



Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband (Ephesians 5:21–33).

I like the song we sang earlier for a lot of reasons, one of them being that marriage is a dance in many ways. When two people dance, there's a kind of unity that's expressed. The couple needs to be in sync. They need to be dancing to the same tune. It's like they're one. But within that unity there's also a diversity. In most dancing, there's a leader and follower. Both of these roles are absolutely essential if you want to keep from stomping on each other's feet!

We see this same thing in many of the Olympic sports we'll be watching for the next couple of weeks. I'm thinking of sports where pairs compete together, like synchronized swimming, pairs rowing and diving. In each of these events there has to be almost perfect synchronization, but if you look closely and talk with the competitors you discover each still plays a slightly different role.

In Ephesians 5:21–33 the apostle Paul addresses the subject of Christian marriage. As he does this, there are several assumptions he makes worth mentioning, especially since we live in a day when not everyone makes these assumptions.

His first assumption is marriage is an institution ordained by God. Paul quotes from Genesis where the very first marriage is

described. We see from the very start marriage was God's idea. We live in a day when not everyone accepts that. Why do we need a piece of paper? Why can't we just live together?

His second assumption is marriage is between one man and one woman. God didn't design us to be married to someone of the same gender. Not everyone accepts that today. This also rules out polygamy. I just returned from Cameroon where many men have more than one wife. We even see that in the Old Testament, but this was never God's design.

His third assumption is marriage is a life-long covenant. It's designed to be permanent. It says, “*The two will become one flesh.*” It was Jesus who quoted that and then added these words, “*What God has joined together, let no one separate*” (Mt 19:6). There are certain instances where divorce is a necessary option, but again that was never God's original design.

But the last assumption is most important for this passage we're in today. Paul's assumption is husband and wife are one, but as in a dance they each play a different part. And if we don't accept that and live that out, we'll fail to realize God's glorious purpose for our marriage. Marriage can bring us great joy. Think of how obsessed our culture is with love stories, how many movies and books follow this theme of two people meeting and coming together. There's something in all of us that longs to be connected at the deepest level with another person; a soul mate. That's how God created us. Yet, as important as this is to our humanity, God has an even higher purpose for marriage. And that purpose is only found in embracing our God-given roles. By the way, these roles have nothing to do with equality. Man and woman, husband and wife, are both created in the image of God and equal in value, worth and dignity. All the blessings we have in Christ, blessings of adoption and redemption and eventual glorification, men and women share in equally. And yet, he created us differently.

All of Us Are Called to Mutual Submission.

Before we look at those different roles, it's important to see the general principle laid down for all relationships. Here he addresses wives and husbands. In the next section, he'll address children and parents, as well as slaves and masters. But right before all of this, in chapter 5:15–21, he talked about being filled with the Spirit. And the last thing he said about being filled with the Spirit is that it's evidenced by “*submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.*” Without the Spirit of the living God filling your lives, you'll never be able to do that from the heart. Notice this isn't addressed to just a few people but to all

Christ-followers. Submission isn't just for wives, children and slaves; it's for all of us.

The word he uses for submission means literally "to arrange under." It was often used to describe the way a soldier submits to someone of a higher rank. But Paul uses a special form of this word that indicates a voluntary submission; one that's not forced upon you. In that sense it means to act in a selfless way. As Paul says in Philippians it means "*to value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but to the interests of others*" (Phil 2:3b-4).

To submit to your brothers and sisters in Christ is your highest calling and privilege as one of his followers. Jesus spent 30 years in a podunk town called Nazareth, submitting to God, learning carpentry. Then it was time to submit himself to three punishing years of people-serving: touching wet leprosy; holding hot, sticky, dirty babies; mending mad minds, damaged psyches, and sick souls. That's submission. In the upper room, he stripped to the waist, tied a towel around himself, and washed men's feet. That's submission.

The spirit of submission helped him to climb a crooked, shameful tree in the shape of our redemption and there hang our sin out to dry by first being hung up to dry himself. What does submission look like? Look at the cross. It's seen there. And Jesus said to us, "*Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me*" (Lk 9:23). Do you do that? That's for all of us. Before we can think about what it means for us to be good husbands or wives, we have to learn to be good Christ-followers. We have to be filled with the Spirit and through him we have to learn to submit to him and to one another.

By the way, notice what he says: we do this "*out of reverence for Christ.*" This is very helpful. We might think, "Why should I submit to that person? Why should I give up my rights for theirs?" Maybe you don't even really like or respect that person. Why should you do that? You do it "*out of reverence for Christ.*" Do it unto him. Don't think of it as you against them; think of him.

So with this as the general principle, you can see there's a very real sense in which husbands and wives submit to one another. And what Paul does in verses 22–33 is tell us what that looks like. What does it look like for a wife to submit to her husband? What does it look like for a husband to submit to his wife?

When we think of it that way, what Paul says here was quite radical for his time. It's a stark contrast to the typical marriage in his day. Under Jewish law, a woman was a thing, the possession of her husband, along with his house and goods. She had no legal rights. In Greek society, a respectable woman lived a life of entire seclusion. She didn't even join her husband for meals. One Greek orator said, "We have courtesans for the sake of pleasure, we have concubines for the sake of daily cohabitation, and we have wives for the purpose of having children." In Roman society, it was the same, as a man was called the *paterfamilias* (the lord of the household), and had absolute authority over all who lived

with him. Against that backdrop, what Paul says here about mutual submission is radical.

I should say it's radical in our day and age as well, but for different reasons. Most people see marriage as a kind of 50/50 proposition, "I'll go this far only if you do the same." And so many couples keep score!

Husbands and Wives Display Something Larger Than Themselves.

So what does he say to husbands and wives? He gives specific instructions about the different roles that each play in the marriage dance. But the basis or the foundation of these instructions is a blueprint that comes from another relationship. It's the relationship between Christ Jesus and his church. Look at verse 31. It's a quote from Genesis 2:24, "*For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two shall become one.*" In the next verse he looks back on this quote and says, "*This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.*"

Why is the coming together of a man and woman to form one flesh in marriage a mystery? A mystery is something that's been partially concealed, but is now being openly revealed. This idea that marriage is like a metaphor or a picture that stands for the relationship between Christ and the church is one God's people had never known before Paul revealed it. But that's the deepest meaning of marriage. It's meant to be a living drama of how Christ and the church relate to each other.

If you want to understand God's meaning for marriage, you have to grasp that there's a copy and an original, a metaphor and a reality. The original—the reality—is Christ's marriage to the church, while the copy—the metaphor—is a husband's marriage to his wife. This means the roles of husband and wife in marriage aren't arbitrarily assigned and they aren't reversible without obscuring God's purpose for marriage. You can't say, "Well, this doesn't really work for us, we're different," without messing up the very purpose marriage was given. The roles of husband and wife are rooted in the distinctive roles of Christ and his church. God means to say something about his Son and his church by the way husbands and wives relate to each other.

Wives Submit to Their Husbands as the Church Submits to Christ.

With that as the backdrop, what are those roles? He starts out and addresses wives. Wives are to submit to their husbands. In a unique way, a wife is to arrange herself under her husband; to support him and be responsive to his leadership. In the marriage dance, her role is to follow, to respond. This isn't blind obedience. As a matter of fact, Paul refuses to use the word "obey" to describe a wife's role, even though he tells children and slaves to obey later. Submission is a disposition of the spirit to a husband's initiatives. It's been said submission is "knowing how to duck so God can hit your husband." A wife does this voluntarily; it's not forced. Submission is never to be demanded from the husband's side. Husbands, don't quote this verse to your wife. It's an issue between her and God. If you have to tell your wife to submit,

you're probably not doing your job. Your job, as we'll see, will make it easy for her.

Notice a few things Paul says about this. First, he says wives do this *"as to the Lord."* This doesn't mean you treat your husband as if he were the Lord. There's only one Lord in your life—Jesus. Instead, it means you submit to your husband not so much because he deserves it, but as a way of serving the Lord. The idea is that as a woman submits to her husband, she looks over his shoulder to see the Lord who is saying to her, "It's not about him, it's about me. Do it unto me."

Notice also he says the reason for this is that *"the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church."* There's been a lot of debate among scholars as to what that word "head" means. Some say it means "authority," others say it means "source" or "origin." You can make a case for either. In Ephesians 4:15-16 we saw that Jesus is said to be the head of the church in that he's the source of the church's gifting and nourishment for growth. But at the same time, this word "head" is used exclusively in ancient Greek literature to describe authority. But, even if that's true, his headship expresses care rather than control, responsibility rather than rule. As we see in v. 23, the head of the church is also the Savior of the church, which is his body.

I believe women cringe when someone brings up this text for many reasons. Unfortunately, some women have had it crammed down their throat by domineering, insensitive and insecure men. But that's not the blueprint. There's also a misunderstanding of what this means and doesn't mean. This has nothing to do with a woman's worth or even her ability. As I already said, men and women are equals. It doesn't mean wives are doormats, allowing their husbands to walk all over them. It doesn't mean they're silent partners, wordlessly carrying out their husband's orders. A wife's input on decisions is invaluable to a husband. It doesn't mean they should do anything the Lord himself would consider sinful. Paul says *"in everything"* but he doesn't mean sin. When a husband is in error or in outright sin, a wife can and should lovingly and respectfully confront him, pointing him to the Lordship of Christ. That's part of her calling as helper.

If I'm about to decide something foolish for my family, my wife should express her submission by saying something like this, "Mark, I know you've thought a lot about this, and I love it when you take the initiative to plan to take responsibility like this, but I really don't have peace about this decision and I think we need to talk about it more. Could we? Maybe tonight sometime?"

That's a kind of biblical submission because husbands, unlike Christ, are fallible and ought to admit it. Husbands ought to want their wives to be excited about the family decisions because Christ wants us to be excited about following his decisions and not just follow begrudgingly. And the way Lynn expressed her misgivings communicated clearly that she endorses my leadership and affirms me in my role as head.

The bottom line comes in Paul's summary in v. 33. It's about respect. The interesting thing is, there's a profound psychology behind this because this is what a man needs most—respect. He

needs to know you believe in him, not just in what he does but who he is. He needs to know you trust him; you have confidence in him. You have great power in his life. You can build him up by respecting him, or destroy him by demeaning him. The greatest fear of a man is failure. It's that he won't cut it; he doesn't have what it takes. And so, a wife's respect can cut through that fear and allow him to be the man he was meant to be.

E.V. Hill was a great pastor who lost his wife, Jane, to cancer. Jane had been raised as the daughter of a prominent African-American pastor, Dr. Caruthers. At her funeral, he spoke about the ways she made him a better man. As a struggling young preacher, he had trouble earning a living. That led him to invest the family's scarce resources, against her objections, in buying a gas station. She felt her husband lacked the time and expertise to oversee the investment, and she was right. Eventually the station went broke and E.V. lost his shirt in the deal. It was a critical time in the life of this young man. He'd failed at something important, and his wife would have been justified in saying, "I told you so."

But Jane knew how vulnerable her husband was. When E.V. called to tell her that he'd lost the station, she simply said, "All right." E.V. came home that night expecting to see his wife pouting over the foolish investment. Instead, she sat down with him and said, "I've been doing some figuring. I figure that you don't smoke and you don't drink. If you smoked and drank you would have lost as much as you lost in the service station. So it's six in one hand, and half a dozen in the other. Let's forget it." Jane could have shattered her husband's confidence, but she showed him respect. The male ego is so delicate, especially during times of failure or embarrassment. So he needed her to say, "I still believe in you."

Husbands Are to Love Their Wives as Christ Loves the Church.

So a wife's role mirrors that of the church, but a husband's role mirrors that of Christ. You can see that Paul has more to say to husbands than he does to wives. You can also see that Paul doesn't tell husbands to **lead** their wives; instead he tells them to **love** their wives. The word Paul uses for love here is *agape*. This is the highest form of love; it's a love that seeks the highest good of the other. By the way, once again we see this profound psychology. While a man's greatest need is respect, a woman's greatest need is to be loved, cherished. Most of all a woman fears abandonment and rejection so a wise man will do whatever he can to make her feel secure in his love. Paul says three things about a husband's call to love his wife.

First, he says it's a sacrificial love. It's not selfish. It doesn't seek its own will or way. It's willing to surrender what he wants in order to meet his wife's needs. Of course, in order to do that a husband needs to listen to his wife and understand what her needs are. This can translate into small acts of service a husband is willing to do or it can be bigger decisions.

This past week I had a chance to get to know our missionaries Moussa and Priscilla Bongoyok. I was sitting at the dinner table one night with Priscilla and she told me about how several years

earlier, after Moussa had graduated from Fuller Seminary and was back teaching in Africa, she got very sick. She had several health issues that were quite serious and the resources in Africa were insufficient to meet her needs. Not only that, their children were forced to live apart from them because of schooling options. They had a difficult decision to make. Moussa was working in his dream job, something he'd prepared years for. He didn't want to leave. His wife was not just sick but miserable apart from their kids. She was honest with him about she felt, which for an African woman is pushing the envelope! But with tears in her eyes she went on to tell me how he had sacrificed his own dreams for her sake. Husbands, this is often our call, to sacrifice our dreams. This is how a husband submits to his wife—by loving her sacrificially.

Second, it's a purposeful love. Jesus died for us with a purpose in mind. Paul speak of that here. His purpose was to make us holy, to cleanse us, to feed and care for us in order to present us to him as a beautiful and radiant bride without stain or wrinkle. These all correspond to the purpose behind a husband's love. He's not to use his headship to suppress his wife, but to encourage her growth—spiritually, intellectually, and emotionally. If your wife has a gift or talent, you should praise her and affirm her and support her as she finds ways to develop and use those talents. If she has wounds from her past, you can take them seriously and see to it she gets the care she needs to deal with that. And you should take the lead in praying with her, reading the Word with her, worshipping and serving with her.

I can't help but think of a ballet dance. Believe me, I'm not an expert but I've watched pairs ballet and what always strikes me is how the man's (the Cavalier's) role is to take the lead in providing strength, support and to instill a sense of confidence in his partner that he'll be there in every situation. But all of what he does really serves the purpose of bringing out the beauty and grace of the female dancer. She's the one people are watching!

Finally, it's a wise love. Why do I say wise? Paul says in v. 28 ***“he who loves his wife loves himself.”*** His reasoning goes like this: it's normal and healthy for all of us to care for our own bodies. We shower, shave, brush our teeth, go to the gym, get a haircut and try to eat stuff that won't clog our arteries. Paul knows that. That's normal. But then he says, “Do you realize that just as Jesus is one with his body, the church, so you are one with your wife? So when you love and care for your wife, you're loving and caring for yourself.” It's true! The bottom line is, when my wife is well cared for, when she feels loved and appreciated and respected, I'm going to benefit because we're one flesh.

If a husband loves a wife in this sacrificial, purposeful and wise manner, he'll never have to worry about having a wife who respects him and submits to him. Liz Curtis Higgs was a well-known disc jockey who lived a very wild lifestyle without God. In fact,

Howard Stern was the A.M. show, and Liz Curtis Higgs was the P.M. show. She was so off the deep end that Howard Stern once told her to clean up her act! And because Liz Curtis Higgs had been burned by so many men, and her heart had been broken, she became a militant feminist. But she had a Christian girlfriend who kept inviting her to church. One day after a long time, she said, “Okay, I'll go to church one time and one time only.” So she went to church with her friend. And that week, the pastor just happened to be teaching on the verse that says, “Wives submit yourselves to your husbands.” Not exactly a good verse to start with a militant feminist! And she got a little uptight, more than a little angry. But she continued to listen, and she actually heard the second part of the verse: husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave his life up for her. When Liz heard that part, she leaned over to her friend and said with a little cynicism, “I'd gladly give myself to any man if I knew he would die for me.” Her friend leaned over and said, “Liz, there is man who loved you enough to die for you. His name is Jesus Christ. That's how much he loves you.” And it was not long after that that Liz dropped her guard, surrendered her life to God in love, and became a believer. Today she's a well-known Christian author.

So there it is. Marriage is a dance with the high purpose of revealing an even greater love story between Jesus and his church. A husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church. A wife is to respect and submit to her husband as the church does to Christ.

This is hard work. Sometimes we feel like we're getting the short end of the stick. But we're never told to play our part only if the other is doing their part. A wife's respect for her husband shouldn't depend on him always being respectable. A husband's love for his wife isn't dependent on her always being lovable. We may say, “Why should I love my wife if she doesn't respect me? Why should I respect my husband when doesn't show love to me?” But maybe this is precisely **why** we should love our spouse; because in their brokenness and fallenness they need our love and respect even more. We love and respect our spouse not because they're saints, but as sinners. If we love and respect them for their saintliness, we do not love her at all. We are called to love our wives not as saints but as sinners; just like we are.

These things aren't easy for us. As a matter of fact I think the very things he tells wives and husbands to do are counterintuitive to both as fallen, damaged human beings. That's why marriage is hard work. That's why every marriage is a dance where we step on each other's toes. That's why time and time again forgiveness is necessary in a marriage. That's why God uses marriage to refine us and chip away at our selfish sin nature and make us more like his Son.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

© 2012 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA
Catalog No. 1372-15

This message from Scripture was preached on Sunday, July 29, 2012 at Central Peninsula Church
1005 Shell Boulevard | Foster City CA 94404 | 650 349.1132 | www.cpcweb.org. Additional copies available on request.