

“And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ 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, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.”

It is “true confessions” time. In twenty years as a pastor, I’ve seen this reading go by at least six times, and I’ve never once preached on it. Not once. But even that is saying it passively. To be more candid, I have *avoided* preaching on this passage, because it seems to say things that socially, you ‘can’t say.’ The cultural acceptability of preaching a sermon on “Wives, submit to your husbands” is pretty low. But over time, a number of things have become obvious to me: Number One being, that you cannot reduce this passage to the one line about wives submitting to husbands and say, “that’s the point.” There is a far greater, deeper point. Number Two: People who are in married relationships need the kind of insight this passage provides. Many marriages are starved for it. And Number Three: the mindset Paul describes here is a Christian mindset; a Christ-centered, Christ-saturated mindset and orientation of the heart that is not just for husbands and wives but for anyone—so the main principles of this passage apply to everyone who has any kind of relationship with another person. Which is to say, anyone and everyone.

So first, let’s take a step back from the specific verses here in chapter 5 to notice something. And it is vital that you notice it. If you don’t notice it and accept it, nothing else I say will make sense. So here it is: God wants to be part of your relationship decisions. What the apostle Paul writes here makes it absolutely clear that God ought to be a part of the choices you make in relationships, even and especially in the relationships we refer to as ‘romantic.’ I’m

making a big deal about this mostly because of my own experiences, and I suspect that a lot of Christians have done this or are doing this now—namely, you compartmentalize your life. Do you know what I mean? In this box you put your faith life, your life in Christ, and that drives some of the decisions you make. But over here in this other box you put romantic relationships and the rules are very different in this box—the expectations are different; I’m listening to a bunch of different voices telling me what a relationship should be, and for some odd reason it doesn’t occur to me that those things don’t belong in separate boxes. It will actually mean great things for me if I bring those boxes together; if I involve God in my relationships; after all, He’s the one who came up with the idea of families; husbands and wives being together; living in relationships of love; having children; He’s the one who blesses us with extended families and friendships, and so it only makes sense that there’s *a way he wants us to be* in those. He gives us each other so that we learn that way to be. So that’s the first thing. Do you see how it’s the foundation? It’s not my faith life is over here and my relationship life is over there; but good things happen when Jesus is in your relationship decisions.

That leads me the second point, where we can start to zero in on Paul’s content. The second point is: There is a relationship behind our relationships...there is a relationship underneath our relationships that can give us insight and can become a great resource for us, and in this passage Paul points this directly at married couples. What is the relationship? To talk about it, Paul makes an analogy, and the analogy is that: as Jesus is to His Church, a husband is to his wife; and as the Church is to Jesus, a wife is to her husband. That’s the image that the apostle is asking us to explore. That’s the relationship under the relationship. And what we need to do with analogies is think about how the one is like the other. How is a wife’s love for her husband like the Church’s love for Jesus? In what way is a husband’s love for his wife like Jesus’ love for his church? Paul actually spells some of that out for us, but it also invites your consideration and imagination. If I am a husband, how can I show Christ-like love to my wife? If I am a wife, how can I love my husband in a way that resembles the Church’s love for Jesus? If I’m single, what type of love ought to drive my relationship with friends and family and community? Plenty of food for thought. And to help us think it through, Paul introduces the idea of mutual submission. Yes, *mutual submission*.

I made it a point to read the verses that lead up to verse 22 a couple minutes ago, even though our Epistle Reading starts at verse 22, because you really can’t do without it. Bible translation editors have done us no favors by putting a heading after verse 21 saying “Wives and Husbands” because it makes it seem like what came before has little to do with what follows, but it has *everything* to do with what follows, because Paul is talking about the basic way that Christians should relate to one another. He says, be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs...giving thanks always for everything to God...*submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ*. This is crucial. Paul says this is the value to be lived out from one Christian to another—before we even start talking about husbands and wives.

What does that look like, then? There are lots of ways to talk about it. Unfortunately, the word “submission” hits our ears in a pretty negative way and creates visions of one person handing out orders and the other person meekly obeying, when the reality is much different. The reality is that a Christian—a person who knows the divine love of God through Christ—can voluntarily and willingly live with the attitude that I am no longer my most important person. I am no longer the one that all my decisions will be based around. I am no longer out to get my way at all costs, but to serve the person who is the object of my love.

Paul says this applies to Christians in general first, and indeed, I think you can see the appeal of being a part of a community in which people are looking to give to each other and treat each other with great dignity. A Christian is a person who can say, “Because of the gospel of Jesus, I am no longer the most important person in my life,” and Paul then says to wives and husbands, ‘take this attitude into your marriage.’

What does that look like? In the case of a wife, it looks like the love that the church has for Jesus. How can we describe that love? We are grateful and thankful for him; we want to serve him as a response to his goodness. We are able to devote ourselves to him because we know he has our best interest in mind, always. What we may want is not as important as what he wants.

In the case of a husband, what does that look like? It looks like the love Jesus has for his church, which is, first of all, sacrificial in nature. Paul writes, “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,” a clear reference to Jesus’ willingness to sacrifice himself, even to the point of death, for his beloved. What he may have wanted—to avoid the suffering—was not as important as what we needed, and so he followed through and went to the cross. It is a love that looks to protect—a love that leads to the flourishing of his bride.

So imagine what it is like when you have a husband and a wife living toward each other this way. Imagine what it is like when you have followers of Jesus living to each other this way. It’s a beautiful vision, don’t you think? Our connectedness with each other and our connectedness to God through Christ is what Paul calls “a profound mystery,” and it is that. This beautiful vision can also be a little deflating too, because it forces me to recognize the times I have acted like I’m the most important person in my life; the times where the only thing that has mattered has been getting my needs met and getting my way; and the damage that has caused the ones that I am supposed to love.

But thanks be to God, I am (and you are) the recipient of a profound and mysterious love that meets your deepest need; Jesus loved you and gave himself up for you, that he might make you holy, having cleansed you by the washing of the water with the word, that he might present you to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing. Take this into the depths of your heart, and let it be the power source of the love you give.

