

Sermon: The Foundations of Christian Marriage, 1
Ephesians 5:22-33

This morning we are continuing our study through Paul's letter to the Ephesians. And we now come to Paul's teaching on marriage. Ephesians 5:22-33 is the locus classicus on marriage. It contains the most comprehensive teaching on what marriage is and how to function within a marriage.

Marriage is a beautiful, foundational, difficult and rewarding institution. No other relationship between humans is so important or intimate as marriage. And yet, in our culture today, marriage is seen through a very pragmatic lens. So pragmatic, that today many consider marriage an optional institution. In our cultures, it is seen as quite permissible today to harvest all of the fruits of marriage without ever **committing** to marriage with another person.

The sexual intimacy, the bearing of children, the relational and financial partnership, cohabitation – all of these can be enjoyed today without ever finally committing to marriage.

And this has left many in our culture asking the very logical question: then why marry? Indeed, statistics tell us that most people today desire marriage with someone they love. Yet, many do not marry because they haven't found **just the right person**. And so they enjoy the fruits of marriage as a sort of try out before ever committing.

Yet as Christians, we are to have a comprehensively different view of marriage- from beginning to end. Our view of marriage is to be informed not by cultural trends but by the unchanging word of God.

And in God's word we learn that marriage is that institution that God set up for the multiple reasons. **First**, when God created Adam in the Garden of Eden, He created him in need of a helper. That is, he created him **incomplete**. Adam had a great task ahead of him in exercising dominion over God's creation. He needed a helper. And not just someone to help him accomplish work. He needed someone relationally. He desired an human intimacy. And so God gave Adam the gift of his wife, Eve.

The story is there in Genesis 2:18. And one of the more striking points of the story is how when Adam first sees Eve, he breaks into either poetry or song:

Hear the word of God from Genesis 2:18-25:

Genesis 2:23 Then the man said,
"This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called Woman,
because she was taken out of Man."

24 Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. **25** And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

Nothing in creation, as far as we are told, had inspired Adam so deeply as his view of his newly formed wife. He loved her the moment he laid eyes on her.

Love and appreciation defined Adam and Eve's relationship before the fall. And their love provided the perfect context for the second great reason that God gave us marriage which is the bearing and nurturing of children. God created the marriage relationship to function like a nest that children could grow up in. Marriage is the cornerstone of the family. And a God intended marriage to help create future God lovers who are whole people:
People who are whole spiritually, physically and emotionally.

From the very beginning, the point of child rearing was disciple making. It was to produce more God worshippers and dominion takers. This is what the command to be fruitful and multiply most deeply meant. It was to bring the glory of God and the kingdom of God to bear in every corner of creation. And so the original plan for marriage was comprehensive.

Yet at the fall, everything changed. The serpent tempted Eve and Eve bought the lies of Satan. She exercised her own initiative and leadership without consulting her husband. And Adam was also at fault because he never stepped in and took leadership when his wife was being tempted. He just sinfully followed his wife into disobedience.

And what results is surprising and gut-wrenching catastrophe. Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden. Adam's work was cursed. Eve's experiences in childbirth and her relationship with her husband became cursed. And in Genesis chapter 4, we see that sin took hold in their family as Cain jealously killed Able.

Adam and Eve's relationship started out so beautifully yet in Genesis 4, yet it sunk to the lowest place imaginable because of sin.

And yet, God has a plan for his people and his redemption extends to the institution of marriage.

Ephesians 5 shows us that God intends Christian marriage to be a picture of his great love for his people. And for this to happen, this means that both man and woman will have to be refined to be more like Christ.

If reflecting Christ's love is the great goal of marriage, then we can expect there to be a lot of refining to happen.

Tim Keller often uses the illustration of a rock tumbler to demonstrate the sanctifying impact of marriage. When I was a child, I remember viewing these commercials where you could buy a rock tumbler. And what you would do is take ordinary small rocks, like the ones you find in your yard, and put them with some water in the rock tumbler for about a month.

The rocks that went in were jagged and not really special to look at. Yet after the month of being tumbled around, the rocks had knocked all of the hard edges off of each other. So that the resulting rocks were smooth and beautiful. This is one of the highest purposes that God has for marriage. It's to make jagged, hard edged stones like me and you into well rounded, beautiful stones.

Many of you who are married are well acquainted with the process of knocking hard edges off of one another. It's a painful process. In marriage we are often offended. We are shown the many ways in which we are not what we should be and how we need to change.

This is by God's design. And many of you who are not currently married hope to be married one day. It is important for you to have the proper expectations going into marriage. Marriage is about being **changed into the image of Christ**.

Yet our culture sees marriage as a project mainly aimed at **self-fulfillment**. That is why many in our culture decide to get married. Marriage helps them become their best self or something like that. Yet God has given us marriage not as an opportunity for **self-fulfillment** but for **self-denial**. It's a relationship where you intensely work out the implications of following Christ.

The Self-fulfillment marriage is primarily aimed at what the marriage does for me. How it builds me up. How it makes me a more complete and happy person. But a marriage rooted in self-denial and becoming more Christ-like is focused on serving the other person. It's focus is on following Christ who told us to deny ourselves, to take up our cross and follow him.

Self-fulfillment and self-denial are the opposites purposes that we are faced with.

And so, we need to take the time step back and see what God designed marriage for.

So, let's read Ephesians 5:22-33. To show the whole context of the verses we are going to begin with sections taken from verses 18 and 21. So, hear the word of God from Ephesians 5:18-33:

Ephesians 5:18 ... be filled with the Spirit... **21** submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

22 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.

25 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. **31** "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." **32** 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.

This is God's word. The grass withers and the flower fades but the word of our God stands forever.

Paul begins his teaching on marriage in verse 22 in a way that many would naturally find a bit awkward and counter-cultural. He begins with the theme submission. Now because this is a long passage, I am going to preach this passage over the next few Sundays. And so, if you think I am only focusing on the role of wives, just wait. Paul spends more than 3 times more time focusing on the role of husbands in marriage.

You have a sermon outline in you worship orders and the first point there is...

I. Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. (22-24)

Now I can think of few verses in scripture that are more controversial today than Ephesians 5:22-24. This is in many ways a passage that is a non-starter for many in our culture. Yet Paul uses it as a starter. Why does he do this?

Well, let's look at the context. The command that wives should submit to their own husbands has a context. And that context is first, being filled with the Spirit in verse 18. Then, as an out-working of being filled with the Spirit, believers are to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

So before Paul ever addresses the topic of marriage, he already has in mind this theme of submission to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Simply put, Christians should find it rather reasonable to submit themselves to one another because they fear Christ. That is, they have already been humbled in a most comprehensive way before God. They have realized that He is the Lord and because he is the Lord, they can make no claims on our own life.

Therefore, we submit to the Lord in everything.

By nature we recoil from the idea of submission. We don't like to sub-ordinate ourselves. Yet Christ has transformed the Christians understanding of Submission by saving us through his own submission.

Therefore, as believers, our attitudes toward the whole topic of submission is radically transformed.

Whereas before we resisted sub-ordination, now as believers, we embrace it and see it as our duty before God.

We are therefore called to submit ourselves in importance to everyone- especially in the church.

This is Paul's teaching for both men and women. We are all to submit ourselves to one another out of reverence to Christ.

This is the indispensable context from which Paul launches into his teaching about marriage.

It's as though Paul was teaching about this general principle of Christian submission and now he is going to apply it specifically in the marriage relationship.

"Wives submit to your own husbands as to the Lord." Do you see how it just flows?

There is no radical break with what has come before.

Now, to be sure, in the Greek and Roman culture that Paul was writing, the idea of wifely submission would not have been unheard of.

As a matter of fact, it would have been considered the rule.

And yet the reason behind the rule is transformed.

Wives are not to submit to their husbands because they are less able or of less value.

That may have been the view of many sinful people in that day, yet it is not Paul reasoning.

Paul commands the wives to submit themselves to their own husbands because this is how God has ordered the marriage relationship.

It is rooted first, in verse 23, in the analogy of Christ and his church.

Christ is the head of the church. The church is his body. And Paul says that **marriage reflects this reality.**

The husband is the head of the wife.

And this means that she is to recognize his leadership in their marriage.

The husband is not the head because of any natural gifts or abilities he may or may not have.

He may be stronger than his wife, but then again, maybe not.

He may be smarter than his wife in some important areas. But then again, he may not be.

He may or may not be more able in many areas.

All references to the husbands abilities or lack thereof are quite beside the point.

The wife is to submit herself to her own husband because Christ has commanded it to be so.

But he does not leave it as a simple command.

He gives the reasons behind the command.

And that is, marriage between a man and a woman is to be a picture of Christ's relationship to his church.

And so, as the church submits to Christ, so the wife is to submit herself to her own husband.

Now many details need to be talked about here.

First, a wife's submission to her husband is not as absolute and unquestioning as the church's submission to Christ.

And this is because, Christ is perfect and he never fails as a leader.

But earthly husbands often fail.

A husband may desire to lead his family in a direction that is obviously unwise and against scripture.

Should a wife submit in such instances?

By no means.

A wife should never follow her husband into sin.

Also, if the wife reasonably objects to her husband's leadership in a certain way, she should by all means bring that to his attention.

Hopefully, if he is teachable, he will listen to his wife.

One of the greatest gifts that God has given to every husband is his wife's mind.

If he does not respect her thinking, there is a major problem and disconnect.

Secondly, a woman who seeks to be married to a certain man should ask herself, "Does this man whom I hope to marry display the type of leadership I can embrace?"

That is, do I trust his judgment and convictions? Will I be able to submit to this man?"

Now one thing that submission does not entail is living under abuse or exploitation.

Christ never abuses or exploits his bride the church. Quite the contrary. He loves her and ministers to her needs.

And so, from the outset, we must state clearly and plainly that wifely submission in no way legitimizes any form of abuse ever.

Christ is never an abuser.

But earthly husbands can be and no wife should be subjected to any form of abuse.

So what is submission?

The submission that Paul is talking about here is a **voluntary submission.**

She submits to her husband not because he is so wonderful and able but because she is doing so out of obedience to the Lord.

Notice that Paul does not tell wives to obey their husbands.

To use the word **obey** here would be an over-reach.

The husband is not the final authority over the wife.

Christ is.

And out of obedience to Christ, the wife submits herself to her husband.

She voluntarily recognizes his authority because Christ has told her to do so.

And this means that in the final estimation, when the husband and the wife cannot agree, the wife should follow the husband's lead.

She should let him have the authority out of obedience to Christ.

Now let me say quite honestly that my wife and I make it a practice to almost never disagree on larger decisions that affect both of us.

I cannot think of any major decision where my wife wanted to go left and I demanded that we go right.

The reason I mention this is because I want us all to know that in a Christian marriage, give and take is vital.

And speaking personally, I believe one of the main reasons my wife respects my leadership the way she does is because her mind is so valuable to me.

If my wife isn't a fan of a particular idea or decision, then we generally won't proceed until we both are.

And the opposite is true as well.

If I am not a fan of a particular idea or decision, yet my wife really likes it, then we generally won't proceed until we both are.

This is because we both love and respect one another. And I must say, this is a product of God's gracious work in our marriage.

The success and harmony of any Christian marriage is very largely a result not of any natural compatibility but of more how we view ourselves before God. And this leads us to our second and final point...

II. Marriage is the Outworking of Our Understanding of the Gospel (18-33 overview)

The success and harmony of a Christian marriage is largely the result of your understanding of yourself before God any your grasp of God's grace in the gospel.

Quite simply, the secret to success in marriage is viewing your own sin as the biggest problem in your marriage.

Have you been wounded in your past?
And has your spouse wounded you?

The answer to both of the questions is undoubtedly yes. We've all been wounded in various ways.

Yet our response to being wounded is often the greatest contributor of disharmony in our marriages.

And so, in order to have harmony in our marriages, we have to deal first with our own sinfulness. Our own sinfulness has to become the biggest issue for us.

In Matthew 7:3, Jesus says:

3 Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? **4** Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? **5** You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

Jesus is teaching us something here that is very applicable in marriage. And that is, the log in our own eye has to be a bigger deal to us than the speck that in our spouses. Now, why is it a log that is in our eye and not a speck.

Well, first it has to do with perspective. If you have just a speck in your own eye, because it is so close to your field of vision, it will invariably seem like a log. Specks are huge when they are in our own eyes- even though they are specks, they look like logs. Secondly, a speck will feel like a log when it is in our own eye because of the discomfort it creates. Though it may only be a speck, it will feel like a log.

And thirdly, we will never be able to do the delicate surgery of speck removal in another's eye when our own field of vision is blocked.

And so, in marriage and in every relationship really, whenever there is a problem, the place where we are to first give attention is to our own sin problem.

In marriage, there is a lot of wounding that takes place. And our response to this wounding is often what creates the biggest problems. Yet wasn't Jesus wounded? Whenever his disciples abandoned him in his hour of need, was he not wounded? Yet how did he respond to them? Did he verbally destroy them for their failure? No, in holiness and love, he showed them in perfect patience their failure.

Christ was wounded and yet he did not wound in return. And this shows us that if just one person in the marriage relationship is willing to take their own sin seriously and treat it like the biggest problem, the marriage has a chance to be harmonious.

So, how do we learn to see our own sin as the biggest problem in our marriage? Well, first we must view ourselves in light of God's holiness. We have all sinned and fallen short of his glory. And we deserve nothing good from him. And after we have recognized our sin we must secondly recognize his grace to us in Jesus Christ. This grace and kindness is completely undeserved. And yet he freely gives it to us. He deals delicately with the log in our eye and with surgical precision he shows us what must be done to correct the problem.

And because he has so dealt with us, we must extend that grace and sensitivity to others.

Once we have recognized these truths and thoroughly internalized them, then we are ready to speak to our spouses about their sin and how they have wounded us.

Our marriages would be more harmonious if only we were more concerned with holiness and loving our spouse than with being treated correctly.

So, in most cases, what we most need for the proper functioning of our marriages is a greater understanding of the gospel. A deeper appreciation of grace and a bigger view of Jesus.

When we have a bigger view of Jesus, the result it that we have a more humble view of ourselves. And then we are more ready to extend grace to others.

Our own personal Christian maturity is the greatest variable in the success of our marriages. Do you view your sin as the biggest problem in your marriage?

And in general, do you view your own sin is the biggest problem in your life?

If so, there is a great deal of hope for you and your relationships. And in the end, the promise of eternal life.

Amen.