

God's New Society

Message 10

Marriage in God's Society

Ephesians 5:22-33

Submission

Tonight we are going to discuss a revolting subject – so brace yourselves. Some of you already bristled when we read the first words of this passage, and others of you have so hardened yourselves to this scripture that its impact was blunted. For educated 21st century Americans, the words “wives submit” grate against our sensibilities. Our imaginations are inflamed with sordid images of women being ordered around by lazy, domineering men who force women to accept demeaning positions while they enjoy the privileges of power.

The idea of female submission is so repulsive, we have created numerous ways of dealing with it. Unbelievers, of course, can simply reject God's word. Although God has equal claim on all men and women, unbelievers have made a life-long career of rejecting God, and they just apply this tactic to this scripture. Christians have a harder time, for belief in God's word is integral to the Christian faith. Some Christians decide that this passage is not really part of God's word, so they feel better about ignoring it. This tactic has been in play since Marcion in the second century excised all of the scripture but parts of the gospels as inauthentic. Other Christians accept this passage as God's word, but marginalize it by deciding it applies only to the culture to which Paul wrote. They say that Paul had no other choice but to teach this way since the whole world was patriarchal, but now that we are enlightened it would be wrong of us to continue this way. This reasoning founders upon the observation that Paul never flinched from attacking the prevailing culture when it violated God's word. The sexual practices Paul called shameful and unfruitful were common among the Greeks of his day. Paul nevertheless prohibited in the strongest terms Christians from participating in them. The most subtle way of blunting the force of Paul's teaching is to accept it on the surface, but redefine the terms. This tactic gains strength by enfolding the teaching about marriage into the previous paragraph.

Some of our Bibles have a paragraph break after verse 21. The new paragraph begins, “Wives, submit to your own husbands...” Other Bibles break the paragraph after verse 20. The new paragraph begins, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” The intention here is to make the submission of wives part of a larger teaching on submission in general. Wives are not singled out for special treatment because submission is required of us all. Now it is true that submission is required of us all, but that general attitude of mutual submission is not what is required of wives. A simple observation of the grammar of the text makes this clear. Verses 18 to 21 are one sentence. Verse 18 contains a prohibition (do not be drunk with wine) and a command (be filled with the spirit). The following verses contain three participial phrases – speaking, giving, and submitting – which modify the command to be filled with the spirit. The New King James Version and the English Standard Version render these faithfully, but the New International Version obscures the Greek text. In a culture where ecstatic experiences – often including drunkenness and sex – were part of religious life, Paul commands Christians to live differently. Drunken revelry is not part of worship. Do not be filled with alcoholic spirits, but be filled with the Holy Spirit. When you are filled with the Holy Spirit you will speak to each other in worship, give thanks to God, and submit to each other. This is all part of the work of the Spirit as He fills us and makes us into new people. Next Paul tells us how to submit in various roles – as wives in this paragraph, as children in 6:1-4, and as servants in 6:5-9.

Wives Submit

Returning now to tonight's passage, we are stuck with a teaching which is unavoidably patriarchal. Unless you are prepared to abandon Jesus or do violence to His words, you cannot escape the reality of wifely submission. But before we proceed any further, let us first dispel the most grievous myths about

submission. First, submission is not demeaning. Jesus, who is fully God and equal in glory with the Father, submits to the Father. In John 5:19 Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner.” Likewise the Holy Spirit submits to the Father and the Son, even though He is as divine as they. In fact, if the Son and Spirit live in submission, then submission must be a glorious thing!

Second, submission does imply lesser value. Creation has no inherent value – its worth is assigned by God. The universe is valuable because God made it and declared it good. Man also is valuable because He was made by God who declared him very good. This applies equally to both sexes. Man’s value is further established because God redeemed him from sin. Since that redemption was accomplished by the death of the Son of God, we might say that man has divine worth. This is true whether he is male or female, young or old, wise or foolish, beautiful or ugly, healthy or sick – and his role in society has nothing to do with man’s value.

Third, submission is not necessarily related to ability. God has established headship in family, church, and state – and we pray that those over us are capable of their tasks. But we all know that this is not always the case. Some of you may think one of your professors is unqualified, but that does not give you license to skip the exam. Half the U.S. thought Bill Clinton was an idiot and the other half thinks the same about George Bush – but those opinions do not relieve anyone of the obligation to submit to the government. A woman may be a better leader than her husband, but that is irrelevant in deciding who is head of their home.

Fourth, submission in the family is not arbitrary, but is established in the creation. Some people try to get God off the hook by arguing that the submission of a wife implies nothing about her ability. But someone has to be in charge and, aw shucks, let’s just keep things simple and let the man do it. This is nonsense. God tells us without any ambiguity that He created woman to help man. Rule over the creation was given to all mankind, but the special role of the woman is to help her husband in subduing the earth. Now lest you bristle at this, note that the word God used for woman’s role as “helper” is the same word God used for Himself as Israel’s helper. Creation establishes male headship, but says nothing about the value or dignity of either sex.

The fifth myth about submission is that it consists of groveling before a superior power. Some have cast the role of the wife as a robot whose only responsibility is to hear and obey the voice of her husband. This also is nonsense. Using creation imagery, if Adam was created king, then Eve was created queen. She was not created a slave. Jesus, who submits to the Father, holds conversations with the Father. Think of the prayer in the garden. Jesus did what the Father required, but they had a talk about it first. Submission does not exclude good conversation, or even debate. In fact, the better the relationship is, the more discussion there will be. Think also of Moses, who with one exception obeyed God. Yet when God proposed destroying the whole nation of Israel, Moses argued vigorously against the idea.

Sixth, some people get on the other side of this issue and construe submission as nothing more than respect. The fact that this passage ends with the command that wives respect their husbands adds weight to this thought. They consider that if a woman listens politely to her husband and gives due weight to what he says, she may do as she thinks best. If he refuses to listen to reason, she may even be obligated to follow her own conclusion. Rubbish! Now if her husband is involving her in illegal activity, she should go to the authorities. But apart from extreme cases, her husband does have the last word.

Having dismissed these myths about submission, what is the positive teaching? First, let’s return to the garden for a moment. Eve was created a glorious being. Adam was stunned when he saw her. She was no mindless bimbo, nor an ambitious career woman, nor a dumpy baby factory. She was queen of the world!

What else could she want? Only malicious ambition would cause her to seek to usurp Adam's position as king. Of course, this is partly how Satan appealed to her and led her into sin. And when Eve attempted to overthrow God's rule, she also brought upon herself all the evils that accompany submission in a sinful world. By rebelling against God's lordship, she made her husband's lordship oppressive. But this is not the ideal, and in Christ we reverse the effects of the fall. The woman in Christ grows into a glorious being who radiates divine brilliance.

The Christian woman is queen in her household. She serves her husband-king by making her home a glorious palace befitting royalty. She may be poor, but she will make the most of what she has and everyone will praise her for her godly qualities.

Second, let's look more closely at tonight's passage. Submission consists of obedience, just as the church is obedient to Christ. Verse 24 says, "Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything." What is a woman's relationship to her husband? The same as the church's relationship to Christ. What is she supposed to obey? Everything. Am I out of my mind? Can I possibly be saying this? Well, let's read verse 24 again. "Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything." Is this too harsh for you? If so, you need to duke it out with God. But leave me out of it. I'm just preaching God's word for Him. You argue with Him about it.

I do want to emphasize two important qualifications I already mentioned. Obedience does not exclude discussion. The husband has the last word, but in a good marriage there will ordinarily be many words before the last one. And obedience does not require illegal activity. If your husband becomes involved in such things, you should report him to the authorities.

Husbands Love

Now if you think Paul's words to women are rough, his words to men are worse. I will spend less time on this part – not because it is less important, but because it is less confusing. But the man's role is far more difficult.

First let's dispel another modern misunderstanding, the myth about headship. Some recent scholars have tried to show that the Greek word for head, κεφαλη, actually means source. Thus Paul is not saying that man has a superior position over woman, but that he is her source. This is a problem just in terms of the meaning of this passage. How exactly is man the source of woman when he comes from her womb? But furthermore, this is deceptive of the use of the Greek word. It is true that κεφαλη can mean source in rare instances, but it is not possible to use it in that sense here. This is an example of twisting the scripture to fit one's own biases. It would be more honest simply to admit one refuses to accept this teaching.

Head means being in charge, the same way Jesus is in charge. Jesus is not our buddy – He is Lord! This is the confession which sent thousands to the lions. Similarly, a man is lord of his household. He is not perfect, as Christ is. He makes mistakes and sins – but he is nevertheless the lord of his house. But Paul does not dwell on this point, because it is well-established. Paul emphasizes that the man's role is to love his wife. Now I think we all, at first glance, think this is a pretty soft order compared to the woman's tall order to obey her husband. But just as the woman must obey *as* the church obeys Christ – the man must love his wife *as* Christ loves the church.

We're not talking about roses on Valentine's Day here. The love required of a husband goes far beyond providing for his family, faithfulness to his wife, and remembering their anniversary – although it includes those things. Our concept of love is so impoverished, we miss the force of this command. It is shameful that we take our image of love from such places as the movie Titanic, where Leonardo lures Kate

Winslet away from a good man to whom she is engaged because he cannot control his hormones. However romantic such movies seem, this is not love. This is lust. If you want to find love in the movies, Humphrey Bogart provides a better example in *Casablanca*, where he denies himself the pleasure of romance out of love for Ingrid Bergman.

What love is required of a husband? The self-giving love of Christ. A man who would marry a woman must be prepared to give up everything for her – including his life. I think some of you here would willingly die for your beloved, but the tougher question is, will you live for her. Will you live a daily death to yourself to glorify your wife? Or will you cling to your other loves? Will your love for your wife be shared with your love for computer games, or hunting, or sports, or cars? Are you prepared, right now to face the rest of your life *never* doing the things you love most because your love for a woman demolishes those other loves? No, I don't think you are. You delight at the thought of a woman serving you, and you are willing to serve her in return, but only to a point. You are unwilling to die a daily death for your wife.

Marriage in America is in shambles. The divorce rate is astronomical. Men and women selfishly pursue individual careers and dump the children into someone else's care. There was at time, in the 1950's, when there was an ideal image of marriage. Men worked to provide for their families and women kept house for the family. Then the feminist movement took root in our society. Gloria Friedan wrote in *The Feminine Mystique* that woman needs man as much as a fish needs a bicycle, and women began to see themselves as suppressed. Women began to seek their own careers, to run for political office, and develop their own identity. They began to be ashamed of their husband's name, and adopted the newly invented title Ms. The children were left to fend for themselves, and the family began to disintegrate.

But that is a false picture of what happened. The vital missing piece is the selfish indulgence of the men. Men would work all day and come home to be waited on by their wives. The problem is their wives had been working all day, too. And when the baby boomers were growing up, the men indulged the kids and refused to train them in disciplined living. The feminist movement has succeeded because men wanted it to succeed. They quickly grasped that a second income would make possible a larger house, two or more cars, better vacations, etc. And remember, the man is the head. Men in America have colossally abandoned their role as head of their homes, and they are responsible for the family disasters we see everywhere. Men refused to die for their wives, and in living for themselves they killed their families.

The hardest part of this passage is for men to love their wives like Christ loves the church. Men, this is your calling.

Submission and Love in Practice

As we consider how to apply this teaching, we need to remember that God calls you to obey Him. God has not called you to make others obey Him. If your husband is giving faint love, it is not the wife's business to correct him. If the wife is giving poor obedience, it is not the husband's job to force her to comply. Each must obey God and let Him work on the spouse in His own time and way.

Some families are a wreck because men refuse to love their wives to the death. Some families are a wreck because women refuse to obey their husbands like the church obeys Christ. Most wrecked families suffer failure by both husband and wife. But even good families often fail to live up to the calling of God. Christian men and women are sorely tempted to enter a devil's pact with each other. He agrees to require little submission and she agrees to settle for little love. Neither wants to live fully for Christ, so they encourage each other in their sin.

Let me solemnly assure you that no one can live by Paul's teaching here. That is one reason this passage is so maligned by Christians and non-Christians alike. The ideals are impossibly high by them-

selves, but if Christ is the standard of obedience and love, how can anyone hope to measure up? So what will you do? Will you give up and get what little pleasure you can from this broken world? Will you settle for cheap sex and trashy toys, and hope for a painless entrance into heaven? I hope not. God would not have given these commands if they were totally impossible. True, sin drags us down from time to time, but the promise of God is that He is sanctifying us. Verse 27 reminds us that Jesus is making us holy, clean, and glorious. He will do this to our marriages and families, too. Life has its ups and downs, but in Jesus the overall trajectory is upward.

On your own you cannot live by this teaching, but then we are not called to live on our own anyway. God calls us to live by faith. Faith is trusting in the unseen. Perhaps you come from a broken home. Perhaps you have experienced fractured loves. Perhaps you don't believe you can live the way Paul teaches. That's OK. Don't bother believing in yourself. Believe in Jesus. Keep your focus on Him, obey his word, and He will guide you into obedience. Then you, your spouse, and your children will become increasingly holy, pure, and glorious.

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