



ephesians

a church becoming

Sunday, January 26, 2025

Ephesians 5:21-33

If you were with us last week, we started walking through the second last chapter of Ephesians - chapter 5 - where Paul reminded us that we are to continually strive to be filled with the Spirit and to live lives where we are pouring out so that we can be filled back up. Paul compared and contrasted life in the Spirit with life in the world by using the example of being drunk with wine. His point being that no matter what you fill yourself up with in the world, it will never really fill - only the Holy Spirit fills - everything else leaves you directionless. So just as a plant leans into the sun for strength, we too need to lean into Christ for our strength as well. As we step into the last part of this chapter, Paul continues under the banner of being filled with the Spirit, and now gives instruction to husbands and wives on how they are to live and operate accordingly.

Ephesians 5:22-33

22 Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. 23 For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. 24 Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, 26 that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, 27 that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. 28 So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. 29 For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. 30 For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. 31 "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." 32 This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church. 33 Nevertheless let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

In my Bible, this section is entitled, 'Marriage - Christ and the Church.' In fact, in all translations,

this section is entitled something along those lines. Now, I'm not sure what translation you use, but the NKJV - which is what I like to use - starts this section in verse 22 with a bold instruction from Paul instructing wives to submit to their husbands. Paul then goes on to give equally clear instruction to husbands on how they are to love and honour their wives. He then concludes by using marriage as a metaphor for how Christians should view their relationship with Christ.

Here's what I find particularly interesting - and what I think changes the reading of this passage. If you were following along and using a different translation, you may have noticed that not all translations begin this section with verse 22. Some include verse 21 as the start of this section instead:

'...submitting to one another in the fear of God.' Wives submit to your husbands....husbands love your wives...

This is significant because if you look at the full context, verse 21 doesn't really seem to fit as a conclusion to the previous section about walking in the light and leaning into Jesus. Instead, it functions far better as an introduction to Paul's teaching on marriage. It's as if Paul is saying that before discussing the specific roles within marriage, there's a foundational principle to acknowledge: mutual submission.

And when this kind of mutual submission is in place, it creates the framework for everything else to naturally flow. As, husbands and wives, we are not called to compete for authority, power or dominance but to serve one another in love, respecting our God-given roles within our relationship.

Paul grounds this mutual submission now, in the fear of God. The Greek word 'phobos' - used here for fear - means reverence though, not dread or terror. Paul is saying that our submission to one another stems from our ultimate accountability to God and our awe of His authority and holiness. This reverence for God becomes the bedrock for Paul's entire teaching on marriage. Husbands and wives are not called to submit to each other based on cultural norms or personal preferences but as an act of worship, reflecting Christ's love and humility.

So, when Paul then instructs wives to submit to their husbands, he's not introducing a new concept here. He's expanding on the broader principle of mutual submission.

Now, before diving into the specifics, we need to understand how revolutionary Paul's teaching was in its cultural context. At first glance, it might seem like Paul is promoting a chauvinistic view of marriage, but in reality, his teaching was directly challenging the societal norms of his day. Ad-

dressing women directly in a public letter was unheard of. In the first-century context, men didn't speak to women directly - especially married women. Instead, communication went through their husbands or fathers. Remember when Jesus spoke to the woman at the well? The shock wasn't just in what He said but in the fact that He spoke to her at all.

You see, in the first century, Jewish culture treated women as second-class citizens, if that. It was a highly patriarchal society where women were often denied a voice or opinion and viewed as objects. Bible expositor William Barclay says: 'The Jews had a low view of women. In the Jewish form of the morning prayer there was a sentence in which a Jewish man every morning gave thanks that God had not made him 'a Gentile, a slave or a woman.' In Jewish law women had no legal rights and were entirely subject to their husbands' will. So again, by addressing women directly, Paul was effectively going against the societal norms of the day by elevating their status and reaffirming their worth in Christ.

But, what I want you to see is that Paul's message wasn't solely intended for the women - it also sent an indirect, yet powerful message to the men in that culture of what they were doing wrong.

Think about it: in the cultural context of the day, women were already living in abject submission to their husbands. So why would Paul feel the need to reinforce something that was already in practice? It seems redundant - unless however, Paul's call to submission was radically different from the domineering, hierarchical submission that they were accustomed to.

Here's where it gets interesting: the Greek word that Paul uses for mutual submission in verse 21 is the same word he now uses to describe how wives should interact with their husbands - *hypotassō*. According to Strong's Dictionary, in this context *hypotassō* means: 'a voluntary attitude of cooperating, assuming responsibility, and carrying a burden.'

This distinction is crucial. By using *hypotassō*, Paul is emphasizing the voluntary, supportive nature of submission rather than something forced or oppressive. He's pointing to a form of submission that undergirds and strengthens, rather than one that devalues or diminishes. And Paul makes it clear that this new kind of submission is something that is to be shared between both husband and wife as he clearly states in verse 21.

So why does Paul feel it necessary to address wives again in verse 22? I think Paul is doubling down on this new, Christ-like form of submission - *hypotassō*. By using that specific word again, he's offering a subtle yet powerful reminder to everyone listening, both husbands and wives, that there is

a godly and correct way to submit, as well as an ungodly and harmful way. Paul repeats himself here to ensure that there is no misunderstanding about the type of submission he's calling for - one that mirrors the love and humility of Christ.

Paul is redefining marriage in a way that was absolutely revolutionary for the first century. To be clear, this wasn't Paul conforming to the cultural norms of the day - it was Paul restoring God's original design for marriage: a partnership of mutual respect, love, and cooperation. He was bringing it back to how marriage was meant to be from the very beginning when God created Adam and Eve with the intent to guard and steward the garden together.

Genesis 2:18

'And the Lord God said, "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him."

The English term helper here doesn't fully capture the weight of the instruction. In our culture, we often view the term helper as a subordinate or secondary role: kind of child-like if we're being honest. But that's not the intent of the Scripture. The word helper in the Hebrew is ezer. Author Darrell Johnson highlights the significance of this word:

'Ezer means "one who comes to the aid of someone in need." When it is used of God; God comes to us who are in need. Kenneth Bailey who has spent his whole adult life studying and teaching the Bible in the Middle-East, says of the word "ezer", it "does not refer to a lowly assistant to the boss, but rather refers to a powerful figure who comes to help or save someone who is in trouble and cannot manage alone." Bailey continues "When you really think about it, women are placed by God on the human scene as the strong who come to help the weak (i.e. men)." How about that for dignity? Male-humans simply cannot make it without female humans. And history bears this out over and over.'

Clearly, the creation of Eve as ezer to Adam was in no way a subordinate role. While Kenneth Bailey's point is both witty and insightful, I think we need to be careful that in elevating the rightful role of women to equality, we aren't inadvertently devaluing the role of men. That's not how equality in the kingdom of God works. Yes, it's true that Adam was incomplete and incapable of fulfilling the mission God had entrusted to him on his own. But let me be very clear: Eve's role as ezer wasn't about helping Adam fulfill his personal calling. Framing it that way would not only diminish her purpose but also reduce his role, making it seem as though her existence revolved solely around him and his shortcomings. This perspective risks portraying the woman with a saviour-type role and the

man as inept - neither of which align with God's design.

Instead, the role of ezer is fundamentally about partnering together to fulfill God's calling - a calling given equally to both Adam and Eve because neither could accomplish it alone. Notice that when God created Adam and entrusted him with the stewardship of the earth, He then saw that it was not good for Adam to be alone. Eve was created, not to replace him and take over the task, but to share in it. For if the call was too great for Adam alone, it would have been too great for Eve alone. The mission required them both.

This is why Paul uses the analogy of a head and a body in Ephesians - not to imply levels of importance but to illustrate their essential interdependence. How long do you think a headless body can survive? Or a head without a body? Neither can fulfill its purpose on its own. The head and body are equally important as each is dependant upon the other for survival. It is only in this partnership - rooted in mutual submission - that God's purposes can truly be fulfilled.

Using this picture of marriage, Paul now shows how a healthy marital relationship mirrors God's relationship with His church. However, some may find it challenging to read Paul's analogy of husbands as the head and wives as the body, particularly because Christ, as the head, is clearly positioned in authority over the church. So does this mean that the husband should exhibit the same authority over his wife?

There are two things that I want to show you here:

First, when Paul says that the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, we must keep Christ's character in mind. Christ (as husband) has already submitted Himself to the church, by suffering for the church, by giving His life for the church, by covering the debt of sin for the church. As head, Jesus has always lead with submission and sacrificial love. Thus, when wives are told to submit to their husbands, it is framed as a response to the submission that should already characterize the husband's role. This is why Paul's specific instruction to husbands is to love their wives. While wives are called to submit, husbands are called to submit specifically through sacrificial love - a deeply profound challenge!

Second, when Paul uses the term head (the Greek word *kephalē*), it carries a dual meaning: it can signify authority, but it also signifies the source of life. In the relationship between Christ and the church, it's easy to see how He is both the authority and the source of life. Because Paul's teaching on mutual submission in verse 21 undergirds this entire passage though, the idea of 'authority' in this

context should be carefully considered. While Christ's authority over the church is absolute, this aspect of the imagery does not seem to cross directly into the husband-wife relationship. Christ, as the head, exists independently of the church and does not need the church to fulfill His mission. However, in marriage, husbands and wives are entirely interdependent, needing one another equally to fulfill God's design. This interdependence is seen in the 'one flesh' relationship established in Genesis - hence Paul's mention of it now in this section.

This reframes headship as a call to embody Christ's humility and selflessness, reflecting mutual dependence rather than dominance. It should challenge every husband to ask: Am I reflecting Christ's love in how I serve and lead? And every wife to ask: Does my submission flow from a heart that is aligned with Christ? Together, this mutual submission becomes a witness to the world of God's love and design for marriage.

When husbands and wives embody this Christ-like mutual submission, their marriage becomes a powerful witness to God's love and design for humanity - a beacon of grace in a world that desperately needs it.

It's important to note that Paul does not say that the husband is the sole or even primary decision-maker. He does not say that the husband is in charge of the family finances. He does not say that the wife's place is to be in the home while the husband's place is to be the sole breadwinner. And he certainly isn't saying that the spiritual vitality of the home is the sole responsibility of the husband...or the wife. While there may be general patterns or tendencies in how couples divide responsibilities, each marriage is unique. Couples should work together to determine how best to fulfill their roles in a way that honours God and serves their family best.

Marriages function best when both partners contribute their strengths, abilities, and resources for the overall benefit of the family. This can involve sharing decision-making, household chores, parenting responsibilities, and spiritual leadership. Open communication, mutual respect, and a willingness to support and serve one another are vital in navigating these shared roles and responsibilities.

Jesus told His disciples that the greatest ones in His kingdom are those who live to serve others. He said that He himself did not come to be served, but to serve and give His life as a ransom for many. In John 13, Jesus stooped to humbly wash the feet of his own disciples. And in an ultimate act of love and sacrifice, Jesus became a slave for us, dying a criminal's death on the cross to save us.

Ultimately, mutual submission is one of the practices that ought to define the relationship between

husband and wife. Because it's only when that is in place that we can learn to live supporting each other in the great call that God has placed on each of us to be bearers of His image.

And when husbands and wives walk in mutual submission, filled with the Spirit, they not only fulfill their God-given roles but also reflect the beauty of Christ's relationship with His church - a picture that draws others to His glory.

2 Points to consider:

Equality between husbands and wives in a marriage covenant is crucial. And even before Paul's instruction to submit to one another, this idea is underscored by his instruction in verse 18 to be filled with the Spirit. Paul compares and contrasts this with being drunk with wine as we learned last week, which represents being filled with the world. So maybe the first question that we all have to ask ourselves here today is are we living a life where we are continually being filled with the Spirit or we allowing ourselves to be filled with the world. Because let me tell you something. If you are stuck in the world, then Biblical submission is an impossibility for you. However, if you are filled with the Spirit and empowered by the Spirit, then Biblical submission is a thing of beauty.

As husbands and wives, we all place some level of expectation on our spouse. Sometimes those expectations are completely realistic and sometimes we place unrealistic expectations on our spouses. Some of you as husbands and wives need to sit down together and talk through these expectations, roles and responsibilities according to your family needs, individual gifting, talents and abilities. What can it look like to lead together in the home? Jordan and I aren't perfect, but I think we are learning to do this well.

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