Title: Love and Respect
Text: Ephesians 5:22-33
Main Point: How to understand marriage from Jesus' relationship to His Church.
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Series: Growing Godly Marriages

GODLY MARRIAGE: INTRODUCTION

We begin a new series on marriage. This series advances Castine's goal of "growing godly marriages to reach the world." Marriage is a part of God's created order. God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." (Genesis 2:18) Then the first declaration of marriage: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." (Genesis 2:24) Marriage was a part of creation before sin entered it in Genesis 3. For any society to thrive, it must value, defend, and promote marriage, which is why Castine's goal is to "grow godly marriages to reach the world." As we begin, I further recognize how difficult having a godly marriage can be. Two sinful people trying to join in oneness will always face challenges. Nevertheless, no faithful church can ignore marriage's importance in honoring God's design, preserving society, and preparing the next generation to carry forward the truth of God.

The Apostle Paul had creation order in mind when he wrote to the Ephesians; in 5:31, he quotes Genesis 2:24, linking his writing to God's original plan for marriage. Ephesians 5:22-33 then is a helpful passage on how God intends marriage to function.

Since I am speaking from Ephesians, here is a brief introduction.

> Ephesians addresses an ethnically diverse Christian community, arguing that a unified church encompassing both Jews and Gentiles represents God's intentional design, with both groups holding equal standing in this new religious community.[1] The letter also promotes values and relational patterns modeled on Christ's example to foster unity and peace within the church.[1]
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> The letter's central theological focus revolves around reconciliation. God's primary work in Christ involves bringing Jews and Gentiles together into "one new humanity,"[2] accomplished through Christ's death. This reconciliation extends beyond the church to encompass all creation, which falls under Christ's authority as he reigns at God's right hand.[2]
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> Beyond theological proclamation, Ephesians insists that believers respond to their salvation through conduct worthy of God's grace—whether in personal behavior, relationships, or household dynamics.[2] The letter also acknowledges the reality of spiritual opposition; despite evil powers being subject to Christ, believers must engage in spiritual combat to protect their character and the church's unity, which Paul addresses through the imagery of God's armor.[2]
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> [1] Thomas B. Slater, *Ephesians*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., 2012), 5.

[2] Derek R. Brown, Miles Custis, and Matthew M. Whitehead, *Ephesians*, ed. Douglas Mangum, Logos Research Commentaries (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2026).

EPHESIANS 5:22-33: FEMINIST INTERPRETATIONS

There is significant debate within Christianity regarding these verses. Do these verses actually teach a hierarchy between a husband and a wife? Or does Paul intend equality between the sexes? How someone answers this question will shape their interpretation, especially of 5:22-24. I begin with this controversy.

According to Dr. Daniel Doriani,

> Ephesians 5 is foundational for understanding the quality and structure of marriage and for understanding male-female relations in the family and in society. It has long been a pillar for the traditional theological teaching about the roles of men and women. It says plainly that wives should submit to their husbands and that a husband is the head of his wife (5:22–23).
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> Because Ephesians 5 appears so obviously to contradict their views, feminist interpreters are obligated to attend to it. Unless they are willing to renounce their feminism, evangelical feminists must argue that despite its apparent clarity, Ephesians 5 fails to endorse male headship and perhaps even undermines it. As uncomplicated and sweeping as Ephesians 5 seems to be in its promotion of male leadership, it is neither, says the evangelical feminist, and so it cannot be taken at face value. It is noteworthy that critical scholars who feel no compunction to heed the text commonly interpret Ephesians 5 the traditional way. For example, Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza says, 'The general injunction for all members of the Christian community, "Be subject to one another in the fear of Christ," is clearly spelled out for the Christian wife as requiring submission and inequality.'
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> Evangelical feminist interpretations of Ephesians 5 may adopt four types of argumentation:

1. Ephesians 5 has exegetical mysteries that make its teaching unclear, and therefore unusable for either side of the gender debate. They assert that the command to submit in 5:22 is rendered unstable by the requirement of mutual submission in 5:21. Christian egalitarians also argue that the term "head" (5:23) is unclear, since it may mean source or leader.
2. Ephesians 5 presents a temporary injunction, adapted to local conditions that no longer obtain, so that the teaching no longer requires literal obedience.
3. The Bible does teach that women ought to be subordinate to men, but the subordination of women to men is a consequence of the curse. Since we should ever seek to reverse the effects of the curse, the church should steadily strive to eradicate female subordination.

4. Ephesians 5 does not support the traditional view at all. Rather, when Paul commands Christians to 'submit to one another,' he abolishes authority structures in the family, forbidding it even as a temporary measure. Ephesians 5:21 overrides or trumps 5:22. (Daniel Doriani, "The Historical Novelty of Egalitarian Interpretations of Ephesians 5:21–22," in Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood, ed. Wayne Grudem, Foundations for the Family Series (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002), 204–5.)

The feminist interpretation is relatively recent in church history.

> For over eighteen centuries the church was confident that it understood this [Ephesian 5:21-22] and other biblical texts central to the Christian concept of marriage and gender relations. The church's leading pastors, theologians, and exegetes held that Ephesians 5 taught mutuality and service within the structure given by the leadership of a husband and father. The church judged Ephesians 5 and other passages, such as Genesis 2 and 1 Timothy 2, difficult to perform perhaps, but not difficult to understand.
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> A handful of Christians began to question this consensus in the 1800s, but the onslaught began with the onset of feminism a few decades ago. As it often does, the church started to echo a new cultural movement by adopting the questions and sensibilities of feminism, about a decade after its arrival. Theologians then began to read teachings about submission and leadership in new ways. Not surprisingly, feminist interpretations of Ephesians 5 started to appear in commentaries around 1970. (Daniel Doriani, "The Historical Novelty of Egalitarian Interpretations of Ephesians 5:21–22," in Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood, ed. Wayne Grudem, Foundations for the Family Series (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002), 203–4.)

Since I have one sermon, I will only address how Ephesians 5:21 and 22 explain gender roles in marriage. If some wish to explore the other interpretations, please email me, and I will provide a helpful source for deeper study.

EPHESIANS 5:23: THE MEANING OF κεφαλὴ (HEAD)

Another serious debate in understanding the roles of husband and wife concerns the interpretation of κεφαλὴ, translated as "head." Should it mean "leader" or "source?

> The Greek term κεφαλὴ (kephalē) presents one of the most contested interpretive questions in New Testament studies, with scholars divided between understanding it as denoting "source" or "authority."
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> The word has been interpreted in two primary ways: either as indicating an origin point (with or without implying subordination), or as referring to a position of authority.[1] However, the lexical evidence strongly favors the authority interpretation. Recent linguistic research has demonstrated that claims about kephalē meaning "source" in the New Testament period lack factual support from Greek literature[1], while the meaning "authority over" was well-established in Greek texts of that era.[1]

The "source" interpretation, though historically defended by church fathers concerned with Trinitarian implications, rests on shaky ground. While kephalē occasionally appears with a "source" meaning in classical texts—such as river sources or a father as progenitor—there is no instance of it meaning the "source" of individual persons.[2] Among the legitimate metaphorical meanings kephalē carried in ordinary Greek were "origin" or "source" and "crown" or "completion,"[3] yet the former usage remains marginal and contextually specific.

By contrast, kephalē functioned as a metaphor for "controlling agent," "ruler," or "leader"—a sense found frequently in the Septuagint and in classical sources.[2] The Septuagint translators regularly employed kephalē to render the Hebrew word rōsh when referring to heads or rulers of societies, a usage pattern Paul would have encountered naturally.[1]

The interpretive choice matters significantly because context determines meaning. While words possess a stable core of meaning, their significance depends fundamentally on contextual relationships, and context is frequently overlooked in this debate.[4] Understanding κεφαλὴ as authority rather than source better coheres with how Paul employs the term across his epistles and how his original audience would have understood it.

[1] Ronald Y. K. Fung, "Ministry in the New Testament," in *The Church in the Bible and the World: An International Study*, ed. D. A. Carson (World Evangelical Fellowship, 1987), 186–187.

[2] Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 32:410.

[3] Walter C. Kaiser Jr. et al., *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 600.

[4] C. Powell, "A Stalemate of Genders? Some Hermeneutical Reflections," *Themelios* (1992), 17:3:17–18.

Therefore, I contend that Paul's usage of κεφαλὴ should be understood as "head," meaning leader, because of these biblical uses: 1 Corinthians 11:3; Ephesians 1:22; Colossians 1:18; 2:10. The combination of these verses explains Paul's meaning of "head."

EPHESIANS 5:22-33: CULTURAL CHALLENGES

Another significant challenge to these verses is imposing a worldview on the passage rather than letting the passage inform one's worldview. Many Christians have a difficult time separating the "loud" voices in culture from biblical truth. The U.S. Supreme Court's 2015 decision, Obergefell v. Hodges, only added to the confusion. The court decided God's created order was subservient to the wishes of nine justices, who required all states to recognize same-sex marriages lawfully

performed in other states. Now, according to American legislation, God's intention for marriage between a man and a woman (Ephesians 5:22-33) is available for same-sex couples.

David Congdon, writing for *The Christian Century*, titled his September 9, 2026 piece "Understanding Polyamory." https://www.christiancentury.org/features/understanding-polyamory. Congdon defines polyamory as "many spouses" or "many loves," a term coined in 1992 to describe the increasingly common practice of consensually having more than one romantic partner. "When the Supreme Court's Obergefell v. Hodges decision legalized same-sex marriage in 2015, many people asked what the next change to marriage laws was likely to be. Chief Justice Roberts raised the question directly in his dissenting opinion, in which he asked whether the same arguments could be used by 'people who find fulfillment in polyamorous relationships.' The New York Times published an op-ed by law professor William Baude under the headline, 'Is Polygamy Next?' and a Time magazine feature asked, 'Is Monogamy Over?'

Congdon reveals his antibiblical bias when he states, "Christians have good reason to be invested in this ongoing conversation—and to look beyond the category of 'natural.' We believe in a God who raised a man from the dead and who works wonders regularly, whether these are actual miracles or the more everyday wonders of love and mercy. We look in hope to an eschatological kingdom in which all things are made right. None of this is natural. One does not need to sign up for John Humphrey Noyes's free love or complex marriage to see that he recognized something essential to Christian faith: that it is a bold wager on the reality that God has made possible something radically out of step with the natural order."

I present the objections above to my interpretation of Ephesians 5:22-33 for your information. I will challenge each one as an incorrect interpretation. I shared them so you know I have considered each one and found them unconvincing. Further, if you want to determine whether I handle the word of God correctly, you have a starting point for your investigation.

EPHESIANS 5:22-33

1. As I begin, I accept that I am fully responsible to God for what I teach you. As difficult as this is, I know God will judge me for how I handle his word. However, I am not fully responsible for your spiritual development. You too have judgments to make. I have given you the challenges. I now present the passage, and you must decide what God wants for your marriage.

2. I cannot accept the feminist interpretation of Ephesians 5:21-22.

    2.1. The first obstacle to my position is the Greek word *ὑποτάσσω*, "submit." It appears in verb form in Eph. 5:21, "submitting to one another." Eph. 5:22 has no verb; the verse literally reads, "The wives to own husbands as to the Lord." 5:22's verb, "submission," depends on 5:21. As noted above, the contention here is how to interpret the verses because of the verb use.

2.2. I believe the syntax is helpful. Paul immediately objects to any husband who understands his role in an authoritarian manner. His "submission" (Eph. 5:21) to his wife is one of loving service.

2.3. Nevertheless, Paul, from general submission in 5:21, has specific submission in mind in 5:22; 5:22 makes no sense without supplying the verb "submission" into 5:22. Not generally, but specifically, Paul limits his discussion to wife and husband.

2.4. The wife is to understand submission by the church's submission to Christ.

2.4.1. Colossians 1:18, combined with Ephesians 1:22-23, leaves no doubt that Jesus leads His church as its head.

2.4.2. "Headship" is understood by 1 Corinthians 11:3; Ephesians 1:22; Colossians 1:18; 2:10, where it does not mean "source" but "head" or leader.

2.5. If one interprets submission as equality between men and women (a feminist interpretation), they must overcome not only the relationship between Jesus and the church, but also the larger context.

2.5.1. In the larger context, Paul addresses the role of child and parent (Ephesians 6:1-4). Although he does not use *ὑποτάσσω*, he expects children to listen to and obey their parents. Parents lead; children submit to this leadership. I do not know of anyone serious about following Jesus who wishes to make the parent-child relationship equal!

2.5.2. The problem comes with bondservants and masters. (I am not going to deal with Christianity and slavery in detail here; I have done so in other settings.) However, Christian teaching was greatly influential in eradicating slavery in America. Further, slavery originated because of sin (Genesis 3) and has no place in society. Yet marriage and family existed before sin (Genesis 1-2). Still, Paul has an order in mind. He says the "master" leads and the bondservant follows or submits.

2.5.3. Finally, I find "submission" in creation order: "Then the LORD God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.'" (Genesis 2:18, a part of the original marriage context). The "helper" (wife) is to support the leader (husband).

2.5.4. Therefore, the larger context (Ephesians 5:22-6:9) persuades me that the church's interpretation over the past eighteen centuries is correct. Husbands should offer loving leadership to their wives and families, and wives should submit to their husbands' leadership by helping them lead more toward God.

3. Wives submit to husbands, whom God expects to lead in marriage. (Ephesians 5:22-24)

3.1. Wives should understand submission in the same way the church submits to Jesus.

3.1.1. Jesus would never lead in a sinful way. Consequently, wives do not submit to a husband's sinful leadership. Instead, she follows Jesus, not her husband.

4. Husbands should understand their leadership by the model of Jesus toward His church. (Ephesians 5:25-32)

4.1. The husband should love his wife with a willingness to die for her, literally. Most will never face this extreme choice. Nevertheless, she should believe that if the worst presents itself, he is willing to die for her.

4.2. Still, short of death, the husband should demonstrate sacrificial love toward his wife.

4.3. Husbands are to lead biblically in the home, creating an atmosphere of holiness.

4.4. Husbands are to love their wives by "nourishing" them.

4.4.1. ἐκτρέφω (nourish) means to provide food, nourish literally. Paul uses the same word in Ephesians 6:4, where he requires parents to "bring them [children] up" (ἐκτρέφω). Husbands are to provide physical care and spiritual care to their wives.

4.5. Husbands are to "cherish" their wives.

4.5.1. Θάλπω (cherish), meaning to warm, keep warm. The word is used twice metaphorically in the New Testament: Ephesians 5:29; 1 Thessalonians 2:7, where Paul claims he is like "a nursing mother 'taking care of' (θάλπω) her own children."

4.5.2. Husbands cherish their wives by looking to Jesus's sacrificial love for His church and seeking to emulate this care by providing for her, showing concern for her, helping her grow spiritually, and speaking often of how she benefits him.

5. Finally, Paul concludes by summarizing his teaching in 5:33.

5.1. Paul concludes by speaking to each husband uniquely, "each one of you." With the model of Jesus clearly in view, each husband is to love his wife as he does himself. I believe this is the starting point. He should want for his wife what he wants for himself. However, this love should grow into sacrificial love, based on Jesus' love for His Church.

5.2. Each wife is to "respect" her husband. The Greek word used is φοβέω (fear). It calls to mind the "fear of God." Modern translations capture this idea, rendering it as honor or respect. As the husband seeks to lead (with all the sinful missteps) as Jesus modeled, the wife, as helper, shows respect through support, encouragement, patience, love, and by instilling confidence, helping him grow into a godly leader.

6. My notes are more extensive than usual because I have tried to lay a biblical foundation for what a godly marriage is. Castine's goal of growing godly marriages requires such effort from me. As marriages grow in line with Ephesians 5:22-33 and other biblical passages on marriage, we shape current and future generations for God's glory!