7-21-19

Ephesians 5:22-33

We come now to a most beautiful and descriptive passage of the union of a man and a woman as husband and wife. It is based in the original intent of God’s design from the beginning of His creation. It describes the way for a marriage to work harmoniously and in the most edifying way for a man and woman to share their lives together. It describes the way for Christian couples to give glory to God. And of course, because of these things, it is the target of sustained and maligning attack by satan.

Satan, in his role of attacking everything good and godly, sets his sights on Christian marriage; not only because of his vain attempt to spoil God’s plan, but because the stability of every society depends on stable marriage and families. He has been largely successful in disengaging Christian doctrine from marriage. The secular world never makes it past the first line of this amazing passage that gives the prescription for a good and satisfying marriage.

At the words “Wives, be subject to your own husbands”, there are immediate cries of “tyranny, oppression, male domination, slavery”. These attitudes have even crept into the Christian church. We try to explain it away by saying that Paul was writing in a different time when women had no rights, but things are different now. We say that he was addressing a particular problem in the Ephesian church or in the churches of Asia Minor. We say that times have changed and women are no longer dependent on their husbands as they once were.

Well, we can expect that kind of reaction from the secular world. They don’t have the Holy Spirit and without Him, Scripture cannot be understood. But there is no excuse for the church of Jesus Christ. The Bible is clear that God is unchanging; we can’t change what His word says just because we have changed over time. As Christians, we need to look at this whole passage with the knowledge that it is the word of God. In so doing, we come to see that there is a marvelous balance between the husband and wife; and that marriage is a picture of Jesus’ relationship with His church. The doctrine and justification for this passage goes clear back to the beginning; in the Garden of Eden.

Notice that this passage follows verse 21, “and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ”. The Christian life is one of subjection; first to God and then to one another. Although Paul uses this verse to conclude the section on being filled with the Holy Spirit and living holy lives, it also begins this section in which we have three specific examples of submission: wives and husbands, children and parents, slaves and masters. Keep in mind that all are to be subject to Christ at all times.

Just as a point of interest, and especially for husbands to keep in mind; this passage contains about 40 words of instruction for the wives, it contains about 115 for the husbands. But it is also important to note that most of the passage is about Christ and His church.

Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. Is this what it really means? Yes. Now, be aware that it does not say, “Women, be submissive to men.” This is strictly within the loving confines of marriage. The only subjection of women to men is in the general admonition for Christians to be subject to each other; of course, that goes both ways. This does not mean that wives cannot have or express their own opinion. If there is disagreement between a husband and wife, it needs to be talked about and a solution worked out. If an agreement can’t be reached though, the wife needs to support her husband’s decision.

The last part of that verse is important, “as to the Lord”. To be subject to your husband is to be subject to the Lord. A wife chooses to be subject to her husband out of obedience to Jesus. This is ultimately the reason for a wife being subject; because that is the design of God.

Verse 23 tells us, “For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself *being* the Savior of the body.” The first part of this verse looks back to Genesis 2. God created Adam first; the first man; the first husband. By this God established the order of things. God saw that it was not good for the man to be alone and that he needed “a helper suitable for him”. This is when God took the rib from Adam and created the first woman; the first wife. Eve was created to help the man, accompany the man, to complete the man. Right here, God established the picture of the future relationship of Christ and His church.

Marriage is just a picture or a type of Jesus and His church. Obviously, there is much more to the relationship between Jesus and the church. As our verse tells us, Jesus is actually the Saviour of the church; the husband is not the saviour of the wife.

It is very natural, especially in our fallen culture, to feel that the idea of being a helper or of being subject to someone shows inferiority to someone else. This is not the case in Christendom; in the Bible. We are absolutely equal in God’s eyes.

Galatians 3:28

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

In the Psalms, God is referred to as a Helper. He is the Helper of orphans and of the afflicted. David even asks God to be his Helper. Remember that Jesus became subject. Although He is God, He volunteered to become subject to the Father. He lived His life on earth in complete submission to the Father; and through that, to the cross. These is no shame in submission, if it is ultimately to our Saviour. The calling to serve is a high one, even if our society doesn’t think so. It is not easy to submit or be subject to your husband; even if he is a Christian, he is fallible and will make mistakes. Yet that is the wife’s ministry in the Christian marriage.

In verse 24, Paul makes a summery by saying that wives ought to be subject to their husbands in everything. This word “everything” needs to be taken in context of the whole Bible. “Everything” does not include going against God’s word or His commands. We see an example of this in Acts 5 in the account of Ananias and Sapphira. Ananias concocted a scheme to sell some property, hide part of the money, and give the rest to the new Christian church. They made the claim that they had given all the proceeds of the land sale to the church. The apostle Peter rebuked them as lying to the Holy Spirit and it cost them both their lives. This is a case where Sapphira being submissive to her husband was the wrong thing to do.

Paul next turns to the husbands. “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her.” If a husband understands this, and puts it into practice, there is no chance of him becoming a tyrant. He will not subject his wife to slavery. He will not hold her back from a fulfilled life and spiritual growth. He will bring about the opposite of all these. He will honor her, protect her, respect her dignity, and encourage her spiritual growth. He will be grateful to God for her.

Our word love has become very diluted. We use the same word for the feeling toward a spouse that we do toward a chocolate bar. The Greeks, at least, have three different words for love; each with different levels or nuances. The first was “eros”. This describes the physical desire or the fleshly desire between two people. There is nothing wrong with this between a husband and wife; in fact, it ought to be present. However, it is, unfortunately, the common meaning of the word love today. The second word used is “phileo”. Phileo is a friendship love; it describes a fondness for someone. This too, is an important kind of love for a husband and wife to have for each other. They need to enjoy each other’s company.

Many marriages today are based solely on one or the other, or perhaps both, of these types of love. Many marriages today don’t last. Eros love won’t weather the storms of life; it is an emotion based, usually selfish type of love. Phileo can work if the friendship is deep enough, but this is not usually the case. Sometimes these people will stick out a marriage by sheer determination, but they are not happy. This is not the way God designed marriage.

The third Greek word, and the word Paul uses in our passage is, of course, agape. Agape is a self-sacrificial love. Agape is God-like love. This is the type of love a husband is to have for his wife. And it is extreme. It is compared to the love Jesus has for the church, to the point of giving up His life for her. Again, we have the picture of Christ and the church in the marriage relationship.

Jesus was perfectly complete in His glorified, loving relationship with the Father and the Holy Spirit. He didn’t need anything; He didn’t need the church. But He chose to submit to the Father’s will and leave the glory of His presence. He became a human-being, began His church, suffered terribly at the hands of the ones He came to save, and was killed by them. This is sacrificial love.

Husbands are to love their wives in this way. Certainly, this includes the extreme of dying for one’s wife if need be. But that doesn’t often happen. It also includes living for her. These are the daily sacrifices that are continued throughout the lifetime of the marriage. A Christian marriage will contain all three types of love; it is the agape love that will weather the storms and make the wife’s role a fulfilling one. While eros and phileo love are emotion-based, agape love requires a decision, which can only be reached by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is on the same order as joyfully following the commands of Jesus in order to show your love for Him.

In the next couple of verses, Paul goes into more detail of Christ’s love for the church and what He is doing for His bride. It is Jesus who is perfecting the church. When the end comes, because of His work, the church will be beautiful and perfect; just as a beautiful bride on her wedding day.

Paul moves on to another comparison for the husband; Husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. At first glance, this seems to be a step downward from the comparison to Christ and the church. But there are important Biblical references here. In John 13:34, Jesus tells His disciples to “love one another, even as I have loved you”. Loving one’s wife self-sacrificially is a subset of this command of Jesus. In the same category is what Jesus says in Matthew 22:39, that “you shall love your neighbor as yourself”. A husband should have no closer neighbor than his wife. And also, we must never forget that we should treat our bodies as holy because we are a temple of the Holy Spirit.

Paul refers to an important Biblical reference from Genesis when he reminds us that a husband and wife shall become one flesh. A wife becomes part of her husband and so he should care for her as part of his body. In the same way, Jesus cares for the church because it is the body of Christ.

This is a great mystery; and it is part of the mystery Paul spoke of earlier in this letter. Even before the beginning of time, God had ordained that the Gentiles would be brought into the church and they and the Jews would become one. Additionally, He will bring all things together in Christ. The husband and wife are a picture of this; there is a union between Christ and His church. Again, we are His body; we are in Christ; He is the vine and we are the branches; we are joined.

Paul ends with an admonishment to both husband and wife: Nevertheless, each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself, and the wife must *see to it* that she respects her husband. So, Paul spoke of the mystery of Christ and the church, but then he goes back to the marriage. Here we see a fundamental difference in the needs of women and men. Women, wives, need to know they are loved; if a man provides her with agape love, she will have what she needs. Men, husbands, need respect; if a wife is subject to her husband, he will receive what he needs.

Yes, men need love and women need respect, and they should receive these in the marriage relationship. Both were created in the image of God. Paul is just pointing out an important difference in our God made design.

In all of our loving and subjecting in the marriage relationship, it is vital to keep our focus on Jesus. He comes before either spouse and a Christian spouse ought to accept that. Both husbands and wives are members of the body of Christ, and He is our head. We must be subject to Him above all.

Prayer

LORD, first off, we pray for Your institution of marriage. It is under terrible attack by the devil and society is following along. We ask for Your grace and strength for all those couples who are trying to live a Biblical marriage; and that Your Holy Spirit would bring conviction so that Biblical marriage will be sought again by Your people.

I pray for each and every marriage represented here. That the focus and confidence be placed in You and Your plan for this union. Protect each couple here from the onslaught of satan; by standing strong may they be a witness for You and thereby bring You glory.

Help each of us here to have a better understanding of the relationship between Christ and we, His church. Lead us to act as the body of Christ; to follow his Lordship, to submit to His commands. By the strength of the Holy Spirit we can be a unity in You.

We ask these things in Jesus’ name

Amen