

Marriage redeemed Eph 5:21-33

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Well this is the last in our sermon series on marriage and sexuality.

We began by looking at how God created marriage in Genesis 2.

When Eve was created, Adam said,

"This is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh."

And the narrator said,

"This is why a man leaves his father and mother

and is united to his wife,

and they become one flesh."

It was a beautiful picture of unity.

Then we looked at how marriage was spoiled by the fall in Genesis 3.

Instead of that beautiful unity,

marriage is cursed as part of the punishment for human sin.

The wife tries to control her husband.

The husband rules over his wife in an unloving manner.

Marriage became a power struggle.

Then we had three sermons where we looked at things that go wrong:

unfaithfulness starring King David and co starring Bathsheba;

divorce in the teaching of the prophet Malachi and Jesus;

Homosexuality as a place where people turn

when they worship sex as an idol.

And now we are back to marriage again.

And our question is this.

Is there a way that marriage can be rescued?

Given that marriage has become a power struggle,

what can we do to make our marriages as good as possible?

Well if there is one key passage in the Bible

about how to make your marriages work, it's Eph 5:21-33.

Now I've done lots of weddings in my time.

More than my colleagues,

because my last church was plonked right in the middle

of some of the most popular wineries in Melbourne

to run wedding receptions.

So I've possibly done 100 weddings.

Do you know I've never been asked to preach on Eph 5?

Not once.

Eph 5 is the subject of embarrassed laughter.

How could it be that if God put one main passage about improving your marriage in the Bible, that no one wants it at their wedding?

Well the answer is contained in a single word, 'submit'.

We don't like to think about submission today.

Submission in marriage

is about as unfashionable as obedience in schools.

But if we are going to understand Eph 5,

we need to understand this word submission.

I thought I might start with Islam.

Submission is one of the key concepts in Islam.

Lots of Muslims will tell you that Islam means peace.

That's not quite accurate.

The arabic word for peace is 'salam' which is obviously related to Islam.

But to be accurate, Islam means 'voluntary submission to God'.

'Submission' is such a key idea in Islam

that it lends its name to the religion.

Suppose something bad happens to you as a Muslim.

We're in a sermon on marriage,

suppose you are a woman

and your husband leaves you for another woman.

The Christian response would be

to pour out your grief to God in prayer.

You might ask God anguished questions.

"Why Lord did this happen to me?"

My friends have good faithful husbands.

Why did you give me the cheating, lying ratbag?"

But such a response in Islam would be regarded as sinful.

If you are a Muslim and that happens to you,

you are expect to pray,

"It was the will of Allah.

I submit myself to the will of Allah."

To pray like a Christian might pray is a failure to submit to Allah's will.

Submission is also key to running of a Muslim household.
It is the job of a husband to ensure his wives submit to his authority.
Any lack of submission on your wife's part
reflects on you as a weak husband.
And in sharia law,
husbands have the full range of physical options open to them
to make sure of their wives' submission.
Let me spell it out,
In Islam, you are expected to give your wife a beating
if she fails to submit to your authority.

So how does submission work in Christianity?

Well we begin in Eph 5:21.

"Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ."

Notice that in this verse,
the submission is mutual submission.

Everyone submits to everyone.

The passage hasn't got to marriage yet,
that happens in the next verse.

The context of this verse is in the church.

And it's saying that everyone in the church submits to everyone else.
To a Muslim, that just doesn't make sense.

How can a person with more authority submit to someone with less?
But for the Christian, submission makes sense.

Jesus submitted to his captors.

He could have called down 12 legions of angels.

He voluntarily went to the cross.

That's submission and from the one with greatest authority.

Jesus said the meek shall inherit the earth.

What is meekness if it's not voluntarily relinquishing your power
in submission to someone else?

We had a great example of mutual submission in our house this week.

Or at least we could have.

One of the things about having lots of kids
is that they have to share bedrooms.

And God has made us different.

Some people feel the heat more than others.
So you can get two people sharing a bedroom.
One wants the window open, one wants it closed.
Now neither child has authority over the other.
So what happens to the window?
Well according to our sinful nature,
we have a power struggle.
We strive to see who can get their own way.
But the way of submission is for both children
to offer to let the other have their way.
"You have the window open,
I'll just put on a jumper."
"It's fine, a bit of stuffiness won't kill me."
With that kind of attitude,
a compromise can be reached in a flash.
Mutual submission is what Christians are called to.

Now notice something about Christian submission.
It's something you do to yourself.
In Islam, the husband compels his wife to submit.
The picture might be something like the wrestling ring.
One wrestler has another wrestler on the floor in a hold.
Recognising that there is no escape,
the first wrestler submits.
It's a struggle for power.
But in Christianity,
submission is voluntarily given by the one who submits.
Jesus voluntarily submitted to his captors.
They arrived with a squad of soldiers.
They thought they were forcing his hand.
But Jesus was not forced.
He went because he chose to go.

In the Bible, submission is always voluntary.
The picture of a wrestler submitting is not a Biblical picture.
We have a word in the Bible for enforced submission.
It is obedience.

In our passage today,
wives are called on to submit themselves to their husbands.
But in the passage immediately following,
children are called on to obey their parents.
What's the difference between submission and obedience?
The difference is that obedience can be compelled.
Parents are called upon to ensure their children obey them.
Husbands in our passage
are not called on to ensure their wives submit to them.
Husbands, if your wife submits to you,
that's her choice.
It's a gift that she is giving to you in your marriage.
It's a gift that the Bible calls on her to give.
But it's her choice not yours whether she gives it.

Is there any difference between the submission a wife is called to
and that a husband is called to?

I mean we are all told to submit to one another
out of reverence for Christ.

That must include husbands.

Should wives submit themselves more?

I think so.

We're told that the husband is the head of the wife
as Christ is the head of the church.

Paul grounds the wife's submission in that.

In verse 24, He says,

"Now as the church submits to Christ,
so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything."

It's very plain what he's saying.

It's just not plain at all in 21C Australia what you do with that.

As a husband listening to that verse,

I'm painfully aware that I am not Jesus.

Submitting to someone perfect

is a very different ask to submitting to me.

But someone does need to take leadership.

Otherwise there is anarchy.

What should the wife's submission look like?

I take it that Paul's spelling out the general principle without a pile of specific examples gives couples plenty of freedom to work out their own way of relating to one another. But I think we could give a couple of examples of what it doesn't look like.

Constant criticism is not submission.

Sometimes wives can be pretty critical of their husbands both to their face and talking about them to others.

I don't think that's easy to reconcile with submission.

Constant nagging is also not submission.

There's a big difference between asking someone to do something even reminding them if they've forgotten, and trying to wear them down by asking them repeatedly.

And you know what,

neither criticism nor nagging achieves its desired aim.

You criticise someone because you want them to lift their game.

But when was the last time you saw someone who faced significant criticism respond to it by saying,

'I know how I'll deal with this criticism,

I'll just change so that people won't criticise me anymore.'

That's fairy land stuff, isn't it?

When people are criticised they get defensive and bunker down, don't they?

You've got a far better chance of getting the result you want by submission and encouragement than by criticism and nagging.

I think so.

Not that Paul is instructing wives about how to get what they want. He's instructing them how to show reverence for Christ.

One of the best examples I've seen of a wife submitting to her husband was from a couple who weren't even married.

They'd been living together for more than a decade, so I have no hesitation in applying this to them.

Cherida had been ministering to this woman for years.

And finally she became a Christian.

Cherida and I were desperately hoping

that she would come along to our church with her three children.

But she didn't.

She went to the charismatic church down the road.

I'll admit we were initially a little bit hurt.

But she explained to us that her partner would come to church with her at the charismatic church,

but if she came to our church,

he would stay home.

Our church was just too formal and stuffy for him.

So she submitted herself to his preference

in the hope of God working in him to save him.

Beautiful submission!

Let's move on to the husbands.

Paul actually has significantly more to say to us husbands.

First let's think about what he doesn't say.

You might expect that he would say,

"Wives submit to your husbands,

husbands make sure you use your authority in the marriage graciously."

But he doesn't.

He says, "Husbands love your wives".

There's no mention of the husband's authority.

Just his responsibility to love.

Now many blokes would respond.

"I wouldn't have married her if I didn't love her.

So that's not too hard."

But fellas, there's a problem.

What we think of love and what Paul is talking about could be very different things.

Often what is mistaken for love in our culture is,

"You make me feel sexually aroused."

That's not love, it's lust.

Often our culture thinks 'I love you',

means you make me feel good to be around.

That's not real love either.

Love is defined by self sacrifice.

"Husbands love your wives,
just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her."

How do we love our wives?

We put them first to the point of giving up our lives.

You know, Christ gave himself up for the church by dying on a cross.

That is the standard of love we measure ourselves against.

Which is to say that the standard of self sacrifice we aspire to
is out of reach.

You can't get there.

Does that matter?

No.

We just have to keep working at it.

What a joy to be able to keep working at loving our wives.

You've got the rest of your life or her life to practice.

Now not too many of us

are going to be called to face crucifixion for our wives,

so what does it actually mean in practice?

Let me give you a couple of examples of what it can't mean.

We can't say that we're giving ourselves up for our wives

if we actually take a consuming interest in our hobbies

and ignore our wives.

'I'm giving up my life for my wife

by spending it on the golf course' doesn't wash.

Neither does 'I'm giving up my life for my wife

by spending it with my mates down the pub'.

We also can't say that we're giving up ourselves for our wives

if we don't listen to them.

You may have noticed that women like to be listened to.

Your wives will want to tell you about their day.

They will want to tell you about the latest exciting instalment

of what the children or the grandchildren are up to.

We aren't giving up our lives of your wives if we attempt to make

appropriate grunting noises from behind the newspaper

at appropriate intervals without actually listening.

If you love you wife,

you actually need to listen to her.
Now I realise I haven't set a particularly high bar
for what it means to give yourself up for your wife.
There will be more challenging ways than listening to her
and paying her more attention than your hobbies.
My advice is concentrate on getting the easy ones right,
and you'll be in a better position
to tackle the more challenging ones when they come along.
Let's be honest, men.
Many of us are not so good at getting the easy ones right, yet.

Paul knows
that men take a little bit of encouraging in the right direction.
That's why he throws in a bit of enlightened self interest in verse 28.
"In this same way,
husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies.
He who loves his wife loves himself."
When we get married,
'the two become one flesh'.
If you love her,
you are actually loving yourself.
If you look after her,
you are actually looking after yourself.
We've all heard the phrase,
'happy wife, happy life'.
Paul says that's not far from the truth.
Not to be said with a resigned,
"There's no point arguing because it doesn't get you anywhere" attitude.
But with a joyful and proactive desire to serve.
Look after her.
It's in your own best interests.

This sermon has been about redeeming marriage.
We saw that marriage was good when it was created.
We saw that after the fall it turned into a power struggle.
This is the recipe for defusing the power struggle.
Submission and love.

If we practice these things,
then our marriages will be saved from becoming power struggles.
The wife who is submitting herself to her husband
as she does to the Lord
is not struggling for power in the relationship.
The husband who is proactively trying to love his wife
by sacrificially giving himself up for her
is not struggling for power in the relationship.
This is what makes for a beautiful marriage.

They also flow from a relationship with the Lord Jesus.
Did you notice that both the instructions to wives and husbands
are tightly connected to our attitude to Jesus.

'Wives submit yourselves to your own husbands
as you do to the Lord.'

'Husbands love your lives,
just as Christ loved the church.'

Marriage is a picture of how Christ relates to the church.

The church submits to Christ.

Christ loves the church.

Our marriages can be a picture to the world
of the beauty of the gospel.

And we work hard to have a good marriage
not just because it makes life enjoyable when relationships work well,
but because of our reverence for Christ.

That's verse 21,

'submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.'

Your marriage has a higher purpose
than just bringing happiness to you and your spouse.

Conducting your marriage in a godly way
is a way that we honour the Lord Jesus.

Well there are so many other things to say about marriage
that we haven't time to discuss.

Marriage is a good thing but it can become an idol.

How do we have love in our marriages

whilst making room for deep friendships with others?

What about people who have difficult marriages despite their best efforts?

Sometimes your spouse won't play ball.

What about the years of being a widow or widower?

Marriage is a subject that impacts us all profoundly and directly, even those who are single are impacted by the marriages around them.

So there is way more to say, than can be covered on a Sunday morning.

But the key message of the passage is this.

Submission and love are what is required to redeem our marriages from the curse of the fall.

Submission and love are what is required to honour the Lord Jesus in our marriages.

So let's pray that we might live that way.