

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Building Faith at Home Series, Message 2

Jeff Harrison

### **A Biblical Vision for Marriage**

Ephesians 5:18-33

#### **I. Introduction:**

##### **A. It's hard to have a biblical perspective on marriage**

I once heard a comedian<sup>1</sup> invite us to imagine a world where marriage didn't exist, and what it might be like to ask a girl to get married in that world. He imagined the conversation going something like this:

*Guy: Hey, so we've been hanging out all the time, spending a lot of time together and everything.*

*Girl: Yeah, yeah. I know.*

*Guy: I wanna keep doing that ... til you're dead. I want to keep hanging out with you until one of us dies. Put this ring on your finger so people know we have an arrangement.*

*Girl: Who's that guy?*

*Guy: It's a priest. I want you to swear to God you won't back out of this deal.*

*Girl: What's he wheeling in?*

*Guy: It's a cake with two tiny dolls that look like us. Eat a slice! Now feed a little bit to me.*

*Girl: This is really strange. Why are we doing this?*

*Guy: Tax purposes*

Some in our society have this kind of perspective on marriage. They've seen many marriages fail, and wonder if marriage makes sense in modern, secular society. Perhaps marriage is just a strange idea from olden times that is no longer relevant.

Others in our culture emphasize that marriage is about self-fulfillment. They say try to find that one special person in the world who'll meet your deep needs, while at the same time not demanding too much from you. And if you find that person, and then later they stop meeting your needs, you've just "fallen out of love", and can look for someone else.

It's tough to maintain a biblical vision for our marriages. Both society and our hearts can encourage us to make marriage about ourselves and wonder at times if marriage is even worth it. And even when we reject selfish thoughts, the day-to-day challenges of life can distract us. I

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<sup>1</sup> Aziz Ansari

mean, some days I struggle to have a vision for my marriage that extends past getting the kids to bed. Further, some of us might not even be sure what the Bible's vision for marriage is.

### **B. What is the biblical vision for marriage?**

So this morning we're going to consider, "What is the biblical vision for marriage?" If you've got a Bible, please turn with me to Ephesians chapter 5. In Ephesians 5 we will see three characteristics of a godly marriage, and what can help us to live it.

### **C. Relevance to singles and brief overview of Ephesians**

Now if you're single, I want you to know that I haven't forgotten about you, so we're devoting next Sunday to a biblical vision of singleness. And I hope you won't check out as we discuss marriage this morning. For you may see something from God's Word that equips you to speak life to a struggling friend. Every married person needs encouragement, including from our single friends. And God's Word is so profound that we will see that it speaks to the unmarried even in this marriage passage. Additionally, if you hope to get married, it's so important to embrace what the Author of marriage says about marriage. If you neglect His vision, you may set yourself up for years of pain. But if you keep God's vision in mind, it will help you choose someone who wants to be in a marriage that can flourish, because it fits God's design.

Now before we jump into Ephesians 5, let me briefly summarize Ephesians. Chapters 1-3 show that all who believe in Jesus are united as one body, the church. And we the church enjoy incredible blessings in Jesus, now and forever.

Then starting in chapter 4, the author Paul explains how the church is to walk in light of our incredible blessing from God. As brothers and sisters in the faith we are to love each other, seek unity, use our gifts to build each other up, live moral lives, and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Next Paul turns to the subject of a godly marriage.

## **II. A godly marriage...**

### **A. Gives generously**

#### **i. Wives give through voluntary submission, like the church (5:21-24)**

And the first thing we'll see is that a godly marriage gives generously. Please follow along with me in your Bibles, starting in verse 21. <sup>21</sup> Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. <sup>22</sup> Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. <sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything."

In verse 22 we see that wives are commanded to submit to their husbands. In verse 23 Paul gives a reason for the command - because the husband is head of the wife, as Christ is head of the church.

So, what does it mean to submit? Things are getting interesting ☺. Well at this point, we can only partially answer the question. That's because Paul compares two pictures in this passage. One picture has Christ as head and the church as body. The second picture has a husband as head and a wife as body. Now Christ is many things to the church - He is our savior, king, groom, servant, caregiver, creator, leader, and friend, to name some. Because Jesus is so many things to the church, we must consider what aspects of Jesus' relationship to the church Paul emphasizes, as well as how the church is to respond. Only then can we fully understand what it means to submit.

However, we can say something about submitting before seeing the whole picture. The New Testament was originally written in the Greek language, and the word "submit" here in our English Bibles comes from the Greek word ὑποτάσσω. In Ephesians 5, ὑποτάσσω it is in the middle voice, which means that the wives do the action to themselves. So no one forces her to submit, she voluntarily submits herself in love, as the church is to freely submit to Jesus.

The 10 volume *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* says that in the middle voice, ὑποτάσσω does not so much mean 'to obey' one's husband or to blindly follow his will. Rather, it is the wife's choice to surrender her own rights or will. It is the wife's generous choice to put her husband first.

And as we see in verse 24, the submission is in everything, so it's a continual posture, regardless of the quality, or lack thereof, coming from the husband. However, wives should not submit to anything sinful because a wife's submission is ultimately to Jesus. And Jesus does not want wives to go along with abuse or any other sin. In that case, wives should follow Peter's example from the Bible book of Acts. There the High Priest tells Peter to stop preaching about Jesus, but Peter does not, saying, "We must obey God rather than man."

## **ii. Husbands give through unconditional, sacrificial love, like Jesus (5:25)**

So how about the husband? Well, he is also to generously give of himself, for the good of his wife. Let's see how in verse 25. "25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her..."

Early in my marriage, I read this passage multiple times, heard sermons on it, and read a few Christian marriage books. So I knew I was to love my wife. I had an intellectual understanding about giving Stephanie a generous, unconditional love, both in her best and worst moments, just as Jesus does with the church.

Yet early in my marriage, I made the mistake of focusing my attention on verses 22-24, rather than on the entire passage. I focused on the fact that I was the one compared to Jesus, and that Stephanie was to submit to me. I read this passage from the perspective of power. As one seminary professor described it, I focused on questions like, “When Stephanie and I reach a stalemate in decision making, I get the final word, right?” rather than asking questions like, “How can I best serve the interests of Stephanie, like Jesus would?”<sup>2</sup> And so my flawed perspective kept me from really giving generously to my wife.

For example, if Stephanie wanted to buy something for our apartment and I didn’t agree, I just expected her to give up her desire and adjust her life to mine. I wasn’t really seeking to understand why the purchase was important to her or thinking about if I could forgo buying something so that her desire would fit in our limited budget.

It was an ugly irony. Verse 25 was saying love Stephanie in the way of Jesus. Jesus, who suffered a bloody death on a cross for my sake. Yet I was expecting Stephanie to consistently die to herself for my sake, that she should keep adjusting to me. But verse 25 makes it crystal clear that we husbands are not to take advantage of our wives’ submission or expect them to do the bulk of the sacrificing. Rather, we are to give to our wives generously, in the way of Jesus.

Now I don’t know about you, but I can make the mistake of thinking of marriage as this zero sum game. Sure, the Bible tells both spouses to serve sacrificially, but if you and I actually take the Bible seriously and give really generously to our spouse, we think we’ll be less happy. But this perspective is not God’s vision for marriage. The biblical vision does not pit sacrifice and joy against each other. Rather, God’s Word invites us to give generously to our spouse, and as both a husband and wife do this, they enjoy mutual fulfillment through their mutual sacrifice.

And isn’t that what we ultimately want? That out of the overflow of God’s love to us, a husband and wife keep giving to each other so generously, putting each other first so consistently, that each overflows from the love and blessing flowing between them. And by the

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Gordon Fee in *Discovering Biblical Equality*, edited by Pierce and Groothuis, 379-80.

way, this love and blessing flowing freely in spite of the fact that both have seen the worst in each other. Fully known and fully loved.

## **B. Inspires holiness**

### **i. Husbands seek your wife's holiness, like Jesus (5:26-27)**

Second, a godly marriage also inspires holiness. Please follow along with me, starting in verse 25. <sup>25</sup> Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.”<sup>26</sup> to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, <sup>27</sup> and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

Look back at verse 26. Here we see that Jesus gave Himself up to make the church holy, to cleanse us from our sin. And look at verse 27 - here we see that Jesus gave Himself up to present us as a radiant church, without blemish, holy and blameless. These verses show that Jesus deeply cares about the spiritual growth of His church - He gave everything to make it possible. And I don't think Paul is telling us this as just an FYI, he's helping husbands see that part of what it means to love your wife like Jesus is to care deeply about her holiness.

Now I can't tell you how many times I read these verses before I began to realize the importance of a husband seeking to inspire holiness in his wife. Early in our marriage, for some reason I would kind of gloss over verses 26 and 27, walking away from the passage with the idea that I was to love Stephanie like Jesus, but not understanding that a big part of that is encouraging her spiritually.

Now how a husband encourages his wife's relationship with God will differ for each couple. Of course, praying daily for your wife is a great place to start. And if your spouse is willing, why not figure out a way to serve Jesus together. There are so many ways that you can join hands and serve Jesus inside and outside the church. And as you serve Jesus together, you will align your marriage with the greatest mission of all time, while growing together spiritually.

### **ii. Wives also to inspire holiness (Gen 2:18-22)**

Now one might wonder if wives are also to inspire their husbands' holiness, since that subject isn't addressed here. As we look at the whole of Scripture, we see that wives are also to seek to inspire holiness.

For example, back in the Bible book of Genesis, chapter 2, God provides Adam with an object lesson. There Adam names the animals, all of which have male and female counterparts,

and so he sees that he lacks a suitable partner, that he is incomplete. Then, God brings the woman to Adam. She is described as a “helper” fit for Adam. The Hebrew term for “helper” here is *ezer* (עֲזָרָה). In English, when we hear the word “helper” we sometimes think of someone lesser in ability or status helping someone superior. But in the Old Testament, *ezer* is often used to describe someone of equal or even superior status or ability helping someone in need.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the term *ezer* is often used to describe God helping His people.

And ladies, God gave you to your husband to be a strong helper. Submission means generously giving up your rights to bless your husband. But it does not mean that you just passively say “whatever you think honey” if your husband is moving your family in a direction away from God. You wrestle with God in prayer for your husband and family and use the gifts He’s given you to encourage your husband towards godliness.

As I said, I didn’t begin to understand the importance of Stephanie and I encouraging each other’s holiness when we first married. Now we went to church together and occasionally prayed together or talked about God. But our focus was on our work, paying the bills, having fun together, romance. Those things are definitely important, but they’re not meant to be at the absolute center of your marriage.

Tim Keller is a pastor in New York City. And after years of studying the Bible, being married, and counseling couples, he and his wife Kathy wrote a book on marriage. I’d like to share a quote from it that really challenges me. They note that if a husband and wife:

“...have mainly mutual material and financial goals, that will serve to bring unity, for a while. But such goals do not create deep oneness, for eventually you reach them (or you don’t), and then what? If you marry mainly a sexual partner, or mainly a financial partner, you are going nowhere together, really. And those who are going nowhere can have no fellow travelers. What, then, is marriage for? It is for helping each other to become our future glory-selves, the new creations that God will eventually make us. The common horizon husband and wife look toward is the Throne, and the holy, spotless, and blameless nature we will have. I can think of no more powerful common horizon than that, and that is why putting a Christian

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<sup>3</sup> According to William Webb’s survey in *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals* (p.128), there are about 128 uses of the noun and verb forms of *ezer* in the Old Testament. 72% of the time it describes someone with superior status helping those with lesser status, 18% of the time it is someone helping an equal and 10% of the time the one helping has a lower status.

friendship at the heart of a marriage relationship can lift it to a level that no other vision for marriage approaches.... Within this Christian vision for marriage, here's what it means to fall in love. It is to look at another person and get a glimpse of the person God is creating and to say, "I see who God is making you, and it excites me! I want to be part of that. I want to partner with you and God in the journey you are taking to his throne. And when we get there, I will look at your magnificence and say, "I always knew you could be like this. I got glimpses of it on earth, but now look at you!" Each spouse should see the great thing that Jesus is doing in the life of their mate through the Word, the gospel. Each spouse then should give him- or herself to be a vehicle for that work and envision the day that you will stand together before God, seeing each other presented in spotless beauty and glory.<sup>4</sup>

Amen. Now if I had heard this quote early in my marriage, I probably would have concluded that I didn't even understand yet what a biblical marriage is. And I still fall short of living this out. All of our marriages are works in progress, but I hope that the quote challenges us in a good way to take steps to get closer to that kind of marriage that really encourages one another's holiness.

### **C. Thinks "we" more than "me" (5:28-31)**

Next, we're going to see that a godly marriage thinks "we" more than "me". We see this idea through Paul's picture of a physical head and body. Look at how Paul motivates the husbands, starting in verse 28. "<sup>28</sup>In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. <sup>29</sup>After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church—<sup>30</sup>for we are members of his body."

Look back at verses 28 and 29 - here we see Paul call the husbands to love their wives as their own bodies. Why? Because, as verse 28 says, "He who loves his wife loves *himself*." To paraphrase, Paul is saying, "Husbands, imagine you're a physical head and your wife is the physical body connected to you. You two are so united to each other, like a head and body, that when you love your wife, it's like you're loving yourself."

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<sup>4</sup> Tim and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 120-21.

Paul keeps emphasizing the intimate connection in verse 31. Here he quotes Genesis 2:24, which says, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.”

When you married, God Himself took you and your spouse and made you one flesh. One of my seminary professors described it as enjoying a “oneness that is not based on sameness.” And now that we are one flesh, the focus is no longer to be on “me”, it is now on “we.”

Now if you’re married, I’d like for you to imagine your last big marital argument. Perhaps it was on the way to church this morning. We’ve had a few of those bad boys in our day. Now if you’re like me, you sometimes think of the perfect comment, hours later. But imagine that during your last argument, in the heat of the moment, you think up the perfect response. It will totally shut down your spouse’s position, while giving them a strong verbal jab at the same time.

To this point your spouse hasn’t been fighting fair, and now you’ve got them right where you want them. Your “perfect comment” is locked and loaded, and you’re ready to fire. What could possibly convince you to put that powerful verbal gun of yours back in its holster? How about keeping in mind the “we”. That God Himself has so closely connected you to your spouse that if you shoot your spouse, you won’t just be shooting him or her, you’ll be shooting yourself.

If you keep that sense of connection, of team, it will help you to deescalate and decrease your arguments. For what’s the point in even arguing if “we” together are facing an issue, rather than facing off “me” against “you”.

And if you prefer avoiding conflict altogether, as I’ve been known to do, keeping in mind that you and your spouse are intimately connected can motivate you to aim for a higher goal than trying to avoid conflict in the moment. Knowing that you and your spouse are “one flesh” can move you from trying to keep the peace to working on making peace.

This vision of “we” can bring challenges in the moment, but again, isn’t this ultimately what we want? A marriage where we have a close sense of togetherness with one another, where we really are a “we” more than a “me” and “you.”

Now you might be thinking. Okay, I buy that you’re outlining a biblical vision for marriage. But you don’t understand the issues that my spouse has, or that I have, that work against this vision. How can a husband and wife love like this?

### **III. What helps us do it?**



### **A. Keep the vision (5:32)**

Well speaking personally, keeping the vision can help. It's so easy to focus all of our time and attention on work and bills and chores and the kids, that we lose sight of giving generously, inspiring holiness, and thinking "we".

But the more we keep in mind the biblical vision and the more we live it out together, the more blessed we'll be. And we can even winsomely point others to Jesus. After making the point that husband and wife are intimately connected in verse 31, Paul says, "This is a profound mystery - but I am talking about Christ and the church."

In the New Testament, the word "mystery" describes a formerly hidden purpose of God that is now revealed in Jesus.<sup>5</sup> The rest of verse 32 clarifies that the now revealed purpose is to unite Christ and the church. And as you and your spouse give generously, inspire holiness, and think "we", you'll have a marriage that winsomely points people to Jesus.

### **B. Seek God's help (5:18-21)**

And in addition to giving us the biblical vision, this passage provides two things to help us live it out. The first one starts in verse 18. Please look there with me.

<sup>18</sup>Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit,<sup>19</sup> speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord,<sup>20</sup> always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>21</sup> Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

I don't think it's a coincidence that right before discussing marriage, we are instructed to seek to be filled with the Spirit. Paul knew that only someone under the Holy Spirit's influence could live out a godly marriage. It is only in the power of God that we can love when our spouse acts with hate. It is only through experiencing the forgiveness of God that we can forgive our spouse, or ourselves, when we royally mess up. It is only as God fills us that we can have an overflow from which to serve our spouse when they can't or won't meet our needs.

Now I once heard an experienced senior pastor say that whenever a Christian couple comes in for marriage counseling, one of the first things he asks is, "Do you pray together on a regular basis?" Now whether you appreciate his direct style or not, that's his way of asking, "Are you seeking God's help in your marriage?" In football terms, here on Super Bowl Sunday, he's asking if they are doing the "blocking and tackling", the fundamentals of seeking God

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<sup>5</sup> Andrew Lincoln, *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol 42, Ephesians*.

together. Things like praying, reading the Bible, serving, being involved at church. He gets that issue on the table quickly because if a couple won't do those things, he wants to help them see that his tips on communication or handling conflict aren't going to get them much of anywhere worth going. For we are in desperate need of God's empowerment if we want to live out a biblical marriage.

### **C. Hope in the perfect spouse (5:29, 32)**

Now I'm aware that a marriage sermon will often stir up emotions. Some of us long to be married, or at least have a date for Valentine's Day, I mean come on. Others of us have been seeking God and a godly marriage, but our spouse is not interested, and we're hurting. The pain and tensions we experience are real. We can't always change the hand we've been dealt, but this passage invites us to hope in something beyond our circumstances.

Thankfully, in a world with singles who long to be married, marrieds who wish to be single, and widows who grieve, we see that marriage is not the "be all end all." It points to something far, far more significant - Christ and the church. As Ephesians 5 says, ultimately Christ is our groom, and we the church are His bride. And He is the only perfect spouse.

If you feel painfully lonely, let Him enter with spousal companionship. If you feel guilty about mistakes, let Him offer you forgiveness. If your spouse is deeply wounding you, let Jesus empathize, for He knows what it's like to have a selfish spouse. If you struggle to keep your marriage afloat, let Him love you in a way that empowers you to persevere. And if there is no hope in your immediate circumstances, let Him help you to see your eternal hope in Him. As verse 29 tells us, Jesus loves to feed and care for His body, the church.

### **Conclusion:**

#### **A. A godly marriage gives joyously, inspires holiness, thinks "we"**

This morning we've seen that a godly marriage gives joyously, inspires holiness, and thinks "we". And we know that living out this kind of marriage can be incredibly difficult.

#### **B. Keep the vision, seek God's help, and hope in the perfect spouse**

And that's why we must keep the vision, seek God's help, and hope in Jesus, the perfect spouse. I'd like to close with an exhortation from Tim Keller about what we should do when our spouse wounds us. Keller says that when that happens, "...we must say to ourselves something like this: 'Well, when Jesus looked down from the cross, he didn't think 'I am giving myself to you because you are so attractive to me.' No, he was in agony, and he looked down at us - denying him, abandoning him, and betraying him - and in the greatest act of love in history, he

*stayed*. He said, ‘Father, forgive them, they don't know what they are doing.’ He loved us, not because we were lovely to him, but to make us lovely. That is why I am going to love my spouse.’ Speak to your heart like that, and then fulfill the promises you made on your wedding day.”<sup>6</sup>

Let’s pray, after which we will take the Lord’s Supper together...

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<sup>6</sup> Tim and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 109.