

A Beautiful Marriage

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- [0 : 0 0] Wives submit to your own husbands. Husbands love your wives. How do we measure the quality of a person or their success? Too often we judge by external appearances. How healthy they are. How wealthy they are. How professionally accomplished they are. How influential they are. But for the Apostle Paul in this passage, the quality of a person is judged not by what they appear to be in public, but by who they are at home. Suppose he is the healthiest, the wealthiest somebody in society. If his home life is a mess, he's not a success. Suppose he's the poorest nobody in society. If his home life is well-ordered, he's a success. Our politicians tell us that their home lives are irrelevant to their public performance. But if a person cannot be trusted to order their families, how can they be trusted to order our nation? The family and the home, more than anything else, are the bedrock of stability in British society, which is why the measure of a person is who they are at home.
- [1 : 2 0] This makes attacks on the family all the more serious, since they are eroding the foundation of what it means to be truly human. Now, the central relationship in the home is that which exists between husband and wife. Healthy churches must do everything in their power to equip Christian husbands to be the best husbands they can be and Christian wives to be the best wives they can be. In our passage, the Apostle Paul, who himself was a single man, respecting the centrality of the marriage bond, instructs us how to be successful by ordering our homes well. He shows us how, as Christians, we can have beautiful marriages. Now, before we get into the meat of this, let me say three things. First, it's really not easy, especially with my wife being here, for me as a married man to talk about marriage. Because in doing so, I realize how far short of the perfect standard I fall, and how much I have got to learn about how to love my wife in the same way Christ loves his church.
- [2 : 3 4] I look with awe upon marriages I see in this congregation, and wish mine could be quite as successful. So don't think I've got this sorted out, because I don't. Secondly, many Christian marriages fall apart, and we should be really wise in how we judge such situations. We do not know what happens between a man and his wife in private. But at least this, we as a church have to be there to help and support hurting partners. And lastly, many single people do not enjoy marriage. God has a different path for them, one which is no less important in his kingdom. Paul himself was a single man, as was Jesus. And yet, they were the most influential Christians, if I may use that term, the world has ever seen. Families in the church must never make single people feel like second-class citizens, simply because God, in his wisdom, has chosen a different path for them.

[3 : 48] Well, having said these things, let's move into the text of this passage, and deal with it in two stages. First, wives submit to the model of Christ, verses 22 through 24.

And then husbands love as the mirror of Christ, in verses 25 through 32. Let me reiterate, just as Ephesians as a whole deals with the church as God's new society, radical society, so the church is built on the foundation of strong Christian marriages.

And that's why the healthy church must promote healthy relationships between husbands and wives. So first of all then, in verses 22 through 24, wives submit to the model of Christ.

Wives submit to the model of Christ. This command of Paul, wives submit to your husbands, may be the most controversial phrase in this book. Historically, bullying tyrants of husbands used it to defend the oppression of their wives.

As if to say, because you must submit to me, I can do anything I like to you, and you must do as I say. So for that reason, many women are understandably nervous about the issue of submission to their husbands.

[5 : 17] The problem with this view is it doesn't fit with the rest of the New Testament, and especially with the way Jesus dealt with women. In the world of Jesus' day, as in many places today, think of Afghanistan, women had no civil rights, were considered unreliable witnesses in a court of law, and were treated as slaves by their husbands.

In the Jewish, Greek, and Roman world, men could have multiple sexual partners, be cruel and vicious to their own wives, and it was considered normal behavior.

No one in the world of Jesus' day treated women as equals. No one except Jesus, who held them up as examples of great faith, and commissioned them to be the first witnesses of his resurrection.

Paul here, now listen carefully, Paul here is not commanding women to submit to bullying, abusive, violent husbands who treat them as slaves.

In fact, by saying, as to the Lord, in verse 22, he is telling them that only in as much as their husbands are following in the example of Jesus should they submit to them.

[6 : 44] In other words, their submission is not to be unconditional. Rather, it is only as the husband mirrors the love of Christ to them that they are to willingly submit.

Furthermore, if the husband is treating them in an un-Christ-like way, bullying, abusive, that kind of thing, they have a duty not to submit but to resist.

But inasmuch as the husband is acting in a Christ-like, selfless, loving manner, it is the duty of the wife to submit to him. If she was married to Jesus, she wouldn't feel threatened by submitting to him.

in the same way as the husband models Christ to her, she shouldn't feel threatened or demeaned by submitting to him. In fact, the very reverse.

She should feel valued, beautified, and secure in his love. In verse 23, the apostle drives home his point by using an illustration.

[7 : 52] For as the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church, his body and is himself its savior. God has chosen marriage to be a parable of Christ's love for his church.

For a man represents Christ and the church represents his wife. As a church, we do not feel threatened by submitting to Christ.

In the same way, a wife should not feel threatened by submitting to her husband. And yet, notice something very important in verse 23. Paul doesn't describe Christ as the Lord of the church, but as its savior, the savior of the church, the Christ who gave himself in love for his bride on the cross.

Clearly, Paul wants us to understand this is the kind of husband to whom a wife feels free to submit herself. A husband who is self-giving, loving, and is willing to put her interests before his interests.

I love the words of one commentator. Again, it's John Stott who wrote these words. The submission to and respect for the husband to which the wife is specifically admonished is not the submissiveness of a pussycat.

[9 : 24] Paul is thinking of a voluntary, free, joyful, and thankful partnership. Submission is by no means inferiority, as if to say that men are more important than women.

That goes against the flow of the entire letter of Ephesians and of the whole New Testament. Men and women are equal in the eyes of God. It's more a question of roles within a marriage.

The wife is to submit, the husband is to love. She is being called to submit to his love for her, to the way in which he puts her interests ahead of his own and sacrifices himself for her.

She is no domestic skivvy, she is no porn star, sex slave of her husband, and as I said earlier, if he treats her in that way, she has a duty to say no, for he is not treating her the way that Christ treats us.

But inasmuch as he is the mirror of Christ to her, putting her rights before his and out giving her, she is to submit to him.

[10 : 42] Traditionally, our wedding vows have included on the part of the wife, love, cherish, and obey. But in the light of Paul's exact wording here, it should be love, cherish, and submit to, which is not the same as obey.

Okay, so for all this underlying theology, what does this mean in practice? We must remember that Paul was writing into a culture very different from ours, and actually, I had to consult with senior ministers on this issue, and the only application we could come up with is to say that when an important decision needs to be made in the home, it is ultimately the husband who needs to make that decision.

If there's a tie-break between husband and wife, the wife needs to submit to her husband knowing that he loves her, and he has her best interests at heart, as we'll see.

Now, I've got to be honest and say, I hope Catherine will agree with me, I can't think of any times in my marriage this has happened, because in almost every single case, having listened to each other and talked with each other, we've come to a consensus in which we both agree.

But ultimately, unless his demands are unbiblical or unreasonable, it is the wife's responsibility to submit to her husband's decision.

[12 : 23] I guess in today's world, this might come across as chauvinism, I hope not, but as far as Paul's concerned, it is biblical marriage. So, wives submit to the model of Christ.

Secondly, from verse 25 through 32, husband's love as the mirror of Christ. Husband's love as the mirror of Christ.

If the role of a wife is to submit to her husband, the role of a husband is to love his wife just like Christ loves the church, and that may be even harder. That's one of the reasons Paul devotes more than three times as many words to the role of husbands as to the role of wives.

The role of a husband is to love his wife, and that love to be the deepest form of love, agape, the love Christ has for us, self-giving, self-sacrificial, utterly selfless.

It is only as a husband loves his wife in this way that she has a duty to submit to him. In our society, love is devalued.

[13 : 39] You see a poster up everywhere, all love is love. But the kind of love Paul is commanding husbands to have for their wives is of a different order altogether.

For a Christian husband to love his wife in this way goes beyond what can be measured because it's the same love Christ has for his church. that same love that's above every other form of human love.

Brothers, we must love our wives the way Christ loves us. For in so doing, only in so doing, shall we earn and deserve their respect and submission.

In other words, when a husband becomes a Christian, it should enhance and strengthen his marriage. The apostle illustrates this kind of love in two ways.

First, from the love Christ has for his church and second, from the love he has for himself. In the first instance, the love Christian husbands are to have for their wives is pictured as the love Christ has for his church.

[15 : 01] In verses 25 and 26, he writes, Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor without any spot or wrinkle, or any such thing that she might be holy and without blemish.

We notice in these verses a progression of five verbs, doing words, each of which express Christ's commitment to his church. In the first instance, he loved the church.

Christ loved the church. Before the universe was created, before the stars began to shine, before the first human being whispered the word God, Christ loved his church.

He loved it intensely, infinitely, uninventively. It was not possible for Christ to have loved the church any more than he did.

Secondly, we read he gave himself up for the church. He gave himself up for the church. And this is a reference to how on the cross Jesus, our Savior, bled and died to take away all our sins.

[16 : 23] The cross in which he shed his blood to cleanse us and give us the hope of eternal life in him. He sacrificed himself for her.

He died for her. He gave up his life for her. Here's the standard of love which is required of husbands. We must lay down our lives for our wives.

We must sacrifice ourselves for our wives. Third and fourthly, he sanctified her by the washing of water with the word.

He sanctified her by the washing of water with the word. This is a reference to Christian baptism, the sacrament that symbolizes how Christ has washed all our sins away.

It's very interesting here that Paul accompanies the physical sign of baptism with the word. The two can't be separated, the sign and the word.

[17 : 28] It is speculated that in the early church, when a new convert was baptized or a child was baptized, the overseeing priest would on behalf of God say over that person, by this water, my love for you was sealed.

In other words, the baptismal sign and word was a public announcement of the love of God. And here we have a challenge to us as Christian husbands.

We must not shy away from publicly expressing and announcing our love for our wives. We must value them to the extent that we are quick to praise them in public.

And then fifthly, Christ's commitment to his church is expressed in his presenting to himself the church in splendor without spot or wrinkle or any such thing that she might be holy and without blemish.

All of Christ's previous actions, loving, giving, sanctifying, and washing are with this future action in view. But in the future, at the end of days, Christ might present the church to himself in splendor, a church he himself has perfected.

[18 : 52] Our church is so disorganized, it's so messy, it's so weak, but on that day we shall be perfected. All its potential shall be realized, all the wrinkles and spots which shall dominate our existence today shall be gone, and all that shall be left will be a church that's holy and without blemish.

the point is this, Christ, the church's husband, does everything for his wife, the church, so that she might reach her full potential and be the best she can possibly be.

Here's a challenge for us as Christian husbands, to what extent do we suppress the potential of our wives? To what extent are we suppressing the potential of our wives?

is our love for them allowing them to be the best they can possibly be? Listen again to what John Stott writes of Christ-like husband's love for his wife.

He gives himself for her in order that she may develop her full potential under God and so may become more completely herself. A couple of applications here.

[20 : 11] as husbands, brothers, are we loving our wives in such a way as to make them the holiest and godliest Christians they can be? Or are there ways in which we are dragging them down in their Christian lives?

Most Christian husbands I know would admit that their wives are far better Christians than they are. But are there things that we can do as husbands to help them grow even further in their Christian lives?

And secondly, are we as husbands, brothers, loving our wives in such a way that makes them the best possible human beings they can be? The professional life isn't for every wife.

Many choose to give up their professional ambition in order to look after their families. But even then, are we as husbands guilty of assuming that our careers are more important than their careers?

Do we give them the freedom and support them to be the best they can possibly be in the workplace or socially or in terms of their physical and mental health?

[21 : 28] Can we support them more in these areas? Paul is calling upon us as husbands to love our wives the way Christ loves the church. That's the first illustration he uses to describe our commitment to one another.

But then from verse 28 onwards, he calls us to love our wives the same way we love ourselves. We rightly nourish and cherish our bodies just as Christ nourishes and cherishes the church.

In the same way we are to treat our wives in the way that we would wish to be treated by them. For after all, as Paul says, when we enter into marriage, while our wives and we are individuals, we are mystically joined together as one flesh.

To treat our wives as lesser than ourselves, to care for ourselves more than we care for them, is to damage not just them but us. It's in the health of that mystical oneness we call marriage, both partners flourish.

How can I say that I'm loving my wife as I love myself if everything in my marriage is about me? Marriage must be a partnership of equals.

[22 : 49] It must be if each partner is to flourish and reach their full potential. This challenges us as husbands. this cuts deep. To what extent am I nourishing and cherishing my wife?

Am I giving her the love that she deserves? What is my marriage about what I want and what I think I deserve?

Does my wife exist to make me holy and happy? Or do I exist to make her holy and happy? Or is it both? to leave a marriage because I'm not getting what I want out of this is the wrong way to look at things because marriage, according to Paul, as you can see, is more about giving than taking.

And a loving partnership of equals is not the same as a legal contract of service. A Christian acquaintance of mine once told me that he should expect or he expects his wife to do for him everything that he could pay a prostitute to do for him.

Think about that. He expects his wife to do for him everything he could pay a prostitute to do for him. Really? Really? Is that how little he thinks of his wife that he should ignore what she wants and doesn't want and put his own sexual desires before hers?

[24 : 14] That's not love and I do hope she told him to leave her alone on nights he felt that way. Husbands, we must love our wives the way Christ loved his church and the way we love ourselves.

The man who does this is the greatest success in the world. The man who makes his wife feel fulfilled and holy and contented. Can I close off this sermon with four very brief applications?

First, as the church, we're always looking out for ways to reach out with the gospel of Jesus Christ to the society in which God has placed us. We're always looking to reach out.

Could marriage be one of these areas? Many non-Christians I know have got amazing marriages but the Christian doctrine of marriage for all that's denounced by the woke brigade is a deeply attractive teaching to people who want to find purpose, belonging, and love in life.

Let's let our marriages be examples to the world around us, to our friends, to our neighbors. Who knows, but some of them might want to know what makes our marriages so fulfilled.

[25 : 30] And then we can tell them about Jesus and his gospel. Second, as church, in the church we want to equip Christians to be the best husbands and wives they can be.

We do this in a biblical way. By older wives training younger wives and by older husbands training younger husbands.

In other words, take advantage of this younger married couples among us. Don't be slow to ask for advice from older married couples in our congregation.

Folk who've been married for decades. Imitate them in their love for their wives and their submission for their husbands. Thirdly, for those of us who are single, let's ask ourselves, how can we support married people?

One of the biggest stresses in marriage comes in the early years. where the arrival of babies means that the mother is often permanently exhausted.

[26 : 41] The couple never get out by themselves. And the relationship becomes strained. Could some of our single folk help by offering to babysit the child stroke children so that the couple can go out for a date night by themselves and talk and learn how to love each other again.

Doesn't sound very much, but it could really help perhaps even save their marriages. And lastly, a word for Christian husbands here who are deeply involved in the life of the church.

the great Christian writer A.W. Tozer died young and his wife married again. Now I love the books of A.W.

Tozer. How many of you have heard of the books of A.W. Tozer? Okay, so a lot of people here have read A.W. Tozer. But late in life, his wife was asked to compare her two marriages.

Let's say the name of her second husband was Henry. I can't remember what it was. She said, A.W. loved God.

[27 : 58] Henry loved me. A.W. loved God. Henry loved me. Is that not a tragic epitaph for A.W.

Tozer? We must never let our love for God and our zeal for his church get in the way of loving our wives.

Rather, we must show our love for God by loving our wives. Not either or. We show our love for God by loving our wives in a Christ-like way.

To be a Christian husband should mean being a better husband, not worse. The point is that as Christian husbands, we must never sacrifice our marriages upon the altar of ministry in the church.

In reality, that which Christian wives and Christian husbands are being called to do isn't really all that different. she's being called to submit to her husband, which means putting him first.

[29 : 13] He's being called to love his wife, which means putting him first. The only way we can do that is to have Jesus and his gospel right at the center of our marriages, which means ultimately to have a successful marriage means to have a cross-shaped marriage, where the sacrifice of Jesus becomes our motivation, our model, and our mirror.

May God bless our marriages with fruitfulness and faithfulness, and may these beautiful marriages proclaim to the world that the gospel really does work.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, thank you for Paul's remarkable teaching in this passage. We pray, Lord, that you would keep us as Christian husbands from being bullying, abusive, controlling, but rather you would help us to lay down our lives and our rights for our wives, to love them the way Christ loved his church and the way we are to love ourselves.

And help our wives, oh Lord, we pray, to submit to us, but only in as much as we are reflecting Christ to them, so that our marriages may be parables to the world around us of the gospel and of how much Christ loves his church.

In Jesus' name we pray these things. Amen.