

THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE - Part sixteen

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CONFORMITY TO CHRIST - HOW HUSBANDS CHANGE WIVES AND WIVES CHANGE HUSBANDS

Ephesians 5:21-33 - "...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."

A few weeks ago we studied *what it means to be married to a redeemed sinner*. The Christian brings resources to a marriage that the non-Christian cannot. That *doesn't* mean non-Christians can't be forgiving spouses. They can. I'm sure we can all name non-believers who show incredible patience and kindness to their spouse. So when I say Christians bring resources to the marriage relationship that non-Christians cannot I mean they bring something *deeper* and more *powerful* than mere kindness or patience.

There are two points of understanding that only Christians can bring to marriage. First, only Christians recognize the depth of the problem of human sin. *Everyone* knows people aren't perfect. Everyone knows husbands fail wives and wives fail husbands. There is nothing unique about that. But *only* Christians know how tragically broken we all are. Only Christians know there is a depth of depravity bound up in the heart of every husband and every wife that no amount of counseling or therapy can untangle. As Christians we enter all our relationships as *realists*.

And there's an important result to this realism about the depth of sin. This understanding sets all Christians into their marriage knowing there is need for a *deep covenant commitment to their spouse right up to the time of death or until Jesus comes again*. We aren't looking for angelic partners overnight. We know our spouse needs more than a moral touch-up. We know our spouse will one day be just like Jesus, but that this won't happen until Jesus comes back and we see Him just as He is (1 John 3:2).

I said there were *two* points of understanding only Christians bring into their marriages. Here's the second. And it is infinitely more hopeful and powerful. Only Christians enter marriage as *redeemed* sinners. Only Christians enter marriage knowing the beauty of already having been *died for* redemptively. Only Christians have already *received* greater forgiveness than they will ever be called upon to *extend* to their spouse. This is the unique forgiveness factor in a Christian marriage. However compassionate or forgiving or patient a non-Christian partner may be to his or her spouse, their lives have never been *redeemed* by infinite grace.

So this is a great start in any marriage relationship. But does the power of the Holy Spirit - as He applies the redemptive grace of God through Christ - does this divine power do anything *more* than merely promote forgiveness? Does it *change* spouses in addition to just *forgiving* them? And if so, *how* does this transformation come about? Specifically, how does God work through a *husband* to transform a *wife*? And how does He work through a *wife* to transform a *husband*? That's the issue we're studying tonight. What does God's grace *do* in a marriage? And how are husbands and wives *involved*?

1) WE WILL PURSUE THE TRANSFORMATION OF OUR SPOUSE IN UNWISE AND COUNTER-PRODUCTIVE WAYS UNLESS WE REMEMBER WHAT WE ARE UP AGAINST IN THEM AND IN OURSELVES

I just state this point briefly up front because we often lose sight of what's most obvious. Your husband, or your wife, is not just a little bit off inwardly. They are just as fallen and inwardly effected by sin as you are. And you *know* the kind of battles you have inwardly with a character and disposition and will and affections that frequently pull you in directions you don't want to go:

Romans 7:15-21 - “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. [16] Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. [17] So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. [18] For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. [19] For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. [20] Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. [21] So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand.”

This is not a negative recognition when we consider marriage. It simply starts all the other considerations about how we change our spouse on the right foot. And it leads into the next important principle for transformation in marriage:

2) IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF YOUR SPOUSE, FOCUS ON OUR OWN HEART FIRST

Please remember the first point as we move on to the second. This is not to **deny** the need for transformation in your spouse. We are not **pretending** and we are not **ignoring**. Your spouse may have serious defects and your faith doesn't require you to deny them. We **enter** marriage and we **stay** in marriage knowing that both **we** and our **spouse** are deeply effected by sin.

What we are talking about now is how shall we **approach** this need for transformation in our spouse? Given this reality of inward sin, what **will** be spiritually fruitful and what **won't** be?

And if you start with anything other than what we've already studied when we considered “**What It Means To Be Married To A Redeemed Sinner**” - if you start with anything other than **unconditional, covenant faithful, forgiveness** - your pleas for change will come across as **ultimatums**. And fallen people don't respond well to ultimatums. If your spouse ever gets the impression that your **loving** him or her, or your **staying** with him or her, is conditional upon their accepting your demands for change, then your spouse will **resent** your appeals for transformation even if they grudgingly go along with you. You will **harden** his or her heart, rather than soften it.

And this is exactly what I meant when I stressed point number one - remembering the reality of the depth of sin, both in your spouse and in yourself. Unconditional forgiving grace is the first step in softening that stone-like heart.

Those are the first two general principles. They apply to all Christian marriages and equally to husbands and wives seeking the transformation of their spouse. I promise you that nothing fruitful will happen in the heart of your spouse if you forget those two bedrock truths. Now we'll move on to considering how husbands change wives and how wives change husbands.

3) THE LOVE OF A HUSBAND FOR A WIFE SHOULD BE A TRANSFORMING LOVE

Paul makes this very clear in our opening text - **Ephesians 5:25-27** - “**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.**”

Christ's love for His bride, the church, is a **transforming** love. The bride isn't static. She is changed by the love of Christ. So we know the love of a husband for his bride isn't a static love either.

But here we are on dangerous ground. It is dangerous to tell either the husband or the wife that he or she is involved in the transformation of the spouse. And the reason it's dangerous is fallen husbands and fallen wives can easily make the desire for the transformation of their spouse a **selfish** desire. I can want my wife to be exactly what **I** want her to be because I don't want my fallen will to be frustrated in any way. So truly, it is a **dangerous** thing for fallen husbands (I'm dealing with husbands first in this point) to try to change their wives.

But Paul deals with these dangers in our text. There are three ideas Paul applies to husbands specifically in their efforts to transform their wives:

- a) **The husband can be used by Christ to transform his wife, but the husband is not Christ.** I know this is ridiculously obvious, but Paul seems to put emphasis on it for a good reason: **Ephesians 5:23** - “**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.”

The important word is that word **“as.”** The husband is head of the wife, true enough. But the husband is **“as”** Christ, or **“like”** Christ. This means the husband is **not** Christ. Christ is perfect. The husband is not. Christ doesn't wrestle with sin. The husband does. Christ can be trusted never to make a mistake. The husband cannot.

And all of these things seem to be very important to Paul. He seeks to remind me that, as a husband, I'm not always wise in the things I'd like to see changed in my wife. I dare not assume infallibility in my headship. Which leads into the second thing Paul says to husbands who seek to be agents of transformation in their wife:

- b) ***My wife's ultimate aim is conformity to Christ, not conformity to me.*** Or, to say it more directly, a truly godly husband seeks to conform his wife more and more deeply to **Christ**, and not his own wishes.

This comes out clearly in **Ephesians 5:26-27** - **“....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.”**

The goal is **sanctification**, growth in the **word**, and an increasing love for **holiness**. Husbands betray the whole concept of New Testament headship when they seek conformation to their own wishes. As we emphasized in our study of the headship of the husband, headship, properly understood and practiced, never seeks **personal convenience**. Which is Paul's final point:

- c) ***The process through which a husband transforms his wife is dying for her.*** This is why Paul stresses the way in which Christ transforms His bride, the church - **Ephesians 5:25-26** - **“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....”**

No one ever effected a greater transformation in sinful people than did Christ. And He, says Paul, is the particular pattern for husbands in transforming their wives. No one desires for His bride to be transformed more than Christ does His, and He brings it about by **laying down His life**.

Husband, does your wife see your desire for her life as meeting **your expectations** or the **will of Christ**? Does she hear **your demands** or the **voice of the Spirit**? When you absolutely must speak the truth and challenge, does she hear **arrogance and macho**, or does she sense humility and brokenness - the voice of a fellow-redeemed sinner who cherishes grace in his own heart?

Remember, transformation of the wife comes about, not when she submits to the **husband** absolutely, but when she submits to **Christ** absolutely. Her submission to her husband is a secondary submission. And when she sees a husband who lays down his life for his bride like Christ does for the church, she will be drawn more and more deeply to Christ by your humble heart than by harsh, authoritative words.

4) **THE SUBMISSION OF A GODLY WIFE TO HER OWN HUSBAND SHOULD BE A TRANSFORMING SUBMISSION**

I have two thoughts from a very simple verse:

- a) ***First, wives know that their husbands aren't Christ. Ephesians 5:22*** - **“Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.”**

“As” to the Lord, but **not** the Lord. So they **do** submit to their own husbands, but they remember the pattern of their submission is **“as to”** or **“like to”** the Lord. That means every wife will see things that need changing in her husband. He will not be perfect because he is **not** Christ. So we know that respecting her husband as the one the New Testament calls the **“head”** doesn't mean ignoring his need for ongoing growth and transformation.

So a godly wife can be submissive and still recognize the need for her husband's growth in Christ. She isn't called upon to **pretend**. And the husband needs to understand that. If his ego goes unchecked by the

Spirit and the Word he will resent anything less than an idolatrous submission from his wife. And nothing transforming will grow in that polluted soil for either the wife *or* the husband.

- b) **Second, the limitations and imperfections of the husband don't mean the wife doesn't have to be submissive.** There are no perfect husbands on earth today and godly wives are still called upon to submit to their own husbands.

And this brings us to the wrap-up question. **Why? Why must a wife submit to an imperfect husband?** That's the question we must come to terms with. What is God's plan here? Come to think of it, husbands must come to terms with the same question put on the other foot. **Why must a husband lay down his life in sacrificial, initiating, rights-crucifying love for an imperfect wife?** That hardly seems fair either. Why has God come up with this seemingly impossible plan?

5) **WHETHER YOU'RE A HUSBAND OR A WIFE, GOD'S PLAN IS TO TRANSFORM YOUR SPOUSE BY THE WAY THEY SEE YOU DEALING WITH YOUR OWN PRIDE**

God knows my selfish desire to want to have a better relationship with my spouse than I want to have with Him. It takes no spiritual grace whatsoever to want to have a good marriage. Atheists want good, happy, fulfilling marriages. So God, in His wisdom, begins my desire to transform my spouse by using the overflow of my deepening relationship with Him. And growing in Christ **always** begins with deeper and deeper encroachments on the life of my own pride.

And that's the meat of this last point. The whole idea we've been building up to is **only Christ is truly beautiful in any marriage.** That means it will be impossible for fallen husbands to change their wives by the power of sheer ultimatum. And it will be impossible for wives to change their husbands by the tenacity of endless pleadings - **1 Peter 3:1-2** - **"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."**

Wives, only Christ is beautiful, Put on Christ. And husbands, only Christ is beautiful, so **die** like Christ. And here's what we learn. The genuine, Spirit-filled, self-crucifying, rights-denying, character adorning life of Christ **is** what will change your spouse. I can only effect change in my spouse by **my own** spiritual growth.

"But what if it doesn't work? You have no idea how long I've been waiting for God to change my husband or my wife and nothing is happening! What if he or she never changes?"

Then you still win. Because one day you will stand before the throne of God and all these earthly things will be passed. Marriage itself will have past away. At that time I will only be judged by what **I** did, never by what my spouse did. So pray and die and love and submit - according to the patterns of mutual submission laid down in the New Testament. In that way you have the best way of changing your spouse and growing your own life in Christ-likeness at the same time.