

“The Covenantal Responsibilities of Wives”
(Ephesians 5:22-24)

We have been looking at the what the Bible teaches concerning the covenant of companionship, or marriage. We have seen that this was something that God instituted from the very beginning of His Creation. It was not good for the man to be alone, so God very graciously created a helpmate for him to meet his needs, to be his companion and to be his friend. When He brought her to the man, the man immediately recognized that this one was truly bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. She was a part of him, because she had been taken out of his side. We have also seen what the Lord calls the husband to do in this covenant of marriage. He is to love his wife as he loves his own body, which means he is to nourish and cherish her as he does his own flesh, for that is what she is. He is to love his wife as Christ loves His Church, which means, like Christ, he is to purify her moral and spiritual character through the Word. He is to know the Scripture and be prepared to read it and explain it to his wife. He is also to pray for her. As Christ continually intercedes for His Church, in order to keep her from falling away into sin, so the husband is to keep his wife continually before the throne of grace that Christ might strengthen her in all the ways of obedience. And he is to rule over her. As Christ exercises His authority to subdue our enemies and to protect us, so husbands are to use their authority and strength to love and protect their wives. They are not to lord it over them, but use their authority for the good of their wives, that they might bless God for His love and protection. This means, among other things, that husbands are to be on the lookout, not only for physical enemies, but especially for spiritual ones. They will need to study the tactics and stratagems of the devil, so that they can recognize his attacks when he comes, for he will come. His major attack is against the family, both inside the church and outside of it. As we saw this morning, if he can divide the family, he can conquer it.

This evening, we will want to look at the wife’s responsibilities in this covenant of companionship. As the husband will need to overcome his sinful self-centeredness in order to lay down his life and love his wife as himself, so the wife will need to overcome her sinful desire to lord it over her husband, which, we saw, resulted from the curse. The main thing that Paul calls the wife to in this passage is submission. What he says is ***Wives are to subject themselves to their own husbands, just as they subject themselves to Christ, and, which is the same thing, they are to subject themselves to their husbands as the church does to Christ.*** Either way the meaning is the same, for Paul assumes here that the wife is a part of the church. And realize too that Paul doesn’t mean that the wife is to subject herself to her husband as the church today actually subjects itself to Christ, but as it is called to do so by her Lord. What the church is called to do, and what it actually does sadly are often two entirely different things.

Now again, consider the parallels that exist here between Christ and the husband and between the church and the wife. First of all, the church was created for Christ’s sake and not Christ for the church. We might be tempted to think that Christ was created (at least His human nature) in order to redeem the church. But really man was created and the elect were chosen for the sake of Christ. It was God’s plan all along to create man, to allow him to Fall, and then to send His Son into the world in their nature to redeem those whom He had chosen, in order to reveal the riches of His grace and glory to them. In the same way, man was not created for the woman, but the woman for man. Man was created first, and then the woman was created in order to compliment and complete the man. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 11:8-9, “For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; for indeed man was not created for the woman’s sake, but woman for the man’s sake.” Consider this too: the church was not made to rule over Christ, but Christ over the church. He is the head of His church. This is the office that His Father gave Him as Mediator to use to bring His people savingly to Himself. This included not only absolute authority to rule over His church, but also over all of Creation in order to work all things together for the good of His church and to insure that everyone whom the Father sent Him to save would be saved. In the same way, the woman was not created to rule over the man, but the man over the woman. Again, Paul writes, “But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:3). This doesn’t mean that the man is better than the woman in God’s sight. Both are equally valuable to Him. But it does mean that when God created mankind, He created the man first and endowed him with the authority to rule in the home. He is the spiritual head of his household. And just as Christ does not use His authority in a tyrannical way to order us about, but instead uses it justly and wisely to bring glory to God and good to His people, so the husband is not to use this authority for his own good, but as a stewardship entrusted to him for the protection and nurture of his wife in the Lord.

Having seen then that the Lord calls the husband to be the head of his wife, let’s consider what it means for the wife to submit herself to him. The overarching idea is that the wife is to submit herself to her husband as the church is to submit itself to Christ. If we can understand that submission in the one case, we should be able clearly

to see how submission works in the other.

The first question we need to ask, then, is how is the church to submit herself to Christ? The answer is *humbly in all things*. Christ, as I said before, was invested with all power and authority in order to fulfill His office as Mediator. Jesus said to His disciples, before He ascended into heaven, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth” (Matt. 28:18). Even before this the apostles recognized that authority and submitted themselves to it. You never find the disciples at any time arguing with Christ. Once they recognized His authority, they simply yielded themselves to it, calling Him Lord. Once He ascended into heaven, they continued to yield themselves to it by obeying the Word He had given them. And realizing that the people of God would need continued guidance after they were gone, they wrote down that Word under the inspiration of the Spirit and ordained elders in every congregation of believers, that the elders might declare that Word and His people might submit themselves to it, just as they would to Christ, since it is His Word they are commissioned to minister. And just as we are to submit to the authority of the president, when he exercises it lawfully for Christ’s sake, whether he is a respectable man or not, so it is in the case of the elders of Christ’s Church: we are to submit to their authority when they lawfully exercise it, whether they are respectable or not, for the sake of Christ. This is important to understand, since the wife is to submit to her husband in the same way.

Paul tells us here that the husband also has an office, an office from God, an office with authority. We have seen how the husband is to steward that authority in order to care for and protect his wife. But now Paul tells the wife that she is to submit to that authority as to the Lord. When she does, she is submitting to and honoring the Lord who gave it. And notice that Paul does not say that the wife is to submit to her husband’s authority only if her husband is a godly and respectable man, but even if he isn’t. It’s not the person that the wife is to submit to, but his office. When we submitted ourselves to the former president of the United States, it was not because he was worthy of that respect. He clearly wasn’t. It was because of the office he held, and the authority he had. It was because our Lord commanded us to do so. Paul writes, “Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves” (Rom. 13:1-2). In the same way, when the wife obeys her husband, whether he is a honorable man or not, she is to do so for the sake of Christ and out of love for Him, for it is His authority that she is submitting to.

Now this might seem a bit frightening for wives at first, but we need to understand that there are limits to this authority. Just as the power of the president is limited by God’s Word, so is that of the husband. The husband has the right to require what he biblically may -- which is that his wife walk in all the ways of the Lord. But he can never require her to break any of those commandments. His authority comes from Christ and is in submission to His Word. At no time does he ever have the right to compel her to break even the smallest of Christ’s commands. If the wife was to obey such a command, she would be sinning. This is why when Abigail heard that her husband Nabal had turned David’s messengers away harshly, she immediately loaded the donkeys with the things David asked for, in direct defiance of her husband. If she hadn’t, she would have sinned against the Lord as well. Many wives have struggled over this point, but it’s true: a husband never has the right to command his wife to break the commandments of her Lord. This would be using Christ’s authority to overthrow His authority.

The last thing I would ask you to consider this evening is how sinful it is to disregard the Lord’s requirements in this area, and, on the other hand, what a testimony it is to Him if it is obeyed.

If a woman constantly rebels against the authority of her husband, then far from being a helpmate and a blessing, she is actually a curse to him. Solomon, a man who had a great deal of experience in this area, wrote, “It is better to live in a corner of a roof, than in a house shared with a contentious woman” (Prov. 21:9), and again, “It is better to live in a desert land, than with a contentious and vexing woman” (v. 19). He says, “The wise woman builds her house, but the foolish tears it down with her own hands” (14:1). This isn’t to say that the husband can’t fall into a sinful and wicked state as well. But when the wife refuses to submit to God’s purpose for her life, she makes not only herself miserable, but also her husband. Of course, if she continues to refuse to submit to her husband, she will also reveal that she really doesn’t know Christ at all.

But on the other hand, if she does fear the Lord and honor her husband, she will not only adorn her household with peace, she will also be a great blessing to her husband and adorn the Gospel with a godly life. Consider what King Lemuel tells us about the virtuous woman. He says, “An excellent wife, who can find? For her worth is far above jewels. The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. She does him good and not evil all the days of her life. She looks for wool and flax, and works with her hands in delight. She is like merchant ships; she brings her food from afar. She rises also while it is still night, and gives food to her household, and portions to her maidens. She considers a field and buys it; from her earnings she plants a vineyard. She girds herself with strength, and makes her arms strong. She senses that her gain is good; her lamp does not go out at night. She stretches out her hands to the distaff, and her hands grasp the spindle. She extends her hand to the

poor; and she stretches out her hands to the needy. She is not afraid of the snow for her household, for all her household are clothed with scarlet. She makes coverings for herself; her clothing is fine linen and purple. Her husband is known in the gates, when he sits among the elders of the land. She makes linen garments and sells *them*, and supplies belts to the tradesmen. Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she smiles at the future. She opens her mouth in wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. She looks well to the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children rise up and bless her; her husband *also*, and he praises her, *saying*: 'Many daughters have done nobly, but you excel them all.' Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, *but* a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised. Give her the product of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates" (Prov. 31:10-31). King Lemuel's mother taught him this proverb. She wanted him to find a godly wife, one that would build up his house and not tear it down, one that would do his soul good all his life and not evil. This is the kind of woman you young men should be looking for in a wife, not the kind that are pretty only on the outside. Listen to what Peter exhorts the women, "And let not your adornment be *merely* external-- braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses; but *let it be* the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God. For in this way in former times the holy women also, who hoped in God, used to adorn themselves, being submissive to their own husbands. Thus Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, and you have become her children if you do what is right without being frightened by any fear" (1 Pet. 3:3-6). Outward beauty might bring the praise of men, but inward beauty will bring the praise of God.

Now you wives here this evening might be asking yourselves, Who can live up to this standard? Who can be this kind of woman? You know you can't do it. You don't have the strength. You might have even tried to become like this before but found that no matter how hard you tried, your efforts only met with failure. If that's the case, don't give up hope. Though you don't have the strength to do this, Christ does. How can a wife submit herself to her husband as Christ calls His church to submit to Him? Only in the same way that a husband can love his wife as Christ loved the church: through the power of Christ Himself. Jesus has called us to do this. Do you think that He won't give us the power to do it, if we ask Him? Jesus says all we have to do is ask. If we know it's the Lord's will, we know when we pray He will hear us, and we will receive what we have asked for (1 John 5:14). I'm sure that all of us ache in our hearts to do better than we have in our marriages, because of our love for Christ. Let us come to Him now and find that renewed strength and blessing we need to do all that He calls us to do. Amen.