

Section 2: God's Good Pattern For Marriage

Lesson 5: The Wife's Role (Part Two): The Wife's Calling

Introduction

Do you know what you see if you look through a microscope? No matter how small the molecule in view, nor the type of matter in question, you find predictable order, structure, pattern, and repetition. You find that no matter how far we zoom into the details of this created world there is a sense in which our observations are always the same: *We see that everything exists according to a well-ordered design that has been set by God.* But this is not only true of the *microscope*, it is also true of the *telescope*. When we cast the lenses of mankind's finest engineering toward the celestial bodies above, what do we observe? We find that no matter how far out into space we look, there is predictable order standing behind it all. We find that planets are not chaotically crashing through the cosmos, but rather traveling upon the circuit set for them from the beginning. We know the number of minutes in a day, the number of days in a year, and all the seasons we can expect as the earth travels its course around the Sun. We know that if our planet was even fractionally nearer to or further from that Sun, human life could not exist. We know hundreds of years before comets will pass or eclipses will commence. Why? Because from the microscopic to the telescopic, all things in all places at all times exist under the organizing hand of the all-wise God.

This brings us right into the heart of the general call to submission in Scripture. The Greek word for "submit" ("υποτασσω" [*hūpotassō*]) is a compound word. It combines "υπο" ([*hūpo*] meaning: *under or beneath*) and "τασσω" ([*tassō*] meaning: *a set order or a set arrangement*). At its most basic, the word submit means: *to willingly place yourself under or beneath the set order or arrangement assigned by God the Creator.* It means willingly following the structure, pattern, and plan that God has set by his divine authority for the flourishing of the world he has made. To be submissive to God is the very definition of a truly righteous life. Likewise, to live in un-submissive rebellion to God's order is the very definition of sin: "*Sin is lawlessness,*" (1 Jn. 3:4).

Moreover, just as we see the organizing hand of God extending into every molecule of creation, so his call to submission extends into every station of human life. Every human being is called to a life of submission according to God's set arrangement for the ordering of the world: *Children are called to submit to parents (Eph. 6:1); church members to elders (Heb. 13:17); citizens to governments (1 Pet. 2:13); employees to employers (Col. 3:22); husbands to Christ, and wives to husbands, (1 Cor. 11:3).* Yet, there is a very strange phenomenon. When we look through the microscope we find every molecule of matter in submission to God's order. When we look through the telescope we find the immeasurable expanse of the cosmos in submission to God's order. But when we look into the heart of man through the lens of Holy Scripture, what do we find? We see a world of men and women whose hearts have turned from the happy state of submission to God to the self-destroying foolishness of rebellion.

If you know the story of Christianity at all, then you will know that the subject of submission is at its very center. It was the un-submissive rebellion of Adam and Eve which brought this world into ruin at the start—*not only that Eve did not submit to God's command concerning the fruit, but also that Adam did not submit to God's command to lead his wife in righteousness, (Gen. 3:6).* Moreover, it was the submission of the Lord Jesus Christ—*"even to the point of death... upon a cross"*—that has, once for all, secured an everlasting redemption for the elect from Adam's race, (Phil. 2:8). It was because Jesus said, "*not my will but thine*" that you and I can be forgiven of all our rebellion, (Matt. 26:39). But the centrality of submission to the Christian faith does not stop there. If everything went wrong when man refused to submit to God's order, what would it look like for everything to be made right? It would look like the rebellious hearts of the redeemed being restored by the Holy Spirit to a posture of glad-submission to all God's holy will. Indeed, this is the very promise of God given to every believer—not only that he will justify them by his grace, but also sanctify them by his power, so that they are being renewed more and more after the image of Christ day by day.

Q: *Have you ever considered how central submission is to the whole of the Christian life and to every station of life?*

The purpose of taking time to consider all of this is to help us recognize two things at the start of this week's lesson:

(1) The call to submission is not unique to women or to wives.

The call to submission is part and parcel of the entirety of the Christian life for men, women, children, citizens, employees, church officers, etc. Everyone who would know God in truth and honor him with their lives must forsake the way of rebellion and embrace his call to submission—that is, *the call to willingly place ourselves under the set arrangement assigned to us by God our Creator.*

(2) The call to submission is not a call to oppression, but to flourishing.

We have all been told that *submission is oppression* and that embracing it will rob us of realizing our full potential and joy. But we must remember that Satan sold Eve this same lie in the beginning. Satan told Eve that rebelling against the Lord's authority over her by eating the forbidden fruit would lead her to a fuller, and more blessed life, (Gen. 3:4-5). But did it? No. Instead, it brought her (and all her offspring) sorrow, dysfunction, and death. Satan deceitfully enticed Eve into a self-destructive rebellion that robbed her of flourishing rather than promoted it. Beloved, we must stop believing his lies and start holding fast to the truth. The truth is that willingly embracing God's call to submission, not merely as a wife, but in every station of human life, is the path of restoration and healing for a broken world—*beginning with our repentance, faith, and submission to the Lord Jesus Christ through the gospel.* Faith-fueled submission will not stifle your joy. It will be a catalyst for your flourishing because you will be embracing the ordering of the world which was designed by God for your good and for his glory.

Three Key Questions Answered From Holy Scripture

The structure of our approach will be simple; we will consider *the what, why, and how* of the wife's calling according to Ephesians 5:22-24. The reason for this structure is because that is exactly how God has revealed his will for us in his Word:

1. What is the Calling of Wives? (v22):

“Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.”

2. Why Are Wives Called To This Role? (v23):

“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.”

3. How Are Wives Called To Fulfill Their Role? (v24):

“Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.”

1. What is the Calling of Wives?

“Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.” (Eph. 5:22)

The call to submission in this verse means that as a wife, you willingly place yourself underneath the authority and leadership of “*your own husband.*” The words, “*your own*” are very important because they make it plain that this calling for women is to *their own specific husband*, not to all men in general. Before a woman is married, she is under the headship of her father (Eph 6:1-4). But once that woman is united in a covenant bond before God with her husband, henceforth, he is to be her “*head*” (Eph. 5:23). From that time on she is called to gladly receive her husband's leadership with all respect, honor, and submission. In fact, while this language may be uncomfortable for us, the Bible never blushes at all when, on three separate occasions, it calls wives to submit to their own husbands “*as to the Lord,*” (Eph. 5:22; I Cor. 11:3; I Peter 3:5-6).

Q: *Knowing this is the calling for wives, how should this influence what young women look for in a husband? What qualities become most important?*

Naturally, this brings up a lot of important questions as we consider how to live this out in the midst of a fallen world. But before we get too far into the nitty-gritty, we need to understand something utterly critical about the wife's call to submission. We can do so by asking a simple question: *Who is the one who calls wives to submission? That is, from where does this calling originate?*

The answer to this question is of profound importance because it not only gives wives much greater peace in embracing their calling, but also the supreme motivation for fulfilling it. So what is the answer?

It is not ultimately your husband who calls you to submission, nor the teaching of your pastor, nor the example of your parents, nor the norms of your culture, etc. The one who calls you to submission is your heavenly Father himself. It is his Spirit speaking through his Word that calls you to “υποτασσω” (*hūpotassō*)—that is, to willingly place yourself under or beneath the set order or arrangement assigned by your Father in heaven for the flourishing of your life and the glory of his name. My dear sisters, the importance of remembering this critical distinction cannot be overstated. Let me briefly describe three ways that this is true.

1. First of all, it reminds us that this call comes from the God who loves us with an everlasting love. The same Lord who shed his blood for your redemption is the Lord who calls you to trust his design by being submissive in your marriage. Therefore, knowing that it is God who calls, you can be certain that this calling is given for your good and not your harm.
2. Second, it reminds us that this call has not come from *the faulty, foolish, and fickle insights of mankind*—which have been proven wrong 10,000 times over. Instead, we know that this calling comes from *the firm, faultless and forever-true wisdom of the almighty God*, (Ps. 119:142). Therefore, knowing that God’s ways are always wisest and best, wives can embrace this call knowing that there is no better way that their lives could be ordered than that which has been given by God.
3. Third, knowing that this call comes from God also reminds us that a wife’s submission to her husband is not ultimately about her husband at all. Rather, it is about her trust in and devotion to her Lord. In the final analysis, the wife does not submit because her husband is worthy of that submission, or deserving, etc.—(though all men should strive to be!). She submits to her husband’s leadership because her God is altogether worthy and deserving of her devotion at all times. Her submission to her husband is ultimately grounded in her trusting-submission to her God.

Thus, remembering that it is God who calls wives to submission not only grants them a tremendous depth of peace in embracing this call (*God is loving and wise*), but also an endless supply of motivation for striving to be faithful in it (*God is always worthy*). But now we need to consider what reason God gives for *why* the marriage is to be ordered this way.

Q: *How does the recognition that the call to submission comes from your Father in heaven comfort and motivate you?*

2. Why Are Wives Called To This Role?

“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.” (Eph. 5:23)

The argument of this verse is not very compelling to the modern person. It does not seek to give us a long explanation on the reasons that stand behind God’s design. It does not invite us to share our input or to offer suggestions. It does not indicate that we have any option about the matter at all. Instead, it simply tells us what “*is*” by God’s authoritative will. And what “*is*”, according to God’s Word, is that “*the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church...*” This is the divine order given to the world for the good of mankind and the glory of God. Thus, the call to submission means nothing less than willingly placing ourselves beneath that divine order in the attitudes of our heart and the actions of our life.

Now, it is tempting at this point to shy away from the bluntness of God’s Word here. It is usually at this point that some Hallmark-styled illustration comes in to soften the edges of the plain reading of the truth. But I don’t want to do that because, in my experience, I don’t think that approach would actually help anyone in the end. As Christians, we need to not be afraid to say with an unashamed simplicity and clarity that the reason wives are called to submit to their own husbands is simply *because God said so*. Period. Full stop. No apologies. No blushing. No shyness. No equivocation. The one who created marriage, and

who created men and women in all their unique intricacies and needs, created them to flourish according to this singular pattern and design. It really is that simple, beloved. *God gave this design. God is wholly trustworthy. Therefore, we can trust God's design.*

Just as surely as trying to bend your elbow backward will break your body, trying to live out married life without submitting to God's design will break your heart and home. Why? For the very simple reason that this is not how the elbow was designed by God to work and to flourish. Bending your elbow backward will never be a good idea, nor will fighting against this inflexible reality ever lead someone to a more fulfilled life. In the same way, the authoritative pattern given by the all-wise God for the flourishing of the marriage and family is that the husband leads his home in love and the wife submits to his leadership with respect, (Eph. 5:33). This is how the marriage and family were made to work. You can argue with it until you are blue in the face. You can come up with all manner of plausible arguments to excuse disobedience to it. You can use examples of abuse and failure in order to try to make the whole design look flawed. But in the end, when all the dust settles, nothing whatsoever will have changed. God's way will still be true, right, best, wisest, most good, most loving, and the most desirable pattern of all.

And what makes this pattern wisest, most desirable, and best is two beautiful realities:

1. It is the pattern for which we were designed, and therefore it is the pattern in which we will flourish.

Earlier in this study I described what happens when we try to use things against their created design and purpose. I gave the example of the difference between trying to drive a nail with a hammer—which was made the job—and trying to drive a nail with a toaster—which was not. I argued that if we tried hard enough it is still quite possible that we could drive the nail with the toaster. But what would that toaster look like after the job was done? It would be marred and mangled, broken and scarred from the task. Is this because a hammer is better than a toaster? No, it is because, by design, the hammer and toaster are different; they have been designed to excel at different tasks and to fulfill different purposes. *(The very same thing would be true in reverse if we tried to make toast with a hammer, wouldn't it?)*

All of this probably sounds a bit silly, and I suppose it is. But the point being made is not silly at all. God created men and women differently. He did not create them different in dignity. He did not create them different in value. But he did create them to each fulfill a unique role in the life of the marriage and family. Thus, when we humbly submit to God's design for us, we are embracing the very calling in life for which we were made to flourish. We are playing to our strengths, maximizing our potential, and applying our unique gifts in ways that will bring about the most blessing—not only for ourselves, but for our spouse and the children God may grant us together. Submitting to God's design leads to human flourishing because that life is the life for which we were intentionally crafted by the hands of God. Refusing to submit to God's design leads to brokenness, dysfunction, and sorrow, because even if we succeed at fulfilling the obligations of roles we have not been called to take (*i.e. driving the nail*), we will all end up looking like the toaster in the aftermath. Living against our design is neither wise, nor holy, nor safe. Submission to God is the life of blessing, joy, peace, and flourishing.

2. When lived out faithfully, God's pattern for marriage pictures the gospel for the world.

What is stated vaguely in the second half of Ephesians 5:23 is set forth unequivocally in Ephesians 5:32, *"This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the Church."* The reason that stands behind a wife's call to submission is not only that it is God's express will for her, and not only that it is God's design for her and her family to flourish, but also that it is a means by which she is called to bear witness to the world concerning the gospel of Jesus Christ.

How a husband loves his wife, and how a wife respects her husband, are part of how God intends to show the gospel to the world. The husband's selfless and sacrificial love is designed by God to be a living picture of the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ for his people. The wife's glad-submission to the leadership of her husband is designed to be a living picture of the church's glad-submission to Jesus Christ as her Lord. Thus, whenever a husband or wife abuses, neglects, or outright rejects their God-given role, the marriage fails to fulfill *its highest purpose of all*, which is to point the world to Christ—a task which begins with the example we set for our own children day by day.

Every wife should be able to say to her children as she teaches them the Christian faith: “*The church is called to submit to Christ just like you see mommy submit to daddy and honor him.*” This makes the wife’s call to submission far more than a matter of peripheral preference or cultural norm, but rather a matter of gospel truth. The same is true for husband in reverse. He should be able to say to his children, “*The Lord Jesus loves his people just like you see me striving to love your mommy and to care for her.*”

So why should a wife submit to her husband? We have seen many answers, all of which are true and important. But above them all stands this reason: *Because this is a means by which God intends to proclaim his gospel of salvation to the world—beginning in the living room of your life with the hearts of your own children.*

Q: *Ladies, have you ever thought about your role in marriage from this perspective—as a living picture that is teaching your children about the way a Christian is called to submit to and honor the Lord Jesus Christ? (Example: Consider the impact of fathers on our perception of God)*

We have described *the what* (v22) and we have considered *the why* (v23), now we must turn our attention to *the how* (v24).

3. How Are Wives Called To Fulfill Their Role?

“Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.” (Eph. 5:24)

If wives are called to submit to their husbands “*as the church submits to Christ,*” this should naturally lead us to ask the question: *How does the church submit to Christ?* That is to say, *what is the posture of heart that believers are called to have toward the Lordship of Jesus Christ over them?* Whatever the answers to these important questions may be, we can be sure that they are to define the attitudes and practices of wives within their marriage because that is exactly what our text teaches us. So let’s consider three answers now, and then we will consider some of the important qualifiers and boundaries with respect to the wife’s call to submission (*i.e. what the call to submission does not mean*).

Believers are called to submit to Christ *willingly*.

Jesus does not forcefully pull his disciples around on a chain, barking orders at them cruelly while they begrudgingly comply with his commands. No, they follow him freely, and with a willing spirit, because of the love they have for him in their hearts, (Jn. 14:15). Their estimation of Jesus’ trustworthiness as a leader causes them to willingly honor him with submission. The same must be true in marriage.

Husbands must strive to lead in a trustworthy manner that inspires their bride to honor them with submission. This is not because the wife’s submission is earned in this way, but rather because her calling is made much easier when she sees godly and wise character in his leadership. Moreover, husbands must not attempt to force their wives into submission in any fashion. Such practices neither resemble the character of the Lord Jesus Christ, nor do they ever actually achieve the desired end. Forced marital submission is as devoid of love as an ice cube is devoid of heat. It leaves the relationship cold, bitter, and full of sorrow.

Wives should submit to their husbands willingly, as an act of their own decision, not begrudgingly or by force. This is a critical part of how they show their husband their love for him, their respect for him, and their trust in his leadership. And just as a husband’s loving leadership makes it easier for a wife to submit, so a wife’s submission makes it easier for a husband to lead in love. That is to say, when a wife respects her husband through willing submission, the husband’s heart tends to be humbled and softened by her trust such that he desires all the more to lead her in wisdom and in love, (Eph. 5:33).

Believers are called to submit to Christ *gladly*.

Another important aspect of the church’s submission to Christ is that she does so gladly—that is, from the heart. We all know of situations where a person has fulfilled the letter of the law *externally*, but not the spirit of the law *internally*. That is, they

may have done what was expected of them on the *outside*, but not with the right heart *inside*. This is the very kind of empty submission that Jesus condemned when he quoted Isaiah 29:13 to the Pharisees saying, “*This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.*” These words reveal that true submission is never less than external obedience, but it is always more. True submission is not merely checking off boxes, but delighting to serve and honor the one to whom we are submitting from the heart. The same must be true of a wife’s submission in her marriage.

Think of this situation in reverse. Imagine the relational sting that would come from a husband fulfilling his duty to his family like a checklist, but with no gladness of heart in his service. Imagine he does all of his external duties, but there is no smile upon his face, no warmth in his voice, and no joy in his heart as he does them. No woman I have ever known would describe this as the ideal situation. Instead, they would all rightly recognize that even though nothing may be lacking *outwardly* in this man’s devotion, something very precious is lacking *inwardly*. The same is true with respect to the *inward heart* that stands behind a wife’s *outward submission*. True submission is not merely external conformity, but rather an external conformity that arises from an inward love for the one she is honoring by her submission. Only then is her submission beautifully reflective of the heart that Christ longs to see in his people.

Believers are called to submit to Christ *fully*.

Jesus is Lord over his church with respect to the whole life of his church. He is not merely Lord over *this area* or *that*, but over every sphere of her life. Therefore, there is no such thing as a part of the life of a Christian which should not exist in willing and glad submission to the authority of King Jesus. From top to bottom and from the inside out, God’s people are called to fully submit themselves to all his holy will in every part. This is how the church is called to submit to Christ. *But is the same thing really true for wives with respect to their earthly marriages?* The answer is both *yes* and *no*. Let’s first consider how the answer is *yes*, and then we will conclude by considering where and when the answer is *no*.

First, the words of Holy Scripture are plain: “*Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.*” The words “*in everything*” make it clear that the wife’s submission to her husband is to be comprehensive. That is a tall order, but we also need to remember that this truth cuts both ways. The words “*in everything*” not only mean that it is the responsibility of wives to submissively support their husband’s leadership with a willing spirit and glad heart. They also mean that it is the responsibility of husbands to exercise loving and godly leadership over the whole spectrum of the life of the family. The husband bears the greatest responsibility before God and he is accountable to the Almighty for all that takes place under his charge. So there is no part of the life of the marriage or family over which the husband can say, “*That’s not my responsibility.*” Likewise, there is no part of the life of the marriage or family over which the wife can say, “*I don’t have to submit.*”

As we said earlier, the answer to our question is both *yes* and *no*. We have dealt with the *yes* portion—*yes, the wife’s call to submission is comprehensive, just like that of the church to Christ*. However, now we need to consider the *no* portion. That is, situations in which the wife’s call to submission is *different* and *distinct* from the church’s call to submit to Christ.

What the Call To Submission Does Not Mean

There are clear and strong limits to the husband’s authority in the marriage. There are also times when a wife should not submit to her husband. Below are four important statements intended to protect us from misunderstanding the Bible teaching on the submission of the wife, as well as to defend women from any mistreatments by their husbands. Nothing that we have been teaching should ever be misconstrued as supporting unloving leadership in the home.

The call for wives to submit *does not mean the wife must submit to sinful commands.*

A Christian woman’s call to submit to God is always superior to her call to submit to her husband. Therefore, if ever a husband is misusing his authority by calling his wife to do something sinful, she is not only permitted to refuse her obedience, but she is required to do so by God, (Acts 5:29). No one has the right to command us to sin against the Lord. However, even in

such cases, she should endeavor to express her refusal in the most respectful and loving way that she can in order to clearly demonstrate to her husband that her intention is not to dishonor him, but rather to faithfully honor God.

The call for wives to submit does not mean the wife must endure abuse.

Note: A basic address of the subject of abuse is needed here in order to unmistakably clarify what the wife's call to submission does not mean. However, this is a very sensitive subject which deserves more extensive treatment in a private setting. If you need help in this area, please reach out to the elders of the church. We want to be of help to you and your spouse for your flourishing in Christ.

The husband is **never** authorized to abuse his wife. If this is happening, it must be reported to either the elders of the church in which their membership is held, or the local police department, or both. Domestic abuse is a violation of Christian law as well as civil law and therefore it falls under the jurisdiction of the courts of both the church and the government.

The call for wives to submit does not mean there is no discussion or that is wrong for the wife to disagree.

Being submissive does not mean that a wife no longer has her own thoughts, ideas, or opinions. Nor does it mean that she is no longer free to respectfully express them—even when they are different than those of her husband. Loving and respectful dialogue is part of a healthy marriage relationship and husbands should strive to be careful listeners to their wives. When there is considerable disagreement between the views of a husband and wife, the husband must still lead. But he may exercise that leadership in a number of ways. He does not have to simply “drop the hammer” so to speak. If there is disagreement and a decision does not have to be made right away, why not wait? Why not continue to commit the issue to prayer? Why not leave the issue alone for a time and revisit it in the future to see if any further clarity has come? Moreover, if and when a decision must be made that is contrary to that of your wife, a husband should communicate those decisions as gently, lovingly, and thoughtfully as possible so that, even though his wife disagrees, she will have no doubt that her husband's actions are coming from his earnest fear of God and sincere love for her.

The call for wives to submit does not mean that the husband is more gifted or wiser than his wife.

Finally, the call to submission does not mean that the husband is more gifted or wiser than his wife. Not at all. God has given all of his precious daughters tremendous dignity, wisdom, gifts, and graces. Her submission does not mean that she will hide her gifts or hold back her wise insights. It means that she will always strive to use them in such a way that honors, supports, and strengthens the leadership of her husband, and never strive to use them to undercut his authority or honor.

Likewise, the exercise of the husband's leadership should never seek to stifle the giftedness of his wife (or children). Instead, in humility, the husband should seek out the superior insights and gifts of his bride and intentionally position her so that she can use those wonderful traits as a blessing to the whole family. Leading does not mean that you are the best at everything, *or even anything*. It means you have been given the position of responsibility before God to faithfully care for those under your charge, and to strive to set them up for maximal success even at great cost to yourself. For a husband, a big part of leadership means knowing the things your bride is especially good at, joyfully leaning on her in those areas, and thanking God continually for giving her those gifts. It never means holding her back and stifling her usefulness in order to protect your pride.

Conclusion

When a husband leads like Christ and a wife submits like the church, neither person is taken advantage of, stifled, or mistreated. Instead, both husband and wife find that in their selfless commitment to one another, and their faithful obedience to God, both of them flourish because they are gladly embracing the wisdom of God's design for the thriving of the marriage and family. There is no better pattern to strive for in our marriage and family than the one given to us by our Lord.