she does voluntarily out of respect for Christ. Everything that she is and has is for her husband. This includes, of course, her judgment, her intuition, her intellect, her gifts, her everything.

Paul is saying that the wife is to assume a subordinate role in the home. This is not a matter of a lack of equality. Whether male or female, child or parent, servant or master, all are made in God's image and are equally valuable to God. Moreover, the subordination involved, particularly that of a wife, is voluntary. No woman need accept the proposal of any man. However, if she does voluntarily accept that proposal and enters into matrimony, she thereby accepts the headship of her husband over her and promises submission to him.

'Submission' in the Greek sense (*hupotassomai*) is a military word that refers to the ordering (*taxis*) of military rank. As a private is subjected to the authority of a sergeant or a colonel to the authority of a general, so too is a wife subjected to her husband. She is by no means inferior to her husband. The woman has been created in the image of God, for God created humanity, male and female (Gen. 1:27). However, God did give each gender a certain office to hold and function to perform. In the military sense, the married woman is a colonel and the man the general. A general would never enter battle without seeking counsel from his colonels. Similarly, a husband should never make a major family decision without consulting his wife.

When the Bible says that the husband is to be the head of the home, and that the wife is to be in submission to the husband, it does not give the man a license to tyranny. When Adam was created, with dominion over the earth, Eve ruled over the earth with him as his helpmate, not as his servant. In a sense, God made Adam king over the creation and gave Eve to him as his queen, not as his slave-girl. There is all the difference in the world between a queen and a slave-girl.

Submission is a service and an act of worship that the woman gives to the Lord Himself. If she wants to honor Christ, then one of the concrete ways she does this is by being in submission to her husband. If a woman is contentions and refuses to follow the leadership of her husband, she is in rebellion, not simply against him but also against Christ.

Why are wives to submit to their husbands, as to the Lord? It is because this is in line with God's blueprint for the family. There is a pattern of headship written into God's universe, and this is to be reflected in the way family life operates. A husband stands in authority over his wife only because God has so ordained. The man exercises authority delegated to him. Therefore, when a wife subjects herself to her husband, she also subjects herself to God. If the husband violates, misuses, or abuses his God-given authority, a wife is no longer required to submit to him, for her first allegiance is to the Lord.

We are told in the whole context of Scripture that we must ultimately be submissive to God. So if there is ever a conflict between the laws of God and the rule of a human being, not only may you disobey, you must disobey the human command. If a husband's decision is contrary to biblical principles, the wife should not support or follow it, for Scripture commands a wife to submit 'as fitting in the Lord' (Col. 3:18).

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### 3. Headship of Christ (5:23-24)

According to Paul, the wife is to submit to her husband ‘as to the Lord.’ That is, there is an analogy between the way she submits to Jesus Christ as Lord of her life and the way she submits to her husband as lord of her home. This is because God has made the husband to be head of his wife just as he has made Christ to be head of the church, which is His body.

Husband and wife are to see their relationship as following the patterns of the relationship between Christ and the church. In the rest of the section the apostle uses one to illustrate the other, backwards and forwards. He uses the marriage relationship to illustrate the deep spiritual relationship of love and dependence, of authority and obedience, between Christ and the church. Marriage supplies an image of the relationship of the church to Christ more adequate than the image of the temple to its foundation stone, or even than the image of the body and its head.

There is, of course, an Old Testament background to this in the way that the prophets regarded the Lord as husband of His people, entering into a marriage covenant with them, and loving them with steadfast love, even when, because of their idolatry, they were like an unfaithful wife who had committed adultery (*cp.* Is. 54:1-8; 62:4-5; Jer. 3:6-14; 31:32; Ez. 16:23; Hos. 1-3).

There is an analogy between the headship of Christ over the church and the headship of the husband over the wife. Headship involves authority. This authority is not given to exercise tyranny, but leadership. The husband is responsible for the leadership of the home. He is accountable to God for how the home is managed, and how the affairs of the home are conducted.

The way a husband and wife behave towards each other is to be a visual parable reflecting the relationship which exists between Christ and His church. The Bridegroom is the Head of His bride, whom He has saved, and she is to be submissive to Him. The reasons why wives must submit to their husbands are thus substantial, spiritual, and convincing.

Just as the church owes obedience to Christ, so, too, does the wife owe obedience to her husband. As Christ is Savior and Redeemer of the community of faith, so, too, is the husband the protector and deliverer of his wife.

### 4. Arguments against Submission

Feminists argue that Paul’s teaching in this section amounts to chauvinism – an assumption that there is an innate or intrinsic superiority of the male gender and a corresponding intrinsic inferiority of the female gender. Therefore, the rationale for calling wives to be submissive to their husbands assumes this feminine inferiority.

This objection is based upon two assumptions. The first is that Paul was not setting forth the revelation of God, but his own opinion. The second assumption is that to teach the subordination of the wife to the husband automatically carries the implication of female inferiority. This assumption is manifestly invalid.

The best model we have for submission is to be found in the Trinity. In the economy of redemption, the Son is subordinate to the Father, and the Holy Spirit is subordinate to both the Father and the Son. Yet at the same time we insist that the Son and the Spirit are co-eternal, co-essential, and equal in power and dignity with the Father. The Son is not inferior to the Father and the Spirit is not inferior to the Father and the Son.

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Another objection raised against the submission of wives in Ephesians 5:22 is based on a misapplication of Galatians 3:28. The reasoning goes something like this: If in Christ there is neither male nor female, this implies that conversion to Christ obliterates the distinction between male and female. Conversion must yield unisexuality or asexuality. Paul, therefore, is caught in a hopeless contradiction between Ephesians and Galatians. On the one hand he teaches that in Christ there is neither male nor female, while on the other hand he enjoins the female members of a marriage (the wife) to be submissive to the male member (the husband).

However, if we examine the context of Paul's teaching in Galatians we see that he is discussing the cardinal question of salvation by faith in Christ (*cp.* Gal. 3:26). It is by faith in Christ that we are saved. Anyone who has faith in Christ is included in the family of God. Salvation is not restricted to Jews or to Gentiles, to males or to females, to slaves or to freeman. The great leveler regarding salvation is not race, sexuality, or status, but faith. That is the obvious point he is making. To carry his statement that in Christ there is neither male nor female to the absolute degree of the obliteration of the sexes is to do violence to the apostle's own teaching.

### **B. Love of Husbands (5:25-33)**

- *How are husbands told to love their wives (5:25; 5:26; 5:27; 5:28)?*

Paul reserves his heavier duty language for the husbands (*andrasin*). Since headship belongs to men, the primary responsibility for all the problems in families and in the world is with men.

#### **1. Christ and the Church (5:25-27)**

##### *a) Christ Loves the Church (5:25)*

The wife's role is to submit to her husband; we would expect husbands to be called to 'rule.' But they are not. Their role is not authoritarian. Their keyword tells them to *love* her in a sacrificial way. The word here is not *eraō* which expressed the deep sexual passion of man for woman, or the words *phileō* or *storgeō* which described affection within the family. The word here for 'love' is once again *agapaō*, which is the word that describes Christ's love for His people. It is love which operates through self-sacrifice. It is a giving love which seeks the welfare of the other, whatever the pain, whatever the cost, and however great the difficulty. Such love is active, not passive, has continual concern for a wife's well-being, and goes out of the way to protect the wife from indignation, insecurity, and a sense of worthlessness. In 1 Peter 3:7, Peter tells husbands that if they do not love like this, God will not even listen to their prayers. Why should God listen to a man who does not even know how to treat his wife properly?

Just because the wife is to submit to her husband does not give the husband a right to act like a petty tyrant around the house. In fact, he is not to be a tyrant at all. If the wife's standard in the marriage is the very high standard of her love for and submission to Jesus Christ, the man's standard is to be even higher. He is to love his wife as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her. No woman will have much trouble submitting to a man who loves like that. No good woman will struggle hard against a man who is willing to die for her. When God's distinctives for family living are observed, the wife puts herself completely at the disposal of a man who wants nothing but her good, and who is making every sacrifice necessary to obtain it.

No Christian woman would object for a single moment to be in submission to her husband, if her husband were Jesus Christ. Obviously the Bible calls wives to be in subjection to husbands who

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are not Jesus Christ, but the responsibility that is given to the man here is terrifying: to love their wives like Christ loved the church and gave Himself for the church. Would a woman be afraid to submit herself to a man who loved her as much as Jesus loved the church? Would a woman fight and kick and scream against the leadership of a man who was willing to give his lifeblood to do anything he could to save her life? The kind of rule that the husband is to have over his wife is to be modeled on the leadership of Jesus.

### *b) Christ Gives Himself Up for the Church (5:25)*

Some husbands respond, ‘I’ll love my wife as Christ loved the church, as soon as she starts to submit herself to me!’ But that’s not how Christ loved the church. Christ loved a church that was not submissive to Him. Christ died for a church that was in rebellion against Him. Christ gave Himself up (*paradidōmi*) for her.

The full measure of Christ’s love for the church was His dying for her. Most of us will never have a chance to put love to that great and ultimate test, but we do have countless less ways to show our love daily. One wife rightly told her husband, ‘Dear, I know that you are willing to die for me; you have told me that many times. But while you are waiting to die, could you just fill in some of the time helping me dry the dishes?’

### *c) Christ Sanctifies the Church (5:26)*

Why did Christ give Himself for the church? First, to sanctify the church or set her apart for Himself. The word for is *hagios*, and it is translated ‘sanctify’ as well as ‘make holy.’ A holy person (a saint) is one who is set apart wholly for God. This is what Jesus desires of His church: that she might be set apart wholly for Himself. Before sanctification, however, Christ cleansed the church from sin and guilt through His sacrificial death and atonement.

Cleansing unto holiness is effected by two agencies: the ‘washing of water’ and ‘through the word.’ Baptism, the washing of water, is the symbol of Christ’s work of cleansing through the Holy Spirit. It is the outward symbol by which the inner and invisible work of sanctification is confirmed. Any thought of the external rite itself automatically conveying the inward spiritual grace is excluded by the addition of ‘with the word.’ This external rite must be accompanied by the second means, the application of the word of the gospel. Scripture becomes the means by which the Spirit accomplishes His work of sanctification—the process of becoming holy and blameless.

‘With the word’ indicates that baptism as a sacrament needs to be accompanied by an explanatory word that defines the actual significance of the rite itself. The Greek word for ‘word’ is *rhema*, which means spoken word rather than written word. This seems to corroborate the view that the word that expresses the promises of cleansing and rebirth must be vocalized during the baptism ceremony.

As Christ set apart the church for Himself, a husband sets apart his wife and holds her in high esteem. In other words, husbands are to have their wives’ spiritual development in view. God holds husbands responsible for the spiritual growth and maturing of their wives, as well as of their children (*cp.* 6:4).

### *d) Christ Glorifies the Church (5:27)*

The second reason Christ gave of Himself to the church is to present her as glorious. A bride wants to be seen as lovely. This is the eschatological dimension, that is, the end product, when the church shall appear before God in perfection. The church could never have made herself

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beautiful or presentable to Christ, for all of our righteousness is as filthy rags (Is. 64:6). Of necessity it is all His work. Beautifying the church was the labor of the Bridegroom, Christ. His labor perfected His bride and liberated her from the ugliness of sin. Jesus' intention for His bride is to present her to the Father in her full splendor, without spot or wrinkle. This is the object of our Lord's cleansing work (*cp.* 2 Cor. 11:2; Col. 1:28); indeed in chapter 1 it is spoken of as the whole purpose and goal of the work of Christ. The word translated 'in splendor' (*endoxon*) speaks of honor, of glory, and of beauty. One day the Savior will take His bride to His home and she will be altogether glorious. He only wants the best for her.

Likewise, a husband loves his wife by beautifying her through encouragement and praise before their children and others. He does not disfigure her physically or mentally, but promotes a sincere and holy reputation for her. God designed the husband as the spiritual umbrella that protects his family. Any husband would be a better husband if he could see his wife as on the way to becoming that dazzling creature, which she will surely be in heaven in her resurrected body, and if he could realize that under God he has a responsible part in her transformation.

### 2. Husbands Love Their Wives (5:28-29)

Paul refutes the view that a wife is a slave or chattel of her husband. Rather, she should be considered an extension of the husband's personality, for God has called the two to become one flesh (5:31). A husband who has high regard for himself will nourish and cherish his wife as an extension of himself. This is enlightened self-interest.

To cherish one another means to hold one another in the highest esteem and to place an infinite value on one another. This is the attitude that is to permeate the home. Not a power struggle or a see-saw battle for more authority than the other one. This will produce peace and harmony within the family unit.

The husband is to love his wife, not just because of the beauty he finds in her, but to make her more beautiful. Christ sees the church in all her weaknesses and failures, and yet loves her as His body, and seeks her true sanctification. Paul is not exhorting the husband to love his wife as an extension of self-love, or because it is to his own advantage. Again the word *agapaō*, used for 'love,' shows that this is not the case. A man should seek his own highest spiritual welfare, and so the highest good of his wife in every way, as united with himself in the marriage bond.

### 3. The Mystery of the Union (5:30-32)

- *In 5:31, what do you feel God meant by husband and wife becoming one flesh?*

In 4:25, the thought is of Christians being members 'one of another;' in 1:23 and 4:12, 16 it is of the church as the body of which Christ is the head. In 5:30, the words 'of His flesh, and of His bones' are influenced by Genesis 2:23. The context shows that the apostle's thought at this point is the still deeper one of the intimacy of the Christian's relationship with Christ. The members are part of Him, as the branches are part of the vine in the teaching of John 15.

In 5:31, Paul is quoting from Genesis 2:24, although this verse has been influencing all of the apostle's thought in this section. This statement from the creation account is the most profound and fundamental statement in the whole of Scripture concerning God's plan for marriage. Paul is saying that his teaching is based on this and other parts of the Old Testament revelation. Paul's view is grounded in the original orders of creation.

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There are three great mystical unions in the Bible: 1) the union of the three persons of the Godhead, being one God; 2) the union of the two natures of Christ in one person; and 3) the union of the believer with Christ. Marriage illustrates the third of these three unions which is why Paul calls it a ‘profound mystery.’ It is not incomprehensible, but it is something that taxes even our sanctified understanding. The mystical goal of marriage is the union of two people. That union does not annul or annihilate individual personalities.

‘This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church.’ Notice how Paul keeps weaving this theme through Ephesians. Earlier he had talked about the church as the body of Christ in the mystical union that is shared by all who participate in the fellowship of Christ.

Paul speaks about the mystery of union in ‘reference to Christ and the church.’ Why God chose to elect some unto salvation to become part of His body is a mystery! However, once members of God’s body, we are always members. This speaks to the lifelong union of husband and wife.

The word *mystērion* is used for the great eternal secret of God’s purpose for mankind hidden in the past but now revealed in Christ (1:9; 3:3-4, 9; 6:19). It is used more generally in the plural of divine truths (*cp.* 1 Cor. 4:1; 13:2; 14:2), but it is used sometimes in the singular, as here, to denote some particular deep truth of the divine plan which has been revealed (*cp.* Rom. 11:25; 1 Cor. 15:51).

Christ gives Himself to sanctify and glorify the church because He is not something separated from her, but united to her. She is His body. This is why He looks after her in the loving and caring way that He does. Men who are members of Christ’s church are to proclaim this truth in the way that they behave towards their wives. The whole relationship is to be a vibrant and obvious portrayal of the union of the Lord Jesus Christ and His people.

Which comes first in the mind of God: the relationship of Christ to the church, or marriage, which is the illustration of it? Obviously the relationship of Christ to the church! But if this is so, then several important conclusions follow. 1. *No one will ever be able to understand the truest, deepest meaning of marriage who is not a Christian.* If a husband is to love like Christ, he must know the love of Christ in order to fulfill that commandment. If a wife is to submit to her husband as she submits to Christ, she must first have submitted to Christ to understand it. 2. *No one who is a Christian should ever marry a person who is not a Christian* (*cp.* 2 Cor. 6:14). If one partner is a Christian and the other is not, a husband and wife cannot possibly have the same ideals for their marriage. 3. *No marriage will ever attain its true potential unless those united in the marriage are pursuing it according to God’s goal and standards.* Only when we pursue marriage according to God’s standards will God make our paths straight and bring blessing.

### 4. Husbands and Wives (5:33)

The husband’s position as head, and his duty of sacrificial love and devoted care for his wife are but pictures, imperfect, but the best that this life can offer, of Christ as head, of His love, self-sacrifice and concern for His church. The dependence of the wife on her husband and her duty to accept his leadership are a picture of how the church should live and act towards her divine Lord.

However, the last word must be the practical one on the subject that the apostle had set out to write about. Leaving aside now the analogy to which he has been lead, he sums up in verse 33.

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*Love*, pure and simple, but transcendent, the truly Christian love (*agapē*) that embraces what is pure in every other love, is the husband's duty. *Respect* is the wife's duty.

If I exercise my headship over my wife in a tyrannical way, I am not respecting my wife. If my wife gives slavish obedience to me without any love, she is not respecting me. The whole basis of the relationship is built upon love, cherishing and respecting one another.

The marriage of Hosea and Gomer from the beginning was set forth as an illustration of the way God loves and gives Himself for His people in spite of their unfaithful behavior. Gomer was like us. She was married to Hosea, but she was flirtatious and soon left him for another man. Hosea made sure that she had food to eat and clothes to wear—even when she was living with another man. But at last Gomer sank so low that she was sold as a slave in the city of Samaria, and Hosea was told to go and buy her. At this point Gomer became Hosea's property; he could have killed her if he wished. But he did not kill her. *He loved her!* And now, since she was his again, he promised love for her and claimed her for himself.

This is a picture of the way the Lord Jesus Christ loves us and of how our marriages are to illustrate that great and prior relationship. We are the adulterous slave, sold on the auction block of sin. He loved us when we did *not* love Him. He died for us when we were scorning His love and running from Him. Still, He bought us by that greatest of all sacrifices, and we became His.

### C. Application Questions

- *I have not been ministering to my spouse (if married) or to my brother, sister, or friend (if not married). What can I do this week to serve him/her?*
- *Husbands: I will love my wife as Christ loved the church by setting her apart in a special way. How will I do that?*
- *Wives: I will honor and respect my husband. How will I do that?*
- *Singles: I will encourage a married friend in his/her marriage. How will I do that?*

For next time: Read Ephesians 6:1-9 and Stuart chapter 12.