



HUSBANDS AND WIVES: APPRECIATING THE DIFFERENCES

SERIES: SPIRITUALITY OF DAILY LIFE

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Ephesians 5:22-33
Tenth Message
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When I got married, I thought I knew my wife fairly well. We viewed life from much the same perspective, I imagined. There were a few differences between us, but those were minor, I assumed. I was very mistaken! Over the years I have discovered that we are not just a few degrees apart, we are utterly different. We view life from a different completely perspective and we respond to circumstances very differently.

For instance, not long after we were married, I discovered that Liz could read my mind. She knew everything I was thinking—always. And I was to discover that I could never read her mind. She was a complete mystery. I learned that I was predictable, but she reserved the right to be unpredictable. I discovered that the rules that applied to me one day didn't apply to her the next. She reserved the right to change them without informing me. I learned that when she was too tired or too busy to talk, then I had better be quiet. But I learned then when she wanted to talk, I had better listen, no matter how tired or busy I was. I learned that when she said she didn't want anything for her birthday, I shouldn't believe her.

My wife, for her part, learned that when we are lost, I never stop to ask for directions. She discovered that when I am sick, I want to be babied. She found out that I did not have a natural taste for clothes and color. Many times she had to say to me, "You're not going out looking like that!" Before we got married, she told me she liked camping. After we were married, we went camping, and it was obvious she didn't like it. She explained that she thought "camping" meant going to summer camp for a weekend where someone else did all the cooking!

Sometimes it seems like men and women come from different planets, as the title of the best selling book put it, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*.

We have already discussed the goal of marriage, from Genesis 2:24. God's vision for marriage, we discovered, is oneness: "For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother; and the two shall become one flesh." But how can this process come about when men and women are so radically different? If we are going to grow in oneness, we need to understand and appreciate the differences between men and women. And we need to learn how God would have husbands and wives relate in order to experience this one-flesh relationship that he has designed. This unity does not come about naturally. Sin, pride, and our natural inclinations get in

the way of oneness. However, when we walk in the Spirit and allow him to guide us, then God leads us into supernatural mysteries.

Our text today is taken from the apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians, chapter 5. I am not going to strictly expound the passage. Rather, I will share around the apostle's general theme to speak to husbands and wives, sharing words for women and words for men.

We find the apostle's instructions for wives in Ephesians 5:22-24:

Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything (Eph 5:22-24, NASB).

Paul is writing about how wives are to relate to their husbands. The exhortation is, "*Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord.*" The apostle's transition, in verse 22, comes from his general instruction, found in verse 21: "and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ." Thus in verse 23 Paul writes, "*For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church.*" God desires a husband and his wife to relate in marriage in the same way that the church relates to Christ and Christ relates to the church.

The notion of submission is not considered culturally acceptable or relevant today, however. But let's be clear about what the apostle is saying. The word "submit" means, "arrange yourself under." A wife is to arrange herself under her husband's headship. In the relationship she is to "see" the Lord right behind her husband, and relate to her husband accordingly. Submission does not mean that she loses her personhood, individuality, gifts and talents, her value or equality. A husband and wife are in the process of becoming one. This automatically excludes any semblance of hierarchy or inequality. Nor does submission mean that a wife is required to fit into some pre-conceived demand. This would run contrary to the description of an excellent wife in Proverbs 31.

How a husband and wife function in marriage, the tasks that each takes on, is determined by their particular gifts and talents, not their gender. Every couple must work this process out for themselves. We know that when we submit to the Lord, as we should, we are blessed. This should be our foremost calling in mar-

riage.

It is noteworthy that in verse 33, Paul repeats his exhortation for the husband and the wife:

Nevertheless let each individual among you also love his own wife even as himself, and let the wife see to it that she respect her husband (5:33).

Paul does not use the word submit here, rather, he uses the term “respect,” the same word he uses in verse 21, where he exhorts, “be subject to one another in the fear of Christ” (which led into a discussion of wives and husbands). The apostle is not referring to a role, but, rather, an inner attitude. The wife is to have an inner attitude of respect toward her husband—the same attitude she has for the Lord. She is not to be critical of him, blaming him, harping on his weaknesses, cutting him down in public and belittling him. She must listen to him, value him and take him seriously in the same way that she takes the Lord seriously. The husband is to be the head, like Christ, and the wife is to respect his headship. She must trust and believe that the Lord will work through her husband for her good. Of course, it is much easier to put on an appearance of submission than to have an inner attitude of respect.

This idea of submission in marriage is a difficult concept to understand, let alone put into action. Submission is an emotional issue for women. Yet I would say, based upon my own experience, that most wives want their husbands to take the lead. A woman longs for an advocate, a champion, a leader, someone who will fight for her honor and take up her cause.

But herein lies the problem. Although we know that submitting to the Lord is designed for our good, we resist doing so. A wife may desire one thing in her heart—she can be convinced in her mind—but her flesh will not go along easily. My wife would readily agree with this concept in theory, but her natural inclination is quite different.

Genesis 3 identifies the root of this problem. Part of the consequences of the fall is that a wife’s “desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (Gen. 3:16). There is a conflict. A wife will seek to dominate and run the relationship, but God has ordained that the husband be the head.

Let’s consider our relationship with the Lord. What are we doing when we submit to the Lord? We would say we are giving up control of our life and giving God control of it. I have come to regard this as one key element in the issue of a wife’s submission, of her not trying to control her husband or the circumstances of their life. My wife would say that this issue of control is the most important thing she has had to deal with in our marriage. It has to do with basic spiritual issues in her life. When I talk about giving up control, I am not referring to a relationship in which a husband is demanding his wife do something immoral or unethical. That would be a different situation entirely.

Let’s go deeper still. Why does a wife seek to control? At times, this is a cover for deeper issues. In our relationship, I have seen that underneath the issue of control lie fear, hurt and pain. It is hard for a wife to learn to trust her husband. And if she has been abused or mistreated in any way in the past, her fear and pain can go very deep. My wife doesn’t really want to control me, but she finds herself doing so because she does not want to get hurt. To protect herself, she has learned to be strong. When I see a strong or controlling response from her, the issue is not how can I gain control of the situation or how can I prove my point, it is, what is behind her fear? The circumstance itself becomes secondary to what is causing her pain.

Now let us consider the dynamics of a woman’s natural tendency to seek control and man’s greatest area of weakness, his sense of adequacy. This is what explains Adam’s silence in the garden when he was tempted to disobey God’s command. Men fear not being able to make it in this world. They fear losing their jobs and being unable to provide for their families. Headship is the most difficult assignment given to men. We just don’t know how to go about it. So, when a wife is critical, controlling and disrespectful toward her husband, she undermines him at his weakest point. She reinforces everything the world is telling him: that he doesn’t have what it takes.

However, if she is willing to let go, to trust him and encourage him, despite the risk of getting hurt in the process, she helps him become the leader that God wants him to be. Wives may not know how much an attitude of disrespect hurts their husbands and how much their support means to them. My wife tells me all the time that she loves me, but when she says she trusts me, that has a much greater impact on me.

So God’s word to wives is, “Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord.” Treat your husbands with respect. Release control of your life. Enjoy a relationship where you can expose all of your heart, your fears and hurt, one in which you can experience trust and safety. Wives are uniquely designed by God to encourage their husbands in their greatest area of weakness—their sense of adequacy.

The apostle now turns his attention to husbands. Verse 25:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her; 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 should 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 it and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church (5:25-29).

The exhortation to husbands is to love their wives. Paul uses two analogies to qualify the kind of love that husbands are to have for them. They are to love their wives as Christ loved the church, and they are to love them as their own bodies. What a high calling—to love your wife in the same way that Christ loves the church.

Paul is speaking of an unselfish, sacrificial love, the kind that Jesus demonstrated when he gave up his life for us. This is a love that is based on long-term commitment, not feelings. It is purposeful, not aimless. Christ died that he might sanctify the church, that it might be holy and blameless, without spot or wrinkle. Christ wants the church to reach its intended glory, to become what God designed it to be from the beginning. Husbands are to love their wives in such a way that they blossom and grow to become all that God intended. Thus a husband provides an atmosphere for his wife's gifts and talents to flourish. He desires for her to grow spiritually and personally.

The love that is described here is active, not passive. A husband initiates speech. We are cleansed and saved both through the Word and through the words that God spoke to us. God is always initiating speech. Husbands are to do the same by providing a supportive atmosphere of listening and sharing. I have learned that when my wife wants to speak to me, she will not come out and tell me up front what is on her mind. She takes a more roundabout approach, circling the field before she lands. She is testing me to see if I am fully available to her. When I am, I have found those times to be cleansing and refreshing.

The love of a husband is to be generous and unselfish, not limited. He is to love his wife as his own body. The reason he loves so extravagantly is that he is one flesh with his wife. She is part of him, and he cares for her body in the same way he cares for his own body. He nourishes and cherishes her. "Nourish" conveys the idea of nurturing. "Cherish" is used in 1 Thessalonians 2 to describe the care of a mother for her children. Literally, it means to "keep warm." A wife always needs more blankets on the bed than her husband. A husband wants his wife to be nourished with food, rested with sleep, healthy with exercise, encouraged with friendships, warmed with care. And he is willing stay home and take care of the children while his wife exercises or meets with a friend.

Now just as submission does not come naturally to women, loving as it is described here does not come naturally to men. Men resist commitment and responsibility. Fear of inadequacy and fear of failure drive this tendency. A man does not look at a woman in terms of the shepherding care he can offer; rather, he looks at her for what she can give him. He is likely to have a checklist mentality when he is considering a relationship. He is looking for a woman who will meet all his criteria, many of which are based on external things. He looks at a woman as a trophy for his mantle rather than a person to love. Generally speaking, a husband will have a more

difficult time relating, communicating and just being with his wife. When he wants to get to know other men, he plays basketball or golf with them, he goes hunting or builds a fence. That is how men bond together. This doesn't work with a woman, however.

But perhaps one of the greatest difficulties for men is that oftentimes they enter into relationships and get married to receive love rather than give it. A wife is not called to love, but to trust and respect her husband. A husband is not called to receive, but to give love. A man's natural inclination is the very opposite of what God calls him to do. When these get reversed, a husband is likely to submit to his wife. He becomes dependent on her love, physical and otherwise, so that he can feel adequate. In the process his headship is diminished. A husband can give sexual pleasure, of course, but that is not the same as love.

In my ministry I interact with many young men who are in the process of deciding whether they should get married. Some explain that they are not sure whether they should marry a particular woman, and they go on to list her positive and negative traits. I tell them they are asking the wrong question. The real issue for a man is whether God is calling him to love the woman in question as Christ loves her, for the rest of his life.

Now, just as there is a deeper issue for wives, there are deeper issues for husbands, too. One is that husbands have never experienced love and acceptance in their homes, especially from their fathers. This empty feeling is perpetuated by a man's tendency to perform and find success through achievements. He is empty of love and so is unable to offer the kind of affection that parallels the love of Christ, because he doesn't know what that love looks like. When he marries, therefore, he tries to gain love and acceptance from his wife. This is why men become possessive. They are not supportive of their wives' interests and friendships, because they feel their wives' capacity for loving them is diminished by other interests. Such a love can become stifling, demanding, coercive, manipulative, conditional and selfish.

Now consider the dynamics of a husband's natural tendency with respect to his wife's greatest area of weakness, her need for security and trust. What happens when she is in a relationship where her husband is looking to her to constantly give him what he needs, where she feels threatened and pulled at, where she cannot trust that her husband has her best interests in mind? She is just going to shut down emotionally and protect herself. Her husband has undermined her at her weakest point.

However, if a husband begins to love his wife sacrificially, unconditionally, then she will experience the love of God through him. She will feel the blessing of knowing security, trust and care. She will be able to let down her guard and open up all of her heart. Just as a woman has unlimited potential to bless her husband, so a hus-

band has unlimited potential to bless his wife. Men are uniquely designed by God to bless their wives so that they can experience trust and security. A husband who begins to express a Christ-like love, a love with no strings attached, will experience the heart of God who loves us in the same way. A wife will learn to trust in the love of God through her husband. And not only that, the husband will find that the love of his wife comes freely as a response, even as he loves and worships God because of Christ.

I want to say an additional word to husbands at this point.

1. You need to know that the heart of your wife is very, very tender.

It took me a long time to learn this. I misread all the signals. I kept looking for fast balls and my wife kept throwing curve balls. My wife is a strong, independent woman; I am the typical passive male. But I have discovered that my wife has a precious, tender heart. Men, your wives are more tender than you can possibly imagine. Don't let externals fool you. Your wife wants your love. She wants you to care for her tender heart. Wives, forgive us for being so slow to recognize this.

2. You need to know that marriage is not an equal deal.

It took me a long time to figure this out, too. Marriage is not a relationship in which we give a little and expect a little in return. If we are to love like Christ, we must love our wives, expecting nothing in return. We must love because Christ loves. This demands that we initiate and never stop initiating. We forgive and never stop forgiving. We love and never stop loving. That is what Christ does. Don't worry about who is right and who is wrong. One act of kindness, one act of sacrificial love will speak louder than many words. If you expect marriage to be an equal deal, then you will never love your wife like Christ loves the church.

3. You need to look for love from God first, not your wife.

If we are going to offer the love of Christ, then our hearts must be filled with God's love. We need to be in relationships with other men where we can pour out our hearts and help one another on our spiritual journey. We need to read books like *The Silence of Adam* (Larry Crabb; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995); *The Sacred Romance* (Brent Curtis & John Eldredge; Nashville: Nelson, 1997); *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (Henri Nouwen; New York: Doubleday, 1992); and *Abba's Child* (Brennan Manning; Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1994). We need to pursue the love of God at all costs, because that is crucial for our marriages. When we know the love of our Heavenly Father, then we can begin to love our wives as Christ loves the church.

So we could paraphrase God's word to husbands in these words: "Husbands, sacrifice your freedom and put aside your irresponsibility and fear in order to love your wives as Christ loves the church. I want you to know what it is like to love in the way I love you; to experience a relationship where you are completely free to give; to feel the inner tenderness of your wife and the joy of her trusting you. And know that I uniquely designed you to encourage your wife in her greatest area of weakness—her sense of security."

In marriage, God wants us to learn a way of relating, a way of being, a way of spirituality. He asks us to do something absolutely contrary to our nature so that we can enter into a divine mystery. If we do what comes naturally, then we will undermine our spouse in his or her greatest area of weakness. But if we learn, by God's grace, to do that which is unnatural, then we will be a blessing to our mates.

So we must choose. We can be frustrated and annoyed and complain about the differences between men and women, or we can accept these differences and enter into the joy of discovering the heart of our spouse. We can enter into the wonder of how God created us male and female. We can encourage one another's gifts and build upon what each has to offer. If we insist on getting what we want in marriage, we will reap frustration and death. But if we are willing to die to our own desires, we will discover marriage to be an adventure of wonder, joy, and life.

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