



A WISE WALK FOR WIVES

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Ephesians 5:22-24
Ninth Message
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As we come to the issue of headship and submission in our studies in Ephesians 5, I am reminded of the story of a couple who were celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary. Asked what had been the secret behind their fifty years of successful marriage, the husband replied: "When we first got married, we decided that I would make all the major decisions and my wife would make all the minor decisions. In fifty years of marriage, we have never had to make a major decision!"

Over the next two Sundays we will discuss marriage – the role of wives today, and husbands next week. Our approach will be both biblical and practical. Apart from our relationship with God, marriage is the most important relationship that we have. Couples enter into marriage with great excitement and anticipation, and yet hurting marriages are a major problem in both the church and society at large. People are captivated by romance, and yet marriage is cheapened by the media and denied the time and attention it deserves. My prayer is that these two messages from Ephesians 5 will present an opportunity for understanding, forgiveness, healing, redemption, and growth between husbands and wives.

In this series we are looking at the practical aspects of the Christian walk. Last week we talked about walking wisely with respect to our time, our understanding of God's will, and the Spirit-controlled life. Commanding believers to be filled with the Spirit, Paul listed four ways in which the Spirit-filled life is to manifest itself, the last of which was that Christians submit to one another in the fear of Christ. He now goes on to apply this Spirit-truth in the most vital relationships in life: wives and husbands, children and parents, employees and employers. How we behave in these relationships is defined by this concept of Spirit-filled submission, although the exact instruction will vary, based on our particular part.

The Christian walk consists of submitting, yielding and dying to self in one form or another in all of our relationships. A godly relationship is one in which we are serving, sacrificing, and doing what we really don't feel like doing. If we are not acting like this, then we are not in God's will and we are not giving the Spirit control of our lives. The quality of our relationships reveals how much control we are giving to the Spirit and how much we are letting go of selfishness.

In Ephesians 5:22-24, Paul narrows his general command to practical application. He begins with some

words on marriage, to wives in particular:

- A Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord.**
- B For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church,**
- C He Himself being the Savior of the body.**
- B' But as the church is subject to Christ,**
- A' so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything.**

(Eph 5:22-24, NASB)

Notice a couple of things here. First, the apostle's transition from verse 21 to 22 is clear in that he does not use the phrase "be subject" again until verse 24. Verse 22 is simply an extension of verse 21. Second, notice that the pattern of the text places Christ at the center of what Paul says.

I will make five observations about these verses.

A. The pattern for relating in marriage is the same as the pattern for the relationship between Christ and the church.

The key principle for marriage centers on the analogy of Christ and the church. It is this relationship that defines for us how a husband and a wife are to relate to one another. In marriage, the ultimate experience is not about a man and a woman, but about Christ and the church. Later, Paul will say that "This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church" (Eph 5:32). His objective is that believers understand the greater reality.

Marriage is not solely about fitting into a role or coming up with the right formula for success. There is something deeply mysterious about marriage: something that cannot be reduced; something priceless to be grasped; something transcendent to be shared. Far from being an end in itself, we could say that marriage is an image that projects onto a bigger screen.

What if you were never able to get what you wanted in your marriage? What if you never got the love, the romance, the care, the respect, and even the spouse you wanted? How many of us would say they got the spouse they wanted or expected? The television show Joe Millionaire perpetuates the myth that there is that one perfect person out there somewhere just waiting for us. That's why 42 million people watched the finale of that show.

However, if you could give up on the things you desire, and through years of growing and learning were better able to grasp the reality of your relationship with Jesus, would your marriage be worth it? For God it would. Actually, this should be our goal whether we are married or single.

B. The concepts of headship and submission are difficult to grasp.

It's much easier to talk about what headship and submission are *not*, compared to what they actually are. Headship and submission are not about decision-making and lines of authority. Headship is not about being a C.E.O. It is not about dominance, superiority or control. And submission is not about inferiority. It is not about giving up one's identity. It is not about talents and abilities. Proverbs 31 certainly dashes all of those false impressions of submission.

At their core, headship and submission in marriage must be consistent with the pattern of Christ and the church. Christ is the head of the body. He is the bridegroom, the church is the bride. "Subject" means "arrange yourself under." The church submits to Christ by giving up control and autonomy. As believers, we give up our independence. Claiming autonomy is what destroyed man's relationship to God in the Garden of Eden. This was the ploy that Satan used to tempt the woman: "For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen 3:5).

The desire to maintain independence, autonomy and control in marriage is what keeps a wife from relating in the way that God has designed. Submission means yielding, letting go, trusting, believing, and becoming soft and teachable. As we will see next Sunday, the husband too must give up his independence as he seeks to become like Christ in the marriage relationship.

The question a wife has to ask herself is this: Am I relating to my husband in the same way that I should relate to Jesus? Of course, that means a wife has to consider her relationship with Jesus, and whether she is giving him control of her life.

C. The concepts of headship and submission are difficult to implement.

Not only are these concepts difficult to grasp, they are difficult to implement, for three reasons.

1. *They will be difficult because of the nature of men and women.*

Adam wilted under the pressure of Satan's temptation. He was passive. He listened to Eve's voice. He could not risk to save his wife. The problem became even more serious after the fall, when God said to Eve, "your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you" (Gen 3:16). The battle for control started a long time ago.

2. *They will be difficult because of a woman's history.*

Women have a hard time relating to men and to their husbands because of how they have been treated historically. Women are the object of abuse, cruelty, and scorn by men. Oftentimes they are stifled, controlled and treated as inferior. They are not given the freedom to be like the woman in Proverbs 31. The way a woman relates to a man at times is due to her reaction to her history.

3. *They will be difficult because of a woman's fear.*

Inside the strongest and most independent woman there beats a fragile heart. And attached to that fragile heart is fear: fear of getting hurt, fear of being stifled and limited. Mostly she fears that if she risks and gives up control, will her husband truly care for her, fight for her and sacrifice for her? Oftentimes a wife's lack of security in this area keeps her from opening up her whole heart.

Submission is difficult for women; headship is difficult for men. Our very nature, our history and our fears fight against relating in this way. Thank God for this letter that so beautifully sets out his design for marriage.

Now this text certainly is not suggesting that a wife has to remain in an abusive relationship. But the fact that she suffered pain in the past should not limit her spiritual growth or God's working in the present. The husbands of Ephesus were far from perfect. Your husband certainly may not be perfect, but as long as he is humble and willing to grow, then God asks you to do your part.

D. God's design for marriage is intended to benefit women.

Jesus is head of the church because he is the Savior of the body. The cross was God's ultimate self-disclosure. In the cross, God demonstrated his desire to save mankind for our ultimate good. This is what qualifies Jesus to be Lord of the church, and this is what should qualify a man to be head over his wife.

Headship and submission are not intended by God to diminish our lives but to enhance them. These concepts are designed to benefit both men and women. The man grows in his leadership, his ability to risk, and in his capacity to shepherd, care and fight for his wife. A wife finds protection, security and safety from the temptations of the evil one, to which she is vulnerable. There is much to risk, but much to gain, too.

In more than 28 years of marriage there have been very few times when my wife and I have disagreed on major decisions. However, there have been a few occasions when I had to stand firm and my wife was called to trust in me and in the God who stands behind me. That was hard for me to do, but in the end, Liz and I both benefited greatly. It was a win-win, not a win-lose situation.

E. The most important factor for a woman is her internal attitude.

In these verses Paul is referring to what happens internally in a married woman. He instructs wives to relate to their husbands “as to the Lord,” and adds the little phrase “in everything.” Later, summarizing his instructions to both husbands and wives, he says, “the wife must see to it that she respects her husband” (5:33). The apostle does not use the word “subject” here, but reintroduces the concept of respect or fear that he used in verse 21. He is referring to internal, not external things. He is saying that a wife should have the attitude of the “fear of the Lord” toward her husband, the same attitude that all believers should have towards one another. A wife is to give her husband her whole heart and respect him in all things.

Peter’s words are very helpful here.

In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior. Your adornment must not be merely external—braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses; but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God. (1 Pet 3:1-4)

The woman in Proverbs 31 is amazing. She buys land, makes fine clothing, and cares for the needs of her family. However, her identity is not in these things, but in the Lord. “Strength and dignity are her clothing” (Prov 31:25). Her concern is for the things of the heart rather than externals:

**Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain,
But a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be
praised. (Prov 31:30)**

Consider Sarah’s attitude when Abraham twice passed her off as his sister to save his own skin. Sarah was not perfect, but she trusted. Consider how Abigail approached David and won him with a gentle and quiet spirit, when David was about to destroy her foolish husband Nabal (1 Sam 25). A godly woman’s influence on a man is immeasurable.

We all make mistakes in our relationship with Jesus as Lord of our lives. It’s a battle to let go. We want to take control; we try to get our way; we resist trusting him and believing him completely. He knows us, and so he expects this. What he is asking for is a broken and contrite heart. This is the most important thing for a wife in her relationship with her husband. If this is not present in a marriage, a wife needs to tell her husband why, so that they can grow in their relationship with each other, and ultimately in their relationship with the Lord.

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