

# *Wives and Husbands*

Ephesians 5: 21-33

First Presbyterian Church  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

January 22, AD 2024  
Gerrit Scott Dawson

---

We have before us a counter-culture passage on the relationship between wives and husbands. There are all kinds of landmines to step on. You can easily create a tumult. At the same time, this passage inevitably makes people deeply quiet. It gives us a lot to think about. So I've got 9 reflections from this text.

**1) Submission Begins in the Trinity.** One of the trigger words in our passage is the word translated as *submit*. We don't like to submit. My beloved terrier reminds me of that. 15 years into it, she still barks and dances at the prospect of a walk. And then she still pulls away from having the leash put on. Every bark says, "I want to run free! I don't care about cars. I don't want to submit to the leash." In our fallen human nature, we view submission first through the lens of restriction, domination, loss of control and abuse. And for good reasons. People do bad things to each other when they have power.

But if we could look back behind the Fall, we might see submission differently. We do not worship an impersonal force. Nor do we worship a solitary, monolithic god. We worship a Creator about whom Scripture says, "God is love." Love means relationship. Love means self-giving to the other. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit love each other perfectly and utterly. I believe that means *submission* is at the very heart of God. This week someone brilliantly defined submission as "yielding the privilege of self-direction." In other words, I'm going to think first about what you might want rather than what I might want. Then, I'm going to act with your fulfillment, your pleasure, as my main motivator. That's what the Father, the Son, and the Spirit ever do.



Think deeply about this. When the triune God determined to create us with free will, God simultaneously made a plan for our redemption. It's as if the triune Persons said, "We will create a people in our image, free to choose, and also a way to save them from the consequences of abusing that freedom, but in such a way that the human will is preserved. So one of us must plan to go down and become one of them." The Son of God agreed to go. He submitted to the triune plan of salvation. The Father also submitted by sending the Son. I love the artwork that shows the

Father standing behind his Son on the cross, holding the beams of the cross in his hands, continuing to submit to the pain of offering his only begotten Son. And the Spirit continues to submit. For the blessed Spirit consents to be sent, again and again into dark human hearts. He is poured out from the Father through the Son to us. And then he agrees to pray within us, to bear up our feeble prayers to Christ to give to his Father. God is love. The Father, Son and Spirit are forever creatively submitting to one another. And their self-giving redeems *us*.

**2) Christians Submit to Each Other.** Before we talk about wives and husbands, we cannot miss Paul's set up. Paul instructs the Ephesians to be "submitting to one another out of reverence to Christ." We belong to Jesus who said, "For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve." We belong to Jesus who gave us to each other. So yielding the privilege of self-direction is to be the culture of the church. Simply said, Jesus made the cross to be the way of life. In all our relationships, and especially in marriage, we are to think of the other first. We are to submit to the needs of the other. This flows straight from the heart of the God who is love, the triune God whose very being is a relationship of submitting, consecrating love.

**3) Paul Addresses *Both* the Wives and the Husbands.** In the Roman world, the male head of the family had authority over the whole family. Wife, children, slaves, workers. Instructions from the 1<sup>st</sup> century Roman world about family life are addressed to the men. But here, Paul speaks directly to the wives. He speaks to the women as people who have agency, choice, power and decision. Giving people responsibility gives respect and dignity. Wives, you don't just take it. You don't just survive it. You choose to yield the privilege of self-direction to your husband's spiritual leadership. You get empowered by making this choice as a choice to reverence Jesus the Lord of both women and men. Even if your husband doesn't deserve it, you do it for Jesus the head of the church. You honor Christ through your marriage. These commands which sound so scary to us were actually respectful and empowering.

**4) Paul Does Not Tell Spouses to Tell Each Other What to Do.** A clear sign that a husband is not reading this passage correctly is when he decides to tell his wife how she must submit. A clear sign that a wife is not reading this passage correctly is when she tells her husband how pathetically not like Jesus he is. There is more than enough in these verses to occupy me for the rest of my life without having to worry about what I need to tell Rhonda about her passages. That's why I'm going to say more about husbands here than wives. So,

**5) The Husband is the Spiritual Head of the Family.** With all this context, we can go ahead and say it. Scripture gives spiritual headship to the husband. This is, on the face of it, counter-intuitive. It's my experience that women, in general, are more naturally inclined to spirituality than men. We consistently have more women at prayer groups than we have men. Emotional awareness, devotion of the heart, sensitivity to the leading of the Holy Spirit all seem more easily found in Christian women than men. That means men may well be working against type in order to offer spiritual leadership.

That's a good remedy for the besetting sin to which men have always been prone: passivity. Genesis 3: 6 chills me with what it reveals. When the serpent tempted Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, Adam was with her. He was just there. He didn't kill the serpent. He didn't stop Eve from eating. He just took what she gave him and ate it too. In the new creation, men are called to do better. To be spiritually vigilant for their families. To protect, not just from literal robbers, but from the intrusion of evil and lies into their family. That means knowing the Scripture, praying, paying attention, listening and watching. Taking the initiative to get the family to worship. And so, before we get offended, should we not ask, "Does a spiritual woman devoted to Christ ever *not* want a husband who is consecrated to Jesus and vigilant in leading his family?"

Perhaps at this point, we can pause and take a breath and remember that classic scene from *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. Toula the daughter has just had a rough encounter with her father, who keeps reminding her that he is the head of the family. Toula's mother comforts her with this advice. "Yes, the man is the head. But remember Toula, the woman is the neck! She can turn him any way she wants!"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJbC5AfxqPc>

**6) The Opposite of Submission Clarifies.** We rightly fear that submission means being servile, without opinion, or input. That's not the case. But it's hard to define exactly what this kind of submission looks like in every particular marriage. But we can fairly clearly see the opposite. Being demanding. *Un-manning* one's husband with criticism, doubt and complaint. *Withering* one's wife by not noticing her or listening to her or speaking kindly to her. *Undermining* one's wife by making separate deals with the kids. Never being satisfied or grateful. Treating him like a home-improvement project. Treating her like a maid. Never building him up. My father, who was incredibly smart, was also quiet. He was a thoughtful processor, usually dealing patiently with Mom's impatience. Though sometimes too quiet, not really dealing strongly, honestly with her. It wasn't always pretty. I

still feel sick when I think of her snarling at him, “You’re just too slow and you’re just too dumb.” I’m pretty sure that plays into my need to be ever quick-tongued and never wrong. Whatever submission is, it’s the opposite of diminishing each other. It has to do with respect, with patience, with trust, with initiative and with encouragement.

**7) Husbands Love as They Sacrifice Their Lives Like Christ Did.** Paul’s command to the husbands is to love their wives. He calls them to nourish and cherish their wives. They are to care for their mates just as they would take care of their own bodies. In the Roman literature of the time, there was advice to the husbands to exercise control by being sympathetic and kind. But not this kind of unconditional, sacrificial love. This was revolutionary. Treat her as well as you would yourself. No, even more, treat her as Christ treated the church. He laid down his life for us.

Suppose in a premarital counselling session, I were to ask the man, “Would you take a bullet for her?” 100% of grooms would answer, “Absolutely!” These guys do love their fiancés. They can imagine a grand manly gesture. Hurling her out of the way as they take the force of the oncoming car. That’s grand. But there’s a more urgent question. Would you die for her every day? Would you give your life a few minutes at a time, even if it seemed like it was going to kill you? Getting up out of the chair. Not only pretending to listen, but expressing empathy and asking questions. Picking up your clothes and starting a load of laundry. Watching a rom com. For the 7<sup>th</sup> time. Passing up a hunting trip. Joining a home group Bible study. That’s the usual way we die for our wives. It’s definitely a form of submission. Yielding the privilege of self-determination.

**8) Submitting is the Path to Joy.** I’m surprised it’s taken me so long to begin to learn this. I lived so long under the impression that the goal of a man’s life is to be a middle eastern sultan. Everyone exists to serve me, especially my wife. It would be perfect if something wasn’t always interrupting my life as a tick. But that path never satisfies. Far more joy arises from seizing an opportunity to die to what I had planned in that moment and do what will be helpful or pleasing. And it matters in what frame of mind we do that sacrificing.

The other day, I got caught cleaning the kitchen in an angry swivet. I was furiously trying to get it all taken care of so I could go sit and eat without worrying about the dishes. I got told, “Just stop. Your anger is not helping” I so didn’t want that to be true. But it was. The submission required of me was deeper than just doing dishes. I needed to do it in love. I started to protest. I was embarrassed. But she was right.

I stop defending. I just hugged her and held her and apologized. The humbling I so feared became a joy. Ah, there a thousand ways to die for love, all our lives.

**9) Marriage Pictures Christ and his Bride, the Church.** Paul quotes from Genesis as to how man and woman enter a one flesh union. This is the deepest intimacy human beings can know between each other. But then Paul makes a daring leap. Such a marriage is just a picture, just a glimpse, of the real marriage we were all made for. Our lives now are just a preparation for the great wedding day at the end of the age. He has given us the Holy Spirit as a pledge of his intent. He has shed his life's blood to cleanse and prepare us to be a holy, forgiven, restored bride. This is what Jesus intends for all who are joined to him by faith.

Think how important this makes every Christian marriage! The great work of our lives, if we are given a spouse, is to show by our love the truth in the love of Jesus for his bride the church. Our call is to mutual submission, to yielding the privilege of self-determination to the other. This will make for maximum joy in a marriage. But it's not just about us. Not even mainly about us. It's so that we who are blessed to have a mate can show the world what sacrificial, redeeming love truly looks like. We work on our marriages for our happiness. But our happiness is not the final point. Our marriages were meant more for holiness than happiness. They are meant for witness more than private satisfaction. Spouses are a splendid gift from God. But the work we put into our marriages is our gift back to Christ Jesus, the true bridegroom of every man and woman.