

The Concept of Marriage in the Letter to the Ephesians

(Ephesians 5:22 – 33) Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. 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. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her; that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless. So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, because we are members of His body. “For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh.” The mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church. Nevertheless let each individual among you also love his own wife even as himself; and let the wife see to it that she respect her husband.

This familiar paragraph is read at many Christian weddings, and is cited often in describing God’s plan for marriage. Unfortunately, many times this paragraph is taken out of its context (which is the whole letter to the Ephesians) and used only as a set of rules for the power structure of marriage, rather than as a teaching tool for grace. Many people apply this passage in the same way as the Israelites used the Law of Moses, as regulations of human conduct, as commands. But that is not the case. Marriage is another of the many ways in which we illustrate the good news to the lost.

God did not come along after the fact and discover that He needed to generate a framework for an existing relationship. God created us. I submit to you that He intentionally created us as men and women, each being only half of the puzzle. God could have created us in an infinite variety of ways. Just look at the animal kingdom. Consider the sea turtle. The female crawls up on a sandy beach, digs a hole in the warm sand above the tide line, lays a bunch of previously fertilized eggs, buries them, and leaves. When the eggs hatch, the tiny sea turtles dig their way to the surface, crawl to the ocean, and start another generation. The parents are not even present at the hatching and have nothing to do with nurturing the young. Various animals participate in the birth and growth of their young in various ways, sometimes with both parents, sometimes with one, and sometimes with neither. And these are just the examples we can see in God’s creation. I’m quite certain that God did not exhaust His creative genius in this variation that we can observe. He just used the relationships that fit together for His plan.

God’s plan for marriage and the family was not established for the purpose of regulating human behavior. God set up this structure as part of the picture of the gospel that was to come to fruition in the church. And as Paul wrote, this relationship of marriage between a Christian man and a Christian woman is designed to be an illustration of the relationship of Jesus and His bride, the church.

But isn’t this a little dangerous? Perhaps the illustration only works the other way around, that the relationship of Christ and His church is an illustration of the relationship of a Christian husband and a Christian wife. Perhaps in a way, but I think that the illustration is not very effective in that direction. How many Christian husbands measure up to the stature of Christ, every day, all day? I think the ladies got the easier role. All they have to do is be better at being a Christian bride than the church has been in the last 2000 years. But this illustration

works well as a teaching tool for the lost. The lost aren't so picky; they don't expect perfect illustrations. All we have to do is demonstrate a better marriage relationship than they could have obtained in the world, and our lifestyle will look incredibly desirable. The places where we fall short of the perfect model we can easily use as a further illustration that we are a work in progress, which affords another teaching opportunity about grace.

But why would God choose to develop this snapshot of the marriage of the Lamb? Because God knows, and has told us, that lost people are not going to be able to figure this out on their own. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 2:14, "But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised." The natural man, the best that this world has to offer, cannot understand the good news. Why can a lost person not understand the gospel? Because their foolish hearts have been darkened by sin. Lost people have lost one-third of themselves. Their bodies are alive; their minds are alive; their spirits are dead. Without a functioning spirit, without an understanding of God, without the ability to overcome, without the tools to deal with this world and with its Creator, spiritual things are a mystery, even foolishness. Until God resurrects their spirits through His grace, our faith, and the sacrifice of Jesus (which all come together when we are baptized), there is no hope of understanding.

So how are we to bring the message of hope to those who cannot understand? God has developed several methods. As an educator, God is unsurpassed. He has a wide variety of instructional methods in order to bring the lost back home. One way is by the proof that Jesus really came back from the dead, demonstrating that this good news contains power over death. Another is the set of predictions that Jesus fulfilled, demonstrating that this good news contains power over life. Another is the obvious hand of God in nature, demonstrating that this good news is sensible and organized and that it pertains to the reality in which we live, not to some mythical realm of the capricious spirits of the ancestors. And another is the marriage relationship between a Christian man and a Christian woman, demonstrating the grace on which this good news is founded. We are the living, breathing, loving illustrations of grace to a lost and dying world. We demonstrate through our marriages the relationship of grace that is played out between Jesus and His bride, the church.

And why do I say that we are an illustration of grace? Because, from my point of view, the letter to the church at Ephesus is all about grace. I break Ephesians up like this. The first three chapters are the Description of Grace; the last three chapters are the Results of Grace. The Descriptions of Grace are four in number: the Relationships of Grace, the Proofs of Grace, the Memories of Grace, and the Qualities of Grace. The Results of Grace are also four in number: Unity, Morality, Subjection, and Strength. The relationship of marriage is applied in the Subjection section, based on the Savior, His Sacrifice, and His role as the Sanctifier. The Subjection relationships include not only marriage, but also parents and children, masters and slaves, and our subjection to one another. Marriage is one of several ways in which we illustrate grace to the lost through voluntarily placing ourselves under the control of others because of our sanctification by a sacrificial Savior.

Chapter 5 is not the only place in Ephesians in which Paul writes about the relationship between Jesus and His church. In fact, that relationship is in every chapter of the letter, each of which points to this marriage relationship between a Christian man and a Christian woman.

Chapter 1, verses 22 and 23, "And He [the Father] put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things in the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all." And back in chapter 5, Paul wrote, "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. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything.”

First let’s look at subjection in the way it has been used for the last several centuries, as rules for marriage. Unscrupulous men have used this passage to gain authority over women, preventing even education and the right to have authority over their own lives. Terrible, sinful practices have been justified by the corruption of these Scriptures, and because of these examples, many, especially women, have been driven away from the faith. This is not an endorsement for male-dominated society, but rather a call to a society in which the men give themselves up, their health and well being and their very lives, for their wives. As Paul wrote in 5:25, “as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her.” This is a call to self-sacrifice on the part of every Christian husband for the salvation of his wife. This is the lesson we are to teach the world.

How is the natural man, the best this world has to offer, the moral and kind and ethical man, supposed to understand the concept of grace? As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 2, he cannot. So, Christian men illustrate grace to a lost world in a way that is sometimes shocking, and always on the edge of being unnatural. All across the world, in every major society, men think they should run the show. Even in marriages where the wife clearly is the head, even the disrespected husband believes that he should be in charge. Men in the world appeal to custom, to law, to the fact that they are bigger in order to gain authority. This is not grace. This is power. People understand power and ruthlessness and domination. They do not understand grace. They cannot, for it is spiritually appraised.

Jesus is head over the church. The husband is head over the wife. The church is in subjection to Jesus. The wife should be in subjection to her husband.

I need to inject a small note about the Greek language here. In Greek, there are several verb tenses, much like we have in English. But they have one that we do not, so it does not translate well. Here’s an example. We could say, “His foot kicked the ball.” That’s called the active voice. Or we could turn it around and say, “The ball was kicked by his foot.” That says the same thing, but in what we call the passive voice. Greek has one more voice, and it would make that sentence sound like this, “The ball allowed itself to be kicked by his foot.” That’s called the middle voice in Greek. Here’s the point. In every description of subjection between individuals in the New Testament, subjection is in the middle voice. It includes the concept that the relationship was entered into voluntarily by the one who is in subjection. The New Testament always says, “Voluntarily subject yourselves” to husbands, or masters, or parents, or elders, or one another, or Jesus. The New Testament never tells those in leadership position to subjugate their respective followers. The subjection relationships in the New Testament are entered into voluntarily and with eagerness, not because we were defeated.

How much subjection do we see of the church toward Jesus? What is subjection? Subjection, simply put, is letting someone else lead.

Do you see a problem here with the worldly concept of male-dominated marriages? What does Jesus do when His bride messes up? Does He yell? Is He unkind? Or does He love and give grace? Does Jesus demand His way? A quick look at history shows that the church has not given Jesus His way very often in the last 2000 years. Does Jesus demand that all decisions emanate from Him? Or does He nurture and develop His bride to be able to survive in this world?

As Paul wrote in 5:28, “So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself.” Many have used this as an excuse to promote the

worldly idea of loving yourself as a good and healthy thing. But the Scriptures teach us that we die to ourselves. We neither think badly of ourselves (which is guilt) nor think highly of ourselves (which is pride). We don't think of ourselves. The body that we love is this one flesh of which Paul and Moses wrote. We illustrate grace in that, as Jesus gave Himself up and merged Himself into His church, we husbands operate not as petty tyrants, but as one body.

Another way in which we illustrate grace to the lost through our marriages may be found in 1:23, where Paul described the church as "the fullness of Him who fills all in all." We, the church, are the fullness of Jesus. In the same way, the wife is the fullness of her husband. But, what is it to be fullness? I know what fullness is when trying to get everyone into the van. But how is the church the fullness of Jesus, and how do wives illustrate this as the fullness of their husbands?

Let's look at it this way. Jesus is Lord, truly. But He is not separated from those in subjection to Him. He is one with them, among them, within them, a part of them. Without the church, Jesus would still be perfect, but He would be alone, empty, because He would have no relationship with others. He would be like an empty van, with just a driver. The van would still function. It would go from place to place, but it would carry nothing. But when the van is full, it is useful. The people are packed together; they are one with each other and one with the van. We put up with the environment in the van because we are together, all going to the same place.

How is the natural man supposed to understand the concept of the fullness of Christ? He knows only authority relationships, not grace. We illustrate the fullness of Jesus, the union of the Lord and His body, by the marriage relationship. The husband is the head, but not a separate, autocratic authority figure. Rather, the two are totally merged together, packed together in this two-passenger van called marriage, illustrating a life that is full.

But how do we do that? Here's another place in this same letter where Paul addressed this idea of fullness, in 4:13, "Until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ." Fullness comes through maturity, through unity, and through knowledge. We illustrate through the marriage relationship the meaning of unity, knowing Jesus, and maturity – all results of grace.

So, gentlemen, when you are out doing the one thing you are here on earth to do, being ambassadors for Christ, how are you going to answer that very common question, "So what's this church stuff about?" The New Testament contains many excellent descriptions and illustrations about church relationships, but they were all written to spiritual people. They often do not always make sense to the natural man, partly because they are spiritually appraised and partly because their experience with churches is that churches are places where they take your money and tell you what to do. So, use your illustration. "Church is like my wife and I. I'm the head, but I run it for her. She's a follower, but we walk side by side. We've grown so together that it's hard to tell where one leaves off and the other begins." Or you wives can say, "The church is like my husband and I. He's the head, but he runs it according to what's best for me. Following is fun, because it's not from the back seat. We're in it together, whatever comes." If you meet a man or a woman who is not looking for exactly that kind of relationship, it's too late for them. Their lights have gone out. God have given them over.

Another way in which we illustrate grace through our marriages is in 2:19 – 20, where Paul wrote, "so then you [Gentiles] are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being

fitted together, is growing into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.” The church, the bride of Christ, is the dwelling of God, and we illustrate to the world how that works. Of course, God cannot be contained in a box, although God called the Most Holy Place His dwelling place. Solomon’s prayer in 1 Kings 8 perhaps explains it best. The Temple was the place from which God spoke and the place with which He was identified. In the same way, the church is God’s dwelling, although He cannot be fully contained even in all of its living stones, although He lives in each believer. The church is the place from which He speaks and the place with which He is identified. In marriage, the character, the glory, of the husband speaks through his wife. The wife is the Temple of her husband.

How is an unbeliever to understand that God lives in us? We illustrate this spiritual concept to a natural world through our marriages. If your unbelieving friend asks, “Wait a minute. How can God live in you? What is that?” You can say, “It’s like our marriage. I live in her and she lives in me. The kind of husband I am shows in her life. The kind of wife she is shows in mine.” That’s not the whole picture of how God lives in us, but it’s a start for the natural man.

Another way in which we illustrate grace through our marriages is in 3:10, “So that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.” Husbands and wives each illustrate the manifold wisdom of God. God designed marriage to be the true and complete relationship between a man and a woman, displaying His wisdom to both men and angels. God did not set about to regulate a human institution, but to create an illustration of a godly institution, the church.

In 4:1, Paul implored the Christians in Ephesus, who by all accounts were already serving the Lord well, “To walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called.” We play a huge role in this godly illustration. We have been given our parts in the play not because we are great actors, but because of grace. Paul reminds us that, because of the great trust God has placed in us, we need to walk worthy of that trust. When someone places great trust in us, does it not give us greater motivation to follow through? If, in your past, you have had a problem with, for example, stealing, and a brother asks you to care for some of his stuff while he is away, it would be easy to sell an item or two and blame the loss on thieves other than yourself. The temptation may be present, but the trust placed in you by a brother can help to overcome that temptation. God has placed a tremendous but undeserved trust in us to illustrate His wisdom to the world. Temptation is weakened when great trust is placed in you by God. And if we do not measure up, will God zap us, or punish us? Perhaps there will be natural repercussions from our sin, but the true result that God wants us to remember is in 4:30, “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.” Our motivation is not to obey in order to avoid punishment, because that is a self-centered view of life. Rather, we fulfill the trust placed in us by God so that God will be pleased (as in Colossians 1:10, “To please Him in all respects.”), and not grieved, which focuses our lives outward instead of inward. Our marriages illustrate the outward focus that is essential to saving faith.

Simply put, Paul called godly relationships fitting and proper and wise in 5:3, 5, and 15.

And finally in 4:4, there is one body. But, people look around and see many bodies, all claiming to be the bride of Christ. Denominationalism makes Jesus a polygamist. This image is perhaps lost in American culture because polygamy is illegal. But in other cultures, especially those in which Islam has a significant stake, polygamy is accepted. If you are having a discussion with a Muslim, and the topic turns to numbers of wives, you will have something to say that teaches about the relationship of Jesus and His church, which is far more important than

whether he has more than one wife. A Muslim with more than one wife is not lost because he has more than one wife. He is lost because he does not follow Jesus, who is Lord of all. Rather than being insulting and announcing that having multiple wives is an abomination before God (and ending the discussion), tell him why Christians have one wife. We are an illustration of the relationship between Jesus and His people. We are one body. We leave father and mother and cleave to a wife. That shows single-minded devotion. Having multiple wives would be like having multiple denominations. This is a great flaw in what the natural man sees as the church today.

The one body concept also illustrates that we leave the past behind. Of course, we leave behind a sinful past, but also we leave behind even a fondly remembered past, father and mother. We are living illustrations of single-minded devotion. So the teaching of Islam cannot be merged with it, neither can the teaching of the ancestors. That is a difficult concept for people you know, who see nothing wrong with keeping a little of Muhammad or a little of their devotion to the spirits of the ancestors, along with their supposed allegiance to Jesus. If you are talking to someone who sees nothing wrong with having a girlfriend in addition to a wife, ask him what his wife would think if she knew. The church is the wife in this relationship with Jesus, and we would be a little bit upset if we found out that Jesus had other interests. Our devotion might be a little disturbed. But Jesus is focused single-mindedly on the church. Our single-minded devotion causes us to focus all our allegiance and all our attention on Him. Therefore, we have one wife, and zero girlfriends. We have the responsibility to be this living illustration.

But, one could argue, that would mean multiple wives in itself was not wrong. Let me ask you a question. Is it wrong to sprinkle water on a person and call it baptism – immersion? I think all of us would agree that such a practice would be flirting with disaster, not because God doesn't like sprinkling (He ordered lots of blood sprinkling under the Law of Moses). The problem comes when we mess with God's symbolism. God is very possessive about His symbolism. God is not pleased when we tamper with the burial and resurrection symbolism of baptism. God lit up Nadab and Abihu over messed up symbolism. God dropped Uzzah in his tracks over messing with symbolism. Messing with God's symbol of Christ and His church, a symbol of grace and unity, is just a bad idea. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:18, "We have this ministry of reconciliation." We can use the relationship of a Christian marriage to explain to a follower of Muhammad or a worshipper of the spirits of the ancestors that single-mindedness is an essential characteristic of our response to the grace of God.

Our marriages are supposed to illustrate to the world how God loves us. Unbelievers have many different conceptions of God, and it is our job to teach them the true one. Some people see a God of wrath, and their religion is designed to keep God from hurting them. They try to appease their gods with libations and sacrifices. Others conceive of God as demanding a piece of them, so they are forever trying to figure out what the minimum requirement is in order to get god off their backs. They will do certain things, like attend assemblies or pray five times a day, but the purpose is to get it over with so they can go and do what they want. Others see God as a gift giver. They turn to god when they want something

How does Jesus treat the church? That is what we teach with our marriages. What does Jesus do when the church messes up? He nurtures; He doesn't punish. As Hebrews 12 notes, God sometimes disciplines us, but discipline is not punishment, although children sometimes have a hard time telling the difference. Discipline is training. If it were punishment, there would be no Judgment Day. Love is not vindictive. Marriage is based on grace, not based on meeting expectations.

Christian marriage is a living illustration of grace, of Christ and His church. And, more than that, it is an illustration of equality between people, and an illustration of the closeness of the relationship between God and His people. This is a very difficult concept for my Muslim friends because they conceive of God as distant and impersonal, when in fact He is close and very personal.

In Ephesians 2:14, Paul wrote, "For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall." Of course, in that place, Paul was writing about the joyous news that we Gentiles were now to be included in the covenants of promise. Think of the parallels to racism. History is full of examples of people being counted as worthless because of their race or their ethnic group or their religion or their poverty or their gender. Who would have been so foolish to design a system in which men and women were equal? We are living illustrations that people can be equal, yet they do not have to be the same. In fact, men and women cannot be the same. Right down to the chromosomes, men and women are different and always will be. Nevertheless, husbands can lead, wives can follow, and at the same time they can be equal. It is not that the women put up with the follower's role because we have convinced them that God said so. They follow, yet they are also equal, just as all Christians, although they acknowledge Jesus as King, also call Him Brother. As Ephesians 2:5 – 6 says, God "made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus." We are the bride of Christ on earth, in subjection, following, doing whatever might be even remotely pleasing to Him. Yet, at the same time, our resurrected spirits are seated with Him, right now, in the heavenly places.

One last thing before moving on to the tasks of each partner in the marriage relationship: marriage is also a training ground for Christians as they learn to become living stones in the Temple of God. Christians can fall prey to all the same misconceptions about God as outsiders do. Our devotion can become mechanical, based on minimum requirements and rules and excuses. But Paul prays for the church at Ephesus, in 1:18, "That the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints." One way we come to know this hope and richness is through the marriage relationship. When a marriage first begins, it is exciting and exhilarating and passionate, much like when we first become Christians. But both relationships can lose their spark over time. As we come to appreciate the relationship of Christ and His church, we also learn the fullness and oneness of marriage.

Turning now to the specific tasks given to husbands, I think the key phrase is in 5:25, "And gave Himself up for her." This is the leadership style in all Christian relationships. Jesus gave Himself up for the church. Church leaders give themselves up for their followers. Parents give themselves up in order to raise up children in the way the children should go. Husbands give themselves up for their wives. But how do we do that? Do we take the coward's way out and just ask our wives what they want to do, and then do exactly that? No, we stop considering ourselves and make decisions based on what is best for her. The selfless person is the best one to make such decisions. The trick is to be selfless. But again, how do we go about this? Fortunately for us, Paul did not leave us without primary subject areas. In that same paragraph, he stresses cleansing, sanctifying, nourishing, and loving.

5:26 "Having cleansed her by the washing of water with the Word." I am only addressing the relationship between a Christian husband and a Christian wife, so I am assuming that the wife has already been baptized and is immersed in the Word. So how does the husband cleanse his wife, illustrating grace to the world? Consider 1:3 – 6, "Blessed be the God and

Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love, He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the beloved.” How were we cleansed? He freely bestowed His grace on us. We were justified by faith. We were washed with water and the Word. How does that translate into the job of a husband by which he illustrates grace to the world? Remember, the primary function of this relationship is not for ourselves, but for the lost. God could have provided for children in an uncountable number of ways; just look at the wide variety of options that are represented in nature. He could have made men and women less different. But He had a plan in mind. How do we illustrate this cleansing that we receive to the natural man who cannot understand spiritual things? How do we use our marriages as a teaching tool for the lost?

Gentlemen, does your wife ever mess up? The correct answer there is, “No.” And the reason is not simple self preservation. We do not say that because she will have a few choice words to say about our answer when we get home. Not even close. Here’s an example. If an angel went up to Jesus and asked, “Has Lamissi ever messed up.” What would Jesus say? I am quite certain He would say, “No.” Why? Would Jesus lie? No. But Lamissi “walks in the light as He Himself is in the light. As a result, Jesus only observes her faith – her heart. The physical missteps are no longer in view. In the same way, husbands cleanse their wives. No, they do not forgive sins; only God can do that. But husbands are certain that God has forgiven their wives, so the missteps of their wives are not in view. It is the heart, the faith, that is of value. If God has let it go, I think I can, too. This is not to say that we never attempt to fix things that go wrong. But, there is a big difference between letting the stains of life remain so I can be reminded of a past problem, which is a bad thing, as opposed to leading into a better way, which is a good thing. I will address that repair function two paragraphs down, under “nourishing her.” The point here is that husbands drop the errors of the past into the past; they don’t drag them along in case they might need ammunition in the future. Not only does this make for a great marriage relationship, it illustrates to the world what it means to be forgiven by God. A terrible number of people drag guilt along with them all their lives, and many churches even play to that guilt to keep their members in line. By refusing to remember the past but rather looking at the heart, we show the lost what a real relationship with God is about, that God can clean us up and accept us, thereafter watching our faith, our hearts. The response to that cleansing is another story, which I will cover in the section that is addressed to wives. But here, the point is that husbands demonstrate for the lost how Jesus is prepared to treat them.

Paul also writes that husbands sanctify their wives, as Christ does the church. What is it to sanctify? The things of the Temple were sanctified. They were dedicated to a specific purpose, and no other purpose was acceptable. For example, gold plates and cups were made for the Temple service. They were sanctified to Temple service. The High Priest could not take them home to use at a family dinner. There was nothing wrong with a family dinner, and there was nothing wrong with using fancy dishes. But those particular dishes and cups were sanctified to Temple service, so no other usage was permitted. Jesus sanctified the church; He gave the church one purpose – to spread the gospel. All actions of the church must point to that goal. Can the church own a business? There is nothing wrong with owning a business; there is nothing wrong with making a profit. But those activities are not the sanctified activity of the church. Should the church run a school? If the purpose is to impart a superior education so the

graduates can make a good living, no. If the purpose is to develop godly character so the graduates can be good citizens of the kingdom of God, certainly yes. Can the church play basketball? If the point is to win the game, probably not. If the point is to develop character and teamwork and good health and to encounter people with whom to share the gospel, certainly yes. Sanctification is all about purpose. That is our purpose?

The husband sanctifies his wife. She has one purpose. What is it? To cook? To keep house? To bear children? Those are all good purposes, and all of them are desired by husbands. But that is not sanctification. That is not being reserved for godly purposes. Husbands dedicate their wives to godly purposes. Here's an example. Jesus sanctified His bride, who is then responsible for the spread of the gospel. Jesus does not personally communicate the good news to the lost. He does it through us, the bride. We do it in many ways, but accosting the lost is the name of the game.

To what have we dedicated our wives? Paul lets us know that husbands dedicate their wives to godly purposes, and give themselves up in the process. Gentlemen, do you arrange your one-body life so that your wife can spread the gospel? This is not to say that the fundamental needs of life such as food and shelter (not to mention clean clothes and handling young children) are things to be forgotten. The details of life must be handled. But the details of life cannot become our life. Face it, fellows, our wives are probably better at reaching their friends with the gospel than we are with ours. Women are different than men in more than just physical ways. They think differently. They relate differently. And, I think, in general, they are a little more honest about God. We need to make it happen for them. Paul wrote in this letter in 2:10, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them." The husband's job is to afford his wife an opportunity to walk in those good works. And imagine what will happen as your neighbors see this strange relationship in which the husband encourages and promotes his wife to be out there serving in the name of Jesus. The wives of unbelievers will see the kind of relationship they desire and will want to know more.

Unbelieving married men will wonder about you, too. At first they may think that you are not in control of that woman of yours, as if she should be a kind of slave. But they will begin to observe the difference between your relationship and theirs. If their light bulbs have not yet gone out, they will see something of interest. Acting out the relationship of Christ and His church by sanctifying your wife helps to explain the true purpose of the church to the world.

But how can a husband do that? In many cultures, girls are not educated as well as boys. Women are not given legal status. Frankly, many cultures treat girls and women like cattle, sometimes not as well as their cattle. Paul's third descriptor of the job of a husband is that he nourish his wife (5:29). This is such a little mention that it is often overlooked. But there it is. Husbands nourish their wives. How does a husband do that? I already hinted at it before in connection with cleansing. Although a husband does not remember the sins of his wife, he is responsible for providing the training to make it less likely to happen again. As a silly example, if your wife can't cook (which is not a sin), find someone to teach her. Many things you can teach yourself, but some things are a little too close to home. You may not want to try to teach about dealing with anger. There are too many side issues going on and the whole training thing may blow up in your face before training can take place. Instead, it may be advisable to find some wise older woman who can help. (Let the older women encourage the younger, a Paul wrote in Titus 2:4-5.) But in other areas, a husband surely is the best one to be on the front lines doing the nourishing. For example, the whole armor of God in 6:10 – 17 does not just apply to

men. Truth, righteousness, preparation of the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, and the Word of God are the tools of all Christians, and it is the husbands' direct job to provide this spiritual armor.

How does Jesus nourish His body? Through the Word and through the Spirit that dwells in us. As Paul wrote in Romans 8, the Spirit gives life to our mortal bodies (v 11); the Spirit aids in putting to death the deeds of the body (v 13); the Spirit leads us (v 14); and assists in prayer (v 26). Here in this letter, Paul adds that the Spirit strengthens the inner man (Ephesians 3:16) and aids in our comprehension (Ephesians 3:17 – 19). One way of being better able to use the power that is in each of us is to know the Word better. So, a fundamental tool of all husbands should be to study the Bible with their wives.

Another way to be filled with this same Spirit is in Ephesians 5:18 – 19, “Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.” Gentlemen, in general, our wives sing better than we do. Encourage that singing to the Lord at all times. This is one way in which we increase our level of being filled with the Spirit. And imagine the result if your wife is singing spiritual songs as she works. And I mean songs with content, songs that teach the gospel, that tell a story, not those supposedly spiritual songs that have a good beat but a message that would work for Hindus and Muslims and lukewarm Christians. Her co-workers will be instructed in the Lord. Your children will learn about the Lord. And both of you will be encouraged by this constant stimulation with spiritual topics. This nourishment results in the husband-wife relationship being just like that of Christ and His church, because you both will be seeking the lost with the good news. Through this nourishing relationship, the lost will come to see what the church is all about – the nourishment of the body of Christ so that the body can spread the good news.

And the fourth descriptor of the husband's job as the head of the wife, to love and cherish her. What is it to love someone? The example is the love of Jesus, the kind of love that lays down itself for the sake of others (1 John 3:16). Love is doing what is best for the other person regardless of the effect on me. This is the love that has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us (Romans 5:5) that then becomes the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). This is the love that is a result of Christ dwelling in our hearts through faith (Ephesians 3:17). In Ephesians 5:2, this kind of love is described as a fragrant aroma to God.

That all sounds great, but this leadership role can feel pretty scary for husbands. Do you ever feel inadequate for the task? Paul called it losing heart. Potential troubles and difficulties can make us lose heart. But right after that line about the manifold wisdom of God being revealed through the church, Paul writes (5:11 – 12), “This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him.” The scariness of the task is overcome by faith, faith that He will make us adequate to the task, because it is our faith that is in view, not our execution of it – and it is our faith that makes us adequate, faith that true strength comes out of weakness. Our feelings of inadequacy should drive us further into faith, not drive us to excuses and second-best choices. Then we can say truthfully to those inquisitive natural men who want to know why your marriage is everything he wants but cannot achieve, “It's not me. It's God working through me. The strength is His, not mine.”

How do you suppose that Jesus felt about His task? Was He resigned to it? Did He mope through life knowing that He would never have a physical family, that He would die young, that He would meet a really horrible death? Certainly, as we can read in the description of His prayers in the Garden in the night in which He was betrayed, Jesus was not thrilled about

the specific events of His last day as a mortal man. And He wept over the lost people of Israel as He surveyed Jerusalem from that hilltop. Those are negative emotions. But overall, I submit to you that Jesus was the happiest man to have ever lived. He entrusted everything to God and went with it. It was a wild ride, and He made the most of it. Imagine His feelings when the disciples returned with food for supper at the foot of the hill on which Samaria was built. He saw people coming out to hear what He had to say because of what that woman had told them, that woman with whom Jesus had had a short conversation about water and marriage and the Messiah. Was He discouraged because He would miss another meal? Or was He absolutely pumped because people wanted to hear about His Father's plans? From another scene, how do you suppose He felt when that centurion said, "You don't need to come to my house to heal my servant. Just speak the word and it will be done." Talk about having a good day! Somebody got it!

The job of a husband is truly frightening and requires great faith. How did Jesus get through His life? By not letting go of His spirit, which was God. That's the difference between the natural man and the spiritual man. The natural man has just two parts, his body and his mind. With that, he can accomplish only so much. The spiritual man has a third part, his own resurrected spirit that is seated in the heavenly places with Christ, and, as a bonus, he has the Spirit of God living in him. We have the parts that Jesus had. We have the capacity to accomplish our task as long as we do not turn loose of our faith. Jesus had an impossible job, yet He accomplished it. Husbands play the Jesus role in this illustration of Christ and His church through the marriage relationship. It's an impossible role. That's why it can be done only with the help of God, through faith. God doesn't do the ordinary. God specializes in the impossible. So, gentlemen, there is no need to be frightened that you may be inadequate. You are inadequate, by yourself. Now use your faith to make the impossible happen. Outsiders will see it and know that something beyond human ability has happened. And when they ask, be sure to tell them, "It's not me. I can't do this. It's the power of God that comes to those who trust Him."

And finally, I will turn to the wives to talk about the part I am most uncomfortable talking about. So, ladies, if I say something that is just totally unrealistic and completely out of touch with how you really think or feel, please be charitable and realize that I am shooting blind here. Men and women are different. They think differently. They feel differently. Example, two men can travel together by car for two hours and speak very few words, and that is just fine with them. Can you imagine two women being silent in a car for two hours? So, I'll do the best I can with what Paul wrote, who could not have done this by himself. He was both male and unmarried. His personal insights surely would have been worthless. But He got a little help from the one who created us male and female. The Creator has the necessary insight.

My first observation is in 5:22, "Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord." If it makes you feel any better, you could insert the word voluntarily in that sentence and be true to the original, "Wives, voluntarily be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord." But, no matter how you cut it, this says that you wives are the followers, not the leaders.

But I have a comparison for you. This may not seem to be related at first, but bear with me. How do you suppose angels feel about their position? Remember that the angels didn't get to learn about the plan of God until the Lamb returned to heaven in Revelation 5. Or, as Paul put it in Ephesians 3:10, the manifold wisdom of God was made known through the church to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. In the Old Testament, what did angels do? Whatever God told them to do. They wielded tremendous power. When God needed a force to

deal with something, He sent an angel or two to wipe out whole populations or armies. The Word was brought to prophets through the agency of angels. They got to deliver the very Word of God! They got to hang out in heaven! Of course, at times it might have gotten a little unpleasant with the devil and His angels still around. They didn't get booted out until Revelation 12.

So, here are these angels, not aware of the plan, thinking they are pretty hot stuff. God entrusted them with great tasks. They wielded great power. They certainly were a whole lot better than those weak earth people, created out of the dust, like the Harmatan dust. But then the writer of Hebrews reveals about Jesus, "Having become as much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they. And to which of the angels did He ever say, 'You are My Son, Today I have begotten Thee.'" And later, "For He did not subject to angels the world to come." But, perhaps for the angels that wasn't too bad. Jesus was a pretty hard act to follow. Perhaps they could handle getting in line behind Jesus. But then the Hebrew writer reveals (and remember that the angels didn't get to learn this stuff except through the church, so they were getting it by peeking over the shoulders of the Christians), "For assuredly He does not give help to angels, but He gives help to the descendant of Abraham." The angels suddenly discovered that they were last in line, behind the dust bunnies (the creatures made from Harmatan dust)! That could have been a terrible shock, a cause for revolt in heaven. But it wasn't. In Revelation 5, the angels sang a new song when the Lamb returned to open the scroll with seven seals. And that new song extolled the salvation of faithful people! All through the unrolling of the scroll, the angels kept doing their jobs with considerable power, and always rejoiced in the presence of God, truly happy that some had been saved.

Aren't wives like the angels? They wield incredible power. And any man who does not recognize that is doomed in his own castle. Yet, the faithful wife is not only content to follow, but also is genuinely pleased at the success of others. Okay, so not all faithful women feel this way, even though they know they should. But perhaps it will help to look at the angels who rejoice night and day, but will never get promoted. Do you suppose that an angel ever thought he had a better idea? I think so. Those are the ones who joined up with Satan. Heaven got a little messy here for a while, until Michael formed up the troops and cleaned house at some time after Jesus returned to heaven but before the destruction of Jerusalem. Jesus had to go and sprinkle His blood on the originals from which Moses made his copies after the bad guys left (Hebrews 9:23). Ladies, you are the angels of the home, with awesome power, delivering the Word of God, carrying out the plan of God, all without thanks or position or honor. Yet, you cheer the successes of faith and serve the faithful. God's plan included lots of angels, and they were integral to the plot. Angels are important, even if they don't get to lead. The same may be said for wives.

And just as a little reminder, the reasons why women get the follower's role were confirmed by Paul in 1 Timothy 2. God's reasons are not the same as those invented by unscrupulous men through the centuries, who have made confident although unsupported assertions that men are stronger and smarter and less emotional – and more ruthless and more cruel and more heartless. Those bear no resemblance to God's reasons. God's reasons were (1) Adam was created first, so he gets the "first-born" responsibility of leadership, and (2) Eve sinned first. So, fellows, if you are ever tempted to gloat about your leadership position, remember that you got it by fortunate sequence of creation, and because male leadership is part of the woman's curse found in Genesis 3:14.

By being like the angels and serving without leading, wives illustrate to the world that serving is a godly trait of the church serving Jesus. They demonstrate that the church is not in it for the benefits that Jesus might throw our way. Wives illustrate that following is an honorable estate.

And finally, in Ephesians 5:33, “And the wife must see to it that she respects her husband.” What does that mean? The word is used in several ways, but it is not the same word as the fear found in, for example, Ephesians 5:21, “Be subject to one another in the fear of Christ,” or Ephesians 6:5, “Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling.” The words are related, but different.

Interestingly, the same word that is translated respect concerning wives for husbands in Ephesians 5:33 is also used in Acts 18:9, concerning Paul in Corinth during a time of opposition, “And the Lord said to Paul in the night by a vision, ‘Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city.’” By this translation, one would think that Paul was afraid of being hurt, which always puzzled me because of all the beatings and imprisonments he had received just prior to this without particular concern. Instead, perhaps it is better translated, “Do not respect your opponents any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent.” There is a word for knee-knocking fear in the Bible, but this is not it. The idea is that of deference, to give place to, acknowledge the position of. Paul was told not to treat with respect the unbelieving Jews in Corinth any longer, but to speak to new people in that city. This word is used about 30 times in the New Testament, many of them translated fear or be afraid. Only once is it translated respect, here in Ephesians 5:33. But after looking them all up, I think the context here in Ephesians is the right one, and that the translators in the other places were too quick to apply to Paul, for example, the concept of fear rather than deference. So, here in Ephesians 5, Paul reminds wives to give deference to, to acknowledge the position of, to show respect for their husbands.

Why would Paul say this? Have you ever known a wife who did what her husband said, but treated him like he was dumber than dirt? One can be obedient without respect. The wife’s part in this illustration is to demonstrate how the church treats Jesus. I think I have seen several poor examples of how churches treat Jesus. Many churches give Jesus only lip service; Jesus is the absentee landlord, the ruler on a long journey, so they run things their own way. Their teaching has a lot more to do with the benefits of being a church member than with serving the Lord. Those who preach the gospel of health and wealth are like that. Their message is all about what I will receive, not how I should serve the Lord. I have already received. All that remains is that attitude of gratitude – serving. Some churches in America preach that Jesus is out of date in some areas, so they modify the morality of the gospel to permit homosexuality and abortion, and they modify the leadership of the gospel to include female preachers. This is following without respect.

Not that wives should park their brains at the wedding ceremony. Followers are not brainless. The best follower is the one that contributes to the knowledge base of the leader. Great generals have always taken the advice of sergeants. But the sergeant then executes the plan of the general, whether he knows all the details or not. Wives are the living illustration of how the church treats the New Testament. I may discuss and have ideas, but the Word has the last word. This is a strange concept to the unbeliever, both of wives respecting their husbands as leaders, and of the church respecting Jesus by letting the Word richly dwell within us (Colossians

3:16 – which is another passage about the importance of singing spiritual concepts). James, John, and Peter all wrote very similar statements.

We have been given a powerful teaching tool to be used with the lost. Our marriage relationships are illustrations of Jesus and His church. In 1 Corinthians 3:16 Paul encouraged the Christians of Corinth to a higher standard of morality by reminding them that they were Temples of the Holy Spirit. As husbands and wives, we are given a high motivation to make our marriages fit this description of Christ and His church, not only because it is how God designed us to be and to live most successfully, but also because this relationship is the earthly illustration of several spiritual concepts that the natural man cannot understand. Our marriages give unbelievers a little window into the mind of God that could well be the difference between life and death for them.