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Series: *In Christ - ONE*

Title: *"What is Submission in Marriage?"*

Text: Ephesians 5:21-33

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I preached on this text many years ago---and a couple days after it was posted on the website, I came into my office check my voice mail. When I listened, I heard an angry voice identifying himself as a pastor serving somewhere on the Eastern Shore. Apparently, his wife had found my sermon on web---and that led the to have some heated "discussions" about marital submission. To quote this angry reverend:

*"Your sermon has put all kinds of silly ideas in my wife's head. It has ruined everything. My phone number is....Call me back so I can tell you how upset I am with you."* I started to dial the number and then I thought, *"What am I doing? Why ruin my day by calling this pastor I don't even know and letting him chew me out? I'm not 'submitting' myself to that."*

Even today---after all these years the issue of who is to submit to whom in marriage is still controversial---even in the church. I hope I don't get any angry phone calls or email bombs this week but let's dig in to the Bible to see what the Inventor of marriage has to say. Our Heavenly Father inspired Paul to address this often-divisive issue in his letter to the Ephesians. God knows that a church cannot be one in Christ---if husband's and wives are not one in Christ. I believe this is timely because one of the main ways this pandemic has hurt the church is seen in its effect on marriage. Too many have called it quits during these difficult years.

Before we dig in---let's get some perspective by looking at what else God says in His written Word about this issue. If we go back to the beginning---we see that the book of Genesis tells us that God made male and female in His image. They were given EQUAL dignity and status—sharing CO-DOMINION over creation. Remember, God said to both Adam AND Eve, ***"Be fruitful and increase and fill the earth and rule over it."*** God didn't say that man was to rule over woman—or vice versa. They would be a husband-and-wife team. They would have children—but in God's original plan, He did not put husband OVER the wife or vice versa. Prior to the fall they were PARTNERS—EQUALLY responsible for dominion over creation and for marriage and family.

Now look at Genesis 2:23. When the man first sees the woman, he says, ***"This now is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh."*** We see here that in essence Adam responds to Eve's creation with the first LOVE POEM and this tells us that God's intent is for marriage to be an experience of great joy and delight. Adam also says, ***"She should be called 'woman' for she was taken out of man."*** In other words, he recognized Eve was not just another creature like the ones that had been paraded before him up to this point. No—like Adam—Eve was created in the image of God.

Okay, before we go any further in Genesis let me give you a little background information. Usually if two people are going to get together, the LOWER STATUS one will leave their post or place to come to the place of the one with the HIGHER STATUS. That's generally the way it is, even in our day, for appointments and so on. For example, I'm sure Elon Musk calls his employees to his office to talk about how to get out of buying Twitter—not the other way around. With that in mind, notice what Genesis 3:24 says, ***"For this reason, a MAN will leave his father and mother and be united, or cling or cleave to his wife, and they will become one flesh."***

If God's ORIGINAL plan were for the husband to RULE over the wife, then I think we would expect for the writer of Genesis to say something along the lines of, *"A woman shall be the one LEAVING. She shall leave her father's authority and pass now under her husband's authority."*

And that's not a far-fetched expectation because when God inspired Moses to write Genesis—in the culture of Moses' day—fathers chose whom their daughters would marry. There was no such thing as dating or picking your spouse on e-harmony or match.com. No—the dad just said, *"Daughter, I've picked out your husband. Pack your things."* So, it is indeed COUNTER cultural for the Bible to say: ***"A MAN shall leave his parents and cleave or cling to his wife, and the two shall become one."***

And please don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying the woman is more important. My point is simply that the most likely reading of this verse is that the two shall come together as EQUALS and become ONE flesh.

This equal footing deal would enable them to know the greatest intimacy possible. You can disagree with me and I'll still laugh at your jokes but I believe the best reading of Genesis, specifically these first two chapters before the Fall--- indicates God's intention from the beginning was that marriage should be a joy-filled PARTNERSHIP between a husband and a wife who EQUALLY bear the image of God---and are equally charged with co-dominion over creation.

Of course, when Adam and Eve sinned—all that changed. Not only was their unity—their relationship with God—broken. The oneness between man and woman was as well. And we see the damage of this right away. I mean, within moments of the fall, the equal partnership between Adam and Eve dissolves into competitive BLAMING.

- *"It was the Serpent's fault!"*
- *"It was Eve's fault!"*
- *"It was YOUR fault God. After all You gave me this woman!"*

Let me stop at this point and ask—how many of you married people out there have ever blamed your spouse for something? Let's have a show of hands. Thanks for your honesty! Okay let's go a bit further—no need to raise hands this time but how many of you find yourself at times wanting to be RIGHT in an argument with your spouse? How many of you ever feel like you have this need to prove your spouse is wrong? I'm guessing all "mental hands" are raised!

I know I mentioned an OLD TV show last week---so forgive me for mentioning another today but all this reminds me of an episode of the old sitcom *Mad About You*. Anyone remember that show? There was an episode where the couple were thinking of investing in a virtual reality machine. The wife tried it out and the virtual reality she chose was her husband coming to her saying, *"I was wrong. It was my fault."* The wife played this reality over and over and over again. I don't think virtual gaming has reached that level yet---but when it does---I imagine lots of spouses will want to try it out.

Well, all this competitive blaming started right here in Genesis 3. And—in just a couple chapters things go even further downhill—fast. Genesis 4:19 tells us that Lamech married two women. POLYGAMY starts in just six generations. And, of course, there's no oneness in that. I mean, from the one flesh that God intended it now becomes possible for men to collect wives like cattle. Then in Moses' day we see men casting their wives aside for any reason—and because of this hardness in men's hearts God told them to at least give the women a writ of divorce.

Down through the ages we see the oneness between man and woman that God intended continue to deteriorate. I mean, it's obvious that the unity God designed men and women to enjoy still suffers from the effects of the disobedience of Adam and Eve.

Well, Jesus came to reverse the curse of sin—including the way sin affected the oneness and community husbands and wives were supposed to enjoy. That brings us to this morning's text. Take your Bibles and turn to Ephesians 5:21-33. Follow along with me as I read from the New American Standard Version. And if able, let's all stand in respect for God's Word.

Ephesians 5:21-33

**21 – Be subject to one another in the fear of Christ,**

**22 – Wives being subject to your husbands, as to the Lord.**

**23 – For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body.**

**24 – But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything.**

**25 – Husbands love your wives just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her;**

**26 – that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water through the Word,**

**27 – that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless.**

- 28 – So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself;**  
**29 – for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church,**  
**30 – because we are members of His body.**  
**31 – For this cause a man shall leave His father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife;**  
**and the two shall become one flesh.**  
**32 – This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church.**  
**33 – Nevertheless let each individual among you also love his own wife even as himself, and let the wife see to it that she respects her husband.**

Now before we go any farther, I want to point out that this particular text can be very difficult to understand. In fact, these verses in Ephesians 5 have caused so much disagreement that many pastors steer clear of it all together, fearing the phone calls and e-mail bombs it could incite. I once saw a cartoon in a preaching magazine that showed a preacher who had prepared his pulpit area like one of those concrete bunker machine gun nests in WWII. The cartoon showed him peering through the narrow slit in the pulpit/bunker and the caption had him saying, *“Today my text is Ephesians 5:22, ‘Wives SUBMIT to your husbands.’”*

The cartoonist was inspired to illustrate his sermon like this because that little six-letter word—SUBMIT—is indeed one of the most disliked, and divisive words in the Bible. But I don’t want us here at Redland to steer clear of it---because I believe we HAVE to come to a proper understanding of this troublesome word if our marriages are to bring us the joy God intends.

In fact, I believe most of the problems in marriage can be traced to one thing: POWER. The majority of arguments between husbands and wives have to do with disagreements over WHO is in charge of WHAT in the relationship. And, more often than not husbands and wives don’t resolve this issue properly—and when they don’t a POWER IMBALANCE develops in their marriage.

Now, let’s stop and think for a moment about what happens when power and authority in a marriage relationship is out-of-whack. First—what does the person who holds the greatest power and authority in a relationship usually do? Well, they LORD IT OVER THE OTHER PERSON. If it’s a husband, he tends to attempt to control his wife. He uses HER to make HIS life easier.

The sad fact is many people interpret this text in Ephesians to SUPPORT this kind of relationship. Pastors who do so say things like: *“The husband should make all the important decisions in the relationship.”* Or *“The husband should go out to earn the family’s daily bread and the wife should stay home and bake it.”*

In my study this week I came across something Martin Luther said about power imbalance in marriage---and it shows he was heading in the right direction on this issue. In fact, I think it proves he was ahead of his time: *“Married folk are not to act as they now usually do. The men are almost lions in their homes, hard toward their wives and servants. The women, too, everywhere want to domineer and have their husbands as servants. It is foolish for a man to want to demonstrate his masculine power and heroic strength by ruling over his wife. On the other hand, the ambition of wives to dominate the home is also intolerable.”*

Perhaps Martin learned this from our text for this morning because here in his letter to the Ephesians---Paul offers us a solution to these problems that come with POWER IMBALANCES in marriage.

Okay, let’s look at the OTHER side of this power imbalanced relationship. What does the person holding LESS power or authority tend to do?

Well, when wives are subjugated forcefully to the authority of their husbands they often REBEL or RESIST. They find some way to make their domineering husband’s lives miserable. And that’s the way it almost always is. When people ABUSE their authority—those who suffer look for a way to get even.

A few years ago I came across a post on social media where a wife confessed to using her husband's toothbrush to clean their toilet. Here's what she said:

*"He had friends over one night and embarrassed me by making a huge thing out of me not cleaning under the toilet seat good enough. So, starting the next day I clean it very, very, well with his toothbrush a few times a day. When I'm done, I pull out the hair from you know where and any obvious chunks of you know what and hang it back up, then I smile happily every single time he brushes his teeth. It's been over a month. I think I'll give it another month and then tell him."*

Well here in his letter to the Ephesians Paul offers us a solution to these problems that come with POWER IMBALANCES in marriage. He reminds us of God's original plan for marriage—which contains a way for husbands and wives to move beyond sinful power struggles—by embracing a PROPER understanding of Biblical SUBMISSION. Now, as I said, this is a concept that is often misunderstood, and my goal is to give us a clearer understanding of what Paul is saying by pointing out 5 things about Biblical submission—five basic things that will help us to comprehend and practice this important concept in our own marriages.

Remember—when marriages are strong, healthy, BUILT-UP—so is the church. So—what does Paul say?

**1.) First, he says that Biblical submission is PERSONAL.**

In other words, it is an attitude that, as a spouse, you choose to live by yourself. It's not something that is coerced. I mean, Paul doesn't say, *"Husbands, tell or make your wives to submit to your headship."* No—instead, Paul speaks to husbands and wives INDIVIDUALLY and asks each to work on their own attitudes. In verse 21, he says, ***"submit YOURSELVES to one another."*** So, TRUE Biblical submission comes from the person DOING the submitting—not from the person BEING SUBMITTED TO! Submission is not something that is DEMANDED. It is something that is GIVEN. Even JESUS does not DEMAND that we submit to Him. Of course, we should always do that—but he leaves the decision as to whether or not to do so up to us. Here's something else God uses Paul to teach us:

**2.) Biblical submission is COMPREHENSIVE.**

In verse 24 Paul says, ***"As the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in EVERYTHING."*** The principle here is that submission is an *"EVERYTHING THING."* In other words, no part of the marriage relationship is to be considered private property. You can't have ONENESS without this principle. There can be no secrets—no off-limits bank accounts—submission is comprehensive.

**3.) And then third—and this is KEY—Paul tells us that submission is MUTUAL.**

Many times, spouses fail to apply this text to their marriages properly because they begin at verse 22 instead of verse 21 where Paul plainly says to BOTH husband and wife, ***"Submit to ONE ANOTHER in the fear of Christ,"*** You see, these verses teach us that the answer to the power imbalance question—you know, *"WHO IS IN CHARGE, HUSBAND OR WIFE?"*—is really NIETHER. No—the correct answer to this question is JESUS! He is the boss! He is the HEAD of any marriage just as He is the Head of the church!

And Paul is saying that a marriage doesn't have much of a chance of lasting unless BOTH spouses believe this and SUBMIT to Jesus' authority—Jesus' headship—in their part of the relationship. Paul goes on to explain HOW this works by first addressing the wife and then the husband.

So—ladies first.

**a. Let's look at verses 22-24 and see what he says to WIVES.**

***"Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, His body, of which He is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything."***

Okay—look at your Bibles. And make a note if it's not already in your particular translation. Write this sentence in the margin:

*"The word, 'submit' in verse 22 is not in the Greek text. It is supplied in verse 21."*

So literally verses 21 & 22 say, ***“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ—wives to your husbands as to the Lord.”***

I point this out because I think the clear principle in this text is this. Wives are to relate to—submit to—their husbands in light of their relationship to Jesus. They are to treat their husbands as Jesus would want them to treat them. I mean, a godly wife should constantly be asking herself, *“What would Jesus do?”* Here’s a rough—but I think accurate—paraphrase of what Paul is saying in verse 24:

*“As the church is constantly asking ‘what would Jesus want us to do’ in everything---wives should also be constantly asking, ‘what would Jesus have me do’ when it comes to relating to my husband.”*

Now, think about this for a minute, husbands—present and future! Can you imagine how wonderful it would be to have a wife who always treats you the way Jesus would want her to—whose love for you reflects her love for Jesus?! Maybe like me you don’t have to imagine—and if you don’t surely you would testify to the fact that no man can be treated better than one whose wife only relates to him in this way!

By the way the movie, *War Room* does an excellent job of showing this principle. It’s a great movie—I recommend it HIGHLY. Okay, it’s our turn husbands.

**b. What does Paul say to the HUSBAND about HIS role in mutual submission?**

He says that men should treat their wives in the same Christlike way, but he even spells it out more clearly for us. For example, in verse 25 he says, ***“Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her.”*** Now guys, that’s a nice, poetic way of saying, *“Jesus chose to submit Himself to the whip, the thorns and the nails for our benefit. That’s the example for you husbands to follow.”* In short, Paul boldly says here that we men are to have a SACRIFICIAL love for our wives. Their needs are always to come before our own—even if it is costly for us to satisfy those needs. In fact, it means we are to be willing to lay down our very lives for our help-mates.

Back in the 90’s Johnny Oates was the manager of Texas Rangers, but he was not a “Lone Ranger”---because he had a wife and three kids. Like all baseball managers he had his mind set on reaching the World Series. Those ambitions controlled him until he decided baseball would no longer be his god. You see, Oates’s wife was hospitalized for emotional and physical exhaustion in April 1995---right when his first season with the Rangers was beginning. Yet Oates had the courage to ask for a leave of absence to spend time with his ailing wife. His assistants could handle the dugout. No one else could do the husbanding. He stood by Gloria. The team stood by him. In 1996, Oates was his league's Manager of the Year; for Gloria, he’s the husband of a lifetime.

Paul reminds us here that Jesus Christ gave us the ultimate model of masculine love: He sacrificed himself for others. It doesn’t take any special ability to live a self-centered life. But it takes character to sacrifice---and this is the kind of character that is needed in husbands for marriages to be healthy and strong. Men take a few minutes and review some of the ways you have to love your wife in a sacrificial way.

- We can put down our smart phones and TALK to our wives and LISTEN to them.
- We can bring them coffee in the mornings made the way they like it—before we get our own “wake-me-up” cup.
- We can take them shopping when we’d rather have a root canal.
- We can put their financial needs above our financial wants.

I’m sure the wives out there can think of other examples of this kind of selflessness. But ladies can YOU imagine how wonderful it would be to have a husband who was always putting you first—who was constantly dying to self to make sure your needs are met---a man who is following Jesus’ example as the gentle Shepherd Who lays down His life for His sheep?

In that movie I mentioned, *War Room*, there's a scene where the husband massages and washes his wife's feet after she comes home from work. He's literally obeying Jesus' command given to the disciples to wash one another's feet. Wives wouldn't you like to have a husband like that? If you would raise your feet!

Now—I think I can read your minds at this point—because many of you are thinking, *“This all sounds nice—but somebody has to be in charge for decisions to be made. I mean, someone has to rule or there will be chaos and disorder in marriage. Someone has to make the final call in decisions—and I vote for me.”*

Well—ideally—when both spouses are submitting to Jesus that kind of rulership is not necessary. I believe when both spouses are looking to Jesus they can have a relationship like Adam and Eve had BEFORE the fall. They will embrace CO-DOMINION—MUTUAL DECISION MAKING. But of course—there comes a time when someone does have to make a call—and I believe the Bible teaches that in those times it should be the husband. But it should never be a dictatorial “call.” It should be selfless-sacrificial type call. And if that call turns out to be the wrong decision—the wife should show her respect for her husband—by NOT blaming him—but rather by respecting his servant leadership—trusting that He did his best. But MOST of the time this is not necessary. Ideally husband and wife make JOINT decisions.

Dr. Gilbert Belzickien wrote a book entitled, *Beyond Sex Roles*. In it he gives some great BIBLICAL principles when it comes to marital decision making.

**a. First he says, learn to DEFER to one another.**

In other words, when husbands and wives can't decide—take turns letting the other have his or her way. Of course, he's talking about the everyday decisions—like what to have for dinner—or what movie to watch on Netflix or where to go on vacation---or what to do with an unexpected financial windfall.

**b. Second, give greater weight to the partner that has stronger expertise or giftedness in that particular area.**

If the husband is a plumber and the wife has her CPA—yield to her in difficult financial decisions and let him deal with how best to fix clogged drains.

**c. Third, in decision making give consideration to whether a decision affects one spouse more than it does the other.**

This is seen in a decision like whether or not to move to take a new job—or how best to care for an elderly parent. Of course with the Internet---these kinds of decisions are easier to make. We can work from anywhere which is why, in order to meet our IT deadline I spend Monday's and Wednesdays studying at home. The point is---when we have decisions to make we need to be selfless---and decided based on who's needs are best met.

**d. Fourth, learn to compromise.**

By the way, do you know that in a relationship, anytime one person loses, the relationship always loses but compromise is a win-win deal. We see this fleshed out in Acts 6 when there was that dispute between the Hebrew and the Greek widows as to who were getting the best of the food. Instead of saying, *“Well, Jesus was a Jew, so we'll go with the Hebrews.”* the apostles set up the office of deacon. It was the deacon's job to make sure widows were treated equally—a win-win all around!

**e. Finally, pray together and wait for guidance.**

Prayer helps develop our oneness as a couple better than ANYTHING as we go TOGETHER to our LORD and then follow His leading. After all He is the HEAD of all marriages! Now—in those rare times when the husband has to make a call in a decision as head it should only after a lot of JOINT prayer and discussion so that in essence it is still a JOINT decision.

**4.) This leads to the fourth thing I want to point out when it comes to true Biblical Submission. It is BENEFICIAL!**

It's good for us! Anyone who is in a marriage where this attitude is embraced has it made! And this is important for us to note because many people over the years have thought of Biblical submission as a terrible doctrine—when nothing could be farther from the truth---because it embraces a truly Christlike love that *“does not demand its own way.”* (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13)

Genuine, Biblical submission does not lead spouses to extract service or to manipulate. Instead, it leads them to cherish the other spouse. It is a love that constantly, even sacrificially, works to satisfy the needs of the other. Husbands and wives who practice it, obey the command that is found in Philippians 2:4 where it says, ***“Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.”***

By the way, let me just stop and ask, *“Husbands do you KNOW your wife’s interests? Are you familiar with her needs as a person? Do you know their dreams—their hopes?”* And wives, what about you? *“Do you understand your husband’s needs? Do you know his interests? His favorite things? His fears—His aspirations?”* We can’t practice Biblical submission to each other if we don’t KNOW each other.

You can’t have the ONENESS we all yearn for without this mutual knowledge. I mean, Paul says that wives who SUBMIT in this sense respect their husbands in spite of their flaws. They believe in them and “root” for them and do all they can to make sure they succeed in life. And a husband who submits to his wife, CHERISHES her as he does his own body. He will encourage and enable his wife to become the unique person God made her to be. My point is this—a marriage where both spouses practice true Biblical submission is a wonderful, satisfying, benefiting marriage. Life doesn’t get any better than this!

#### **5.) And then finally Paul says that Biblical submission is SPIRITUAL.**

The point here is that it is really impossible for a husband and a wife to submit to one another---and daily practice a sacrificial love and mutual respect—ON THEIR OWN POWER. If a husband is to love like Jesus, he must have personally experienced the love of Jesus. If a wife is to treat her husband as Jesus would want her to she must know Jesus and have submitted to His Lordship herself. They each need Jesus living in and through them—they each need to be acknowledging Him as LORD—in order for them to practice true Biblical submission. This is what Paul is saying here in verse 21. Husbands and wives are to ***“submit to one another—OUT OF REVERENCE FOR CHRIST.”***

In fact, the word *“submit”* here in verse 21 is not a command. The command is back in verse 18 where it says, ***“Be filled with the Spirit.”*** In other words, SUBMITTING to one another is an expression of being filled with the Spirit of God. The text should read, ***“Be filled with the Holy Spirit...submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.”***

You see, if you are a disciple of Jesus, yielding to His lordship, then when a problem comes you’ll let Him take the lead—you’ll submit to what He would want you to do. And you know, it IS impossible to submit like this on your own strength. We have to draw on God’s power. As I have often told you, in marriage as God intends there are not two partners but three—and Jesus is the third—the head.

So—Biblical submission is: personal, comprehensive, mutual, beneficial, and spiritual. That’s what God’s blueprint calls for when it comes to building a marriage—a home—one that brings us joy instead of sorrow—peace instead of stress.

Let us pray.