

The Renewal of Marriage

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Preacher: Simon Dowdy

[0 : 00] That's Ephesians chapter 5, starting at verse 22. Wives, submit to your own husbands as to the Lord, for the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its saviour.

Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. 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 splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

In the same way, husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself, for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body.

Therefore, a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. Morning everyone, lovely to have you with us. Thanks Katie for reading.

[1 : 39] Please do keep Ephesians chapter 5 open, and let me pray as we begin. Let's pray together. Earlier on in Ephesians, the Apostle Paul writes, And he gave, that's the risen Lord Jesus, gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.

Heavenly Father, we praise you that Jesus is Lord. We thank you that we can hear his voice, and we pray our Father this morning. Please would you equip us for the work of ministry, for building up the church.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, as John said, this is the last in our series of four talks on marriage and the maker's instructions.

They do kind of run as a series, so if you've missed one of them, it'd be great to be able to catch up online, and I'd love to encourage you to do that. Last week, you'll remember, we thought about the pain of marriage, and this week, we're thinking about the renewal of marriage.

And just as we saw that God's original blueprint for marriage was very beautiful and attractive, so this morning, my longing is that we would leave this morning rejoicing in God's blueprint for the renewal of marriage.

[3 : 08] After all, renewal and restoration are wonderful things, aren't they? Perhaps there's been, I don't know, a family heirloom that you've, perhaps you've inherited it. It was kind of ravaged by the years, I don't know, a piece of furniture or a piece of jewellery.

You've even wondered if it's worth keeping, and yet you've had it restored or you've done the work yourself, and it's been renewed, and it's wonderful, beautiful again. Or perhaps you've visited a country house and garden that's been restored in Cornwall.

We've been to the lost gardens of Heligan, which was lost completely, sort of overcome with brambles and all sorts of things. Most of the workers in the garden went off to fight in the First World War.

Many of them never came back. The garden completely kind of left to rack and ruin. It was discovered in 1990, and over the following 20 years or so, it became Europe's largest garden restoration project.

And today the website describes its 200 acres as a paradise for the explorer, the plant lover, and the garden romantic. And yet even more wonderful is the renewal of marriage.

[4 : 23] Marriages in which both husband and wife can flourish. So often, we've said this before, haven't we, in this series, but so often the narrative in our society seems to be that Christianity and the teaching of the Bible in particular is part of the problem.

And yet once again we're going to see today that actually far from being part of the problem, it is very much part of the solution. Now, I'm conscious we're not all married, but it's vital that all of us understand God's plan for the renewal of marriage, partly so we can encourage those who are married, but also because those of us who aren't married, we might get married or think about getting married one day.

I'm conscious too that maybe some of us either here or online who are looking in on the Christian faith, in which case our hope will see how very attractive and how very distinctive God's plan for the renewal of marriage is.

Well, three points this morning. Our first one, the blueprint for the renewal of marriage. The blueprint. And have a look at Ephesians chapter 5, verse 31.

Therefore, a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. Now, this is the foundation statement in the Bible concerning God's plan for marriage.

[5 : 57] It's that original blueprint design, you'll remember, that we looked at two weeks ago in Genesis chapter 2, verse 24. And yet, what's the surprise? Well, the surprise comes in the next verse.

This mystery is profound, and I'm saying that it refers to Christ and the church. So, way back at the creation, it wasn't only marriage between a man and a wife that God had in view, but far bigger, the relationship between Christ and his church.

Indeed, throughout the Old Testament, God pictures the relationship between himself and people as a marriage, the Lord taking his people as his bride. I put Ezekiel chapter 16 there on the outline, verses 1 to 14.

Don't look it up now, but do look it up later. Indeed, this picture of the relationship between God and his people as that of a husband and a wife, it reflects where the whole plan of God is heading.

Jesus, the bridegroom, the church, his beautiful bride. Later on in the year, when we finish the book of Revelation, at the end of the Bible, we will see that glorious marriage taking place.

[7 : 13] It means, then, that God's intention at creation was not to create marriage as an end in itself, but as a picture of this relationship between Christ and the church.

Just as a child, perhaps, might painstakingly make a model airplane, kind of gluing it all together, kind of painting it all the different colors and all the rest of it. And yet, in their mind's eye, they got something far greater in view.

Perhaps the day when there'll be an engineer, or when there'll be a pilot, or perhaps a teenager starts a small band at school, and they perhaps write their own songs, and they have a little rehearsal once a week, whatever it is.

And yet, in their mind's eye, they have something far greater in view, the day when there'll be the next Harry Styles, or Billie Eilish, or whoever it is.

And in a far greater way, when God created marriage between a man and a woman, and when he said, therefore, a man shall leave his father and mother, and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh, he had something far greater in mind.

[8 : 22] And because marriage is a picture of the far bigger relationship between Christ and his people, it is therefore the blueprint for the renewal of marriage.

It's why, if you notice this, as Katie read the passage for us, it's why throughout this passage, the husband's love for the wife is to mirror Christ's love for the church.

Did you notice that in verse 23? The husband is head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church. Verse 25, husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church.

Verse 29, no one ever hated their own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church. And likewise, did you notice how the wife's submission to the husband is to mirror the church's submission to Christ?

Verse 24, now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. In other words, we mustn't dismiss what the apostle Paul says here, and what he says about submission and headship, as simply being based on first century cultural values, or indeed on any other cultural values.

[9 : 44] Note the blueprint for marriage is not culture, but instead the relationship between Christ and his people, the church. Indeed, it's most likely here that as the apostle Paul addresses wives first, actually he is being profoundly counter-cultural.

You know, in the first century Roman world, they wouldn't be spoken to at all in public. And yet the fact that he addresses them first, it's a reflection of the fact that men and women are created equal by God and are equal in Christ.

So the blueprint for the renewal of marriage. Secondly, the role of wives in the renewal of marriage. Have a look at verse 22.

Wives, submit your own husbands as to the Lord. Now, the word submit lands with a very heavy thud, doesn't it, in our culture.

I guess we associate it with words such as inferior, or perhaps subjection, or patriarchy. All of them overwhelmingly negative.

[11 : 00] It sounds like something from the 1950s at best. And yet these verses are not about an oppressive patriarchy where men dominate and exercise power and influence, while women are regarded as second-class citizens.

Nor does this undermine the equality that men and women have as equally made in God's image, or imply in some way that women lack dignity.

It doesn't mean that men are more competent than their wives. There are plenty of areas in which wives will be able to be far more able than their husbands. That is certainly true in my marriage, and I guess it's true in every marriage in this room.

And it certainly isn't a license for husbands to abuse their wives. Because in the Bible, submission is a beautiful thing.

It reflects what you've seen throughout this series of talks on marriage, that husband and wife are equal, and yet different. There is a complementarity.

[12 : 05] He is the leader with responsibility to lead, and he is accountable. She is the helper, a beautiful partnership between the two.

It's why Jesus himself submits, do you remember, to his heavenly father. Perhaps we see it, most of all, his submission to God the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane, the night of his arrest, as he prays, yet not my will, but yours be done.

Jesus isn't any less God than the Father is. He is fully God, fully equal with God, not in any way inferior. And yet he submits his will to the Father.

It follows that wives and husbands have different roles, but equal dignity. He is the head, the leader, verse 23. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its savior.

In other words, submission is saying, I'll trust you with my life. I'll trust you to make the right decisions. I'll trust you to lead me.

[13 : 21] I'll put my life in your hands. Submission is about honoring and affirming the God-given leadership of the husband. That's why in verse 22, the apostle Paul says, wives, submit your husbands as to the Lord, because it's recognizing the leadership that the husband has been given.

Now, three other things briefly to notice about submission. Firstly, it's voluntary. Notice in verse 25, husbands are not told to make their wives submit.

Instead, it's the kind of voluntary, joyful submission with which a Christian responds to Jesus, submitting to him. It shouldn't be enforced.

It can never be an excuse for abuse of any kind. If that is a concern for you, please speak to someone. Mary Burke, our safeguarding officer, is always available to talk to.

Notice too, in verse 24, submission is to be in everything. In other words, in every area of life. In other words, saying no to a resentment or manipulation or stubbornness.

[14 : 37] Saying yes to supporting husbands as they seek to lead. Now, of course, it doesn't mean she always has to agree with him. Part of her honoring and honoring his role and affirming who he is as the leader will be to question him when he's wrong.

Although, of course, it will ultimately mean letting him make the decision and letting him deal with the taking responsibility for that decision.

So, submission is voluntary. It is in everything. And yet, there are limits. Notice in verse 22, that little phrase, as to the Lord. It shows not only the motivation for submission as to the Lord, but it also shows that submission has its limits if the husband is leading her into sin.

or perhaps married to someone who isn't a Christian and she is being asked to do something that is contrary to what the Lord Jesus would have her do.

Or if she's being forbidden from doing something which the Lord Jesus does want her to do, at which point she needs to explain why she is going to submit to the Lord Jesus rather than her husband.

[15 : 58] And, of course, before we leave this point, as we think about this pattern for marriage, what it doesn't do, it doesn't kind of reinforce any cultural stereotypes that we may have of masculine and feminine behavior.

So, for example, the Queen is well known, isn't she, for being an excellent mechanic. And no doubt, if she wasn't the Queen, and perhaps if she wasn't in her mid-90s as well, then she would be responsible for vehicle maintenance in the family.

I can think of plenty of Christian marriages where the wives are more capable than their husbands, for example, in dealing with the finances, or he's a better cook than she is. So, the role of wives in the renewal of marriage.

Finally, the role of husbands in the renewal of marriage. Have a look at verse 25. Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

Now, it seems to me that when we put the words men and authority together, there are so often two sort of pictures, if you like, that stand out. You know, one is the sort of domineering figure who makes all the decisions himself, he issues commands, and he inhibits and suppresses his wife and prevents her from flourishing.

[17 : 28] The other is the kind of weak figure who fails to lead and doesn't act on his responsibilities. And therefore, perhaps it's rather surprising that husbands are not told to rule their wives or to exercise leadership.

And that is because the Bible has a radically different view of what leadership looks like. It is a four-letter word, L-O-V-E, love.

Not the kind of sentimental Valentine's Day love that we see in the movies, but a love patterned on the Lord Jesus. The kind of love that we saw in the centre of London just a couple of weeks ago when 20-year-old Jimmy Olubumi Adewali jumped off London Bridge to save a woman who had fallen into the river to try and save her life.

His body was found the next day. His best friend said of him afterwards, Jimmy didn't think twice as to what was going to happen. I just remember him saying, I have to save her, I'm going to save her. The friend added, to risk your life in such a way, you don't see that every day. The fact that he was adamant to save that woman, it just shows his nature and his mindset.

[18 : 46] Well, that is the kind of laying down your life for your wife that husbands are to demonstrate. That's the kind of leadership they are to cultivate.

Why? Well, because it's precisely the love that the Lord Jesus shows for the church. Notice in these verses that there are past, future, and present dimensions to the love of Jesus.

In verse 25, which we've read already, he loved the church in the past by giving himself up for her at the cross while we were still sinners. He took the initiative. He loved the church selflessly, sacrificially, willingly.

And then in verses 26 and 27, we see the future focus, the future direction of his love. 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 spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without leish.

The spots and wrinkles have nothing to do with physical perfection, but being presented before the Lord Jesus on the final day of history. Finally, Jesus loves his church in the present.

[20 : 06] Verse 29, he nourishes and cherishes it just as Christ does the church. the Lord Jesus tends for and cares for his people.

Husbands, your love for your wives is to mirror and reflect that love of the Lord Jesus for his people. You are responsible for her spiritual well-being and development. Now, what this means, of course, is that this kind of marriage, modeled as it is on the blueprint of Jesus' love for his church, is a place of safety and protection for both husband and wife, in which both can flourish.

At a time when there are calls for women to be protected from men, it is a reminder that the mark of a godly husband isn't that they're the kind of alpha male who's always having to win, but instead someone who stands out because of their sacrificial love serving their wives.

Rebecca McLaughlin in this excellent book, *Confronting Christianity*, I think I referenced this a couple of weeks ago, says this. She writes, what it means is that Ephesians 5 is a withering critique of common conceptions of so-called traditional gender roles that have amounted to privileging men and patronizing women.

[21 : 42] In the drama of marriage, the wife's needs come first and the husband's drive to prioritize himself is cut down with the brutal acts of the gospel.

This is no return to Victorian values. Rather, it is a call to pay attention to the character of Christ. If we hear the call to husbands as a mandate to oppress and dominate, we are forgetting that Jesus came not to be served but to serve.

She adds, it is a daily challenge for me to notice opportunities to submit to my husband as to the Lord. Not because naturally I am more or less submissive or because he is more or less naturally loving, but because Jesus went to the cross for me.

And those of us who are husbands in the room, I guess if we were writing that, then we would say something like this. It is a daily challenge for me to notice opportunities to love my wife and lay my life down for her, not because I am more or less servant-hearted by nature or because she is more or less submissive by nature, but because Jesus went to the cross for me.

Now, we all need to work out what the details are going to look like in practice. That would be a good conversation to have outside later on. It seems to me, though, that some of the details are going to, some of the implications are going to be at the level of detail.

[23 : 17] Some of the implications are going to be kind of much bigger picture. So here are one or two detailed implications. It may mean taking our wives a cup of tea first thing in the morning so they can read the Bible and pray before the day gets started.

It may be ensuring that there's a babysitter once we are back to a meeting as growth groups in person so that actually together, both husband and wife, we can get to our growth groups.

It's one of the reasons, by the way, as a church, we don't have separate growth groups for men and women. I know some churches do, but we don't do that because we're very keen that husband and wife both go together so that they're on the same track, so to speak, spiritually speaking.

Other details, it may mean stopping work earlier to help read the Bible to the kids. Much easier to do, of course, when we're working from home rather than working away from home and it will certainly mean taking the initiative in praying together.

And yet other implications will be much bigger picture. And I think supremely in terms of the whole area of ambition. If your ambition in life focuses primarily on your career, then I hope you can see you are selling your wife and your family short, and yourself, of course.

[24 : 48] The absolute focus of ambition is to be that future day when our wives stand before the Lord Jesus. The priority in our marriages is to be her growth.

Now for some, that will mean dropping other ambitions, perhaps in the realm of work, career, or personal fitness, or whatever it is, so that we have the time and space and capacity to lay our lives down for our wives.

Now let me finish by speaking to those who aren't married. Some will be married one day.

Ephesians 5 shows the kind of person you should be aiming to be and the kind of person you should be looking to marry.

If you're unwilling to submit to his lead, or if he's unable or unwilling to give a lead, don't marry him.

If you're unwilling to love her like Christ loves the church, then don't marry her.

I take it those are obvious applications from what the Apostle Paul says here. Others, of course, will never be married or will never remarry.

[25 : 56] And I think one of the great temptations perhaps at that point is to look at others and think, well, I'm missing out. It's what our culture says to us, isn't it, all the time. You know, if you miss out on sex, you miss out on life.

In which case, we need to be assured that if we belong to Jesus, the perfect marriage is still for us. The perfect wedding day is still for us in the future.

The wedding between the Lord Jesus and his church in the new creation. which also means that for those of us who belong to Jesus and are married, that ultimate marriage is where we are heading.

It takes the pressure off, doesn't it? It takes the pressure off the marriages that we have now. In one sense, human marriage is designed to disappoint. We've been reminded, haven't we, in Ecclesiastes that actually we live in a fallen world.

The effects of sin are everywhere and that includes in our marriages. Human marriage leaves us longing for more. Even the very best of human marriages leaves us longing for more.

[27 : 16] For that ultimate marriage in the new creation of which human marriage is only a scale model. Let me lead us in prayer together.

This mystery is profound and I'm saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

Heavenly Father, we praise you for the Lord Jesus. Thank you for his great love for his people, the church. Thank you that he has laid his life down for the church.

And we praise you Heavenly Father for the wonderful joy of being able to submit to him and to follow his lead and to live for him as his people. And we thank you, our Father, that in a fallen world where the effects of sin are everywhere, we thank you for this pattern for what renewed marriages looks like and we pray that you would help us to reflect that pattern increasingly and all along looking forward to the final marriage between you and your people in the new creation.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[28 : 59] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.