

# Mysterious Marriage

EPHESIANS 5:22-33

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This morning we return to our series of lessons from the New Testament book of Ephesians, a letter written by the apostle Paul to the church in Ephesus. Over the past month or so, we have learned that those of us in the church have been blessed with every spiritual blessing ***“in Christ.”*** We have been adopted into the family of God, and as we learned last week, this means that we are to bear the family resemblance. In other words, as children of God, we are to imitate our Father in Heaven. We are to love each other, we are to be pure, we are to walk in the light, and we are to live our lives according to the wisdom of God’s word.

This morning, as we move into the second half of Ephesians 5, we find that the apostle Paul now starts to address a number of family relationships, starting with the relationship between husbands and wives. Probably all of us who are married would agree that marriage can be rather complicated. In fact, toward the end of this passage (as we will discover in just a moment), Paul describes marriage as being a ***“mystery.”*** With reference to marriage, he says, ***“This mystery is great.”*** We might say, then, that marriage is mysterious, and sometimes it seems that the longer we are married the more complicated and mysterious it becomes. The last time I preached on this passage was back in April 2009, and I can very safely say that marriage is just as mysterious to me now as it was back then, five years ago.

Many years ago, a young man asked Aristotle whether he would recommend marriage, and Aristotle responded by saying, “Yes, if a man gets a good wife he will be very happy, and if he gets a bad wife then he will become a philosopher, and the world needs more philosophers.” So, either way, I suppose, marriage is a mystery. There are so many unknowns. And really, there is no way to adequately communicate this to the next generation. Years ago, I would talk to younger couples who were getting ready for marriage, and I would try to pass along some advice. Now, though, my approach is pretty much, “Here are some things that you two at least need to discuss with each other,” and I have narrowed that list down to only 100 items. Beyond that, it is up to them! And the difficulty in communicating comes in the fact that marriage is indeed a ***“great mystery.”***

And this brings us back to Ephesians 5 (p. 1833). This passage is extremely practical, and yet at the same time it may also be quite difficult to hear, and part of the reason is: This passage has been terribly misunderstood, and sometimes even abused over the past 2000 years. It may be difficult, and yet it is the word of God. So, we need to look at it, we need to understand it, and we need to live by it. One comfort for both husbands and wives as we look at this passage is that statement made by the apostle John in 1 John 5:3, ***“For this is the love***

**of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome.”** So, whatever we learn this morning from Ephesians 5, we know that it will not be burdensome. Right? Whatever we read this morning will not be a burden, because the commandments of God are not burdensome. If you will, then, please look with me at Ephesians 5:22-33,

***<sup>22</sup> Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. <sup>23</sup> For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. <sup>24</sup> But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything.***

***<sup>25</sup> Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, <sup>26</sup> so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, <sup>27</sup> that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. <sup>28</sup> So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; <sup>29</sup> for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, <sup>30</sup> because we are members of His body. <sup>31</sup> For this reason A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND SHALL BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH. <sup>32</sup> This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church. <sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself, and the wife must see to it that she respects her husband.***

As we look back at this paragraph of scripture, we have a lot of information here, there is much we will need to skip over for now, but as I see it, there are basically two things Paul addresses here. This morning, then, we will follow Paul’s lead, and we will start with the ladies.

#### **I. The first thing Paul does here is to encourage THE WIVES TO SUBMIT TO THEIR HUSBANDS.**

Well, we think about this for even a split second, and we realize we have a problem. We look at the world around us, and we see some extremes on this subject. On one hand, we have the radical feminist movement which I am sure views this verse as a form of hate speech, and their conclusion is: This verse proves that the Bible is an old and outdated book written by men during a time when women were treated as property. Then on the other extreme, of course, there is the radical macho-man idea where some men today really do treat their wives as slaves, and some on this extreme would use this passage to bolster their opinion that women are to worship the ground they walk on. And so we look at this passage through 21<sup>st</sup> Century glasses, and our first reaction might be, “Oh no! This is not good! This cannot be right! Surely we can dismiss this as being from the culture of a bygone era.” We have some issues here. Some, then, have looked at this passage and have concluded: There is no possible way for us to ever apply these verses here in Madison, Wisconsin!

I hope you still have your Bibles open, because as we get into it I want to point out something that really helps in understanding this whole passage. Please remember that we started in verse 22. In most Bibles, the paragraph seems to start in verse 22, right? There is a gap between verses 21 and 22. Some translations even have some kind of heading there. In our pew Bibles, you will notice the bold italicized heading “Marriage Like Christ and the Church,” and that heading comes right in between verses 21 and 22. I would point out: That heading is not inspired. And what I mean by that is: Paul did not write that heading. Instead, those who made this translation put that heading there to help us break this book into chunks that we can understand. And usually, the headings are very helpful. But I need to point something out here, and that is: Verse 21 is

absolutely essential to understanding everything we have just read. I say this, because in the original manuscripts the word *“submit”* or *“subject”* is not found in verse 22. You know how we just read that wives are to be *“subject”* to their own husbands? The word *“subject”* is not in the original text. If you are reading the NASB, for example, you will notice that the word *“subject”* is in italics. That means that the word is not there, but it is implied by the context. So, let’s look back at verse 21 and move over into verse 22, leaving out the word *“subject.”* Paul says, starting in verse 21, ***“...and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ. Wives, to your own husbands, as to the Lord.”*** This section actually starts, then, with Paul telling us to be subject to one another. In other words, there is to be harmony, and unity, and a kind of give and take in that relationship. We do have different roles to play, but neither husbands nor wives are to go into this relationship demanding obedience or submission from the other person. Paul, then, is not addressing a power struggle. This is not a case of slave versus master.

Now, when we get to verse 22, Paul does apply submission directly to the wives, but we do need to remember how we got here, ***“be subject to one another in the fear of Christ. Wives, to your own husbands, as to the Lord.”*** While we’re on this point, we also need to be sure we understand what Paul meant when he used that word *“subject.”* When we think of being subject to somebody, many different thoughts may come to mind, and not all of those thoughts may be accurate in terms of what Paul is saying here. The word *“subject”* comes from two different words meaning, *“to arrange under,”* and the idea is that one person will arrange himself under another person so that a mission can be accomplished. The word was often used in the Roman military, as soldiers arranged themselves under their commanding officers. It did not mean that the person of higher rank was a better person. It did not mean that the person of higher rank was any smarter or any more qualified, necessarily, but for the sake of the mission as a whole, soldiers would arrange themselves under those of higher rank for the purpose of order and efficiency. An individual soldier would give up some of his own individual rights to protect and strengthen the unit as a whole. I have never been in the military as some of you have, but I would imagine that it works in somewhat the same way today. The Roman army could move together as one man, because thousands upon thousands of individual soldiers were so good at arranging themselves under the authority of the next person up the chain of command. This is the word Paul uses here.

Outside the military, the word referred to, *“a voluntary attitude of giving in, cooperating, assuming responsibility, and carrying a burden.”* When I *“subject”* myself, it means that I will willingly respond or yield to another person for the sake of unity, for the sake of efficiency. When I pull up to a stop sign, I will yield to the person who gets there first. I will yield to the person on the right – not because that person is a better person, not because that person is more valuable to society, not because his truck is bigger than my car, but I will submit and allow him to go first, because the rule is there for a reason. I will yield for the sake of getting through that intersection in a safe and efficient manner. That is the idea here – voluntary cooperation for the purpose of achieving a mission. And so the word basically refers to cooperating or working together on something. There are times when we need to arrange ourselves under another person for the purpose of getting something done.

Something that might help here is to notice that submitting to a husband is directly tied to submitting to the Lord. In verse 21, wives are told that this submission is to be done ***“in the fear of Christ.”*** In verse 22, wives are to be subject to their husbands ***“as to the Lord.”*** And in verse 24, Paul says that, ***“as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything.”*** In all three cases, the voluntary subjection is based on being subject ***“to the Lord.”*** In other words, she does not subject herself because her husband is perfect, not because he is a perfect leader by any means, but she submits for the Lord’s sake. She does it out of her respect and reverence for God.

And while we're on the subject of submission, I should also point out that nowhere in the entire New Testament are husbands ever told to make their wives submissive. Even in this passage, the command to submit is given to the wives. The husbands are never commanded to force their wives to accept this position. Instead, this is something that is completely up to the wives. By the way, for you ladies who are not yet married: Be sure to pick a man you can willingly submit yourself to for the next 50-60 years. Be very careful making that decision.

So, in practical terms, what does this submission look like? It means that the wife will honor her husband as the head of the family. She does not criticize her husband publicly. She speaks to him in a respectful way, not condescendingly, not with anger or malice. She doesn't go behind his back to do things she knows he would disagree with. We could go on and on with practical examples, but most of us, I believe, already know what this looks like. And wives, if you have no idea here, if you have no clue as to what this actually looks like, I would suggest asking. Go home today and ask your husband: What can I do to respect you as the head of this family? We might have some interesting conversations at the dinner table today!

**II. And now we get to the husbands – if wives are told to submit, we might expect Paul to tell the husbands to lead, and yet he never does! Instead, we find in three different verses that HUSBANDS ARE COMMANDED TO LOVE THEIR WIVES.**

I'm certainly not saying that leadership is excluded in this passage, but the overwhelming message of Ephesians 5 for husbands is that we are to love our wives. The message comes through in verses 25, 28, and 33. As we think about love, I find it interesting that in English, we use the word "**love**" in many ways. I love bacon. I love my wife. And I use the same word, don't I? Paul, though, was not writing in English, and from what I have read, Paul actually had several words for "**love**" that he could have used here. He could have used a word referring to friendly or brotherly love, the basis of our English word "Philadelphia," the "City of Brotherly Love." He could have used a word referring to romantic or erotic love. He could have used a word referring to family love, the kind of natural love we might see between a parent and a child. But instead of using these very common words, the apostle Paul uses the word AGAPE here, a word that was very rarely used in ancient Greek literature. AGAPE refers to the kind of love that looks out for and acts upon the well-being of another person, a decision to do what is best for someone else, expecting nothing in return, and sometimes requiring great sacrifice on our part. And to illustrate the kind of love that husbands are to have for their wives, Paul gives the example of Christ and the church – in verse 25, "**...as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her.**" And so he gives an example. In case there is any doubt as to what Paul means here, husbands are to love their wives just as Christ loved the church. Jesus gave himself up.

Several years ago, we heard this exact phrase being used all over the media. Here was the headline on Fox News back in April 2009, "FBI hostage team assisting in efforts with Somali pirates holding American Captain Richard Phillips, who gave himself up to free hijacked vessel." We now know how that turned out, but in the middle of it, if you remember what happened five years ago, Captain Phillips "surrendered himself" to the pirates to secure the safety of his crew. He "gave himself up" for the crew. Pirates took the crew hostage, and Captain Phillips said, "Take me, instead." He "**gave himself up.**" Again, this is the exact phrase Paul uses with reference to Christ in verse 25, the pattern for how husbands are to love their wives, following the Lord's example, who "**gave himself up**" for the church. I want us to think back to what happened several years ago: In light of what Captain Phillips did, do we think the crew of that ship had any trouble submitting to their captain after that?

As husbands, therefore, we have been told to love our wives. We are to give ourselves up just as Christ gave himself up for the church. And I would give all of us as husbands a reminder: It is very easy to think of this command in terms of going out in a blaze of glory. “When the bad guys break down the door in the middle of the night, I will be there! Honey, I will step in front of a bullet for you! I will pull you out of a burning building! I will push you out of the path of a speeding train! But, uh, cleaning the kitchen...no, I don’t think I can do that.” Do we see the problem here? Going out in a blaze of glory is not all that the apostle Paul had in mind here. Yes, Jesus did give himself up on the cross, but Jesus also lived a perfect life for 33 ½ years – day in, day out, for days, months, years at a time. When we love our wives sacrificially, we love them (doing what they need us to do so that they feel loved) even when we might not feel like it at the time. Sometimes, that will involve cleaning the kitchen. Jesus Christ loved the church by humbling himself and coming to this earth as a servant. He poured himself out in human form, he offered himself on the cross, and he washed the church by the washing of water with the word of God. Years ago, Ms. Katherine (one of the seniors of this congregation who passed away a number of years ago), Ms. Katherine suggested that, “No woman would have any trouble submitting herself to a man who loved her just as Christ loved the church.” Ms. Katherine was a very wise woman! I hope we appreciate that statement, “No woman will have any trouble submitting herself to a man who loves her just as Christ loved the church.”

While we are on the men here, I should point out something else in this passage (just to be clear). I would emphasize that husbands are to love their **“own wives.”** Did you catch that (in verse 28)? They are not to love their neighbor’s wives, but they are to love their **“own wives.”** I mentioned this several years ago right after it happened, but when we were on the way home from my grandfather’s funeral in Tennessee several years ago, we stopped in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, and worshipped at brother Walt’s home congregation. The preacher down there had some very wise words that morning. Now to understand this, we need to try to put ourselves in a Kentucky frame of mind for a moment. So we’re in Kentucky right now. The preacher at Walt’s home congregation said this: He was speaking to the men of the church, and he said that when you go next door to ask for some sugar, it had better be granulated! Does that make sense? Any “sugar” we get from our neighbors had better be granulated! Husbands are to love their **“own wives”** (verse 28).

Connected to this idea of love, Paul also tells us in verse 29 that husbands are to **“nourish”** our wives, we are to **“cherish”** our wives. That is, we are to care for them, we are to protect them, we are to provide for them. We are to feed them and help them grow. We are to **“cherish”** them. As I understand it, the word **“cherish”** refers to warming them – we are to keep our wives warm. We are to treat them not with coldness, but with warmth and tenderness.

And I would point out that all of this Paul says by way of command. Love, therefore, is something that we as men can do in response to being told. Love, then, is not just a feeling, but love (as we have noticed all through this passage), love is something we choose to do. So let’s not imagine that love is something we can “fall into” and “fall out of.” The kind of love Paul tells us as husbands to have here is a choice to do what is best for our wives. And if we think love is something we can “fall out of,” I would remind all of us how Paul says all of this is actually a picture of Christ and his relationship with the church. Did you know that as the bride of Christ, the church in Ephesus eventually “fell out of love” with Jesus? Let’s remember what John would go on to write more than 30 years later in Revelation 2:4-5, the Lord’s message to the church in Ephesus, **“But I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place – unless you repent.”** Just like the love this congregation has for Christ, if we as husbands ever lose the love we have for our wives, the Bible says we can repent; that is, we can turn around, we can go back and do the

deeds we did at first, we can make a choice to go back and treat her like we treated her back when we were dating, we can go back to putting her in a place of great honor in our daily lives.

### **Conclusion:**

As we close, we cannot miss what this passage is really about. And I know we've referred to it in passing a time or two already this morning, but as we close, I would like for us to go back to verse 32 where after telling wives to submit and husbands to love, he finally gets to his main point here, ***"This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church."*** We have learned some powerful lessons about marriage this morning, but the main point of all of this has been to give us some deep insight into the relationship between Christ and the church. As Christians, we are the church, we are the body of Christ, we are the bride of Christ. As Christians, then, our role is to submit to Christ as the head of his church. With that said, I would offer just a few closing thoughts on how we as Christians speak of the Lord's church. Since the church is the bride of Christ, can we be very careful how we speak of the church? From time to time, I will be reading an article or I will listen to a sermon online, or I'll even be talking to somebody face to face, and I'll hear somebody start talking about the church, and they'll say, "The church has done a poor job of this or that." Or maybe they'll start talking about how "we don't understand grace," or "we don't understand love," or "we have our priorities out of whack." Can we remember that we are talking about the bride of Christ? Let me ask all of us something (and especially those of us who are married): How might we react if we hear somebody criticizing our wives in public? What if you go to work tomorrow morning and hear some of your coworkers talking in a very negative way about your wife? Most of us would hopefully get pretty hot over that. Let us be very careful, then, when speaking about the Lord's church. The church is the bride of Christ. The church is a perfect organization. Yes, the church is made up of imperfect people like all of us, but the church itself is the bride belonging to Jesus. Let us, then, make sure we speak of the Lord's bride with the utmost of respect.

You know, we love things that are important to us. Over the past few days, I've been doing some thinking about what constitutes a family heirloom. A family heirloom is an item that is important to the family for some reason – maybe because of who made it or where it came from. It has some kind of sentimental value. A number of you were kind enough to come help my parents move in yesterday. We moved a bunch of stuff – boxes, containers, a whole lot of homemade furniture. And you know, to most people, that's just stuff. It's like the stuff we see lining the shelves at Goodwill. And that's fine. But to the family, some of those items are beyond value. And that's the way it is with the church. To most people in the world, the people in this room today are pretty average. We come in all heights and weights, all colors, all shapes and sizes, different ages, we have a wide array of physical concerns and family issues. To the world, we're pretty average. But to Jesus Christ, we are his bride. We have tremendous value far beyond what is evident from the outside. We are the church of Christ, an assembly of people belonging to God. So, let us make sure that we love the church just as much as He does.

There are some of you here this morning who have not yet been adopted into God's family. So before we close today, we want to give you an invitation. It's not really our invitation, it's the Lord's invitation. God invites all people to obey the gospel. The gospel is the good news that Jesus died for our sins, that he was buried, and that he was raised up from the dead. We obey the gospel today by turning away from sin. We die to sin. We have a change of heart concerning sin, and that change of heart causes us to turn away from it. We then allow ourselves to be buried in water for the forgiveness of our sins, just as Jesus was buried in the tomb, the ***"washing of water with the word,"*** as Paul said up in verse 26. We are then raised up out of the water to live the Christian life. If you would like us to pray about some situation in your life right now, we would invite you to write that down (if you're able) and bring it to the front. We would be honored to go to God on your

behalf. If you have any questions about what you've heard this morning, let us know. But if you are ready to obey the good news right now, you can come to the front as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing together...

To comment on this lesson: [fourlakeschurch@gmail.com](mailto:fourlakeschurch@gmail.com)