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The Truth About Our Life in Christ

A Study in the Book of Ephesians

“In Christ” at Home: Husbands and Wives

Ephesians 5:22-33

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Let's imagine that I owned a business, and I was trying to grow my business. I needed to hire more people to work for me, and when I began interviewing people, they asked me some questions. First they asked if they could see a job description, and I said, "Oh, we don't bother with that kind of thing. We just let people do whatever they want to do." "*Well, what would my role be?*" "We don't really worry about roles, we just work that out as we go." "*Can you help me understand the authority structure here—who answers to whom?*" "No, we don't worry about that kind of stuff. We all just do our own thing and it seems to work out in the end." Some of you are probably thinking, *I work for that guy!*

Obviously, that doesn't work well in business. But it is interesting how many people take that same approach to marriage and family. They have no real understanding of what their role is as husband and wife; what they are responsible for; or how they function together to make the marriage work. They just stand at the altar and think, *We're just going to work this out as we go.* But it doesn't tend to work well that way—it creates a lot of conflict and confusion.

I think there is significant confusion in many marriages concerning the biblical roles of a husband and a wife, and I believe there are several reasons for that. One of the main reasons is that we have often confused the traditional roles with the biblical roles. It's not that the traditional roles are right or wrong, but they are not necessarily the biblical roles. So we need to make sure that we distinguish between the two, and understand what God intended as the biblical role for a husband and wife.

Often when I talk to people they indicate a feeling that the biblical roles are restrictive. But I would suggest to you that it is just the opposite; I think they are liberating. So if you think the biblical roles of husband and wife are restrictive, I would suggest that you don't understand them. As we talk about them from Ephesians, I think it will become clearer that they actually liberate—they set us free to be who God has created us to be. It's also important to realize that there's a significant amount of theology that's taught through the biblical roles at home. When those roles are carried out, then God is properly taught to our children at home. But when those roles are ignored, it creates all kinds of confusion, so they do need to be seriously considered.

We will look into Ephesians 5 to see what God has to say about the biblical role for a husband and a wife. But I realize that as soon as I say that, there are many of you here this morning who are not married. So the tendency is to think, *Well, I can kind of check out of this one...give myself a little nap...go home well-rested.* I would encourage you not to do that. There are several reasons, but maybe the main reason is because all of us grow up in a context. We may have had a mother and father who really loved each other, or we may have grown up in a single parent environment, or in a foster home environment, or maybe even in an orphanage. But that still is a context. We all grow up in a context, and from that context we learn things about God. At the time we may not realize we're learning about God, but we are. That's how God has designed it, and that's how He 'has wired us.

Because of that, it's possible we may have grown up in an environment where we learned things about God that aren't true. We may have had a father who didn't really love our mother like Christ loves the church. Or we may have had a mother who didn't really submit to his headship. So we may have learned things about God that aren't really true. Now, here we are 20...30...40... years later, and we're still having trouble entering into an intimate, consistent walk with God, and the reason may be because we hold beliefs about God that aren't true. Holding views about God that aren't correct is often what causes us to struggle being intimate with God.

Having a warped view of God, or believing things about God that aren't really true, is hard to deal with. Because, if you knew it wasn't true, you would correct it. The problem is those beliefs lie in there somewhere, and you're not sure what they are—you're not sure where you're off. One of the things that's even difficult to check is: How do I know if I have beliefs about God that aren't true and correct?

There is a way, I think, to measure that. When you think about your life, is there any area of your life where you hesitate to submit fully and totally that area of your life to God? If there is, then I would suggest to you that you hold a false view of God somewhere along the way. Because, if you accurately understand the character of God, there's nothing within God's character that should cause you to hesitate for a moment to yield everything totally and completely to Him. The reason we often hesitate is because we believe something about God that isn't true. And until we correct that, we're going to hold back. So if you find areas of your life where you say, "You know, I've never really been able to submit this to God," it's probably because you believe something about God that isn't true. And that has to be corrected.

To correct that, it is often necessary to go back and understand what you should have experienced growing up. So you think back and realize, *This is how my father should have treated my mother. This is how my mother should have responded to my father. If that was done correctly, I would have learned about the love of Jesus and I would have learned about obedience to Him.* If those things weren't done correctly, then I may have learned some things that need to be corrected. The only way to correct it is to learn what it *should* have been and go back and think about what you *did* experience. Then you can identify areas that you may want to go back and revisit, because they taught you some things about God that may need to be re-thought. So whether you're married or single, there is still plenty of application in this passage for all of us.

Having said that, let's look at Ephesians 5. Paul has just been talking about Spirit-filled behavior, and the last thing he said in verse 21 is that Spirit-filled behavior causes us to submit to one another in the body of Christ. He says, "be subject to one another in the fear of Christ." Now he's going to take this same idea right into the home. So, really what he is talking about is Spirit-filled behavior between a husband and a wife in a marriage.

In verse 22 Paul gets very specific: "Wives, be subject {*submission is the word*} to your own husbands as to the Lord." Now I realize we have just uttered the "s" word! As soon as that comes up, there are all kinds of baggage that go with that word. The baggage is pretty much from misunderstandings and abuse of this whole concept. I'm going to ask you to do me a favor and pretend that we've never heard this word before. Let's pretend that we've never before read this passage; let's lay aside all the baggage and just redefine it the

way Paul defines it here in this passage. I think that if we understand it correctly, it is not what many people think it is.

You notice in verse 22 that the words *be subject* or *be submissive* are probably in italics in your Bible. That tells you that the Greek word doesn't even show up in verse 22—it's simply inferred from verse 21. Another way of saying that is that it would be impossible to translate verse 22 without verse 21, because the word *submit* comes from verse 21. Paul has forced us to go back to verse 21 in order to interpret verse 22 to make a very significant point.

The point in verse 21 is this: As the church, as Spirit-filled people, we are in submission to one another. I submit to you. You submit to me. Submitting to each other is Spirit-filled behavior. That means in my home I, as the husband, am submissive to my wife, and my wife is submissive to me, because we are part of the body of Christ. So we submit to one another. She has strengths I don't have, and I willingly submit to those. I have strengths that she doesn't have; she willingly submits to those. But you cannot get to verse 22 without going through verse 21, which is saying we mutually submit to one another, and that does include a relationship within marriage.

From there, it gets more specific in verse 22. "Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body." She is submissive to his headship. What does it mean to be the head of the wife? There's really no question that the term means authority. There is a movement today which tries to dismiss the fact that there are roles in a marriage and roles within a church. Their basic argument here would be that the word "head" doesn't mean authority, but that it means source. But there is a problem with that, because there is no evidence that this Greek word ever meant anything but authority. In fact, one Greek scholar studied over 2,300 times when this word shows up both in biblical literature and in extrabiblical literature, and he couldn't find one example of it meaning anything but authority. So it clearly is a reference to authority.

But what is this authority? Does it mean it's the authority to boss around my wife? Does it mean it's the authority to be in charge, and she is supposed to bring me whatever I want? No, that's not what it means at all! One of the best ways to understand this is to go back to verse 21. When we talk about the fact that we, as the church, are mutually submissive to one another, does that mean that there's no authority structure in the church? The answer would be "of course not." Even though we are mutually submissive to one another, there is still an authority structure. Because of my role as the senior pastor, I have been given authority by God to fulfill my responsibility. My responsibility is to shepherd the flock. The Bible tells me that one day, as the shepherd, I will give an account for you...for how I have shepherded you as the flock of Jesus Christ. Because I have that responsibility and will give an account, I've been given the authority to fulfill my responsibility. It would be completely unfair to have that responsibility, but not the authority to carry it out.

The same thing, then, is true in the home. When we talk about headship, we have to understand what the responsibility of the husband is. In the context of mutual submission, we understand that he has, then, been given the authority by God to carry out his responsibility, and we'll define that in just a moment. But it is helpful to understand that there cannot be any hint of inequality in headship. Nor can there be any hint of anything negative in the term headship. Because, in 1 Corinthians 11, Paul says that God the Father is head of God the Son.

As God the Son is head of the man, man is head of the woman. Now there can't be any inequality there, because God the Son isn't less than God the Father. Nor can there even be anything negative in that, because there's nothing negative in the relationship between God the Son and God the Father. It's simply establishing the fact that even in the Trinity there are roles, and so there are roles within the context of the home.

Notice that Paul says the husband is to be the head, as Christ is the head of the church. This isn't new for us. At the end of Ephesians 1, we studied this concept of Christ as the head of the church. When we talked about what a marvelous concept that is, I don't think there was one person who walked out the door and said, "That is such a terrible, negative thing that Christ is head of the church." As a matter of fact, it was just the opposite. We celebrated the marvel that He would be the head of the church. So don't take this anywhere else but in the context of Ephesians. Paul is essentially saying that we have studied for three chapters the marvelous reality that Christ is the head of the church, and all the things he has done for the church in order to redeem her and present her to the Father in all of her glory. He says that just as Christ is head of the church (and that's a very positive thing) then the husband is to represent that same picture in the home. He is to be head of the wife, and it should be as positive in the home as it is in the church.

Then there is a theological reminder in verse 24: "But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything." Paul is saying that the wife is to picture the submission of the church to Christ, as the head of the church, by her willingness to submit herself to her husband in the marriage. So the theological picture—what the wife symbolizes—is the submission of the church to Christ.

That's consistent, then, with the role of the husband, which he begins to define in verse 25: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church..." It would be hard for us to understand how absolutely radical those words were in the first century. Women were not treated honorably by the Greeks, Romans, or Hebrews in the first century. In fact, they were not loved by their husbands, except in a few rare occasions. Just to help you understand, I have a couple of quotes from scholars who talk about the woman's role in the first century culture. One writer says:

What information we do have about women and attitudes toward them paints an *absolutely awful picture*. For example, one writer said women were the worst plague Zeus made. Another said, "The two best days in a woman's life are when someone marries her and when he carries her dead body to the grave." *{That's not terribly encouraging.}* In Judaism women were not counted in the quorum needed for a synagogue and were ritually unclean during menstruation. One rabbi advised, "Do not talk much with a woman." Another added, "Not even with one's wife."

-Klyne Snodgrass, *NIV Application Commentary: Ephesians*

Well, that gives you just a little picture. Another writer, William Barclay, makes these comments:

Under Jewish law a woman was a thing; she was the possession of her husband, just as much as his house or his flocks or his material goods were. She had no legal right whatever. For instance, under Jewish law, a husband could divorce his wife for any cause, while a wife had no rights whatever in the initiation of divorce. In Greek society a respectable woman lived a life of entire seclusion. She never appeared on the streets alone, not even to go marketing. She lived in the women's apartments and did not join her menfolk even for meals. From her there was demanded a complete

servitude and chastity; but her husband could go out as much as he chose, and could enter into as many relationships outside marriage as he liked and incur no stigma. Both under Jewish and under Greek laws and custom, all the privileges belonged to the husband, and all the duties to the wife. — William Barclay

You have to understand that was the mindset of men and women in the first century culture. So when Paul uttered these words, it was absolutely radical to say that husbands should love their wives as Christ loved the church.

I know that there are women today who think Paul was some kind of a woman-hater and that he was oppressive to women. But I want you to know that if you went back to the first century and made those statements, the women would have tarred and feathered you. Because, to them, Paul was a hero and a liberator. He treated them in a way that they had never known before. He demanded that husbands treat wives totally differently than anything they had ever experienced in their culture.

How does a husband love his wife as Christ loves His church, and what did Christ do for His church? He gave Himself up for her. That's what he says in verse 25: "Gave Himself up for her; that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless." The words "holy and blameless" are not new to us. As a matter of fact, they are very strategically placed here. Back in Ephesians 1 we were told that Christ chose us before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and blameless before Him. All through Ephesians, in chapters 1, 2, and 3, we have learned about the marvelous way that Jesus died to save His church; how He has redeemed us, called us, and empowered us with His Spirit; and how He's seated us in the heavenlies. We have seen all the marvelous ways that He has done whatever was necessary in order to create an environment where the church could flourish spiritually, so that He could present her to Himself holy and blameless before Him.

When you understand that picture, you then understand that is the role of the husband. I am to present my wife one day before the Father, in an act of worship, and she is to be spiritually all that He intended her to be. I will present her to Him in all of her glory—holy and blameless. Therefore, I understand that one day I, as the husband, will be held accountable. That's my headship. So because I will be held accountable, I have been given the authority to carry out my responsibility. What is my responsibility? It's to die to myself—to die to my rights and my own selfish interests—in order to create an environment where my wife can flourish spiritually. I create an environment where she can be everything God ever intended her to be, knowing that one day I will offer her up as a gift of worship to the Father.

The submissive role of the wife is to cooperate with that. Because if that's true, then I have to understand who my wife is. I have to understand how God has made her, how God has wired her, what she needs to flourish. We guys are sometimes a little bit thick, and so we need help. We get help from a wife who's willing to submit to that. We need a wife who says, "I understand that one day you're going to give an account for me, so I'm going to tell you what you need to know in order to create an environment so I can flourish." So she cooperates with this understanding by submitting to my role and saying, "This is what I need to flourish." As she informs me of that, it's my responsibility to create that environment.

Now what is so wonderful about this is that everybody, then, is free to be exactly what God has made them to be. When you get confused between the biblical roles and the traditional roles, you start trying to pigeonhole people into roles that just don't fit. And that's why a lot of people are frustrated with what they believe are biblical roles, and they are not. They're just trying to stuff themselves into more traditional type roles.

Let me give you an example of that. Let's imagine you have a woman who has a very strong personality and is very gifted in leadership. And she's married to a very quiet, gentle, behind-the-scenes kind of man. If we aren't careful, if we define the roles incorrectly, then he's going to spend his life trying to be something he just isn't, and she's going to spend her life trying to be something she is not. Both are going to be frustrated, and eventually they're going to bail out and say, "It just doesn't work." The reason it doesn't work is because God never intended that.

If we believe that there is a Creator God, and we do, then certainly God created that woman just the way He wanted her. He created her with those talents, gifts and abilities, not so she could flourish in the marketplace, although there's nothing wrong with that. But the ultimate usage of any talent, gift, or ability is not in the marketplace—it's in the Kingdom. Ultimately God gave that woman those talents, gifts and abilities so she could flourish in the Kingdom, which means she can flourish at home and she can flourish in the church. And God made that man just the way He wanted him. Not so that He would assign him a role that he could never fulfill, but so that he could be the person God made him to be and fulfill his responsibility.

Now what that man cannot do is say, "You know, God, you just gave me a strong woman. She was too much for me, and she took over, so it's not my fault." I don't think God is going to buy that one, because this doesn't have anything to do with talent. It doesn't have anything to do with personality. It doesn't really have anything to do with giftedness. It has to do with heart. Every husband is able to fulfill his role, and every wife is able to fulfill her role. All the husband has to do is understand this is the wife God gave him. These are her strengths; this is what she needs to flourish. He creates that environment so she can flourish just the way God made her to be. She doesn't have to stuff anything, and he doesn't have to try and be something he's not. He just has to be responsible for that role which God has given him, in order to help his wife to flourish.

You know, I can't find anything restrictive or anything negative in that. As a matter of fact, I can't imagine a better arrangement, as a husband and wife work together as a team to be everything God created them to be. Nobody has to be pigeon-holed; nobody is asked to fulfill a role that they can't fulfill.

One of the questions that might arise is that the husband says, "OK. I'm supposed to die to myself and my own agenda and rights in order to create this environment. And what about me? What about my own spiritual walk?" That's a great question, and I have a good answer. Verses 28-31: "So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, because we are members of His body. For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh."

Now follow the logic of this. Paul goes all the way back to Genesis 2:24 and reminds us that this is a mystery that only God can fully understand. But when a man and a woman come together in a one-flesh relationship (and that's specifically in reference to the sexual union) they become one flesh. And because they have become one flesh, when the husband loves his wife, he's loving himself. When a husband nourishes his wife, he's nourishing himself. When a husband creates an environment where she can flourish, he's creating an environment where he can flourish. Because they are no longer two people—they're one. So when a husband stands before God the Father and presents his wife in an act of worship, he's presenting himself, because they can't be separated anymore. So it's an environment where everybody flourishes and everybody grows. In fact, Paul is very careful in verse 30 to remind us that this is the picture of Christ and the body. We are all Christ's body—one body—which we've already talked about in Ephesians. Because we all have one Spirit we're all united as one body.

We are the body of Christ, and you can't really separate us out. So when Jesus Christ does what he does for us, as we've studied in chapter 1,2, and 3, He's doing that to us, but he's also doing that to His own body, so that body might be presented back to the Father in an act of worship. As He pours out His grace, He then receives the glory. Paul says it's the same picture at home. Because the husband and wife are now one flesh, when the husband creates that environment for his wife, he's creating an environment where he, too, flourishes. As she flourishes, he flourishes, and you can't really separate the two anymore. They represent one body, just as the church in Christ has become one body.

Paul then says a most interesting thing in verse 32. He has just reminded us from Genesis 2:24 the reality that a husband and wife are one flesh—that's their sexual union in Christ. Just about the time we're absolutely sure he's talking about the marriage relationship, he says, "This mystery is great {*meaning how two can become one flesh*}; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church." So there's no question that he connects the sexual intimacy of Genesis 2:24 with the picture of Christ and the church. The intimacy that a husband and wife experience as one flesh is merely a picture—it's symbolic—of a greater relationship between Christ and His church. As a husband and wife are intimate, so Christ wants to be intimate with us. He's connecting those two concepts, saying one is a picture of the other; one is a picture of the greater reality.

So primarily what we've been talking about isn't marriage—it's Christ and the church, which is symbolized in the marriage relationship. The husband represents Christ and Christ's love for His church. And the wife represents the church and the church's submission back to His headship. That's why he concludes this discussion in verse 33, saying, "Nevertheless let each individual among you also love his own wife even as himself; and let the wife see to it that she respect her husband." In essence, Paul is saying, "What we've been talking about is the church, but because that is symbolized in the marriage, then fulfill your responsibility—fulfill your role within the home."

The theological implications of this are huge. If you grew up in a home where you experienced a father who loved his wife as Christ loves the church, you learned something about God that you wouldn't have learned any other way. But if you grew up in a home where your father didn't love your mother that way, then you learned some warped views about God that eventually will have to be corrected.

Every husband, when he tucks his children in at night, ought to be able to say to his children, “Kids, do you know how much Jesus loves us?” That’s such a big, abstract concept for kids. But the husband should be able to make it really concrete and should be able to say, “Kids, if you want to know how much Jesus loves us as His church, watch the way I treat your mother. You just watch the way I love her. Because that’s a model of Christ’s love for His church.” And if the husband can’t say that, he’s not fulfilling his role. That can get a little convicting, can’t it?

The wife has to be able to tuck her kids in at night and say, “Kids, have you ever wondered how you’re supposed to respond to the love of Jesus? Just watch the way I respond to your Dad everyday. Watch the way I treat him. Watch the way I respond to his love, because that’s the way we’re supposed to respond to Jesus.”

It’s a beautiful picture when it’s done correctly. God takes these images that are so big and abstract and He brings them into such concrete terms in the home. But if it is not done correctly, there’s some really strange theology that kids learn. Kids can learn that, *Maybe God loves me the way my daddy loves my mom*. If that isn’t a pretty picture, they start to form some warped views of God, about how God loves us and how that works itself out. Twenty years later they’re wondering why they still struggle to be intimate with God. What they don’t realize is that they learned something about God they didn’t even know they were learning. Some wives teach their children that it’s OK to be controlling and manipulative and resist Christ as head of the church. They didn’t mean to teach that to their children, but that’s what they taught, because that’s how they responded to their husband. So twenty years later, their kids are still struggling to have a relationship with God and they wonder why.

You see, God takes these roles of husband and wife very, very seriously. Because not only does it help us to function well in our home, it is also teaching a very significant theology about Christ’s love for his church and the church’s response back to that love.

I would encourage us all to consider our role in this—that we might be godly husbands and godly wives. I pray that we might properly picture Christ and His church in our homes, that another generation will grow up rightly believing what is true about God.

“In Christ” At Home: Husbands and Wives
Ephesians 5:22-33
Study Questions

Opening Discussion

1. The most recent statistics indicate that marriages of believers are falling apart at the same rate as marriages between unbelievers. Why do you think this is true?
2. The various biblical roles at home are designed by God to teach us about Himself. If you grew up in a home where the biblical roles were carried out, you likely learned a right view of God. If you grew up in a home where biblical roles were not carried out, you may have learned a warped view of God. How do you think your home life has affected your view of God?
3. (For those who are married) Describe what you consider to be the traditional roles of a husband and wife. Are these traditional roles necessarily biblical roles? What may happen when we confuse the two?
4. (For those who are single) In what practical ways can a text like Ephesians 5:22-33 apply to you as a single person? Brainstorm some ideas.

Bible Study

1. Read Ephesians 5:21-33. (Verse 21 is a transition verse that continues to define the submission of a Spirit-filled person.)
2. Paul states that the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church. What have we learned about Christ as the head of the church in Ephesians so far?

Have you thought of Christ’s headship over you as a negative or positive thing in our study of Ephesians? Why?
3. Read I Timothy 2:11-13 and I Corinthians 11:7-10. What is the biblical basis for headship, according to these passages? How does this address those who say headship was merely a cultural thing? Notice also I Corinthians 11:3. Given that verse, could headship reflect any inequality?
4. How has Christ loved the church according to our study in Ephesians? What, then, does it mean to love as Christ loved the church?
5. How would you define headship and submission according to what we’ve learned in our Ephesians study?

6. In a home where biblical roles are followed, children learn in concrete ways how Christ loves His church and how the church is to respond to that love in submission. How does this line up with your experience growing up? How has your experience affected your view of Christ's love for us and our obedience and submission to Him?

(For marrieds) What are you currently teaching your children about Christ's love for us, and our submission to Him, through how you are responding to your spouse?

7. Notice 5:31-32. Verse 32 is a quote from Genesis 2:24. Compare with I Corinthians 6:16,17. Notice again the emphasis on how the sexual union ("one flesh") in marriage is a picture of the intimacy God wants with us or Christ with His church.

(For marrieds): What does God want you to learn about Himself from your marriage and your marriage partner?

(For singles): Marriage roles and the sexual union is a picture of the relationship Christ desires with us. As a single person you are not experiencing this picture, but you do have complete access to the fulfillment of this picture in a relationship with Christ. Longing for the picture more than the fulfillment would be like talking and staring at a picture of a friend, instead of going to see that friend. Rather than dismissing this passage as not relevant to your situation, how might you learn more about Christ's love for us and our response of submission to Him as a single person?

Application

1. Summarize the biblical role of a husband and wife according to the book of Ephesians.
2. (For marrieds) Evaluate how you are doing on a scale of 1-5 in fulfilling your biblical role. What 1 thing can you do this week to improve?
3. (For marrieds and singles) Evaluate your submission to Christ. Is there any area of your life you are holding back? If there is, that indicates you are holding a wrong belief about Christ and His love for you. The truth about Jesus should set us free to totally submit to Him. Given your definition of what the biblical roles should be, try to identify what incorrect view of God you may hold from your experiences that keeps you from total submission to Christ.