

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Under Construction

(studies in Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus)

Regarding Husbands, Wives¹

(Ephesians 5:22-33)

Study #10

Introduction: When streams converge...

When you go walking through the woods - in places where there are running streams (i.e. - places other than Texas) - you'll sometimes come across two streams that join.

Prior to joining, each stream was happily flowing downstream, minding its own business. Then, because of topography, they flowed into the same drainage. If you watch them merge, you notice that there is white water and violent disruption at the point of confluence.

If you follow the now larger, single river downstream, it is clearly more powerful than it had been before the two became one.

Everything about that image - two becoming one, disruption, and increased power - is a fit image for the theme of today's message.

As we approach this morning's text, I'm both excited and nervous, because it addresses a theme fraught with landmines and with great potential.

¹ While there are dozens (hundreds!) of quality books on marriage, I enthusiastically recommend [The Mystery of Marriage](#) (Mike Mason), [The Marriage Builder](#) (Larry Crabb), and [Sacred Marriage](#) (Gary Thomas).

Today, we going to consider together what the Apostle Paul has to say about marriage.

And as it is with rivers and streams, as two lives unite - *and as they repeatedly unite in more and different and deeper ways over time* - the initial whitewater rapids will be followed by increased power.

To the married and to all others...

I hope that those of you who are married are eager to hear what the Bible has to say regarding husbands and wives. At the same time, I fear that if you are here and not married, you're wondering if there is anything for you today.

Let me assure you that you who are not married are welcomed at the table. This morning is also for you.

Maybe you've been married before, but aren't married now. Maybe you hope to be married one day. Maybe marriage was a sad disappointment for you.

I don't know if marriage is in your future, but I do know that you'll hear things today from the Bible that will help you understand and appreciate marriage.

Some of what you hear will help you pray for your married friends. Some of it will help you in marriage if you get married.

What you hear today will definitely prompt you to cheer on the husbands and the wives you know to be faithful to their marriages.

In addition to all of that, for all of us, married and unmarried, the reality is that while marriage is a good and very human relationship, there is about marriage an element of transcendence.

Paul is going to explain that the marriage relationship, in a profound and mysterious way, allows us to understand something about the relationship between the Lord Jesus Christ and His church that we wouldn't understand without marriage.

The need of the hour...

I'm sure that there has never been a time when all marriages everywhere were exceptional. It is now and it always has been a challenge to build a marriage that thrives through good times and bad.

I do suspect, though, that some of the cultural stresses on marriage today make marriage tougher than it needs to be, maybe tougher than it has been at other times.

It is certainly true that many marriages struggle today.

Increases in longevity have increased the odds that we will live long enough to celebrate forty, fifty, sixty - or more - years of marriage. But many marriages end too soon in divorce and others pass milestones without much to celebrate.

It doesn't have to be that way. It's possible for marriages to prevail in tough times. Broken marriages can be rebuilt. Hurting marriages can heal. And there is MORE for even good and healthy marriages.

God's gift of marriage was a very good gift, and there is hope for growth for every marriage represented here today.

I'm sure not going to say everything that could be said about the role of the husband or of the wife. But, for the next few minutes, you and I are going to hear truth from the Bible that will help us husbands "husband" well and you wives "wife" well to God's glory.

If any of us make progress in becoming the husband or the wife God wants us to be, it'll be because we have taken to heart some of what we find in the Bible.

And, if we do make that progress, and if our marriages become those God-honoring, joy-filled, relationships God intended, we will also be serving as great witnesses for Jesus, because our world desperately needs to see healthy, loving marriages with Jesus at the center.

We will be mainly looking at what Paul has to say in his letter to the church at Ephesus. But any consideration of marriage does well to start at the start, so we'll turn first to Genesis 2, where we find the first-ever marriage.

The action begins as the LORD creates the first man, Adam.²

The Bible Defines Marriage (Genesis 1-2)

[Genesis 2:7] Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.

God placed Adam in Eden and gave him gardening work to do.

I picture Adam happy and content. He hadn't noticed that he had a problem (read: *"he didn't have a clue"*). But God saw what was wrong and set about awakening Adam to his need.

He gave Adam a new assignment, an assignment with a point. The LORD tasked Adam with naming the animals. I believe it was while he was busy naming the beasts that it became obvious that, in contrast to the rest of Eden's inhabitants, he alone had no partner.

As the animals passed before him, there was this gnawing, growing sense of aloneness. There were two elephants, two horses, two cats, two dogs. Me...

There were two of everything. ***[Genesis 2:20]...But for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him.***

Adam was brought to the painful realization that he was playing solo in a world of duets. He had always been alone; now he's lonely. He longs for a partner and the next move is up to God.

² The Hebrew verb used to describe the making of the man ("formed" - v. 7) is a construction term. The word used to describe the "fashioning" of the woman (v. 22) is a term borrowed from the world of art. This indicates that a great distinction was intended between the sexes, in both form and function, from the start.

[Genesis 2:21] So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept.; then He took one of his ribs³ and closed up the flesh at that place. [22] The LORD God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man...

With Eve “*fashioned*”, God brought her to Adam.

When Adam opened his eyes, he was clearly overwhelmed by God’s gracious provision. In the Hebrew, there is an untranslatable “*Wow!*” in the text as Adam looks at the woman standing before him.

Now, for what purpose did God bring the woman to the man?

The author of this account is Moses, and he was writing for his own generation of Jews long after the event in the Garden.

Speaking to our generation, too, he writes, ***[24] For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become ONE FLESH.***

This, the creation of a one-flesh unit, is God’s purpose for marriage.

Of course, the physical one-flesh union of a husband and a wife is good and right, beautiful and sweet. But marriage is about much more than that.

In fact, the sexual union is a physical picture of the personal joining of two lives. Marriage is fundamentally about developing an ever-deepening bond between a man and a woman.

It is God’s will that all marriages head toward this one-fleshness.

Husbands and wives are to strive, together, toward God. They are to seek union in their physical intimate life. And they are to seek to know each other at the point of their deepest personal needs.

Before I officiate at a wedding ceremony, I like to spend time with the engaged couple talking about issues that they will face in their married life.

With Scripture guiding our discussions, we discuss money and marital roles, communication, child-rearing, sexual intimacy, and how to deal with in-laws (and out-laws).

Each of these issues is important and they are all vital elements of a marriage.

But they are all minor compared to the point for which God created marriage. That point is to form a lifelong one-flesh relationship between a man and a woman. THAT is what marriage is all about.

In the passage in front of us today, Paul speaks to the husband and to the wife because a growing, multi-faceted, one-flesh marriage develops as the two members of the marriage bring what they are supposed to bring to the marriage.

The last thing we heard Paul say last Sunday was this: ***[Ephesians 5:21] and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.***

We in the church are to maintain mutually submissive relationships with each other. That said, he jumps from the church frying pan into the marriage fire.

Paul addresses both husbands and wives, but he starts with the wife. We will, too.

Words to the Wise [Wives] (Ephesians 5:22-24)

[22] Wives, be subject⁴ to your own husbands, as to the Lord. [23] 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. [24] But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything.

³ Literally, “*He took from his side*”.

⁴ My own study leads me to believe that the words “*be subject*” do not actually occur in verse 22. They are carried over as the assumed verb from verse 21.

Our response to these words hinges on our understanding of the word *subjection* or *submission*.

To many people, to submit implies an admission of inferiority. Being a *submissive* wife is widely believed to be nothing but an invitation to doormat-ism.

So, let's think about what Paul meant when he used the idea of being *subject* to describe a wife's role in marriage.

The Bible and Subjection

Involuntary subjection (the way of the world)

In ancient Greek literature (centuries before the New Testament was written), the word "subjection" always appeared in the active voice. It meant *to subordinate*.⁵

It usually carried with it the idea of someone being forced to submit to someone else.

A military would **subject** a conquered foe. A master would **subject** his slaves to his will. It was all about *involuntary* subjection.

Today, in the martial arts, a match ends when one fighter "submits" another or when he or she wins a "submission."

When we come to the New Testament,⁶ though, we encounter a very different, distinctively Christian, idea. We find the idea of *voluntary* subjection.⁷

Voluntary subjection (distinctively Christian)

- Jesus **submitted** Himself to the Father's will. (Philippians 2)
- Christians are to **submit** themselves to governing authorities. (Romans 13)
- Children are to **submit** themselves to the discipline of their fathers (Hebrews 12)
- Slaves are to **submit** themselves to their masters (Ephesians 6)
- Church members are to **submit** themselves to their Elders (1 Timothy 5:17; 1 Peter 5:5)

Bible scholars tell us that in the New Testament, this word (*hupotasso*) means, "To renounce one's own will and pleasure for the sake of another's good."

In the church (Ephesians 5:21), believers are to "renounce their own wills and pleasures for the sake of each others' good." When that happens in a church, all kinds of harmony, power, and love break out.

Paul describes a wife's role in the marriage in terms of being subject. She is called to renounce her own will and pleasure for the sake of her husband's good.

So how might this *voluntary submission* work itself out in a marriage? I believe that Paul gives a very practical insight into what this might involve near the end of this passage.

The Powerful Role of a Wife (Ephesians 5:33b)

[33b]...the wife must see to it that she respects her husband.

Wives, you give your husband a powerful gift when you let him know that you believe he is capable, that he can make a difference, that he has what it takes to make impact. You respect him when you take him seriously.

You are a great help to your husband when you let him know that you respect him. And it is a high and holy calling to be your husband's helper.

⁵ The Greek word literally means "to place under."

⁶ It is a frequently occurring word in the New Testament, used by Paul, Luke, the author of Hebrews, and James, and Peter.

⁷ The grammatical form that is used to denote this voluntary sense is called the *middle voice* in the Greek language. English has no parallel grammatical form. It describes the subject both performing and receiving the action of the verb.

Back in Genesis 2, God created Eve to be Adam's helper ("helpmeet"). And lest you are underwhelmed by this title and role, let me explain what the word "helper" means in Hebrew.

The word that describes a woman in the role of "**helper**" (*ezer*) is used elsewhere in Scripture to describe: (1). God in His relationship to Israel, and (2). a military force that gives aid to an ally.

In those cases, the word is usually translated *deliverer* or *support*. In Genesis, the translators have rendered the word *helper*.

It is not wrong to say that in the Garden, God created woman to be the man's deliverer - and this was before there was any sin to be delivered from. From the beginning, she was designed to be his support system.

Now, we've got to be careful here, because there are good, healthy ways to be a deliverer and there are less healthy ways (think enabling).

But if we understand the concept of "submission" correctly (*voluntarily putting our resources to work to bless someone else*), this idea of being a *helper* radically changes our opinion of what a wife might be called to do for her husband in his times of crisis.

She might deliver him from fear and paralysis by affirming her confidence in him, "*You can do this thing.*" She can pray for him.

A wife might creatively affirm her husband's masculinity - by words, by touch - expressing what is true about him as a man, empowering him to act boldly.

If he is a Christian, a wife can remind him of who he is in Christ, bring Scripture to bear on his dilemma.

Wives, you have strengths of which you may not even be aware. They have been given to you by God. You are to use those strengths to *help* your husband. That's what *submission* is all about. This is what *respect* is all about.

Think of your husband. Yes, THAT man. He is the man to whom you will submit. He's the man you will respect. He's the man you'll help.

And you will learn so much about following Jesus from your high position of submission. You will grow as a next-step taking disciple when you agree to put your strengths at the disposal of your husband to bless him.

There have been moments when your husband has used his strength to bless you. In the moments of his greatest need, you will be the *help* your husband needs.

That is the powerful role God has given to the wife. Now, we'll consider what Paul says to and about the husband.

Husbanding, God's Way (Ephesians 5:25-27)

[25] Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her; [26] so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, [27] that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless.

There is a lot to unpack there. But, as we were able to better understand the wife's calling to be a *helper* by looking at the Old Testament, so we're going to turn to the Old Testament now to get a clearer picture of what it means to be a husband.

Biblical "Husbanding"

God as husband to Israel

He is provider and protector (Isaiah 54:5)

The prophet Isaiah described God as a husband to the Jews. Let's think about that.

[Isaiah 54:5] For your husband is your Maker, Whose name is the Lord of hosts;

***And your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel,
Who is called the God of all the earth.***

What is a husband? Watch how God cared for the people of Israel. Watch how God met His people's most pressing and personal needs. That's what a husband does.

A husband rushes to his wife's rescue when she is in trouble. A husband protects his wife.

On the strength of God being referred to as a husband to Israel, I believe that the husband has a responsibility to provide for his wife in a way that she does not have responsibility to provide for him.

The prophet Jeremiah also referred to God as Israel's husband.

He is committed to his wife's welfare (Jeremiah 31:32)

Jeremiah described the relationship God established with His people after He delivered them from Egyptian bondage.

He wrote that God made a covenant with Israel, ***[Jeremiah 31:32] "not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them."***

What is a husband? A husband is a man who is committed to his wife, and who shows that commitment by leading her into freedom, into purity, into joy.

Next, listen to what Jeremiah writes as he speaks of the emotional investment God has in His relationship with Israel, His wife.

He gives himself, emotionally, to his wife (Jeremiah 3:20)

***[Jeremiah 3:20] "Surely, as a woman treacherously departs from her lover,
So you have dealt treacherously with Me,
O house of Israel."***

What is a husband? He is someone who is deeply, emotionally connected to and invested in his wife.

Guys, if we would model our husbanding after the way God deals with His wife (Israel), we will engage with our wives with every fiber of our being, we'll open ourselves up to risk and pain, we'll be vulnerable and emotionally present, and we'll express our love even if our wife is unresponsive.

That's some great stuff from the Old Testament about husbanding. The picture we get from the New Testament letter Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus is even greater.

Jesus, Husband to the church

[25] Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her...

Jesus demonstrated sacrificial love when He died on the cross for our sins. Husbands, we are called to love our wives as sacrificially as Jesus loved His church.

We are to make it our aim to get hooked on loving our wives. It is what masculinity is all about. The glory of a man is to give and give.

If you are a husband, you will never find yourself feeling more alive and more a man than when you are giving yourself, sacrificing yourself, for your wife.

I am convinced that there is only one way for a husband to give this kind of love. It is for us husbands to know what it is to be sacrificially loved by the Lord Jesus Christ, the One who gave Himself for every one of us here today, husband or not, wife or not.

The Transcendent Motivation of the Jesus-Centered Marriage

It is a great thing for a husband to love his wife, just as it is a great thing for a wife to submit to and respect her husband.

Often, when wives treat their husbands as the Bible tells them to, husbands become more loving. Often, when husbands treat their wives as the Bible tells them to, wives become more respectful and helpful.

But there is a dirty little secret that we don't talk about much when it comes to marriage.

That secret is that wives who submit to their husbands, help their husbands, and respect their husbands may end up living with a selfish and insensitive man.

Husbands who sacrificially love their wives may end up with a woman who disrespects and doesn't help them much.

I say this because, sooner or later (and almost always, sooner), the reality hits every married person that our husband, our wife is a sinner.

There is a book about marriage that I don't have to read because the title says it all. The thesis of What Did You Expect?, by David Paul Tripp is that the pool of potential spouses available to us all is only sinners.

Your wife will not always respect you. Your husband will not always lay down his life for you.

What will you do when marriage disappoints you?

This dirty little secret we don't much discuss is discussed honestly in Gary Thomas' great book, Sacred Marriage, and I have read this one.

Thomas even gives the secret top billing in the book's subtitle: *"What if God designed marriage to make us holy more than to make us happy?"*

When something we deem central to our happiness disappoints us, it feels like our life's foundation has crumbled. We so carefully constructed this life and our husband was mean; our wife was cold.

I'll get a little bit personal.

Kathy and I just celebrated forty years together in June and we have every intention of celebrating forty-one. We love each other - and we have disappointed each other.

I'm not going to go into ugly specifics, but I can assure you that Kathy could fill a notebook with legitimate grievances endured over four decades.

I would need a much smaller notebook, but, given my demandingness, what wife could ever live up to my expectations?

What we have both learned - not perfectly; we're still learning - is that looking up, turning to God, when we are most disappointed turns the reality of an imperfect marriage into an opportunity to know the Lord.

That's what you do when your spouse disappoints you. You turn to the Lord. Use the occasion of disrespect from your wife to prompt you to seek Jesus. When your husband is insensitive to you, worship God.

With Jesus at the center of your life, marriage can not only be delightful, it can be a tool God will use to shape your character and to make you a better man, a better woman.

We'll end this morning by remembering that there is only one marriage made in heaven.

The Marriage Made in Heaven

Near the end of our passage for this morning, Paul tells us that in all that he says about husbands and wives, he is ***[Ephesians 5:32] speaking with reference to Christ and the church.***

All of us who have believed in Jesus for eternal life make up what is referred to here and elsewhere "the bride" of Christ.⁸

⁸ Most notably, Revelation 19 and 21.

The bride in a human relationship is to submit to her husband, putting all her resources and strengths at her husband's disposal to bless him.

We, the men and women who make up Jesus' bride, are to wholly submit ourselves to Him.

Every human wife submits herself to a fatally flawed husband. We Christians are called to submit ourselves to a perfect Husband.

Every human husband fails to love his wife as he is commanded to love her. Jesus loves us perfectly.

He protects and provides, nurtures and guides. He forgives us our sins, He seeks us when we stray, He never ceases to pursue us with the passion of a lover.

Given the holy Husband our Jesus is to us, let us at this church strive to be the most obedient, most submissive bride we can possibly be.