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# Ephesians 5:21-24

We Need Grace:

Marriage Part I: Wives

*Jonathan M. Romig*

[CornerstoneWestford.com](http://CornerstoneWestford.com)

Today's sermon is the first part of a two part-series out of Ephesians on marriage. This week I'm talking to wives and next week I'm talking to husbands. All I have to say to wives is that you're **awesome**. **The end...** I'm just kidding, but when I told my plan to several Cornerstone women about preaching on wives one week and husbands the next I could tell it made them each a little **nervous**.

But if you think you're nervous. Imagine how I feel. In case you haven't noticed. Although I am **married** to a woman, I am **not a woman** and will **never be a wife**. I was originally going to try and preach all of Ephesians 5:21-33 today, and speak to the **both roles** of husbands and wives in a **single sermon**, but the more I thought about it the more I wanted to **slow down** and do a more careful and thorough job. I'm speaking to wives first because your section comes first in the text. So ladies first.

Although I am the one preaching today I hope you will **first** and **foremost** hear what **God has to say** about marriage. He **created** marriage in **Genesis 2** and he has a **perfect plan** for it. When we abide by his plan our marriages work the best. So I'm going to do my best to say what the Scripture says and to not add **gender-stereotypes** or other **extra-Scriptural lessons**. I'll do my best to preach the Bible and we can each wrestle with what it has to say. Let me **pray** and we'll begin...

*Heavenly Father, please guide my words as I speak today. Help each one of us understand our God-given roles in marriage, whether we are married or want to be married or will never be married but want to support our friends in marriage. Open our hearts and minds to your plan for us. Amen.*

**How we understand** the roles God gives us as husbands and wives can depend on **how you read** this section on marriage in **Ephesians 5**, and more specifically, **where** you start reading. For example, the **ESV** places the **header** "*Wives and Husbands*" right before **verse 22**, so we **start reading** the text like this, "Wives, submit to your own husbands..."<sup>1</sup> The **NIV** on the other hand places its header before **verse 21**, "*Instructions for Christian Households*" and starts this section by saying this, "Submit to one **another out** of reverence for Christ." So the **ESV** starts by focusing on **wives submitting** to their husbands and the **NIV** starts by focusing on **mutual submission**. Which one is right?

In the **original Greek** manuscripts there are no headers. Instead, a better way to understand the text is to look at the **grammar**. The word "submit" in verse 21 in the **NIV**, is better translated as "**submitting**" because it is **grammatically dependent** on an earlier **verb** in the text. The verb "submitting" is **dependent** on an **imperative**, which means "**command**," found in the second half of verse 18, "...**be filled** with the **Spirit**." So the point it's making is to be filled with the Holy Spirit **through** the **process** of our **mutual submission**.

**Within the church we are filled with the Holy Spirit as we submit to one another. (Eph. 5:18b, 21).**

Before Paul ever addresses wives **specifically**, he addresses the church **generally**. If we as the church want to be filled with the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit there needs to be a **general-attitude** of **mutual-submission** throughout the **entire church body**. As believers interact, whether we are **male** or **female**, **young** or **old**,<sup>2</sup> **Elder** or **Deacon**, a **longtime** member of the **Congregation** or a **new member** of the

All Scriptures are quoted from the New International Version (NIV®) unless otherwise noted.

Congregation,<sup>3</sup> we are to have **listening hearts** and **attitudes**. We should **prayerfully consider** what others have to say.<sup>4</sup> When we do this, there will be a sense of **peace** and **calmness** in the church body and I believe the Bible promises us that the **Holy Spirit** will fill us and work through our church in a **special way**.

I thought of a recent example of mutual submission in **our church**. This example begins with **Molly C.** Molly, I want you to know that I **called your mom** and asked if I could share this story and she gave me **permission**, and when I asked her to ask you she said, and I quote, “No! She’ll be fine.”

Some of you may have noticed that we have a beautiful new **church carpet**. Back in the fall the Deacons had narrowed the choice of carpet down to **two options**. Molly looked at the options and said one is **clearly better** than the other. And so she wrote a **letter** to the Deacons explaining why she thought they should choose one option over the other. One of Molly’s reasons was because she thought one option would **clash** with her future **wedding dress**— which is a very **strong argument**.

Molly took this letter and a **petition** around the church and asked others to **sign it**. This is a great example of a **teenager** having a **voice** in the life of the church. She gave her letter to the Deacons who **received it**, **thoughtfully considered** her request, but **decided** to go with their **choice** of carpet, which was not the one she wanted. But the Deacons wrote her back a letter **thanking her** for sharing her opinion and **assuring** her that people will not be looking at the carpet on her wedding day, but at her in her **beautiful wedding dress**. Although Molly’s petition may not have gone the way she hoped, I think this story is a great example of mutual submission between different **ages** and **stations** within the church. Both parties **listened** to each other and treated each other with **respect** and **kindness**. Thank you Molly and Deacons for being a **good** example of mutual submission. *Within the church we are filled with the Holy Spirit as we submit to one another.*

I think Paul builds submission on the **Holy Spirit** both because the Holy Spirit fills us **as we submit** and **because** we can only submit **if** the Holy Spirit **fills** us. Submission is hard, both within the church community and within our families. We can’t submit without God’s strength and help.<sup>5</sup>

Now Paul writes verse 21 as a general call to submission within the church and it **functions** as a **transition** to what this looks like within the **family unit** among husbands, wives, and children. As **Bernie M.** wrote in his sermon on this passage, “There will be **no peace** in the **church** if there is no peace in the **home**.” Now let’s turn from the **general to the specific**, from the church to the family.

## **God calls wives to submit to their husbands. (Eph. 5:22-23, 33)**

**22** Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. (NIV®)

In our **culture** this call to submission is rather **offensive**. I remember at one of my brother’s weddings his bride’s sister gave a speech for the **Maid of Honor toast**. In her speech she reminded my sister-in-law of the Bible’s call for wives to submit to their husbands. I didn’t think much of it. A couple days later when I saw one of the **guests** at the wedding who wasn’t a Christian she brought the speech up. She was **disturbed** by it and **questioned** if that’s what she really meant. Now I hadn’t studied this passage and I **assured** her she probably **hadn’t meant that** and **everything was fine**. But guess what? I was wrong! She did mean it and **the Bible does say it**. *God calls wives to submit to their husbands. What does submission look like?*

### **1. Submission recognizes and affirms both leadership and responsibility.**

**23** For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. (NIV®)

First Paul calls believing women to submit to their husbands, and then he **explains why**. He **grounds** his **reason** in the husband being the “**head**” of the wife like Christ is the head of the church. There has been a lot of debate recently about what the Greek word for head (“**kephalē**”) means. Obviously, it can **literally** mean the thing that **sits on top of your body**, but what does it mean when used **figuratively**?

Since about the **70s** some have argued that “head” can mean “**source**.” Because God made **Eve** out of **Adam’s rib** in the Garden of Eden, he is her source. “In other words, as a **spring** is the source of a **stream**, so the husband is the source of his wife.” This means that when Ephesians talks about the husband being the “head” of the wife it’s **not about leadership** but where the wife comes from. The **problem** with this view is that it seems to **bypass** what the verse itself is saying about **Christ** being the head of the church and I’m not sure it fully takes into **account** how Paul uses this word **earlier in Ephesians**.

**Ephesians 1:22** And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, (NIV®)

This verse **equates headship** with **rule** or **leadership**. The word itself for “**submission**” has nothing to do with **inherent value** (men and women are **equally valuable** in God’s eyes), but it does have to do with **rank** (that **God** has given the husband more **authority** and **responsibility** in the family), so the concept of **leadership in headship** makes sense.<sup>6</sup> But what about this **usage**?

**Ephesians 4:15** Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. (NIV®)

The **Exegetical Commentary** says this regarding **headship**, “...there is a dual notion of leadership and provision. Christ not only gives **guidance, direction, and inspiration** for his body, but he also provides **strength, help, and sustenance** for his people.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, to be the head of your wife **includes leadership**, but also provision, strength, and help. Headship is **not just rank**. It’s **responsibility**. A husband is responsible **before God** for his wife and family, for their **spiritual growth in Christ** and **general good**. *Submission recognizes and affirms both leadership and responsibility.*

I really appreciate **Pastor Timothy Keller** and his wife **Kathy Keller**. They wrote a book called *The Meaning of Marriage*. In it Kathy gives an **example** of submission in a tough life choice (pg. 243-244).

In the late 1980s, our family was comfortably situated in a very livable suburb of Philadelphia where Tim held a full-time position as a professor. Then he got an offer to move to New York City to plant a new church. He was excited by the idea, but I was appalled. Raising our three wild boys in Manhattan was unthinkable! Not only that, but almost no one who knew anything about Manhattan thought that the project would be successful. I also knew that this would not be something that Tim would be able to do as a nine-to-five job. It would absorb the whole family and nearly all of our time.

It was clear to me that Tim wanted to take the call, but I had serious doubts that it was the right choice. I expressed my strong doubts to Tim, who responded, “Well, if you don’t want to go, then we won’t go.” However, I replied, “Oh, no, you don’t! You aren’t putting this decision on me. That’s abdication. If you think this is the right thing to do, then exercise your leadership and make the choice. It’s your job to break this logjam. It’s my job to wrestle with God until I can joyfully support your call.”

Tim made the decision to come to New York City and plant Redeemer Presbyterian Church. The whole family, my sons included, consider it one of the most truly “manly” things he ever did, because he was quite scared, but he felt a call from God. At that point, Tim and I were both

submitting to roles that we were not perfectly comfortable with, but it is clear that God worked in us and through us when we accepted our gender roles as a gift from the designer of our hearts.<sup>8</sup>

Your husband **may not experience** a call to **start a church** but God can lead him through other **equally important decisions** in your family's life. *Submission recognizes and affirms leadership.* There's more to it than this. There's a **certain quality** about submission.

## 2. Submission is full of respect.

Jumping ahead, verse 33 summarizes each **marriage role**.

**Ephesians 5:33** However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband. (NIV®)

Submission and respect go **hand in hand**. I think respect is a pretty **good gauge** of submission. If your husband feels **mocked or disrespected or chastised**, chances are you are **not submitting** to him. But if he feels **respected** and **honored**, even in the **midst of disagreement**, I think it's much more likely you are obeying Christ's call to submission. There's a certain quality to submission. *Submission is full of respect.*

## 3. Submission is not the same thing as obedience.

I think it needs to be said to all the **present** and **future husbands** in the room. Husbands, you are not called by God to **make** your wife **submit** to you. That doesn't appear anywhere in the New Testament. Next week we are going to look at your role. You are called to do a lot of things, but first and foremost you are called to **love** your wife **completely self-sacrificially**, **not enforce** her submission.

Submission isn't about **petty demands** or never disagreeing. Wives should be able to freely discuss decisions **with** their husbands. "**Iron sharpens iron**" isn't a Bible verse **just for men** (Proverbs 27:17). Husband and wives should make most decisions **together**, even if at the **end of the day** the husband makes the **final call**.<sup>9</sup> When we do it must never be for our benefit but for our family's (Rom 15:2-3).

Paul does use the word for "**obey**" but not in the section on marriage. **Ephesians 6:1**, "**Children, obey** your parents in the Lord, for this is right." Children are called to obey. Wives are called to submit. Obedience is different than submission even though submission will involve **deference** and **following the lead** and **desire** of the other. *Submission is not the same thing as obedience.*

## 4. Submission has its limits (sin).

Verse 24 says "wives should submit to their husbands in **everything**" but elsewhere the Bible makes it clear that there are **limits**. Paul wrote a similar passage in Colossians where he says this:

**Colossians 3:18** Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. (NIV®)

There are some things that are **fitting (righteousness, holiness)** and some things that are **not (sin)**.

**Acts 5:29** Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than human beings!"

Wives are to submit in **all things** to their husbands **unless** their husbands are leading them **astray**. A couple things I want to make clear here. **Husbands**, if **you are disobeying God**, and you expect your wife to follow you into your disobedience, then your wife is **under no obligation to submit to you** (1 Pet. 3:7). **Wives**, is your husband actually disobeying God or is he simply **not choosing your preference**? This may require **prayerful discernment** and speaking with a **trusted Biblical mentor** for **guidance**.

It's **sad** that I need to say this but **physical** and **emotional abuse** is always sin. Wives you are not called to submit to a man who is abusing you.<sup>10</sup> Please know that you have an **advocate** in **myself** and the **other leaders** of this church, the **Elders and Deacons** and staff. You will be **loved** and **cared for** if you **come to us**. We will **help you get to safety**. "Domestic violence is not welcome in this church. It is from the devil. It will not be tolerated. Submission does not ever mean control or possession."<sup>11</sup> Men, if you are an **abuser**, one day **you will stand before the living God** and **answer for all you've done**. *Submission has its limits.*

**Lord willing**, none of us are experiencing abuse and can **happily submit** to your husband because he is loving you like **Christ loved the church** (more on that **next week**). But maybe he is a **mediocre** husband, and you really don't feel like submitting to him. Well, that doesn't change Jesus' call.

## **Wives, submit to your husbands for Jesus. (Eph. 5:23-24)**

**23** For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. **24** Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. (NIV®)

In **our verses** today Paul has been **weaving in Christ Jesus**. This is because when wives submit to their husbands as unto the Lord it's a **picture** of the church's submission to Christ. Wives, when you submit to your husbands, God sees **his gospel playing out**.

Submission is **rooted** in the **gospel**. Christ is the "Savior" of the church. Now, your husband is not your Savior but somehow when you submit to your husband you're modeling the **message of salvation**. People can actually **catch a glimpse** of the Savior through your willing submission.

Salvation is the good news that Christ Jesus loved a **lost** and **broken people** enough to **leave the glories** of heaven to come and save us in our sins. You and your husband are those broken people who need our heavenly groom. Jesus **didn't buy a ring** but he did pay the **highest cost**, his **own life** on the cross. He knows what it's like to submit when it's **really hard**. The night before his **crucifixion** Jesus **prayed**:

**Luke 22:42** "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." (NIV®)

If your husband isn't worth submitting to, remember at the end of the day you're not submitting to him but **through him to King Jesus** (1 Cor 11:3). And **King Jesus is always worth submitting to**.<sup>12</sup>

## ***Wives, submit to your husbands for Jesus.***

When Monica and I got **married** we **wrestled** with whether or not we would include **this passage** from Ephesians in our **wedding ceremony**. It's not in **fashion** anymore to promise your **wife to love her unconditionally** and promise your **husband to be subject to him**. We didn't put those words in our ceremony because they're **popular** but because **they're in the Bible**. We weren't really sure what it would **look like**, and **honestly**, we're **still figuring it out**. It's a **journey, not a destination**. But **I can tell you** that as we've tried to fill these Biblical roles it's made our marriage **better** and **sweeter**. Let me pray.

*Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above, which includes further endnotes and references. Click to listen to sermons or to read our story.*

<sup>1</sup> See also NASB.

<sup>2</sup> “Pride of position and the authoritarian spirit are destructive of fellowship. The importance to Paul of the whole concept of submission is evident from the use of the word more than twenty times in his letters. He is to apply this in special instances in the next section, but we should note that he first gives it a completely general application. There must be a willingness in the Christian fellowship to serve any, to learn from any, to be corrected by any, regardless of age, sex, class, or any other division.” (Ephesians 5:21 explanation)

Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 10 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 158. [https://accordance.bible/link/read/Tyndale\\_Commentary#53342](https://accordance.bible/link/read/Tyndale_Commentary#53342)

<sup>3</sup> The congregation should submit to the Elders and Deacons (Hebrews 13:17) and as a congregational church likewise the Elders and Deacons should submit to the membership of the church (Acts 15:28).

<sup>4</sup> When we do this we are taking part in God’s plan outlined in the first chapter of Ephesians “—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.” (Eph. 1:10b) I believe several commentaries made this same point. See *Ephesians For You* and the *Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians*.

<sup>5</sup> Timothy Keller helped me understand our need for the Holy Spirit to help us fulfill our marriage roles in *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God*. See pages 50-52.

<sup>6</sup> According to Richard Coekin in *Ephesians For You*, “In all forty occurrences in the New Testament, the word ‘submit’ means to arrange yourself under someone’s authority, as soldiers accept the authority of their commanding officers.” Submit implies rank—that if the family unit is like the military, the husband would be no more valuable than anyone else in the family, but would hold a higher rank. Although he may not be smarter or wiser than anyone else in his family, because of his role, his family should follow his lead. The concept of military rank it is a broken illustration because it implies obedience without question or discussion.

A similar point is made in Mounce. “This suggests that a husband’s headship is not to follow the model of a CEO but of a head and body relationship, where the husband takes sacrificial action to nurture his wife into Christian maturity. See NIDNTT-A, 302–5. MED, s.v. “HEAD;” 325. [https://accordance.bible/link/read/Mounce\\_Expository#5378](https://accordance.bible/link/read/Mounce_Expository#5378)

<sup>7</sup> Zondervan., *Ephesians* (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on The New Testament series Book 10) (Kindle Locations 10345-10347). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

<sup>8</sup> Keller, Timothy. *The Meaning of Marriage*. Pages 243-244.

<sup>9</sup> Keller, Timothy. Page 241.

<sup>10</sup> Please see <http://www.autumnmiles.com/lifeway-study/> for ways churches can help victims of domestic violence.

<sup>11</sup> #420 The Church Has a Domestic Abuse Problem (with Autumn Miles). November 6, 2018. The Bad Christian Podcast. <https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/420-church-has-domestic-abuse-problem-autumn-miles/id807519271?i=1000423299849&mt=2> Interview starts at 32:07.

<sup>12</sup> Submission is a **choice**. In **verse 22** in the Greek Paul actually says, “Wives, [blank] yourselves to your own husbands.” The word for submit isn’t there but is carried over from verse 21. I’m not exactly sure why he does this, but maybe it’s because he wants wives to make the decision to submit. Will you submit, or won’t you? It’s not an easy decision. Don’t make that decision based on who your husband is but on who Christ is. He is good and he will never lead you astray.