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Ephesians 5:21-24, 33 “How to Be a Good Wife”

Intro. As we continue our series of sermons on the Christian family, I will share with you the role of the wife. This is a subject that is not easy to preach about. Most of what I will say goes against secular thought. But let every woman keep her mind and heart open to the plain teaching of Scripture on this subject. God has spoken. Marriage is an edifice built by God. In it, He assigned responsibilities to man and wife, understanding the nature of both. When people follow His design, the building is able to stand against almost anything. When they ignore it, the structure cannot support itself. So listen to God’s wise counsel on how to have a good marriage & family.

Wives, how do you relate to your husbands? Do you dominate him? Do you manipulate him? Do you express words of criticism more than words of admiration? If you answered “yes” to *any* of those questions, you especially need to listen to my message today.

It is significant that throughout this section husbands and wives are reminded of their duties and not their rights. It is interesting that the first duty of the wife mentioned here is that of submission. There are at least 4 other New Testament Scriptures that call upon wives to submit to the leadership of their husbands (1 Cor. 11:3; Col. 3:18; Titus 2:5; 1 Pet. 3:1-6). The Old Testament certainly teaches the same thing. After Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden, God said to Eve: “Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (Gen. 3:16). So this is a clear teaching of scripture, and not just an isolated text or a command simply to meet the requirements of an ancient social setting.

Don’t imagine that Christian teaching will cause women to be oppressed. Christian teaching has done the opposite, lifting women from cruel & unloving oppression for the past 2,000 years. The New Testament throughout emphasizes the dignity of womanhood, and it is an indisputable fact that the example and teaching of Christ have lifted woman in one country and society after another to a position that she did not occupy before. You just compare the role of women before Jesus came and transformed society. The ancient world was a man’s world, and in no place was this more apparent than in the home. The Greeks confined the women of the household to their own quarters and did not even permit them to eat their meals with the men. In many great religions, including Judaism and Islam, women have a far lower place than men to this day. So women should delight in the teaching of the Word of God.

Now let’s look into our text and see how a woman is to be a good Christian wife. The starting place is for her to have a sweet & submissive spirit to her husband’s leadership within the home. So let’s see first of all:

I. THE MEANING OF SUBMISSION

Paul says in v.22, “Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands.” There may be many modern women who just cringe when they hear those words. But I think part of the problem is a misunderstanding of the meaning of submission. So first of all, let me share with you:

A. What It Does Not Mean:

1. It Does Not Mean that the Wife Is Inferior to the Husband - The word deals with function & position, not essence. Woman is not inferior to man. In fact, she is in certain ways superior. She is much better at being a woman than any man I know! Furthermore, women are usually better at talking, better at nurturing and caring for people, and so forth. On the other hand, men tend to be superior in upper body strength, in bravery, and tend to be more analytical in their thinking & reasoning. So women are superior in some ways, and men are superior in some ways. But that's not the point. Rather, it is clear from creation that God made man to be the leader of the home.

Now there can be inequality of authority, and yet equality of essence and personhood. To illustrate, look over to 1 Cor. 11:3. There Paul says, "But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God." Christ is under the authority and the headship of God the Father. Yet we know that there is no inferiority on the part of Christ. Christ specifically said on one occasion, "I and the Father are one." Even so, a wife is equal to her husband in essence, and certainly in spiritual standing before God, according to Gal. 3:28. However, in terms of function, she is under the headship of her husband.

2. It Does Not Mean that the Wife Becomes Her Husband's Slave – Clearly, Paul does not mean that the husband is to be a domestic despot. At least, that is not God's will for marriage. He doesn't say, "Husbands, *make* your wives submit." Submission doesn't mean that the wife is a spineless kind of person who never has any opinion of her own. Furthermore, the context clearly shows that the wife's submission is prompted by and warranted by the husband's unselfish love. A loving husband would not subject his wife to a marriage that feels like slavery.¹

B. So What Does It Mean?

1. Submission Is a Functional Term – At times the Greek word was used of soldiers lining up under the command of an officer. Any military operation would totally fail without a recognized system of authority and submission. If each soldier does his own thing, that army will meet with disaster. Ladies, God wants the best for us, and He knows that a home also needs to have a leader, and God has appointed the husband with the responsibility of leadership within the home. I will talk more about the husband as the head of the home later.

Yet the husband/wife relationship is a partnership. The Bible says that the two become one. Husbands and wives should strive toward unity and agreement. We should not interpret submission in such a way that we view the husband as a president and the wife as one of the lowest workers in the corporation. Instead, we may compare the husband to a president, and the wife to a vice-president, who serves under the authority of the president. However, a lady wrote about her friend Connie, who was very supportive of her husband's campaign to be elected vice president at his local union. She missed seeing him off for work the day of the election. And since she would be late arriving home, she left a special message for him on their home answering machine: "Good luck, honey, and don't worry. No matter how the election turns out, you'll always be vice president at our house."²

No, the husband is to be the president, or head of the home. Now this is a good analogy for a number a reasons. A wise president seeks input from the vice-president & others before

¹ It also does not mean that women must be in subjection to *all* men. They are instructed to be in subjection to their own husbands. "Your own" is *idios*, "one's own private, peculiar, unique possession." I don't think Paul would have added the words "your own" unless he wanted to clarify this point. This is not to say that you are not to submit to other men who are in a rightful position of authority over you, in the realm of their rightful authority.

² Christy S. Marchand, *Reader's Digest*, issue unknown.

making decisions. Even so, a wise husband seeks his wife's input before making decisions. A wise president doesn't make all the decisions. He delegates decision-making authority to other people. Even so, in a home there are certain areas where your wife is much more qualified to make the day to day decisions. Many of the responsibilities of raising the children are typically best delegated to the wife and mother. Those areas in the home where the wife & mother are better equipped should be fully delegated to her authority. 1 Timothy 5:14 says, "Therefore I desire that the younger widows marry, bear children, manage the house..." It's interesting to me that the single Greek word translated "manage the house" (*oikodespoteo*) literally means "to rule a house, to manage family affairs." This coincides with what I am talking about here. Furthermore, wives are traditionally best suited to be in charge of the kitchen. If she's willing to accept that responsibility, then don't try to tell her what to do in the kitchen.

That reminds me of the story of a businessman who took an efficiency seminar. He presented a case study on his wife's routine for cooking breakfast. After a few days of observation, he determined what was slowing her down and suggested ways to speed up the process. The teacher asked if it worked. He said, "It sure did. Instead of taking her 20 minutes to cook my breakfast, it takes *me* only seven."³

So submission is a functional responsibility. It is a matter of recognizing God-given authority, and yielding to that authority. Furthermore:

2. Submission Is a Christian Responsibility - In v.21 we see that *all* Christians should practice submission. Submission is not a command only for women, but for all believers. Based on v.18, being submissive to authority is a characteristic of the Spirit-filled Christian. If you rebel against authority, and insist on having your own way, you are not filled with the Spirit. Again and again we are taught in the Word of God that we should submit to authority. For example, we are taught to submit to God, to church leaders, to government officials, and to our parents. 1 Peter 5:5 says, "Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for 'God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.'" And there are times when a wise husband submits to the wishes of his wife. V.21 says "submitting to one another." Paul wrote in 1 Cor. 7:33, "But he who is married cares about the things of the world—how he may please his wife." If you are going to please your wife, then you will need to yield to her wishes at times. Furthermore, in vv. 3-5 of that chapter, Paul instructs husbands and wives to exercise mutual submission in marital intimacy. It's clearly not one sided.

We husbands should also consider to what extent we should exercise our God-given authority. I have already stated that you should delegate decision-making authority to your wife in certain areas. Don't try to micromanage all of her affairs, and demand that she get your approval for every little thing she does. And I believe the *proper* exercise of authority primarily has to do with leading your family to obey God. As God directs you through His Word and by His Spirit, you are to lead your wife & family to obey God.

Almost 20 years ago I felt that God was calling me to Swift Creek Baptist Church to serve as pastor. Even though it meant moving 550 miles away from her parents, my dear wife was willing to follow me as I followed the Lord. She submitted to me, as I submitted to the Lord. Men, you are not to use your authority selfishly, but to lead your family to obey God.

So I hope you have a better grasp of the meaning of submission. Now let's consider next of all:

³ "Laughter, The Best Medicine," *Reader's Digest*, Jan. '05, p. 132.

II. THE REASONS FOR SUBMISSION

Why is it that God, in His wisdom, said that the husband is to be the head, and the wife is to submit to his headship? Paul gives two reasons for this command. We will look at these and then two other reasons. First of all, wives should submit:

A. Because Doing So Is Yielding to the Lordship of Christ – Notice in v.22 that Paul says that wives should submit “as to the Lord.” Paul is comparing your submission to your husband with your submission to the Lordship of Jesus in your life. Now you see that lifts submission to the highest possible level. There is nothing here that would suggest the husband’s authority to be equal to Christ’s authority, but that in subjecting themselves to their husbands wives are subjecting themselves to the Lord, since the command to do so came first from Him. In another place Paul writes: “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as is fitting in the Lord” (Col. 3:18). Such submission of a wife to her husband is part of her obedience to the Lord. Furthermore, when the Christian wife submits herself to Christ, and lets Him be the Lord of her life, she will have no difficulty submitting to her husband. On the other hand, if you have a problem submitting to the authority of your husband, you probably have a problem submitting to the Lord in other areas as well!

By the way, if both husband and wife are living under the Lordship of Christ, there will be harmony.

A second reason for submission is:

B. Because of the Headship of the Husband – I have already alluded to this truth. Paul says in v.23, “For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church....” Every institution has got to have a head. There has to be a pastor of a church. There has to be a principal of a school. There has to be a president of a nation. An army needs a commander. A home without a head is an invitation to chaos. Even so, God in His wisdom knew that a home needs a leader. And from the creation account we can see that God intended that the husband and father should be the leader in the home. God designed men to be stronger in order to provide for, and protect the family.

But someone may ask, “Why can’t both husband and wife both be heads?” Well, look around. Do you see any two headed people? That would be a monstrosity. Even so, a household with two heads cannot stand. There must be one head, and the head should take the lead, not the body. If a body doesn’t respond to its head, that is degrading. On the other hand, but the body that obeys and follows the head is a well-coordinated, functioning body. In such a case both the body and the head are honored. So to promote order and unity, there must be leadership, and the authority of the husband and father should be accepted.

I want to advise all the young ladies and single women who will marry some day to be sure you marry a man that you respect. If you respect him, you should not have any problem submitting to his leadership in the home. Don’t marry someone you can easily manipulate and control. There will come a time when you will want someone to lean upon, and you don’t want a weakling who can’t even hold you up. And if you are a strong woman, find a man who is even stronger.

Paul has given 2 reasons for submission in our text. I want to add 2 more. You should also submit to your husband:

C. Because It Meets a Need in His Life - The last of v.33 gives another, related responsibility of the wife, and that is that she “respect” her husband.⁴ Your husband's needs to know that you respect him as a man, and as a leader in the home. This meets the greatest psychological need of his life, and that is a sense of significance. If he feels that you look up to him and respect him, he feels significant. So you need to honor and respect the leadership of your husband. In a similar vein, Willard Harley says that one of the top 5 needs of a man is to be admired by his wife.⁵ A wife needs to remind her husband of his value and achievements, and help him build & maintain his self-confidence. She should be his biggest fan, and he should be her hero.

But if you do not respect his leadership, and refuse to submit to his leadership, you are damaging his self-esteem. So be very careful about the extent and tone of your disagreements & criticisms. Don't make him feel incompetent or dumb. Show respect and admiration. A husband and father who is treated with honor and respect is more likely to rise to the calling and be more of the man he needs to be.

Finally, you should submit to his leadership:

D. Because It Meets a Need in Your Children - A father's headship is very important for the proper development of the children within the home, especially for your sons. Statistics prove that the vast majority of neurotics grew up in homes without a father, or the father was weak, and the mother was domineering. Furthermore, a major factor in avoiding juvenile delinquency is that the wife and children respect the headship of the father of the home. In the October, 1999 issue of *Focus on the Family Magazine*, they had an article on the prevention of homosexuality. Researchers discovered that 100% of homosexuals surveyed stated that their father or father figure in the home was absent or uninvolved in their upbringing, or frightening and unapproachable. 87% spoke of a mother who was close, controlling, and overbearing. Your children need an involved father who is respected as the head of the home.

Furthermore, you cannot exercise authority unless you are under authority. The wife should set the example in the home. The man cannot exercise authority rightly in his home unless he himself is under the authority of the Lord Jesus. And wives, if you are not under the God-given authority of your husband, then you are going to have a hard time getting your children to be submissive to your authority.

But some may say, “What about the times when my husband doesn't deserve my respect?” Well let's just suppose that your husband does something that you think is dumb or detrimental to the family. Do you look at your children and roll your eyes, silently communicating your disappointment? Or worse, do you talk down to your husband, and patronize him in front of the children? Well guess what will happen to your children as they grow older? They will fail to respect their father, and that will lead to all kinds of problems when they get to be teenagers. Such a wife has trained her children well in the folly of disrespect and irreverence. If your husband is a 50% father and you make the children aware of your dissatisfaction, you will have 50% kids; but if you respect and honor your 50% husband, you are more likely to have 100% kids that are one your team.

So the first and the most important thing you will ever do as a mother is to respect your

⁴ Though the Greek word used here (*phobeo*) is often translated “fear,” here “respect” is probably the best translation. It is this kind of “fear” that the Bible so frequently calls on every individual soul to show before God.

⁵ Willard F. Harley, Jr., *His Needs Her Needs: Building an Affair-proof Marriage* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1994), 12.

husband, delight yourself in him, love to submit to him, and feel honored to be married to him. In doing so, you are building up your house. But if you disrespect your husband, and rebel against his authority, you are destroying your home. Dr. Dobson says that mothers are the *primary* interpreters to the children of their fathers' character and integrity. In other words, the way children see their fathers is largely a product of the things their mothers have said and the way she feels.⁶

I must add a word about what happens when you do not submit your husband. He will do one of two things. He will either rebel or he will retreat. Either one of those can be terribly detrimental. If he rebels then you have war in your house. If he retreats and pulls himself into his shell, you probably have a greater problem. At that point in time, *you* become the leader in the home. You will be more of a mother figure to him than a wife. That will cause resentment on his part. His self-esteem will be damaged. He will be more likely to abandon the home altogether. Then you will discover that the only person you have to lean on is yourself. Furthermore, your children will suffer as a result.

I hope I have convinced you that obeying the biblical teaching of submission is the right thing to do. It is the best way to have a marriage that God will bless. Now if I have convinced you, then you should also consider with me:

III. THE MANNER OF SUBMISSION

Husbands and wives are to see their relationship as following the pattern of the relationship between Christ and His Church. V.22b says that you should submit to your husband the way you submit to the Lord. Likewise, in v.24a Paul wrote, "Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands...." How should we submit? From those verses we see that the manner of our submission to the Lord is how we should submit. That being the case, our submission should be:

A. Voluntary – I want to say to you that no husband delights in involuntary, grudging submission. We delight in voluntary, sweet submission out of love. The Greek word uses the middle voice, which is best translated "submitting yourselves." Furthermore, Christ does not force you to submit. There are consequences if you don't, but submission is not forced against your will. So if you truly love your husband, submission will be voluntary. Submit with a good attitude.

Secondly, submission should be:

B. Complete – Paul says that submission should be "in everything" (v.24b). Submission must not be partial, so that the wife only submits to her husband when his wishes coincide with her own. This is where the real difficulty is. It's easy to submit when your husband's leadership is consistent with your own desires. But what do you do when he leads in a direction you don't want to go? What if says you can't make that purchase you want to make? Well some women have developed ways to get around their husband's desires with certain manipulative techniques like moodiness, scheming, sexual bargaining, or even lying. That is not right. You are to submit to your husband even when you don't like it. But you say, "If I submit to my husband in everything, my husband will take advantage of me." Some will to a point. But in 1 Pet. 3:5-6 Peter spoke of the holy women of old who trusted God, and who thus did not fear. They

⁶ James C. Dobson, *Parenting Isn't for Cowards* (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 163.

willingly put the issue in God's hand. Trust God, and let Him take care of your husband if he abuses his role as head of the home.

Now there is one exception to Paul's statement that we find in Scripture. If a husband tells his wife to do something that is disobedient to God, then she has to say what Peter said in Acts 5:29, "We must obey God rather than men" (cf. 4:19-20). When an authority figure in our lives asks or demands that we do something immoral, illegal, or clearly contrary to Scripture, we must obey God instead. However, before you use this exception, you should consult with a mature Christian to make sure you are doing the right thing. Our selfish desires may cloud our thinking at times.

Conclusion: Now what I have been sharing today applies first and foremost to the Christian home. But much of this teaching applies to the Christian wife who is married to a non-believer. Read 1 Peter 3:1-6 and you will see this brought out. Christian submission is one way to win your husband to Christ if he is lost. How do you get the gospel to your lost husband? Well you don't do it by constantly nagging, criticizing, or fussing about the fact that he doesn't go to church. You don't win them by pasting scripture verses on his beer can. In this situation, the most important means of winning your husband to Christ is by your lifestyle. Just be faithful to follow God's plan, and show respect to your husband, and submit to him lovingly. Then, it will be much more likely that the day will come when you husband says to you, "I have been noticing your life, dear, and there is something different. What is it all about?" And then at that point you can give them the Gospel.

Liz Curtis Higgs was one of the best-known disc jockeys in America, and she lived a really wild lifestyle without God. In fact, Howard Stern was the a.m. show, and Liz Curtis Higgs was the p.m. show. And one day Howard Stern said to Liz, "You know, you need to clean up your act." Now, that really says something if Howard Stern is saying it! And because Liz Curtis Higgs had been burned by so many men and her heart had been broken so many times, she became a militant feminist. But she had a Christian girlfriend who kept inviting her to church. So one day after a long, long time, she said, "Okay, I will go to church one time and ONE TIME ONLY." So she went to church with her friend. And that week, the pastor just happened to be teaching on the Bible verse that says "Wives submit yourselves to your husbands." Now, that's not exactly a good verse to start with a militant feminist! And she got a little uptight, a little ticked, a little angry. But she continued to listen and she actually heard the second part of the text, which says "and husbands love your wives just as Christ loved the church, and sacrificed Himself for her." Who is asked to give their life up? The husband or the wife? The husband. Well, when Liz heard that part, she leaned over to her friend and said with a little cynicism, "well, shoot, I'd gladly give myself to any man if I knew he would die for me." And her friend leaned over and said, "Liz, there is man who loved you enough to die for you. His name is Jesus Christ. That's how much He loves you." And it was not long after that that Liz dropped her guard, surrendered her life to Christ in love, and became a believer. Today she is a well-known Christian author and speaker.⁷

Is there someone here who needs to submit to God? Is there someone here who needs to give your heart to Christ? He loved you enough to die for you. Come to Christ today!

Ladies, how should you respond to this message today? Perhaps some time today you need to go to your husband and tell him that you affirm and appreciate his leadership in your life. And if you have been dominating or manipulating him, then perhaps the first thing you should do

⁷ Told by Rick Warren in his sermon, "Planned for God's Pleasure."

is confess that as sin to the Lord and ask forgiveness from the Lord. Then, you can work on your relationship to your husband. The more you acknowledge and respect the leadership of your husband, the more he will look to the Lord for help in carrying out this God-given assignment.

Sources: Francis Foulkes, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963); William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Galatians and Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967); Tim Lahaye, *How To Be Happy Though Married* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1968); Lightner-Laing, *Success In Family Living* (Denver, CO: B/P Publications, 1977); John MacArthur, Jr., *The Family* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1982); John MacArthur, Jr. *Family Feuding: How To End It: Study Notes on Ephesians 5:21-6:4* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1981); Debi Pearl, *Carnal Husbands, Cranky Wives, and Cantankerous Kids* (magazine article, source unknown); Larry Pierce, Online Bible [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Lehman Strauss, *Galatians and Ephesians* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1957); Charles R. Swindoll, *Strike the Original Match* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1974); Curtis Vaughan, *A Study Guide Commentary: Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977); Dr. Jerry Vines (notes from his sermon on this text); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Rich: Ephesians* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1977); Kenneth S. Wuest, *Word Studies in the Greek New Testament*, Vol. I, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), including vol. 3, pp.103-113; Ed Young, *Romancing the Home: How to have a Marriage that Sizzles* (Nashville: Broadman & Hollman, 1994). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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