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Sermon

Relationships that Work

Ephesians 5:21-33

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This is a very complex passage with issues of interpretation being affected by profound cultural and sociological differences from the time it was written, the context of this passage within the letter, the issues of how men and women interact and to top it off, Paul says he is really writing not so much about our marriages as the relationship between Christ and the church.

Perhaps, then, I can surprise you by exploring first what Paul tells us of Christ in the passage.

Christ as Bridegroom

In the Old Testament, God portrays himself as a husband to his people, notably in Hosea. He compares Israel to an unfaithful wife. However, in the New Testament, the church is repeatedly referred to as a pure virgin espoused to Christ.

John the Baptist referred to Jesus as the bridegroom and himself as the friend of the bridegroom (or best man as we would say) early in John's gospel.

"You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.' The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete."¹

Similarly, Jesus answering a question about why his disciples do not fast said,

"How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast."²

He told the Parables of the Wedding Banquet (Matthew 22) and the Wise and Foolish Virgins (Matthew 25) which both contribute to the idea that he is the bridegroom and the church is the bride. After Paul wrote to the Ephesians, the

¹ John 3:28-29

² Matthew 9:15

Revelation of St John referred repeatedly to the wedding of the Lamb and the new Jerusalem being the bride of Christ.³ Here, Paul tells us that marriage is a picture of the relationship between Christ and his church.

We all think of this passage as being about marriage relations, but hear it again, with all reference to our marriages stripped out leaving what it tells us about Christ and the Church:

Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. The church submits to Christ. 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. Christ feeds and cares for 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.

In these verses, we are told the story of the incarnation, redemption and the restoration of the Church. The Son left his Father to find his bride. He gave himself to make her holy. He cleansed her from sin by his death on the cross; he continues to wash her with his word to make her holy and acceptable without any defect. He cares for his church and feeds her. Just as a man and woman become one flesh in marriage, so it is a profound mystery with Christ and the Church. The Church will be united with him and become one in glory. There is a unity with Christ through being in the body of Christ. There will be a further unity in glory after the wedding feast of the Lamb when the two will become one.

Friends, perhaps some of us have been quick to discard this passage because we don't like the word submit. But look how much we lose about the relationship of Christ and Church if we ignore it.

Submission

The big difficulty for us is the word "submit" of course. It reminds me of story of the couple celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary. A reporter was interviewing them for the local paper and was amazed when the old man said that they had never argued. "How did you manage that?" he asked. The old man said, "Well, it's simple division of responsibility. I make all the important decisions and my wife decides all the trivial matters. She decides what we eat, what TV programmes we watch, where we go on holiday; she decided which school the children went to, which house we bought; she managed our finances and choose where we retired – you know – the trivial decisions in life. I, on the other hand, decide the important matters: which international treaties we should support, whether we should declare war or not, what to do if there is an alien invasion – that's my area of responsibility."

The instructions in this passage are to submit and to love. Husbands are to love their wives. Do you think wives should love their husbands too? Yes of course, it is mutual. Husbands should love their wives, wives should love their husbands.

The wives are told to submit to their husbands – are husbands to submit to their wives? Often this passage has been understood as if were a one way street. But look at verse 21 – "Submit yourselves to each other out of respect for Christ." Those verses are separated into separate paragraphs, but that is incorrect – and I proved it last week.

To reiterate briefly: a sentence must have verb. In the Greek text there is no verb in verse 22. It reads: "Wives to your husbands as to the Lord." Wives do what to your husbands? The verb is in verse 21: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." Do you see that verse 22 makes no sense without the rest and it says Christians are to submit to one another; not just wives to husbands?

Husbands are to submit to their wives; husbands are to love their wives; wives are to love their husbands; wives are to submit to their husbands – it is mutual. Furthermore, we saw, that even that verb, *submit*, is really a participle, *submitting*, and the real verb is all the way back in verse 18:

³ Revelation 19:7 Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.

Revelation 21:2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

Revelation 21:9-10 One of the seven angels ... said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.

“Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ, wives to your husbands as to the Lord.”

Those actions of speaking, singing, giving thanks and submitting to one another all depend on the command be filled with the Holy Spirit - both grammatically and spiritually.

But note that there is no mention of obeying. In the following paragraphs, he does say that children are to obey their parents and slaves are to obey their masters, but he does not say wives are to obey. And what would we expect as the corollary of submission – would it not be to rule? But, he does not say husbands are to rule over their wives – there is no dominance here – rather the emphasis is that husbands are to give themselves for their wives. The husband has a responsibility to love his wife, to give himself for her, to nurture her. Jesus has all authority but demonstrated servant leadership. He explained to his disciples,

“The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. ²⁶ But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. ... I am among you as one who serves.” ⁴

So to understand “submit”, we might be best to think in terms of loving respect, of honouring and deferring to each other.

Paul’s critics say he is hopelessly culturally bound in this passage. But that is not so. Paul was going against Greek, Roman & Jewish cultural norms when he imposed a responsibility on the husband. It was a radical idea for his time. Paul was not toeing the cultural line at all.

Helen and I went on a marriage seminar presented by an American speaker who was very keen on this idea of honouring. He kept saying that we should gasp in amazement at how wonderful our spouse is. He kept emphasising the gasp, “Oh!” - until it became quite funny. When we got out to the car, I thought I should try it. As Helen sat down, I gasped, “Oh!,” ready to say, how wonderful she was. However, she was so startled that she jumped and hit her head on the door frame. As she rubbed the sore place, we had to conclude it was not culturally appropriate expression of honour.

How might we defer to each other? It starts in the small, but important courtesies – please & thank you, serving each other, listening to each other, talking over decisions together. You know, even the patriarch Jacob deferred in this way to his wives. When God told him it was time to leave his father-in-law’s community and go back home, he went and told them, they discussed it and then the wives said they thought it was right for them all to leave. Amazingly, he submitted the decision to them.

Love

We have said that they should love each other. But Paul especially tells the men to love their wives. Not in some light way but profoundly and sacrificially. Husbands are to give themselves for their wives. To love them as Christ loved the Church which was literally to die for her. If that seems too hard to relate to the domestic round, he says men should love their wives as they love their own bodies. How do we love or care for our own bodies? Pretty well by and large. The tummy rumbles you get a big mac and fries. Pull a calf muscle and you hobble around on crutches to protect it until it is healed. The body demands and we meet its wishes. Food, sleep, pleasure and it gets it. Well men, we are to be just as quick to care for our wives’ needs. That is not an easy option. It is *agape* love – God’s love- which desires the best for the other regardless of the personal cost.

Wrong balances:

Men and women are equal before God. Peter says husbands and wives are joint heirs of the gracious gift of life.⁵ If the relationship gets out of balance and the husband is too weak in the relationship, then instead of wife and husband, it will tend to become wife and son. That is unhealthy. The instruction for the wife to submit is a corrective against that error.

⁴ Luke 22:25-27

⁵ 1 Peter 3:7

If the husband is too dominant, he become bossy even a tyrant. That is also unhealthy. The command to the men to love their wives as themselves would correct that if obeyed.

Conclusion

The last verse sums up the passage: “Each one of you must love his wife as he loves himself and the wife must respect her husband.” Actually it is even clearer than that. Looking at the Greek, it would be better translated, “Each of you must love his wife like this as he loves himself so that the wife may respect her husband.”

So that! So that she may respect her husband. (So that is the Greek word, *hena*, which means so that and takes the subjunctive mood, which is true of the following verb). When I first parsed and exegeted this sentence I was shocked at the standard translation. So I tracked down my Greek Tutor from Theological College to ask if my reading was faulty. She confirmed it is a valid reading of the text. You see it all hangs on us, men. If we truly love our wives, they will come to respect us and mutual submission will be easy and safe.

But how can we do this? Paul tells us the answer lies in submission and love. Submission is an outflow of being filled with the Holy Spirit; love is the chief fruit of the Holy Spirit. These two qualities come from God’s Spirit to us. They are what will allow our marriages and indeed all our relationships to work.

As we allow the Holy Spirit to fill our lives, he will enable us in our relationships. If you want to live up to this passage, you need God’s help. It is a high standard, especially for the husband. It is perhaps an ideal, but the great thing is that God loves to help and only waits your request. If you are going to love each other and submit to each other you need to depend on him to be the foundation of it all.