

## Wives, Submit to Your Own Husbands

*Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. 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. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.*

Ephesians 5:22-24

Matthew Henry correctly declared, “Now I know not any thing that will contribute more to the furtherance of this good work than the bringing of family religion more into practice and reputation. Here the reformation must begin.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the importance of the family can almost not be overstated, and it is upon the family that we know turn our attention.

With these verses, Paul officially launches into the household commands, which address authority and submission within three of the most common relationships in life: marriage, parenting, and work. Although we will have much more to say about the importance of these commands in the coming weeks (and specifically as we tackle 5:32-33), we should note here that the apostle is applying the cumulative weight of the letter into these passages. Lest we think that chapters 1-3 presented only a spiritual reality, Paul gave us the walk commands of 4:1-5:21, and in case we believe that those commands only apply to our Sunday gatherings, he now applies the power of the gospel onto daily relationships. Thus, he is making it clear that there is no facet of our lives that can be withheld from transformative love of Christ.

The remainder of chapter five deals with how wives and husbands are to relate to one another in the Lord. We will spend more time on this section than upon parenting or work because of the greater space that Paul gives to it and because of the immense cosmological significance of the Christian marriage. Let us begin, therefore, with Paul’s word to the wives.

*Wives.* This first word gives abundant clarity which of Paul’s readers he is specifically addressing. Because of this explicit directing of the apostle’s words, this sermon will be directed particularly at my sisters in Christ who are married. Since all of Scripture is profitable for teaching, correcting, reproving, and training in righteousness, we should each have plenty to learn and apply to ourselves from this passage and the ones that follow; however, the sights of this text are set firmly upon wives.

The three verses of our text communicate one command and one reasoning, expressing both twice, forward and backward. The command is first given to us as *wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord*. Then Paul gives the reasoning: *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*. Verse 24 then repeats both the command and reasoning, but this time reverses the order: *Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands*. We will, therefore, break this text into its two parts: the command and the reasoning.

---

<sup>1</sup> As cited in *A Puritan Theology*, 859.

## RESPECTFUL SUBMISSION

*Submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.* And in case we missed that meaning, he reiterates *wives should submit in everything to their husbands*. The duty of the wife in marriage is respectful submission to her husband. Submission, as we discussed briefly last week, means to place oneself under authority, to be subject to another. Wives are, therefore, under the authority of their own husbands, and Paul is commanding them to display this reality by their submission. Although submission is filled today with a plethora of negative connotations. Let us, therefore, focus specifically on what a wife's submission both is and is not.

First, her submission is willing rather than forced. Denny Burk comments on Paul's specific word choice here, saying:

But notice what he doesn't say. Paul could have said, "Husbands, subject your wives to yourselves." Paul might have spoken in such a way that called on husbands to compel or coerce submission from their wives. Such a command would have fit quite well within the patriarchal culture of Paul's day. But that's not how Paul talks. He addresses the wives and says "be subject" in the passive voice. This means that wives are called on *voluntarily* to submit to their husbands. The responsibility falls to the wives to submit themselves, not the husbands to make them submit.<sup>2</sup>

History is, of course, littered with forced marriages, which are again a lamentable consequence of sin; however, the biblical pattern is that of Eve happily giving herself over to Adam in marriage, with Adam lovingly leading her as more significant than himself. Because the Scriptures never present marriage as necessary union, it should always be a voluntary institution with the husband understanding well his responsibility to lead sacrificially and the wife understanding her role as his submissive helper.

Submission to her husband is not absolute. Paul does say that a wife must submit to her husband in everything, but he also qualifies it with *as to the Lord*. Submission to Christ takes preeminence over submitting to one's husband; therefore, husbands cannot use these verses to justify demanding sinful, harmful, or demeaning actions from their wives. Of course, even a refusal to submit to such things can still be done in a respectful manner.

Submission is not silence. Several times, women in general are given commands of quietness like to "learn quietly" (1 Timothy 2:11) and be adorned "with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit" (1 Peter 3:4). Yet these do not mean that a wife is to remain perpetually silent in the presence of her husband. Indeed, Paul apparently permitted women to both pray and prophesy aloud at church (1 Corinthians 11:4). The excellent wife described in Proverbs 31 has her husband's deepest trust for "she opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue" (Proverbs 31:26). Such wisdom can only come through the fear of the LORD and meditation upon His Word. Wives should, therefore, be filled with Scripture and its wisdom so that they are fountains of counsel and comfort to their husbands.

---

<sup>2</sup> Denny Burk, *The Gospel & Marriage*, 28.

Likewise, submission is not passivity. Especially for wives who struggle to be submissive, the danger may be to swing over to the opposite extreme. Passivity, however, is not submissiveness. Peter called wives to use their submission, even to nonbelieving husbands actively because “they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, when they see your respectful and pure conduct (1 Peter 3:1-2). Again, the wise wife of Proverbs is both active and assertive in her submissive help to her husband. She happily provides food for her family (v. 15), buys a field and plants a vineyard (v. 16), gives to the poor (v. 17), makes merchandise to be sold (vv. 18, 24), and generally avoids all idleness (v. 27). She is what we might call a go-getter. Yet this activity is not a lack of submission. This image is of a husband and wife in sync with one another. She has her husband’s trust and “does him good, and not harm” (v. 12). Her desires are not contrary to him, and he does not rule over her. She knows her husband and by wisdom actively implements his leading of their family.

Finally, we should note that quarrelsomeness is not submission. Four times the Proverbs warn against this kind of wife. “It is better to live in the corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a quarrelsome wife” (21:9). “It is better to live in a desert land than with a quarrelsome and fretful wife” (21:19). “It is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a quarrelsome wife” (25:24). “A continual dripping on a rainy day and a quarrelsome wife are alike; to restrain her is to restrain the wind or to grasp oil in one’s right hand” (27:15-16).

Such quarrelsome women may indeed appear to be submissive to their husbands in public. They might have a quiet and calm demeanor around others. Yet they bear the authority over their household rather than the husbands simply because if her will is not done she makes his life miserable. Hear this often-ignored truth: many wives emasculate their husbands little by little using nothing more than their tears. Few men are able to respond reasonably to a sobbing woman, which makes emotional manipulation an easy to perform (whether intentional or not). Sadly, the combination of an emotionally volatile wife and a well-meaning husband<sup>3</sup> can result in marriage that appears biblical on the outside but a closer inspection reveals that the marriage is inverted, the wife has become the head and the husband the helper. Make no mistake, such emotional manipulation (again, intentional or unintentional) is a form of quarrelsomeness, and it is absolutely opposed to biblical submission.

Submission is, however, an act of worship. The church’s submission to Christ is her reasonable service in light of His atoning death upon the cross. Likewise, a wife’s submission to her husband is not primarily for the good of her husband but for the glory of God. Jesus summarized the law into two commands: love God and love your neighbor. Both are necessary, but loving God is primary. We cannot know how to properly love our neighbors without first knowing and loving the God who is love. Similarly, obedience to God’s commands is always first and foremost an act of worship to Him and secondarily an act of love to others. Peter makes this explicit by noting that a wife adorned with a submissive spirit is “in God’s sight... very precious” (1 Peter 3:4), and this was after he instructed them to be submissive even to gospel-rejecting husbands! Though your husband and

---

<sup>3</sup> Lord willing, we discuss Peter’s call for husbands to live with their wives in an understanding way next week. Husbands are called to love their wives, but love does not mean making someone happy. It is easy for a husband to feel good about and justify yielding to his wife’s emotions, but the loving response is not always what the other person desires.

others fail to notice your submissiveness, take heart that “your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matthew 6:6).

Finally, even though the church submits to Christ, we should also remember that Christ Himself modeled submission for us. After describing the only story of Jesus’ youth in Scripture, Luke records of our Lord’s relationship to his parents, saying: “And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them” (Luke 2:51). The incarnate and sinless Son of God willingly submitted to the sinful and fallen Mary and Joseph. Furthermore, Jesus also submitted to the will of the Father, as see vividly in His prayer within the garden of Gethsemane. After Christ’s humble submission to the Father upon the cross, He received His glorious exaltation in the resurrection and ascension. Likewise, in the kingdom the humble shall be exalted while the exalted shall be humbled. Glory follows the submission of a godly wife.

## AS THE CHURCH SUBMITS TO CHRIST

Instead, wives are to submit to their own husbands *as the church submits to Christ, 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*. Notice that Paul’s reasoning behind marital submission based upon creation rather than culture.

One writer explains the its biblical significance of submission, noting that:

Submission is an unavoidable biblical category. Let’s look at the Greek again. The Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) uses the verb *hupotasso*, meaning to “set under” or “to submit,” 27 times, while the New Testament uses it 76 times. “Submit” is used as an exhortation to Christians in their present lives to be salt and light (Matt 5:13-14), to take control by actively submitting ourselves to the structures God has created in the world, witnessing to the fact that God is still in control and that everything God created is good (1 Tim 4:4). As redeemed saints living in God’s new family, we are, in a sense, reliving the experience of Adam and Eve, who failed in their task. In the power of the resurrection and the Spirit of Christ, we reclaim the cosmos, honor the Creator, and exercise our godly role of filling and subduing the earth by honoring the goodness of creation’s structures and submitting to them.<sup>4</sup>

The submission of a wife to her husband is one of these structures embedded within creation by the Creator. We find this pattern made explicit within the second chapter of the Bible. Adam, the first man, was formed from the dust and given the breath of life by God through his nostrils. Although he was given dominion and command over all the earth, the only not good thing in the pre-fallen world was Adam’s loneliness. God, therefore, made “a helper fit for him” (Genesis 2:20), forming Eve, his wife, from one of Adam’s ribs. Adam’s authority over Eve is then demonstrated twice by naming her (Genesis 2:23, 3:20). Thus, marital authority and submission is not a by-product of the Fall, but the Fall did complicate matters significantly.

In Genesis 3:16, God spoke to Eve after her sin and warned, “Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you.” Interpretations of this verse are notoriously vast; however, God’s intentional repeating of these phrase to Cain regarding his conflict with sin help clarify the

---

<sup>4</sup> Peter Jones, *The Other Worldview*, 154.

meaning. Speaking of Cain's sin, God said, "Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it" (Genesis 4:7). Rather than being a helper fit for Adam, Eve's desires would now be contrary to Adam's, much like sin is against us. And like God commanded Cain to ruthlessly rule over his sin, Adam would rule over Eve with a harsh rather than sacrificial hand. Therefore, the pattern of husband authority and wife submission has not changed post-fall, but it has become much more difficult. We no longer see this structure of creation as a joy in which to dwell but as shackles that we must break. We do so, however, to our own harm and destruction.

While certain outward expressions of masculinity and femininity vary from culture to culture and between time periods (i.e. head coverings), the principle of submission and authority is not predicated upon the culture. The husband is the head of his wife; he is her leader, her protector, her shepherd. And Paul makes a direct comparison to Christ's relationship with the church. As we each die to ourselves and submit ourselves to Christ as our Lord, wives also die to themselves by placing themselves under the submission of their husbands. As Paul will declare explicitly in verse 32, the mystery of marriage is profound, but "it refers to Christ and the church."

Christian wives are meant to be a living, breathing illustration of how the church follows and submits to Christ. To follow Christ means sacrificing our own goals and aspirations upon the altar and living for the exaltation of Jesus' name. Being united to Christ means having life abundantly, but it also means that we are no longer our own. We belong to our Lord. We are His servants. Yet this losing of our lives is actually gain. We are more free as slaves to Christ, not less. Wives provide a physical picture of this transaction. Under their husbands loving headship, wives should flourish and thrive through all of their strengths and gifts, yet in doing so, autonomy is surrendered. Wives, you are no longer your own; rather, by marriage covenant, you have given yourself to your husband as a helper fit for him.

Ray Ortland reflects on the wonder of this calling:

Christian marriage is like a waltz, not a military march. By trusting the Lord and embracing her calling, a Christian wife empowers her husband as no one else on the face of the earth can do. She is so secure in Christ that she is no longer jealous to establish her identity separate from her husband. She understands how profound it is to be one flesh with him, and she gives him her whole heart and her practical support.<sup>5</sup>

If you are, therefore, a wife, consider your calling to your husband in the Lord. Are you respectfully submitting to his headship? Are you encouraging him to take loving leadership of your family? Are you giving him your practical support as a helper fit for him? Are there any false forms of submission of which you need to repent? Do you confuse submission with silence or passivity, or do you appear to be submissive, while in reality acting as the head?

---

<sup>5</sup> Ray Ortland, *Marriage and the Mystery of the Gospel*, 94.