

“GOD’S WORD TO WIVES” (Ephesians 5:22-24)

As we continue our study of the book of Ephesians, for the next couple of weeks are going to talk about marriage – and since marriage can be a rather heavy subject, I thought I’d start out with a little joke. A man went to the doctor after being ill for several weeks, and after the doctor examined him carefully, he called the man’s wife into his office. He said, “Your husband is suffering from a rare disease and without treatment, he’ll be dead in a few weeks. The good news is, his condition can be treated with a robust food plan. You will need to get up early every morning and fix your husband a hot breakfast – pancakes, bacon and eggs, the works. He’ll need a home-cooked lunch every day, and then an old-fashioned meat-and-potato dinner every evening. It would be good if you could bake frequently – cakes, pies, homemade breads, and so forth. And since his immune system is weak, it’s important that your home be kept spotless at all times. Do you have any questions?” The woman shook her head “no.” “Do you want to break the news to your husband or should I?” The wife said, “I will.” As she walked into the exam room the husband sensed the seriousness of his illness and asked her, “It’s bad, isn’t it?” She nodded and tears welled up in her eyes. “What’s going to happen to me?” “Well, honey, the doctor says you’re gonna die!”

Few things in life call for more sacrifice and effort than marriage. I have heard couples say that their greatest joy has been in marriage, and that their greatest pain has been in marriage. In marriage you feel the whole range of emotions. Marriage is the very first institution established by God, and was designed to bring the greatest intimacy, security, and happiness of any relationship this side of heaven. Marriage is the bedrock of civilization, and many of the problems we face right now in our society today are directly linked to the decline of marriage and the rise of divorce and broken homes. The problems that marriages face is not the fault of the institution of marriage – the marriage relationship as originally given by God still works if we follow the instruction manual. But whenever His instructions are ignored, big problems begin.

For the next couple of weeks we are going to look at one of the key passages on marriage in Ephesians 5, in which the Apostle Paul defines the primary roles and responsibilities of husbands and wives. In the verses leading up to this passage Paul has been talking about the fact that once we’ve been saved and born again, we are different people – we no longer walk according to the values of the world, but according to what God wants. One of the big changes is that the Holy Spirit of God comes to live within us, and enables us to live the life God wants us to live.

One of the signs of being filled with the Spirit is stated in 5:21... “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” In our relationships with other people, we are to humble ourselves and put their needs and interests above our own. It’s the same attitude of submission Jesus showed when He humbled Himself and came to earth and voluntarily laid down His life for the sins of the world.

Now beginning in rest of chapter 5 and going into chapter 6, Paul is going to expand upon this theme of submission and apply it to three key relationships in life: to marriage, to parenting, and to the workplace. He begins with submission in marriage and says this in verses 22-24... “Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. 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. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.”

Those verses certainly grab our attention, don't they? I remember the first time I talked on the subject of wives submitting to husbands – I was in my twenties and single, and remember being very uncomfortable talking about this subject. I can still visualize the face of a lady in the congregation who looked like she was enjoying my discomfort and how I was going to explain this passage.

I have considerably more comfort in teaching this passage now, not only because I'm married but because my confidence in God's Word is unshakable, and whatever God says in His Word – even if it is controversial or hard to swallow – I can trust that it has my best interests in mind and is given to bless me and protect me.

Having said that, we have to deal with the fact that wives submitting to their husbands is viewed by culture not only as archaic and outdated, but hateful and dangerous. How could anyone in 2023 still hold to such a view? I would simply challenge any fair-minded person to observe the havoc that abandoning God's design for marriage has wreaked on our culture, and ask, "How's it working out for us?" Not so good. Perhaps the ancient truths of the Bible are not so backwards or archaic after all – maybe the problems we face today are the result of tossing aside the original owner's manual on marriage, and our only hope of turning things around is to return to it.

In Ephesians 5 God gives instructions for both wives and husbands – and when each functions according to their design there is beautiful peace and harmony and fulfillment. This week we'll look at God's word to wives, and next week we'll look at God's word to husbands. And wives, you might be interested to note that nine verses are written to husbands, and only three to wives. You can deduce from that what you want, but the goal is that after these two messages you will not only understand the roles God has ordained for wives and husbands, but that you will embrace them as essential to harmony in marriage.

Let's begin with God's instructions to wives. Verse 22 says, "Wives, submit to your own husbands as you do to the Lord." The word "submit" obviously brings up a number of questions, and we're going to look at submission in marriage from three angles. First, we'll look at the reason for submission, going all the way back to the early chapters of Genesis to get the broad perspective of why it's important in marriage; then we'll zoom in and look closer at the definition of submission and what it means and doesn't mean; and then we'll zoom in even closer to talk about the practice of submission in everyday life.

As we saw a few weeks ago when we looked at verse 21, the Greek word for "submit" is *hupotasso*, which means "to place yourself under." In the first century it was a military term that referred to lower-ranking soldiers arranging themselves under the orders of higher-ranking officers. The general idea of submission is the acknowledgment of proper order and authority.

God, of course, is the ultimate authority, and He created a finely-tuned world with amazing order and design. Everything from the alignment of the planets and the rotation of earth around the sun, to the complex ecosystem of the earth – everything in creation functions according to a well-ordered design. In keeping with His well-ordered design, God established authority and submission to govern all our relationships. As citizens of a country, the Bible says we are to be in submission to those who govern over us. In nations of the world where the lines of authority and submission break down, there is anarchy.

God has also established lines of authority in the church. Christ is the head of the church, the pastors and elders are submissive to Him, and the congregation in turn is to be submissive to its leaders.

There are lines of authority in work. Not everyone can be the boss. Someone has to lead and manage, and those who work under their boss needs to submit to his authority in order for things to run smoothly. Everyone is under submission to someone – that is God’s design. It’s important to see that submission has nothing to do with a person’s value or importance, it’s simply a matter of function. You may be smarter than your boss, and you might be a better boss than your boss, but someone has to be the boss and for the business to function well everyone yields to the boss’s leadership.

Given this, it’s really no surprise that God would establish lines of authority and submission in marriage, and we see this from the very beginning of creation. Genesis 1:27 says, “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” This verse tells us two important things regarding marriage. The first is that men and women are equal in value and importance in God’s eyes, and the second is while they are equal in God’s eyes, they are also distinct. God created two distinct genders to whom He assigns a different role and function.

God first created man and placed him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. Then God said in Genesis 2:18, “It is not good for the man be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” God brought all the animals before Adam to name them, but Adam saw that none of the animals were like him. But when God made woman and brought her to Adam, he said, “Now we’re talking. She compliments me – she is like me and yet different.”

When I was going to a community college years ago, I had a professor that said there was no difference between men and women – it was just a construct that society made up. Yet everyone instinctively knows that men and women are different – and sometimes very different – not just biologically, but in their makeup. Every culture throughout history has recognized that there are general masculine traits and general feminine traits. In 1992 a secular author named John Gray popularized some of these differences in a book he entitled *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*. Men and women live on different planets in their interests, their needs and desires, how they communicate – and a host of other things. God made us different genders to reflect His glory, and we should celebrate those differences, not try to deny them or blur them.

As the creation story continues in Genesis 2, we find that God gives the man and woman different roles. To man God gives the role of **headship** – he is to lead, provide, protect, and care for his wife. To the woman He gives the role of **helper** – to come alongside of together fulfill God’s purposes. Men need a lot of help, amen? We’re not equipped to function on our own and need the unique qualities God has given to women to compliment what we lack.

At first glance, the word “helper” might sound like an inferior role, but guess who else is called a helper in the Bible? God is – He is the helper of His people. In the New Testament the Holy Spirit is also called our helper who comes alongside us and enables us to life the Christian life. God’s design is that two co-equal people, made in the image of God, will come alongside each other and function according to the roles God has given them.

As with every institution God has established, someone has to lead, someone has to take the role of authority, and in marriage this role is given to the man. This is reflected in the simple fact that Adam was created first. God could have created Adam and Eve at the same time, but He created Adam first, and then Eve. Before Eve was created, God gave Adam the mandate to subdue the earth and rule over it, and after Adam and Eve sinned, Adam is the one held accountable by God.

In every arena of life, someone has authority. When you have a complaint at a store you say, “I’d like to see the manager.” You want to talk to the person with the authority to solve your problem. In every area of life there is order and structure and authority, and when people cooperate with order and give respect to those placed in a position of authority, things function smoothly and efficiently and there is a peaceful atmosphere. When there is rebellion against the established order, there is chaos and dysfunction.

Why did God make man the head? I don’t know, but He did. Someone’s got to be the head and when God made Adam He said, “You’re it. You’re the leader, you’re the head.” Now in many, many cases, wives might be smarter than their husbands (that is certainly true in our marriage) and wives might be more spiritual. But God designed man to take the role of headship in marriage and the church, and uniquely gifted them to do so.

Notice in verses 23-24 that Paul goes even deeper into the reason for submission in marriage... “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. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.” Every major spiritual truth of God is pictured in creation by a physical truth. For example, the physical act of baptism illustrates the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ and our union with Him. Likewise, the physical elements of the Lord’s Table illustrate the death of Christ on our behalf. Marriage, Paul says, is a picture of the relationship between Christ and His church.

The marriage relationship, someone said, is like a grand drama being played out before a watching world. In marriage the husband represents Christ, who sacrificially loved the church and gave His life for her – and the wife represents the church who submits to Christ as the head or authority. When a husband doesn’t love his wife and give himself up for her, he is not submitting to God’s design. Likewise, when a wife doesn’t submit to her husband, she is not submitting to Christ. But when we play our roles correctly, we display before the world what it means to have a relationship with Christ.

The reason submission is resisted by so many in our culture – and even in the church – is because we are living on the other side of Genesis 3 – where sin entered the world. Before the fall, Adam and Eve had no problem accepting and flourishing in their roles, but after the fall there would be a power struggle – and men would lead imperfectly and women would not respect well. The “Me too” movement has brought to light how badly some men have strayed from their original design. Because of this, masculinity is deemed as “toxic,” and our boys are taught that there is something wrong with being manly. Just because people do not live up to the ideal design of God does not mean that we should throw out the ideal. The reason we are where we are today is precisely because we have abandoned God’s design. The ideal still works if we follow the blueprint.

When a man steps up and leads his family in a Christlike way, when he exercises his God-given strength in the right way, when he sacrificially loves his wife as Christ loves the church, and listens and affirms and builds his wife up to be all that she can be – there is not a Christian wife in the world who wouldn’t want to submit to a husband like that. And when a wife gives her husband respect and honor, it is a powerful motivation for him to live out his design. God’s design still works, and when rightly understood, brings peace and harmony to relationships.

With this birds-eye view of submission, let’s zoom in on a little closer and define what submission means in marriage. One definition is this: “Submission is voluntarily accepting God’s divine design for the family by respecting your husband as the God-appointed leader of your home.”

It means that you as a wife choose to voluntarily place yourself under the authority of your husband. Don't miss the word "voluntarily." In verse 22 the verb "submit yourself" is in the middle voice, which means that you are the one doing it – no one forces you to submit – not even your husband – it's a choice you make in reverence to the Lord.

Another good definition of submission is this: "Submission is the disposition to honor and affirm a husband's authority, and an inclination to embrace his leadership" (Dr. Sam Storms). What I love about this definition is that it speaks about the heart. It's talking about the disposition and the inclination to submit. If you're a single woman and not yet married, you can still begin to cultivate a disposition in your heart, an inclination of your heart, that when a godly man asks to marry you, you are already inclined to be affirming of his leadership. It's the idea that you do this not because you have to and God tells you to, but you willingly do it because you trust God's design for marriage and want a full and rich marriage.

One of the reasons people reject the teaching of submission in marriage is because of how some have misused and abused these verses. It's important to not only understand what submission is, but what it is not...

- Submission does not mean that a husband controls and dominates his wife. As we will see next week, the husband is to be a servant leader who loves and sacrifices for his wife.
- Submission doesn't mean that you agree with your husband on everything, or that he makes all the decisions and you just go with it.
- Submission doesn't mean that you are passive and never voice your opinion. It doesn't mean you never challenge or confront your husband.
- Submission doesn't mean that you follow your husband into sin – if God's Word clearly forbids something, you're under no obligation to disobey God.
- And submission for sure does not mean that you passively endure physical or emotional abuse. You have every right to get away from that kind of situation, seek counsel, and establish boundaries.

Some of you are married to godly men who love and care and provide for you, and submitting to him is not hard. Some of you may be in marriages where your husband does not fulfill his God-given role well, and submitting is not easy. If that's the case, you need to remember that you don't submit to your husband because of who he is, you submit to him because of who Jesus is. Submission is not saying, "I submit to my husband because he is such a wonderful, kind, gentle man, but I submit to him because this is what Jesus has called me to do. I do it not because my husband is necessarily deserving of it, but I do it out of respect and obedience to Christ."

1 Peter 3 says this is exactly how you win over your husband's heart. Peter says, "Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives" (1 Peter 3:1-2). If your husband is not a Christian, if he's immature, if he's rebellious, if he's hard-headed, Peter says the way he will be won over is by observing your respect and godly behavior. There's a dynamic God has hardwired into a man's heart where he is respected by his wife, when he's encouraged by his wife – it breaks down his defenses and softens him. It's counter-intuitive. It doesn't make sense that a hard-hearted, prideful man would have his defenses broken down as his wife is submissive and respectful, but that's exactly how it works.

Now if you don't like that, you can try the opposite, which many women do. You can try berating him, you can try emasculating him, you can try saying, "Why don't you get your act together and lead this family? What is wrong with you?" That may make you feel better, but you're not going to get a better husband out of it. That's why you need to do exactly what the Bible says in 1 Peter 3 because God knows how men's hearts are wired – that they respond well to respect and submission – and God will use that to soften his heart.

So what does submission look like in real life? Lots of decisions must be made in marriage – everything from how to raise the kids to how to manage money to who does what around the house. As co-equal partners, both husband and wife should have open, give-and-take communication about the issue, talk it over and pray about it. As we will see next week, men, listening and validating your wife is a huge part of loving her. Then as a couple, you need to think through what the scriptures say, and perhaps seek counsel from others to get an independent perspective. Usually, when both perspectives are heard and valued, you'll come to a mutual, agreed-upon decision, and there's very little conflict.

But, from time to time, there's a stalemate – you can't agree. What then? As the head, the husband makes the final decision, and the wife – even if she doesn't agree with that decision – not only submits to her husband, but submits to God's design for marriage. She doesn't harbor resentment and she doesn't say "I told you so," if his decision backfires. She recognizes that God will hold him accountable for his decision and he bears the responsibility for it. It's the same principle in every authority structure God ordains – God holds those in charge responsible, and He also holds those under them responsible to cooperate and respect their leadership.

Next week we'll talk about God's word to husbands, and it's when we put God's instructions to both husbands and wives together that we see the true picture of what God wants marriage to be, and we can't understand one without the other.

As we reflect on God's word to wives, there are a number of ways you can apply this message depending on your circumstances...

- If you're not married – if you're single or divorced or widowed – these words do not apply directly to you now – but it helps prepare you for the day you may get married. You can focus your life right now on being submissive to Christ, and to other authorities He has placed in your life.
- If you're in a marriage that is functioning according to Ephesians 5, you can be very grateful and you can continue to live by God's design.
- If you are in a marriage that is struggling, don't give up hope – God is in the business of restoring broken things. The first step is to submit yourself to God's design – whether it's being a submissive wife or a loving husband – and by your respect and godly attitude you can, with God's power, win over your spouse, you can soften the hard edges of your marriage, and create the atmosphere for God to work.