

THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE - Part fourteen

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THE HEADSHIP OF THE HUSBAND IS DEFINED BY THE RESPONSIBILITY CHRIST TAKES IN DYING FOR HIS BRIDE

Ephesians 5:18-33 - “And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, [19] addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, [20] giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, [21] submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. [22] Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. [23] For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. [24] Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. [25] Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, [26] that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, [27] so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. [28] In the same way husbands should love their 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 Christ does the church, [30] because we are members of his body. [31] “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” [32] This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. [33] However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.”

It is no longer acceptable to read these verses at most Christian weddings. Women especially have come to resent them. And the *reason* brides have come to resent them is the way many foolish grooms have misunderstood them. So when these words land upon our ears - “**Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands**”(24) - the words sound *cave-manish*, like keeping women barefoot, pregnant and in the kitchen, which is not only untrue, but a pathetic, modern caricature of the skillful, creative art of being a full-time homemaker in the twenty-first century.

To make this passage more palatable some have placed Paul's emphasis on a truth upon which we can all safely agree. There is a more *egalitarian* view of Paul's teaching on submission which goes something like this. **Verse 21** becomes the heart of the passage: “**....submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.**”

Verse 21 unarguably draws out the fruit of the indwelling work of the Holy Spirit outlined in **verses 18-20** - “**And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, [19] addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, [20] giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, [21] submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.**”

Truly, this is what the Holy Spirit *does* in the body of Christ. He takes the gnarly root of *pride* and *arrogance* out of all our hearts. He makes us *mutually submissive* one to another. He turns all of us into authentic *servants* of Christ and one another. And we should *all* - young and old, men and women, husbands and wives - we should *all* rejoice and submit, deeply and then deeper still, to this redemptive, gracious work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. There is simply nothing to disagree with in this beautiful truth.

But is that *all* Paul is saying? Are we to use **verse 21** to *override* and perhaps even *undo* everything said in the next twelve verses where the unique *roles* of the husband and wife are so clearly and irreversibly defined? Is this the best hermeneutic we can come up with? Are we just left to ourselves to sort out *how* we serve each other in marriage as husband or wife? Or is Paul going to tell us more?

I am certain Paul tells us more. He is going to sort out *how* mutual submission expresses itself in a Christian marriage. He's going to explain how husbands serve wives and how wives serve husbands where the Holy Spirit is leading and ruling in our hearts.

And here's the key point. Here's the point which must be grasped before anything else Paul says about how mutual submission is to be expressed in marriage can be understood. Here's the one point that lifts the fog of cultural distaste and confusion over the rest of Paul's remarks about the nature of a husband's love and the nature of a wife's submission. **You don't need to resist the unique roles Paul assigns to husbands and wives to embrace mutual submission in the**

Spirit. What Paul says in **verses 22-33** in no way contradicts the mutual submission he describes in **verse 21**.

Here's the assumption I'm making in today's teaching. You don't have to dump the headship of the husband to embrace mutual, Spirit-led submission. Paul wasn't changing his mind about mutual Spirit-led submission when he went on to exhort wives to submit to their own husbands. Rather, he was **defining** the husband's headship **in terms** of the way the husband serves his wife by taking on the responsibility of dying for her as Christ did for His bride, the church. Paul will go on to describe the **different forms** of servanthood the husband and wife must each manifest in order for marriage to be an accurate picture of the union between Christ and His bride, the church.

Again, the husband's headship isn't the **opposite** of the mutual submission described in **verse 21**. Rather, it's a beautiful **example** of it. That's the assumption upon which I'm grounding the rest of this teaching. And I think this is easily proved from the clear teaching of the rest of the New Testament.

Consider an example from the life of our Lord. Picture a small room where Jesus has gathered with His disciples just before the Passover. The text says Jesus was now fully aware that "**his hour**" had come (**John 13:1**). It was time to be executed. One of the last things Jesus does is take a towel off the shelf. The disciples probably sat in an awkward silence wondering what He was up to as he found a basin and poured water into it. Did he spill a bit of it as he labored to carry it over to where His disciples were sitting?

Then Jesus did the unthinkable. He actually **knelt** before them. What a self-erasing posture that was for the Son of God. They didn't even know what to say - except for the emotional blunderings of Peter - when Jesus began to undo their filthy sandals and pick up their soiled feet, cupping them in His holy hands while washing off the layers of stale sweat and dust.

Now here's my question. And it's an incredibly important question for our study today on mutual submission and the husband's headship. **Who is doing the servicing in that little, dim lit room?** And when your own mind answers with the only imaginable answer and whispers the name of "**Jesus**," then ask the next important question. **Who is doing the leading in that small room?** You'll get the same obvious answer.

The point is only our fallen, self-absorbed minds lead us to think Jesus was abandoning His role as their leader by becoming their servant. Fallen people always have their own conceptions of headship. We **know** the ideas that filled the minds of these early disciples - **Luke 22:24-26** - "**A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. [25] And he said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. [26] But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves.'**"

Apart from the model of Christ dying for His bride, the church, headship meant **being in charge** - pure and simple. Headship becomes **subjugation**, not a **self-sacrificing, self-emptying love** that births warm, glad submission in the one whom it serves. This is so important. You can, as long as you're bigger and stronger, **force** subjugation. But you can only **win** genuine submission. And in Biblical marriage, a husband wins it by laying down his life just as Christ laid down His life for His bride, the church.

I hope you can now see why we didn't **start** with how to be a good husband and a good wife. You really can't start by dealing with **how** to have a good marriage. You have to start with understanding **what marriage is**. This is because we **all** have our ideas of what would make us more happy and fulfilled in our marriages. We will spray ideas all over the map until we understand what **God** said marriage is **for**.

The meaning of marriage isn't rooted in the "**How To**" books on relationships. We are not **self-defining** creatures in terms of our roles as husbands and wives. God has told us why He created marriage. He created marriage to present to the world a picture of His covenant relationship between Christ and His bride, the church. Marriage is the **illustration**. Marriage is the **copy**. Marriage is the **model**. The marriage between a man and a woman is **not** the original reality. Christ's covenant of grace with His bride, the church is the **original**. And that means marriage isn't **first** about a relationship between a man and woman. It is **first** about Jesus Christ and His church.

And here's why this matters more than we can fully appreciate right now. It is only when **first** things are kept first that **second** things are made better. Remembering what marriage **is** will keep both husbands and wives happier and godlier than processing the relationship on their own terms.

So the husband is to take a long look at Christ's loving headship of the church and make that the pattern into which he pours his life out for his own wife - "**For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the**

church....”(5:23). Let’s look at Christ as head of His bride, the church:

1) CHRIST’S HEADSHIP OVER THE CHURCH IS A SELF-SACRIFICING HEADSHIP

Ephesians 5:25 - “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church *and gave himself up for her....”*

And immediately we wonder how in the world can this be true headship? What kind of leadership is it that allows itself to be trampled to death? Won’t this kind of headship make the husband a doormat, rather than a leader?

No. It won’t. Here’s why. This self-sacrifice wasn’t **demand**ed by Christ’s bride, the church. She didn’t earn it or deserve it. She did nothing whatsoever to initiate it. In other words, this decision to lay down His life was a **sovereign** decision. It was a **mighty** decision. It was headship because Christ **headed it up** without the request of the church. The incarnation and the cross were both examples of Christ taking the lead, in the most majestic fashion, out of love for His bride.

Husband, if you picture your headship in your marriage primarily in terms of **authority** you will never get it. That’s because **authority** can never win **submission** from your wife. Authority can only force **subjugation**, never **submission**.

Here’s the whole point. Glad submission (rather than grudging subjugation) can only be won from a wife who knows she can trust her husband **never to put himself first**. This is why I think the best way for husbands to consider the nature of their headship is not in terms of raw **authority**, but **responsibility**. Get a picture of Christ Jesus giving Himself over to the nails and spear and spit because He is desperate to show His love to His bride, the church.

2) CHRIST’S LOVE FOR HIS BRIDE, THE CHURCH, IS AN INITIATING LOVE

I know there’s a sense in which we’ve already covered this, but I want to take us in a fresh direction for just a minute. Headship costs. The exercise of Christlike headship in a marriage is so much more difficult than merely being some kind of ego driven boss. Let me show you what Christlike headship **is** and also what it **isn’t** by examining its most practical application to marriage.

I’ve already said Jesus took the **initiative** in laying down His life for His bride, the church. She didn’t ask Him to come and die. She didn’t even **deserve** what He did for her. It was His tough, sovereign, decision of headship.

I take that to mean that one of my primary responsibilities if I’m to be the head of my wife “....**even as Christ is the head of the church....”(5:23)** is I must take the initiative whenever reconciliation is needed in my relationship with Reni. If harsh words have been spoken and an apology is needed, if tension has mounted and someone has to break the silence, headship means **going ahead - leading first**. Loving my bride as Christ loves His means nothing whatsoever without this. My headship is all talk and blither.

That doesn’t mean my wife never apologizes. But it means woe to the marriage where the husband never initiates reconciliation as Christ did with His bride. Anger is a spiritual issue - **Ephesians 4:26-27** - “**Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, [27] and give no opportunity to the devil.**”

Here is headship defined perfectly. Unresolved anger opens the door of my entire household to the entry of the Devil. And my Christ-defined headship means if anyone is going to initiate the defusing of that anger - regardless of who is or isn’t at fault - I am called upon by God’s Word to be the one who bolts that door shut to the Devil’s presence. That’s headship.

Let me stay with this just a bit longer. It is very easy in any marriage for silly squabbles to escalate. Sometimes couples just let things go. Time passes and tempers cool. Sometimes both partners just eventually forget and pretty soon are smiling and it’s all business as usual. No damage seems to have been permanently done.

As I get older, I like that system less and less. My job as head is to take the initiative - whoever was at fault - and apologize. Get to the issue of repentance. Ask for forgiveness (which is different from apologizing). **Make** restoration happen **before** you forget about the fight. That’s what headship means.

Why does this matter? Because my marriage isn’t the ultimate reality. My marriage is a picture of the covenant between Christ and His bride, the church. In other words, my marriage isn’t just a single, private relationship. It reveals something about Jesus Christ. And it **trains** us in our thinking about God and redemption.

In other words, marriage is where we **learn** repentance and humility. Never forget, you will come to treat a fractured relationship with God exactly the same way you habitually treat a fractured relationship with your spouse. And husband, it is **always** your job to die to self and initiate the process of reconciliation. It's your job because that's what Jesus did. And He, says Paul, is your specific pattern in marriage.

3) **CHRISTLIKE HEADSHIP MEANS NOURISHING THE MARRIAGE RELATIONSHIP SPIRITUALLY**

The idea I'm considering is found in **Ephesians 5:29-30** - "**For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, [30] because we are members of his body.**"

The husband doesn't **nourish** his wife by telling her she must eat all her peas. Husbands are called to lead the way for **spiritual nourishment** in the marriage and home. Certainly this isn't his duty alone. He isn't called to be a loner in spiritual nourishment. His wife may well be more spiritually mature and mentally deep than he. But the husband should still **initiate** the process. What I'm trying to say here is **headship** doesn't assume **superiority**.

What headship **does** mean is the husband doesn't have to be dragged into the Word or to church or to devotions as some kind of reluctant dead weight by the wife. Headship means the husband leads in **hunger**. He leads in **making time**. He does his prayerful best to lead in **attitude**.

Perhaps most of all, he leads by his own walk with the Lord. You can't lead others into what you don't have yourself. Headship means pursuing holiness and Christlikeness with a deeper passion than you pursue anything else.

And here's where all this is heading. My closing words are to wives. Especially new brides. Please remember that the headship of the husband mustn't be understood by either the ignorance of many immature husbands or the blindness of our fallen, push-for-my-rights culture. It's framed by the exquisite example of the bleeding, self-sacrificing, devoted Savior.

If I were a bride I would **insist** these words about the husband's headship be read at my wedding. They are the only covenant guarantee of a wife being sacrificially loved - not just lusted after - by a Christ-like husband until the day you die. Think carefully before you have them removed from your wedding vows.