

Commentary and Questions | Ephesians 5:21-24

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Commentary:

Before talking about the role of the wife, we must recognize that verse 21 serves as a foundation for the following three paragraphs. Ephesians 5:21 says, “submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Therefore, the following three relationships that Paul discusses focus on the idea of submission. This explains why Paul always begins with the role charged with submitting first (wives, children and slaves or workers). There is no doubt that our culture generally rejects the idea of submission because it seems to go against the popular ideas of liberation and freedom. However, Paul and the rest of the Biblical authors affirm three things about all people: (1) the dignity of womanhood, childhood, and servanthood, (2) the equality of all people before God regardless of race, gender or social class, (3) the unity of all believers who are members of God’s family.

The role of the wife is to submit to her own husband. There are two reasons why this is so. The first reason involves the headship of the husband and its origin (cf. 1 Corinth. 11:3-12; 1 Tim. 2:11-13). In both of these passages the author goes back to Genesis 2 and points out that the woman was created after the man, out of the man and for the man. Contrary to how many people feel in our postmodern world, this is not chauvinism but creationism and should therefore free us from the deformation of gender roles caused by the fall. Also, the fact that Paul references the creation narrative in 1 Corinth. 11:3-12 and 1 Tim. 2:11-13 means that these roles are always true regardless of the culture! These ideas of submitting and leading find their origins before the fall in Genesis 2. The second reason for the wife’s submission deals with the redeeming work of Jesus and His headship over the church. In other words, the wife’s inward desire and outward display of submission to her husband is simply a shadow or reflection of how Christians submit to Jesus. God, in many cases, uses human things to describe spiritual truth (i.e. bread, water, vine and branches, etc.). In much the same way, God takes a relationship that everyone is familiar with and describes a deeper spiritual reality. Christians submit to Jesus wholeheartedly, willfully and readily because of the type of leader that He is (more on this subject next week!). There are many principles of implication and application just in these few verses. Here are a couple of implications:

1. Gospel-centered motives – A wife will never submit well if the desire is not there just as a Christian will never submit well to Christ if the desire is not there! The first implication deals with the interior motives of the wife. Do you as a wife genuinely desire to submit to your husband? If the answer is no, I would encourage you to think through reasons as to why that is. Does it concern your past or possibly your husband’s lack of ability to lead or is it simply a sinful inclination?

2. Gospel-centered attitude – Everyone’s natural inclination is undoubtedly towards selfishness! However, Christians are called to put off selfishness and to put on selflessness. Therefore, in the context marriage, the wife’s attitude (as well as the husband’s) toward the husband should be marked by self-sacrifice and altruism. Often times it is difficult simply because the husband is a sinner and therefore a bad leader at times. However, I would encourage all Christians to think deeply about the cross and the complete selflessness of Jesus who did not count equality for God a thing to be grasped but made himself nothing in order to reconcile many to God. This is the primary source of empowerment!

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3. Gospel-centered actions - How a wife treats her husband whether in private or in public should reflect the Gospel and glorify God. How do you speak about your husband to others? How do you speak to your husband? Is it easy for others to see an attitude of submission with respect to your husband? These are all action-centered questions that will serve you well to think through!

Questions:

1. Write down any thoughts, comments or questions you had from the passage or sermon.
2. What does the Bible teach about the source of authority (Cf. Gen. 2:4-25; 1 Corinth. 11:3-12; 1 Tim. 2:11-13)? How should this affect your attitude towards those in authority over you?
3. Why do you think our postmodern, western, and affluent society dislikes the idea of submission? How has the Biblical idea of submission been distorted by the fall?
4. What are the two reasons given for why wives should submit to their husbands?
5. What would you say to a wife that struggles to submit to her husband because the husband leads poorly or even sinfully? Is it still necessary to submit to the husband? Explain.
6. How would a wife's understanding of the Gospel empower and enable a submissive spirit towards her husband?
7. Describe in your own words or from your own experience some practical applications regarding submission. How would a wife submit to her husband's authority in everyday life?