

Put a Ring On It
The S-Word
May 12, 2019

Good morning everyone.

If you were looking for an expression of our culture's perspective on love and romantic relationships; the philosophy by which most people these days choose (or at least consider) a mate (whether they intend to live together or marry), you'd be hard pressed to find a better one than Walk the Moon's *Shut Up and Dance*.

"Victims of the night
The chemical, physical, kryptonite
Helpless to the bass and the fading light
We were bound to get together ...
This woman/man is my destiny."ⁱ

When we're falling in love with someone, that

attraction and that reaction – because it's so strong – feels like it must *mean something* significant. Maybe it's a sign from above – or, wherever – that “we” are meant to be.

Not to bust anyone's bubble or take away the mystery, but it turns out that neuroscientists have discovered that what might seem like a sign *actually is* a chemical and physical reaction taking place in our brains.

That's a great insight.

“Chasing those feelings can lead to mismatched unstable relationships” which is why, as we saw in the first week of this series, the greatest strategy for finding success in marriage is an “equally-yoked partner” – someone who shares your values and direction in life.

I won't go back through all of that – if you're new with us or you missed a week of this

series you can always watch, listen to or read that particular message on our app, website and podcast. And I encourage you to do so.

But what I wanted you to see in that video is the power of the chemical, physical reaction that draws couples together; a power which naturally leads us to think it will keep us together.

In other words, because the initial attraction to someone is so strong, it seems logical to think that going the distance with them – 'til death do us part – would require keeping those feelings at the same level.

Unfortunately, brain researchers have also determined that, over time, the chemical process during a relationship changes. Because our serotonin levels rise, that initial rush – that initial craving (to use the language of addiction) for the other person – begins to

fade ...

... which means that happiness and contentment and joy for the long haul requires something else, and a lot of it; something I like to call ... *the s-word*.

And that's what we're going to talk about today.

“Household Codes”

But before we can really get into that –

Oh, and by the way, I should probably say that the s-word *I'm* thinking of probably isn't the s-word *you're* thinking of (although we will get into *that* s-word as part of the discussion of the other s-word).

In any case, before we can talk about *my* s-word, we need to go back to something I said

in the first week of this series which was that as Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire and eventually, all of Western Civilization, it fundamentally and radically changed the way that the family worked, especially when it came to married men – husbands.

Here's what I mean by that.

Long before the time of Christ, the ancient Greeks were intensely focused on the question of "how can our empire maximize its existence socially and economically?"

Their answer was *through political and civic order* beginning with the individual household and, more specifically, the *paterfamilias* – which is a Latin term meaning "father of the family."ⁱⁱ

By the way – and this is important to know –

when the Greeks and later the Romans (who implemented their ideas on an even grander scale) spoke of a “household” they meant a lot more than what you and I as 21st century Americans do.

To them, the ideal household was a unit of economic production – a family business so to speak – all under the direction and authority of the paterfamilias.

Because the household was so important, much advice and training was given to the paterfamilias on how to manage his household. This advice came to be known as the “household code” (kind of like a “code of conduct”).

Probably the most well-known of those codes was written in the middle of the 4th century B.C.E., by a guy named Aristotle (you may have heard of him). Aristotle wrote a long

treatise called *Politics* ...

... in which he wrote ...

“The primary and smallest parts of the household are master and slave, husband and wife, father and children.

We ought therefore to examine the proper constitution and character of each of these three relationships – that of *mastership*, that of *marriage*, and thirdly the *progenitive* relationship.” (Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253b)ⁱⁱⁱ

And then he went on to do just that – to define what those relationships ought to look like.

One philosopher who followed in Aristotle’s footsteps hundreds of years later (which shows how persistent this model was) ...

... summarized the role of the paterfamilias in this way:

"A man has the rule of this household *by nature*, for the deliberative faculty in a woman is inferior, in children it does not yet exist, and in the case of slaves, it was completely absent." - Arius Didymus

In other words, "the man of the house is the head over everyone else because no one else is fit to be."

Which means ... if you're on the bottom of this system, what is your primary duty with respect to the paterfamilias?

- If you're a slave, you're to obey. He's your master.
- If you're a child, you're to obey. He's your father.

- If you're the wife? You're to obey. He's your husband.

Now, one more piece of Greco-Roman history and we'll get to the s-word.

Fast forward a little bit in time to right before Jesus of Nazareth is born in the backwaters of Judea.

The Roman Empire (made up of various people groups from conquered nations all over the near Eastern world) is beginning to show signs of stress and strain.

In order to pull things together, Caesar Augustus starts speaking of the Empire and all of its people as one big household. And who do you think is the paterfamilias over everything and everyone? He is!

In fact, when the Roman Senate declares his

deceased adopted father, Julius, to be divine, Augustus is referred to as *the son of God*. And eventually, all households in the Empire are expected to worship Caesar (or the genius thereof). They're to give honor and glory to the head of the Empire's household.^{iv}

So, got the picture? Caesar is the ultimate head over all households and the man in the household is the head over everyone else.

And it's into this cultural mindset that Jesus of Nazareth is born and eventually begins His ministry among the Jewish people living in the biblical land of Israel – people who, as you know, were unwilling subjects of the Empire.

Jesus goes around saying things like:

- "Good news! The Kingdom of God – not the Kingdom of Rome – is at hand. And to be part of it, you have to repent – to

change the way you think about how things ought to be; and how the world ought to run.”

And people like that because they don't like Rome. However, Jesus' plan isn't what they expect.

- “For instance,” He says to his innermost circle “If I, your lord and master, am willing to wash your feet, then what should you to do to one another? You should do the same. You should humble yourself and serve one another regardless of your status or position.”^v
- And when his disciples argue amongst themselves about who will be greatest in the Kingdom of God, Jesus tells them that “anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.”^{vi}

But the most interesting thing Jesus says ...

... at least as regards this topic, is ...

"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them."

Matthew 20:25 (NIV)

Now, look closely.

Who is He talking about? Well, He mentions "high officials" which obviously refers to Rome's political and military leaders, including Caesar.

But who else *rules* in that system?

The *paterfamilias* – the head of the household, the man, the master, the husband, the father. According to Greco-Roman culture, he is *supposed* to rule. He's

the only one *fit* to rule. It's literally his *calling* to lord it over his slaves, spouse and offspring.

And Jesus says, "that might be how *they* say it should be but ...

"Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave ..." Matthew 20:26-27 (NIV)

"... just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Matthew 20:28 (NIV)

That's a completely different vision of power and how it should be used.

In the Greco-Roman system – which, by the way, had seriously infiltrated and influenced Jewish thinking – the vision was “power over.” If you had a position of authority, that meant you had power over others. You could tell them what to do and they had to obey or else.

But Jesus’ said that was upside down. His vision – the vision by which His followers were to live – was “power under.” In other words, the purpose of authority is to use your power and position *to serve* those in your charge, even if it costs you ...

... which, of course, Jesus modeled as He gave up His divine privileges and humbled himself, even to the point of dying a criminal’s death on a Roman cross^{vii} for your sake and mine – as our savior, as our substitute.

Now, with all of that as background, we’re ready to talk about the s-word and marriage;

specifically, what Christianity teaches about the s-word and marriage.

Revising the Code

And I know some of you are thinking, "Good, because I'm not sure I understand why all of this historical information is necessary."

Well ... let me explain.

Years ago, one of my seminary professors said "when you read the Word of God – the Bible – and you try to interpret it and apply it to your life (which is what we're about to do), you must never forget that the Word of God was the Word of God *to someone else* before it became the Word of God to you."

Meaning, that you need to understand – as much as possible – how those who heard it first, *first heard it*, i.e. what it meant to them

when it came to them.

And once you understand what it meant to *them*, you're in a much better position to understand what it should mean to *you*.

And that's obviously true for Christians but also for those who are not Christians. I mean, if you're a person trying to evaluate what Christianity is all about, sometimes – a lot of times – you have to look beyond the current practice of Christianity because ... well ... we Christians get things wrong and we mess things up.

So, the s-word ...

It's 20 years after Jesus has been crucified outside of Jerusalem by the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate. But, instead of dying out like so many other failed Jewish Messianic movements of that era, the followers of Jesus

multiply dramatically. And not just among the Jewish people but among the Gentiles as well.

In fact, countless groups of Jews and Gentiles together come together every Sunday morning all over the Roman Empire in little cohorts known as "churches"; gathering to worship Jesus and learn His ways.

And I won't get into all the reasons for this improbable explosion of interest in Jesus other than to state, once again, that the simplest explanation is that He literally was raised from the dead consistent with the eyewitnesses accounts recorded in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. (We talked about that on Easter Sunday so if you weren't here and you want to know more, it's posted online).

So ... anyway ... the s-word.

As the church spreads all over the Roman Empire, a guy by the name of Paul – the Apostle Paul who started many of those churches ... Paul writes letters explaining:

- What it means for people to be followers of Jesus in their current cultural context.
- <JESUS OVER ALL> What it looks like in everyday life for *Jesus* to be their King and not Caesar; where God is the paterfamilias and all followers of Jesus belong to *His* Kingdom and are part of *His* household.

The metaphors of the New Testament are shockingly subversive when you understand the cultural context!

... which is why one of Paul's concerns is how to do those things without raising the ire of the authorities who were very much against

anything that threatened the stability of the Empire.

As one commentator puts it: “because Rome was suspicious that minority religious groups undermined their traditional values, such groups often labored to reaffirm their belief in Roman values.”^{viii}

It’s kind of like what’s going on in China these days. Christians there are often accused of undermining traditional Chinese values so they have to be very wise about how to be Christian *and* Chinese at the same time.

Anyway ... in two of his letters, Paul directly addresses *the household* – that centuries-old structure upon which the Greco-Roman world has been built.

And in both of those letters (and we’ll look at one of them) Paul speaks directly to those

three foundational relationships as defined by Aristotle ... which is important to know because when we (who live in the modern age) read what he wrote, it's easy to think that Paul was just kind of freestyling:

- "Hey, all you husbands and wives, listen up."
- "And you fathers and children, yeah, you should listen up, too."
- "And let me also throw something in for you masters and slaves as well."

But that's not at all how people would have heard it.

When Paul addresses those relationships in his letters, everyone would have known exactly what he was talking about and exactly what their place and duty was in the

structure.

More importantly, because everything Aristotle and those who followed him wrote was directed at the man of the house, the *paterfamilias* – the guy charged with ruling in all of those relationships – would have heard it as primarily being directed to him. He would have heard Paul providing a Jesus-oriented version of the household code that he and his father and his father and his father had been taught.

So, here we go.

The first word Paul writes is (and this is from the letter written to the Ephesians) ...

The first word Paul writes ... oh, and, by the way, this *is* the s-word ...

The first word is ...

Submit ... Ephesians 5:21
(NIV)

And everyone hearing this letter (that's how it worked in those days – Paul would send a letter and the congregation would gather to hear it read) ...

... everyone hearing this letter – all the paterfamilias in the church and all the members of their households – would all go “yep, that's how it works. If you're on the bottom of the pile, you have to submit to those on the top.”

But then Paul throws his first curveball.

After the word “submit” he adds ...

... to one another ...
Ephesians 5:21 (NIV)

Heads turn.

“Whoa, wait a minute. That’s *new*. Submission according the household code is supposed to go *up* the chain. This sounds like, for Christians – Christian men who are husbands and fathers and masters – it’s supposed to go *down* the chain as well.”

“Why in the world would any *man* do that?”

... which is what Paul explains when he completes the sentence and throws his second curveball.

Submit to one another, he writes, ...

... out of reverence for Christ.
Ephesians 5:21 (NIV)

Meaning ... because Jesus – and not Caesar – is our ultimate authority ... and because Jesus is the head of everyone in the

household of God ...

No one is at the top of the ladder – not even the paterfamilias.

In fact, there *is* no status ladder in the household of God because distinctions such as male and female, slave and free, Jew and Gentile mean nothing.^{ix}

Of course, Paul knows that the wives by now are thinking “wow, that is *radical*. So what does this mean for us?”

So he addresses them next ... which, by the way, was never done in any of the codes. Everything was written to the man.

But Paul writes:

*Wives, submit yourselves to
your own husbands ...
Ephesians 5:22 (NIV)*

... just as the household code requires.
However, when you do ...

Do it ...

*... as you do to the Lord.
Ephesians 5:22 (NIV)*

Not that he *is* your lord who you're forced to obey ... but that you choose as a free woman in Christ to serve him ... just as you freely choose to serve *Jesus*.

Paul continues:

*For the husband is the head of
the wife ...
Ephesians 5:23 (NIV)*

That's just the world in which we live. Like it or not, that's how things are set up.

He's the head, Paul says. *But not in the way that Aristotle says.*

Instead, as a follower of Jesus, he is the head
...

... in the way that ...

... Christ is the head of the
church, his body ...
Ephesians 5:23 (NIV)

And how does Jesus act as the head of all the
multitudes of believers all over the world?

Well, that's not too hard.

... he is the Savior.
Ephesians 5:23 (NIV)

Jesus, Paul is saying, used His "headship" –
His high position – not for His own benefit but
for the benefit of those who, because of sin,
were at the bottom of the chain; those who
could do nothing to improve their status (like
a wife in that culture).

"While we were still powerless," Paul was fond of saying, "Christ died for us."^x

So, people listening to this are thinking, "wow, for a man who believes in Jesus and follows Jesus, having the position of the head of the household means far more than what Aristotle said.

- Aristotle said that the man should rule because everyone else was incapable of it and inferior to him.
- But Paul is saying that whatever power and position the paterfamilias has is to be used like Jesus used His power – for the benefit of those in his household who don't have it – *beginning with his wife!*"

And if that wasn't mind-blowing enough, what Paul says next about husbands being like

Jesus is.

He writes ...

*Husbands, love your wives,
just as Christ loved the church
and gave himself up for her.
Ephesians 5:25 (NIV)*

Now, when you and I read that, we hardly flinch because we know that a husband ought to love his wife. As we saw at the beginning of this message, we expect to fall in love with someone and we expect love to last throughout the relationship.

But in the Greco-Roman world, very few married for love. Marriage was a part of the political and economic equation. It was business. A man needed a wife to produce and raise his offspring just like he needed slaves to run his enterprise (whatever that might be) ...

... which meant that she was a lot more like property to him than anything else. In fact, most men obtained their wives through a business transaction.

But Paul says, "no, in God's household, the wife is to be treasured and valued and loved by her husband in the way that Jesus treasures and values all of us, which was *to the point of death*" ... which obviously wasn't meant to be literal for husbands.

However, it was meant to be radical. And radically different.

Whereas the household codes said "husband *rule* your wife for the sake of preserving the social order" Christianity said, "husband *love* your wife for her own sake even if it costs you. Create the kind of loving environment that allows *her* to flourish just like Jesus' love

allows you to flourish."^{xi}

As Paul puts it a few sentences later:

*Husbands ought to love their
wives as their own bodies.*

Ephesians 5:28 (NIV)

Because that's what she is.

*"For this reason a man will
leave his father and mother
and be united to his wife, and
the two will become one
flesh."*

Ephesians 5:31 (NIV)

Now, Paul goes on in this passage to apply the idea of mutual submission to the father/child and master/slave relationships, and you can read that later if you wish.

But this is why I said at the beginning that Christianity fundamentally and radically changed the way that the family worked, especially when it came to husbands.

So ...

- If you think that a marriage ought to be based on love ...
- And if you think that a woman ought to be valued as more than "property to be had" by a man ...
- And if you believe that a husband ought to treasure his wife and put her needs and desires above his own ...

You can thank Jesus and Paul and the early Christians and their churches because, as Christianity spread and more and more people began to believe in Jesus and live this

way, the culture changed even *though the structure remained*.

In most cases, the husband was still designated and presumed to be the head.

In fact, many Christians throughout history and even today believe that is *God's intention* for husband to be the head precisely because of the passage we just read (and what Paul writes in that other letter to the Colossian Christians).

And whether that's true or not, as I said two weeks ago, from what I've seen, in our culture the husband *does* function as the head when it comes to spiritual matters. If he follows Jesus, there's a high likelihood that his wife and kids will follow Jesus. If he doesn't, same thing. Whatever standard he sets, they will follow.

Others would say that this structure was simply a passing cultural arrangement and that Paul wasn't endorsing it as God's plan for all time.

Instead, he was trying to explain how, in a culture where the "head" is supposed to call the shots and everyone else is to be subservient, those who follow Jesus can do it God's way without being accused of leading a rebellion and getting thrown to the lions.

As to which position is correct, honestly, I'm not sure. Both have their strong points and their weak points which we don't have time to get into.

However, I really don't think it matters all that much practically speaking. In either case, regardless of what you believe about that ...

What matters is the principle. What matters is the s-word: “submit” and that it is mutual “to one another.”

That – and not the other s-word (as important as it is) – is the key to happiness and contentment and joy over the long haul.

In Real Life

So let’s look briefly at how this principle might work out in a real life marriage.

And let me say up front that you don’t have to be a Christian to do this (though, as we’ll see in a few minutes Christians do have an advantage). You and your spouse can choose to build your marriage on the idea of mutual submission – submitting to one another – and it *will* make a difference.

So, what does it look like – beyond the obvious of putting your spouse’s well-being

and ability to flourish ahead of your own?

You don't need me to explain *that* to you. You can figure out *on your own* what that looks like.

Three things ... and the first one ... well, the first is what this principle *doesn't* look like – and I can't believe I even have to say this because this goes so against what Jesus taught and modeled when it comes to power and authority and position.

1. The principle of mutual submission is not a license for abuse.

Unfortunately, in far too many cases this principle has been just *that* – a license for verbal and even physical abuse by men who claim to be Christians.^{xii}

- “The Bible says I’m the head and you need to do what I say.”

- "I'm just telling you, Jesus isn't happy with you right now."
- "You better keep your place, woman. Shut up and submit – or else."

And if you're a woman in that situation, you need to get help. If it's verbal or emotional abuse, call me or one of the other pastors. If you're in physical danger, call the police and run. *Now*. The time for talking is past.

That said, most abuse of this principle isn't that flagrant. It's a lot more subtle. So let me tell you how to avoid even getting near that.

If you're a guy and a Christian and you think that male headship is God's intention and not a cultural thing, before you ever open your mouth to demand something from your wife – even gently – with "well, you know, the

husband *is* the head of the wife" ... ask her if she feels that you love her and care for her like Jesus does.

And if she says yes, then go ahead and say what you need to say.

If she says no, you start doing what you need to do before you talk about what she needs to do. Because if you're going to claim the position of divinely mandated head over your wife, you'd better be acting like the One who is head over you.

You'd better be serious *first* about creating the kind of environment that allows your wife and children to thrive and to flourish.

Now, because I'm an equal opportunity offender, let me also say ...

If you're a Christian woman and you think this

hierarchical system was cultural and that now you can demand something from your husband, before you ever open your mouth to say – even gently – “well, you know, in Christ there is no male or female, so you have to do what *I* say” ... ask your husband if he feels respected by you.

And if he says yes, then go ahead and say what you need to say.

If he says no, you start doing what you need to do before you talk about what he needs to do.

The principle of mutual submission is not a license to power up for either the husband or the wife. It's totally contrary to the way of Jesus.

OK, let's get on the positive side of all of that.

2. The principle of mutual submission means expressing love and respect *his way* or *her way* instead of my way.

... which obviously requires that you *know* what your spouse considers to be loving and respectful ... which means you might have to turn off the TV or get off of your phone and have some conversations about this. It means you have to pay attention to what you observe.

And what you discover might not be all that big but if you do it – if you make it part of your pattern of behavior, you will communicate love and respect and that will keep the joy and contentment in your marriage.

For instance, I know that my wife feels loved and respected ...

- When I close the computer and look her in the eye when she wants to talk.

- When I ask questions about her day or her concerns without interrupting to talk about mine.

I know that she feels loved and respected ...

- When I listen to her feedback about my attitude and actions without becoming defensive or firing back at her.
- When I take initiative to do stuff without being asked.

She feels loved and respected ...

- When I choose to spend time with her instead of doing something I want to do (especially after our grandkids leave and she is sad).

What about your husband or wife? What communicates love and respect to *them*?

Mutual submission means you do *that* ... as often as possible.

3. Finally, the principle of mutual submission means matching the pace or capacity of your spouse.

Now, this one is a lot harder to do because it really does require you to go beyond yourself and your preferences.

For example, Jetta has a much greater capacity than I do for spending time with people in general and with our kids and grandkids in particular. I mean, there's a point when it's just too much for me.

I mean, I love when our kids come and I love when they go. But Jetta cries when they go. I'm doing the happy dance.

That used to cause us a lot of tension because

she wanted more and I wanted less.

But because we believe in the principle of mutual submission, I've chosen to give up my right to peace and quiet and endure the chaos a little longer than I really want to – and to do it with a good attitude.

And she has chosen to give up the right to demand my presence and, instead, give me space when I need it ... without becoming critical and judgmental.

That's what I mean by matching pace or capacity.

Oh, and before I forget, this is where that other s-word comes in. You know, the one you thought I was going to talk about today.

It's very rare for a husband and wife to have the same capacity or desire in that area,

especially when kids come along. It's very rare for a couple to run at the same pace in that area ... which means that if you want *that* s-word to go really well, it would be wise to do this one really well, too.

The “God Factor”

Ok, one more thing and then we're done. And maybe this is obvious, but I need to say it.

Paul didn't write simply “submit.” And he didn't write “submit to one another.”

Paul wrote ...

*Submit to one another out of
reverence for Christ.*
Ephesians 5:21 (NIV)

This is why I said that a Christian husband or wife has an advantage and researchers have found this to be true. Couples who keep

Christ at the center of their home and family stay married at far greater rate. Not only that, they actually thrive within those marriages.

One of the reasons for this, they've found, is that those whose first commitment is to Jesus put fewer expectations upon their spouse to meet emotional needs that only God can meet^{xiii} which is similar to what Paul is saying.

- Because we understand who Jesus is and what He has done in submitting Himself on our behalf ...
- Because we remember that on a regular basis as we connect with other Christians and attend services ...
- Because we are engaging with Him, relating to Him through prayer and the Scripture ...

We have the strength to love as we have been loved and to serve as we have been served regardless of what our spouse is doing or not doing. We love because He first loved us.

That's why, sometimes, when things aren't going well with your spouse, you don't have a marriage problem – you have a God problem. Deal with him first, then look to yourself and your spouse.

And that's how we're going to close out this message. We're going to give you time to deal with God on this issue.

So let's pray together.

I Surrender (4)

1. Next Week – Trouble in Paradise

- Just dating / living together / married short or long time you need to know this info
- Problems come to all relationships

[SPACE] Also, just a reminder ... in two weeks, Q&A ... email questions about today's message or anything related to marriage in general to pastor@northheartland.org.

2. In three weeks, baptism.
3. Finally, goal is to help relationships which is why ...
 - o Single ... special class "New Rules for Love, Sex and Dating" (Shannon down front
 - o Free wedding for those who are living together but want to change that.
 - o Use communication card for both

of those

Endnotes

ⁱ *Shut Up and Dance* by Walk the Moon

<https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/walkthemoon/shutupanddance.html>

ⁱⁱ This next section is based on Michael Kruse's excellent work at https://krusekronicle.typepad.com/kruse_kronicle/2007/07/household-the-h.html

ⁱⁱⁱ See Kristen Rosser's work at <https://krwordgazer.blogspot.com/2012/06/does-bible-teach-male-headship-part-2.html>

^{iv}

https://krusekronicle.typepad.com/kruse_kronicle/2007/06/household_the_g.html

^v John 13:14

^{vi} Mark 9:35

^{vii} Philippians 2:7-8

^{viii} <https://www.cbeinternational.org/blogs/case-mutual-submission-ephesians-5>

^{ix} Galatians 3:28

^x Romans 5:6

^{xi} Ephesians 5:26-27

^{xii} See <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-07-18/domestic-violence-church-submit-to-husbands/8652028> for an example.

^{xiii} <https://www.deseretnews.com/article/900067366/sexual-satisfaction-byu-baylor-study-religious-couples.html>