

## “Making Marriage Work”

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Ephesians 5:22-33

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Little Suzie came home from first grade and excitedly said, “Mom, today our teacher told us the story of Snow White.” For the next five minutes she then recounted the fairytale, including the arrival of Prince Charming and his rescue of Snow white. “Then do you know what happened, Mom?” Suzie asked. “They lived happily ever after?” “No, mom, they got married.” Someone said, “All marriages are happy. It is the living together afterwards that causes all the trouble.” Friends, even if a marriage is made in heaven, we are responsible to maintain it and that is seldom an easy task. A lot of marriages breakdown and seem beyond repair. In our country, 41% of first marriages end in divorce, and over 50% of subsequent do.

Perhaps most disturbing is the fact almost half of Americans really see no reason to get married. One reason is that many believe cohabitating, living together, is an adequate substitute. In fact, one survey found that only 15% of Americans believe it is morally wrong for an unmarried man and woman to live together and sleep in the same bed. Another reason is that many prefer the freedom of singleness, to the security of marriage. Pew research found that between 1990-2019, the percent of American adults between the ages of 25-54 who were married declined from 67% to 53%, while those cohabitating more than doubled from 4% to 9%. While those “unpartnered” increased from 29% to 38%. That is in just a 20-year period. My fear is that we may be moving toward a Scandinavian type of scenario where only 20-25% of adults are married.

So, it is not a wild exaggeration to say that the institution of marriage maybe at risk in modern western society. That is not a good thing. As we ponder what can be done about that I am reminded of the old saying, “When all else fails, read the directions.” In this case that means we need to pick up the Bible and see what God says about building a marriage that will work as He intended. Today we will explore the directions He gives us in Ephesians 5:22-33. If you have a Bible I encourage you to turn there. Now, there are plenty of good books out there about how to improve your marriage. My favorite, probably because of the title, is Dave Harvey’s, “When

Sinners Say I Do.” Yet, the words on which we focus today is more important than all the many marriage books put together. God is the creator of marriage. Paul quotes from way back in Genesis 2:24. **Ephesians 5:31** “**Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.**” Yet, it is this passage in Ephesians which most clearly spells out why the Lord ordained marriage, what the relationship really is meant to be. These instructions God gives us through the apostle Paul applied to the people in Ephesus in 60 A.D., apply to folks in Northern Minnesota in 2022, will apply to those who live in Zimbabwe in the year 2522, if Jesus doesn’t return to earth before then. If we are to make our marriages work, we need to listen to what God has to say. Let’s pause and pray He would enable us to do that today.

Two weeks ago we had a 30-minute introduction to this sermon that some of you did not hear. If you have a hard time accepting some of the things I say today, please take time to either listen to or read what I said on March 13. Maybe that will help put things in perspective. Basically what I said was this: The Bible teaches that men and women are equal in Christ, Galatians 3:28. Yet, there are also differences between men and women, and because of those differences the Lord sometimes calls us into different roles. One of these times is in the marriage relationship where men are called to be husbands and women are called to be wives. Those are two different assignments. These diverse roles have nothing to do with the superiority of one sex over the other. Men and women are different, but equal.

These two realities are clear in our text today. Husbands and wives are equal, but different, and each is responsible for making a marriage work. The basic instructions the Lord gives us in **Ephesians 5:22 Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.** And **5:25 Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loves the church and gave himself up for her.** A marriage won’t really work the way God intends unless each spouse obeys God’s command. In football a pass is complete when the quarterback throws the ball and the receiver catches it. That is the only way the play works. For a marriage to work it requires

a team effort. The relationship will not thrive or maybe even survive if only one spouse obeys God. Both partners should seek to follow His instructions.

The basic equality of husband and wife becomes evident when we realize the commands to submit and love are really quite similar. Both words focus on giving to the other person, of not being absorbed in your own desires, but seeking what is best for your partner. A wife who submits to her husband will not demand her own way. A husband who loves his wife will not demand his own way. If neither partner is in the habit of demanding their own way, it is a great start to a good marriage. In this type of relationship, Mary would say, "Joe, I know you want to stay home so you can go fishing on Saturday. We don't have to go to my sister's this weekend." Joe would then say, "No, I know you want to go and see your sister. I can go fishing another time." Of course, there can still be an argument, with each one insisting the other person get his or her way, but if that is the type of fights you have in your house, your marriage is in great shape. When wives are submitting and husbands are loving, marriages tend to work.

Submit and love are similar commands, but they are not identical. This is where the differences between men and women come into play. Yes, there are times when a husband submits to his wife. **Ephesians 5:21** says, **Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.** And yes, a wife should love her husband. The Bible commands all Christians to love one another. Yet, Paul does intend to give different instructions to husbands and wives. Many folks, think the instructions should be interchangeable, but they are not. A woman cannot be a husband, and a man cannot be a wife. Let's take a closer look at that our text says.

We start with the wife because that is where Paul begins. A wife's responsibility is to submit to her husband. **Ephesians 5:22, 23** **Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. 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.** In other words, a wife is to recognize and follow her husband's leadership. Most wives don't always find that easy. Let me explain part of the reason why. We were warned of the problem back in **Genesis 3:16** **I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you**

**shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you.** That is the English Standard Version, but in some other versions the last sentence reads differently, "Your desire shall be *for your husband or to your husband.*" When I ask folks what that means most say, "It indicates a wife will be sexually attracted to her husband." I don't know, but to me that seems like a weird punishment. The ESV reading, however, indicates that part of the punishment for sin, part of the curse, involves a woman not wanting to submit to or even partner with her husband. Instead, as the NLT reads, she wants to control him. This leads to a power struggle between husband and wife. Because the husband is usually physically stronger he will often win the battle.

"Pastor Dan, that is interesting, but how do you know the ESV translation is correct." Well, I don't know for certain, but I am pretty sure it is for a couple of reasons. Number 2, it makes more sense, and number 1, because of **Genesis 4:7b** where the Lord warns Cain, "**Sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it.**" That is the CSB and that is the same Hebrew phrase as in Genesis 3:16. Here, in chapter 4, I think it is clear that sin's "desire for you" means a desire to control, but Cain needs to fight back. In Genesis 3, I think the desire the woman will have is to control her husband, but he will fight back. The curse is she will usually lose. In Ephesians 5 Paul says now that we are Christians, this has all changed. We can begin to go back to Eden before sin messed it up. The wife was to be equal with her husband, but she was created with a special purpose: to work beside him and help him.

**Ephesians 5:24** **Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.** How does she do that? Part of this is respecting her husband and his role. Verse 33 says a wife is to respect her husband. That is important, men seem to need that. Yet, a big part of the submission is done willingly, joyfully, and out of love. I know and have known many Christian women who say, "I want to submit to my husband. I enjoy submitting to his leadership." To most feminists that sounds insane. It is like saying, "I love to drop bricks on my toes." Yet, a Christian wife who constantly experiences her husband's love will often, not always, but often, find submission to be a positive,

maybe even a joyous experience. Now, verse 24 says, “Wives should submit in everything to their husbands.” This means in various aspects of the relationship, but it doesn’t mean in every possible situation, especially when a husband asks his partner to do something wrong. Some Christians say “if a husband tells his wife to rob a bank, the wife should obey. God will punish the husband for breaking the law and commend the wife for submitting to her husband.” Well, I doubt the state of Minnesota would commend the wife. This type of submission would be described as, “knowing how to duck so God hits your husband.” That is not what Paul is talking about. Wives are to submit to their husbands *as to the Lord*. Part of the expression of love and obedience to Christ is submitting to her husband. However, the wife’s first loyalty should always be to the Lord Jesus. The husband derives his authority from the Lord. Whenever a husband asks his wife to do something contrary to God’s word, he forfeits his role as head of that marriage.

Now, let’s look at the husband’s responsibility. Paul uses three verses to instruct wives on their job. He spends nine verses on the husbands. Now, if some of you fellows really have not been paying much attention so far, it’s time to listen up. This is for you. And wives, you might want to pay attention too, in case your husband needs a gentle reminder of his role in your marriage. **Ephesians 5:25 Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.** Paul is talking about something more than physical or emotional love. This is a self-giving, sacrificial love. This is the type of love Jesus shows to us. Paul has high expectations of husbands. Jesus says, **John 15:13 “Greater love has no one than this, that he be willing to lay down his life for a friend.”**

That is exactly what a husband is supposed to do. We are to give as Christ gave to us. Paul explains what Jesus did in **Ephesians 5:26, 27 Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkly or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.** Many husbands love their wives because they think they are beautiful. That is not bad, but here the implication is that because a husband loves his wife, he would do everything

possible to make her more who God wants her to be. That is far more important than physical Appearance. Or we might even call it cultivating holy beauty.

Some of you men are starting to realize that what the Lord is calling us to do maybe a bit harder than what our wives are called to do. I think men who really study this passage often like it less than feminists do. Yet, Paul says very important in **Ephesians 5:28 In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church.** Because of the unity that exists in a marriage, verse 32 calls it a profound mystery, whatever I do that directly benefits Nancy, also helps me. When it comes to marriage, she and I are in it together. If a marriage is not working it makes is hard for either partner to enjoy spiritual or emotional health. Guys, husbands, if you have a struggle in your soul, one thing you should do is check and make sure you are really loving your wife. If you are not, you are hurting her and hurting yourself. So, folks, these are God’s instructions for making marriage work. Wives submit to your husbands, husbands love your wives, just as Christ loved the church.

Now, let me say something to those of you who are not married, because I know there are many of you in this room. Some of you used to be married, but are not now. You are widowed or divorced. You might marry again or you might not. Others of you have never been married, but probably will be someday. That is true of those of many of you under 18. Some of you, however, have never been married and never will. For those of you single folk who might be getting married in the future, I hope you pay close attention to what God says in this passage. This is good stuff to know before your wedding day. Some Christians struggle in marriage because they have picked up wrong and warped ideas from couples around them. Just because you never saw your dad help fold the laundry, doesn’t mean a husband should not do that.

Those of you who are unmarried and will remain single also need to listen to what the Lord says, because you have great opportunities to help others in their marriages. Married people need parents, grandparents, siblings and friends who

will encourage them in their relationship with their spouse. Married people need folks around them who will tell them to love their wives and submit to their husbands. When I have done marriage counseling, all too often I have seen how problems are compounded and made much worse because family and friends are giving advice about marriage that is opposite of what God word says. Those who are not married need to help others make marriage work. That is part of what the Lord means when he says **Hebrews 13:4 Let marriage be held in honor among all.**

Okay, in the last few minutes I want to share two quick thoughts from this passage that I don't want you to miss or forget.

**Number 1**, it is up to the wife to choose to submit to her husband. There is no indication in our text it is appropriate for a husband to force his wife to submit or even demand that she do that. Now, at times, he may try to persuade his wife to do so, but he should never try to make her submit. One thing that means there is no place, zero place, for physical, verbal or emotional abuse in a Christian marriage. Some folks claim that the Bible, in places like Ephesians 5, encourages spousal abuse. That simply is not true. Now, as a church we are committed to ministering to and helping both the abused and the abuser, God's grace is big enough to do that. Our primary concern however, has to be for those suffering the abuse. Yes, sometimes it is the husband who is receiving the abuse, but in the vast majority of cases it is an abused woman who needs our help and support. As a church and as individual Christians, we must be ready and willing to provide that.

**Number 2**, your marriage can be a beautiful reflection of the gospel that point people to the Lord Jesus. **Ephesians 5:32 This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.** Profound mystery. None of us understand fully how much the Lord Jesus loves His church. Yet, the more your marriage is like what the apostle Paul describes for us in this passage, the more you will understand this mystery. This verse also implies that if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, no matter how good your marriage is, there is room for improvement. Your marriage is like a triangle. We have two individuals, a husband and wife, both believers in and followers of Jesus. They may be very close together, or they may be pretty far apart. Yet, in

both cases the truth is this... The more each partner grows in his/her faith, the closer they grow to the Lord, the closer they will grow to each other. When that happens, not only does it bring greater joy to a married couple, but it enables them to more clearly reflect the goodness and grace of the Lord Jesus.

Friends, when two less than perfect people are married, it will seldom be easy. Yet, God's word gives us a path that leads to the type of grace filled, joy producing marriage He intends. May the Lord help us travel that path each day.