

THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE - Part fifteen

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DOES GOD SERIOUSLY STILL EXPECT WIVES TO SUBMIT TO THEIR OWN HUSBANDS?

Ephesians 5:15-24 - “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, [16] making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. [17] Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. [18] 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.”

1 Peter 3:1-7 - “Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives— [2] when they see your respectful and pure conduct. [3] Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair, the wearing of gold, or the putting on of clothing— [4] but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious. [5] For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their husbands, [6] as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening.[7] Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.”

We're continuing our study of passages of Scripture considered, perhaps, the most intolerable by contemporary culture. I mentioned last Sunday that the distaste for the mention of the headship of the husband or the submission of the wife has turned the church from even wanting these verses read at the weddings of two disciples of Jesus Christ. **1 Corinthians 13** will do just fine, thank you. And no one will have to feel the sting of being considered sexist or chauvinistic.

But the words are there. We've read them together. And there are others besides these. Either we explain them as irrelevant carry-overs from a patriarchic culture or we conclude God is just out of touch with the modern world. But we can't just pretend they aren't in our Bibles. No one will respect us for long if we do that. And what **other** portions will our society find offensive next? What will we do with passages dealing with homosexuality as a sin? Or polygamy? Because, believe me, there are Bible passages that read just as out to lunch to many readers as these passages we're studying tonight.

For these and many other very good reasons, we'd better know where we stand on these passages describing the roles of Christian husbands and Christian wives. We're going to try to consider both of our opening texts at the same time, pulling together the key, non-negotiable truths from both Paul and Peter. There is so much at stake.

1) MARRIAGE IS THE SOLE PROPERTY OF GOD. HE CREATED IT TO MODEL THE NATURE OF THE REDEMPTION HE ACCOMPLISHED THROUGH CHRIST FOR HIS BRIDE, THE CHURCH

Here is the meaning of marriage - **Ephesians 5:31-32** - “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.”

I didn't take the time to read the instructional context of these two verses. Every time Paul has anything to say about the husband loving the wife or the wife submitting to the husband he bases his ethical instructions on Christ and the church. He says nothing whatsoever to husbands **merely** as husbands or wives **merely** as wives. Christ and the church is the pattern for all things pertaining to Christians in marriage.

We've restated this in each teaching because nothing else makes sense if this truth is lost sight of, even for a moment. **We** don't get to select the meaning of our marriages. And we don't get to select our responsibilities as Christian husbands and wives. **God** has established the purpose for this union of husband and wife, and we either understand and accept it or destroy ourselves through the arrogance of our independence.

So the meaning of marriage is a **revealed** meaning. We would never figure it out on our own. Christ came and gave His life for His bride, the church. Long before Moses understood the meaning of the marriage union he

described in **Genesis 2:24** God had planned the meaning of the union of husband and wife. That's why He created mankind **male** and **female**. It was all pre-planned to prepare the world for a living, breathing, material model of what He would one day do, through Christ, to win His bride, the church.

Now we know this meaning of marriage. Paul says this "**mystery**" has been revealed - "**This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church**"(**Ephesians 5:32**). And the reason this is so important is in the opening remarks Paul makes in that same passage: **Ephesians 5:17** - "**Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.**"

The "**will of the Lord**" isn't just that we try to be nicer people. Paul is going to **tell** us very specifically about the will of the Lord, right in this fallen, confused world, about how the Holy Spirit shapes the patterns of submission and service in our culture. And the reason Paul emphasizes the importance of "**understanding what the will of the Lord is**"(**5:17**), is most people **don't**.

There is a way of getting so **caught up** in the flow of the pull of the surrounding culture that keeps us from thinking about **God** when we shape our relational roles in this world. That's the thrust of Paul's remarks in **Ephesians 5:18-20** - "**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....**"

We must constantly find ways to fill our mind with God rather than wine. And what Paul means by that is it takes constant effort - constant **corporate** effort with other Christians ("**addressing one another in psalms and hymns, etc....**") - to sustain a joyfully thankful heart to God's truth and God's revelation. Like the effects of too much wine (and wine is constantly and consistently linked in the teaching of the apostles and Jesus in particular with **missing out** on Kingdom priorities) - like the effects of too much wine, the mind-set of our culture is designed to **cloud our judgment** of things eternal and absolute and counter-cultural.

And once you get hooked on wine, life seems flat and uncelebratory without it. So works the tone and rhythm of our culture to make what Paul is going to say about husbands and wives seem archaic and irrelevant. Like wine makes it hard to drive, our culture's ways make it hard to value the ways of God.

Stay with me here. I **am** still getting to what Paul is going to say about husbands and wives and marriage. There is a key principle that Paul says lies right at the heart of knowing what the will of the Lord is. The key principle is stated in **Ephesians 5:21** - "**....submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.**" Because we are a **redeemed** people our relationships are shaped by the same kind of **submission** and **self-sacrifice** Christ displayed in the redemption of His bride the church - us.

That's why the most important words in understanding that short twenty-first verse aren't "**submitting to one another,**" but, "**out of reverence for Christ.**" Everything important about our relationships with each other in the church, and in marriage in particular, is tied to what God has done in Christ Jesus. The **kind** of submission described in verse 21 is a **defined** submission. Our relationships with each other - in the church, and in our families, have a specific pattern and model. And the rest of Ephesians chapter five is dedicated to defining the roles of submission, sacrifice and service.

We've already spent a whole study on what Paul meant when he described the husband as the "**head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church**"(**5:23**). This is the starting place. We started with this because that's where the church's relationship with Christ started. The bride didn't **earn** Christ's right-forsaking, death-embracing love by her submission. Christ initiated - **headed the process up** - as He submitted to the Father. He laid down His life while I was still an enemy of God.

That means I gladly **submit** my life to Christ, as you do as well, because He **won** my submitted devotion by **dying** for me. So I learn, first of all, husbands don't just lay down their lives for wives who are gentle and submissive. They lay down their lives for wives who may still be stubborn, hard-hearted, and rebellious. Headship means husbands **initiate** death to self in marriage.

2) **THE WILLING SUBMISSION OF A GODLY WIFE TO HER HUSBAND IS AN EXPRESSION OF HER COMMITMENT TO JESUS CHRIST**

I want to **establish** this fact and draw out some of the practical **implications** of it. Here are several key concepts:

A Godly wife submits to her own husband as an expression of her commitment to Christ Jesus. I think this is the repeated emphasis of both our opening texts:

Ephesians 5:17-21 - “Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. [18] **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.**”

We’ve already looked at these words. The whole foundational principle of the pattern of relationships Paul will go on to unfold is laid down in the principle of **“submission out of reverence for Christ”** (21). So this spiritual submission isn’t **earned** by the one to whom I submit. On its visible level it isn’t the submission of a **lesser** to a **greater**. This submission is, at its deepest level, a submission to **Christ**, not merely another individual. Understanding this key principle is what Paul means when he urges a deep understanding of **“what the will of the Lord is”**(17).

Then Paul repeats this same principle as it relates specifically to the submission of a Godly wife to her own husband:

Ephesians 5:22 - **“Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.”** This text is even more specific. The wife **does** submit to her own husband. But while she does, she is thinking about more than **just** her husband. She is thinking about **the Lord**. That is, she has come to think of her submission to her husband, who is, in himself, totally **unworthy** of such submission, as an expression of her submission to Christ Jesus, her true Lord, who is absolutely worthy of her humble obedience.

The text from 1 Peter makes the same point, though in less direct terms:

1 Peter 3:1-5 - **“Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives— [2] when they see your respectful and pure conduct. [3] Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair, the wearing of gold, or the putting on of clothing— [4] but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious. [5] For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their husbands....”**

I’ll say more about these words in a minute, but for now just note the way Peter speaks of these women who, long before Christ ever came into this world or the meaning of marriage was fully revealed, submitted to their husbands primarily out of a devotion to **God**. As they submitted to their husbands they were aware they themselves were just as bright, talented, holy, and able as their husbands.

But Peter says more. He says they weren’t just thinking about their husbands in their submission. Peter says they had an eye to **God**. They were hoping in **God** while they submitted to their husbands - **“....this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their husbands....”**(3:5). They saw their submission to their own husbands, long before the New Testament was written, as a part of their devotion to God Himself.

3) **THE SUBMISSION OF A WIFE TO HER OWN HUSBAND IS NOT AN ABSOLUTE SUBMISSION INTO SPIRITUAL CARELESSNESS OR SIN**

This is especially obvious in the 1 Peter 3 text - **1 Peter 3:1** - **“Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives....”**

While never stated explicitly, we know that submitting to her husband doesn’t require the wife to agree with everything he believes or does. In Peter’s account the wife is a Christian. The husband isn’t. The fact that Peter’s hope is the husband **“may be won”** is simple proof of that fact. That means the husband has one set of ideas about what is ultimate reality and the wife has another. He has his priorities and she has hers. And hers are completely different. She loves Christ supremely. He never thinks about Christ, or has perhaps rejected Him

outright. So we know submission to a husband can't mean agreeing with everything he thinks.

Equally obvious in the 1 Peter text is the fact that submitting to her husband doesn't mean following the will of her husband into sin. The wife is a **Christian**. That means the will of Christ is supreme in her life. She will try her best to be submissive to her husband. Peter says she will, with a deep reliance upon the Holy Spirit, constantly manifest a **"gentle and quiet spirit"**(3:4). But she knows her submission to her husband has limits. Christ is her Lord.

4) **IN THE NORMAL CIRCUMSTANCES OF A CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE THE WIFE WILL SERVE CHRIST THROUGH SUBMISSION TO HER OWN HUSBAND AND HER HUSBAND WILL UNDERSTAND HER SUBMISSION AS HER DEVOTION TO JESUS**

This idea lies deeply in one of the hardest verses to interpret in the whole New Testament - **1 Peter 3:7** - **"Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered."**

The hard phrase is **"...live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel..."** What does Peter mean here? In what sense is the woman the **"weaker vessel?"**

Most commentators go in one of two directions. The first and most obvious is simply that, as a rule, the majority of men are physically stronger than most women. True enough, I'm sure you could find some Olympic athlete who could clean most men's clocks. But I think it is still **generally** true that the average man could physically overpower the average woman. And, so the argument goes, Peter is asking husbands to remember this.

But I doubt this can be all Peter is getting at. I doubt that his sole concern is that all these Christian men would be brutally beating their wives. I'm not making light of this kind of abuse at all. I'm simply saying I don't think this was the **primary** problem Peter saw with these Christian husbands.

Others go the route of saying women are **"weaker"** in the sense of being more emotionally sensitive. They remember unkind, cruel words longer than do most men. They feel the weight of events long after many men had moved on. And there may be some truth to that.

Let me give just one other idea that I think fits the context better. I think Peter means **"weaker"** in the sense that her **role** - her **calling** - as one to be submissive to her own husband creates a **vulnerability** for the godly wife. It's easy to take advantage of a submissive partner, especially if she knows it's her **calling** to submit to her own husband. . Our fallen world can quickly treat submission as **weakness**.

So Peter calls on these husbands - the **Christian** husbands who will read and meditate on his words - who want to do the will of God in their marriages - he calls on these husbands to **"live with your wives in an understanding way...."**

When we see that word **"understanding"** it's easy to translate it in a way that reduces it to mere sentimentality. But Peter means much more. He doesn't just mean to be **patient** with them. He means godly husbands must live with their wives **recognizing deeply** that they are submitting to their husbands out of **devotion to Christ**. This is Peter's way of saying "The submission of your wife to you really **isn't** your possession at all. Don't you dare abuse it. She is accountable to Christ for her submission to you and you are responsible to Christ for the way you **"honor"** her for it - **1 Peter 3:7** - **"Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered."**

So important is it to God that husbands remember all of this that God will **interrupt** His relationship with any husband who forgets it. He won't hear their prayers.

5) **THROUGH THEIR COMMITMENT TO THEIR RESPECTIVE ROLES IN MARRIAGE CHRISTIAN HUSBANDS AND WIVES DEMONSTRATE TO EACH OTHER WHAT A PASSIONATE COMMITMENT TO CHRIST LOOKS LIKE IN THIS FALLEN WORLD**

The wife looks to the initiating, self-sacrificing, love of her husband as he swallows his pride and takes the lead in

reconciliation and she knows how hard that is for his male ego. And the only conclusion she can reach is “My, Christ must be incredibly glorious. He is more satisfying to my husband than the feeding of his own pride! He lays down his life repeatedly for me, and I know I don’t deserve this special treatment. My husband must be so devoted to Christ Jesus!”

Then the husband looks at the gentle, submissive devotion of his wife, who, even though he behaved like a complete oaf, never made life miserable for him or mocked him or got bitter, or bossy. And the only conclusion the husband can reach is “My, Christ must be gloriously satisfying to her if she would be willing to submit to me rather than displease Him! What joy her passion for Jesus brings to my wife! What contentment she has found in Him!”

So in a thousand small daily ways, God uses the mutual roles of Christian husbands and wives to pull the other partner toward the freeing, transforming grace of our Lord. It’s a beautiful thing. And we discover God has designed marriage so Christ always gets the glory. And knowing the *meaning* of marriage, that shouldn’t surprise anyone at all.