

The church and Christ: a marriage blueprint

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[0 : 00] The day is taken for Ephesians chapter 5 verse 22 to 33.

Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, and Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior.

Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the Word.

And to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

In the same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body.

[1 : 17] But they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church, for we are members of his body. For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.

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

This is the Word of the Lord. Thank you, Margaret.

And can I just add my welcome to Charles as well, to those who are visiting us this morning, or who are new to our church. My name is Brian. I'm the pastor here. We are currently almost at the end of a series in Ephesians.

We are in the second last chapter of the book of Ephesians. And also, can I just quickly say, with that form that you were given in the bulletin, it's not so much about telling me whether the sermons are too simple or too difficult.

[2 : 38] Although you can tell me that, you can come and talk to me personally if you think they are too simple or too difficult. I'm fine with that. But it's more to just reflect on what has encouraged you or what has challenged you from the book of Ephesians.

So it's more that, and with that, we want to encourage others as well. As you write down those comments, hopefully we'll be able to share some of them with the wider church on a future Sunday.

So that's what the form is for. There's also a box at the back of the hall. It's marked encouragement from Ephesians, and you can drop the form in there. Let's make sure the Bible is open in front of us to Ephesians chapter 5.

There's also a sermon outline as well. And let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Father, we ask again that you come and speak to us.

Convict us once again of how deep your love goes and how much you care for your church. And Father, we pray that you would help us as well, especially for those of us who are married, to walk your way.

[3 : 48] Give us your Holy Spirit to have ears to hear. All this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. This morning's passage is potentially a difficult one for many of us.

It's difficult, I think, because broadly speaking, many of us would have responded to it in one of these three ways. For some of us, it feels offensive.

From the very first sentence, we heard wives submit, and we go, what? What century are we living in? Whatever happened to female empowerment?

Well, here's proof that the Bible is merely an ancient book out of touch with human needs today. Even worse, it seems to treat women as second-class citizens and human beings, enabling a sexist, chauvinist attitude that tells women to know their place.

For others of us, it feels irrelevant. As soon as you heard wives and husbands, you immediately thought of switching off, because you're not married.

[4 : 58] You're single and perhaps even perfectly happy to be so. And there might be others of you as well who were married, but for various reasons are no longer so.

And so it doesn't feel applicable anymore. And then there might be others of us for whom this passage feels discouraging.

And I probably put myself in this category. We feel discouraged because we recognize that the picture being painted in this passage sometimes feels so far off in our own marriages.

We instinctively know that our love is not perfect or flawless. Perhaps some of us even argued on the way to church this morning, so you're not feeling particularly warm about your own marriages at this moment.

But we cannot escape the fact that this passage is in the Bible. And let me begin today by reminding us that if we call ourselves evangelical Christians, that means we treat the Bible as nothing less than the voice of God speaking to us, and we must take it seriously.

[6 : 08] I'm a young preacher with less years of marriage behind me than many of you in the congregation this morning. And if I were just to offer you my own words of advice, you could very understandably choose not to listen to me.

But if I am speaking from the very text of Scripture itself, then regardless of the age of the preacher, we need to pay attention.

And that's why it's a good idea to make sure that the Bible remains open in front of you this morning, and actually every Sunday morning, not just this morning, and see that everything I say comes from Scripture.

So as we come this morning to Ephesians 5, with all our various initial responses, let's be willing to humbly and carefully listen. For those of us who feel the offense of the text, well, that's okay, because at the very least, it means that we are not indifferent to it.

If the Bible always agrees with our view of things, then we have to wonder if it really is the Word of God. Because we are not God, and a book that mimics our thoughts exactly probably isn't either.

[7 : 25] But if the Bible has a counter-cultural edge to it, that means at least the Bible is not acting as our own echo chamber.

And it's worth pondering on whether our current cultural views of marriage are doing us any good. So we live in a time where there's profound confusion and disagreement about gender and sexuality and what marriage is all about.

We can't avoid being exposed to this, because we now live in a world where we're all connected to the World Wide Web. And some of the rules of the game that we've absorbed from the cultural air that we breathe are as follows.

As long as we love one another, it's okay. That's one rule. As long as I have the right to express my individual freedoms without hurting others, it's okay.

That's another. And yet there are so many struggling marriages, not just out in the world, but in our churches too. So these rules don't seem to serve us so well.

[8 : 38] So perhaps our human wisdom is not as enlightened as we think. For those of us who feel that the passage is irrelevant, well, it might be helpful to remember that the book of Ephesians is not just written to individuals, but to a church community.

Indeed, Paul is continuing on a section about what it means to be a spirit-filled church. That's what he's just been talking about from last week, and he wants to apply it now specifically to marriages.

And so it's relevant to you because it helps you to understand what Christian marriages should look like. And do all you can to be supportive and encouraging of the married couples you know in church.

It will help you to know better how to pray for your married brothers and sisters in Christ. It helps you to build others up. And it will also prepare you should you ever get married in the future.

And it's relevant to you because marriage ultimately matters to God because of what marriage is. And hopefully by the end of today's sermon, you'll see that as we dive into the text proper.

[10 : 01] And for those of us who feel a little bit discouraged, again, when we come to Ephesians 5, yes, we should feel prodded and challenged to up our game.

That's part of the way Christ prunes us to make sure that we walk his way. But as we come to the text, we'll see that the gospel of grace is never far away.

It remains front and center. The gospel provides the pattern, the anchor, and the goal for Christian marriages. Jesus provides all the resources we need.

And let me just make a couple more preliminary comments before we look at the details. First of all, I just want us to realize that although, yes, Ephesians 5 is about marriage, it's really about something else.

The relationship between Christ and the church. Actually, a huge chunk of the passage is devoted to that theme. Count the number of verses that talk about that and it's at least half.

[11 : 12] That's what provides the framework. In fact, in verse 27, right at the center of this passage, we find the church being presented as a radiant bride to Christ the bridegroom.

And if that's the framework, it also suggests that what is being said here in Ephesians 5 cannot simply be dismissed as purely only for the cultural times of post-day.

And second of all, just notice that although the instructions to wives is what often gets all the attention and is what we're going to talk about in a moment, the section on husbands is three times as long as that to the wives.

The husbands are not going to get off easy. So let's look at the instructions to the wives first. That's in verses 22 to 24.

Here's the instruction, verse 22. Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. That word submit is the sticking point for many of us, so it's important that we work out what Paul is getting at.

[12 : 32] But to do that, let's examine the basis for this submission in verse 23. So Paul is drawing a parallel.

As Christ is the head of the church, so the husband is the head of the wife. And as the church submits to Christ, so the wife is to submit to her husband.

Now before the husband goes, yes, I've got a blank check to do whatever I want now, let's just figure out, so far in Ephesians, how is Christ the head of the church?

Well, in Ephesians 1, verse 22, Christ has been appointed to be the head over everything for the church. That's how he's described.

So it implies a kind of authority. Now that's another word, authority, that as soon as we hear it, we have a negative reaction.

[13 : 44] Because we are so used in our society to associating that word with corruption and exploitation. But let's explore Christ's authority more.

Notice that in Ephesians 4, verse 15 to 16, Christ's headship is one that grows the body in love. Let me read it. 4, verse 15 to 16.

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is Christ.

From him, that's Christ, the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love as each part does its work.

So Christ's headship speaks of authority, yes, but it's an authority that grows his body in love. And so similarly, the husband is the leader in a Christian marriage, but he's meant to be a loving and nourishing one.

[14 : 56] And so the wife is to follow such, a leader she submits. This does not imply inequality. Again, remember in Ephesians, the stress has been on how in Christ we are all one new humanity.

No one is considered less human in Christ or receive the full spiritual blessings of Ephesians chapter 1. And just because, let's say, Stephen is an elder in our church, it doesn't imply that he is somehow more valuable than someone else in the church body, simply because he's in leadership.

And similarly, the husband is not somehow more valuable than the wife. No, the wife is equally valued. She is no less intelligent or gifted or able just because she submits.

After all, Christ himself did not see submitting, properly defined, as something degrading or oppressive.

In Luke chapter 2, verse 51, it should be on the screen, we read how Jesus as a boy was obedient to his parents. Now that phrase translated was obedient is actually the word submit.

[16 : 27] The same word here as in Ephesians chapter 5. And then in 1 Corinthians chapter 15, verse 28, we read this. When God, the Father, has done this, that has put everything under Christ, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him so that God may be all in all.

again, we find the submission of the Son here, this time to his heavenly Father. Submission, contrary to our cultural assumptions, is not necessarily something undignified or unbecoming.

Jesus transforms our notion of submission. So, having established that the husband is to lead and the wife is to submit, it's good to flesh out what that means and doesn't mean for the wife.

Come back with me to verse 22. First of all, the wife isn't meant to submit to any man. It's only to her husband.

There are limitations. And second of all, to submit is not the same as to obey. Paul could have used that word.

[17 : 51] He uses it later in Ephesians 6, I think, but he didn't. He says submit, which simply means not to assert yourselves in a way that is controlling or dominating.

And just as the church willingly and voluntarily submits to Christ, so the wife's submission is to be willing and voluntary.

It's not something done against her will. And third of all, the submission of the wife is to be as to the Lord.

This submission is part and parcel of her following Christ. And that means that if the husband is leading his wife into sinful behaviour or engaging in abuse, well, that should not be tolerated.

Because Christ comes first. And Christ will not tolerate such things. That's not Christ-like headship.

[18 : 56] What this means, too, is that submission is not about the wife being a doormat. well, that's not how we submit to Christ, by demeaning ourselves. Instead, she is a full contributor to the marriage.

She fully exercises the spiritual gifts Christ has given her in a manner that builds up her spouse. She provides input into the decision-making.

She doesn't have to be confined to the kitchen or out of the workforce. Sometimes, cultural stereotypes get confused with the instructions that are given here.

But there's no reason to insist that Ephesians chapter 5 verse 22 to 24 means that so-called traditional family roles from the 1950s and 60s are the only way to go.

Instead, I think there's quite a bit of freedom within this pattern of headship and submitting. Which is why I think Paul doesn't give us detailed instructions on what submission is to look like exactly.

[20 : 08] We have to work it out for ourselves in our context. It will look different from situation to situation and culture to culture.

Some wives will stay at home. Some wives will work. some wives will be good at doing the household work. Others will be good at the budgeting side of things.

That would affect what leading and submitting would look like in a marriage. There's no one size fits all. Their partnership looks more like a dance than a marching band.

There's flexibility rather than rigidity. submission will, I think, include these following elements.

It will include a basic respect for the husband. That seems to be implied in verse 33 which ends this section. Christian wives shouldn't be always putting down their husbands or always putting their interests first.

[21 : 31] They will not feel the need to have the last word. They shouldn't only be ever critical and demanding always finding fault with their husbands.

They must respect him and allow him to be the leader he should be. In Proverbs chapter 21 verse 19 we're told that it's better to live in a desert than with a quarrelsome and nagging wife.

It means that she is always seeking his good as a member of Christ's body. She would manipulate him saying one thing and then acting in another way simply to get what she wants.

She wants to encourage him to help him to lead their family well and make the most godly decisions he can. And so she will be responsive and reassuring when she sees her husband trying his best not to be passive but to take initiative to be responsible.

Proverbs 12 verse 4 says a wife of noble character is her husband's crown. She is much appreciated.

[22 : 50] And verse 24 As the church submits to Christ so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

Now we've already established that doesn't mean wives should unquestioningly obey their husbands on every single thing. It's not about micromanagement.

but it does mean that there is no part of her life that is cut off from her husbands. She cannot say I will let him lead me in this area but not in that area.

I have full autonomy in that area. I reject his input in that area because you see they are now one flash an idea that will return to later.

they are united to one another in a way that they are united to no one else. If the wife resists this pattern the marriage will just be like a dance where the two partners are following different steps while it will result in plenty of stepping on each other's toes within it.

[24 : 08] Now they need to dance in harmony in every area of life with the wife following the husband's lead. But what about the husbands?

Well, let's move now to the instructions given to the husbands. And notice straight away that the command to the husbands is not husbands lead your wives.

It's not husbands be the head of your wives. wives. No. Verse 25, husbands love your wives.

And he repeats it two more times, down in verse 28 and 33. So yes, the husband is the head, but the stress is not on leading, but on loving.

And husbands that work hard at loving their wives will be following their Lord, who as the head of the universe was giving himself in love instead.

[25 : 21] Now that word love is just as often misunderstood as the word submit. Romantic love in our world is often about self-fulfillment, about finding someone who makes me feel good.

And so Paul makes sure to avoid any misunderstanding on our part. He defines love for us. Verse 25, husbands love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

So here's how husbands are to love their wives. The way Christ sacrificially loved the church. how did Christ do that?

Well, we know it, don't we? Christ gave his very life for his bride, the church. He died. That's what it looks like.

Husbands have to die to themselves and carry their crosses every single day in their marriages. it doesn't get more real than this.

[26 : 35] It might mean taking the kids for a while even after a long day at work, simply to give your wife a chance to rest and recuperate. It might mean not retreating automatically to your laptop or smartphone, but spending some time listening to your wife on how her day has been, even when you're not in the mood.

it might mean choosing to give up certain favourite activities, whether that's time on the PlayStation or watching football, to help your wife with certain chores.

It's not going to be easy. Who said killing yourself is? Well, I know I often don't live up to this. When I was engaged, I was foolishly overconfident that I could be a husband like this.

Well, I soon found out I had underestimated my own selfish desires and how difficult it is to deny self. It takes work. Marriage is always good for exposing how far we have to go in attaining Christ's likeness.

But giving your life and denying self is the way of Christ's like love. Well, that was the way taken by Robertson McQuilkin to his wife.

[27 : 55] I told this story before, but I think it's worth retelling again because it's such a great illustration of a deep, sacrificial kind of love.

McQuilkin was a former missionary and principal of a Bible college. But in 1990, he resigned because he decided he needed to care full time for his wife who was suffering from Alzheimer's disease.

and she was becoming increasingly distressed when her husband left her alone. And so he decided he needed to give up his job at a fast-growing seminary.

And so for the rest of her life, he would be wheeling her around in her wheelchair, he would be feeding her, he would be changing her as if she was a toddler.

yet never once did he ever call it burdensome. Instead, in a famous resignation speech, he called it his privilege to serve his wife this way.

[29 : 01] That's what I'm called to do in my vows, he said. That's exactly how Christ wants it to be. Did you notice how deep his love goes?

Just look at verse 27. Notice God's intent. God wants to make her, he's now talking about the church, holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle, or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

Paul seems to be drawing on Old Testament imagery here. In Ezekiel chapter 16 verse 8 to 14, the Bible reading with which we began this morning, we find God describing Israel as his bride, whom he found abandoned and dirty, but whom he subsequently bathed, cleansed, anointed, and clothed in fine jewels.

people. It's a picture of what God is determined to do, clean his people, even when they were filthy. This, Paul has been telling us through our Ephesians, is what God has done for us.

This is how he dresses his bride, his church. God has done for us. This is the good news of Jesus, forgiving and cleansing people like us, who have committed spiritual adultery by fixing our eyes on things other than God, who have polluted ourselves by impure thoughts and mixed motives.

[30 : 49] This is how he loves us and he should give us great hope, because even when we don't live up to being the best husband or wife that we could be, he doesn't give up on us.

He doesn't dismiss us as hopeless. This is the word of the gospel that he has given to us. That's what Paul is referring to by the word here. And he did all this to make his bride look absolutely stunning.

God will stop at nothing to make his people look completely glorious. That's how deep his love goes. He wants nothing but the best for us.

Let that anchor your thoughts today. And that means Christ wants to ensure his bride will be holy. His love is nothing less than purposeful.

And that's how it's to be in our marriages. Although it's too much to say that we are responsible for our wives' progressive sanctification, that's a responsibility that they own for themselves, it is right to say that a husband should be concerned to see his wife progress as a Christian.

[32 : 12] Well, whether we're husband or wife, we should long to see each other become more like Jesus. and that means as Christian husbands, we should take the lead to ensure we are participating in Christian things together that help us towards that aim.

Husbands, are you making time to pray with your wives regularly? Are you doing some devotions together? Are you taking the initiative to discuss the sermon?

Could you be reading a Christian book together once a year? It could be marriage-related, like reading *The Meaning of Marriage* by Tim and Katie Keller. But it doesn't have to be.

It could be just a book on prayer, on living all of life for Christ, or even on a specific doctrine. The point is to be purposeful in encouraging each other to grow spiritually.

my former pastor regularly asks this question of Christian husbands. Is your wife flourishing under you?

[33 : 28] Well, that's a good question. Is she? Do you see more love, more joy, more goodness, more kindness in her?

Or more bitterness, more selfishness, more envy? For that's what Paul wants to see, wives that flourish.

Just look at verses 28 to 29. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.

After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church. The logic is this.

Husbands, you naturally want your own bodies to flourish. So just as you want your own bodies to flourish, you will take care to make sure that your wife flourishes under you.

[34 : 31] And that means you feed and care for them. It's not just about putting food on the table. people. It's about nourishing and cherishing them.

Actually, that word care is actually the word cherish. When we first started dating our wives, we likely wanted to find out more about them. We held their hands.

We tried to take an interest in the things that they found interesting. We cherished them. But it's easy for those things to drop off after a while in a marriage, especially once the kids arrive.

But just as Christ doesn't merely provide for us, but continually pursues our hearts, so we are to do the same for our wives.

We cherish them. Well, what might that look like? It will probably mean maintaining our curiosity about each other. It will mean being intentional in the way we speak to our wives.

[35 : 38] Think about what you appreciate about your wife, what she loves to do. Go arrange something for her. And speak the gospel to your wife.

Remind her when she's feeling guilty because she's not lived up to her own expectations about being a good mother, that she is justified by Christ, not by being a good mother.

Take the initiative in the midst of conflict, not to go to bed facing away from each other, hugging your own pillows. But let the gospel of reconciliation shape your responses to each other, so that you move towards each other, and not away from each other.

why do all this? Why should marriages look this way? And this is where Paul is ultimately moving towards.

Verses 30 to 32. For we are members of his body. For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.

[36 : 56] This is a profound mystery, but I am talking about Christ and the church. This is the logic Paul is giving us here.

The love of Christ for his church is why people get married. Your love story only exists because it echoes the ultimate love story.

Marriages testify to the gospel. That's why Paul quotes Genesis 2 in verse 31. The reason people leave their parents to be joined to their husband or wife in marriage is to make clear, to put on display that Christ is now united with his church.

And so Paul is making a radical claim. The gospel is not just the background to a Christian marriage. Rather, Christian marriage itself pictures the gospel.

As wives submit to their husbands and husbands love their wives sacrificially, they have the privilege of making the gospel visible in concrete terms to the world out there.

[38 : 21] You see, in a world where power and authority is only ever associated with abuse and exploitation and lording it over people, in a world where submission is only ever associated with weakness and disempowerment, Christian marriages show the world that there is a better alternative.

They reveal a world in which the head of the universe actually comes down and willingly sacrifices himself for the good of others.

and that people who follow his lead paradoxically find more freedom than if they choose to be lord over their own lives.

It projects a radically different reality to what the world thinks. No wonder Paul calls it a profound mystery.

this isn't to put pressure on Christian marriages to be perfect. After all, the point is that the Christian marriage is just the illustration.

[39 : 36] It's not the ultimate reality. It only points beyond itself to that ultimate reality where Christians are joined inseparably with Christ, where Christ is the groom and the church is the bride, where Christ loves us and remains faithful to us even when we stumble and make a mess of things where there is grace and love poured out incessantly.

That's why Christian marriages are so important to God because in the end, they're about Jesus and us. the Bible begins with marriage.

Genesis 2, for this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two will become one flesh. And the Bible ends with marriage.

Revelation chapter 21 should appear on the screen. I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Look, God's dwelling place is now among the people and he will dwell with them. They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God.

[41 : 08] marriage pictures the gospel. And so this morning, as people who live in between the beginning and the end, we honour marriage.

We don't devalue singleness. That's a sermon for another day. That singleness too is a gift from God. But we honour Christian marriage. We pray for such marriages to exist in our churches.

We encourage each other to pursue such marriages. And we rejoice in such marriages because of what it points to, the faithful, unbroken, sacrificial relationship Christ, our head, has with us.

Well, may we never feel Christian marriages the same way again. Let's pray. Father, thank you so much that when you saw us dirty and abandoned, filthy and polluted, yet you came to us, you came to us, and brought us to yourself to be made holy and blameless.

Thank you, that is the gospel of Jesus that anchors our entire reality. We pray that this same gospel will anchor our marriages if we are married.

[43 : 00] we pray that you will help us to follow your pattern and your blueprint, always mindful of each other, and mindful of how we can honour you as we love each other.

For those of us who are not married, we pray that you would help us to know how to best encourage our married brothers and sisters, and to pray for such marriages.

And Father, we look forward to that day where we will be dressed as your perfect bride and be at that marriage supper of the Lamb together with you forever.

All this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

[45 : 56] Amen. Amen.