

The Vow: Part Four

Ephesians 5:21-33

Mutual Submission.

- *Ephesians 5:21*

Husbands.

Wives.

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- *Ephesians 5:32-33*

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Today we are concluding our four-part series called, "The Vow," looking at marriage from God's Word. We've looked at instructions from the New Testament about what we can do in a marriage where one is a believer and the other is not. We also looked at two examples of marriage from Scripture (Abraham and Sarah, and Hosea and Gomer) – marriages that were far from perfect and yet they became examples of God's faithfulness and love.

So to wrap this series up, today we want to learn what it takes to have a healthy and fulfilling marriage as God has designed it, with Christ in the center. The passage we are going to look at is from Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus, and it is found in chapter five. Before we dive into it, I want to give a bit of the context. Then we'll learn what it's telling us about marriage.

In all my years as a pastor I have shared this passage with every couple that I do pre-marriage and marriage counseling with. Some of you will recognize this. But until today I've never preached this. I don't know why, I just haven't. But I'm excited to do so today.

This passage that we are looking at is a part of Paul's teaching on holiness in the believer's life, or what we call living the sanctified life. To be sanctified means to be surrendered completely to God and to totally live for Christ in everything you do and every circumstance and relationship you find yourself in. Paul is making the point that to live the Christian life makes a practical difference in all of our relationships, including and especially in our families. In fact, Paul's making the point that the Christian family is the key to the church being able to be the church. The church is supposed to be a community of people who love and accept and serve each other, and do the same for all the unchurched people around them. If this is going to happen, it starts when we practice it in our homes. So what we are going to see is not optional for Christian marriages, nor is it simply marriage advice. This is a description of marriage that God intended, that Jesus died to give us, and that we can experience. Okay? Ready?

So I'd like to read this passage to us, and it's a long one, but I'm going to ask you to help me with it. There are some verses that are for everybody, some for women or wives, and some for men or husbands. So you are going to help me by standing when I'm reading the part that applies to you. Okay? So to start, I'd like to ask everyone to stand with me please. Thank you!

Here's the beginning of this passage, and it applies to both husbands and wives:

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. (Ephesians 5:21, niv)

This is the key to the entire passage, as we'll see. Now the next section is instructions for the wives, so ladies please remain standing as I read these three verses, and men you can sit down:

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. (Ephesians 5:22-24, niv)

Thank you, ladies, for standing for those three verses. You can be seated, and now men it is time for you to stand. Great. These next eight verses are instructions for you in marriage:

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. (Ephesians 5:25-32, niv)

Great job guys; keep standing, and ladies please join them in standing because the concluding verse is again for all of us:

However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband. (Ephesians 5:33, niv)

Good job! I’m glad we could get your blood flowing a bit before I preach! Your standing helped illustrate a few things that are very important about this passage. You can have a seat.

So let me first give some serious, serious correction, because this may be one of the most misused and abused passages of Scripture. Some of you who have been around the church for a while will recognize this passage, because it talks about the husband being the head of the wife and how the wife is supposed to submit to the husband. First of all, if that is the entirety of your understanding of this passage, you are taking it out of context and *you are wrong*. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve had to correct peoples’ thinking on this passage, especially when I’m counseling a wife who is in an abusive marriage. In many of those cases, if that wife has been around the church for a while, inevitably some terrible pastor has told them that because of this passage, they have to stay submitted to their abusive husband. This comes from a false doctrine that dictates that a wife has to submit to her husband in everything, no matter what, because she is ruled over by her husband. And if she doesn’t, this false teaching says that she’s sinning and not being a good witness. Maybe you’ve been taught that, or you picked that up somewhere along the way. *Listen:* to stay submitted to an abusive spouse is *not* God’s will. I’m not saying you should divorce, because there are things you can do to try to save the marriage. I’ll talk some more about this in a minute, but I think it’s important to get that out up front before we proceed any further, okay?

That’s important because this passage of instructions for husbands and wives must be read in the context of...

Mutual Submission.

Before Paul even starts out into any of the specific instructions, he makes it clear that what he is about to say involves mutual submission between the wife and husband.

When we talk about mutual submission, I want you to notice something else about this passage: pop quiz! When it came to the parts that we read how many verses were specifically for women? Do you remember? Three verses were specifically for women. How many verses of instructions were there specifically for the men? Eight verses were instructions for the men. Do you know why over 75% of the instructions are for the husband? I don't know for sure, but here's my opinion: I think it's because it takes three times as much to get it through our thick heads! But also, I think it's because the lion's share of the responsibility for a healthy, Christ-centered marriage falls on the husband. If he is doing his part, the wife's part will be much easier. I think you'll see that soon.

But when it comes to this idea of mutual submission, you need to know that this description of a Christian marriage was incredibly countercultural at the time. Remember that Ephesus was a Gentile city – it was Greco-Roman. It was not Jewish, and it was definitely not Christian. At that time and in that culture, people held levels of importance, and males were at the top. The bottom levels were women, children, and slaves – all of which Paul addresses in chapters five and six of Ephesians, and in all those relationships, the Bible teaches that there should be mutual submission. Paul's teaching on the sanctified Christian community includes husbands and wives, children and parents, and then slaves and masters. The revolutionary thing was that in all cases there was to be mutual submission. You see, it was accepted in that culture that men ruled, and women, children, and slaves had to do whatever the men said. They had no choice or voice. Of course children were below women, and slaves were below children. So if the husband chewed out the wife, she could take it out on the kids, who could take it out on the slaves, who I guess could take it out on the cat (not the dog).

We don't have time to go into the teaching to families and slaves and masters; I'm just wanting to point out that mutual submission is the expected, sanctified way of relating to each other in the Church, no matter the age or the social standing. The marker of mutuality for the Christian is that he or she has their exclusive focus on serving each other and their *shared* responsibility – *not on individual rights*. The Christian does not seek his or her own rights first; instead, he or she surrenders rights in order to serve others. This is the way of Christ. I think it is countercultural even today, isn't it? Maybe this makes you uncomfortable, but to submit voluntarily to your spouse is to choose to place yourself *under* the other person; to serve and to yield to the other person. And the Bible is very, very clear: we are to do this out of reverence for Christ. Christ is Lord over all, and therefore we all are under him. *To live a worthy Christian life in relationship to other believers calls for humility, gentleness, patience, tolerance, love, and peace.* This is the definition of mutual submission (repeat). In another place in the Bible, Philippians 2:3, we are told to:

“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves...” (Philippians 2:3, niv)

...and two verses later we're told:

“In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus;

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:5-8)

The expectation is that those in our culture who have positions of power and authority have the greater responsibility to *submit* to those considered beneath them. If this is uncomfortable to you, then I think you’ve come across an area that you need to submit to Christ. If you as a husband are chafing at the idea of submitting to your wife, you’ve got some praying to do. If as a wife you are chafing at the idea of submitting to your husband, you’ve got some praying to do. In the Christian marriage, it requires mutuality. This is the definition of love, as defined and demonstrated by Christ himself toward us. Okay?

Now, let’s see what this mutual submission looks like more specifically for each member of the marriage. Paul starts with wives, but I want to first look at the teaching to...

Husbands.

That’s because the husband has the lion’s share of responsibility. The passage starts with women but not because they have to submit first; the passage indicates that wives can submit *because* the husband submits. And if we can understand that, the wife’s response is much easier to understand. This section of God’s Word, Ephesians 5:25-32, describes what and why a husband submits to his wife.

The husband is supposed to love the wife like...what? As Christ loves the church. How does Christ love the church? He gave his life for her; Jesus Christ died on the cross for you, and for everyone. And everyone who responds to that loving self-sacrifice are Christians – they are part of the Church, capital C, of which West Valley Church is a part. What is one of the big metaphors for the church that you find in the Bible? The Bride. Christ is the groom, we are the bride. Christ loves the church so much that he willingly gave his life for her. Correct? So then Paul describes some of the ways that Christ loves the Church; not only did he die for her, he also washes her with water through the word. There are several things that this alludes to; one is baptism. In baptism we demonstrate that we have been saved from sin and death and we have been washed clean by Christ’s sacrifice and shed blood. We are also cleansed by the Word of God – that means that God speaks into our lives through Jesus, through his word, and through the Spirit, and he speaks things that encourage us, that build us up, that empower us to be the very best that God created us to be in the first place – without sin. He does this so that the church can be “without spot or blemish.” Here is the deal: everything Christ does for you, everything the Spirit of God does within you, is for you to become fully what God has created you to be – in His image, filled with abundant and eternal life, living a life of purpose and meaning by living a life of love, which is the greatest of all. That’s what Christ did and does for you!!!

Husbands: *there* are your orders. It is your job to submit to your wife, putting her ahead of yourself, giving your life for her in big ways and every little way. It is your job to see her become all that God has designed and destined your wife to become. It is your job to

encourage her, to build her up, and to do everything in your power to see her reach her fullest potential. Do you understand?

Okay let me ask all of us: if Christ hadn't done that for you first, would you be able to respond to Christ? No. You would be lost in sin, dead in your Spirit, unable to even know God as your father, let alone respond to him. It is because of him that you can even respond to God's love in the first place. 1 John 4:19 in the Bible says:

"We love because he first loved us." It was because he took the initiative and sacrificed himself and humbly serves us that we can respond to him, and it is because of his love that we can submit to one another in love. (1 John 4:19)

Husbands, you shouldn't expect anything from your wife if you are not first loving her like Christ does. This is why over 75% of the instruction is for you; you must take the initiative. Now...

Wives,

...before you start elbowing your husband in the ribs, let's look at you; let's see what God says your job is in the marriage. Your job is to submit to your husband. Now I know, that sounds archaic and medieval and misogynistic. But not if you put it into the context of the whole passage.

Let me ask all of us: when you finally realize how much God loves you, and what Christ has done for you on the cross in his suffering and death in your place, and the fact that he's given you his very own Spirit to help you live an abundant and full life of purpose and love – once you realize that, is it a problem for you to submit to him? No! Not if you finally realize and accept it; then submission is your natural response! If you know how much Christ loves you and has done for you, and you still won't submit, then the problem is you, isn't it?

Let's translate that into the marriage: wife, if your husband loves you the way that he's told to in this passage, by giving his life for you and doing everything to help you achieve your highest and best in this world, is it difficult for you to submit to that? No! It shouldn't be...and if it is, well then, the problem is with you, isn't it?

I know this is hard to understand. In our society, we work hard to give women a fair and rightful place. I would submit to you that what our society is trying to do is get back to what things were like in the Garden. Let me remind you: in Genesis 1:27 we are told that BOTH male and female were made in the image of God; the woman was not less than the man. The idea of a companion or helper, as Eve is described in chapter two, carries with it a mutuality; of both being a companion and helper to each other. Now watch this: it isn't until *after* Adam and Eve sinned that the wife was put under subjection to the husband. In Genesis 3 God describes to both Adam and Eve what the punishment will be, and for Eve it says this in verse 17:

"Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." (Genesis 3:17)

And we've seen that played out ever since. That's not to justify men mistreating women;

that mistreatment is SIN. But when women want equality, they are instinctively wanting to get back to what God first intended. The problem is, no one can get back to the Garden without Christ! You can't regain the Garden without submitting to Christ's death on the cross and his new life for you. No matter how well-intentioned women's rights are, it will never be fully achieved without Christ. Because men have too much sin, so they won't give up power, and if women get power they have too much sin and they want to rule over men. Only Christ can remove our sin nature and give us the ability to humble ourselves and serve each other in mutual submission.

I might add that equality does not mean that men and women are the same. We are built differently, wired differently, and better at some things than others. I'm speaking in generalities. There are many things women can do that men can. But there are many that they cannot. And there are many things that women do that men cannot. In marriage counseling I always say that you are both different. That can either become a source of conflict or it can be a way to help each other. If you were both the same, one of you wouldn't be necessary!

The point of all of this is that, when your husband loves and serves you selflessly and wants you to become all God created you to be, then submission isn't so hard.

Now, if the man refuses to serve you in this way, that's a different thing. Then we get back to Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 7; you should submit to him if you can, in the areas you can, but not in ways that subject you to abuse. If he mistreats, demeans, disrespects, or abuses you, the mutuality is broken. You do not have to subject yourself to that. But listen carefully: I'm not saying you should divorce – I will never tell a person to get divorced, no matter how bad it seems. That is not my decision to make; never. I have told people who have grounds for divorce that the choice is theirs alone, not mine, and as a pastor I can't ever advise divorce, because I believe in a God of miracles. And there are things you can do to try to salvage the marriage. You don't have to put up with abuse – not for one day. If there are children involved, not for one minute! We'll help you get out of the house or get him out of the house. There are still steps you can take to try to get him the help he needs and to rebuild the marriage, if he's willing. My advice is, "don't divorce until you know you've done everything you can, as much as it depends on you, to restore the marriage. But God understands; that's why he's given grounds for divorce. Sometimes too much water has gone under the bridge, and you can't make water flow upstream. In that case, as a church we will do all we can to support you and your kids, while still praying for and trying to help the husband."

But I can tell you that I have even seen divorced couples, when there were things like adultery and addiction and even abuse, who both submit to Christ and ended up back together. For example, I worked with one couple, and they submitted to Christ and worked on repairing their relationship and learning mutual submission. Months later, I had the privilege of officiating their remarriage to each other. Their little seven-year-old daughter walked mommy down the aisle to give her to be remarried to daddy. That was twenty years ago, and they are still enjoying a strong marriage today.

Mutual submission,

...under the power of Christ, is a powerful thing! Paul begins and ends this passage on marriage with mutual submission. That's why he says this is such a profound mystery – that a healthy, Christ-centered, mutually submissive marriage is the closest thing the world will ever get to seeing what the relationship is between Christ and the Church. When he says mystery, he's not saying it's a puzzle. What he's saying is that this was what God designed at the beginning in the Garden, but after sin entered the world and our lives, that relationship to God and to each other was lost; a mystery; until Christ came and died for us and revealed the mystery. He restored our vision of what our relationship to God and to each other could be. Mutual submission.

There's so much more I could teach from this passage, but let me change gears and explain what this means, with pictures. In pre-marriage and marriage counseling, I usually draw out what this looks like, so let me share that with you now; I think it will make sense. Bring up the first diagram, please.

Diagrams on the screen.

Does this make sense? This is the key to a healthy, life-giving marriage. Bow your heads with me.

The only way for you to have a healthy marriage is if you are willing to submit to your spouse. But the truth is, the only way you are ever going to have a healthy life – period – is if you are submitted to Christ. If you have not accepted Christ's love for you, why not? The God of the Universe gave his life for you and can live in you so that you can become fully human. Christ loves you and gave himself up for you to make you holy, speaking life-giving words into you so that you can reach your fullest potential; cleansing you by the washing with water through the word, and to present you to himself a radiant person, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In fact, if you want to learn how to truly love yourself, you must accept and submit to his love. Will you?

If you are a Christian, are you living your life fully submitted to Christ, every day? You might make it to heaven, but you will never live the abundant life God created you for if you won't submit fully to him.

You will never have a life-giving marriage if you don't first submit to Christ and then to each other.

Take a moment. Acknowledge that Christ has humbled and submitted himself to you. Confess your sin to him. Ask him to forgive you.

Would you pray along with me? All of us, let's pray together, everybody pray aloud. Pray after me:

Heavenly Father,
I am a sinner
who needs a Savior.
Jesus, save me,

change me,
make me new.
I believe you died for me,
so I submit myself to you.
I give you all of my life.
Fill me with your Spirit
That I might fully live my life
Like Jesus.
That my marriage might be
An example to the world
Of your love for us.
Thank you for new life,
now you have mine.
In Jesus' Name I pray,
Amen!

Please stand.

Pastor Jason:

"Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." - Colossians 3:12-17