

The Beauty of Christian Marriage

Ephesians 5:21-33 on August 10, 2025

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Please read Ephesians 5:21-33 before going further in this transcript.

Today we're smack dab in the middle of a 5-part sermon series on Human Sexuality. Here's our schedule

July 27: A Way That Seems Right (Intro to Human Sexuality series)

August 3: The Beauty of Christian Singlehood

August 10: The Beauty of Christian Marriage

August 17: The Beauty of Innocence, Modesty, and Purity

August 24: A Compassionate, Truthful Response to LGBTQ+

Each of these sermons will be posted in our archives on the church website: www.efcbemidji.org/sermons/sermon-list

As we've mentioned before, this series will contain some "PG-13" themes, so we've provided some special options for our younger worshippers. See page 2 of the bulletin for more details. We're also providing a "Fireside Chat" after each of these sermons down in our Fireside Room at 11 a.m. Anyone who's interested in discussing the sermon, or asking any follow-up questions, is welcome to grab a treat from the gym and then walk on over to the Fireside Room.

Relationships between men and women have been strained ever since humankind's original fall into sin.

Genesis 3:16 records this part of God's judgment,

"To the woman he said,

"I will make your pains in childbearing very severe;
with painful labor you will give birth to children.

Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you."

The interplay of this "desire" and "ruling over" has led to all kinds of infighting within marriages, and a desire for control, rather than the joy and harmony that God originally intended.¹ My *NIV Study Bible* has a helpful note: "Here there is a breakdown in the original harmonious relationship between the man and the woman. Ideals such as care for one another give way to conflict. As the New Testament suggests, this is NOT irreversible. ...The reconciliation that Jesus Christ brought to the world by the forgiveness of sins can restore the ideal harmony of the relationship that existed between the man and the woman before the fall."²

¹ See *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 15 footnote on Genesis 3:16.

² *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 31 footnote on Genesis 3:16.

This morning's Scripture reading from Ephesians 5:21-33 paints a beautiful picture of love and respect within Christian Marriage. It presents God's redemptive design, for how together, as one flesh, a husband and wife can not only find joy and harmony, but also how they can magnify the beauty of Christ and His Church. Ephesians 5:33 summarizes this section with two key words: "However, each one of you [husbands] also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband." "Love and respect," and based on the verses leading up to this summary, we could clarify this summary with two other key words: "Sacrifice and Submission." In other words...

Christian marriage is a call to embrace God's redemptive design for sacrificial love and submissive respect.

> Husbands loving their wives as they love themselves, specifically refers to "sacrificial love," to husbands laying down their lives for their wives out of reverence for Christ.

> And wives respecting their husbands, specifically refers to "submissive respect," wives voluntarily following their husband's leadership out of reverence for Christ.

For believers who choose Christian marriage, instead of Christian singlehood, these are fitting descriptions for how husbands and wives should conduct themselves. Deeply devoted followers of Jesus are called to live out these two godly attributes. This is God's beautiful, redemptive design for the marriage relationship; this is *His* idea.

Ephesians 5:31-32 also adds this to the mix: "31 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' 32 This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church." Christian Marriage is something beautifully designed by God for the "one flesh" shared harmony and mutual joy of both the husband and the wife. And even more incredibly, it brings God great glory as it points to the mysterious union between Christ, and His Bride, the Church.³

Well, let's take a closer look at the two aspects of this redemptive design. First of all...

³ Friends, the book of Revelation reminds us that this Christian life will come to its ultimate crescendo at the Wedding Supper of the Lamb. "The imagery of the church as the bride of Christ draws upon the Old Testament imagery of Israel as the bride of Yahweh (Isaiah 54:5; 62:5; Jeremiah 31:32). Paul goes further in Ephesians 5:31 by quoting Genesis 2:24 to show that Christ and the church are one body. The union of man and wife prefigures and points to the reality of the union between Christ, the last Adam, and his bride, the church. This is a "profound mystery" because no one could have understood Genesis 2:24 this way apart from God's revelation. The union of Christ and the church finds its ultimate consummation in the wedding of the Lamb and the new Jerusalem (Revelation 19:7-8; 21:2,9)." *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2409 footnote on Ephesians 5:32.

The wife's role shines forth the beauty of submissive respect.

Ephesians 5:21-22 says to, “21 Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. 22 Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord.” Verse 21 starts us off on the right foot by clarifying that biblical submission is motivated by, and structured around, our shared reverence for Christ. It’s also worth noting that this word, “submit,” is a passive participle, which simply means that this submission is something that is done voluntarily, not by force.^{4 5} New Testament scholar Peter O’Brien clarifies: “The use of the middle voice of this verb emphasizes the voluntary character of the submission.”⁶

We should also note that this biblical submission is not about inferiority or a “2nd class” status for women; not at all. In fact, if we examine the approximately 40 occurrences of this verb throughout the New Testament, we find a pattern. God’s is not a god of disorder, so He’s built a healthy-functioning, God-honoring aspect into every relationship structure.⁷

> For example, in the New Testament we see Jesus the Son, *submitting* to God the Father, but that doesn’t mean that Jesus is somehow inferior to God the Father.^{8 9 10 11}

> We also find this New Testament principle in reference to citizens *submitting* themselves to the governing authorities.¹² But this also isn’t about 2nd class status; it’s about how we function as citizens living in a structured society, which benefits from the orderly operation of various relationships.

> This is the same idea that we find in Ephesians 5.

⁴ The word for submit in verse 21 is “ὑποτάσσω” in the Greek. Verse 22 then goes on to “borrow” from this participle. The full range of meaning includes: “to cause to be in a submissive relationship, to subject, to subordinate: ‘subject oneself, be subjected or subordinated, obey...Of submission involving recognition of an ordered structure... to whom/which appropriate respect is shown.’” See Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature (3rd ed., p. 1042). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁵ “to order oneself under” a leader... or to “submit oneself voluntarily.” Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Eerdmans, 1999, p. 399, Note #156.

⁶ Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Eerdmans, 1999, p. 411. And thus, “submit yourselves.”

⁷ See 1 Corinthians 14:33,40.

⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:28 says, “When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.” The *ESV* translates this a bit more literally, “When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.”

⁹ “Be made subject to” in 1 Corinthians 15:28 is the same Greek word that we find in Ephesians 5. So clearly this is not about inferiority or “2nd class” status. The doctrine of the Trinity clearly presents Father/Son/HS “existing in a loving unity of three equally divine Persons.” See EFCA 10-point Statement of Faith, Article 1. Thus, having equal worth with distinctive roles is entirely possible.

¹⁰ Therefore, as Jesus submits to His Heavenly Father, it in no way suggests “that the Son is in any way inferior to the Father.” NIV2011 Study Bible, p. 1946 note on 1 Corinthians 15:28

¹¹ Jesus’ submission to God the Father demonstrates “a functional subordination without implying inferiority, or less honour and glory.” O’Brien, p. 412.

¹² 1 Peter 2:13-15 says, “13 Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, 14 or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. 15 For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people.” See also verses 16-17, “...Show proper respect to everyone....”

Ephesians 5:23-24 goes on, “23 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. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.” So even as Christ is the head of the Church, so also the husband is the head of his wife and family. God’s has providentially designed a healthy relationship structure within families, within the church, within governed societies, and even within the Godhead. New Testament scholar Peter O’Brien says it well: “Submission is a humble recognition of [God’s] divine ordering.”¹³ So it’s up to each one of us as deeply devoted followers of Jesus, to decide to trust God’s design, to submit ourselves to it out of reverence for Christ. Once we rightly understand Biblical Submission, and once we rightly recognize it as God’s beautiful design, we can then wholeheartedly and joyfully embrace it.

It’s interesting to note that 1 Peter 3 applies the beauty of this submissive respect even to marriages where the spouses are unequally yoked. 1 Peter 3:1-2 says, “1 Wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your own husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, 2 when they see the purity and reverence of your lives.” Indeed, what could be more beautiful, than beautiful feet which bring the Good News of salvation to their own husband!?¹⁴ So a wife’s role as a Christian, even if she’s married to a non-Christian, is to shine forth the beauty of purity and reverence. God’s redemptive design shines through even in situations that don’t spiritually match up.¹⁵ By the way, this principle can be equally true for Christian husbands who are married to non-Christian wives. They also can win their wives over with their Christian behavior, as they love them in a Christlike, sacrificial way.

1 Peter 3:3-5 goes on, “3 Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewelry or fine clothes. 4 Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight. 5 For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to adorn themselves. They submitted themselves to their own husbands.” True beauty, genuine godly attractiveness, stems from the inner self. Godly women of the past, adorned themselves with beauty, by submitting themselves to their own husbands. This is what true beauty looks like in God’s design.

¹³ O’Brien, p. 411.

¹⁴ See Isaiah 52:7 and Romans 10:15.

¹⁵ Consider 1 Corinthians 7:12-16.

1 Peter 3:6 then goes on to say something that may seem a bit shocking at first, “like Sarah, who *obeyed* Abraham and called him her *lord*. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear.”¹⁶ What we need to realize here is that Sarah calling Abraham “lord” was simply a cultural term of respect. And “obeying” him was simply related to her submission to his leadership. So Sarah adorned herself with the beauty of submission, and Peter urged the other Christian women in his day to follow her example.

But Peter isn’t suggesting that this will be easy, which is why he includes the second half of verse 6, “You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear.” You see, submission is a high and holy calling, but it can get complicated. There were certainly situations where these Christian women wanted to do what was right, but it became challenging to do so while also submitting to their unbelieving husbands (husbands who may have been doing wrong, and urging their wives to join them in doing wrong). This puts Peter’s counsel, at the end of verse 6, in perspective: “and do not give way to fear.” Easier said than done, but good counsel nonetheless.

The New Testament was written some 2,000 years ago, in the midst of a Roman world which was entirely male-dominated. The historical context in which 1st century Christ-followers were living, gave full authority to men, to lead as harshly as they wanted to, and that made the New Testament teaching on submission, all the more challenging. This brings to mind the ongoing reality of Genesis 3:16, “...Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.” Having a husband “rule over you,” at this time in history, had the potential to be pretty scary. And yet, in the midst of this fear and this ongoing tension between men and women, and in the midst of a very male-dominated society, God’s redemptive design breaks forth in even greater beauty...

The husband’s role shines forth the beauty of sacrificial love.

1 Peter 3:7 goes on to declare, “Husbands, in the same way be *considerate* as you live with your wives, and treat them with *respect* as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.” In an incredibly countercultural move, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the writers of the New Testament called Christian men to live out God’s redemptive design before a watching world. Rather than using their positions of leadership in the home as a hammer, to force their wives to do what they said, they were called to be considerate of their needs. They were called to treat them with respect. Colossians 3:19

¹⁶ See Genesis 18:12.

confronts the culture head on, “Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.”

With these Scriptures in full view, we should all agree that God leaves no room for any type of abuse within his design for marriage, whether that be physical, verbal, emotional, mental, or other abuse. So ladies, if you or someone you know, is enduring an abusive relationship, get help today! You are not expected to silently suffer and submit to abuse; that is *not* Biblical Submission. Ephesians 5:28-30 says it plainly, “28 In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church— 30 for we are members of his body.” (*Jesus does not abuse His Church.*)

In stark contrast to the surrounding cultural norms in the Graeco-Roman world, Christian husbands were called to a much higher standard.¹⁷ Ephesians 5:25-27 declares, “25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her 26 to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, 27 and to present her to himself as a *radiant* church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.” In Ephesians 5, Paul teaches Christ-followers the God-honoring way that Christian households should function in the midst of their non-Christian neighbors.” In a society that unfairly favored men, one of the clear Christian teachings was for men to step up and become the sacrificial, kind, and considerate leaders God intended them to be! Rather than serving their own interests, Christian men were to focus on the interests of their wives, what would honor them and make them radiant.¹⁸

- > Talk about a stark contrast with the surrounding culture!
- > Talk about a clear witness for the Good News of Jesus Christ!
- > Talk about the difference it makes between a husband and wife when one or both of them are a deeply devoted follower of Jesus!

Unfortunately, a number of people have come to view this section of Ephesians as somehow misogynistic or repressive. It’s actually quite the opposite. The Apostle Paul, is explaining God’s redemptive design for how “sacrificial love” and “submissive respect” can display God’s goodness and wisdom, as human relationships thrive and flourish. God is honored, and

¹⁷ This is actually foreshadowed in other places like Ephesians 2 where Christians were reminded of the evil way they used to live before Christ but, now that they’ve been saved by grace, they are God’s handiwork created to do good. And in Ephesians 4, Paul called them to put off their old way of life and put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. Now, in chapter 5, Paul applies these same ideas to particular household relationships.

¹⁸ Consider Philippians 2:3-5.

people experience a mutual blessing, as they relate to one another out of their shared reverence for Christ.¹⁹

And so, we see God's redemptive design shine forth in beauty:

> The judgment from Genesis 3, of husbands ruling over their wives, is redeemed as God brings men to salvation, and teaches them to be Christian husbands who give up their very lives for their wives.

> In a similarly redemptive way, the judgment from Genesis 3, of wives desiring to control their husbands, is redeemed as God brings women to salvation, and teaches them to be Christian wives who respectfully follow their husband's leadership.

All of this is motivated by our shared reverence for Christ. It's fueled by our devotion to Him, and our trust that God's design for marriage is right and true and good. And let us never forget, that all of this can only be accomplished, as we daily depend upon the power of God's Spirit within us.²⁰

I'd like to conclude with a personal appeal to the husbands and wives who are reading today:

HUSBANDS, we take our cues directly from our Lord Jesus. A key factor in our growth as Christ-followers is learning to die to ourselves every day. Each day we need to learn more and more what it means to love our wives sacrificially, by laying down our lives for them. As we learn to embrace this

¹⁹ To be clear, the verse 21 reference to submitting to ONE ANOTHER is NOT suggesting mutual submission in every relationship structure. This would render the very concept and range of meaning for submission irrelevant. (See O'Brien's discussion of this on p. 402) For example, verse 21 is not suggesting that even as children submit to their parents in Ephesians 6 that parents should then also mutually submit to their children. Nor are masters being urged to mutually submit to their slaves later on in Ephesians 6. They are however reminded that they also have a Master in heaven and that they should treat their slaves well in reverent fear of God. Therefore, "the pronoun 'ONE ANOTHER' is not always fully reciprocal." (See O'Brien, p. 403) So when verse 21 says "ONE ANOTHER" it is saying that each Christ-follower should submit himself or herself appropriately in whatever relationship structure in which they find themselves: wives to husbands, children to parents, slaves to masters, and so on. We could just as easily include citizens to governing authorities. Autonomy and independence can be very good things, but we need to be aware of the danger of shedding all relationship structures. Many of these structures are God's good design and His loving provision for the people He has created. God created people to exist in relationships; to thrive in a social environment built on mutual respect and orderliness. The freedom and independence of the American psyche does not tend to embrace all of the good aspects of God's plan for social interactions, peace, and harmony. And that's our loss; it's to our own detriment. The above said, this should be held in check by our understanding of verses like Ephesians 4:2, "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love." And, Philippians 2:3-5, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus."

²⁰ Ephesians 5 directly addresses how submission is empowered by the Holy Spirit. Grammatically, the participle "submit" in verse 21 is dependent on the earlier imperative from verse 18 "be filled with the Holy Spirit." So, we could summarize this thought as "Be filled with the Spirit, so that you are empowered to submit to one another." We will not be able to practice submission in our relationships with one another apart from the reality of being filled with God's Holy Spirit.

beautiful and challenging goal, we'll find ourselves growing spiritually, by leaps and bounds, into the strong, godly man that God wants us to be.²¹

WIVES, embracing the teaching of Ephesians 5 is a key factor in your personal spiritual growth as a Christ-follower. As you voluntarily choose to submit to your husband, you are, in that very act, submitting to Lordship of Christ in your life. Following your husband's leadership is "part and parcel" of the way that you serve the Lord and grow into a mature woman of God.²²

HUSBANDS, there are plenty of men in the Bemidji area who have no idea what it means to truly love a woman. They're in need of a stable marriage relationship, but they have no idea how to even begin. They need our Christian example. They need to see what Christ-like chivalry looks like. They need to know that male chauvinism and harsh treatment of women is wrong; that women are not just objects to be used for our selfish pleasure. They need us to show them that the way to the heart of a woman is by first having a heart for the Lord.

WIVES, there are plenty of women in the Bemidji community who are longing in their hearts for a stable, meaningful relationship with a man, but they don't have the spiritual understanding to guide them. This idea of submitting to their husbands out of reverence for Christ, is a completely foreign concept to them. They need your Christian example. They need to see what Christ-like femininity looks like; the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. You can help them break free from the curse of desiring control in their relationship with their husband.

Love and respect. Sacrifice and Submission. No one said that Christian Marriage was going to be easy, but we do have the assurance from Scripture, that it is God's good and beautifully redemptive design.

²¹ In fact, the very effectiveness of a husband's prayers is impacted by the way he treats his wife. 1 Peter 3:7 teaches us, "Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers." We shouldn't even bother to ask God for anything until we've begun to show our wife the consideration and respect she deserves.

²² O'Brien, p. 412.