



A WISE WALK FOR HUSBANDS

Catalog No. 1335
Ephesians 5:25-33
Tenth Message
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March 2nd, 2003

God loves marriage! In our fast-paced world, however, this most important of relationships gets pushed way down on our list of priorities. We need to view marriage with the same degree of importance as God does. Husbands and wives need to be humble and teachable, yet we can be stubborn and hardhearted. We have to be willing to change. Marriages drift into troubled waters when we try to live on our own terms, not God's. Are we willing to let go of our demands and allow the Holy Spirit to take control of our lives? If we do, we may not get what we dreamed of in marriage, but we may receive something more significant and special than we ever imagined.

Our text is Ephesians 5:25-33.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, because we are members of His body. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and shall be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church. Nevertheless, each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself, and the wife must see to it that she respect her husband. (Eph 5:25-33)

In this series of studies from Ephesians we have looked at the apostle Paul's exhortation to believers to "walk wisely." One aspect of walking wisely is being filled with the Spirit, and one dimension of that is submitting to one another in the church family out of our adoration of and devotion to Jesus. This concept of submission then carries over into several vital relationships, including marriage, family, and work.

In Ephesians 5:22-24, Paul exhorted wives to give up control and relate to their husbands as they would to Christ. Addressing husbands now, the apostle asks them to give up control of their lives and relate to their

wives as Christ relates to them. Paul's word goes against the grain for both husbands and wives. Both are asked to do something that is absolutely contrary to their natural inclinations. Both sides are asked to submit, but in different ways.

Listen to Paul's exhortation to husbands to love their wives: "Husbands, love your wives" (25); "So husbands ought also to love their own wives" (28); "Nevertheless, each individual among you also is to love his own wife" (33). Many men hear this exhortation and immediately their minds begin to race and their bodies tingle. They think, "All you have to do is submit to me and let me love you! Oh, baby!" But no. Paul is talking about a very different kind of love. He makes use of two analogies to describe and qualify the kind of love he is referring to: "love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church" (25); "love their own wives as their own bodies" (28); "love his own wife even as himself" (33)

First, husbands should love their wives in the same way that Christ loves the church. Christ gave himself up for the church. He died for her, displaying unconditional and sacrificial love in order to sanctify his bride. He cleanses her with his word, leading to salvation, and then sanctifies her, leading her towards the ultimate goal of completed glory, i.e., holy and blameless, without spot or wrinkle.

That is how a husband should love his wife—by giving up his life for her and accepting her just the way she is. He must encourage her to grow to be the woman God wants her to be, not what he wants her to be. He should want her to be sanctified in all aspects of life—spiritually, emotionally, and physically. She is to blossom and flourish under his headship. A husband must give up his independence and submit to the Lord, responding in ways that are absolutely contrary to his selfish nature. He must be willing to suffer and even die to save his wife.

Wendell Berry expresses this thought beautifully in these lines:

To love is to suffer—did I
Know this when first
I asked you for your love?
I did not. And yet until
I knew, I could not know what
I asked, or gave. I gave
A suffering that I took: yours

And mine, mine when yours;
And yours I have feared most.¹

Secondly, a husband should love his wife as his own body. Paul further qualifies this in verse 33, in the words, *as himself*. The reason a husband is to love his wife as himself is because in marriage, the two become one. This is the goal. Even though a husband and wife are two people, and they maintain their own identities, they become one flesh, one holy union, even as the church is united with Christ. The one who loves his wife loves himself, because she is his flesh. A man does not hate his own body, but nourishes and cherishes it. "He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, because we are members of His body" (5:28b-30). "Nourish" is the word that describes how a mother cares for a child, to bring it to maturity; "cherish" means to keep warm.

A husband must feed and warm his wife's body in the same way he does his own. He is attentive to her needs for food, rest, exercise and recreation. When she is sick, he nurses her back to health. Husbands want their wives to take care of them when they are sick, but sometimes they don't reciprocate when their wives are laid up. Husbands must make opportunities for their wives to spend time with the Lord, explore their spiritual gifts, and become involved in ministry. They should encourage them to seek out and maintain friendships.

Two things are important in this analogy. First, it is clear that a husband must love himself. If he does not, then his love for his wife will be diminished. A husband who is filled with self-hatred and low self-esteem will have difficulty here. Second, it's important for a husband to love his wife as himself, not more or less than himself. If he loves her more than himself, she will become an idol to him. Then he will not assume proper headship, because he won't risk conflict. If he loves her less than himself, he regards himself as superior and will not care for her properly. A husband is to love his bride as himself.

This brings me to the following five practical principles for husbands.

A. Becoming like Christ to your wife is a difficult but high calling.

When I got married over 28 years ago, I thought I understood Paul's word, but I had no idea what it really meant. What does "die to myself" mean? Why did I think that becoming like Jesus was easy? It's not. It's a very high calling. If Jesus' death on the cross was the most important event in history, then becoming a Christ-like husband is a highly significant task. Perhaps it is the most vital ministry to which a husband is called. All of us are called to be conformed to the image of Christ in all aspects of life, but for husbands, this is

the most important area. This can be the place where men grasp the reality of Jesus for their own lives, and where a wife can see Jesus in her husband.

This idea is expressed in Hosea, as God talks about his marriage to his people. The result of that union was that they would know the Lord:

**"I will betroth you to Me forever;
Yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice,
In lovingkindness and in compassion,
And I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness.
Then you will know the LORD" (Hosea 2:19-20).**

B. To understand what it means to be like Christ in marriage, observe how Jesus treated women in the gospels.

Read the accounts of Jesus' interactions with women: one wiped his feet with her tears; one was offered living water at a well in Samaria; one was caught in the act of adultery and forgiven; women were the first to discover the empty tomb. Jesus' actions towards women were tender, loving, and filled with grace. In a culture where they were not regarded as equals with men, he always treated them with dignity and value. He responded to them with a wonderful balance of truth and compassion. He revealed their fears and wounds, and offered them a place of healing. Women felt trusted, secure and forgiven in his presence.

Jesus is the model for how husbands should act toward their wives. A husband must look past his wife's external reactions and mechanisms to see a fragile and sensitive heart that may be filled with guilt and fear. Being like Jesus means that a husband provides a safe harbor for his wife to share her deepest hurts and longings. Wives should feel safe and protected by their husbands. A husband's interaction with his wife must be honest, lifting the burden of guilt that might be holding her captive in Satan's stronghold.

A number of years went by before I was able to see the fears that lay behind the strong exterior that my wife presents. As a result, we have had some of our most intimate times when she has been able to share her deep pain and longings. The occasions when I have acted like Jesus to her are not when I tried to "fix" her, but just love her.

C. To be like Christ, husbands must always initiate grace, compassion and forgiveness.

This is a hard but true statement. The husband sets the tone for the entire household. His wife and children pick up on his mood and way of relating. Being like Christ means that he must act independently of his wife to bring wholeness and unity—because that is what Christ did. In Romans, Paul reminds us that "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we

were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (5:8). God always makes the first move. While we were rebellious, stubborn and unbelieving, Jesus died for us. He offers us grace and forgiveness before we even ask.

In order to be like Christ and love like him, husbands must be willing to make the first move. They can feel misunderstood and slighted, they can feel their actions were misinterpreted, but it doesn't matter. They are still called to initiate forgiveness and grace.

Difficulties arise in marriage when a husband plays the role of victim, or merely responds to his wife's moods and actions. When he does this, he is being defensive and failing to accept responsibility. He heaps guilt on his wife and makes her feel she is to blame. His love is conditional, based on what his wife does or says. He is critical, angry and uncommunicative. Jesus never acted like a responder. In every encounter, in every situation, even in his death and crucifixion, he set the agenda. And by God's grace and power, husbands can do the same.

This means that marriage is not a reciprocal relationship; it's not a 50-50 deal. Knowing this will help husbands continue to initiate grace and kindness toward their wives, even when they don't feel like it. A godly husband does not keep score. He initiates and never stops initiating. He forgives and never stops forgiving. He loves and never stops loving. This is how Christ acts toward us.

D. To be like Christ, husbands must know the love of the Father.

Many men struggle with feelings of inadequacy. They don't know if they have what it takes. To deal with this fear they either become passive or violent. A high-achieving or driven man is just another form of a violent man.

What a man desires more than anything is the approval and love of his father. Most men have been wounded by their fathers. That is why they seek out a woman, hoping that her love will release them from their fears and wounds. Thus they give a woman the power to validate them. In doing that, of course, they also give her the power to control and destroy them.

Many men enter into marriage seeking to be loved and validated. Thereby they reverse the order of Paul's word in Ephesians, and invert the way of relating that God intended. God calls men to love rather than be loved. If a husband becomes dependent on his wife's love, he will not act independently to love her like Christ; he will not risk conflict, since he fears the loss of her affections; and he will not assume the role of leadership and headship in the way that God intended.

A woman's love will never be enough for a man, because she can never give him the validation he longs

for. He must find love and validation from God the Father. The Father's love is what freed Jesus to love mankind and to offer up his life. He could set the agenda because he was free from the acceptance and approval of others. In order to be like Christ, and in order to be free to love their wives, husbands must also know the love of the Father.

My wife shared last week about how marriage revealed her controlling nature, and that giving up control has become the essence of her journey, not just in marriage but in her relationship with God. In the same way, marriage revealed my deep longings for a father's love. Finding this love has been the essence of my journey, not just in marriage, but with God too. God will actually thwart a husband's ability to be validated by his wife so that he will find his deepest longings in the Father. If you are a single man, you do not need to be married to begin this journey. The best thing you can do for your future spouse is to start knowing the Father's love right now.

E. A husband's joy is seeing his wife's growth and sanctification.

God is preparing the church, the bride of Christ, for his Son. Christ's joy is seeing his bride in all her beauty and splendor. He sacrificed his life to save her. When she flourishes and blossoms, she gives life back to him. This is what gives joy to Jesus. The same is true in marriage: a husband gives his life for his bride and she gives life back to him.

When I was first married I had definite ideas about who and what my wife should be. Based on my Mid-western upbringing, I expected my life's partner to be quite domestic. When my wife didn't fit that mold, I tried to help her change for the better. I refused to accept her for who she was, and as a result I became frustrated, stifling and controlling. After we had children, she expressed a desire to work outside our home. Even though she worked only one day a week, I was always surprised when she left for work on Friday morning. I guess I was in complete denial. But somewhere along the line I began to accept her for who she is. She is not domestic, but she has wonderful talents and gifts. I am the engineer; she is the artist. If she is not creating, she is dying. Several phrases in Proverbs 31 come to mind when I think of Liz:

**She looks for wool and flax
And works with her hands in delight (31:13).
She considers a field and buys it;
From her earnings she plants a vineyard (31:16).
She makes coverings for herself;
Her clothing is fine linen and purple (31:22).
She makes linen garments and sells them,
And supplies belts to the tradesmen (31:24).**

Liz has been successful in starting two businesses, the

second of which involves interior design. Over the years I have noticed how excited she would get as she worked on her projects. I became delighted for her and supportive of all she was doing. Every chance I got I would brag about her. Setting her free and watching her blossom brought me tremendous joy. One day she told me she heard a new song by Celine Dion, "I'm everything I am because you loved me." She said that song applied to her. It was my love and support that had allowed her to fly. Hearing that, I never felt more like a man. In that moment I was able to grasp the heart of Christ and the joy that he has in us.

As we close, I want to leave us with some important reminders.

1. Marriage is a mystery. You won't understand it fully, so enjoy it.
2. Marriage is about heavenly realities. Don't look for it to be the be all and end all.
3. For your part, be independently obedient to the Lord. Don't wait for your spouse to get squared away.

4. Be patient. Don't get discouraged. Marriage is a long-term arrangement.

5. Go to a lot of weddings. We need constant reminders of how God wants us to live.

But perhaps most importantly, we cannot experience in our own strength what God intends for marriage. That requires the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus' first miracle took place at a wedding. The wine ran out and the celebration was in jeopardy. The couple's joy hung in the balance. But what they could not do, Jesus did, turning the water of self-effort into the wine of the joy of the Spirit. This is what we need in our marriages. We cannot get there on our own. We need the transforming hand of God at work in us in order to taste the sweetness of the wine.

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1. Wendell Berry, *Entries* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1994), 46.