

MARRIAGE AND THE MYSTERY

SERIES: EPHESIANS: THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST



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Ephesians 5:22-33
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Ephesians 5:22-33

The following is from a Chinese poem written around the first century AD. It's called "Reverencing the Husband."

When a girl leaves her father's house
Her husband thereafter
Is her nearest relative.
Her husband is to her as heaven!
How dare she fail to reverence him?

The poem continues later on:

If the husband is angry,
Let not the wife be angry in return,
But meekly yield to him,
*And press down her angry feelings.*¹

Here is a quote from a Roman author named Plutarch writing around the same time:

*A virtuous woman ought to be most visible in her husband's company, and to stay in the house and hide herself when he is away.*²

The Jewish writer Philo writes:

Taking care of the house and remaining at home are the proper duties of women... Therefore let no woman busy herself about those things which are beyond the province of economy, but let her cultivate solitude, and not be seen to be going about like a woman who walks the streets in the sight of other men.

Those are three different first-century perspectives on how women ought to function within a marriage. Three different cultures: Chinese, Roman, and Jewish.

Those comments should be difficult to hear because perspectives like those have caused a lot of pain and damage for women over the years. Unfortunately, even the words we're going to study today have been

misinterpreted to defend oppressive behavior, justify abuse, and perpetuate systems that devalue women. But when properly understood, our passage today offers a revolutionary perspective.

We are getting near the end of our series on the book of Ephesians. We've subtitled this series "The Mystery of Christ" because we've seen the word "mystery" appear several times throughout the series. Every time that word has appeared, it has to do with some aspect of unity. Over and over again in this book, we've seen God's design to bring together two different things and make them into a unified whole.

We've seen it on a cosmic level. We've seen it on an ethnic level. We've seen it within a community with different gifts and callings. And today, we'll see it in the relationship of marriage. We're going to look at Marriage and the Mystery.

At first glance, you might think this is only a sermon for married people. But in reality, marriage affects everyone. Some of you are married. Some of you want to be married. Some of you wish you weren't married. Some of you used to be married. Some of you were born to parents who were married. Some of you were born to parents who weren't married. Even if you haven't had any personal experience with marriage, you live in a world where marriage continues to be the primary social institution for a long-term romantic relationship. Marriage affects everyone.

My hope is that this morning we are going to see how revolutionary the apostle Paul's words about marriage actually are. Instead of seeing this passage as limiting or even misogynistic, we are going to see how these instructions to wives and husbands can bring an incredible amount of freedom. When these words are properly understood, we don't have to be bound by cultural expectations.

Our passage offers a complete reorientation of marriage from focusing on our partner to focusing on Christ. As husbands and wives start to make that shift, they will find liberation. It's the same freedom that we

have already seen throughout the book of Ephesians, as God brings things together in unity. It's the same freedom that we find when we accept Jesus and choose to follow him. It's the gospel of grace and transformation played out in the context of marriage.

We're looking at Ephesians 5:22-33 this morning. If you have a Bible, you may want to open up to that passage; we'll be looking at it in detail. There are roughly three sections: instructions to wives, instructions to husbands, and a reflection on the nature of marriage. We'll walk through the passage in that order. But everywhere in this passage is a repeated emphasis on how Christ changes the nature of marriage. This is not just another cultural code for marriage like the three we heard earlier. This is a complete theological reorientation that elevates the work of Christ to the center of marriage.

Opening thoughts

Before we jump into the text, I want to make a few introductory comments to set the stage for our discussion.

First, I have a lot to say—far more than I can fit into a sermon. So this morning, I'm going to offer some theological reflections and then give us some ways to apply them. But I've written more than I'm sharing this morning. This written version is longer than what was preached on Sunday morning.

Second, each of us comes to this passage with a very personal experience. Rather than claiming that I am somehow immune or that I've figured out how to cleanse myself of any cultural or personal assumptions, I want to acknowledge that we are all reading through a dirty lens. If nothing else, this should give us humility regarding our conclusions.

It is naïve to think that we can somehow approach the Bible without the bias of our cultural background. All you have to do is look through history to see how easy it is to read the Bible and see what you want to see. We bring our experiences, our fears, our past hurts, and our future hurts into how we read these words.

The goal of biblical interpretation is always to separate the truth about God from its original culture and then re-apply it to our own culture. On a human level, that is an impossible thing to do. But through the help of the Spirit, working slowly in a community of people, I believe that truth eventually emerges. Sometimes it takes a while. And we can't always see how it will play

out in the end. So, for now, we listen to other people, try to interact with people from different cultures, and hold our views, particularly on controversial topics, with a great deal of humility.

Third, there are typically two major camps of interpretation when discussing gender in the Bible, and I don't really fully resonate with either one.

Complementarians generally believe that the Bible instructs men and women to occupy different roles in marriage and the church. They tend to focus on how God created men and women to be distinct from each other. They are insistent that men and women have equal worth before God. But they generally believe that men are supposed to lead within marriage and the church.

From my perspective, the complementarian argument for a gender-based hierarchical authority structure lacks support in Scripture. The passages that seem to grant authority to men are better understood as instructions for behavior within existing social structures rather than a roadmap for the creation of social structures. In its extreme form, I've seen these ideas result in horrific abuses of power and the devaluing of women. For most of history, women have suffered great harm from actions defended by misunderstood words of Scripture.

On the other hand, Egalitarians tend to minimize differences between biological sex distinctions. They focus almost exclusively on the equality between biological sexes. Because of their focus on equality, they can end up being uncomfortable with any distinction between men and women. Often, sin causes differences to quickly turn into ammunition for hierarchical oppression. To avoid that, it becomes difficult to meaningfully discuss the unique contributions that men and women make.

In its extreme form, this results in erasing sexual distinctions altogether. Uniquely female contributions, such as the sole capability to carry and deliver a child, can lose value. The ideas of masculinity and femininity become meaningless. At the far end, the very idea of biological sex becomes fluid or problematic.

But the Bible clearly gives unique instructions to husbands and wives. Those distinctions must be accounted for. Erasing biological sex doesn't solve the problem; it only creates more.

Because of that, I will say something this morning with which you disagree. Maybe strongly so. I probably already have. That's okay. I'm comfortable with that. My only request is that you try to understand the idea you disagree with instead of just having a knee-jerk reaction. Then go to the text, ask the Spirit to help you sort through the complexities of this passage, and come to your own conclusion.

Finally, here's my overall perspective on this passage. I do not think these words are intended to establish or defend a hierarchy of authority within marriage. This is not another attempt to define the institution of marriage. These words do not create an organizational chart out of marriage. Instead, they are instructions on how following Christ changes how a wife treats her husband and how a husband treats his wife. It's about learning to love a spouse who is different from you in confusing ways. Ultimately, it's about finding Christ in the midst of marriage.

Does the New Testament prescribe a hierarchy in marriage?

There are several reasons why I find the argument that these verses are intended to establish or defend an authority within marriage lacking Biblical support.

First, the opening instructions read, "wives, submit to your own husbands." However, as many have observed, the word "submit" is not actually in that sentence but is a carryover from the previous sentence. Ephesians 5:21 reads, "submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ." The next verse picks up that idea by saying, "wives to your own husbands".

The word for "submit" is used throughout the New Testament. It is sometimes used in the context of a hierarchy, as in Romans 13:1, where believers are instructed to submit to governing authorities. But it is also used outside of the context of a hierarchy, as in 1 Corinthians 16:15, where the Corinthians are told to submit to the household of Stephanas. Ephesians 5:21 is another example of this. "Submitting to one another" cannot refer to the establishment of a hierarchy because everyone submits to everyone else.

Second, the instructions to the husband do not refer to his authority, nor do they instruct him to establish, assert, or defend his authority over his wife. In fact, the New Testament contains seven instructions given specifically to husbands. None of them involves anything about authority or hierarchy, or leadership.

Here is the complete list of those instructions:

- Ephesians 5:25, "Husbands, **love** your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her..."

- Ephesians 5:28, "So husbands ought also to **love** their own wives as their own bodies."

- Colossians 3:19, "Husbands, **love** your wives and do not be embittered against them."

- 1 Peter 3:7, "You husbands in the same way, **live with your wives in an understanding way**, as with someone weaker, since she is a woman; and **show her honor** as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered."

- 1 Corinthians 7:3, "The husband must **fulfill his duty** to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband."

- 1 Corinthians 7:11, "the husband should **not divorce** his wife"

As a reference, here are the commands given to wives in the New Testament:

- Ephesians 5:22, "Wives, **submit** to your own husbands, as to the Lord."

- Colossians 3:18, "Wives, **submit** to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord."

- 1 Peter 3:1, "Likewise, wives, **be subject** to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives,"

- 1 Timothy 3:11, "Their wives likewise must **be dignified**, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things."

Notice the consistency between commands. The instructions for husbands to love, honor, and understand their wives share a common thread. In the same way, the instructions for wives to submit are repeated several times.

Much current Christian teaching on marriage focuses their instructions toward men to "lead his wife and family." But nowhere does the New Testament focus on leadership in the words to men. The only indication

of leadership is as a consequence of the instructions to wives to submit. However, we've already seen that submission doesn't always involve leadership in the New Testament.

Therefore, it is safest to assume that the instructions given to husbands in the New Testament are the main things husbands should focus on: love, honor, and understanding. While those are sometimes included as a subset of leadership, the New Testament treats them as primary.

Third, Ephesians 5:22-33 is part of what's generally called a "household code." That was a common form of instructions in the first century which typically addressed three categories of social relationships: husbands and wives, parents and children, and masters and slaves. Our passage in Ephesians addresses all three of these.

Most people agree on the interpretation in the next section addressing masters and slaves, which we will look at next week. Those words intend not to reinforce the institution of slavery but to help masters and slaves know how to relate within the current cultural forms of the first century. In fact, it is generally understood that over time, the instructions to masters and slaves were revolutionary enough that they eventually changed the social institution of employment from within.

It seems reasonable, then, to apply the same logic to the instructions for husbands and wives. The purpose here is not to reinforce or assert a hierarchy of authority within the institution of marriage. The purpose is to help husbands and wives in the first century know how to relate to each other within the existing forms of their culture.

This approach aligns well with the general posture of the New Testament instructions regarding culture. God never seems concerned with radically overturning cultural forms of power and authority. We see that through commands to submit to authoritarian governments. We see that in the way Jesus acted toward Rome. We see that throughout Acts in the disciples' attitude toward persecution and oppression. Their posture was not to revolutionize culture but to live the way of Jesus as part of the culture they found themselves within.

Those are three of the reasons that I don't read these verses as establishing a hierarchy within marriage. The word submit does not require this. Husbands are never instructed to lead or use authority. And biblical

instructions like these tend to focus on relationships between believers rather than reforming cultural forms.

If I'm correct in my interpretation, that still leaves an open question. Namely, when those cultural forms are changing, how should followers of Jesus be involved? The last fifty years in America has seen dramatic changes to the cultural institution of marriage. How should Christians respond? Even if these verses aren't intended to shape cultural forms, we have an opportunity to speak into our culture as it changes and adapts.

Should we defend and seek to maintain existing structures of authority? Or should we advocate for more equality across different areas? Those are complicated questions that we will not have the time to address this morning. There are good ways of thinking about those questions, but they aren't the purpose of the words we're looking at this morning.

If these words are not intended to establish or defend an authority hierarchy within marriage, what are they intended to do? They are meant to instruct men and women on how to relate to each other within the institution of marriage in which they find themselves.

Now that we've gotten our bearings let's look specifically at these instructions through that lens.

The redemption of marriage

We're going to start looking at this passage in the middle. That will help us make sense of what the apostle Paul is trying to do here. After the instructions to wives and husbands, which we'll get back to, the apostle quotes a verse from Genesis to link all of this to the creation story in Genesis.

Ephesians 5:31:

Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.

This is a direct quote from Genesis 2:24. Notice the emphasis on the unity between the husband and wife. "The two shall become one flesh." That's reminiscent of the passage earlier in Ephesians 2:15, "that he might create one new man in place of the two." That passage referred to the unity Christ brings about between Jew and Gentile: two warring ethnic groups with a history of hatred and distrust.

This passage focuses on the unity that God intended between a man and a woman in marriage. And sometimes, a marriage can feel a bit like two warring ethnic groups with a history of hatred and distrust.

When you keep reading in Genesis, you find out why. After the first sin, God outlines the consequences of sin in a lengthy passage. When he addresses the woman in Genesis 3:16b, we see how sin affects marriage.

Your desire (*teshuqah*) shall be for your husband, and he shall rule (*mashal*) over you.

This is a tricky verse to understand, and there are different interpretations of it. But I believe this verse describes the power struggle that can happen within marriage. Both the wife and husband are struggling to assert control over each other.

The main reason for understanding the verse in this way comes from the next chapter. In Genesis 4:7, we see the author use the same words in a similar construction when God speaks to Cain. That verse reads, "If you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire (*teshuqah*) is for you, but you must rule (*mashal*) over it."

The meaning of this verse is clear. Sin is attempting to gain control over Cain, but God is urging him to resist that control and assert his own will in the face of sin. In short, sin and Cain are engaged in a struggle for power over each other.

Generally, when words are used in such similar ways in close proximity, the meaning is the same. Thus, it seems reasonable to conclude that Genesis 3:16b is also describing a power struggle between the man and the woman.

Instead of a place of unity and intimacy, this verse describes the wife desiring to control her husband and the husband asserting domination over his wife. The words used are different because men and women tend to control each other in different ways. However, the root issue is the same: how can I get what I want from this person?

When my wife and I were dating, I was constantly amazed at how similar we were. It seemed we found a new overlapping desire or interest or way of seeing the world at every turn. But then somehow, on our marriage day, a switch got flipped. From that point on, it seemed we found a new conflicting desire or opposite way of seeing the world at every turn.

In those moments of differences and disappointments, people often feel their spouse isn't meeting their needs. That moment becomes a critical turning point. There is an important choice to be made. And because of sin, our first instinct is usually to panic and figure out some way to *get our desires met*. Often, we end up resorting to controlling our spouse in order to get what we want.

That control can take many forms: persuasion, deception, manipulation, guilt-tripping, logical argument, physical force, withdrawing, avoiding conflict, disengaging completely, trading one favor for another—the list goes on and on. Paul Simon said there are 50 ways to leave your lover, and there are at least as many ways to control your spouse.

Because men and women are different, they tend to favor different strategies for controlling their spouses. But husbands and wives are equally sinful. We both try to control the other. We just usually go about it in different ways.

If Genesis 3 describes the poison of sin on a marriage, then Ephesians 5 offers the antidote. Sin placed a curse on marriage, and Christ brings redemption. The good news of the gospel for marriage is that Christ can reverse the curse.

Here is our goal this morning: Look for how Christ redeems marriage.

Husbands and wives are given different commands in order to address the unique ways they attempt to control each other. Wives are told to submit, and husbands are told to sacrifice. It's important to realize that each of these specific commands given to wives and husbands is given more generally to everyone in the church earlier in Ephesians. The language of sacrifice shows up in Ephesians 5:2, and the language of submission shows up in Ephesians 5:21.

Notice the similarity between Ephesians 5:2, "walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us" and Ephesians 5:25, "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." The same command is given broadly to the whole church and then emphasized specifically for husbands.

The same comparison can be made between Ephesians 5:21, "submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ" and Ephesians 5:22, "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord." Once again, the command is first given broadly to everyone and then emphasized in a particular way for wives.

Wives and husbands aren't told to do anything different than what elsewhere we're all told to do. That's because the core issue is the same for each. Instead of yielding to my sinful desire to control the other person, how does Christ free me from the curse of sin, transform my heart, and forge unity in my marriage?

Let's see how that plays out in the specific instructions to wives and husbands.

Instructions to wives

The passage begins by addressing wives.

Ephesians 5:22-24:

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

Let's start by talking about the word "submit." What does it really mean?

Merriam-Webster defines the English word submit as "to yield oneself to the authority or will of another."⁴ That's a fairly good summary of the Greek word. Learning to yield ourselves to the will of another is one of the most basic aspects of following Jesus.

The word is used throughout the New Testament. Jesus submits, young people submit, citizens submit, and everyone submits to God. Submission is not something for women. Submission is something for everyone. Every follower of Jesus has to learn to submit.

The Greek word used here is *hupotasso*. It is used 38 times in the New Testament in a variety of circumstances. Jesus submits to his parents (Luke 2:51). The demons submitted to the disciples (Luke 10:20). Human flesh tends not to submit itself to God's Law (Romans 8:7). Everyone ought to submit themselves to human government (Romans 13:1). Younger men are supposed to submit to older men (1 Peter 5:5). All of us are supposed to submit to God (James 4:7). We are all supposed to submit to each other (Ephesians 5:21).

In these verses, two instructions are given to wives to submit. Each time, there is a different explanation. The first has to do with Christ; the second has to do with the husband.

In the first instruction, wives are told to submit "as to the Lord." This does not mean that they are to treat their husbands as their Lords. It does not mean that they do everything their husbands tell them to do. How could it possibly mean that when the prior verses tell everyone to submit to one another?

It means that when wives treat their husbands in this way, they are actually doing so in relation to Christ. The purpose is actually to take the focus off of their husbands and put it on Christ. It's a parallel thought to what comes later in the context of employment. Ephesians 6:7 reads, "rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man." When a wife submits to her husband, what she is doing has more to do with Christ than the person she is married to. She is actually submitting to Christ.

The second instruction uses a familiar metaphor of the body. We've seen that before in the book of Ephesians. Here, the husband is compared to the head and the wife to the body. People sometimes refer to this as "male headship," but that doesn't capture the full metaphor. It's a holistic image of head and body, husband and wife.

The head-body metaphor is an important one. We see it throughout the Bible used in a variety of ways. And the metaphor is multi-faceted. One of the often-overlooked aspects of this image is what we've seen throughout Ephesians: unity.

Think of it this way. If you have a whole person—body and head—and you cut off an arm, what do you have? A person without an arm. If you have a whole person and you cut off a leg, what do you have? A person without a leg. But if you have a whole person and you separate the head from the body, what do you have? Not a person. The person has been destroyed.

The intimate connection between body and head is so critical that the whole person ceases to exist without it. That isn't true of any other part of the body.

The metaphor is used to describe a situation that exists, not to prescribe behavior. It doesn't say, "the husband should try to be the head" or "the wife should act more like a body." Whatever is being communicated by this metaphor is already true—it's describing reality. In these verses, that reality is used as the basis for the instructions to the wife.

Sometimes we get triggered over the word "submit" because of what it sometimes leads to. The fear which

keeps us from submission—either in marriage or in general—is that we will somehow lose ourselves. I think this is what makes submission terrifying within marriage. The fear is that wives will lose themselves to their husbands. They will cease to exist and somehow be subsumed into the man they are committed to.

Unfortunately, this is a reasonable fear. When I got married, I often thought of the passage from Genesis that we'll see quoted in a few minutes: "the two shall become one." And though I would never have said so at the time, I now realize that I expected my wife to become like me. I was the "one" that she was supposed to merge into.

That assumption led to a lot of problems early on in our marriage. I had to learn a lot about respecting my wife for who she was. I had to live out the apostle Peter's command that a husband "show his wife honor." I wasn't doing that.

Here's what I know. Our God is big enough to take each of us into the shadow of his wings. Even if you are married to a man who expects you to become like him, you can yield to him without losing yourself. That's what this passage says.

Because when you yield to him, you aren't losing yourself in him. You are submitting to Christ. And Christ is the one who holds your identity secure.

So what does this submission look like in practice?

Does this mean that husbands are to have the final say if they can't agree on a course of action? Again, that doesn't fit with the other usages of the word "submit." Occasionally you'll hear the argument that "someone has to have the final say." But that argument isn't very compelling to me. First of all, it's not based on the text; it's purely pragmatic. Second of all, our church model is built around the idea of a plurality of leaders making decisions unanimously. So if multiple elders have to be unanimous to make decisions at PBC, it seems reasonable that a man and a woman could make decisions unanimously in a marriage.

Submission in verse 22, where the instruction is to wives, means the same thing it meant in verse 21, where the instruction is for everyone to submit to one another. It's not about authority or hierarchy. It's about one person yielding their desires to the will of another. It's sacrificial love. Agape. The transformation from selfishness to selflessness.

For the wives in the room, I'll ask you: what are you trying to get out of marriage? Maybe you're already married, want to be married or used to be married. Or maybe you don't want to get married. The question still applies. What are you trying to get from other people?

Here's the invitation. Stop trying to get what you need from your husband. Stop trying to get what you need out of other people. Turn to Christ. Wives, get what you need from Christ.

I want to add as well that getting what you think you need out of another person can happen actively or passively. Some wives try to control their husbands through various means in an effort to get what they need from them. Other wives tell themselves that they are submitting to hide the fact that what they need is harmony.

Sometimes laying down your life for another means staying silent. Sometimes it means speaking up and showing up. When you are oriented in your marriage toward Christ instead of your husband, you aren't afraid that you might make him angry. You aren't trying to keep the peace. Your focus is on how Christ is calling you to show up, be present, ask for what you need, but trust that ultimately, it comes from Christ.

Can you imagine the freedom of loving your husband without needing something from him? What would that even look like? How intoxicating would that kind of unity be?

So this is the instruction to wives. As we move on to husbands, we'll see that the command isn't all that different.

Instructions to husbands

Having addressed wives, the apostle Paul moves on to husbands. This section is much longer and has more detail than the instructions to wives. It's also much more surprising from a cultural perspective than the previous section. What Paul says to wives would not have caused too much of a stir in the first century, while what he says to husbands is radically counter-cultural.

Ephesians 5:25-30:

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, 26 that he might sanctify her, having cleansed

her by the washing of water with the word, 27 so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. 28 In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, 30 because we are members of his body.

A typical first-century household code would emphasize how a husband ought to exercise his authority. Most of them actually encouraged a gentle approach to that authority, but they focused on his authority. This passage in Ephesians is unique. There is no reference to the husband's authority, nor is there an instruction to lead.

Once again, we have an instruction repeated twice: "love your wives." Once again, the first time references Christ, and the second time references the head-body metaphor. The nature of this love is spelled out by the phrase "gave himself up for her." If the instruction to wives is summarized by "submit", then this instruction to husbands can be summarized by "sacrifice."

First, the husband is reoriented by pointing him toward Christ instead of her. The attention, focus, and concern is taken off the woman and put onto Jesus. When the husband sacrifices for the sake of his wife, he is following the call of Jesus to give himself up for the sake of another.

The second reason the husband should sacrifice is the unity between the husband and wife. We see the body metaphor appear again. And here, the point of the metaphor is very clearly the unity between husband and wife. The apostle says that because the husband and wife are one, when the husband sacrifices for his wife, he's actually sacrificing for himself, so it's not really a sacrifice at all.

The call of the husband is to give up his will for the sake of the will of his wife. Do you see the similarity with the command given to the wife: to yield herself to the will of her husband? But the husband is told that because this woman is intimately connected to you when you choose her, you're actually choosing yourself.

I like to play ping-pong with my sons. When I do, I always feel like it's a win-win situation. If I win the game

and beat one of them, I win, and I'm a winner. But if I lose the game and my sons beat me, I still win because I've managed to raise a child who is better than me in ping-pong. So I'm still a winner. Either way, I've won.

Here's the message to the husband. You think that getting your way is the only way to get your way. But you don't realize that because your wife is your body, when she gets her way, you really get your way. Either way, you get your way, so you may as well give up your way for her way and get your way anyway.

The problem for husbands is that giving yourself up is hard. We are afraid that if we don't make sure to get what I need, how will I be okay? I need to do whatever it takes to ensure that my needs or wants are met. Just as with wives, this can be active or passive.

Some husbands use force. They dominate. They insist on their way. Maybe they don't even ask their wives, and they simply make decisions unilaterally. But other husbands are passive. They withdraw, disappear and just go do their own thing. That's a method of control, even though it may not feel like it. It's passive control. It's really hard to deal with because it's so easy to deny.

If you're a husband in the room, take a second and think of one thing that you want from your wife. It doesn't have to be the biggest thing. Just think of an example that you want from her. Maybe it's admiration. Or a feeling of competence. Sometimes it has to do with sex. Or companionship. Or a playmate to do activities with. Or space—maybe you think you just want to be left alone.

Now think about what happens when you don't get that. What happens to you internally? How do you respond externally? Do you try to get it out of her? Are you tempted to try and control her in order to get what you want? Remember that control can be active or passive. You can force what you want out of your wife. Or you can withdraw, disappear, or just go do your own thing. Controlling takes many forms.

What would it look like to sacrifice that desire for her sake and trust that God will meet your needs another way?

Here's my invitation to husbands. Husbands, get what you need from Christ.

The apostle Paul says that in this case, the head should give up itself for the sake of the body. That's

completely reversed from how it would have worked in the first century. In fact, the Roman philosopher Seneca speaks of Emperor Nero as the head of his people. He says that their job is to sacrifice their body for him by serving in his army. In return, he will be merciful to them—the body sacrifices for the head.

In many marriages, this ends up being how it works. The wife sacrifices her desires, her ambitions, often her actual physical body for the sake of her husband. Maybe he doesn't demand it, but it ends up that she is one sacrificing for him.

The husband needs this corrective instruction that it's his job to lay himself down for his wife. Just as she yields to him, he sacrifices for her.

It's interesting to note the kinds of activities ascribed to Jesus in these verses. Jesus cleans, he does laundry, he irons, he cooks, and he feeds. All of those are typically activities associated with women, but Jesus is said to do them. This would be a dramatic violation of the standards of masculinity within the first century. Men simply didn't do those things. For the husband to be encouraged to follow Jesus, who acted like this, would be shocking.

The household code here doesn't challenge the existing social hierarchy of the social world. It doesn't instruct husbands to discard their authority or for wives to rise up and overthrow their husbands. Instead, it remakes the relationship between the husband and wife within the cultural social structures of the day. That happens primarily by the husband acting differently than he would normally.

This is a difficult path. For those people who want to keep the status quo, these instructions challenge the cultural norms of the day. There is no ammunition for conserving the gender roles of the day. But for those people who want to overturn cultural structures, throw off the hierarchy and rise up, there is no support for that either. These instructions do change culture, but they do it by teaching individuals to act differently within the constraints of their situation. As those relationships are transformed, culture changes slowly.

This is why this passage flows seamlessly from the instruction to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Each partner is reoriented to see their marriage not as simply a relationship with another person but an arena in which they live out their discipleship to Christ.

In a surprising twist, that's where the apostle Paul goes next.

The mystery of Christ

After spending so much time on the practicalities of marriage, this passage ends by saying that marriage isn't actually what is being talked about here.

Ephesians 5:32-33:

This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. 33 However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

Here is the fifth of six occurrences of the word "mystery" in Ephesians. All of the previous usages had something to do with unity.

First, all things would be unified in Christ (Ephesians 1:9). Then that Jews and Gentiles would be "fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 3:6). Now the apostle says that his whole discussion of marriage is a profound mystery, but it actually has to do with Christ and the church.

Remember the context of the book. Everything is becoming one in Christ. The cosmos, ethnic groups, and men and women in marriage. The focus is not on how to structure that unity. There aren't systems and roles and power allotments in view. The focus is on how Christ dissolves barriers, unites enemies and forges a new oneness. When that happens, the details tend to work themselves out.

That has been my experience in marriage. Early on, I was really concerned with who was supposed to be in charge. I tried hard to be a good leader. All the marriage books I had read told me that should be my goal. But it seemed the more I tried to lead, the more things fell apart. It was in returning directly to the Scriptures that things started to be clearer. My goal was not to lead my wife. The Scriptures told me to love her and give myself up for her.

But more importantly, I was to be reoriented toward Christ instead of her. I spent a lot of effort trying to get what I wanted out of her. Approval. Companionship. Sex. Respect. But those things can't be forced. All of this led to significant challenges about five years into

our marriage. We found ourselves fighting all the time. We'd just circle around the same issues over and over again. Nothing seemed to get better. We never made any progress.

In those moments of brokenness, I encountered Christ in powerful ways. I'd been a Christian for a long time. I was in seminary at the time, training to be a pastor. But I remember literally falling on my knees, weeping for the pain I was going through. And somehow, Christ was there. Somehow he gave me comfort. He gave me companionship. He gave me what I needed.

That freed me to love my wife and give myself up for her. I didn't have to control her because I didn't have to get what I needed from her. That wasn't a lesson I learned overnight. We've been married for 22 years now, and I'm still learning it. But my marriage has led me to the feet of Christ.

Here's my most important exhortation: Find Christ in marriage.

Keep in mind that marriage is not eternal. Your marriage won't last forever. Jesus says that in the new creation, the institution of marriage won't exist. But our relationships with each other are eternal, and our worship of Jesus will spread into eternity. So if you find Christ, you find something that lasts forever.

This means that if your marriage is in crisis, there is hope. I have seen God work miracles to heal marriages that I never thought would survive. Christ can redeem a marriage. Even more importantly, there's hope for you even if your marriage doesn't improve or you lose it altogether. The goal of this life is not to have a great marriage; it's to find intimacy with Christ. You can do that no matter what your circumstances.

That means if you desperately want to be married, you can find Christ there. If you feel stuck in a difficult marriage, find Christ there. If you used to be married and are grieving that loss, find Christ there. If you aren't married and probably won't get married, find Christ there. If you're young and are looking forward to meeting someone to marry, find Christ there.

As you follow Christ, you will learn to submit and sacrifice. That's the way of Jesus. If you get married,

you will learn to submit and sacrifice in a unique way to your spouse. In any case, the path of spiritual growth is learning to love. All of us are learning to give up ourselves for the sake of others—whether married, single, divorced, or anything else. That's how we find Christ.

Conclusion

We started this morning by looking at some cultural expectations of marriage. Do this. Don't do that. Women should be like this. But then we saw how the way of Jesus teaches wives and husbands to give themselves for each other in marriage. The particular path is different, but the underlying command is the same. Find freedom by choosing the other over yourself.

When Christ is placed at the center of a marriage, each partner finds freedom. But in the end, marriage is not the point. Christ is not the point. How much clearer could the apostle be? "I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church." Marriage isn't even about marriage. The church doesn't exist to make sure our marriages get better. Marriage exists to make sure the church grows into unity in Christ.

That's marriage and the mystery. Christ in all, through all, and for all. So whatever your marital status, let's appreciate the work of Christ and look for him in all our relationships.

Endnotes

1. Zhao Ban, "Reverencing the Husband." CommonLit, <https://www.commonlit.org/en/texts/on-reverencing-the-husband>.
2. Plutarch, *Moralia*, 140e. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moralia>.
3. Early Jewish Writings, <http://www.earlyjewishwritings.com/text/philo/book29.html>.
4. Merriam-Webster Dictionary, [merriam-webster.com, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/submit](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/submit).