

“Christ and the Church”

The Thirteenth in a Series of Sermons on Ephesians

Texts: Ephesians 5:22-33; Genesis 2:15-25

Martin Luther once quipped that anyone who was able to master the distinction between law and gospel should be immediately awarded the doctor’s cap (the symbol of the doctor’s degree in theology). In Ephesians 5:22-33 we come to one of those passages which requires us to make a very important determination, “is this passage law, or is this passage gospel?” Or, is it something else? “Wives, submit to your husbands,” sounds like law to me. And “husbands, love your wives” is certainly a command (and therefore “law”). But it is Paul’s assertion “*I am saying that this refers to Christ and his church,*” which provides the key to understanding this entire passage.

As we continue our series on Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians, we come to the apostle’s discussion of a Christian’s submission to divinely-established authority. This discussion runs from verse 21 of Ephesians 5, all the way through to verse 9 of chapter 6. Paul touches upon many aspects of the Christian household and daily life. In verse 21, Paul lays out the general principle that all believers are to submit to Christ, before taking up the subject of duties of wives to husbands (in verses 22-24), husbands to wives (vv. 25-32), children to parents (6:1-4) and slaves to masters in the balance of this section (vv. 6-9 of chapter 6). This passage is known as the “household code,” and in many ways it serves to establish a distinctly Christian understanding of marriage and the family.

Throughout our series on Ephesians, we have been making the point that in Ephesians 1-3 Paul sets out his understanding of the gospel—a gospel grounded in God’s gracious election of sinners in Christ, who are then saved by grace through faith, through the proclamation of the saving work of Jesus (preaching). In chapters 4-6, Paul discusses the Christian life—the application of that doctrine which he set out in the first three chapters to specific situations facing Christians in western Asia Minor. In talking about the contrast between Christian and pagan ways of thinking and doing, Paul has discussed Christian unity, the need to strive for maturity, as well as the importance of stripping off the old self and putting on the new. Paul has exhorted us to imitate Christ, to walk in love, and to be filled with the Holy Spirit, so that Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs pour out of our hearts during Christian worship, as opposed to the partying and drinking songs which resound in the pagan temples and guild halls.

As we work our way through Paul’s discussion of a Christian’s submission to proper authority, we need to be especially mindful of the fact that Paul’s directives found in this section are often applied without any regard for the gospel from which they flow. How many times have we heard verses from this passage cited as though we were perfectly capable of fulfilling them? While these verses do indeed instruct us to submit to Christ, wives to submit to husbands, husbands to love our wives, children to submit to our parents and slaves to submit to earthly masters, the fact of the matter is that no husband in this room ever loved his wife as Christ loves the church. Not one of us has ever fully submitted to Christ as we should. And how many of us perfectly submitted to our parents while growing up?

This raises the question—“Why does Paul command us to do something which we are not capable of doing?” The question itself illustrates the reason why we cannot properly interpret a passage such as this one if we don’t understand the distinction between law and gospel, or carefully distinguish the indicative mood (a statement of fact) from the imperative mood (a command). While these verses tell us what God expects of us now that we are Christians, if we consider them apart from the fact that Jesus has already

fulfilled all of these things for us, then we turn this section from instruction about how Christians ought to live out of a sense of thanksgiving (to use Paul's term, or gratitude, if we use the language of our catechism), into an intolerable burden—here's another yet another list of things I've failed to do.

It is also important to consider the vast cultural differences between Paul's world and our own. I refer to this passage in my wedding sermon. When I mention the "s" word—Paul's instruction that wives are to *submit* to their husbands—many times you can hear an audible gasp from the women who are present. This is because the word "submission" conjures up all kinds of negative images of woman being "barefoot and pregnant," and under the dictatorial control of a macho husband who barks orders to his wife in the kitchen, while he is ensconced on the couch watching TV. This is why it is so very important to consider that Jesus and Paul did more to protect the rights and dignity of women than probably anyone else in history. In this chapter, Paul completely undermines the first century Greco-Roman legal code which held that a husband had absolute rights over his wife and children, and could do pretty much as he wanted with those in his household—including physical abuse if he saw fit.

In most marriage contracts from this period, the wife (who was most often in her early teens), was obligated to obey to her husband (who most often was in his thirties). Not only was the woman very young and at a tremendous physical and emotional disadvantage, the whole culture sided against her. If she was beaten by her husband, there was no police protection or women's shelters. She couldn't go get a job and live on her own. She couldn't go home because her father signed her legal guardianship over to her new husband when the dowry was given by the bride's family to the husband's. It was worse if the woman was from the slave or laborer class because she had far fewer rights than if she came from a wealthy family. No doubt, this was a very difficult time to be a woman, and Paul's call for husbands to love their wives overturns the universal cultural expectation that a responsible husband's first duty was to ensure that his wife submit to him without question or complaint.

Now, things are different—we live in the light of Christianity's belief that women are divine image-bearers, co-heirs with Christ in terms of our heavenly inheritance, and are to be cherished, protected, and provided for by their husbands. But we must not forget that Paul's emphasis upon mutual submission to Christ, wifely submission to her husband, and a husband's sacrificial love for his wife, was absolutely revolutionary at the time.¹ The women of Western Civilization have equal standing and many of the same career opportunities as do men because of Christianity, not because of secular liberation movements. Given the gender issues (and gender confusion) in modern America, and given the confusion that Christians have about how God intended the Christian household to be ordered, it is all the more important that we hear Paul speak directly to this subject.

Keeping both the law-gospel distinction, and cultural differences between Paul's day and our own in mind, we now turn to our text, Ephesians 5:22-33.

As I mentioned last time, verse 21 serves both as a conclusion to the previous section (verses 15-20), and as a heading for Paul's discussion of submission within the household.² In verse 21, Paul begins with our mutual submission to Christ—*submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ*—before proceeding to set forth a very basic household order. This means that any discussion of a wife's submission to her

¹ See, for example, Craig S. Keener, *Bible Background Commentary* (IVP, 1993), 551.

² A. T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 365.

husband, or children to their parents, as well as slaves to their earthly masters, must take place with the knowledge that all Christians are to submit to Christ. We cannot even talk about submission within the Christian household without keeping before our minds the fact that all of us must submit to our Creator-Redeemer. From the outset of this discussion then, Paul places the example of Jesus before everyone in the Christian household. Jesus humbled himself and became obedient unto death (cf. Philippians 2:3-8). And that example provides the context of Paul's discussion of a husband's sacrificial love for his wife, a wife's submission to her husband, children's submission to their parents, as well as submission to earthly masters. We will make a mess of this passage, if we don't keep Jesus' humility and submission to his heavenly Father before us as the example we are to follow in the Christian household.

That said, some contend that Paul teaches mutual submission between husbands and wives based upon his comment in verse 21. But mutual submission within the household cannot be found in what follows. Wives are directed to submit to their husbands, children to their parents, slaves to their earthly masters, while husbands are never directed to submit to their wives, but to love them as Christ loved the church. And yet when discussing a husband's love for his wife, Paul informs us that the relationship between a husband and his wife is an analogy of Christ's relationship to his church. This means that God has placed the institution of marriage into creation, so as to continually point us to what transpires at the cross, where we see that it is God's sacrificial love which saves us from our sins, which is the reason why we in turn are to submit ourselves to Christ.

This is why anyone who preaches this passage without keeping the analogy between Christ and the church at the center of the passage, will get it wrong and likely confuse the law and the gospel. In such a case, the passage will become what it often becomes—some sort of general ethical principle regarding Christian marriage. Why this misses the mark is that the commands given by Paul are presented as though we can fulfill them, if only we resolve to do so. Such an interpretation fails Luther's test and (to use another late medieval image) should result in the interpreter being awarded the dunce cap, not the doctor's cap. More importantly, such a reading of this passage completely misses Paul's main point.

In verse 22, Paul instructs "*wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.*" Notice what Paul does say, and what he doesn't say. Wives are to submit to their husbands just as they submit to Christ. Because God requires this in the Christian household, such submission is not optional and cannot be ignored simply because our culture doesn't like it. But notice that Paul does not say the husband is the wife's Lord—Christ is the Christian wife's Lord. Christ is also the husband's Lord. Notice too that a Christian wife is not commanded to submit to men in general, but only to her own husband. She is to do this as a particular aspect of her obedience to Christ. Why should a wife submit to her dolt of a husband who reeks of spiritual b.o. and who is covered with spiritual gravy stains? Because Jesus directs her to do so as part of the on-going process of her sanctification.

Paul makes this point quite explicitly in the very next verse. "*For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.*" Paul does not appeal to cultural consent, nor to the moral law. Paul appeals to the creation account (which we read for our Old Testament lesson). Eve was taken from Adam's side, therefore the husband is "head" of the wife because this order of things was ordained by God at the time of creation. Although our culture seems bent upon obscuring gender distinctions, the basic point that Paul is making that ultimately this is a matter of biology. Men and women do not have the same physiology—women bare children, men do not. This is pretty basic stuff, but it never ceases to amaze me how nature trumps virtually every contemporary theory which seeks to blur the biological differences between the sexes. No question that men and women are equal in terms of their standing before God. No question that men and women are

equally intelligent, have the same general skills, and can equally excel in most vocations.

But women are infinitely superior to men when it comes to bearing children. This means that Paul's directive for women to submit to their husbands is not in any sense a declaration that women are inferior, or somehow less than equals. But women are not men, and God assigns to them a complementary role to their husbands in establishing the Christian home. Wives are to submit to their husbands just as they would to Christ. This is not some arbitrary decision because men made the rules back in the day when women were regarded as inferior (as our contemporaries argue), but rather this is how God ordered creation. The biological differences between the sexes inescapably proves this to be the case.

Furthermore, the headship which the husband exercises must be understood in light of the way in which Christ is head over his church. Christ is not a tyrant, nor a hot-tempered despot. He is a loving, caring shepherd who provides for the needs of his bride (the church). Jesus does not use his greater strength and power to control, dominate or abuse his spouse. This is what Paul is getting at when he says in verse 24, "*Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.*" In effect, Paul is simply restating what he said in verse 22—the model for a wife's submission to her husband is the church's submission to Christ. The church does not submit to Christ in some things, but in all things. But the church submits to Christ in all things because Christ always cherishes the church and provides for the needs of God's people (his bride). Therefore, Paul's call for a wife to submit to her husband is also a call for the husband to treat his wife as Christ does the church. Wives must know they are not submitting to a tyrant, but to someone who will provide for them, protect them, and encourage them to flourish. The command for a wife to submit to her husband is also a command for husbands to keep Christ's example of humility ever before them.

In verse 25, Paul once again turns to the example of Jesus when he commands husbands to love their wives. "*Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.*" Any man who reads "wives, submit to your husband" as though that gives him absolute control and domination over his wife has completely missed Paul's point. Husbands are to love their wives and Paul tells us precisely what this means. Just as Jesus gave himself up for the church—the supreme example of self-sacrifice—so too husbands are to give themselves up for their wives. Self-sacrifice is the exact opposite of control and domination. While Christ has authority over the church, how does he exercise that authority? Christ loves his church. He provides for his church. He protects his church. He gives himself up for the church. And this is what a Christian husband is called to do for his wife. His divinely-given authority requires him to both love and to give himself to his wife.

In what follows, Paul speaks of what Christ does for his church using images with which first century readers would be well familiar. Before the wedding, the bride was given a ceremonial bath (remember, unless you lived in a Roman city with a public bath with facilities for women, bathing was a major chore). The bride was perfumed and then dressed in bridal garments reserved only for that occasion and passed down through the generations.³

This same image appears in Ezekiel 16:1-14, where YHWH speaks of Israel (or Jerusalem) as an unfaithful bride. In the passage we find the following. "*I made my vow to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord God, and you became mine. Then I bathed you with water and washed [you] . . . and anointed you with oil. I clothed you also with embroidered cloth and shod you*

³ Bruce, The Epistle to the Ephesians, 387.

with fine leather. I wrapped you in fine linen and covered you with silk. And I adorned you with ornaments and put bracelets on your wrists and a chain on your neck. And I put a ring on your nose and earrings in your ears and a beautiful crown on your head. Thus you were adorned with gold and silver, and your clothing was of fine linen and silk and embroidered cloth.”

While leather and nose rings may conjure up images of a biker wedding, Ezekiel does mention embroidered cloth, linen and silk. Although you probably can't find a wedding dress like this at David's Bridal, in the ancient world these were appropriate wedding garments. No doubt, Paul has Ezekiel 16 in mind when he writes these words in Ephesians 5. As YHWH prepares Israel to be his bride, so too Jesus prepares his bride by laying down his life for the church so *“that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.”*

As YHWH prepares his bride for her wedding, so too Jesus Christ is preparing his church to be his bride. In fact, in verses 25-26, Paul uses five verbs to emphasize Jesus' redemptive work on behalf of his church. Jesus loved the church. Jesus gave himself up for the church. Jesus sanctifies the church. Jesus cleansed the church. Jesus presents the church as his bride.⁴ Jesus did all of this to save us from our sins and then prepare us for eternity in his presence. This means that the bridal imagery found in the Old Testament, and in virtually every culture throughout the ancient near-east as well as the modern world, serves to remind us that marriage is a picture of how Jesus is even now preparing his church for a great wedding feast yet to come on the day when Jesus, the bridegroom, returns (cf. Revelation 19:9 ff.).

No doubt then that Paul grounds a wife's submission to her husband in the creation order, while at the same time he reminds us that the husband's responsibility to love and care for his wife must be seen in light of Christ's work on behalf of his bride (the church). Wives imitate Christ by submitting to their husbands. Husbands imitate Christ by loving their wives in light of Christ's sacrificial work on behalf of his church. In this, husbands and wives complement each other in building the Christian household. But the duties of wives and husbands only makes sense against the backdrop of creation and redemption—especially redemption, the very point Paul will make in verse 32.

Continuing the theme of how a husband is to demonstrate sacrificial love for his wife, in verses 28-30 Paul affirms that *“in the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body.”* When Paul directs husbands to love their wives, he is drawing a specific application of the commandment from Leviticus 19:18 to love our neighbor as ourselves. Paul's reference to a husband's own body instead of the law's command to love our neighbor as we love ourselves, is Paul's way of rebutting the teaching of the Talmud (a Jewish commentary on the law), in which the original intent of the commandment was completely distorted.

The Talmud cites the commandment to love one's neighbor as applying to husbands, who are to love their wives as themselves with the proviso, “lest he find something repulsive in her.” If your wife burns the toast or puts on a few pounds, then you need not love her as yourself. So, when Paul applies the commandment to husbands who are to love their own wives, he adds the phrase that husbands are to love their wives as they do “as their own bodies.” In doing this, Paul connects the creation account (in which God takes Eve from Adam's flesh) to the command that husbands love their wives, because this is

⁴ Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, 227.

analogous to Christ's love for his church. Husbands and wives become one flesh when they are married. In Genesis 2:23, we read that of Adam's declaration that Eve was "*bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.*" Therefore, husbands are to love their wives not as they love others, but as they love their own bodies.⁵ To love our wives, is to love ourselves. After all, no one in their right mind ever hated their own body, says Paul. Given what we know about first century Graeco-Roman and Jewish culture, this is a revolutionary statement and a far cry from the expectation that a husband's first duty was to make sure his wife obeyed him, and that he was to love her unless he found fault with her.

Paul's next point is that the marital union (becoming "one flesh") establishes a new family identify. This reaffirms the teaching of the creation account, as well as the teaching of Jesus in Mark 10 that sexual relations are to take place only within marriage. Paul cites directly from Genesis 2:24 in verse 31. "*Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.*" The husband and wife are joined as one in such a way as to illustrate for us the intimate relationship that Christ has to his church. For the church too is "one body."

Paul wraps up his discussion of the duties of husbands and wives in verse 32 by giving us the interpretive key to the whole passage. "*This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.*" The mystery is profound, but wonderfully simple—Jesus Christ's relationship to his church (he is our bridegroom, and we are his bride) reflects God's purpose in establishing the created order as he does. Through the distinction of the sexes and the institution of the family, God is not only providing the proper means of the perpetuation of the human race, but he is also providing us with a wonderful and complementary means of fulfilling our sexuality as husbands and wives are to become one flesh. In these prescribed duties of husbands and wives, Paul is also instructing to us look to Christ who is our collective bridegroom and who has saved us through his sacrificial love.

Once we understand that the mystery which Paul has been talking about is the relationship between Christ and the church, Paul ends this section with a very simple conclusion in verse 33, "*However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.*" Next time, we will take up the subject of submission by children to parents and slaves to masters.

So then, back to our original question, "is this passage law, gospel or a something else?" And what do we as God's people take from it?

Lets answer that question by returning to the basic distinction between the indicative mood (a statement of fact) and the imperative mood (a command to do something). Usually in Paul's letters we have the indicatives followed by the imperatives. "Here's what Christ did for us, now do x, y, and z." In this passage both the indicatives and the imperatives are present, but the usual order is reversed. Paul begins with the imperative (command) for wives to submit to their husbands and for husbands to love their wives. But the gospel indicative is clearly present when Paul speaks of Christ' saving work on behalf of is church. Remember the five verbs Paul uses of Christ's work on behalf of his church? Jesus loved the church. Jesus gave himself up for the church. Jesus sanctifies the church. Jesus cleansed the church. Jesus presents the church as his bride. These five verbs constitute the gospel indicative. Although it comes after the imperatives, nevertheless the gospel indicative (what Jesus has done for us) is the basis for the imperatives that wives submit to their husbands, and that husbands love their wives. The imperatives both show us our sin, as well as how we are to live because we are already in Christ.

⁵ Bruce, The Epistle to the Ephesians, 391.

Because Jesus already loves us, because Jesus has already given himself up for us for all the times we did not submit nor love as we ought, because Jesus is even now sanctifying us, because Jesus has already cleansed us, and because Jesus will present us to his Father, who, in turn, gives the church to Jesus as his bride, this is why wives are to imitate their Lord in submitting to their husbands, and why husbands are to imitate their Lord in loving their wives as themselves.

Therefore, this passage contains both law and gospel, and the commands given here flow out of gratitude because all that our merciful bridegroom has already done for us in preparing us for the great marriage supper yet to come. Yes, this passage is about how Christian wives are to submit to their husbands despite what our contemporaries say. And yes, this passage commands Christian husbands to love their wives as they love their own bodies.

But the only way these imperatives make any sense, is if we see them in light of the great gospel mystery now revealed—and that great mystery centers around Christ and his church, especially in the gospel indicative that we have a Savior who loves us, who gave himself up for us, who sanctifies us, who has cleansed us, and who presents us to his father as his future bride.