

Mutual Submission in Marriage

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Ephesians 5:21-33

Sermons Series:
Best Spiritual
Practices

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Something stunning is going on in society and culture these days. Marriage is rapidly declining as the primary way families are organized and children raised. People are marrying later, if they marry at all. Divorce is happening in greater numbers. Tipper and Al Gore, the latest statistic. For the first time in history, divorce has replaced death as the most common ending point of marriage. Over the past 40 years, there’s been an 1100 percent increase in the number of people living together out of wedlock. More than 15 million people in America are cohabiting instead of marrying (U of Chicago, 2002). Stunning!

This morning, Paul is writing to us about marriage. What he advocates is something stunning, too, in his Jewish and Roman world. This section on marriage is the first part of a larger section in Ephesians, named the “household codes.” Paul is giving instruction to 1st century, new Christians about their behavior and conduct within their homes and, in this case, within marriage. The relationship of marriage, as well as parent/child, master/slave relationships, was

functioning within a “superior/inferior,” a “husband-over-the-wife” dichotomy. But Paul stands in the face of this dichotomy and argues that there is another way – a better way, a distinctively Christ-centered way! It is the principle of “**mutual submission.**” It’s the most compelling principle for a healthy marriage.

When he “humbled himself and came to earth as a loving servant,” Jesus did away with the “superior vs. inferior” dichotomy. Instead, Jesus gave us a model of mutual submission. In marriage, this means wives respecting their husbands, and husbands loving their wives.

Here’s the context for these 12 verses from Ephesians 5:21-33: In verse 22, wives are to submit to husbands. Up to now, an Ephesian wife was a virtual slave to her husband and her husband’s family, in both Jewish and Roman cultures. But here, wives were using their newfound freedom in Christ as an excuse to prod, press, push their husbands. Paul wants them to stop it. So he tells them to submit to their husbands, just as both wife and husband are to submit to Christ. The word “submit” (*hypo-*

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tasso) here means to be a subordinate to one who is deserving of respect because of his godly character. Paul is in no way advocating submission in abusive relationships. There is nothing godly about that! A wife, out of respect, is called to submit to a husband who is respectable!

Paul spends two verses instructing wives, then spends three times as many verses instructing husbands. Go figure! In verse 25, husbands are to love their wives. Husbands have reacted to their newly-assertive wives by failing to love them. AND, they continue to be tripped up by deep-seeded conditioning that wives ought to be fully compliant and obey their husbands without questioning. Paul is challenging husbands to submit to their wives and to give them the same selfless, sacrificial love as Christ gives to His Church.

That's the context. Now, this one word that makes some of us uneasy, uncomfortable – “submission.” Some of us have this mental picture of a person who is weak, passive, timid, perhaps. We have this mental picture of an easily manipulated person who blindly obeys to the point of losing her entire identity serving somebody. But this isn't a true picture. The biblical call to “Mutual Submission” is powerful, distinctive, counter-

cultural. Jesus is the model: being content with second place; not keeping score of the sins of others; not flying off the handle; being quick to forgive, as Jesus quickly forgives.

Live your life, as Jesus would live your life, if Jesus were you! Jesus never forces anyone to submit to Him. It is out of His own humility, out of His own love and mercy that people choose to submit to Jesus (Mary, Nicodemus, Zaccheus, the Samaritan woman). Similarly, no one ever forces Jesus to love them (Judas, the Syphrophoenician woman, Peter). We are invited to be like Jesus – humble, willing to submit to and love another!

Let's now bring this home, into our marriages, our relationships. Some marriages are hurting; many marriages are STUCK in old patterns of communication, in unhealthy actions towards each other. Husbands and wives, over time, just stop growing well together, in Christ. I want to give you three levels of practical encouragement, and you can self-select as you choose: Level 101 – the Love Languages. Level 202 – Love and Respect. And Level 303 – the model of transparency.

Level 101. In his *Love Languages* book, Gary Chapman says that you've got to find out what your spouse's primary love language is, and

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do all you can to communicate this love to your spouse. What is the love language that fills up your spouse's tank? There are five basic love languages that Chapman describes: Words of Affirmation, Quality Time, Receiving Gifts, Acts of Service and, Physical Touch. I know of a husband who signed up for the "Bouquet of the Month" club, who has flowers delivered to his wife every month, always with a card attached, filled with genuine Words of Affirmation for who she is in his life. I know a woman who goes out on the hiking trails with her husband, because she knows it's the kind of Quality Time he enjoys. Find out what your spouse's primary love language is and fill up his/her tank!

Level 202. In verse 33, Paul ends his instruction on marriage by saying, "Wives, RESPECT your husbands; husbands, LOVE your wives." So Emerson Eggerichs wrote a book about this, called *Love & Respect: The Love She Most Desires & The Respect He Desperately Needs*. For Eggerichs, a husband and a wife are growing together when they are both making a conscious, prayerful, daily DECISION to respect and to love one another, even when it's hard to do so. Decide every day, by God's grace and power, through prayer, to submit to Christ. Submit to Christ, who

can give you the will to give her the love she most desires, and to give him the respect he desperately needs.

Level 303. Model of Transparency. In verse 31, Paul references the very first wedding, there in Genesis. With joy, God places Adam and Eve in the garden, and joins them together as "one flesh." They are in "full partnership," they are "naked together without shame." This "nakedness" imagery is not so much about not having any clothes on. It is about living in "transparency" with one another, emotionally, behaviorally, spiritually. It is a husband and wife, compelled by love, not holding back anything from the other. It is extending grace when the other makes a mistake. It's about confessing our weaknesses, asking for prayer, sharing with each other our fears, our desires, our hopes. It is building up your spouse to become the disciple Christ is calling him/her to be.

Like you on your wedding day, Connie and I could not have known all the "joys and sorrows" that would come over our 22 years of marriage. The births of our two daughters; the sad deaths of beloved family members. "In sickness and health, in plenty and in want." Really? Who would have known it would be five years of infertility for us, longing for children; or my battle with

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Stage 4 cancer, and surviving a bone marrow transplant?

These were moments of feeling out of control, powerless. A major struggle with one of your children; unexpected job loss; a sudden diagnosis; caring for an aging parent – these are moments when we realize that our lives are in God’s hands. We and our marriages are fully dependent on God. Our marriages need Christ at the center. William Barclay wrote that, “In Christian marriage there are not two partners, but three – and the third is Christ.” King Solomon, in Ecclesiastes, writes that “A threefold cord is not quickly broken” (4:12).

It is easy to acknowledge Christ and to thank Him when things are going well. But when things are not going all that well, we sometimes forget who is there for us, who is available to us, who is with us. When we are struggling to forgive, we can call on Jesus. When we are struggling to keep on loving our spouses, we can call on Christ. We can ask for HIS filling. We can ask for God’s grace and love to allow us to start over again. We need the binding strength of a THREE-FOLD CORD. We need our THIRD PARTNER. Our day-today marriages (our lives’ relationships) will be more Christ-like if we live as if Christ is truly always with us.

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