

Beauty in God's Order: husbands and wives

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[0 : 00] Now, in today's world, the word submission has a lot of baggage, correct?! We now place a premium as a society on individual rights and personal freedom.

! And so the notion of submission runs counter to these. Besides, we've also seen how submission has gone horribly wrong and has resulted in abuse.

But as Christians, we want to treat God's word seriously as well. We can't just choose what we like and leave the rest. And so today we need to take today's passage seriously and work out how to handle it and apply it rightly.

Now, the bulk of today's passage is actually focused on the relationship between a husband and wife. But before that, in verse 21, it first talks about submission more generally.

If you remember last week, I said that submission was the last of the four aspects of being filled with the Spirit, which started earlier in verse 19, the others being speaking to one another and singing, making music with our hearts to the Lord and giving thanks to God in everything.

[1 : 18] And then we come to the fourth, verse 21, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. And so to begin with then, we need to understand what submission is.

And at its core, it's simply the appropriate recognition and response for authority. Any society, community, organization, set of relationships need to actually have properly constituted authority to function well.

So take, for example, a school with a principal, a company with the CEO, who is in turn actually accountable to a board, a church and a pastor or pastors.

And even in a democracy where you go, oh, you know, this is all, everyone gets to, you know, be in authority. No. The idea of democracy really is instead of mass rule by the people, it is actually giving everyone a say, a vote on who is to be given authority to govern.

After which, authority is appointed and everyone else, all of us, even those of us who got a vote, have to then submit to that duly appointed authority.

[2 : 40] Now, no matter how authority is established, humanly speaking, we also know that God remains sovereign over all of it. Paul says in Romans 13, verse 1, on the next slide, there is no authority except that which God has established.

And importantly, God does not establish authority for its own sake. Rather, with authority comes responsibility and accountability.

God assigns authority to those to look after people under them. And ultimately, God will seek an account for that use of authority.

If you misuse or abuse it, then God will call them to account. Conversely, if authority and submission works as God intends, then there is blessing for those under authority.

Submission. Submission. Submission properly understood, we need to strip that of its baggage. Submission properly understood does not imply subjugation, nor subservience.

[3 : 58] Neither is the one who is in submission inferior. All of us, whether we're rich or poor, young or old, male or female, will find ourselves under authority in one way or another.

Sometimes we will be in authority, sometimes we'll be under authority. And Romans 13, verse 2 says that we ought to submit to authority because it's an expression of our submission to God.

So the next slide. Whoever rebels against authority is a rebelling against what God has instituted and will come under judgment for it.

Now, verse 21 here then gives us another motivation because we're asked to submit to each other as a result of being filled with the Spirit. We're to do it out of reverence for Christ, who is the head of the body.

You see, God in His master plan has placed all things under Christ. And we saw that. I've repeated it, I think, nearly every week. Ephesians 1, verse 10.

[5 : 09] All authority has been given to Christ in heaven and on earth. Jesus Himself says that in Matthew 28. That is God's master plan, to bring all things into unity under Christ.

But then God or Christ assigns or delegates this authority in a variety of ways in order to ensure the proper functioning of the body.

And here we have three specific examples that Paul teaches us regarding the Christian household. Marriage, children, and then thirdly, masters and slaves, which we'll look at over the next three weeks.

Now, submitting to one another then does not mean mutual submission, as though everyone's just going to submit to everyone else. Because that will just lead to confusion.

Some people use this argument because they want to explain that later on, a husband's love for his wife is his submission to her. But no, even though a husband's love is sacrificial, just as submission is, it is not the same as submission.

[6 : 21] And to say so confuses, I believe, who has the God-given authority in a relationship, which God will hold the husband accountable or responsible for.

Further, if you think about it like that, then Christ's love for the church, which is an example to the husband, would mean that Christ is submitted to the church, which surely can't be true.

So, submission to one another then, in verse 21, just means that everyone is to submit to each other in accordance with how the authority has been established. And then Paul applies this, firstly, to marriage, verse 22.

And he says, Now, the word actually submit is not in this verse 22. It's not in the text. It's actually implied from verse 21.

So, the exact wording of verse 22 is more like, likewise to your own husbands. The word submit is not in that verse, but it borrows from verse 21.

[7 : 30] And Paul is saying, therefore, that wives are to do in their marriage what he's already asked everyone to do generally in verse 21, with the same motivation.

Remember, verse 21 is out of reverence for Christ. Verse 22 is, As you do to the Lord. And then the rationale, or the explanation, is given from verse 23.

For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ is the head of the church's body, of which he is the saviour. Now, as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

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 blemish, but holy and blameless.

So, it's very clear, isn't it? You can see what the parallel is that Paul is drawing. It is between human marriage and Christ's relationship to his church.

[8 : 33] Christ loves the church, so husbands should love their wives. The church submits to Christ, so wives do the same to your husband. And so, in order to understand the instructions for human marriage correctly, we must first understand, actually, Christ's relationship with his church.

And the key, as Paul explains it, is to appreciate the manner and extent of Christ's love for the church. That is seen supremely in Jesus giving himself for her on the cross.

That's the means by which he makes her holy. He pays the penalty for our sins, collectively the church, her sin, and she is made holy and blameless by it.

And the result, she's clothed in his righteousness. No stain, wrinkle or blemish on her garments. She becomes a fitting bride, which he presents to himself.

And I've done quite a few of your weddings. You know, the bridegroom, as long as he's presentable, it's fine. But the bride, the wedding dress, the bridal gown, that has to be perfect, right?

[9 : 53] Spotless. No wrinkles, no blemish. And this is the picture here of the church presented to Christ an extension of his own glory and perfection.

Jesus may have left his glory when he came down to earth to die for us, but as he rises from death, he lifts up his bride, his church, with him to glory.

And hence Paul talks about all of us seated in the heavenly realms with him. It's a bit like Catherine, you know, Princess Catherine, that is.

When she married Prince William, she no longer, she went from being a commoner to a royal princess, isn't it? She's given titles, gets to live in whichever castle she wants.

She's got now royal status. Now conversely, actually, just by way, it's a sidetrack here. In Japan, some of you may know this because you're all sort of Japanese fans.

[11 : 00] Put up your hands, who has been to Japan in the last 12 months? Probably half of you. Japan's crown prince, the daughter, Princess Mako, I think her name is, or Meiko, she had to relinquish her royal titles because she got married to that guy on the left.

He's a commoner. So, I mean, good on her, right? What a courageous sacrifice. But anyway, we concentrate on Catherine because that's our position.

Now, let me explain the phrase because it's there, and some of you might be wondering, washing with water through the Word. I don't think that's a description to baptism. I think it has an allusion there to Old Testament passages that talk about washing with water of the bride, Ezekiel being one of them.

But even though we are being cleansed by the blood of Jesus, as I spoke of earlier, what happens is that each of us are washed clean as well by faith through the Word.

That is, Christ's body is ever-growing as He continues to call people, each one of us, to faith as we hear and believe the message of the Gospel.

[12 : 20] And so, as we put our faith in Jesus, that makes us clean as well because we become part of the body that's holy and blameless. And so, I think the word, the phrase, through the Word, refers to that process.

And so, it's this body that's ever-growing that one day will be complete with all the saints, all of us and more and evermore growing across the world and across time so that on that last day we will be presented as Christ's perfect bride, joined with Him in marriage for eternity.

But now, I want you to notice that although Christ has authority over His church, what is emphasized here is His love for her instead.

That is, as we heard, the counterpart to submission by the church is not that Jesus is ruling or exercising authority over her, even though that's true, rather, the counterpart is His love.

And Paul does this because the parallel he wishes to impress for husbands in marriage is not His authority, but rather His sacrificial love for His wife.

[13:41] And that's why Paul then directs our focus to Christ's tenderness and care. It's the manner in which He goes about being head over the church, caring for her, looking after her needs, to which Paul then adds in verse 28, in this way, poor 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.

Jesus cares for His church like you would care for your own body. Now, I know that there are sometimes people who get accused of not looking after themselves, but by and large, I think we're all pretty good, aren't we, looking after our own bodies.

So, take me for example, prime example. When I was a bit unwell, again, this week, and I was in a bit of pain, what was the first thing that I reached out for?

Painkillers, right? Anything to get rid of that pain. Then, when I felt better, and I started working on this sermon, what did I do immediately when my stomach started to growl?

[15:14] I stopped writing and started hunting for food. In fact, it was at this very point that I stopped the sermon writing and hunted for food.

So, very handy illustration. But, what I'm trying to say is, I don't know whether, maybe you guys don't do this, but that's what we do, don't we? When the body cries out for something, we look after it.

We almost drop everything else and look after ourselves. You know, that's where we get the phrase hangry from, isn't it? Likewise, Jesus knows what his body needs.

And in particular, he knows our need to be built up and fed spiritually. Fed by his word and powered by his spirit. And that's how he continues to care for us as the church.

Not just making us clean, but building us up, preparing us for that future eternity as his bride. But he does it in a way which makes submission to him easy.

[16:19] We're meant to submit not grudgingly, but willingly, joyfully even. And for this, look at Jesus' invitation in Matthew chapter 11, 28.

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened. And we sang that first up, didn't we? And I will give you rest. And then he says, take my yoke.

That's his sign of authority. Take my yoke upon you. But then look how he administers that yoke. He says, I am gentle and humble in heart. He does it gently and humbly.

And the result, you will find rest for your souls. It's for our good, isn't it? Submission is therefore not meant to be oppressive, but freeing when done right.

Now, I know that some of us here today are not married. In fact, many of you probably are still single. But others may have lost a spouse and some may have had marriages that didn't quite work out as you hoped.

[17:28] And so I know that sometimes you will approach this passage and have mixed feelings of sadness and regret or feeling excluded or even wondering what its relevance is.

Well, before we finally apply this to those who are married, I think the wonderful truth that all of us need to hear first, is that when we are in Christ, we're all part of that eternal marriage that truly matters.

Human marriages, Jesus even said, wouldn't exist in the new creation, but His marriage to the church will. And we're all part of that. And on that day, you know, the past will be forgiven, sins, forgotten, sins will be forgiven, but the marriage feast of the Lamb will continue forever.

And by the way, it's not just have the feast and then get on with the marriage. No, it's the feast itself will just keep on going. Because on that day, we keep celebrating the fact that we are the bride to our Lord Jesus.

But for those of us who are married, then we have earthly marriages that add an additional dimension to help us get to that day.

[18:51] That is, help us as husbands and wives, but also help everyone in the body of Christ to aim with the picture, to aim at that eternal marriage.

And so all of us, even those of us who are single, can support marriages towards this end. And so with that, we finally get to earthly marriages. And I think I don't need to say more.

The principles are clear given the parallels with Christ and the church. But what I want to do then is tease out what this means in practice. So, for husbands, you need to consider this as a specific aspect of your discipleship.

Living a spirit-filled life worthy of your calling involves loving your wife as Christ loved the church. And I know there are a lot of young men around here who really want to serve the Lord in the church.

Well, good, but don't neglect loving your wife. Don't do it at the expense of loving your wife, because that is part of your discipleship.

[20:03] And as I said earlier, the emphasis here is not your headship, but your sacrificial love. For that is how Christ expressed his headship over the church, not by lording it over us, but laying down his life for us, sacrificially, for our good, and even at the cost of his own welfare.

But just as Christ's goal was to feed and care for his church spiritually, with the new creation in mind, so consider that you are to care for your wife spiritually as well, with her place in the new creation in mind.

So yes, please care for her in all things, but make sure that includes her spiritual well-being. Now, don't hear me wrong here, I don't mean that a wife is inferior spiritually, or that she knows less about the Bible than her husband.

It may even be that in some respects she's more godly than he is in character. In fact, not maybe, definitely. So, caring for her spiritually does not require a husband to be her spiritual hero, okay?

Only Jesus is. Rather, caring entails making provision. Does she have opportunity for time with God? Is she allowed to grow spiritually, to serve God with her gifts?

[21:31] Because if she suffers spiritually, you suffer too, because you are to love her as your own body. Now, as for wives, remember that as your husband follows Jesus, submission does not need to be a burden.

And let me just say here, as a bit of a digression again, this passage is about marriage alone, all right? It's not talking about the relationship of men to women generally.

whether in society or in church. There are other passages that talk to it. And so, for you wives, you are not asked to submit to all men, just one, and only when you are married to him.

He's the one you respect, and he's the one who loves you in return. At its heart, what you're called to do is to recognize and respect your husband's headship.

Give it not to lord over you, but to take responsibility for both of you in the marriage. So, allow him to fulfill this responsibility so that he can then give a proper account to God one day, and support him in it.

[22:51] Now, again, none of this means that a wife has no voice in the marriage, or is not involved in decision making. It doesn't even mean she can't lead where she has certain strengths in the marriage.

It doesn't mean that wives are incapable of looking after themselves, or that they have no responsibility. But in your husband, you now have another who is also responsible.

Someone else will look out for you, who will take overall responsibility for the marriage. Now, if you want an analogy, it's a bit like health and safety at work.

I hope you realize if you're working, you're going to work, you have a personal responsibility to work safely. Don't go into the kitchen and take out the knife and do silly things with it.

But your employer also has a duty of care. Correct? In fact, they have overall responsibility and there are laws in place that actually they're negligent if they don't.

[23:53] So this idea of responsibility is not an either-or. Both can have responsibility but one, the employer, in my example, has overall responsibility that encompasses everyone.

So this is how we are to see that you can have responsibility but also the husband has responsibility for the marriage and for you. But apart from these general principles, it's interesting, isn't it, that Paul doesn't prescribe a whole list of what you must or mustn't do.

And that's because in each marriage, a man and a woman are unique individuals and so is the couple. And God has given us the freedom to work these general principles out in our own marriages.

That's part of the adventure, maybe even, of working out, yeah, how does this work for you and I? Yes, you're going to have some confusion, some maybe misunderstandings along the way but over time as you communicate and you learn, then you work out actually what this means for you and you, your marriage alone.

So while it's good to be looking up to other couples for guidance and ideas, you don't need to follow them because everyone is unique.

[25:14] Now you may ask, why has God done it like that? Why the man rather than the woman? Why not just have equal partnership? I don't have a lot of time to tease it out in full but I believe the answers can be found in Genesis 2 which is a foundational passage for marriage which Gillian read part of and Paul quotes from it and I'll get to it shortly.

But in that passage you'll find that Adam was created before Eve. Eve was then given to Adam as God saw the need for a helper. And now you might think, oh, God, was that an oversight by you that you created Adam and then realized, oh no, he actually needs a helper.

No, this is part of his design for humanity. There is a reason for this order. And so it was that if you read the passage carefully, only Adam received directly the instruction not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

That was not something that Eve was there to hear, as it were. Yes, all humanity is to obey it, but actually God held Adam responsible for keeping it.

Instead, he listened to Eve and sin came into the world. And so in Christian marriage, God looks to each to live up to this original calling, but now in the light of Christ's redemption.

[26:36] For the husband is to own and not shirk his responsibility. For the wife, it's to be a helper to her husband in it.

Now, I know that there may be marriages that thrive even though it's not aligned to this view of marriage. Some Christian couples even may subscribe to this.

It's what we call an egalitarian view, that's the terminology of marriage, versus a complementarian view, which is what I've been trying to explain. But for me, even if egalitarian marriages work, functionally, when we jettison complementarian marriage, because I think for most part it's offensive to the world, then what we do is we actually lose the opportunity to use our marriages as a witness to the world about Christ and his church.

We lose that as a witness. And Paul says this in verse 32 now using Genesis chapter 2 when he says, 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, he says. What is? Not that, you know, the fact that a man and his wife become one flesh. No, no, no. That's not earth-shattering.

[27 : 55] No, he says, it is a profound mystery because what I'm talking about is Christ and the church. However, he says, each one of you must also love his wife as he loves himself and the wife must respect her husband.

In other words, Paul is saying what is profound about Genesis chapter 2 is that actually it applies to Christ and the church. Now, in the Old Testament, it's true that God is portrayed as a faithful husband to an unfaithful Israel as the wife, but really it's only when Christ left his father in glory, came down in the flesh, laid down his life for his disciples, and then taught them about their union with him, that we discover that actually from the beginning, human marriage is designed by God to be a witness to and a pointer towards Christ's union with his church.

If you think about it, in God's master plan, not that God did it that he just thought and it came to pass, but when God sat down, humanly speaking, he sat down and said, what's my master plan?

The first thing that he put in place is not human marriage. The first thing he put in place logically is Christ's marriage to the church. This, after all, Paul says, is the mystery of his will, the goal of creation.

Everything else then fits around this, including marriage, which God designed by creating humanity, firstly male and female, so that in their union and marriage, they are able to point towards Christ and his church.

[29 : 37] Christ and his church, that's the big thing. Human marriage is a shadow, is a pointer to that big thing. So if we jettison complementarian marriage as Christians, what we do is we lose this.

We throw away this opportunity to witness to God's manifold wisdom. what is lost is the beauty of Christ as the head of the church, loving her, laying down his life for her, and then in turn the church submitting to him out of reverence for this love.

When we model that in marriage, we are able to showcase, actually, in our lives, the beauty of Christ and his church. This is what's at stake, I think, when you throw away complementarian marriage.

Now, again, sorry, there's a lot of caveats I have tonight, but again, I'm not saying that the husband is the savior of the wife, okay? Husbands, please, get that out of your heads.

The image does not extend there. We do not make our wives holy and blameless by our sacrificial love, and neither is Christ's marriage to the church sexual in any way.

[30 : 52] So the imagery only goes so far. But it goes to the extent that the husband is to express sacrificial headship just as Christ does, caring, taking responsibly for his wife's well-being, and then in turn the wife to submit to show how the church is doing likewise in response to Christ's love.

So really that's in one sense the explanation of the passage today, but as I said earlier, there are a few empty bullet points there, because I just want to make a few more points, which I think is important.

So first, can I just say that even though there is, and this is a criticism that is often leveled at complementarian views of marriage, even though we subscribe to that view, it in no way condones abuse by the husband whatsoever.

Okay? In fact, if that occurs, rather than modelling Christ, it becomes a disgrace to Christ. And husbands, can I say, will answer for it to the Lord Jesus one day.

So the problem isn't a view of complementarian marriage itself, but rather the abuse of it. And so rather than throw away this view, what we need to do is work harder to show forth the true beauty of it by practising it rightly.

[32:19] And so as a church, and as leaders in the church, we will not turn a blind eye to such conduct. If it's happening, then please have the courage to come and talk to us about it.

Because as leaders, we are responsible. We will have to give an account too, one day, as leaders of the church, for the care of the people in the church. And part of it, therefore, is that we need to do the right thing.

When necessary, exercise discipline for the good of those who suffer and the good of those who perpetrate it as well. And in some instances where it's a breaking of the law and there's crime involved, we need to take this to the police as well.

Second, the idea here is that marriage is to be between two believers. But, sad to say, sometimes that's not always the case.

And that brings an added challenge. But I have to say that Paul's teaching is not contingent on that. And so, if, I don't know everyone around here, but if you happen to be one of those people, then can I encourage you to ask God for wisdom as to how you can do your part in the marriage, even though your spouse may not be reciprocating as intended by the passage.

[33:40] Because what you're doing is that you're trying to do it as unto the Lord, out of reverence for Christ. And Peter writes in his own letter that who knows, you might be able to win your spouse by your conduct as a result.

Third, let me also offer a plea for grace. Be gracious to each other. Because this is a really high calling and in one sense a challenging thing.

We need the Spirit's filling in our lives to achieve this. And for that occur, therefore, we need to be gracious to each other as we live it out. That's husbands and wives, that is.

Humanly speaking, as husbands, we ourselves know how hard it is, isn't it, to submit to authority. And for example, if we fail to obey Christ, even though He's perfect, then consider your wife who has to submit to you who is someone far less perfect than Jesus.

don't make it hard for her, but rather a joy. That means, for example, don't be lazy, but own your responsibilities for the whole family.

[34:51] It means, as I failed to do early in my marriage, and even possibly now, I don't know whether Alyssa's watching, but giving her a voice and listening carefully so you truly understand her needs rather than presume that you know.

Because silly me, I used to think, headship is about knowing it all and then taking the lead and acting like it. No. She's your helper, and she will help you understand what her needs are.

Likewise, wise, make it a joy for your husband to lay down his life for you. He may have Jesus as his model, but trust me, he will never be Jesus.

He needs a Savior just like you. He's saved by grace as much as you are. So, understand that, that he's often trying his best, but he's still going to get it wrong.

Only Jesus is perfect. You may wish your husband to be, but maybe in the new creation. And for those of you who are still young in your marriage, maybe let me offer this as someone who is not so young.

[36:04] just remember that we all enter marriage as complete novices. It's an entry level position. As first time husbands, as wives, we have no prior experience.

We're learning on the job. So, Paul says in chapter four, forgive and forbear. Cheer each other on. Bring the best out of each other.

Rather than look at that passage, which you're not meant to look at, by the way, you're looking at your own, looking at that passage and wondering why your husband and wife has not fulfilled their side of the bargain. And finally, for those of you who are young ones who are looking to get married and thinking about it, hopefully it's giving you some thought as to what you need to consider, not for the person you're looking for, but actually for yourself.

I know that I often hear that there is a checklist going for the person that you're looking for. It might not be a bad idea to have a checklist for yourself and consider, for example, whether you're prepared and you're ready to be married or to look to marriage.

Because, really, I mean, there's a thrill in a romantic relationship, isn't it? It's fun, but it is a real step up, isn't it? From being a boyfriend and girlfriend to then what God calls us to be as husbands and wives.

[37:33] A big step. No one is really prepared for it, but hopefully you're mentally at least thinking about it. And then, the last point, be thankful that actually God's spirit is at work in us.

because God is committed to the beauty and success of Christ and His Church, to which we all belong as believers, and therefore, He will also work in our earthly marriages because He wants them to be a light shining in the darkness, pointing towards this heavenly marriage of His Son, Jesus, and His perfect, radiant bride, the Church.

We are part of that Church. That is where we're headed. That is where we belong already in some sense. God will work in us, in our marriages, to ensure that comes to pass.

Let's pray. A wonderful husband, Jesus is to His Church, the body. We are made holy and blameless, radiant, glorious, resplendent by His blood and through His Word.

Help us to submit to Him wholeheartedly, and may our marriages bear witness to His glory and grace. In His name we pray. Amen.