

Husbands and Wives, Be Subordinate to Each Other

Pastor Chip Fisher

Scripture: Ephesians 5:21-33

Most of you have noticed it will be Valentine's Day later this week. Usually I'm reluctant to allow the secular calendar to drive our church schedule, but this day provides a good excuse to preach the first of at least two sermons on married, romantic love.

The U.S. Greeting Card Association estimates that 1 billion cards will be sent for this holiday. 850,000,000 of them will be bought and sent by women, whose motives are clear and straightforward. Mostly I trust them. The other 15% are bought and sent by men. I don't trust their motives whatsoever—I suspect most of us are warily circling around this holiday, looking for some possible strategic advantage. We want to be good husbands, and we want to please our wives. We vaguely intuit that for some reason which we will never understand, this day is somehow important to our wife, but most men will never “get” Valentine's Day.

We cannot be sure how Valentine's Day originated. As good a legend as any other goes back to the reign of Roman Emperor Claudius II, who didn't like the fact that young men were too often choosing to marry and make and nurture babies back home rather than enlist as soldiers and fight the Emperor's battles in farflung places. So Claudius made it illegal for couples to marry. The priest Valentinus feared God more than the emperor, and continued to marry young couples, even under penalty of death. They caught him at it, and he was put in prison. According to the story, he had either married or healed the jailer's daughter, and he wrote her a note of encouragement in the faith. He signed it from “your Valentine” and the jailer smuggled it out to her just before St. Valentine was put to death February 14, 249 A.D.

Most of us who are married find ourselves somewhere between Art Linkletter and Larry King. Larry King recently hosted Art Linkletter, who is now well into his 90's, on his TV show. Art was expressing his gratitude, and their exchange went something like this: “Larry, I've been married to my wife for over 70 years now, and she has been the greatest blessing of my

life.” Not to be outdone, or perhaps entering into the spirit of matrimony himself, Larry offered, “Art, I've been married 48 years myself. To six of the nicest gals you'd ever want to meet.”

The lesson we heard from Ephesians makes clear Christian marriage is intended and suited for a woman and a man who have given their lives over to the lordship of Jesus. There is growing confusion as to what constitutes marriage, and my intention this morning is not to debate all the variations and possible understanding of marriage. The covenant and blessings of Christian marriage are meant for and available for Christians—for those whose lives are yielded to God in Christ.

It is one of the ironies of our time that Christian marriage has become a victim of its own success. There are many possible arrangements for a society to organize the challenges of social stability, reproducing and raising and protecting babies and children to become the next generation, harnessing young men's sexual energy, and our human yearnings for emotional and physical intimacy. Because for centuries Christian marriage succeeded in these challenges far better than other alternative arrangements—certainly in the West—we have forgotten the original foundation in Christ until now we think of marriage as being any rite between two consenting adults—on the beach, at the county courthouse, in a church building. These may all be valid arrangements, and no doubt many couples married in these ways enjoy wonderful marriages. But the promises of God, the power of the Holy Spirit, pertain to those couples joined in Christ. Otherwise, two people are on their own, doing their best. (They get to decide, of course, whether that's good enough.)

I learned first-hand as a young adult how different cultures and religions manage these cultural challenges. I was playing in a tennis tournament in Ankara, the capitol of Turkey, in 1975 with several other Americans. It was a long tournament—almost two weeks—and on the second day a young Turkish national

(a bright and Westernized Turk who had gotten his law degree at Pepperdine) took a shine to Maggie, one of the American players. They saw a lot of each other—he was a marvelous host—and he surprised Maggie when the night before we were all to fly back to Spain he proposed to her. ““I would be very honored if you would become my wife. My third wife.” (So I was not surprise to learn that Osama bin Laden has four current wives (yes, at one time!) and one ex-wife and about 23 children (*Newsweek*, Aug 12, 2002.)

Before we head back into the lesson I want to be forthcoming. What I have to share with you comes from my authority as one trying to understand the Scriptures—not from my own success. Most of you know I was married in 1981 and divorced in 1984 (no children). Nothing in the Christian life is automatic; I failed in marriage. But I’m also here to tell you that the mercy of God is new every morning. In His mercy God brought me Trish, and we’ve been married now 20 years. No sin or shortcoming is final or fatal, not as long as God is God. It was for us sinners that Christian marriage is designed. (As far back as the Garden of Eden this has been a broken world; women and men have been in competition and tension with each other. This is exactly why Christian marriage has been designed the way it is—not for perfect people.)

If you have heard or read the text this morning, you are likely either perplexed or outraged. [If you are reading this sermon and have not read the lesson, this would be a good time to do so. It’s appended on the last page of what you are reading.] This counsel to Christians is extremely counter-cultural—no question. Many think of it as an embarrassment: “Wives, be subordinate to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which He is the Savior. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands. Husbands, you must love your wives; wives, you must show respect for your husbands.” [vv 22-24, 31]

Can you believe this stuff? Women are supposed to submit to their husbands—and in everything? The husband is the head of the family? Can you believe the Bible actually says women are inferior to men, wives to their husbands? God says so?

Actually, I don’t believe this either. Which is why now I love it when occasionally a hopelessly out-of-fashion couple will choose this lesson to be read and preached on during their wedding ceremony. Because it gives me a chance to clear up a whole lot of misunderstandings.

This lesson was amazingly counter-cultural alright when the early church heard it, but not in a way any of us sitting here in 2009 can begin to imagine. Let’s hear how this was so radical, so revolutionary.

First, this perspective was immensely elevating to women. Contemporary philosophies, including the Stoics, commonly made out lists of behavior and ethics comparable to what we heard. But always only for the men. Women were not understood to be moral agents, and were never accorded the respect of being able to choose how to behave. Women had no comparable status—yet this letter is trusting that women were responsible for the choices they made. This letter treats women with the inherent dignity which is theirs not by virtue of living in the Greek or Roman culture—but because of their status as sisters in Christ.

Second, why would women need to be reminded to be respectful to their husbands in the first place? There would have been no need to remind women who were already beaten down or bullied to show respect for their husbands. Apparently the wives in the church at Ephesus, the hearers of this letter, were already enjoying their freedom in Christ so much they needed a reminder to show respect to their husbands—just as the husbands needed a reminder to love their wives. This letter is a corrective; only women already having been set free from the oppression of the culture all around them would need this reminder. (For this reason “be subordinate” is the best translation. Husbands and wives both have a choice in the matter; each is a responsible agent and may choose to following a new ordering of priorities. “Be subject to” implies being run over and chewed up; “Submit to” implies passivity.)

Third, also unique and mind-blowing at the time, is the call to mutuality and reciprocity. “Husbands and wives, you are each to be subordinate to the other...” What? Husbands are to submit to their wives? In Stoicism men were perhaps to submit to the State or to the gods—but never to a woman. What? A wife had a claim upon her husband, just as he had a claim upon her? Unthinkable. [These insights from John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, Eerdmans, 1972, chapter 9: “Revolutionary Subordination.”]

This call to husband and wife, reciprocally accountable to and for one another, is the direct result of the teaching and example of Jesus, who surely understood and modeled the equal value and dignity of women and men. Who surely understood Genesis 1:28, in the first chapter of the entire Bible: “God created them, male and female; both equally created in the image of God.”

Equal value and dignity in the eyes of God does not mean women and men are created identically or given interchangeable roles or functions or natures. God has created women and men very differently: the moment we start to forget these differences our marriage is headed for rough waters. Equal before God, but with complementary temperaments and functions. God has made us beautifully, intentionally, on purpose—typically, very different from one another.

Our post-Christian age has tended to forget this God-given distinction. But this distinction helps to explain the statement “For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the Head of the Church” [v 23]. Many of you know there are two different meanings to this word “head of”, and we don’t need to go to a Greek dictionary to find out which is the right one. Our lesson provides the context: men are to be heads of their wives, their families, exactly “as Christ is Head of the Church.” One dead giveaway: if ever a man lords it over his family, demands special privileges, demands that his wife has to obey him or agree with because he’s the head, that man has totally misunderstood and is distorting the intention.

How does the head of the family, or the head of the wife, behave? A year or so ago our family was getting to bed on a Friday night. It was about 11:10 pm; we’d probably finished watching “Numbers” together and had just turned out the lights. We were expecting no one, it was totally dark inside and out. Trish and I were in the hallway heading for our bedroom when there came a knock at the front door. Not knock—a violent repeated pounding which shook the whole front of the house. It startled and frightened us; adrenaline shot thru our veins and sweat beaded on our foreheads.

Being a liberated and equality-minded husband, not afraid to change with the times, I said, “Honey, I think it’s your turn. Why don’t you go and check who’s there?” (There’s a lot I don’t get right, but that time I got Trish and the kids into the back rooms, rushed into our bedroom to arm myself with my trusty tennis racket, and apprehensively went to see who was at the front door. Fortunately, it turned out there was no danger. I forget the reason—maybe one of the kids’ birthdays, or a big game the next day—a group of friends of Katie or Matt had come over and TP’d our front yard and cars and trees. I don’t know why it couldn’t wait ‘til morning, but they really wanted us to come out to admire their handiwork then and there!)

Jesus defines how a husband is to be head. Jesus gave his very life for His Church. He gave every ounce of His energy to bring new life to others. He recognized

the dignity within every wounded and frightened friend or enemy of His; He kept believing in the potential of each one He meet, and kept trying to see, and help others see, the pure heart somewhere deep within each one.

How did Jesus treat women? Remember the woman who anointed His feet with her hair and the costly perfume? The holy people at the party were offended that she, of all people, should come in and do such a brazen thing in front of them. Jesus leapt to her defense; he commended her to them and in fact got in their face: “How dare you hypocrites judge her, this woman My friend, who is showing her love for me in a beautiful way. As a matter of fact, you holy ones haven’t paid attention even to the minimum duties of hospitality; to the barest needs of Mine or your other guests. Don’t you even think of speaking a word against her, not as long as I am here!” Jesus used His authority to defend and elevate her.

Over and over again: at the Samaritan well; with the woman caught in adultery, to the women He healed. Over and over again Jesus saw the beauty and the dignity underneath the wounded or the forsaken or the threatened exterior. Jesus understood how painfully, how easily women with such a capacity to love could have their hearts broken. Jesus understood how men could take advantage of the physical weakness and the emotional openness of women. Jesus is the One who kept believing in those women around Him; who kept seeing their value and their beauty no matter what the world saw on the outside, no matter what the world had done to them or how much mileage they had racked up along the way. Jesus is the One who does not take advantage.

Every honorable husband wants to love his wife in these ways, at least in the beginning. Jesus calls every husband who claims to be a disciple of His to step up and to love our wives; the writer of Ephesians calls every husband to love our wife as Christ loves His Church. I wonder how many of our wives would object to showing us respect if we loved them something like Christ does?

The Western world today, a lot of it, seems to think the best thing for women and men are identical roles within a marriage, if it still bothers with marriage at all.

And see what a great state of affairs our secular consensus in the West has achieved. No need to subordinate myself to anything or anyone. Why ever would I? I answer to no one but myself. My personal autonomy is my highest good. “Choice” is all-important.

My every feeling is to be obeyed; my every appetite is to be satisfied.

Modern science has even freed women from the biological tyranny of unwanted pregnancy. What a great time to be a young woman, finally freed from the oppression of the need to be married, oppressed by some male. Women, finally freed of the ages-old sexual double standard, may get out and express themselves, may freely enjoy their bodies as men have long gotten to do. Women, too, can now go for the gusto.

Statistics, if not common sense, tell us what a great time this is for adult women. Sexually transmitted diseases, some of them resistant to all treatment, are at an all-time high. The incidence of gynecological sterility is at record levels. Depression, and prescription drugs to treat it, also at record levels. I don't know who measures the levels of enmity and mistrust between young women and men—or the incidences of broken hearts, broken dreams, inner turmoil and self-loathing. Teenage girls, even female children, are being sexualized and indoctrinated into this brave new culture of “freedom” in ways that alarm parents. The rate of children born out of wedlock now exceeds 1 in 4 in the U.S.; children without a father at home are by far at greatest risk of abuse, failure in school, inability to live in satisfying adult relationships. See how well this new understanding is serving women and children.

Isn't it shocking how Paul hated and oppressed women?

By the way, this is also a great time for young adult men. For millennia, young men have been trying to figure out how to enjoy sex with women without that inconvenient little part about having to commit the rest of their lives to one. (In many parts of the globe even today young a man is still afraid of the brothers or uncles or father of the young woman with whom he may enjoy a dalliance coming after him to beat him maybe to death. Think of how much trouble this new understanding of sexual liberation in the West saves the men: no more guilt, no more vengeful relatives coming after you, no more having to take such risks and endure all that inconvenience for sexual relationships. Now many young women are eager—what a great time for a young man to be alive!)

The confusion about marriage in the post-Christian west has also greatly increased the incidence of cohabitation or “living together” before marriage. Every statistical study has revealed that couples who lived together before being married suffer greater risk for physical abuse, for divorce, for children at greater risk,

and less statistical possibility for fulfillment in marriage than do couples who start out the old-fashioned way. You can imagine the great majority of couples married here live together beforehand—why would they not; how ever would they know otherwise? Not only does their living together before marriage save them a lot of money, but they share the notion that they want to get to know each other better before they're married. They want to enjoy the benefits of marriage while avoiding the responsibilities and the covenant bonding. It's all very understandable, very natural for those who are not disciples of Jesus.

[And obviously we who are His disciples are very fallible. Every one of us knows what it feels like to try to rationalize: “the rules don't apply to me...” “A lot of other people couldn't but I can handle it”... “God will understand; after all, God created me with these desires...” None of what I say needs to be a judgment; if we were each being judged on our merits before the living God, who could stand? No one needs my puny judgment from the pulpit, and I have no desire to judge: Reality is the judge, and it can be ruthless; the rest of peoples' lives is the real judgment. Then, there is the Judge to whom we will each give account—but that's sure not me.]

Why would you marry someone if you've never lived together? In the old analogy, why would you want to buy a car before you've taken it for a test drive? This image sounds great if you think of yourself as the driver—but do the math! Half of us are going to end up being driver, but half the used car. Driven hard, dented up, no oil change, never washed, broken down and dropped off at the dealer's curb. Someone is always the car. And guess who's usually the car: the more tender your heart, the more readily you want to give yourself to someone in a loving relationship, the more you end up being the used car. And it's not usually the man.

The New Testament keeps telling us we are each the car, we are each the driver. We have a responsibility each to the other. Male or female, we are to treat each other with love and respect.

And many today are indignant at how Paul was so oppressive toward women.

Time to get to the heart of the matter: past time. We've covered everything but the heart of the text. Husbands and wives, be subordinate to each other “out of reverence for Christ.” As a result of your awe before, your loyalty to, your obedience to Jesus, you are to live counter-culturally. Husbands, love your wives for the sake of Jesus. Wives, respect your husbands for the sake

of Jesus. This shouldn't catch us by surprise: for us, the Holy Spirit of Jesus is at the heart of every relationship, every activity, every effort. It is ultimately Him to whom we are subordinating ourselves. The Mystery at the center of each Christian marriage covenant is the Holy Spirit of Christ. Our marriage is all about Christ! Our marriage is not about finding Mr. Right, but becoming Mr. (or Mrs.) Right.

Wives: show respect to your husband for the sake of Jesus—now. It's not "I'll respect my husband when he quits acting so irresponsibly and childishly. When he quits totally ignoring my needs. When he makes some attempt at communicating better. I'll respect my husband when he shows me that he deserves my respect."

Husbands: love your wives for the sake of Jesus—now. It's not "I'll love my wife when she quits trying to control my life, when she quits trying to correct and manage me, when she remains cold and superior to me while ignoring and belittling my physical needs. I'll love her when she deserves my love."

The covenant of Christian marriage is not about our immediate happiness but about our long-term holiness. It's not about "looking out for #1"—we all know how to do that, married or single. It's not about using someone to meet my needs. It's about trusting in the Spirit to allow me to keep offering myself to meet the needs of my beloved.

Whether I'm young or old, single or married, male or female: for us disciples of Jesus, it's never "just about me." It's always about allegiance to our Lord. Marriage happens to make a marvelous theatre for the ongoing challenge and drama of living out our faithfulness to God, of learning further to trust Him, of being conformed more nearly to the image of Christ.

But if we're paying attention, just about every relationship, every endeavor, every element of our lives makes a marvelous theater for the ongoing challenge and drama of living out our faithfulness to God, of learning further to trust in Him, of being conformed more nearly to the image of Christ.

Ephesians 5:21-33

Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Wives, be subordinate to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. Just as the church is subordinate to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind--yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body. "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church.

Each of you, however, must love his wife as himself, and a wife must respect her husband.