

# *“Husbands and Wives”*

COLOSSIANS 3:18-19

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This morning I would invite you to turn with me to a passage in the New Testament book of Colossians so that we can investigate two verses, that, if many of our neighbors here in Madison knew we really believed, we would perhaps be driven out of town. The so-called “forward thinking” residents of the Madison area would be clamoring to have our tax-exempt status revoked, and we would be laughed out of the city. And yet as Christians, we know that God’s word is true, so there is a value to studying any passage – especially those passages that challenge the culture around us. I am referring to two verses on the subject of marriage in Colossians 3:18-19 (p. 1845).

When we think about marriage, those of us who are married, or who have been married, and even those who have observed married couples interact; all of us know that marriage can be a challenge. Marriage can be a struggle. On the other hand, from experience, many of us know that a good marriage can be the most invigorating, the most fulfilling, and the most amazing relationship in the world. And yet at the same time, most of us also know that such a relationship does not happen by accident. Most of us know that it does not come easily. And then we also know that a difficult marriage can be one of the most draining experiences we could ever possibly imagine.

With these comments in mind, I would like for us to look together at Colossians 3:18-19. There are certainly a number of more comprehensive passages on the subject of marriage, and yet for the purpose of our study this morning, I would like for us to keep it as simple as possible. As the apostle Paul writes a note of encouragement to the Lord’s church in the ancient city of Colossae, he briefly addresses the marriage relationship. In Greek, we are talking about a grand total of 19 words on the subject of marriage. Most of us can handle 19 words! And yet at the same time, these 19 words have a way of keeping us challenged for a lifetime. So, let us then look together at Colossians 3:18-19, where the apostle Paul says, ***“Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered against them.”***

Again, at first glance, Paul’s inspired words here go against so much of what we are hearing in our culture, but that is why we are here this morning – to study the word of God and to remind each other that we are different. We are strange. As God’s people, we are rather unusual. And as children of God, we trust that God knows what is best for us. With this in mind, with the idea of keeping it simple, and even with the idea that some of us here this morning may struggle with these statements, I would like to divide this morning’s lesson

into two parts. First of all, let us look very carefully at what Paul has to say to wives; and then, let us consider what Paul has to say to husbands.

**I. But first of all, let us consider Paul's advice to WIVES as he encourages wives to SUBMIT to the leadership of their husbands.**

And with this, we come to an instruction that we will most likely never find in any of the women's magazines. This is not something that we would ever hear in a public college. This is something that our children will never hear in their Madison classrooms. This is something we will never hear from our friends and neighbors and peers here in the Madison area. And yet it is the word of God. Before we even get into the meaning of the word "**submit**," I want to take just a moment to clarify what it does NOT mean. Sometimes people hear this verse, and they say, "Oh, you people believe this, this, and this," but no. So let us first consider what it does not mean. Submitting does not mean that a woman is a slave to her husband. Submitting does not mean that the woman must always be the one who gets up and fetches things on command. Submitting does not require that the woman must subject herself to physical or emotional abuse. Instead, the Bible allows a woman to get out of those situations – in 1 Corinthians 7, the Bible allows a temporary separation for a period of time until certain issues can be worked out; so, submitting does not mean that a woman must put up with abuse. Submitting does not mean that a woman must submit to all men. I've heard people say this, that women must submit to all men in society. I've heard this used to say that a woman can never be the CEO of a company, or that a woman can never be president, but that is not what submission means in this passage. That is not what we are talking about. I would vote for a woman for president in a heartbeat. Submitting does not mean that a woman must be her husband's doormat. Submission is not something that a husband imposes on his wife. As far as I can tell, the Bible never tells husbands to make their wives submissive; but rather, women are to voluntarily submit to their husbands – a big difference. Submission does not imply inferiority.

But rather, the word Paul uses here literally means that the wife will willingly place herself under the leadership of her husband. The word means, "to arrange under," and it is a term that was used in the military, a concept that we still understand today, the idea of rank, the idea of arrangement for the purpose of getting a job done. In the military, for example, even though someone may rank under another person, that distinction has nothing to do with personal worth, it has nothing to do with wisdom, or knowledge, or physical strength, or even the ability to accomplish a particular task. But rather, the rank exists for the purpose of organization, for the purpose of accomplishing a mission. There is order. There is organization. And when a decision needs to be made, a wise leader (in the military or in any other organization) will take many things into consideration, many times including much input from those who are arranged under him, who may actually have more immediate knowledge of the situation they are facing.

We see submission in other areas of life. When two cars pull up to a stop sign at the same time, for example, somebody's got to go first! As we make that decision, value, or knowledge, or education level has nothing to do with it. When we pull up to a stop sign, we don't quiz the other driver concerning his income, and level of education, and so on. But instead, the law says that the car on the right goes first. Hopefully we don't get all upset at that, but that is one of those rules we just need to follow so that we stay safe. So that traffic flows smoothly, we voluntarily arrange ourselves under other people on the road, we submit to them, even though we might be smarter, and even though we might have a bigger car than they do. I grew up with the "Law of Gross Tonnage," the idea that the largest vehicle goes first – if you're on a bike, you let the motorcycle go first, if you're in a little Honda, the Ford F-150 goes first, and so on. As I was learning to drive, my dad always said, "There are a lot of people in the cemetery who can say they had the right of way." Of course, we don't really go by the Law of Gross Tonnage, but we yield for the common good.

We can learn a lot about the concept by studying how it is portrayed in other relationships, in other passages in the Bible. Jesus, for example, was subject to His parents (Luke 2:51). Think about that: The eternal Son of God submitted Himself to His parents! Paul tells us to subject ourselves to the governing authorities (Romans 13:1). The church is to be subject to Christ (Ephesians 5:24). As Christians, we are to submit ourselves to the elders of the church (Hebrews 13:17). All of us are to be subject to God (James 4:7). Angels are subject to Christ in heaven (1 Peter 3:22). Those who are young are to submit themselves to those who are older (1 Peter 5:5). The concept of submission, then, is common, and God says that wives are to submit to their husbands. Why? Not because the husband is better; but as Paul says, because this is “*...fitting in the Lord.*” This is appropriate. This is God’s design. God planned the family with the husband serving as the head. As has been said, “Anything with no head is dead, and anything with two heads is a freak.” The same thing is true of the family. The husband is the head, and as the head, he needs the support and encouragement of his wife.

In practical terms, this means that wives will praise and appreciate their husbands. It means that wives will disagree with their husbands privately and honor their position of authority, especially in front of the children. When there is a disagreement in front of the children, the wife should probably not say, “What in the world were you thinking? Are you an idiot?” But instead, the wife can respect her husband’s position by having that discussion privately. That way, the husband gets to keep some level of dignity, he gets another shot at it next time, and the children can continue to respect their father, as they should.

Ladies, have you taken a few moments to let your husbands know how much you appreciate his leadership in the family? Have you taken a few moments to praise your husband in front of your friends? Have you taken a few moments to express your respect for him in front of your children?

But even when things are not going well, I would suggest that it is still possible to disagree while still being respectful. It is possible to submit (as the Bible says here) and still have an opinion of your own. It is possible to submit and respect your husband’s position as the head of the marriage. And the reason this is possible is because the submission is not based on his perfection, but the submission is based on his position. If we could go back to the military picture, think about saluting the position, not necessarily the individual. I have told you several times before about when Keola and I were dating and when we were first engaged, I always had a hard time getting on the Air Force Base where her dad was stationed at the time. I didn’t grow up with the military, so here I was, showing up at the guard house, and I always had to go in, there were some very serious-looking men with large guns, and they would need to call her dad for permission to let me on the base, and they would need a copy of my license, and the address on base where I was going, and I was a nervous wreck. I just knew I was going to get shot. However, once we got on base, Mr. Vosburgh would let me use his car. That way, we could leave the base to do something, and when we got back to the front gate, those very serious young men with the big guns would snap to attention and they would give me the nicest salute! Of course, you know, they were not actually saluting me – they were saluting the stripes, they were really saluting the little sticker on the front bumper of his car. And I would say, in a similar way, a wife must respect her husband – not necessarily because he is the perfect husband, not necessarily because she agrees with everything he has ever done, but because she respects the position of leadership that God has placed him in within the family. She is willingly placing herself under his authority (the meaning of the word that Paul uses in verse 18).

What if the husband wants his wife to do something that is against God’s law? What if he wants her to sign off on some tax forms that she knows are not true? What if he wants her to skip an assembly of the congregation? That is where I would go back to her submission being “*fitting in the Lord.*” In those situations where the husband wants his wife to violate her faith, she has to realize that the Lord is the higher authority.

What about those situations where the husband is just a jerk? In those situations where the husband might not be a Christian (or even a Christian who's not acting like a Christian), the Lord addresses this in 1 Peter 3:1-2, ***"In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior."*** In other words, it is not a matter of constant pestering, but it is a matter of patiently doing the right thing over a period of days, and months, and years, and even decades.

Before we move on from this point, I would like to say a brief word to our young women who may decide to get married at some point in the future: As you get closer to making that decision, remember that God will be calling you to follow the leader in your family. And with that in mind, I would encourage you: Do not settle for a man who you would not be willing to follow spiritually. Yes, he might be good-looking. Yes, he might make a lot of money. Yes, you two might have a lot in common. You might have a lot of fun together. And those things are okay, but as you are scoping out the field (so to speak), ask yourself: Will I be able to cheerfully follow the leadership of this man for the rest of my life? Will this man look out for my physical, emotional, and especially my spiritual well-being? If you cannot answer "YES," then back away from that situation. Because, once you are in a marriage, God does not give us permission for a do-over, just because we are incompatible, or just because we think we might have made a mistake the first time.

**II. At this time, let us go back to Colossians 3, and let us now consider Paul's words to the husbands (in verse 19) as Paul tells HUSBANDS that they are to LOVE their wives.**

As I understand it, the word ***"love"*** in this verse does not refer to romantic love (there is a Greek word for that, and Paul does not use it here). He is not talking about a friendly or brotherly kind of love (there is a Greek word for that, and Paul does not use it here), but rather, Paul refers to doing what is best for another person, sacrificial love. And the tense of the verb here tells us that this is something we are to do continually – not just on the wedding day, but continually, day in and day out, until the day we die. The love we are talking about here is the kind of love that Jesus had for the church. This is the kind of love God had for us. As Paul said in Romans 5:8, ***"...God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."*** Even when we didn't deserve it, Christ died for us – that is the kind of love that husbands are to have for their wives – the same word is used in both passages.

In practical terms, it means that we will rearrange our schedule when she wants to go out for lunch. It means that we will do our part around the house without needing to be harassed about it. It means that we will make sure that she has some time to herself – time to spend with her friends, time to go shopping, or whatever. It means that we will be willing to hold her hand when we're out in public. It means that we will send her an email from work to let her know how much we appreciate her. It means planning a family vacation. It means making time to go out on a date every once-in-a-while. It means that we will not drool over other women. It means that we will praise her in front of our friends. It means that we will be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger. It means that we will make some effort to be interested in what she is interested in. It means that we will seek out her opinion and value what she has to say. We are to treat our wives with tenderness. As Peter said in 1 Peter 3:7, ***"You husbands in the same way, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with someone weaker, since she is a woman; and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered."*** The emphasis there is not on the idea that our wives are weaker, the emphasis is on the fact that we are to treat our wives in an understanding way ***"AS WITH someone weaker."*** We are to be careful to treat our wives with respect, so that our prayers will not be hindered.

And so, while wives are told to submit, husbands are told to love. We might say, then, that the submission is not exactly one-sided. Husbands are not kings being tended to by servants, but husbands and wives are to work together. If we as husbands want to lead (as God instructed), then we must also fulfill our responsibility to love our wives just as Christ loved the church. How many of us truly love our wives that much? And yet that is our mission – that is our goal – that is our command.

And in case we missed it here, I would just point out that since love is commanded, it must not just be a feeling. So many times today, we see love portrayed in the movies as something that happens to us – we fall in love, and really we don't have much of a say in it – it's almost like catching a virus. And yet that is not the kind of love that Paul is talking about here. Rather, Paul is talking about the kind of love that can be commanded, **"Husbands, love your wives!"** Make a decision to do what is best for her!

And then we get to the second part of verse 19, as Paul adds to this by saying, **"...and do not be embittered against them."** One translation says that we are not to be **"harsh"** with them. Another translation says that we are not to be **"resentful"** toward them. The word literally refers to bitterness, to something sharp,

A number of times through the years, I have had Christian men come to me and say, "Baxter, I know the Bible tells me to be the head of my house, but she just won't listen! She just doesn't care. I want to lead, but she just won't follow! What do I do?" That is where this second part of verse 19 comes in. No matter how a wife responds to her husband's love, Paul says that the husband never has the right to stop loving her. Even when that sacrificial love is not appreciated, do not be **"embittered"** against her. Do not allow yourself to go sour in that relationship; but instead, keep on doing what you know to be right, keep on loving her just as Christ loved the church.

And it never hurts to remember that you are married to God's daughter. Men, if you are married to a Christian, then God is not only your Father, but He is also your Father-in-Law! This week marks 20 years from when I had that conversation with my future father-in-law, asking his permission to marry my wife. What a nerve-wracking conversation for a young man – I had the distinct impression that if I did not take care of her, if I did not treat her well, that he would seriously hurt me! God is our Father-in-Law. When we put it in those terms, I think we understand why it is so important to God that we treat His daughter with love, **"so that your prayers will not be hindered."** If we're struggling with this, maybe we could ask God for help: Dear God, help me truly love Your daughter, as I should!

And here's another way of thinking about it: As husbands, we have been called to give our wives just a taste of the kind of love that Christ had for the church. As husbands, our love should give our wives a reminder of what the Lord has done for all of us. As husbands, we are to sacrifice ourselves for the family.

In practical terms, this means that we actually lead spiritually, that we make sure that our families are getting fed spiritually. At a minimum, we make sure that our wives have the opportunity to be a part of God's church. It is their choice, but we can expose them to it. That is a priority for us. We can be aware of how our wives are doing spiritually. What are they struggling with? We can make sure they have time to read the Bible on their own. There is so much more we could say, but as husbands, most of us already know. We just need a reminder from time to time, and that is what Paul has done for us this morning. Our goal is to make it as easy as possible for our wives to submit to us. We do that by loving them and by not becoming embittered against them.

**Conclusion:**

This morning we have studied a passage that most of our friends and neighbors would laugh at. And yet we have studied two of the most fundamental concepts of marriage. For those whose marriages are doing well, our study this morning has served as a reminder. And for those who are having some struggles, I would point out that even if only one spouse is willing to change, then the marriage can improve. Wives, you do not need to wait until your husbands are perfectly loving before you start submitting to him. God doesn't say, "Start submitting as soon as you think he loves you." But instead, start submitting anyway – it might do some good (for you and for him). And husbands, you do not need to wait until your wives are perfectly submissive before you start loving her. God doesn't say, "Start loving as soon as she submits." That's not what He says, but instead, start loving anyway – it might also do some good (for you and for her). What we do know is, it is always good to start doing what God has told us to do.

As we close, we would like to invite those of you who are not yet Christians to obey the gospel. The gospel is the good news that Jesus came to this earth to give up His life as a sacrifice for our sins. We accept that sacrifice by turning to God in humble obedience. We turn away from sin, and we allow ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of sins. At that point, we are born into God's family. If you have any questions, let us know. But if you are ready to obey the good news right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

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