

A MODEL FOR MARRIAGE

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Marriage is the second most important relationship a person can enter into. The *most* important relationship is the one we have with God but the second most important is the relationship with our spouse. If you are married then no other person on this earth should be closer to you than your spouse. Marriage is a God-ordained institution that brings a man and a woman together to share their lives in such a close and intimate way that they actually live a joint life with a common purpose and vision. That's the picture the Bible gives us.

A truly good marriage is one of the great joys of life and a bad marriage can be one of the most painful things you will ever live through. In our society today there is a lot of confusion about what constitutes a marriage, what it takes for a marriage to be healthy, and what roles men and women should assume within the marriage. However in the Bible there's no ambiguity about it. The Bible makes it clear that marriage is intended by God to be between one man and one woman in a committed relationship for life. Additionally, in Ephesians chapter five the Apostle Paul teaches that the key to a healthy Biblical marriage is "mutual submission."

What is mutual submission?

In Ephesians 5:21 Paul wrote, "*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*" In most English translations there is an artificial paragraph break after verse twenty-one. That break is inserted by translators for ease of reading but that's unfortunate because it gives the impression there is also a break in Paul's line of reasoning, which there is not. That break does not appear in the original Greek. Verse twenty-one is actually a hinge verse between the preceding narrative that dealt with wisdom and living under the influence of the Holy Spirit, and the following verses which consider the relationship between husbands and wives and Christ and the church. Paul links the two teachings together with the concept of submission - submission to the Holy Spirit, submission to each other, and ultimately submission to Christ.

In verse twenty-one Paul writes that we are to "*submit to one another ...*" Then, once he has established that point, he goes on to give specific instructions for wives and then for husbands. But he intends for his readers to keep in mind that this is not a one-sided discussion aimed at only women or only men. When the teaching is done, women will have been instructed how to submit to their husbands and men will have been instructed how to submit to their wives. But let's begin by considering what submission is.

By making the connection between his teaching on living under the Spirit's leadership, and the marriage relationship, what Paul is saying here is that the person who is filled with the Holy Spirit, and living under the Spirit's leadership, not only reflects God's goodness in speech and attitudes - as he taught in the previous passage, but also

that person will reflect a willingness to submit to others out of reverence for Christ. A man or woman's willingness to live in a condition of mutual submission to his or her spouse is an indication of being filled with, and living under the guidance of, the Holy Spirit.

The dictionary defines submission as the act of yielding to the authority or influence of another. Examples of godly submission are woven all throughout the Biblical narrative. In Luke 2:51 we learn that Jesus willingly submitted to His earthly parents. In 1 Corinthians 15:28 we read that He was also fully submissive to the will of His Father in heaven – even to the point of death. In 1 Peter 3:22 we are told that the angels willingly submit to the authority of Jesus. The Bible also teaches that all believers are to submit to the governing authorities of society and that we are also to submit to one another. We read that slaves are to submit to the authority of their masters, that young people are to submit to those who are older, and that children are to live in submission to their parents. Submission is a theme woven all throughout Scripture and never is it portrayed as an indication of being weak, powerless, or in any other way inferior. Jesus was submissive but He was not weak, powerless or inferior.

Biblical submission also does not involve groveling or in any way demeaning yourself. It is actually a God-ordained system of checks and balances. God imposes the requirement of submission on all creation as a means of establishing order and to keep people from becoming prideful and arrogant. When we are willingly and obediently submissive to the authority and influence of another we are acknowledging that we are fallible and capable of being in error. The willingness to submit to the authority of and to be held accountable by others, demonstrates that we realize perhaps we are not always right and we do in fact need to be held accountable.

So, submission is the act of allowing ourselves to be under the authority and influence of another person; but what about *mutual* submission – especially within the context of marriage? We need to consider this because it is only the concept of mutual submission, properly understood and routinely practiced, that makes a godly marriage work. In our understanding of mutual submission we must realize that husband and wife are equal in the eyes of God just as Father, Son and Holy Spirit are equal within the Trinity. But just as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have different roles to play within the Trinity, so too do the husband and wife have different roles to play within the marriage. Both are equal, and equally important, but they have different roles to carry out.

Now let's follow Paul as he leads us to more fully consider the responsibilities of both wife and husband in the marriage relationship. He has firmly established the idea of mutual submission, now he will provide specific instructions for each partner.

Submission by the wife

“Wives, submit to your husbands as 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.” Ephesians 5:22-24

The Amplified Bible provides a little more depth to the translation of these

verses. It reads: *“Wives, be subject (be submissive and adapt yourselves) to your own husbands as (a service) to the Lord.”*

“As a service to the Lord.” Paul is talking about voluntarily submitting yourself to your husband as you would to the Lord. As you make a decision day-by-day and moment-by-moment to willingly submit yourself to the leadership of your husband, you are doing it as an act of devotion, indeed as a matter of service and obedience to Jesus, because you know it is what He requires of you.

Now, that does not mean the husband has the freedom to “lord” it over his wife. One commentator said, “Jesus is Lord over all things, but the husband isn’t lord over anything (especially not his wife!)” Remember, we are talking here about *equals* who are in submission to one another for the sake of the Lord (Husbands, we will get to you in a minute). The wife’s submission to her husband is actually an act of devotion to the Lord. She does it voluntarily out of her love for Jesus and her husband. But remember, doing so does not in any way make her inferior to her husband. In God’s eyes she is of equal value and importance, she simply has a different role to play within the structure of the marriage. Paul also speaks to this in Galatians 3:28: *“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ.”*

It has been said that Ephesians 5:23 may be one of the most abused verses in all of Scripture. Historically, Christian men have tried to use the verse to justify placing their wives in an inferior position within the marriage. However, Paul’s purpose in writing this verse was not to bestow upon the husband privilege and dominance in the marriage relationship. He never intended or suggests that wives are to be simple-minded servants of their husbands obediently carrying out his every whim and desire. That is not what this verse teaches. The emphasis here is on Christ and His Lordship over the church. The marriage relationship is to be a picture of that holy union. If it does not reflect that, then something is seriously wrong in the marriage relationship and the wife then actually incurs a responsibility to take the necessary steps to correct the deficit. The editors of the Life Application Commentary provide a helpful explanation of this:

“(This verse) means that wives are to willingly support their husband’s leadership – not balking or undermining him. They are to be active participants in the challenging task of running a Christian home. They are to do everything they can to encourage and support their husband’s leadership in the home, but not blindly or unquestioningly. When the husband is in error or even in outright sin, it is the wife’s responsibility to lovingly confront him, pointing him back to the lordship of Christ as the ultimate authority. It takes both partners to make a Christian marriage and home.”¹

There is a crucial point in that commentary note and we need to be sure we don’t miss it. If a husband’s conduct is sinful, the wife is not obligated to go along with him or to follow his leadership. In those cases the wife’s response has to be that of Acts 5:29 *“We must obey God rather than men!”*

Also, if the relationship is abusive, either physically, emotionally or sexually, the wife cannot submit to it because those actions are sinful. As a Christian her goal is to model Christ’s life with her own, but she is not expected to suffer and perhaps die at the

hands of an abusive husband. In cases like that I always tell the wife to remove herself from the situation. I don't counsel her to get a divorce, but to move herself and her children to a safe environment, or to have law enforcement remove the husband from the home and then obtain a restraining order. You see, the husband's leadership is to be followed as long as it is godly leadership. If it is not, then the wife's role becomes one of holding her husband accountable for what the Lord requires of him, and to lovingly but firmly help him to shift his focus back to being a true model of Christ within the marriage and within the home.

God's desire for the marriage relationship is for it to accurately reflect the love relationship between Jesus and the church. Both the husband and the wife have an equal responsibility to take the actions necessary to ensure that it does, and they both have an equal responsibility to initiate the necessary corrective actions when it doesn't.

If we keep this teaching about marriage relationships in its proper Biblical context then we realize the text in no way grants the husband license to be domineering, dictatorial, or in any other way to force submission from his wife. Paul's focus and emphasis is on modeling the love of Christ through the relationship of human marriage. When people look at a good Christian marriage and see the love, compassion, tenderness, respect and mutual submission the spouses practice towards each other, it should remind them of the relationship Jesus has with His church. Wives, I believe you will see in a minute that when the marriage is properly structured on the Biblical model presented here, mutual submission on your part will not be a problem for you. When your husband is being the man God has called him to be, you will have no hesitation fulfilling your role in the marriage relationship. So let's now turn our attention to what the Apostle has to say to the men.

Submission by the husband

"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church – for we are members of his body. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband." Ephesians 5:25-32

I believe these may be the most important verses in the whole passage because historically it has been the men who have misinterpreted, misapplied and most abused Paul's teaching on submission. And men, I think right off the bat we should be struck by the fact that Paul used only three verses to teach submission to the ladies but he now uses nine verses to get the same point through the thick heads of the men! Apparently Paul felt it would require three times as much teaching to get through to the men as it did for the ladies.

The point here is that husbands are called to be *as submissive* to their wives as wives are to them, just in a different way. In fact the argument could be made that

husbands are actually called to an even *greater* degree of submission than are wives. The lesson Paul teaches in the above passage is that God requires the husband to be a *servant-leader* to the wife. The example he uses to help us grasp this important point is none other than Jesus Himself. Jesus leads but also serves the church. Jesus is the head of the church, that is true, but He is also a sacrificial servant of the church. Jesus bled and died for the church. Jesus assumed the responsibility to love, lead, protect and provide for the church at all times and in all circumstances. And He continues to do it even if the church is not properly submitted to Him. Jesus is so dedicated to serving the church that He performs His sacrificial role of lover, leader, protector and provider even during those times when the church is not doing her part to be properly submitted to Him.

Now, since Jesus' relationship with the church is the model of servant-leadership God gives husbands to follow, the lesson here is that in the marriage relationship the husband is to sacrificially serve the needs of his wife - loving her, leading her, protecting her, and providing for her, *even if he believes she is not properly submitted to him!* Biblically it is the husband who is called to the greater degree of submission and sacrifice because he is commanded to serve his wife *just as Jesus serves the church!*

Yes, the husband is the leader of the family, but he is the *servant-leader* in the same way that Jesus is a servant-leader. Now with that Biblical picture firmly in mind let me ask you to consider if there is ever a time when it would be ok for a husband to be a loud, overbearing, dictatorial ogre booming out commands for his wife to meekly follow? Or, would it be ok for a Christian husband to be detached, treating his wife with disdain and disinterest? Not according to the Bible, because that's not the way Jesus treats the church.

Men, with Jesus as our example we discover that we are to love our wives with the tenderness, compassion, patience and unconditional love that Jesus has for His church. Just as Jesus made a sacrificial surrendering of Himself, even unto death, for the sake of the church, just as He put His own interests aside for the sake of the church, so too husbands must be so intent on loving their wives, so committed to serving their wives, so ready to sacrifice for their wives, that their marriage becomes a living picture of the love Jesus has for the church. In this passage Paul teaches that the husband must be willing to put aside his own desires, his own preferences and even his own well-being, to treat his wife as the most important relationship he has on this earth, because that is what Jesus does for His church. God has not appointed the man to rule his family with an iron fist. Rather, He has called him to be a humble, submissive servant constantly seeking the best for his wife and children. The husband is to serve his wife as Jesus serves the church.

Some final thoughts about mutual submission

If a husband is striving to be the godly, Biblical husband Paul has described in this passage, the wife won't have a problem with her role as an equal but submissive partner in the marriage. The wife is not a door mat, nor is she in any way inferior to her husband she simply has a different role in the marriage relationship. Just as Jesus doesn't have a problem being the second person of the Trinity so too in a healthy Christian marriage, where the concept of mutual submission is actively practiced, the wife will have no problem with her God-ordained role.

The husband has a huge responsibility to serve like Jesus serves. The wife must

help him do that. If they are going to establish a marriage relationship that reflects the love of Jesus to the world, it will require a great deal of *mutual* submission – submission to each other and to God.

The story of creation, the teachings of Jesus, and the teaching of the Apostle Paul all help us understand that through marriage God intends for two lives to be merged into one. That doesn't mean one person loses their identity in the other person's, but it does mean that each person in the relationship cares for the other as though they were caring for themselves. It means that nothing can affect the one without also affecting the other. It means that two people have joined their lives together for the purpose of honoring God, and to help each other reach their greatest potential as a unique individual created in the image of God. They are soul-mates, walking through this life together with the common goal of using their marriage as a means of honoring Jesus. That is what mutual submission is all about and that is what a Christian marriage should look like.

1. *Life Application Bible Commentary of Ephesians*, (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1996), 113