

## ***The Beauty of Submission***

Good morning friends.

Although it's not my normal practice, I want to **begin** this morning with reading the whole of our passage for us today – **Ephesians 5:18-33.**

And I don't **often** do this, because I find that **my mind** is often not yet **on** right at the **get go** – and so I often need some ground-work to prepare my heart and mind to hear God's Word.

This happens to me all the time in my **own** reading of scripture. I'll open the text and start reading and a few paragraphs in, I'll have to **acknowledge to myself** (and God) that **I'm not listening yet**, I'm just reading the words...

And so I stop, pray and come again to it – with my heart and mind **turned ON** – maybe reading it aloud to help me listen with more of my soul.

But today's text is one that I know will **grab our attention** – that will itself **wake us up** – with its talk of husbands and wives, submission and headship. **Got your attention!**

And if, some of you, right off the top, find yourself uncomfortable with this passage – please stick with me today, because I'm convinced that what Paul is on about here is truly good for all of us – that, rightly understood, Paul's vision of submission in marriage is truly **beautiful, liberating and life-giving – for all...**

And I hope and pray that you will see and feel that with me today...

So, listen with me to our text – **Ephesians 5:18-33 (more recent NIV).**

*Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.*

*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*

*Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which He is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.*

*Husbands, love your wives, just as 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. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does 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 profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband."*

**Let's pray.**

"Living God – Father, Jesus, Holy Spirit – grant us humility today as we attend to Your revelation in Scripture. Thank You for inspiring the Apostle Paul in the writing of this letter to the Ephesians, and, in your grace, guarding your Word down through the ages – that today we might **hear your Voice and Live**. O Rescuing God, give us ears to hear Your Voice today, and in your mercy, speak Your Gospel over us and to us... for Your glory, for the good of the world, and for our joy in You.  
Amen."

Alright... Well, as many of you know, over the last year, after much prayer, listening, conversation, and discernment, the Elders empowered me to take a few Sundays in the first half of this year to teach on different **core texts** that speak to the

role of women in the life and leadership of the church – out of a shared conviction that, interpreted in context, the gospel of Jesus Christ (as revealed in the Old and New Testament) opens the door for women and men to participate **together as equal partners in life and leadership.**

And so, as you can find in our teaching archive, I took two Sundays (both in February) to help us hear again what the Bible teaches **on this vital topic.**

And the plan was that, following Easter, I would invite us into **another core text** – one that has been raised in the midst of my conversations with different people along the way. And specifically, Paul's teaching in **Ephesians 5** regarding submission in marriage, and the husband being the **head** of his wife. Now clearly, this is not a text about authority **in the church** – but there are obvious implications for that conversation...

But, with all that we are in the midst of these days, our physical distance specifically, the Elders and I have been hesitant to continue to press into this critical leadership conversation **at a distance.** Not that we want at all to put this vital issue on pause, but we are committed to walking together with you – our church – in this, pastorally, prayerfully and theologically – with a longing not to **force change**, but to **lead change** that will deepen our unity in Jesus and discipleship to Jesus...

And yet, in recent weeks, along with many of you, I've been struck with the simple fact that due to the intensity of this moment in our world and lives, **marriages**

**are under a lot of stress these days.** If there was a fracture in the foundation of someone's marriage prior to the Covid Crisis, I would think the intensity of being forced into **constant contact in closed quarters** would prove to be a crucible for many marriages.

**And it is.**

Sadly, I know of at least one Vancouver-based crisis phone line for women experiencing domestic violence, that has seen **a 300% increase** in calls for help – and **40% of these calls** are from women reaching out for the **first time**.

In other words, many **marriages, families and relationships** – which means many **people** – are on the brink.

**And some of you know this first-hand.**

Which means, although maybe not primarily with a view toward the implications of this text for our ongoing conversation about women and authority in the church (though I'm sure some of this will become clear), I'm convinced we need to spend this morning in Paul's teaching on marriage in Ephesians 5 **for the sake of every marriage among us and around us.**

And before those of you who are single or divorced assume that this passage and teaching **is not for you**, can I invite you to acknowledge with me that every one of our lives is impacted by the health of marriages – whether our own marriage, or that of

our parents, or our siblings, friends, children and neighbors. A text like Ephesians 5:18-33 is not just for the married among us. It speaks to and impacts all of us.

And we know it.

Which is why Ephesians 5 is so **vital** for us to hear and understand.

And I'll say right now, that this is a **surprising** text, a **counter-cultural** text, an **unpopular** text – though maybe *not in the way we've often believed or perceived it.*

In truth, when Paul wrote these words to Christians in the first century, they must have been **stunned** with his obvious implications.

*And I hope we will feel this afresh today.*

So, if you have a Bible, can I encourage you to open it with me to our text – to Ephesians 5:18-33. I want you to actually look at it with me – because how the text is laid out in our Bibles often shapes our understanding of what it says.

And if your Bible is like mine – I suspect you'll notice that there are some paragraph divisions within this text – and possibly even an **editorial heading**. The one in my Bible here provides a heading before v.21 that says: "**Instructions for Christian Households**". You might have something similar – before v.21 – or more likely, **before v.22**. Traditionally, this has been where English translations have divided the text.

And although this may seem **incredibly minor** to many of us, I hope to show how hugely impacting this is...

**And here's why:** If you have your Bible open in front of you – and I were to ask you to start reading for me where Paul begins to speak to Christian marriages – to the relationship of husbands and wives – **Where would you begin? At what verse?**

Because unless you are reading Paul's letter to the Ephesians in the original Greek (shout out to Daniel McDougall) – your translation is divided up into paragraphs, and some parts even provide headings. Headings, which are not a part of the inspired text, but the addition of Bible editors *in the hope of helping us navigate the text well.*

*Thank you Bible editors → sometimes!*

Because this is one text where the common editorial practice, rather than helping us understand Paul's teaching, **often misleads us.**

And I say this because I suspect many of you, in answer to my question, "Where does Paul begin to speak about and to Christian marriages?" – would start reading at v.22. Right? Where Paul writes, "**Wives, submit to your husbands... [or] Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord...**"

Which is what v.22 says, right?

And yet, in the original language, in koine Greek, this verse (v.22) is not the beginning of Paul's teaching, but the **continuation** of what comes before it.

And we know this because, in the original language, there is **no verb** in v.22.

The verse literally reads, "***Wives to your husbands as to the Lord.***"

Which is not to say that this verse does not truly teach that wives are to submit to their husbands. Paul says that. But my point is that this verse – this teaching – flows out of what Paul teaches in the previous verse – **vs.21** – where we hear this foundational and radical instruction. Speaking to husbands and wives, Paul says,

***"Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ."***

This **verse** – Ephesians 5:21 – is the **beginning** and foundation of Paul's teaching in Ephesians on Christian marriage. The foundation of Paul's teaching to husbands and wives. Ephesians 5:21 – "***Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.***"

And not only that.

Not only is this verse and teaching the **beginning** of Paul's teaching in Ephesians on Christian marriage – but it is also the **conclusion** of Paul's teaching on what **being filled with the Spirit** brings about in our lives.

Which is why I've chosen our text for today as beginning not with Ephesians 5:22, or 21, but with v.18 – where Paul commands the Ephesians (and us) to "***Be filled with the Spirit...***"

And note this is a command given to **the whole community** of Christians – **men and women**... young and old... married and single...

***"Be filled with the Spirit..."***

And I apologize for all the Greek grammar and sentence structure references in my teaching today – but this is vital for us to understand – because what can seem like an isolated command in Ephesians 5:21 – “*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ*” – is actually the last of four vital expressions and trajectories of being filled with the Spirit, according to Paul...

So, let me read this part for us again – beginning in v.18. Paul writes, “*Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit...*” That’s the core command in this passage – the imperative: “*Be filled with the Spirit...*” To which Paul then outlines **four evidences or consequences of the Spirit's empowerment...** He writes,

“*Be filled with the Spirit, addressing/speaking to one another with psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...*” And lastly, “*submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.*”

**It's not complicated.** Paul is simply saying that those who are **filled** with the Spirit **will** use their words to encourage one another; **will** overflow in heartfelt worship to God; **will** be thankful; and **will submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.**

And note right away that Paul’s implicit **and** explicit emphasis here is that **submission is something that is to characterize the life of every Christian – not just one subset of Christians** – and specific to our text here and the context of addressing marriage relationship – **not just wives.**

No, according to the Apostle Paul, **submission is something that is to characterize the life of every Christian.**

According to the Apostle Paul, submission is not an essential female quality and calling. No. *It is an essential Christian quality and calling.*

Just as everyone of us is called to *be filled with the Spirit*, every one of us is to manifest this, to express this, by *submitting to one another* out of reverence for Christ.

Which, as I said at the start, is surprising, counter-cultural, and unpopular – in our day – and, equally so, though in a different way, in Paul's time.

So, let me just say it: for many in our day, maybe some of us, submission is a dirty word – something to be purged from wherever it is found. It is a diminishing word. An oppressive word. A word not to be used. An idea and reality to be *cast off and left behind* - aggressively and immediately...

For some of us, it **surprises** us to hear this word used here in relation to the life of the gospel...

But in Paul's day, it was **no surprise**. It was simply assumed – and affirmed – everywhere – **as the sole and primary duty of a woman** – whether as a daughter to her father or a wife to her husband.

So, when I said that this text was surprising, counter-cultural and unpopular in Paul's day – I wasn't speaking **at all** about its instruction for wives to submit to their husbands.

**This was assumed and accepted – and endorsed by the state!**

But **what was** surprising, counter-cultural and unpopular – if not, utterly unheard-of in Paul's day – was this suggestion – and more than that, **explicit apostolic instruction** – for all Christians – **men and women – husbands and wives** – to "**submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.**"

And if I'm honest, this is where I have **a hard time** with the mass of Christian teaching out there today and in many times and places that has had the **sole intent** of teaching that **the primary duty** of a woman in marriage is to **submit** to her husband, and **the primary duty** of a man in marriage is to be the **head** of his wife (in the sense of, *being the leader and decider in all things*). This is what is taught in so many churches and homes, conferences and books.

And yet the **primary** duty, according to Paul, for husbands and wives, is named for us here in v.21, and it is the same for both husband and wife. It is in fact addressed to **every Christian, in every relationship** – "**Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ**".

This is the **primary duty** of every husband and every wife – not the casting off of submission, but the beautiful ideal and pursuit of **mutual submission** – in honor of Christ. And not as an enforced-posture, but as a Spirit-inspired gift of grace.

This is God's design and vision for Christian marriage...

**"Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ."** (Eph 5:21)

And then, having said this, Paul goes on to elaborate what this means and looks like worked out in the **primary relationships** of our lives (in our covenant, our blood and our working relationships)...

It's not an exhaustive list. There are countless other relationships where mutual submission is to be worked out. Paul is simply here following **the common framework** for giving ethical instruction in his day.

And we need to understand this—because this hugely helps us make sense of what Paul is saying here...

And to help us wrap our minds around this, I'm curious if anyone remembers the 2004 short-lived reality tv show called "**WifeSwap**"? Just the title sounds horrific for many reasons. I did not follow the show, but I understood the premise.

Which was this: that two families would **swap mom's for ten days**.

For the **first five days** the *visiting* mom had to function under the normal rules of the house, and for the **last 5 days** the *visiting* mom ran the house *her way*. And so

before it all got rolling, each mom would sit down and write out **her rules for the house** – how things were to be run—her “**household code**” we’ll call it.

And in many regards, is a great example of something that was **very real** in the world of Paul’s day.

Not swapping wives, or individual families sitting down and writing out their own household code, but the ruling thinkers of the day (mostly philosophers) writing out a “**household code**” that would reflect the values and guide the practice of the society in **their primary relationships** – which for them meant, marriage, family and household servants or slaves.

Aristotle did this.

The Romans, the Stoics, the Egyptians did this—each writing up a household code that was to shape and guide to the lives of their people.

And so, if you were a part of this society, your marriage, family and working relationships were **governed** by the society’s “**household code**”.

*Are you with me? (oh, I wish I could see your faces to gauge whether I've lost you or you are locked in with me. I'm going hope for the latter...)*

Now, it’s worth noting that, in Paul’s day, Greco-Roman household codes were addressed **ENTIRELY** to the **husband and father** as the master of the household, and was filled with instructions for how **he** was to **rule over** his household – how to **rule over** his wife, his children, and his slaves.

*His utter authority was given, and his wife, children and slaves' utter submission was assumed.*

And so here, Paul (inspired by the Spirit of Jesus) is writing a "household code" for Christians. A household code that reflects the values of God's new society. A household code that dramatically and explicitly confronted and overturned the values of the society around him.

### **How? How did he confront and overturn the values of his day?**

Well, in a society that extolled the **unquestionable** authority of husbands over their wives and children, and with this, the **utter submission** of all to the father and husband – Paul prefaces everything he says with a call for **mutual submission** – out of reverence for Christ...

**Think about this with me:** If the submission of **one** implies the authority of the other, then **mutual submission** implies the **shared authority of both**. Which means, in a Christian marriage, just as there are times where a **wife** will recognize and submit to the God-given authority of her husband, there are times where a **husband** will recognize and submit to the God-given authority of his wife.

This is the clear and shocking implication of Paul's teaching in v.21 – "**Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.**"

As one historian attests,

"This seems to have **no precedent whatsoever** in earlier Jewish (including the OT) or Greco-Roman literature." (Ben Witherington).

**Ok, but what about Paul's explicit teaching that the husband is the "head" of his wife?** What does mutual submission mean when, according to Paul, the husband is the head of his wife? (this is something I've wrestled with a lot over the years).

And there are two critical pieces that have helped me make sense of how these two realities work together.

The first is how Paul himself **defines** "headship" within this passage.

Because, in the household codes of his day, to be the "head" meant to **rule over the other**.

In many ways, this is what ancient **household codes** were all about – *how the husband and father – the man – was to rule over his household and ensure, even enforce, the total submission of every other member of his household.*

But here, Paul **defines headship in a radically different way**. In the Way of Jesus – who "*loved the church and gave himself up for her.*" These are Paul's own words in v.25. **"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her..."**

Do we hear this? **Husbands – do you hear this?** Those of you who hope and pray to one day be a husband – do you hear this?

In Paul's day, being the head of the home meant **ruling the home, being the Lord of your wife and household**. But Paul says that in God's kingdom, in Christ, being the "head" of your wife means **loving her through self-sacrifice – that's the very**

**definition of agape love – laying down your life for her.** This is headship as Paul

defines and describes it.

As John Stott, a guardian of historic orthodox evangelical faith, has argued – **nothing** of what Paul says here suggests that headship means that the husband is **always supposed to have the final word**, or that **what the husband wants goes**, or that the needs and dreams of the husband **always come first**, or that the husband is to be **exempt** from doing dishes or knowing his way around the kitchen or a dirty diaper.

Paul's teaching on headship in no way suggests this.

No, in speaking of the husband as the "head" of his wife, Paul is naming a call and responsibility for husbands to lay down their lives for their wives, for their family, and for others. **In the Way of Jesus – who is**, as Paul states, "**the head of the Church—his body – of which He is Saviour.**" (Ephesians 5:23). And note here that Paul does not here refer to Christ as **Lord**, but as **Saviour**. As John Stott explains this, "the characteristic of this headship is not **lordship**, but **servanthood**." Self-sacrifice...

Which should not surprise us, for it was Jesus himself who said to the apostles in **Mark 10:42-45**,

"*You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be a servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many*".

This is Paul's vision and definition of headship in marriage – the self-denying love of Christ alive in a husband for his wife...

And with this, second, let me take a brief moment on the actual word translated here for us as "head". Because this word says a lot to us – on its own. At least we think it does.

It's the Greek word "**kephale**". And I'll be honest, many books have been written on the historical meaning of **this ONE word** – arguing very different things. Those engaged in the literature on this refer to it as "*the battle of the lexicons*" (lexicon being an ancient word for dictionary).

So, without going into all of that (and I'd be happy to do so with those interested), at the most basic level, we need to know that in NT Greek this word **kephale** – which when used **literally** referred to **the head of a body**, when used **metaphorically**, rarely meant "**ruler**" or "**leader**". Some argue for this, and I'm convinced the historical record is against them. Instead, it referred most often to "**headwaters**" or "**fountainhead**" – in the sense of being the source of a river – the source of its' life, or the source of its' growth.

Now NT Greek had a word for *ruler* or *leader* that Paul often used in his writing – it's the Greek word **arche** or **archon**. But Paul **never uses** this word when referring to a husband in marriage. No, according to Paul, the husband is not the **archon** of his wife. He is her **kephale**. Her source of life. Her source of growth.

So, husbands, let me ask you – are you being a source of life to your wife, a source of growth? Causing her to become more radiant?

Or are you ruling over her in a way that diminishes her?

If the latter, then it's time to learn from Christ a new kind of headship – by the empowering of the Spirit – in the way of Jesus – in self-giving love and mutual submission.

This is the duty and calling and responsibility of every husband in marriage – to be the *kephale* of his wife.

As many have said before, we tend to read the call for **wives to submit** and **husbands to love** – and conclude that the wife gets the short end of the stick, and the husband gets off easy. As though the wife is called to deny herself and the husband just needs to be romantic from time to time.

**But let me ask you:**

What does it mean to *submit*—

but to set aside your rights and desires for the sake of another?

And what does it mean to *love like Christ*—

but to give up your rights and desires for the sake of another?

"In the end", again to quote John Stott,

"'submission' and 'love' are two aspects of the very same thing, namely of that selfless self-giving which is the foundation of an enduring and growing marriage."

The kind of marriage to which Christ calls us.

What a beautiful and liberating call in marriage – *not to the eradication of submission, but to the loving act of submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ* – for which we all need the power of the Spirit...

Let me close with a story from my marriage...

About 18 years, Janet and I faced a major decision that would have major consequences. I was in the midst of my Masters degree at Regent at the time. I had **one year left** and then I'd be done and ready to begin my pastoral career—to pursue opportunities and go wherever God would take us.

Janet had just stepped away from being a **high school art teacher**, and had a job offer before her that required **a minimum two-year commitment**. Her experience teaching high school had been very hard on her (a bad fit for her), and as a result she was pretty beaten up, lacking confidence – and I knew that she needed something that would use and develop her gifts, a job where she'd work on a team and be built up again as a person, as a leader, as a woman. And the opportunity before her promised all that and more...

But at the same time, here I was, one year left and then I'd be able to pursue associate pastoral roles and begin my career. I could farm out resumes across the country. **Wherever.**

We had invested so much in getting me to this point... And if Janet took the job, I would be either majorly limiting my options for where I could pursue work **or** putting off really starting my career for another year... **A lot was at stake for me.** And we both knew it...

And so over the course of a while, we weighed options, talked about things, prayed about it, and, in many regards, Janet expressed her willingness to let me discern what we'd do.

And as I prayed through it, and wrestled through it, I felt God challenge and inviting me to recognize that *our marriage is not just about me*. It's not about **us** pursuing **my** dreams and calling. It's not about Janet putting aside herself and her gifts so that I could pursue my calling. Her calling isn't just to be a pastor's wife. She has her own calling, her own dreams and passions, and in that moment, I felt the Spirit calling me to stand behind her in the pursuit of her dreams, to sacrifice my plan for how the coming year would unfold, to take my cross and follow Him by *following HER*

– trusting that God would work with this and through it, and unfold His good plans for me as I choose to set my plans aside for Janet...

And it was one of the best things that could have happened **for Janet**, and in the end, **for me**. It made my commute to Regent horrible, put an obstacle in my expectations for the following year, and it was humbling giving up a very nice apartment in White Rock for the single-pane windows and concrete carpet of campus life. But that was where the shadow of the cross was falling for me, and that was where the Spirit was leading for us, and so that is where we went... in obedience to Christ.

I'm hesitant to use myself as a positive example of headship and mutual submission in marriage – because the truth is I so many more stories of where I have utterly failed in this...

But I wanted to share this story because it was for me an undeniable moment where God called me to step beyond simply **understanding and agreeing with the idea of mutual submission** – to **actually living it out in my marriage**.

And I know that this story highlights mutual submission in the context of **a major decision**, but most of life is not made up of major decisions. It is filled with little things (*who will do the dishes after you've both worked long all day, who will choose which household project to prioritize, etc...*)—and that is where mutual submission is learned and lived out. This where a husband and wife are invited to show and live in the grace that Jesus Christ is Lord – not one of us...

And because HE is LORD – because He is in charge, **we can serve one another...**

**Let's pray...**

**Come to Christ – share communion together...**