

Husbands, Wives, and Paul
Ephesians 5:21-33
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Kory Wilcoxson

Well, hello! It is so good to be back in the pulpit again. The last time I preached was October 17, then a bout with COVID knocked me out for a couple weeks and last week we enjoyed the choir's amazing presentation of Rutter's "Requiem." So, to all of you who've not heard me preach for a month, I say, "You're welcome."

One of the reasons I've missed preaching is this sermon series. I was so excited to dive into Paul and some of his more controversial statements. It's so much fun to immerse yourself in a scripture passage and converse with God about its meaning for you. Paul says such inflammatory things about women and slaves, and I'm so thankful for a colleague like Trish who handled both of those topics with such sensitivity and conviction, all on a few days' notice. I hope we all can appreciate what a gift she is to us.

So, today I get to work with what Paul says about the relationship between husbands and wives. This is a curious topic for me since today is my three-month anniversary and Amy and I are embarking on this new journey of marriage together. We both are strong believers in God and God's word as given us through the Bible, so what should we take away from Paul's words? And, more importantly, will I still be married at the end of this sermon?

I have done 58 weddings in my career. Most of weddings were fun, a few were less than fun. I've had nervous grooms, late brides, and drunk best men. I've done weddings in people's houses, in our church courtyard, in a city park and in a posh downtown Chicago hotel. Every wedding I've done has been different, except for one thing. In all of those 58 weddings, not once has either the bride or the groom asked to have the word "obey" in their vows. Amy didn't even request that for our wedding, which was a real missed opportunity on her part.

I'm not actually sure where the tradition started of including "obey" in the vows. A lot of people blame Paul for that, but nowhere does Paul say wives must obey their husbands, although he does say slaves should obey their masters and – listen up, kids! – children should obey their parents. But wives obeying their husbands? Paul didn't say it. What he did say may actually be even more radical. While Paul's words are directed to wives and husbands, I believe the conclusions I'll be drawing are applicable to anyone. Whether you're single, widowed, divorced, or married, whether your marriage is same-sex or different-sex, there is something to take away here about how we are treat those we love.

"Wives, be subject to your husbands." Other translations say "Submit to your husbands" or the more troubling "be submissive to your husbands." The translator of The Message, who is a man, says, "Wives, understand and support your husbands," which is his way of tempering the original language and making sure he didn't have to sleep on the couch when his translation came out. No matter how your try to soften or modernize it, Paul's words definitely carry a hierarchical assumption, that the man is the head of the household.

That may chafe us a bit, but remember, we have to understand the concept of marriage in Paul's time. Back then, there were certain unwritten rules about how a

household was managed, which were known as household codes. Bullet point No. 1 of that code was that the man was the head of the household, the CEO of the family. Paul never puts down the value or intelligence of women, but he does presume this household hierarchy that was universally accepted in his day. The man was the authority of the house, and women were expected to operate within this understanding. We don't have to agree with that or accept it, but we do have to acknowledge that it was the reality of Paul's time.

Initially, it sounds as if Paul is reinforcing this hierarchy with his instructions, and in a way, he is. But if we resist the temptation to take these words out of context and read them within their surroundings, we'll discover Paul has a much more important agenda here, and it is one that is so radical and revolutionary it would completely redefine the understanding of a relationship between a husband and wife.

For example, Paul starts out by saying, "Submit to each other," setting up his redefinition of the hierarchical relationship. He then spends three verses talking to the women and nine verses talking to the men. It's like when one of your kids acts up, but you talk to both of them so as not to single one of them out. Paul is talking to both wives and husbands here, but the real meat of what he's saying is not for the women. It's for the men because they were the ones not honoring Christ in their marriage.

What Paul does say to the wives is to "submit to your husbands as to the Lord." That last part is sometimes omitted, but it is crucial to our understanding of Paul's words. Submission to Christ was one of Paul's most important aspects of being a follower of Christ. Submission simply means to give ourselves over to the other person, to serve them with all our hearts. It's the same model Paul sets for himself when he identifies himself as a "servant of Christ."

Amy and I started listening to a book called The 80/80 Marriage. The authors make the point that the understanding of the marriage relationship has gone through a major shift. The traditional understanding was an 80/20 relationship, where the wife did 80% of the work while the husband went out and earned the money. The authors say in more recent times, the shift has been to a 50/50 marriage, where a couple each strives to do half the work. Sounds fair and egalitarian, right? But the authors say that in that situation, you start keeping track. "I got up with the baby last night, now it's his turn." I've unloaded the dishwasher three times in a row. That's not fair!" A 50/50 marriage is a recipe for conflict, because sometimes life is hard and we don't have 50% to give.

The authors argue that, instead of striving for 50/50, we should strive for 80/80. That means that each person in a relationship seeks to do 80% of the work. Think about how the changes the nature of the relationship. No more keeping track, no more resenting the other person for not carrying their load. Early in our relationship, Amy and I were intentional about saying our goal was to out-serve each other. That's 80/80. That's what it means to submit to each other. Think about how our marriages, our family relationships, our friendships could be enriched if we lived this way. If we are genuinely concerned for the happiness of the other person, our submission to them is a natural part of working toward that happiness.

So let's turn to Paul's words for the men. In the Greco-Roman culture, there were no limits placed on husbands and their authority. No one told them how to treat their wives, and there were rarely any repercussions for mistreatment, so we can only imagine the types of abuse and degradation that took place. The woman's role in the marriage was

primarily that of reproducer so that the man could pass on his legacy to his male children. There was nothing that called for respect or love or protection for the wife.

So, do you see what's so radical about what Paul says? Paul's words turn all of those unwritten societal laws on their ears by filtering them through Christ. "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." The word Paul uses for love here is "agape," which is a selfless, sacrificial kind of love. Paul says, "Husbands ought to love their wives as they love their own bodies," and "he who loves his wife loves himself." The authority Paul is giving husbands here is not based on domination or intimidation; it's based on sacrificial love.

As we try to bring Paul's words into our context, here's what we have: (1) husbands, be willing to sacrifice everything for your wife; (2) husbands, make your wife's well-being your primary importance, and (3) husbands, care for your wife as you care for your own body. No early Christian wife would fear submitting to a husband who treats her this way, because this represents service and submission on the husband's part, as well.

I believe the reason this passage has caused women so much pain is not Paul's words, but how they've been misused. These words are sometimes brandished as a weapon to force women to submit to their husbands no matter what "because it's in the Bible." But Paul doesn't say "no matter what" here. Submission does not mean becoming a doormat to be stepped on. Paul states very clearly that a husband's authority should mirror Christ's authority. Paul is not requiring wives to accept degrading or harmful forms of submission, and verbal and physical abuse are not in any way on Paul's radar screen of what a husband's authority should be. When these words are used to guilt a wife into staying in an abusive relationship, that is the worst kind of sin. Paul calls for submission out of love, not out of fear, and any exercising of harmful authority would go directly against what Paul is saying here and is extremely un-biblical. I believe that's true for any kind of relationship we're in, be it a friendship, family relationship, or marriage.

When this passage has been misused, it's an example of taking one or two verses out of its context and applying them to gain a certain advantage. I'll bet good money that almost all of the preachers who've done that were men. Of course domineering husbands are going to quote Paul's instructions to wives, and of course they're going to leave out his nine verses to husbands! But we have to take them together, because to understand one set of instructions, you have to understand the other. They cannot be separated.

The wisest thing Paul says in this passage may be in v. 32, when he says, "This is a profound mystery." Yes it is! Any kind of relationship is a complex bundle of emotions and commitments and competing agendas. But if we follow Paul's instructions, we can become more Christ-like in how we treat each other, an 80/80 relationship. A wise person once said that more couples would celebrate their golden anniversary if they first followed the Golden Rule. Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. Husbands love your wives as much as you love yourselves. And in all things, submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. That's one instruction it would do us well to obey.