

“God’s Design for Marriage”
A Household of Faith: Sermon Series on Ephesians
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(Eph. 5:21-33)

Introduction.

Today we’re going to study Ephesians 5:21-33, and the title of my message is “God’s Design for Marriage.” I don’t know of another passage of Scripture that has been more controversial in recent years than this one...and for that reason Amy Carlan is going to come and explain it to us! In all seriousness, some people outside the church use these verses as ammunition in their argument about why they think Christianity is outdated and archaic. Still other people, even some Christians, think these verses are irrelevant to modern life. What are we to make of these things?

My own personal conviction is that Paul’s words offer hope to troubled marriages, and I think they’re a powerful corrective to the self-centeredness which dominates most marriages today. I also think that a careful reading of this passage blows much of the contemporary thinking and attitudes about marriage right out of the water, and the Bible offers a different way of living and a different way of loving for husbands and wives.

Now, I realize that there are many people here today who aren’t married. As you know, I’m not married myself anymore since Lorie passed away last year. I still believe these words of the apostle Paul present wise counsel for us single people in learning how to understand and celebrate the differences between men and women, as well as keys to building healthy relationships. And we would all do well to give careful consideration to the advice he offers in this passage.

One final comment. There is a good chance I may step on some emotional landmines in our congregation today when I speak on this subject. In addition, there is no way I will be able to cover everything that could or should be said about these matters. I hope that you will be gracious to me. I don’t pretend to have the corner on the truth, and you may disagree with some of the things I say this morning. That’s okay. I simply ask that you set aside your own preconceptions (and maybe even your pain) and listen for whatever word God wants you to hear today. May His voice be the loudest one that is heard here this morning.

As we reflect on God’s design for marriage, there are two matters I want you to consider with me this morning: 1) the differences between men and women; and 2) the responsibilities of husbands and wives.

I. The Differences Between Men and Women.

I want to begin by saying men and women are different, and I'm not just talking about the physiological side of things. Those differences are pretty obvious. I'm talking about the subtle yet profound differences in our mental and emotional make-up. We think differently, we're wired differently, and often times we want different things out of married life.

There has been considerable debate over the years about what contributes to the differences in men and women – is it nature or is it nurture? Regardless of your conclusion on that matter, there is no getting around the fact that there are differences between men and women. I believe God made us different, and it's a part of the beautiful and diverse design of creation.

What exactly are some of those differences? Let me give you a few examples. These are generalizations, of course, and there certainly are exceptions, but I think there is truth in this analysis. Generally, men and women have different strengths that result in how they solve problems, build consensus, nurture relationships, and perform leadership functions in different ways. For example, in an interesting case study in the op-ed pages of the *New York Times*, Marietta Cheng, who is a female conductor and music director of a symphony, outlined how gender differences in each of these areas meant that she directed her orchestra differently than a man would.¹

Did you know that women speak on average 20,000 words a day, while men only speak on average only 7,000 words a day? That's 13,000 more words every day! A study at the University of Maryland says it's because the researchers discovered that women have higher levels of a protein called Foxp2 in their brains than men do. It's called the "language protein." Sometimes, when Lorie was alive and she wanted to talk to me at the end of the day and I was all talked-out, I used to say to her, "Sorry, honey, but I've used up my quota of words for the day. You'll have to go talk to the boys...or maybe the dog!"

In addition, a study was made of preschool students. In the research, they discovered that 100 percent of the sounds the girls recorded were discernable words, whereas only 60 percent of the sounds boys made were discernable words. The other 40 percent were noises, like the sound of trucks and machines, or gunfire.

Did you know that autopsies of the brains of men and women also reveal something interesting about the differences between us? The male brain does not have as much crossover from the two halves of the brain as a woman's brain does. Women have a greater number of fibers that actually cross over to both halves of the brain.² As a result, one could say that generally women are more in touch with themselves than men are. Men and women are different.

Now, there are some people today who try to downplay or minimize the differences between the sexes, and there is a push for androgyny in many circles of our society. I disagree. And I believe that most people will acknowledge that profound differences do indeed exist between men and women, which is both part of the attraction and part of the frustration in human relationships. These differences draw us closer, and they drive us crazy. And they show up in significant ways when men and women try to be husbands and wives to each other. What does the Bible have to say about all of this?

II. The Responsibilities of Husbands and Wives.

The word “submission” has developed a negative reputation in recent years. In a day when people are concerned about rights, we tend to neglect or disregard any discussion about responsibilities or duty. And yet, every Christian lives under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. We are not our own; we have been bought with a price, the price of Christ’s own shed blood. Therefore, we should give careful attention to the calling of God as revealed in His Word when it comes to ordering our lives at home, at work, at play and in marriage.

One of the things that’s important to bear in mind in reading this passage is to avoid the temptation to focus on what the other person is supposed to do and neglect your responsibility. Husbands tend to read what Paul says to wives and say, “See there? You’re not doing what God says you’re supposed to do.” Wives tend to do the same thing. If you’re a husband or a wife, be careful that you don’t read someone else’s mail when it comes to understanding your responsibility in marriage. Focus on what God is saying to you.

A. The Principle of Mutual Submission.

There are three things I want to highlight from this text about the responsibilities of husbands and wives. The first is the *principle of mutual submission*. In spite of the division and paragraph heading which the editors of most Bibles artificially place at the beginning of verse 22 of this passage, I believe the section actually begins in verse 21, where Paul talks about mutual submission. The first and primary calling to all husbands and all wives is to submit to each other out of their reverence for Christ. The wife isn’t the only one who is commanded to submit in this passage. The husband is, too. And it’s out of this mutual submission, which is born out of our commitment to Christ, that husbands and wives can find joy and fulfillment in their marriage.

Elsewhere the apostle Paul writes at length about the dignity of womanhood, the equality of men and women before God, and the unity of all Christian believers. According to the Bible, women aren’t second-class citizens in the kingdom of God. They are joint heirs together with men, and they are responsible for spiritual leadership in the home along with their husbands. As Paul writes in

Galatians 3:28, “*There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*”

How is this mutual submission to be lived out in practical ways? What are the implications for daily living? Paul provides a reminder to wives and husbands about the responsibilities on which they need to work in their relationship. The first reminder has to do with the power of a wife’s respect.

B. The Power of a Wife’s Respect.

The passage plainly reads, “*Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church*” (5:23).

There are some who take these verses to mean that there should be a hierarchical, authoritarian order to the home with the husband as the head of the household and the wife and the children in subordination to patriarchy. I disagree. I believe that while it’s true that husbands have a special responsibility before God to be spiritual leaders in their homes, I think it misses the mark to interpret these verses in a way that insists on a hierarchy.

In order to understand a text, one must look at the context. At the end of this section, Paul provides a summary statement in verse 33 of what he has been saying about the responsibilities of husbands and wives, and he closes by saying, “...*each one of you [husbands] must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.*” “Submit” and “respect” are interchangeable words for Paul in this passage, and, therefore, we must understand submission in light of the power of a wife’s respect.

Earlier I explained how men and women are different, and one of the ways we’re different is in the area of our needs. Paul reminds his readers here that while women need to be loved, men need to be respected. It’s part of the way we’re wired. Psychologists say that the question that is most important to women is, “Am I loved?” But the question that is most important to men is, “Am I good enough?” We wonder if we measure up. Wives are in a unique position for good or for ill to either affirm their husbands or take them out at the knees.

When Lorie was alive, I used to say that if I believed I was in the center of God’s will, and if I felt Lorie’s 100 percent support, I believed I could take on anyone or anything in this world. I really did. However, if I wasn’t convinced that I was in the center of God’s will, and if I didn’t sense Lorie’s 100 percent support, I would crumble at resistance. You may not have seen it on the outside, but I caved inwardly, in my spirit.

God has designed men to need the respect of their wives. Sadly, in an effort to be more like men, many women have abandoned this unique position of influence, and they have forfeited their real power because they fear subjection will lead to oppression. However, submission and respect does not mean being a doormat or letting anyone take advantage of you. A godly wife will speak her mind and will

jointly exercise leadership in the home. Rather, it means having the strength and the security in one's relationship with Christ that you don't always have to get your own way, and you are freed up to serve and support your husband because of who and whose you are in Jesus Christ.

A friend of mine was preaching on this passage some time ago, and the week before he gave his sermon he asked 12 women if they would give an illustration as to how submission had worked in their marriages. In each instance, he was met with the same response – uproarious laughter. Most of them said, “Why don't you ask my husband?!” The notion of submission, when it doesn't bring laughter, usually brings resistance or defensiveness if not downright anger. Why is it that we are so insecure and afraid to explore what this may mean? Can't we trust in the Lord to show us a better way?

But let me be clear, as I said before wives aren't the only ones who are supposed to submit in marriage. Husbands are too (5:21). But it appears that Paul needed to re-emphasize this for wives because they are prone to either forget or resist it.

C. The Power of a Husband's Sacrificial Love.

If women thought they had the hard part in this passage, let me remind you that there are only 3 verses directed to wives, whereas there are 8 verses written to husbands. Husbands you have to remember almost three times as much information!

Paul urges husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her. What this means is that a husband must be willing to die, if necessary, for those whom God has called him to love, even as Christ died on the cross for you and me. No king of the castle mentality, no “bring me my pipe and slippers” attitude is allowed here. Only self-sacrificing love which is willing to give itself away in the service of another will fulfill the expectation of God for husbands.

The apostle adds another analogy, and he says that husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. It may be difficult to fully comprehend the self-sacrifice of the Son of God, but husbands can at least understand the principle of self-love. Love your wife as you do your own body.

I don't know about you other men, but I'm pretty conscientious about making time to get enough sleep, and I'm regular in my eating habits. I spend as much time as most guys do in front of the mirror making sure I look good. But as a husband do I spend the same amount of time attending to my wife's needs as to the needs of my own body? In addition, when a part of my body is hurt or injured, my world stops. If I get a hang nail or I stub my toe, I stop whatever I'm doing, and I give my full attention to where I'm hurting. But do I stop whatever I'm doing when my wife is hurting? Do I seek to bring relief to her pain?

The heart of a woman longs for a man who is willing to sacrifice for her out of love. She doesn't want to have to ask him to do it. She wants him to see the need himself and to be motivated by his deep love for his bride, even as Christ was for the church. It's just that simple.

I saw a short video recently that provides some insight into how most men need to grow in this area of life. Check it out.

You don't need to be from India to understand the message of this commercial. Men, we've got some work to do, and as the older man in the video demonstrates, it's never too late to learn and to grow.

Too often women in many cultures have been exploited, being treated like servants in their own homes. We who name the Name of Jesus need to acknowledge with shame that we ourselves have contributed to this sin, instead of being in the vanguard of those seeking social change. There is nothing in this passage that is inconsistent with the true liberation of human beings from all humiliation, exploitation and oppression. Rather, we read here where true freedom lies in marriage. It lies in mutual submission, in the power of a wife's respect, and in the power of a husband's sacrificial love.

Conclusion.

Helen Roland once said, "Marriage is like twirling a baton, turning hand springs, or eating with chopsticks. It looks easy until you try it!"³ I think she's right. Godly marriages are hard to find these days, and that's a testimony to just how difficult this passage is to live out. And yet, it's the clear calling of God. All of us are in process, and we've all got a long way to go to become the people God desires us to be. The question is: are we open to making progress and to learn from our mistakes?

Husbands and wives, you are two imperfect people trying to love one another the best you can. Some seasons are full of romance and joy, and other seasons are full of pain and struggle. What keeps us going during the more difficult times? I found that what helped me in my marriage was to remember that God had called me to my marriage to Lorie, and sometimes the most faithful thing I could do was simply live out my vows even when it was tough – "And by God's grace, I will live with you and honor you, for better or for worse, in plenty and in want, in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death. This is my solemn vow." Faithfulness helps see us through the valley of a difficult time, and it can take us deeper to a place of greater commitment and love than ever before. I know it did for Lorie and me, and I believe it can for you, too.

And when you're able to persevere, you'll not only enjoy the fruits of a long marriage which are rich and wonderful, but you will also be a witness to a watching world that desperately needs hope. When you learn to submit to one

another and stay married for a long time, you help reflect the truth of the love of Jesus, the bridegroom, for His bride, the Church. And that makes the Gospel just a little more believable and gives people hope that it really is true. Amen.

¹ Cited in Tim Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, p. 179.

² Source unknown. I copied the information during a talk I heard back in 2002.

³ Source unknown.