

HOW TO HAVE A GOD-PLEASING MARRIAGE

ACCORDING TO EPHESIANS 5:21-33

- **We are not making progress in godliness if we have not considered how it impacts our marriages.**
 - No talk about godliness is complete without talking about how it impacts our daily relationships.
 - Ephesians 4-6 speaks about applying the Gospel to our lives in godliness. 4:17-24 speaks about godliness generally and 4:25-5:7 speaks of it more specifically. Then Paul speaks about godliness in terms of light, wisdom and life in the Spirit (5:8-21) - the last verse being a reference to 'submitting to each other'. But now he starts to speak of how godliness involves relating skilfully to people close to us: husbands, wives, children, parents, workers, employers...
- **The best thing we can do for our marriages is to root them in a vital Christian community.**
 - The life experienced in our Christian gatherings should flow into our daily relationships.
 - In 5:18-21 we have seen what a Spirit-filled Christian gathering looks like, but then amazingly Paul, without even (in the Greek) using a full-stop he shifts into the marriage relationship (5:22 onwards). In other words, great church meetings should result in great marriages! It's absurd to think that we can submit to the Spirit when gathered as Christians but then not submit to the Spirit once we are dispersed.
- **A marriage is first and foremost a team.**
 - The basic principle of all relationships - whether husbands and wives, children and parents, workers and employers - is a willingness to team together.
 - Verse 21 (which says 'submit to one another' out of reverence for Christ) reminds us that as we all live in the Spirit, a kind of mutual submission flows through all of our relationships. This means a commitment to respect each other, to get on with each other, to play on the same team. It implies an equality of status before God, even if there are different roles.
 - This is not the last thing that needs to be said, but it is the first thing - Paul is about to explain that not only are we to team, but there is such a thing as God-given authority, or leadership patterns in all these relationships. But before he gets to these leadership patterns, he wants to ensure that, especially amongst Christians, leaders lead someone they have respectful relationship

with, and followers follow someone they have a respectful relationship with. One may be a captain of the other, but they are still on the same team. And this is, as we have seen in verses 19-20, meant to be a joy-filled team.

- But, Paul now begins to speak of roles and leadership patterns within these relationships...

22 Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

- **The exercise of authority (i.e. leadership) and submission (i.e. followership) within a Christian marriage should be shaped by the glorious truths and experience of the Gospel.**
 - In these verses Paul tells wives to submit and husbands to be heads. BUT, and this is very important, this is not where the emphasis is. He is not trying to persuade people to submit, and to lead - he assumes that generally people, especially in his day, do understand that the husband is leader. Rather than trying to persuade them to lead / follow he is trying to shape the very way that they lead / follow - by helping them to see their relationship in a whole new way, a way informed by the Gospel.
- **Wives are to submit to their husbands as a way of expressing security in, and worship to Jesus.**
 - The phrase 'as you do to the Lord' (v22) should be translated 'as something you do for the Lord'. It echoes the prior thought of submitting to each other 'out of reverence for Christ' (v21). This implies that she finds great joy and security in her direct relationship with Christ, who is her Saviour and her Head, and that, from that well-spring, is ready to entrust her life to her husband's leadership.
 - It must be remembered that these verses connect directly to the instruction to 'be filled with the Spirit.' Only a Spirit-filled wife can truly submit to her husband in the way described here. If we are not controlled by the Spirit, our sinful tendencies to self-assertion, self-promotion, and rebellious independence will get in the way.
- **A wife's submission implies neither inequality nor suppressed contribution.**
 - The metaphor of body to head is powerful in that it does not imply inequality or suppressed contribution. The wife is in no way inferior. She is not less human. She is not less Christian. She has no less access to the Spirit. She does not have less gifting or intelligence. The picture of a body and a head is one of

interdependence, where one cannot exist nor thrive without the other. It is a picture of teamwork.

- **Husbands need to lead their wives in a cherishing way, not in a domineering way.**
 - Let's explore that simple metaphor: Christ is head of the church, his body. What else has Paul already said of this in this letter? Paul speaks of Christ's headship in two ways:
 - 1) Christ is confrontational head over all his rivals. This is the emphasis in 1:19-21 where it speaks of Christ conquering death, and having authority over all competing powers, dominions, rules and authorities. Now, when Paul speaks about the husband as head of the wife, he is *not* referring to this kind of confrontational authority over a rival. That is *not* how a husband leads.
 - 2) Christ is benevolent head of his church. This is the emphasis of 1:22,23 which says that 'Christ is head over everything (ie over competing rivals) for the benefit of the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all things in every way.' These verses tell us how Jesus relates to the church: Firstly, we see that his authority exists for her benefit. And all that he has accomplished, and all his strength is so that she will succeed and become all she can become. Secondly, we see that he is profoundly interconnected with, and interdependent on her, like a head is with a body. He has chosen to team with her, and to live life together as one.
 - So, when a husband is head over his wife it does not mean he exercises a *confrontational* authority over her as a rival, but rather that he exercises a *benevolent* authority, where he gives his life for her benefit, where all his strength and success in other areas of life is channelled into her security, her growth, her benefit, her wholeness; where he is profoundly interconnected with her, and where they live life together as a team, and as one.

- **It is the wife's responsibility to be ready to follow with the right spirit.**
 - Verses 22-24 are written to wives, not to husbands. That is what God wants to say to wives not husbands. In other words, the cry of a wife's heart should be, 'Husband, we are a team, and you are the team-leader. I am ready to follow your captaincy. Lead me into our good.' This should come from the wife, not be insisted on by the husband.
 - A wife's submission to her husband is a commitment to respect and trust and support her husband's leadership. 'For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church.' Paul uses two interwoven analogies for this submission:
 - 1) The submission of the church to Christ: the church chooses to respect and trust and support Christ's leadership. Similarly, the wife chooses to submit to her husband.

- 2) The submission of the body to the head: imagine a body that did not choose to trust and respect and support the head. Similarly, the wife chooses to submit to her husband.
 - Interestingly, there is a way a wife can follow which draws the leadership out of her husband, who through fear or laziness is not leading. She must find this way with God's wisdom. Sadly, many women, experiencing a leadership vacuum because of their husbands laziness or fear, begin to lead. But a better option is to do all you can to try draw his leadership out of him.
 - The phrase 'in everything' (vs 24) speaks of a whole-hearted willingness to follow. Obviously, it does not mean that every single decision you make needs to be green-lighted by the husband, but it does mean a readiness to seek the husband's counsel in all major decisions.
- **Every married couple needs to work out for themselves how they practically apply the following two truths in their daily lives: 1) the couple is to be a team, and 2) the husband is to be the team-leader of the team.**

1) First and foremost, they both need to seek to be a team. This simple truth that a couple is a team has radical implications. And every couple needs to work those implications out for themselves. Some of the implications may be:

- Having a joint-bank account.
- Learning to minister together.
- Refusing to compete with each other.
- Praying together several times a week.
- Discerning the call on the marriage, not just on the individual lives.
- Deferring at times to the other person's areas of gifting and competency.
- Talking to each other before making decisions that impact upon both lives.

2) But over and above the concept of teaming, the husband is the servant-team-leader. Again, each couple needs to work out the implications of this. Some possible implications of this are:

- If in a dangerous situation, the husband is ready to give his life to save his wife's - and not the other way around. Wives are not meant to die so their husbands will live, but rather husbands are meant to be willing to die so their wives live.
- The husband carries the burden for providing for and protecting the wife (and the kids for that matter). This does not mean that he alone needs to generate an income, but that it is he, not her that carries the burden of this. If there is going to be financial difficulty, he should be the first to see it coming, not her. And he should be initiating some solutions. Similarly, he not her, carries the burden of the physical security of the family.

- The husband is, generally, first up in the morning to seek God and cover his wife and family in prayer, and last to bed to make sure all are safe.
- The husband keeps on proactively directing the team towards passion for God, towards involvement in church, and towards the fulfilling God's call on the couple. Although the wife shares the same pro-activity and eagerness, there is something wrong when she keeps on having to encourage him to pray, to read the Word, to get involved in church and to fulfil the call on the marriage.
- In a very difficult decision that requires immediate decision-making the husband, after listening intently to his wife, makes the final decision - and the decision is based not on what is preferable for himself, but on what is best for both. And always the best way to make the decision is through reaching consensus, but if this is not possible and a decision must be made, then the husband makes the call, and the wife should freshly entrust herself to the husband's decision.
- The husband does all he can to find the strength, the courage, and the wisdom he needs to lead this team. He does this through seeking God and through seeking mentoring from other seasoned, Christ-like married men.
- A wife, however, does not need to follow her husband when he tries to lead her into sin. Her highest authority is God after all (see Acts 5:29). Although her husband is her head, he is not her Lord. Only Jesus is that to her.
- What if a husband is not a Christian, or what if he is not very wise and sensitive in the way he leads? 1 Peter 3:1-6 speaks about this, but the answer is that, first and foremost she entrusts herself to Jesus, and then to her husband. Jesus calls her to follow her husband, and that's why she does it - not because the husband is deserving or easy to follow but out of her security in Christ. Her reward is Christ. However, on top of this, doing this makes it more likely for her husband to change for the good.

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her 26 to make her holy, cleansing [b] her by the washing with water through the word, 27 and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. 28 In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives

- **Husbands need to become the kind of husbands who are a joy to follow.**
 - Verses 22-24 have been directed to wives. Now these verses are directed to husbands. Imagine Paul just told wives to follow their husbands, but then did not tell husbands to be a joy to follow. But that would be cruel - and he does not do that. In fact he only takes up three verses speaking to wives about the kind of wives

they should be, but he spends eight verses speaking to men about the kind of husbands they should be.

- **Husbands need to, out of a growing experience of Christ's sacrificial love, love their wives (v25).**
 - This love for his wife must be sacrificial. He must make it his highest priority, and must be willing to exert huge amounts of energy into loving his wife. He must regularly and routinely say no to some of his own desires and, letting go of them, give himself for her benefit.
 - This love for his wife must aim at her holiness and her wholeness. Just like Jesus makes the church holy, and radiant, so the husband needs to keep at the fore of his mind the question, 'How can I help my wife become all God wants her to be - holy and whole?'
- **A wife will begin to shine when her husband loves her (v27).**
 - Christ gave himself up for his bride, the church - but in return he gets a radiant church. In the same way, the love of a husband for a wife should bring out the best in her. She should come alive and deeply thrive in his love. Conversely, a wife can begin to shrivel up as a person when her life is dominated by the insecurity and misery of not being loved by her husband.

28 In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 After all, people have never hated their own bodies, but they feed and care for them, just as Christ does the church— 30 for we are members of his body. 31 "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh."

- **Husbands need to see their wives as extensions of their very selves (v28,29).**
 - Paul has compared a husband and a wife to a head joined to a body. Which head would not nourish (or feed) and cherish (care) for its own body? Which head would neglect or destroy its own body? Similarly, husbands - as they realize that their wives are extensions of themselves - must not neglect or hurt their wives, but must do all they can to nourish and cherish them.
- **The marriage relationship is to be the closest of all relationships (v31).**
 - Paul quotes from Genesis 2:24. Paul switches from the one-flesh picture of a head and its body (which he has explored from v23-29), to the one-flesh picture of Adam and Eve, where Eve has been taken from his body, and who through marriage is in a sense re-united.
 - In Genesis 2:24 (quoted in v31) we see a few things about marriage:

- Marriage is the beginning of a new family unit. A man leaves his father and mother and starts his own family.
- Marriage calls for an intimacy shared that is to be closer than the intimacy shared between children and their parents.
- Marriage is 'the forsaking of all others' - in other words bonding to, teaming with and loving one's partner becomes a higher priority than any other relationship.
- Marriage is about the forming of a new union - where the other person is an extension of yourself.
- Marriage is a covenant that is to be celebrated and sealed through sexual intimacy. This is the meaning of 'one flesh'. This is why sex is for marriage alone. It is a life-uniting act that is meant to be enjoyed in the context of a life-uniting covenant of marriage.

32 This is a profound mystery - but I am talking about Christ and the church.
 33 However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

- **Our marriages should be a picture of the Gospel to the people around us (v32).**
 - The quality of our marriages, and our profound capacities to respect, love and trust each other - this is meant to display the love of Christ for his church to the world. To the degree that a church's marriages excel, to that degree its Gospel-impact is increased.
- **Marriage is one of the chief environments God uses to shape our lives toward Christlikeness.**
 - Marriage is profoundly mysterious (v32). Since marriage is meant to be a living metaphor of something else, it has many layers of meaning. Certainly, one layer of meaning is the one mentioned in verse 26 - that marriage is the environment God uses to sanctify us and make us more like Jesus. Becoming like Jesus is impossible in isolation, and it is impossible to meaningfully do in the context of superficial relationships. One of the ideal places for Christ to iron out character flaws and teach us a robust Christ-like character is in the very close, very intensive relationship of marriage. To the degree we co-operate with Christ's sanctifying work to that degree will our marriage be a joy. There is nothing that can hurt a marriage like a stubborn refusal to change. And we don't change primarily because our spouse wants us to change, but rather because Jesus wants us to change.

- **A good starting point for a marriage is to meet the most basic need in the other person (v33).**
 - The most foundational need of a wife is love - which is why the husband needs to love his wife. Of course a wife needs respect, but statistics confirm that most women have an even more basic need for love. A loved wife will more likely be a happy wife.
 - The most foundational need of a husband is respect - which is why the wife needs to respect her husband. Of course a husband needs love, but statistics confirm that most men have an even more basic need for respect. A respected husband will more likely be a happy husband.