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WHAT! ME, SUBMIT TO HIM?

Ephesians 5:22-24

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Ephesians Lesson 48

What! Me, Submit to Him?
Ephesians 5:22-24

I chose the title, "What! Me, Submit to Him?" because I suspect that that might be the reaction of many women when they hear that I am speaking on the subject of wives submitting to their husbands. While some women might not verbalize it, they are still prone to thinking it. "How can he even *think* of giving such a message? Is he living in the Dark Ages?" I suspect that the feminist movement has infiltrated the church much more than we realize.

I assure you that in preparing this message, I have spent hours trying to understand the meaning and application of these verses to our marriages in this day and age. I have tried as much as is possible to divorce myself from the prevailing currents of our culture and to get at both *what* the Scripture is saying here and *why* it says it. What it says is fairly straightforward:

As the church is subject to Christ, so wives are to be subject to their husbands in everything.

That is almost verbatim from verse 24. I trust that you accept this text as the inspired Word of God, which is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16). But because it goes so strongly against our cultural mindset, let me offer a few comments that may help us approach it.

First, as with all of God's commandments, the commands of our text are *for our good* from an all-wise, loving God (Deut. 6:24; 10:13). He originated marriage and so He can tell us how He designed it and how we must live in it if we want His blessing. God is not a cosmic male chauvinist, who is punishing women and rewarding men by commanding these respective roles in marriage! Rather, they reflect His wise and loving care for us as we obey. Also in this regard, *all* Christians are under authority. Husbands are not an authority unto themselves. They must submit to Christ and to the elders in a local church. To live in rebellion to authority is to live in defiance of God Himself, who ordains all authority.

Second, note that the church is in no way degraded by submitting to Jesus Christ. To the contrary, it is to the church's glory to submit to Christ. Even so, it is not degrading for a wife to submit to her husband. Rather, it results in "her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless" (5:27). Submission results in her ultimate good.

Third, the context here is the joy and thankfulness of being filled with the Spirit (5:18-20). Thus a wife's submission to her husband is not a cross that she glumly must bear. It is rather the path of joy. Just as submission to God is the way to true and lasting joy, so a wife's submission to her husband as to the Lord is the way to true and lasting joy.

Fourth, we need to understand that Christian marriage is to be a powerful witness to a selfish world where everyone is fighting for his or her rights. The world should look at Christian marriages and instantly see the difference. They should see a Christian husband tenderly and selflessly loving his wife as Christ loved the church. The world should see a Christian wife joyfully submitting to and respecting her husband, always seeking his good. The world should see Christian children obeying their parents and the parents lovingly and patiently training their children in the ways of the Lord. The difference between this picture and the garbage on TV should cause the world to marvel.

In both the Old and New Testaments, the Bible uses the marriage relationship to picture the relationship between God and His people. Paul shows here that Christian marriage is an earthly picture of Christ and the church (5:32): "This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church." God created man as male and female to reflect His image (Gen. 1:27). As we saw last week, in the Trinity, all three Persons are equally God and yet to carry out the divine plan, the Son submits to the Father and the Spirit submits to the Father and the Son. There is perfect love and harmony among the members of the Trinity. There is no rivalry or competition. Even so in marriage, the husband and wife are equal as persons before God, sharing in the grace of salvation (Gal. 3:28; 1 Pet. 3:7). But there is an order of authority and submission to reflect the divine image.

When a husband treats his wife poorly and puts her down, he is proclaiming heresy, that Christ abuses and puts down His bride. If he is a dictator over his wife, he tells the world that the gentle, loving Christ is a cruel tyrant. When a man abdicates his headship and lets his wife lead, he preaches that Christ does not lovingly shepherd His church and that the church is free to live out from under submission to Christ, again heretical lies. If a husband deserts his wife, either through unfaithfulness or indifference or by being married to his career or hobbies, he preaches that Christ abandons His church, another falsehood. So as married Christians, our witness to a watching world is very much entwined with how we relate as husbands and wives.

To explain and apply our text, consider four main statements:

1. To submit biblically to your husband, you must be in submission to the Lord.

Paul states (5:22), "*Wives, be subject* to your own husbands, as to the Lord." The verb is in italics because it is not in the Greek text, but is carried over from verse 21. As we saw, being subject to one another in the fear of Christ is a result of being filled with or controlled by the Holy Spirit. "As to the Lord" does not mean that a wife must submit to her husband in exactly the same way that she submits to the Lord. The Lord is perfect and every husband is far from perfect (all the wives say, Amen!). Rather, Paul means that submission to your husband is a part of obedience to the Lord. If you are fighting against the idea of being subject to your husband, your attitude reflects that you are really fighting against the Lord, who ordained this order in marriage. So you must begin by yielding to the Lord and His inspired Word.

2. To submit biblically to your husband, you must recognize that he is in fact your head.

Verse 23 explains ("for") verse 22. It is significant that Paul does *not* say that the husband *ought to be* the head of his wife, but rather, "the husband *is* the head of his wife." It's a stated fact, not a command. Some husbands are weak, ineffective, and just plain lousy heads of their wives, but they are still in that position of authority. Douglas Wilson (*Reforming Marriage* [Canon Press], p. 24, italics his) writes,

Meditating on this is a very valuable thing for husbands to do. Because the husband is the head of the wife, he finds himself in a position of *inescapable leadership*. He cannot successfully refuse to lead. If he attempts to abdicate in some way, he may, through his rebellion, lead poorly. But no matter what he does, or where he goes, he does so as the head of his wife. This is how God designed marriage.

The fact of the husband's headship, which is analogous to Christ's headship over the church, has at least two implications:

- A. The fact of the husband's headship means that there are gender-based roles in marriage as ordained by God.

While there is a sense in which all believers submit to one another (5:21), there is also a restricted sense in which wives submit to their husbands, but husbands do not submit to their wives. It is significant that whenever the New Testament addresses the subject of Christian marriage, it *always* commands the wife to be subject to her husband, using the same verb as here. But it never commands the husband to be subject to his wife (Col. 3:18; Titus 2:4; 1 Pet. 3:1). The verb means to put oneself in rank under another.

Also, all of the New Testament commands for wives to submit to their husbands are addressed to the wives, not to the husbands. The Bible never commands the husband to put his wife in subjection. It does not command the husband to be the head of his wife, as we've seen. Rather, it is a fact and the wife is to respond to the Lord, who designed marriage in this way, by willingly submitting to her husband.

This is not a culturally-determined role that we are free to discard, since it doesn't fit our culture. God could have created Adam and Eve at the same instant by speaking the word, but He did not. He created Eve out of Adam. From that fact, Paul concludes (1 Cor. 11:9), "for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake." She was to be a helper suitable for him, to assist him in his God-given tasks. So the roles in marriage are not culturally determined, but rather ordained by God at creation. Specific duties in a household are flexible and can be worked out in a marriage for the mutual good of the couple. But the role of the husband as head and the wife as subject to him are fixed.

- B. Just as Christ's headship over the church means that He is in authority over the church for her good, so the husband has authority over his wife for her good.

Headship here means "authority" (see 1:22). In 1 Corinthians 11:3, Paul writes, "But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ." He is talking about an order of authority.

As we saw last week, biblical authority is never given for the advantage of the one in authority or so that he can suppress those under authority. Rather, God delegates authority for the blessing and protection of those under authority, so that they will become all that God wants them to be. Also, the one in authority is accountable to God for those under his authority. This does not mean that a husband must make every decision, but he is responsible for every decision made. If he is negligent with that responsibility or he abuses it for his own advantages, he will answer to God!

After explaining the analogy, "as Christ also is the head of the church," Paul adds (5:23), "He Himself being the Savior of the body." Commentators puzzle over why he says this here, but it seems to me that he is both assuring the wives and exhorting the husbands. Christ's headship over the church meant that He gave Himself on the cross to save His people from their sins. While Christ's role as Savior is unique, there is yet an analogy: husbands must sacrificially give themselves in love for their wives (5:25). They must use their headship to protect and help their wives, not to abuse them. Wives can be assured that they will not be harmed, but rather cared for and loved, when they submit to such godly husbands. Husbands who abdicate their God-given authority in the home leave their wives spiritually unprotected.

Thus to submit biblically to your husband, you must be in submission to the Lord. And, you must recognize that your husband is in fact your head, or authority.

3. To submit biblically to your husband, you must understand what biblical submission is (and is not).

First I will offer a definition and then I will list seven positive and negative characteristics of biblical submission.

Definition: *Biblical submission is the attitude and action of willingly and wholeheartedly respecting, yielding to, and obeying the authority of another.*

That definition applies to all of the spheres of authority: to God Himself; human government; church government; wives to husbands; children to parents; and workers to employers. It includes our attitude, because it is not to be forced, but willing and wholehearted. Applied to wives, it includes the following:

(1) Submission involves respecting your husband.

When Paul sums up his counsel (5:33), he repeats that the husband is to love his wife (from verse 25). But rather than saying that the wife must *submit* to her husband, he says that she must *respect* him. I conclude that a large part of submission involves respect. While books have been written on this (e.g., *Love and Respect*, by Emerson Eggerichs [Integrity Publishers]), at the very least it means that a wife not attack her husband or put him down. Rather, she should get on her husband's team and cheer him on. If he makes a mistake, she should assure him of her loyalty and love.

(2) Submission includes the desire to please the one over you.

When I counsel couples whose marriages are in trouble, invariably they are competing with one another. Rather than seeking to please her husband, the wife is trying to get him, to make him pay for what he has done to hurt her. But submission means that you want him to be happy. You want to please him. If he likes a particular meal, you fix it often. If he likes the house to be neat, you try to keep it that way. You don't punish him by making him unhappy. You please him in every way possible.

(3) Submission means not subverting your husband's will and desires through deception, manipulation, or whining.

I've seen wives who put on a veneer of submission to their husband's face, but then they go behind his back and use subversive tactics to get what they wanted. Or, they whine or nag him until to get some peace, he capitulates. That is not submission!

(4) Submission means responding to your husband as leader and lover.

Many husbands feel threatened and incompetent when it comes to leading their wives. If their feeble attempts to lead meet

with criticism or apathy, they probably won't try again. If your husband takes a stab at giving leadership in your marriage, even if it's inept, fan the flame! If he makes a suggestion for a romantic evening together, don't criticize his idea! If he dares to share something on his heart with you or a fear that is nagging him, listen sensitively and thank him for it. Be responsive, not resistant!

(5) Submission does not imply the inferiority of the wife to her husband.

As I said, this would be heretical, because it would imply the inferiority of the Son to the Father because the Son submits to the Father (even in eternity, 1 Cor. 15:28). A godly husband is to be a good manager of his household (1 Tim. 3:4, 12). A good manager utilizes and praises the strengths of those he manages. If a wife is better at something than the husband is, a smart husband will recognize that gift and let her use it for their common good.

(6) Submission does not imply passivity.

A submissive wife may actively try to influence her husband for God (as 1 Peter 3:1-6 implies). The wife whose husband is disobedient to the Lord is not told to be passive and not influence him. Rather, she is told *how* to influence him by her quiet and gentle spirit. The Proverbs 31 wife is hardly a model of passivity! A submissive wife needs lovingly and humbly to confront her husband if he is in sin. She needs to communicate her dissatisfaction with her husband's insensitivity or aloofness. She may need forcefully to express her opinions, so that her husband knows exactly what she thinks. Without honest communication, a marriage cannot grow in intimacy.

Submission means that after a thorough, honest sharing of opinions and feelings, if there is still disagreement, the wife must go along with the husband's decision, as long as it is not sinful. But, I must add, *he will answer to God* for that decision, and so he should only override his wife's objections after much prayer and with fear and trembling! In our now 34 years of marriage, Marla and I cannot come up with a single example of where I have had to overrule her. We've always come to mutual agreement as we've talked and prayed through decisions.

- (7) Submission does not require a wife to bury her spiritual gifts.

There are many gifted women in the Bible and in church history who have been greatly used of God. Priscilla is often mentioned before her husband, Aquila. She was probably the prominent one in helping Apollos straighten out his theology (Acts 18:24-26). Lois and Eunice, Timothy's grandmother and mother, played key roles in training him in the Scriptures (2 Tim. 1:5, 3:15). Paul refers to the mother of Rufus as "his mother and mine" (Rom. 16:13). Apparently she had ministered to Paul as a mother. In our day, women like Elisabeth Elliot and Edith Schaeffer have used their gifts to influence many men and women in the faith.

So Paul is saying that as the church is subject to Christ, so wives should be to their husbands. But, there is one more thing:

4. Since genuine submission to Christ must be total, genuine submission to your husband must be total.

Paul adds two little words at the end of verse 24, "*in everything.*" Why did he add those words? What does he mean?

- (1) "In everything" means that you cannot create loopholes to dodge the commandment.

Paul knew that we're all prone to try to dodge the difficult commands of the Bible. Many wives will say, "I would submit to my husband if he would just love me as you've described. But how can I submit when he is so selfish and insensitive?" In marriage counseling, this is always the biggest hurdle that I have to try to get couples over. When they stop focusing on the faults of their mate and start focusing on their own responsibilities, it's a breakthrough.

- (2) "In everything" includes submission in thoughts, words, and deeds.

Submission and respect begin in your thought life. Are you running your husband down and complaining about his shortcomings or are you thankfully focusing on his strengths? Are your words encouraging and affirming? Are your deeds supportive and responsive?

- (3) "In everything" does not include commandments to sin.

If your husband asks you to do something that Scripture forbids, you must respectfully decline. If he asks you to view pornography, you must say no. If he asks you to lie for him or cheat on your taxes or stop going to church, you would sin against God to go along with your husband's request. There is a respectful way to resist such ungodly demands, but you must resist.

- (4) "In everything" does not mean that you say yes to every demand, if in so doing you are fostering your husband's laziness and irresponsibility.

If your husband is dumping his responsibilities on you or using you as his slave to cater to his laziness, you need to talk to him. He needs to be confronted with his faults in a gracious, but firm manner. To allow him to go on in his sin is not to love him as Christ commands you to do.

- (5) "In everything" does not mean yielding to criminal behavior, including physical abuse.

If a husband is doing drugs in the home or is abusing the children or his wife, he is violating both God's law and the law of the state. Submission does not mean passively tolerating such sin. A wife should call the police and the husband should go to jail.

A godly wife may need to tolerate *some* verbal abuse, such as put-downs or name-calling or cursing, if her husband is not a Christian. But she should talk with him and explain that she would like to be close to him, but his abusive language is damaging their marriage. But if he is threatening her with physical abuse or death, she needs to move to a place of safety and get some godly counsel.

Conclusion

I realize that this is not an easy subject to apply and obey, but I would encourage each of you to grapple with it especially in areas where you may be resisting the Lord. If you're having trouble in your marriage, don't blame your husband or wait for him to start loving you as he should. Instead, do something radical: Submit to your husband in every area, even as the church is to submit to Christ. If you're fighting this portion of Scripture, you're not submitting. And if you're not submitting, the world won't see Christ in your marriage.

Application Questions

1. How can a wife respect a husband who doesn't deserve it? What does respect mean, practically, in this situation?
2. Does the submission of the wife imply that a husband makes all the decisions unilaterally? Would he be a good manager of his household to do this?
3. Are specific tasks in marriage gender-related (earning a paycheck, housework, caring for the children, etc.)? Give biblical support.
4. What if a wife is a better natural leader than her husband is? Must she still submit, even if he agrees to let her lead?

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