

December 10, 2023

THE GLORIOUS MYSTERY OF MARRIAGE—PART 2
(13 of 16 in a series through Ephesians)

This morning we're concluding a two-part sermon on Ephesians 5:22-33, so I thought it best to start like a television show does when the storyline has been continued across multiple episodes. That is, I'll give a "previously on 'The Glorious Mystery of Marriage'" recap for us. Last week as we looked at this text we first noted the intentional and divine design and purpose of marriage, saying that God made marriage to be a picture to the world of the relationship between Jesus Christ and his church. Moreover, because marriage has this purpose the man and the woman have specific roles to fill. The husband is to picture Jesus Christ toward his church in how he relates to his wife, and the wife is to picture the church toward Jesus in how she relates to her husband. Then, I noted that the Scripture states that the husband is the head of his wife as Christ is the head of the church and noted a couple of ways that can be carried out sinfully and foolishly before noting what is demanded of the husband of the head of his wife. Specifically I stated (in light in verses 25-27) that men should lead their homes by ensuring that the Word is faithfully believed and obeyed, pursuing the holiness of their wives in sacrificial love, to the point of being willing to die for them. In other words, the husband is tasked with leading his wife toward a beautiful holiness through holding up the Word before her and sacrificially loving her. And, finally, I noted that this week we'd add some details to the role of husbands and then move on to the role the Scripture gives to wives. So that's what we're going to do this morning.

If we're told that the husband leads his wife by laboring to ensure she believes and obeys the Word, pursuing their holiness in sacrificial love, to the point of being willing to die for them, what does that look like? Well, obviously there will be a need to hold up the Scripture in your home. You simply cannot be said to love someone if you don't want that other person to believe and obey the Bible. And so the husband must do this in his home. However, when Paul fleshes out the details of the husband's headship, he doesn't paint a picture of a man bossing his wife around. Rather, he provides an image of the husband picturing Jesus to his wife, loving her in tenderness. We can say it this way:

The husband must picture Jesus to his wife, nourishing and cherishing her in tenderness, so that she knows he loves her even as he loves himself.

Let me show this to you in the text. We know from verses 25-27 that the husband's key means of being a head of his wife as Christ is the head of the church is found in loving her. Paul's main charge to husbands is that we love our wives as Christ loved the church and laid down his life for her in order to present her beautifully holy. That's why we noted this last week. But after noting how Christ loves the church in those verses, Paul continues in verses 28-30, saying, "In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body."

So what is key for us as husbands here, men, is that we're to be a picture of Jesus toward our wives. And when we consider Jesus, we should remember that he came not to be served but to serve. He came to lay down his life for us. He came to make us holy at great cost to himself. That's the orientation that the wife must see from her husband. She must see that he is bent toward serving her and sacrificing himself and his desires so that she might become more beautifully holy.

The words Paul uses are nourish and cherish. The idea of nourishing is to feed her, care for her, and do everything necessary for her to blossom into the woman God has made her to be. The idea of cherishing is often used to connote the idea of keeping another warm.¹ Perhaps we can imagine a hen keeping her chicks warm under her wings—which is, interestingly, the picture of how Jesus says he would have been toward Jerusalem had those within believed (Matt 23:37). You can see that the picture is of tenderly caring for her and loving her, even as you would your own body. Paul notes that no one hates his own flesh but instead you feed yourself and care for yourself, and so you tenderly care for and sacrificially love your wife.

Men, our wives must feel loved, cherished, and tenderly cared for by us, even as we see Christ caring for us in the same way. I once heard a story of a man who saw his wife beginning to drift from holiness, and he simply decided that he would double-down on making sure she saw that she was tenderly loved by him, and she began to pursue more beautifying holiness in response. Brothers, our wives are given to us by our Heavenly Father in order that we might beautify them in holiness, and this means that as we hold up the Word in our home, we draw our wives toward it by drawing them to us in tenderly loving them, making sure that they know they are cherished and cared for and exalted above ourselves. Perhaps we might picture this with an image of a man holding up the Scriptures high with one hand, leading his wife toward that Word, while embracing her warmly with the other, ensuring she feels treasured and cherished, wooing her toward himself and God's Word.

And by being charged to love and nourish and cherish them, the Lord reminds us that we do not treat them as we do other men. Again, they must know they are treasured and cherished, even as we are treasured and cherished by our Lord. And in this way, we may picture Jesus. In fact, let me end this section on husbands with this note. All of us may well find ourselves struggling at times to believe the Lord really loves us. Ephesians has been good for that, reminding us of the limitless dimensions of God's love for us. But every wife married to a Christian husband should have a scriptural reminder of this—as we've seen in Ephesians—and a personal reminder in their husbands. As we love, we remind them of Jesus' love for them. What an honor and privilege.

But clearly men aren't the only ones addressed in this text. Wives too play an essential role in ensuring that the marriage relationship paints an accurate picture of the relationship between Jesus and his church. She is to be a picture of the church toward Christ in how she walks with her husband. In short, we may say this:

¹ Clinton Arnold, *Ephesians*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 392.

The wife is to picture the church toward Christ by submitting to her husband's leadership and respecting him.

The text begins with an exhortation to wives, saying, "Wives, submit to your own husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church" (vv. 22-23a). Then, he repeats this charge in verse 24, writing, "Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands."

Now notice first that the wife's charge to submit to her husband is built upon the reality that she recognizes his headship. Wives, Paul says, submit to your husbands, *for* the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church. Wives must not come into marriage thinking they are competing with their husband for leadership in the home. The Lord has given the home a specific design where the man is to portray Christ toward the church, and it is the wife's task to picture the relationship of the church toward Christ.

Therefore, Paul calls her to submit to her husband. This means, then, that your heart is bent toward following your husband's lead. When he attempts to lead, you are not bent toward resistance but eager to follow. Now, this does not mean that you do not share your heart with him. Of course you do. You know that you are his helper, and failure to let him know your heart would be a failure to be his helper. The Lord has given you to him for his good. Don't deprive him of the good gift that you are.

But this doesn't mean that if he hears you're heart and believes you all must take a different path, then you should keep reminding him that he is out of step with your desires. That would be to be a nagging wife, which Scripture compares to something like a dripping faucet (Prov 27:15). The call here is to submit.

I remember years ago getting a call from a sister in Christ (who is not a member of our church) asking that I talk to her husband and help him because he wasn't leading. I decided it best to ask them to be put on speaker phone so that I could talk back and forth with each of them. And soon into that conversation I realized that she had not diagnosed the problem accurately at all. He actually had a clear vision for how they should proceed in a situation and was spelling it out in such a way as to leave no doubt. The problem is that his wife didn't think it was the best path for them to take, and she was only willing to follow his lead if he was leading in the way she thought they should go. Therefore, I noted that their problem didn't lie in his failure to lead but in her failure to follow. It is simply not submission if you will follow your husband only if he makes every decision that you would make if you were in his shoes. And, wives, to push against this constantly is to rob yourself of the opportunity to be cared for, cherished, and loved.

I do, however, want to note two qualifiers here on submission that are crucial. First, wives, you never submit to your husband when he is asking you to sin. I've mentioned before that no human can ever be your ultimate authority; only God has that role. And when your husband is asking you to disobey God, then you submit to God and not to your husband. If he asks you to

watch pornography, or share with him in doing illegal drugs, or the like, your answer is, “I must obey God rather than man.” But in areas which are not sin, he needs to know that your heart is to follow him.

Also, somewhat connected to that previous qualifier—and this one is crucial for all of us to hear—wives, the call to submit to your husband doesn’t alleviate the responsibility of you being his sister in Christ. Here’s what I mean, the Bible commands us as brothers and sisters in Christ to love one another to the point that if your brother is walking in unrepentant sin, you confront him. If he repents, you rejoice and keep his sin to yourself. But if he won’t repent, then you call in two other witnesses who will join you in calling for his repentance. And if he still doesn’t repent, we will tell it to the church in hopes that he’ll then repent. And if not, this professing brother is removed from the church as one who does not give evidence that he knows Christ.

Wives, your call to submission does not alleviate you of your responsibility to obey your Lord in this way toward your husband. If he is in unrepentant sin, you must confront him. If he won’t repent when confronted (and he is a member of this church), I would encourage you to come to your pastors as those two witnesses who can confront him. Sisters, do not think that you can sit idly by, refusing to address your husband’s lingering, unrepentant sin and think that you are honoring the Lord Jesus Christ in the name of being a submissive wife. You’re actually being disobedient toward your Lord Jesus Christ and not loving your husband as his sister in Christ. And, men, do not think we can command our wives not to obey the Lord Jesus Christ in this way as we’re walking in sin. We do not have the right to tell them not to obey their Lord, Jesus Christ.

And, one more thing here. Wives, I know this can be a challenge, but if you’re hesitant in approaching your husband about his blatant, unrepentant sin because you know you’re called to submit to him, think of the Apostle Paul’s words to the Galatians. Here was an apostle of Jesus Christ, who was responsible to tell Christ’s church what to believe and how to live. And he did. We’re reading one of his letters now, commanding us how to think and act as husbands and wives. And that apostle—whom the Galatian believers had to submit to and obey in order to honor Jesus—told them that if he (or even an angel from heaven) ever told them to believe a gospel contrary to the one that Jesus had delivered through his apostles, then they should not listen to Paul and judge him as being under the judgment of God. He was telling them that no human (or even angelic) authority could ever be their final authority. And so, sisters, don’t write your husband off if he’s walking in unrepentant sin, but don’t ignore his blatant, unrepentant sin either. Rather, love him enough to confront him and if he won’t repent, come talk to your pastors. It is your responsibility toward him in obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Failure to recognize this point has led at times to continuing abuse in marital relationships in the name of being complementarian. That is, in the name of upholding the theological vision that we hold to as a church and what is taught right here in this text, namely, that men are women and not given exactly the same roles in the home but complementary roles in the home. But a man commanding his wife not to address his sin or a woman sitting idly by, refusing to address her husband’s blatant, unrepentant sin and even taking it to the pastors if necessary in the name

of being submissive, is not complementarianism. It's a caricature of Christ's teaching and must not be seen as acceptable. So, husbands, hear your wives if they're confronting your sin as loving you as your sister in Christ. And, wives, if your husband is walking in unrepentant sin and won't hear your call to repent, please come and talk to your pastors.

But let me add another element to the responsibility of wives. There is something even deeper that Paul commands of wives than their submission to their husbands. At the very end of our text Paul seems to be repeating his exhortations. He's summing up, if you will, his exhortations to husbands and wives after noting the glorious nature of marriage in verse 32. And you'd expect him, as you've been following his argument from verses 22-32, to say, "Husbands, love your wives, and wives, submit to your husbands." But he actually says, "However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband" (v. 33).

Sister, your husband needs to know that you respect him. Just as he must show you that you are treasured and cherished by him, he must see that you respect him and esteem him. Just as he must seek to treat you in tenderness, you must seek to build him up and let him know that you respect him. Praise him as he walks in obedience, leading your family well. When you see his strengths, note them. Just as he must not let you ever question whether you are loved, he should not question whether or not you respect him. He should never have to wonder what you think of him. And even when you have to address his sin in obedience to Christ, you do so with a tone of respect—even as he must address you in a tone of tenderness and love.

Also, earlier, I told the story of a man saying that he saw his wife drifting from holiness in some small ways, doubled down on loving her well, and saw her changed. Wives, you have the same opportunity with your husbands. If you see areas where you want to see him grow, the response is not to constantly point out his weaknesses and belittle him but respect him and build him up. And the respect you show him can cause him to rise up in good ways. The very path for your husband growing in respectability may well be you respecting him. So obey the Lord here. He knows what we need.

Now, let me say one final thing on these roles that husbands and wives are to fill. It's no doubt true that there will be occasions, wives, where your husbands are less than respectable. And there will be occasions, husbands, where your wives are less than lovable. And this sets up a scenario where things could go terribly wrong if you start taking your cues from one another's shortcomings. You start treating her harshly because she's not respecting you, and you start treating him with disrespect because he's not loving you well. And if we do that, we'll spiral down to a bad place. So just keep asking yourself what Jesus asks of you—husbands and wives—in this text and obey him.

And, positively, as you each pursue obedience, it'll become easier for a wife to submit to and respect a husband whom she knows loves her and is willing to sacrifice for her. And it'll become easier for a husband to love, cherish, nourish, and be willing to die for a wife whom he knows respects him and submits to him. So let's pursue these realities as believing husbands and wives, and as we do so, it'll honor Christ. But it'll not just honor Christ, it'll be for our good.

I remember the story a former professor of mine told one time of how he boarded a plane, sat by a woman who was a university professor, and when she found out that he was a Baptist preacher, she mocked him relentlessly for what we taught about men and women having different roles in marriage. She couldn't believe, for example, that he taught that wives should submit to their husband. And, finally, after a bit of enduring her ridicule, he turned to her and asked, "Are you married?" She said, "Yes." Then he asked, "Are you happy?" And she began sobbing.

Brothers and sisters, God's ways are always best, so let's not try to be wiser than him. And even when the culture pushes against what we've seen in this text, just remember that their hearts and minds are darkened, and they're going to bed every night with their hearts condemning them. They not only need the truth of the gospel—that Christ lived, died, and was raised—but they need an apologetic, a picture of how God's truth transforms. And we can provide that in our marriages. In the midst of a culture that is growing ever darker and falling apart, let's strive to obey our Lord and live out marriages that portray a relationship that they will be drawn to. And I don't simply mean that they'll be drawn to want marriages like ours—though certainly we hope that will happen. I mean they'll be drawn toward the relationship our marriages picture, that of Christ and his church. In other words, let's allow our marriages to be a constant picture of the gospel to a world that so desperately needs it. And let's now come to the table thanking out Lord for that glorious hope we have in him. Amen.