



Mystery and Dance

Ephesians 5:22-33

Grace Church | 2.13.22

I will waste no time today in setting up for you an emotive invitation to engage in the text today. The reason is that, we are coming to a text that is the most significant exhortation on the topic of Christian marriage in the entire Scripture. God breathed out these words—not just Paul—but the Holy Spirit. This is our conviction. Marriage is a God instigated leftover from the garden of Eden—it's the first institution ordained by God in a world of perfection. There is a standard, and a purpose of marriage that goes beyond the fall of man, since it came before. Although it exists in some form in every culture, marriage is not created by society. It is God's idea and God's plan and God's design.

Some of you care about this text because you are married. The glory of the gospel in Ephesians to this point has brought you to the place where your whole life, all of creation, and social order, is wrapped up under the domain of Jesus. He has brought you from death to life—so what does that mean for your marriage? Here is the grace of God to help you answer that question today.

Some of you are not married. Why should this be pertinent to you? How is this text the grace of God for you? We are tempted to say: "because one day you may be married!", and that is true. One day you may, so it is good to engage for that sake. But let's move beyond that for a second into something deeper. Marriage is not the goal of the Christian life. We don't call our unmarried brothers and sisters "those who haven't been married yet". There is nothing lacking in them in Christ. So regardless of whether God in his providence will lead you into covenant marriage in the future, this text today is the grace of God, because you have the opportunity today to revel in and enjoy the blessings of covenant marriage. Even if you are not married, you have the blessings of covenant marriage—because you are unified with your married brothers and sisters, and you are united to Christ. If Ephesians has taught us anything, it is that any dividing wall of hostility has been broken down and we are one in Christ. The flourishing of marriage in our church is the flourishing of the whole church. The display of the gospel in our church through marriage is the display of the gospel in our whole church, for every member. Not only this, but we will see today in our text a clearer picture of the way in which Christ operates in his marriage to every believer. There is no way to come to Christ apart from covenant union, and so if you are in Christ by faith, the picture of marriage in our text is a picture of your relationship with Christ.

Let me say it more simply. Today we will see two things: first, *the Mystery of Marriage*; second, *the Dance of Marriage*. And so whether you are married or single, here is the good news, I'll give away



the ending: the mystery is about Jesus and his love for you, and the dance is about Jesus and his love for you. Marriage is about the glory of God—so we should care about marriage, because for all of us he is shouting his glory and inviting us to enjoy it. Ready?

The Mystery of Marriage: What is the point?

We actually will start here at the end of the text. That is because I don't want to get too lost in the weeds of implication first. I want to show you first the great mystery of marriage, and I will keep it quite simple and shockingly brief, mostly because the meat of this text addresses the outworking of marriage rather than the definition.

Let's look first at **verse 32**. Here Paul gives us his definition of marriage: it's a mystery. As we learned earlier in Ephesians, "mystery" does not mean unknowable, but rather it means a previously hidden fact now comes true. Like a mystery novel has an ending, so does this. You might say of a mystery novel you have already read: "I am going to read a mystery". Marriage is in the genre of mystery: a story about something that was once hidden and now revealed. Marriage is a mystery genre because it's content is "Christ and the church". Christ and the church and their relationship is the great point of the Biblical witness. God is calling a people to himself, and he calls it the church, and he does it by marrying them to Jesus Christ in spiritual union. **Verses 25-27** is the gospel. That's an amazing mystery revealed, and marriage is a picture of that. So that's as clearly as I can say it: marriage is about the gospel. Marriage inherently involves the following elements:

1. **Sacrificial love.** Marriage is a picture of the cross. The most closely related doctrine to marriage is atonement.¹
2. **Washing and holiness.** Marriage is not about finding someone who accepts you as you are, Marriage is about committing to someone who will be your catalyst for change into Christlikeness. Marriage is sanctifying.
3. **Unity.** No one hates himself. Marriage is a great unifier. It's Biblical definition is **verse 31**. It's leaving and cleaving, one flesh union with no boundaries. It's not about receiving love from someone else as an add on to your life, it's about a total giving of yourself and life to someone else.

That is marriage, according to Ephesians 5:22-33. It's all about Jesus and his love, and modeling Jesus and his gospel to the world. Which is a very very high standard. Maybe even one that weighs us down at times. Do our marriages meet that standard? How do we know they are meeting that standard? This is why this text really exists. It tells us not just what marriage is, but how it works.

¹ I think Martyn Lloyd Jones said something similar. I read it somewhere, can't find it. Just covering my bases!



The Dance of Marriage: How do we do it?

How does marriage work? Look first and notice Paul separates his instruction between husband and wives. He doesn't give them the same instructions. So, right away we know marriage is about teamwork. It's complementary. Marriage is about two people becoming one flesh—two distinct and differing sexual others becoming one sexual whole. Men and women were literally created to fit together in a specific way. Marriage then is not a contract where two superpowers coldly agree to a nuclear ceasefire—it's a dance. It's a beautiful intertwined call and response. Complementarity should also draw us into beauty, and it's also about unity and sameness. Two distinct, equal, parts, designed to fit together perfectly. Like when you finally get that last piece of the puzzle. That's marriage: a dance.

So, let's move to the first dance partner: the wife. We enter into this text in **verse 22** recognizing right off that this is a specific outworking of the truth preceding. So, **verses 15-21** are really important here. Wisdom is required for the Christian life, discernment. And that discernment is marked by thanksgiving and mutual submission out of reverence for Christ. How do we submit out of reverence for Christ? Well, Paul gives 3 examples—he addresses the marital, the familial, and the economic when he talks of husbands /wives, children/parents and slaves/masters—you could kind of say the trifacta of society. At some point we are in one or more of these camps, and in each of these camps, the Scripture is showing, we have an opportunity to exercise the principle of submitting to one another in different ways. So when we come to **verse 22** and we read “wives, submit to your own husbands”, we are not singling out women. We are all called to submit in different ways, that is what it means to live out the realities of the gospel as God has “subjected all things to Christ in heaven and on Earth”. But we do so with several categories in mind from Ephesians already.

1. **The glorious headship of Christ.** Remember in 1:21-22 says that all things will come under Christ the head. The Father put “all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church”. So submission in the realm of marriage, family, and vocation is ultimately submission to Christ who is given for us.
2. **The great unity of the church.** Submission cannot and doesn't negate unity. It's purpose must be *for* unity, not against. Can we give God's word the benefit of the doubt, that it would not just gloriously show us the great tearing down of walls in the gospel and unity and equality of worth and value for all in the church, only to cast it aside a few verses later? Ephesians is a book about unity. Whatever submission means in chapters 5-6, it cannot mean inequality or disunity. Remember: we all were dead, we all have been made alive. We all were strangers, we all have been brought in. All of grace.

I hope that clears the air a bit, acknowledging that when we hear the word “submission” we think of subjugation, as if that is the implication. But if we are all under the glorious headship of Christ, and we are all unified to each other—there is absolutely no question that this does not mean



subjugation or domination. Notice too the command is not for all women and all men—just wives and their husbands. Submission has nothing to do here with differences between men and women, it has everything to do with the task of maintaining the unity of the gospel through the paradigm of marriage. Neither is submission the same as “obedience” in 6:1 or 6:5.

I will clear some of this up later, but I can say this now: there is no definition of **verse 22**—no interpretation that is remotely Biblical or God-honoring or theologically sound—that leads to the degradation, subjugation, domination, abuse, control, demonizing, or dehumanizing of women by men. To use this text in your marriage or in any sphere of life in this way is not only a gross mishandling of God’s word, it is an evil mischaracterization of the heart of Christ. Wicked men use this text to get their way with their wives. Wicked men use this text to devalue women and trample over them. The call is for wives to submit to their husband “as to the Lord”, and our Lord did no such thing. I love this from Dorothy Sayers:

They [women] had never known a man like this Man -- there never has been such another. prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronised; who never made jokes about them, never treated them either as 'The women, God help us!' or 'The ladies, God bless them!'; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unself-conscious. There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything 'funny' about women's nature".²

That is how men of God treat their co-rulers of eternity. So let’s leave all that behind us, right now. If submission does not mean all of these things, what does it mean? The answer lies in **verse 23-24**. As the church submits to Christ, women submit to their husbands, because as Christ is the head of the church, each husband is the head of the wife.

Again we must define our terms. What does “head” mean? Some have argued that here “head” simply means “source”, and link back to Eve coming from Adam’s rib, and give some interesting arguments from how the word is used metaphorically in ancient texts. But even if that fits here as a definition and not just an extended metaphor, I can’t infer what submission means. How do you submit to a source? Neither does this square well with the various contexts of the use of “head”, one of which we just mentioned in Ephesians 1 where all things are “put under Christ’s authority” and another clear one in 1 Corinthians 11:3, which reads: “I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.” In all of these cross-biblical contexts, “submission” and “head” imply some kind of authority.

² Dorothy Sayers, *Are Women Human?*



I want to argue that the most fitting understanding is authority, but with a nuance. We typically think of authority with “responsibility” or “power” or “control”. In other words, “authority” implies more ability, therefore more responsibility. It certainly can mean that. Parents, who have authority over their children, do have more responsibility than them, more power, more say. But remember Paul does not say “wives *obey* your husbands”, even though many of the wives in Ephesus would have been 15-20 years younger than their husbands! Neither do we find any evidence in this text related to obedience, to control, to power, to subjugation, or to the husband’s authority having anything to do with commands, mandates, or anything else that would come with a greater responsibility or higher position.

Authority does not always mean responsibility. It can also mean, as often does in relation to Christ and the church, representation. For instance, the authority we see scripturally of a pastor over a congregation. Your pastors do not have more authority or power in God’s kingdom—rather, we are fellow workers, it’s the people of God who carry out the ministry. Your pastors do not have more say-so over your spiritual state, more ability to bring you to Christ than anyone else. Rather, scripture says the authority comes not primarily from responsibility but representation. Your pastors must give an account for those in their care. They represent the congregation before God. Submission to pastors is not about bowing under their rule, but allowing them to represent you and opening your heart up to their care and teaching.

So here is my best attempt at interpreting “head” in the context of Ephesians and Genesis 1-2, which is referenced by Paul in **4:31**. The husband is the representative authority of his wife. He does not carry more responsibility, more power, more control, or more say so. Rather, he is created by God first in the garden and given responsibility to subdue the earth *with* Eve. Again, not a greater responsibility. Not more power, not more say. But he is given it first, and he is the one who names Eve, and ultimately the one when God calls, who bears the representation for his marriage and family, and ultimately the whole family race. Eve is called Adam’s helper, not because her responsibility is lesser and therefore she must obey his whims, but because in their partnership they have specific, not greater or lesser, roles: Adam is the representative head, Eve the helper. But both share the authority from God to subdue the earth. Both Adam and Eve disobeyed God, they both had responsibility before God. But who bore the representation of that disobedience? Adam did. To Eve he gives a consequence, but to Adam he says “Because you have... eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, you shall not eat of it.” The weight of the curse of death for disobedience comes upon his head. God tells him “from dust you were made, to dust you shall return”.

Notice the disunity of the fall. Before their sin, Adam expresses Eve to be “bone of my bone”, truly one flesh. After the fall, he blames her for his disobedience, creating a distance between their mutual responsibility and neglecting his part as representative. Instead of praising Eve for her fittingness, he refers to her as “the woman you gave me”, objectifying more than honoring her. Instead of representing her, he blames her. All of this creates a division from the one flesh union that is the great mystery and purpose of marriage!



So that is my best shot for you. When Paul urges wives to “submit to their husbands in everything”, what is he saying? He is saying: like Eve, be the great help of your family. Resign yourself to the understanding that your husband bears the representation for your family. But he cannot do that alone.” In the context of the dance you may feel that to be the “help” is less important than the “head”. Nothing could be further from the truth. To be helper is to be the lifeblood that keeps the marriage intact. Without a helper, the head cannot take initiative in the same way. Like a dance, to help is more than to respond to how you are led—it’s to offer encouragement, support, creativity, beauty, flow. God is called our great help—because he is exactly what we need. The role of the wife is so beautiful I wish I could better describe it: to be exactly what your family needs, what your husband needs—to fit together and fill in all the lacking places, to lift your family up on your gentle shoulders when the weight is too much for your husband, to point him as help to his great help—it may not always get the honor it deserves, but it is exceedingly honorable. In 1 Peter 3, Peter calls this role of help a beautiful adorning: more eye catching, more God glorifying than any fancy or stylish outward adornment.

Paul is saying “be the helper Eve failed to be. Communicate to him that his strength comes from God alone. Help him, prop him up by your great faith, to be the man he needs to be, to be a man who you are proud to represent your family, who you feel honored to associate with. Don’t demean or mock him, don’t undermine him or always second guess him. Don’t buck up against his love—help him to love you, submit to his sacrifice for you, respond with grace in the great dance.” I can sum up the role of the wife in marriage like this:

Wives, you are the great help of your family. Respond in submission to the love of your husband and confidently honor his sacrifice for the sake of unity and gospel proclamation.

Now, the second dance partner: the husband. **Verse 25**, what is the “head” supposed to do? In ancient greek, “head” does imply authority and power, a superiority because of its placement or preeminence on the body. It was a fairly common metaphor to describe rulers or kings. One New Testament scholar, Michelle Lee-Barnwell, refers to a very specific passage from the Roman philosopher Seneca, who urges the people of Rome to do all they can to preserve the “head” of state, the emperor, because to preserve him is for their own well-being. Similarly, the common wisdom of the day was that the “head” or ruler should not throw himself into danger or battle frivolously. He should work to preserve himself and his safety, because his safety is safer for everyone.³

This is where the reversal of Ephesians 5:25 is so shocking. If the man, as “head” is preeminent, if he is stronger and wiser and more worthy of respect and submission, then we would actually expect the wife to sacrifice for him! She should be the one laying down her life to protect her head. Imagine then the shocking reversal for the Ephesians when Paul instructs the very opposite—husbands, love your wives, and give yourself up for them. There is no doubt this exhortation is just as counter cultural today as it was then. Husbands are acting in godly headship

³ Michelle Lee-Barnwell, *Neither Complementarian or Egalitarian*, 156.



not when they demand their way, assume their comfort, kick off their shoes and expect service, honor, and respect. They exercise their role when they sleep well at night knowing they have tired themselves in sacrifice for their family. Husbands, your home will flourish when you take on the form of a servant and give your life up.

This is the crux of the great beauty and mystery of marriage. Christ our representative head did not use his authority for his own gain, but for ours. He did not send us into battle to protect him, he gave himself up to love us. Truly this a mystery, it defies natural sense, it breaks down our cultural expectations. And what is the purpose of such a great reversal of sacrificial love? Unity. In Christ's work, we are brought in to be his bride. He cleanses us, washes us, cultivates us, and marries us. We become like him, one flesh, bone of his bone, and he rejoices over us. So **verse 28**, "in the same way", be like Christ. Are you a husband? Do you desire to be? Filter every single iota of your masculine self through this lens: I am most like Christ when my thought is not of myself, but of Christ.

Consider what can happen in your marriage when you decide to love your wife as Christ?

- Your wife is cleansed and washed clean, as you point her to Christ through your love. Your sacrifice is like a baptism of gospel to her.
- Your wife glows with radiant splendor, and all look to her as a woman of true magnificence and beauty.
- Your wife is provided for, lacks nothing, is supported, bears a light burden, and is cherished for the royalty that she is. To "Cherish" means to comfort, warm up, like a fireplace on a winter night. A husband who cherishes doesn't compare his wife to others, he treasures her, a disposition of the heart which warms her and comforts her. He says to her often: "you are wanted. You are worthy. You are worth more than riches to me."

We summarize like this:

Husbands, you are the final representation of your family. Lay down your desire for self serving and blame and sacrificially love and cherish your wife for the sake of unity and gospel proclamation.

Here is the marriage dance: head and help. Let me say one more thing. Count it a blessing that God has given us a standard here, a principle. This is not just for ancient Ephesus. But neither does the text give us all sorts of specific outworkings. Those are all subject to our culture. We must all work out our salvation with fear and trembling. Some people equate headship and marriage down to deciding arguments, but I don't see that here. When you are at odds, unity is not found in the husband being a "tie breaker": the husband lays down and the wife submits to his love and both of them are back to being unified. This is a principle: it won't tell you who needs to do the dishes and who should do the laundry. But who cares who does those things? Husbands, cherish and lay down for your wives, wives submit to the love of your husband. You work that out! When you can, you will begin to see the great dance of Christian marriage: a beautiful display of the gospel—poetry in motion.



Marriage is a mysterious dance of call and response.

Husbands, you are the final representation of your family. Lay down your desire for self serving and blame and sacrificially love and cherish your wife for the sake of unity and gospel proclamation.

It's not easy, but you can in Christ. He has given you what you need by his Spirit. Husbandry is not for selfish satisfaction, it is selfless love.

Wives, you are the great help of your family. Respond in submission to the love of your husband and confidently honor his sacrifice for the sake of unity and gospel proclamation.

You are called to submit to your husband's love when it comes. I know sometimes it doesn't—and I'm sorry. I am so sorry when you have not been loved as Christ. You do not have to submit to abuse: you are a partner in a dance that can only work both ways. But if your husband is in Christ, Christ is working in him. Accept his love as it comes, call him a high standard of love when he fails, and walk in the great dignity that you deserve as the crown jewel of his creation.

To the single, you can be included in this dance. You are not bystanders: Christ has welcomed you into the real thing in him. Honor the dance, clap and shout for joy when you see reminders in earthly marriage of your heavenly marriage in Christ. As God calls you, ready yourself to be a dance partner. Look for men who love sacrificially, who are not consumed with their own ego, power, or authority. Look for women who confidently respond to the love of Christ, who are intoxicated with their king. But I also mean this for those for whom God is not or may not ever call you to marriage. Keep our standards high. When marriages flourish in our church, you flourish, because they become for you a living portrait of your union with Jesus.

And for all of us, let us not forget the significance of marital principles: all of it is meant to point us towards our marriage to Christ. The mystery is about Christ and the church, marriage is just the metaphor. All of us, regardless of our marital status, end here with rejoicing in **verse 31**. Jesus Christ left the throne of God. He did it for all of us: men and women, who were stuck in our sin. He loved us too much to lord it over us. He loved us too much to take a well-deserved break. He left perfection to hold fast to us. He lived and died so that your very flesh and bones and body and soul could be one with him. He became man and is taking you to God so he can look at you and say: "at last, bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh"! This mystery is profound, what do we do in response? Submit to Christ's love, open up your heart. Put away your excuses—the bridegroom is waiting even now to receive you.

