

Prayer

Lord God, may we be faithful in our work of proclaiming the Gospel and sustaining Your Kingdom here on earth. May we be fearlessly active in its defence, vigorously effective in promoting its growth, and unshakably confident in its eventual completion at Your coming again in glory. Lift us up to do this work, now and always, AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Let your conversations with others be the trigger for prayers about them and the issues they raise

On-going prayers

- **Pray for those who preach** *Pray for those who train and mentor preachers, that they may pass on the truths of faith with love and care*
- *Pray for those whose lives have been blighted by drugs*
- *Give thanks for your friends and the help they give you*

Meditation

Be the church of God,
gathered, saved and loved for all time.

Be His visionary people,
unashamed of the eternal call of the Gospel.

Be His unfaltering witnesses,
in every conceivable place and time.

Be His disciplined community
Instructing each other in heavenly arts of love

Be His suffering yet glorious body
rejoice to be rooted and sustained in Him

Be His glorious, happy bride
Adorned and beautiful in His sight for ever

Be the united church of God
Love the call, love the people, love the future!

Bible passage – Ephesians 5:21-33

²¹ Be submissive to one another out of reverence for Christ, ²² wives, to your own husbands as to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and He is the Saviour of the body. ²⁴ Just as the church submits to Christ, so wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her, ²⁶ in order to make her holy and cleanse her by the washing of water with the Word, ²⁷ and so to present the church to Himself in her full glory, having no blemish or wrinkle or anything similar, but to be holy and without fault.

²⁸ In this same way, husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself. ²⁹ For no one ever despises his own body, but nourishes and cares for it, just as Christ does the church, ³⁰ for we are members of His body (of His flesh and His bones). ³¹ 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' ³² This is a profound mystery, and I am saying that it

refers to Christ and the church. ³³ However, each one of you must love his wife as himself, so that a wife should respect her husband.

Thought for the Day

Text

Ephesians 5:21

²¹ *Be submissive to one another out of reverence for Christ.*

Thought

This verse of scripture deserves to be placed firmly in our hearts. It is a firm command, and it comes just before Paul tells men to love their wives and wives to be submissive to their husbands. Consequently, this command for all God's people to be submissive to each other is of prior importance.

How easy do you find it to be submissive to others? In many places of work, we have to be bold to survive, and the ethics of our work conflicts with the commands of faith. Remember though, that this command is for the church, and we must obey it there. Our relationship with the world is different.

Bible Study

Review

This is a powerful passage of Scripture, which requires our full attention. It describes the relationship between Christ and His church and between a husband and wife in a revolutionary way, both for Paul's own times and even for our days now. Unfortunately, Paul's writing is often misunderstood, especially the words 'head' and 'submit', along with verses 22 and 33. Consequently, this text has been used to advocate the absolute subjection of wife to husband, and this is a misinterpretation. I urge you to follow this study carefully, and read the 'translation notes' provided on these two words, and verses 22 and 33.

Before attempting to interpret this text, we should try and understand the background against which Paul wrote. Firstly, in the first century Roman Empire, people held certain general beliefs about marriage, and about how someone might appease the gods. Briefly, men were the masters of their households, and although some men and women undoubtedly loved each other, society required that the man exercised total control over his affairs and his family. Secondly, people believed that true 'religion' was like a marriage, so when someone worshipped a god, that god exercised total control, and in religions like the worship of Dianna of Ephesus, this 'divine' marriage could be consummated by sex with a temple prostitute!

In the light of this, it seems almost inconceivable that Paul, having written a letter to the Ephesians about the complete equality of all before God and the unity of all believers (3:14f.), should now contradict this teaching by advocating any form of superiority of men. If this passage appears to suggest that women are inferior to men, or that the relationship between Christ and the Church is one of subjection or domination, then we have misunderstood the passage. Paul wrote carefully, so we should look carefully at what he said. One of his main concerns was that some believed that Gospel gave them freedom to abandon all social restraint and do what they wanted in the world (see Rom 6:1f., Gal. 3:1f.). He therefore felt it necessary to write down a social 'order' for marriage (5:22-33), for relationships in the family (6:1-4) and for slaves and masters (6:5-9), and he did something similar in his other letters (e.g. Colossians 3:18-22, 1 Timothy 3:4f.).

Today's passage therefore offers comment on Christian marriage; and to begin with, the first four verses follow on directly from what Paul has previously said. In verse 18, Paul said '*do not get drunk with wine ... but be filled with the Spirit*', and he then gave examples of what this meant. To be filled with the Spirit meant to praise God in song (5:19) and to give thanks (5:20); then, using the same language (words and grammar etc.), he told people to '*be submissive to one another, as to Christ*' (5:21). This totally inclusive command now covers all that comes next, including his comments about marriage (and the church), children and slaves (in tomorrow's reading – 6:1-9).

With this in mind, it is clear that Paul's comment about wives being submissive to husbands was not given to women as a command to them alone (see notes). It was an appeal to social responsibility, lest some misinterpret 'freedom in Christ' as license. Unsurprisingly, Paul continued by comparing the marriage of husband and wife and the marriage of Christ and the church (5:22-24). Christ subjected Himself to the world when He died on the Cross for our salvation, and Paul has already spoken about this extensively (1:19f., 2:16f.). This the moral pattern for all human relationships, in love and subjection. He says more about this,

in particular the love of Christ for the church (5:25-30 – see ‘going deeper’), and concludes that marriage is a relationship in which a husband’s love and a woman’s respect will create stability (5:28, 33).

This passage undoubtedly calls on wives to be subject to husbands and husbands to love wives, but if we imagine that these words are anything more than appropriate advice for mutual submission and love, then we misunderstand the letter. Paul’s advice was radical and liberating in his day for both men and women, and we should not interpret it otherwise.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- What do verse 23 and 24 say about marriage and the church?
- How does Christ make the church clean, and what does this say about marriage? (5:26-27)
- What does Paul try to teach by speaking about ‘the body’? (5:28-31)

Notes on the text and translation

Important words

V21 ‘be submissive’, or ‘submit’

The Greek word here (‘upostasso’) means ‘to put into subjection, subject, subordinate, submit to, obey, be under the authority of’. The meaning of this clearly defines all that follows in this passage. To make the matter more complicated, this can either be subjection by compulsion, or voluntary subjection, as in the notion of being ‘submissive’ by choice. **The general sense of this passage suggests that Paul wanted the entire Christian community to choose to be disciplined, and therefore ‘submissive’ in character** (see study).

V23 ‘head’

The Greek word ‘kephale’ meaning ‘head’ can mean firstly a head of a body in the usual sense of the word. Secondly, it can mean the ‘superior part’, or in a building, a ‘keystone’. However, Paul also used the word to convey the Hebrew meaning of the word ‘head’ (‘rosh’). This means a ‘source’ or ‘origin’, or as we might say ‘the head of the river’. Now, it is obvious that when Paul speaks of the ‘body of Christ’, Christ is the whole body working together, so it destroys the picture completely to say that Christ is just head by itself. **It must be therefore that when Paul says ‘Christ is the head’, he means that Christ is the ‘source’ of the body, and not one superior bit if it!** For the meaning of this, see the study.

Significant phrases

V23 ‘he is the Saviour of the body’

Other translations:

‘his body, of which he is the Saviour’ (NIV)

‘the body of which he is the Saviour’ (NRSV)

The differences between the translations are due to a difficult Greek sentence, which reads ‘Himself, the Saviour of the body’. How this is handled is a matter of style and interpretation; some place the emphasis on ‘Saviour’, and others on ‘body’. I have taken a plain reading of the Greek and added ‘is’ because this reads most naturally, and it makes sense in the sentence.

V33 ‘each one of you must love his wife as himself, so that a wife should respect her husband’

Other translations:

‘each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband’ (NIV)

‘each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband’ (NRSV)

The different translations struggle to come to terms with the Greek subjunctive verb at the end of this sentence, which says quite literally ‘so that she should respect’ her husband. A careful look at the grammar of the verse makes it clear that there is NO command to a wife to respect a husband. **Instead, there is a requirement placed on the husband to love, so that she will respect him. Nothing could be clearer.**

Problems with the ancient Greek/Hebrew text

V22 *'wives, to your husbands'*

Other translations:

'wives, be subject to your own husbands' (NRSV)

'wives should be subject to your own husbands' (Jerusalem Bible)

In Greek, there is a division between the ancient manuscripts over the inclusion of the verb 'submit' in this sentence. Some have 'wives be subject to your own husbands'; others miss out the verb completely, leaving the sentence, 'wives, as to your own husbands', but with the sense of the verb 'to submit' carrying over from the previous sentence. **There is good reason to believe that the second of these possibilities is the original text, without the verb 'submit'.**

The meaning is broadly same in each case, however, when we place the verb 'submit' in verse 22, it creates a sentence in English that sounds like a command: 'wives submit to your husbands', and as a consequence, some have taken this to justify men's subjection of women. This is a tragic and unintended consequence of what Paul says. For this reason, I have translated the text without the verb 'submit', as in the original text. It does not read easily, and subjection is indeed part of what Paul says about relationships (see study) but **this translation stops people making incorrect assumptions, and saying that Paul directly commanded women to be subordinate to men. He did not.**

V30 *'for we are members of His body (of His flesh and of His bones)'*

Other translations:

'for we are members of his body' (NIV)

'for we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones' (Authorised Version)

A few significant ancient manuscripts include the quote from Genesis 2:23, which refers to 'His flesh and His bones', which reinforces the connection between the idea of marriage and the relationship between Christ and His church. However, scholars reckon that it is more likely that these extra words were added to the text rather than that they were somehow left out. It is not easy to be definitive about this, so I have included the extra words in brackets. They do not add to the meaning of the text, they merely reinforce it.

Going Deeper

What do verse 23 and 24 say about marriage and the church?

Once we have understood the nature of what Paul says about submission, then we are in a position to interpret verses 23 and 24 correctly, and in order to do this, we must look carefully at what Paul says. It is important not to mistake this passage with 1 Corinthians 11:7f, which appears to suggest an order of priority, Christ first, then 'man', and then 'woman'. I have discussed this fully in my notes on 1 Corinthians, where this is a word picture illustrating the nature of creation, not the nature of marriage. Here, Paul compares the marriage relationship to that of Christ with the church, and he uses two words to help him describe this, 'head' and 'Saviour'.

We will firstly look at the meaning of the word 'head', and I suggest that you read the notes above concerning this word. I have read a number of commentaries and Bible dictionaries, and while they make a number of comments about what 'headship' means, very few attempt to describe what it means for Paul to say *'the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the body'* (5:23). If the word 'head' used here has more in common with the Hebrew idea of 'source' rather than 'pre-eminence', then to speak of Christ as the head of the church is to speak of what Christ brings to the relationship, to make it work; it is not to describe any authority Christ exercises. This makes sense, because Paul adds to the sentence *'and He is the Saviour of the body'* (5:23), so this means that the relationship between Christ and his church works because Christ is the Saviour.

Does this mean that the man is the Saviour of the woman? Not at all; that would be nonsense, and we would be getting far too mixed up with the picture if we were to suggest this. Paul does not say what kind of 'headship' a man brings to marriage, but he certainly has a distinct and unique contribution without which the marriage does not work. Perhaps this is the message he wants to bring to the women of the early church who had lost sight of the meaning of marriage because of the suffocating restrictions of the pagan world on women. What we do know is that in this passage, Paul commands men to love their wives (5:28,29,33), and wives to submit to their loving husbands 'in everything' (5:24). However, please note that this last phrase about the submission of wives is not a command, it is Paul's expectation of what will happen when men love

their wives (this is indicated by a particular Greek tense for the verb 'submit' in verse 24, which is repeated in verse 33, later in the passage).

How does Christ make the church clean, and what does this say about marriage? (5:26-27)

In verse 25, Paul goes further, and identifies the one characteristic of 'headship' that is common between Christ and the man in a marriage, and this is 'love'; *'husbands love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her'*. This is one of the few places in Scripture where we read the phrase *'Christ gave Himself up'* for the Church. The idea is central to our understanding of what Christ has done, and this is described in many places within Scripture (e.g. Romans 3:25f.), but this precise phrase is not common. This phrase describes the selfless love of Christ, which is an example to all men in marriage. Let there be no doubt that there are no commands placed upon women in this passage, but there are a number of commands given to men, principally, that they should love their wives. It could be that if Paul was worried about women not being sufficiently submissive in the home, then he was also worried about men not showing love to their wives!

The next sentence is even more interesting, and adds more, based on the idea of Christ as the Saviour of the church, as mentioned previously in verse 23. Verses 26 and 27 describe Christ's work of salvation as a cleansing *'by the washing of water and the Word'* (5:26). The washing refers to baptism, by which the members of the church enter into the experience of Christ's death and resurrection, the evidence of salvation. The Word refers to the Word of God, that is, the spoken Word that in Christ, which is the Gospel of Salvation. It is possible to argue from this passage that God intends there to be two 'sacraments' (meaning 'holy means') within the church, being baptism and the preaching of the Word. Of course, others argue that there is evidence elsewhere in Scripture sufficient to define the Lord's Supper as at least one other sacrament, but this is of no interest to our passage here.

The unique feature of this text is the description of the Word as holy. Perhaps we should regard preaching as a 'holy' sacrament? Nevertheless, my own conclusion from this text is similar to that from verse 23. Christ is the Saviour of the church, but Paul is not saying that a man is the Saviour of his wife. The wonderful and enigmatic descriptions of what Christ has done for the church in verses 26 and 27 merely serve to illustrate the strength and vigour with which a man should love his wife. The text does not suggest otherwise, and this is a sufficient conclusion to draw from the text.

What does Paul try to teach by speaking about 'the body'? (5:28-31)

IN the last few verses, Paul re-introduces the idea of the 'body', perhaps to explain further what he meant earlier in the passage when he spoke of the 'body'. If you read verse 23 again, you will discover that the 'body' is the church, loved by Christ. It is only one step further to say that a wife is like a body to be loved by the husband. The more you think about this, the more likely it seems that Paul was referring to sexual matters without speaking about this specifically; but it seems that he does not want us to travel off down this possibly slippery slope!

Paul's words here are powerful, and call for selfless love on the part of men. The comparison between a man's love for his wife and the Lord's love for the church still seems rather chauvinistic to some, because of the implicit power and priority that Jesus has over the church. However, this passage is clearly not about power, it is about a beautiful relationship! In true marriage, one partner finds fulfilment in the other; and here, a man is fulfilled in loving his wife 'as his own body' (5:28) and a wife is fulfilled in receiving the gift of purity before God through the love of her husband (5:26,29). One cannot use such language without indicating total reciprocity of spirit; each giving the other different but essential life-affirming gifts of God.

This is marriage as God intends it to be and as Paul expounds it. In verse 31, Paul uses the same quote from Genesis 2:24 used by Jesus when talking about marriage (Matt 19:5); *'a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.'* No other passage of scripture that appears 'verbatim' in each of these three; the 'Old Testament', the 'Gospels', and the 'Letters' of scripture! These words confirm what was on Paul's mind here, which is that the 'image' of God does not lie in a man or woman, but in the two, joined together in marriage (Gen 1:27).

Application

The unity and sanctity of marriage is very precious to God, and marriage is itself something very important for the life and health of the church; one reflects the other. Certainly, if you live in a society in which marriage is a crumbling institution (as I do in England), then the church has a clear chance to witness to the rest of society through upholding marriage between one man and one woman as holy. It should actively promote heterosexual marriage as a demonstration of the love of God and His presence in the world.

Paul gives no instruction about how a man and a woman should work out the details of their personal and private relationship before God, because he would have believed the basic Biblical teaching that women and

men were made by God to reflect His image when united in spirit, within marriage (Gen 1:27). I suggest that it is a reasonable thing for a man and a woman to agree in marriage that the husband should take final responsibility for the decisions made by the two together, but there are many ways in which a couple might interpret this scripture together. This approach, however, is a far cry from male domination (deduced by some from this passage), which allows husbands to ignore their wives' opinions because they do not regard them as relevant. Such an attitude is an ungodly mockery of this passage of scripture and is dishonourable to Christ, as Paul makes crystal clear (5:21). The freely given love of a husband to a wife and the unconditional respect given by a wife to her husband reflect God's will for marriage. This, without a shadow of a doubt, is scriptural teaching about marriage.

Finally, remember that at the beginning of the passage, Paul says generally that submission 'to one another' is to be done 'out of reverence for Christ' (5:21); so because Christ is in us, we must all honour God by submitting to each other. This principle is of crucial importance for the health of the church, because if people act as if they do not have to pay attention to the views of others and submit to them when necessary, they insult Christ, whether in public or in the home. Such a superior attitude does not serve God and it can easily turn into an ungodly domination. Instead, we must respect the fact that Christ is to be found in all His people, whether male or female.

Discipleship

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your group whether you believe that Paul is equal in his treatment of men and women in Ephesians 5.
2. What does this passage teach you about Christ and His church, and what does this passage teach you about marriage?
3. How can a husband and wife honour this scripture in their marriage and avoid domination of one by the other?

Topics covered by this text

- *The relationship between men and women in marriage*
- *The relationship between Christ and His church*
- *The nature of salvation, 'by water and the Word'*

Personal comments by author

In writing this study material, I am deeply conscious that I write it as a man, though my wife will read this (as she always reads my work) before it is published. With care, I do believe it is possible to honour both this scripture and also the general Biblical teaching that men and women are equal in God's sight. I have had to labour over this passage, and I guess that most of us will have to labour over it if we are to find a way to honour it and do what is right for ourselves and those to whom we may be married.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *If there is some part of this text which you find obscure, search further yourself by looking in books and talking to friends about the issues which concern you.*
- *Pray about this passage and examine yourself to ensure that you have a good general grasp of what this passage says. If you find this difficult, discuss it with someone else. If you are married, discuss it with your spouse!*

Final Prayer

You, O Lord, have done wonderful things for me and for those I love. Help me within the difficult times when I need you most, and be the master of my emotions and my thoughts, so that I can act in a manner that is worthy of You. All praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ: AMEN