

# RESTART—RELATIONSHIPS (MARRIAGE PART 2)

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## MARRIAGE: SUBMISSION AND LOVE BECAUSE OF CHRIST

### Ephesians 5:22-33

#### Introduction

In 2004, President George W. Bush nominated J. Leon Holmes to serve on the federal district court of Arkansas. Holmes became a controversial nominee when it was discovered that in 1997 he coauthored an article with his wife in the Arkansas Catholic Review in which they wrote, "The wife is to subordinate herself to the husband . . . the woman is to place herself under the authority of the man." Holmes claimed that the words were taken out of context. Senator Dianne Feinstein opposed Holmes's nomination, asking, "How can I or any other American believe that one who truly believes a woman is subordinate to her spouse [can] interpret the Constitution fairly?" Republican senators Susan Collins, Lisa Murkowski, and Kay Bailey Hutchinson also demurred, arguing that Holmes did not have a "fundamental commitment to the equality of women in our society." Although Holmes was eventually confirmed by the Senate 51–46, the objections raised by the Senate in the early 2000s are, no doubt, even more wide-spread today.

The church has always been at war with the world, but there seems to be a sense of reluctance within the Christian community to engage in discussions about sex and gender, possibly due to embarrassment over outdated beliefs. When considering these topics, we typically consider culture, biology, and human history. The mention of Ephesians 5 often elicits discomfort, as it brings to mind the historical oppression of women in traditional gender roles where wives subjugate themselves to their husbands' needs and husbands assert dominance. However, it is important to note that Paul does not prioritize the husband's needs over the wife's, suggest that women are less capable leaders than men, or discourage women from pursuing careers outside the home.

If Jesus' message holds true, nobody can approach the table with entitlements. The only way to gain entry is by humbling ourselves completely. Regardless of gender, if we cling to our desire for personal control, we are unable to embrace Jesus because he demands our full submission. While Christians are indeed required to make sacrifices in response to Christ, our main duty is to acknowledge and accept his sacrifice on our behalf. As our lives are transformed by Jesus Christ, our marriages are as well. Even when we fail, the grace of Jesus gives us a place to RESTART.

#### Outline

**Questions about marriage are questions about your Bible.**

**Submission and love are not the results of traditional marriage, societal roles, or cultural expectations. Submission and love are the results of lives that have been transformed by Jesus Christ. Submission and love must be freely given, not forcibly taken.**

## What does submission look like? Wives who support, respect, and follow their husband's lead.

- **Support**—God made you to be a helper for your husband (Gen. 2:18). Do what you can to encourage him as a husband, father, and worker. Come alongside him, not to control him or to be recognized for your service (but your husband should recognize it), but to help him.
- **Respect**—Give your husband unconditional respect (which is not the same as unconditionally enduring mistreatment) just as your husband ought to show you unconditional love.
- **Follow**—Respond to his initiative. Don't second-guess him all the time. You can certainly have an opinion and should not be afraid to voice it, but don't try to undermine his properly exercised authority. Provided he's not sinning against you or leading you into sin, follow him.

## What does love look like? Husbands who lead, sacrifice, and care for their wives.

- **Lead**—Take the initiative, but go together. This isn't about making every decision or believing that listening to your wife is a sign of weakness. Together is about the man's attitude and approach—his eagerness to make plans, take risks, and be fully engaged in the marital relationship.
- **Sacrifice**—Jesus died for the church. Your leadership as a husband is a self-sacrificing leadership. You die first.
  - This can mean little things: coming home early, taking care of the kids, participating joyfully in something she likes to do, overlooking an offense, running errands, fixing something around the house, and cleaning up the house.
  - It can also mean big things. You may need to forfeit climbing the corporate ladder in order to be a decent husband. You may be called upon to give up your hopes and dreams in order to take care of your wife after she falls ill or is injured. You may sacrifice the big house or the best neighborhood and live at a lower lifestyle so your wife can stay home with the kids.
- **Care**—Cherish her as your own body (Eph. 5:28). She is not merely your partner. She is your other half, your own flesh and bone. Women, more than ever, need to know that men will treat them by a different set of rules and will seek the well-being of women above their own.

## Husbands—Is your wife more like Christ because of you or in spite of you?

### Application

Have you been transformed by the grace of Jesus?

Wives—where does submission to Jesus need a RESTART? / Husbands—where does sacrificial love need a RESTART?

Men—where does the spiritual welfare of your wife need a RESTART?

## Questions

1. How would you explain the biblical understanding of what submission is? How is the world's understanding different? What is similar?
2. If you are a wife, when do you find it hardest to submit? Why? How can you reflect on the gospel in such a way that you are enabled to submit willingly rather than grudgingly?
3. If you are married, how do you talk to others about your spouse?
4. If you are a husband, what are you doing to lead your wife in a Christ-like way? In what ways is the Spirit prompting you to be more Christ-like?
5. If you are unhappily unmarried or unhappily married, how do these verses help give you hope?

"Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord." (Colossians 3:18, ESV)

"Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, when they see your respectful and pure conduct." (1 Peter 3:1-2, ESV)

"and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled." (Titus 2:4-5, ESV)

"Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you." (Isaiah 49:15, ESV)

"and the name of the other, Eliezer (for he said, "The God of my father was my help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh")." (Exodus 18:4, ESV)

"There is none like God, O Jeshurun, who rides through the heavens to your help, through the skies in his majesty." (Deuteronomy 33:26, ESV)

"Our soul waits for the Lord; he is our help and our shield." (Psalm 33:20, ESV)

"He destroys you, O Israel, for you are against me, against your helper." (Hosea 13:9, ESV)

The husband should love his wife regardless of how lovely she is, because she is as the church to him. And the wife ought to respect her husband regardless of how worthy of respect he is, because he is as Christ to her.

Christian husbands can be aggressive and assertive when it comes to making money, tackling problems at work, or pursuing their hobbies, but when it comes to loving leadership in the home, too often they're doormats. They take zero responsibility for the spiritual well-being of their household.

As Edgar Rice Burroughs wrote in *Tarzan of the Apes* when the title character first saw Jane Porter, "He knew that she was created to be protected, and that he was created to protect her."<sup>6</sup> Such a sentiment will strike many today as quaint, if not outright sexist.

There are worse things than men feeling deep within themselves that women are to be protected, not exploited, defended, not demeaned, and treated with special honor instead of nothing special whatsoever.

Being a spiritual leader means taking the initiative to repair the breach when the relationship has been damaged. If Christ loves the church, his wayward bride, and continually woos her back from her spiritual adulteries, how much more should you woo back your wife after a disagreement when half the time it will be your fault anyway? It is always 100 percent the church's fault. And it is never 100 percent your wife's fault. Husbands ought to take the first step toward reconciliation when the marriage has grown cold with hurts and disappointments.

I have a responsibility for my wife's holiness.

**God holds men accountable for the spiritual welfare of their wives—so take the lead.**

**All authority is derivative.**

It is a call to pay attention to the character of Christ. If we hear the call to husbands as a mandate to oppress and dominate, we are forgetting that Jesus came not to be served but to serve, not to lead an army but to give his life as a ransom.

The first was that wives should submit. I knew women were just as competent as men. If there was wisdom in asymmetrical decision-making in marriage, surely it should depend on who was more competent in the relevant area. My second problem was with the idea that wives should submit to their husbands as to the Lord. It is one thing to submit to Jesus Christ, the self-sacrificing King of the universe. It is quite another to offer that kind of submission to a fallible, sinful man. My third problem was the idea that the husband was the “head” of the wife. This seemed to imply a hierarchy at odds with men and women’s equal status as image bearers of God.

How would you feel if this were the command to wives: Wives, love your husbands to the point of death, putting his needs above yours, and sacrificing yourself for him? Ephesians 5:22 is sometimes critiqued as a mandate for spousal abuse. Tragically, it has been misused that way. But the command to husbands makes that reading impossible. How much more easily could an abuser twist a verse calling his wife to suffer for him, to give herself up for him, to die for him?

First, it depressurizes single people.

But within a Christian framework, missing marriage and gaining Christ is like missing out on playing with dolls as a child, but growing up to have a real baby. When we are fully enjoying the ultimate relationship, no one will lament for the loss of the lesser.

It also takes the pressure off married people. Of course, we have the challenge of playing our roles in the drama. But we need not worry about whether we married the right person, or why our marriages are not flinging us to a constant state of Nirvana.

In one sense, human marriage is designed to disappoint. It leaves us longing for more, and that longing points us to the ultimate reality of which the best marriage is a scale model.

Jesus is the true husband who satisfies your needs, the one man who truly deserves your submission.

No one who uses the Bible’s teaching on marriage to justify chauvinism, abuse, or denigration of women has looked at Jesus.

If Paul’s instructions on marriage are shocking to our modern ears, they would have shocked his first hearers for precisely opposite reasons: their radical elevation of women. Indeed, for many Gentiles, the Christian expectation that men be faithful to their wives and sacrificial in their approach to them would have seemed quite unreasonable.

Would you feel comfortable putting your wife down as a reference on your Christian resume? Throw out all the ways our culture confuses love with feelings and euphoria; could your wife look you in the eye and say with all sincerity and tenderness, “Honey, you love me well, like Christ does the church”?

The verb love, like the verb submit, is given, not taken. The wife does not manipulate or demand love from her husband. The husband freely and unconditionally shows love to his wife. In both commands—submit and love—the focus is on what we give, not on what we get. The problem with so many books on marriage is that they focus on what we need to get out of marriage instead of telling us what we need to give in marriage.

Viewed closely, Ephesians 5 is a withering critique of common conceptions of "traditional" gender roles that have often amounted to privileging men and patronizing women.

But the command for wives to submit occurs three times in the New Testament (see also Col. 3:18; 1 Pet. 3:1), while husbands are called four times to love (Eph. 5:25, 28, 33; Col. 3:19) and once to honor their wives (1 Pet. 3:7).

Yes, God created marriage for companionship and for sex and for children, but most of all, he created marriage to reveal this profound mystery of Christ and the church. This is a high calling. His plan is for a watching world to look at husband and wife and see such gentle, joyful submission and such self-denying, loving leadership that it gets a picture of the beauty that is the relationship between Christ and his church. Nothing less than God's full glory is at stake.

Men, your number-one command in marriage is to love like Jesus. As Presbyterian pastor and American founder John Witherspoon said 250 years ago, "If superiority and authority be given to the man, it should be used with so much gentleness and love as to make it a state of as great equality as possible."

But let's not paint too rosy a picture. As in every other ethical area, the church has under-delivered on its promise to women. Denigrating and patronizing attitudes have all too often infected church culture, and selective readings of Scripture have enabled men to propagate misogynistic views.