

Marriage is God's Idea Power

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This morning we conclude our series of messages entitled "Marriage is God's Idea." Marriage was not invented by a group of people sitting around a camp fire in the Late Bronze Age. Nor was it invented by a District Judge in California. Marriage is God's idea. It is one of three institutions that did not evolve as result of human thought. These three institutions are God's ideas: family, the church and the state. In God's Word he addresses his plan for each of these. There is nothing in the Bible about schools, community centers, art galleries or United Way. Why? Because God did not invent those. They are all wonderful things, but they were not ordained by God. When we get married, we put ourselves under God's authority about what works and what does not work. There are principles that make marriage work, and if we violate those principles, our marriage will not work. We have looked at four of those principles: commitment, priority, friendship and mystery. Today we discuss what Paul means by a wife submitting to her husband and a husband as head of the wife. It is the principle of power through submission. If you would like to continue to strengthen your marriage, I encourage you to participate in a short term study group on Sunday mornings called: "Simple Secrets of A Great Marriage." See the "Connect" brochure for more information.

Ephesians 5:21-33

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

²²Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. ²³For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. ²⁴Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

²⁵Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. ²⁸In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church-- ³⁰for we are members of his body. ³¹"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." ³²This is a profound mystery--but I am talking about Christ and the church. ³³However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

The whole understanding of submission hinges on this key verse: “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Some preachers skip this verse and launch into the next verse: “Wives submit to your husbands.” They proclaim that the husband is to be the decision maker and absolute leader of the household. Therefore, what he says goes, and the wife is not to question him. When you look at this passage in its context, it is impossible to interpret “wives submit to your husbands” in that way. In the chapters leading up to this passage, Paul has described who we are in Christ and described the Spirit-filled life. This is the core principle about power in marriage: if you are going to have a fulfilling marriage it will come through the Spirit-filled ability to serve your spouse—to take yourself out of the center and to put the needs of other people ahead of your own. Self-centeredness is a major problem in marriage relationships. The inability of couples to submit to one another is at the root of many other problems in a marriage.

Paul lays this as the cornerstone of a fulfilling marriage: the ability to give yourself to another person; to give up your rights; to defer your desires to help another person reach their desires. These things are not instinctive! Just visit the two-year-old Sunday School class anytime, and you will see they are not instinctive. Selfishness is instinctive. Only by the Spirit of God can we be re-born to a non-self-centered life.

Generally speaking, two people get married because they like each other. Exceptions include arranged marriages and the 30-year-old who marries a 97-year-old billionaire! You marry someone because you think they are wonderful. When the honeymoon ends, suddenly you begin to see how selfish your spouse is. Certainly your spouse is more selfish than you are! When the selfishness

surfaces, many couples strike a bargain: “If you won’t bug me about this, I won’t bug you about that.” Seeds of estrangement are sown. Neither gives up his/her selfishness. Each remains totally selfish. “I’m going to do this. You are going to do that.” We just tolerate each other’s selfishness.

Fulfilling marriages make a 90 degree turn. Each person begins to take seriously his own self-centeredness and begins to recognize the destructiveness it is causing in his own life and his marriage. We have to admit our powerlessness over our selfishness and pray for the Holy Spirit to release us from it. Seldom do both marriage partners get to this place at the same time. One brings their selfishness to God and starts the process of letting the Holy Spirit shape and mold them into the image of Christ. Overcoming our selfishness is the work of the Spirit. I cannot overcome my selfishness—it is the core sin. I want my way instead of God’s way. I want my way instead of what is best for my spouse. I have to confess my selfishness to God, repent of it and ask him to become the center of my life. Until I yield my self-centeredness to God, I will not be able to serve another person.

When Paul talks about submission and headship, he assumes that both partners have laid down their self-centeredness. Otherwise it makes no sense. In the preceding chapter, Paul says, “Put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; ...put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.” (Ephesians 4:22-24) Rather than being self-absorbed or full of self-pity, the Holy Spirit changes us and makes us humble and gentle and patient so that we can love unselfishly. (Ephesians 4:2)

The other principles that we have talked about in this passage also help us to interpret what submission means. Submission occurs within the context of

commitment. Two persons have entered into a public, legal, binding and exclusive covenant to share all of life together. Submission can only occur within the context of total commitment to each other. Submission can only occur when both partners have forsaken all others and made their relationship to each other the number one human relationship in their lives. Submission assumes friendship. Two persons standing side by side facing in the same direction with the same goal of becoming like Jesus Christ. Marriage partners encourage and help each other to grow toward Christ likeness.

The position of friendship—side by side—is a key to understanding submission. Most of the misinterpretations of this passage assume that Paul is advocating a hierarchy in the home. The husband is the head of the house, the wife is second, the kids are third and the dog is fourth! There is a military style chain of command in the home. Advocates of this position point to the scripture in Genesis where God says to Eve, “Your husband will rule over you.” (Genesis 3:16) This picture of a hierarchy in the home completely misses what the scripture teaches about marriage and family.

Paul quotes the passage from Genesis 2 which spells out what God intended in marriage: “a man shall leave his father and his mother and shall cleave unto his wife and the two shall become one.” This verse follows the creation account of human beings which says: “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1:27) What these passages tell us is that husband and wife were created fully equal. Both are created in the image of God. Both are required to break from their parents and start a new life together putting each other as top priority. When God speaks to Eve “your husband shall rule over you,” it is after

the fall. God sadly, regretfully describes what is going to happen in a fallen world. God is not advocating that a husband should rule over his wife. Rather he is just stating that is what will happen because the male is physically stronger. Our fallen world is a world of struggle for power among self-centered persons. Who is going to be in charge? Who is going to rule over whom? Hierarchies and chains of command are attempts to bring order to a chaotic fallen world. In the Garden of Eden, no human hierarchy is present. Adam and Eve together are to rule over the animals, but there is nothing said about Adam ruling over Eve before the Fall. Hierarchies between humans are the result of living in a fallen world.

When Jesus Christ came to earth, he came to begin the process of restoring the fallen world to what God intended it to be. He established the Kingdom of God upon the earth. That Kingdom is growing and will one day be completed in its fullness when Christ returns. The created order in the Garden of Eden will be restored.

When Jesus came, he started turning upside down the orders in this fallen world—especially the hierarchies. Let me share with you just a few examples.

Mark 10:42-45

Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ⁴³Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. ⁴⁵For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

The Gentiles are those who were not the people of God. They represent the fallen world order where there are rulers who exercise authority over others. In the Kingdom of God, it is different. Jesus did not come to be served but to

serve and to sacrifice his life for us. Those who are first become servants to others.

In John 13, Jesus joins his disciples for the Passover feast. It is their last meal together before his death. Normally there would be a servant present to wash everyone's feet before the meal. No servant was there and none of the disciples was about to volunteer for the menial job of washing the others feet.

The evening meal was being served, ...³Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; ⁴so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. ⁵After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him...

¹²When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them.

¹³"You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. ¹⁴Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. ¹⁵I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. ¹⁶I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them. John 13:2-6, 12-16

Jesus makes it clear that to be Lord of all means to be servant of all. He came to serve and turned the understanding of leadership upside down. It is interesting that corporate America is discovering that the hierarchical style of leadership is ineffective. Several corporations are advocating servant leadership styles. Jim Collins author of Good to Great says that the top level five leaders in the country possess a quality of humility. The Kingdom of God is being restored in many ways!

Paul summarizes what the Kingdom of God looks like when he says: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female for you are all one in Christ." (Galatians 3:28)

God's intended order was not hierarchy for the world or for marriage. We are all equal in God's sight. To submit to one another means to serve one another as Christ came to serve us. Paul then tells wives to submit to or serve their husbands as they would serve Christ. Paul calls husbands "the head of his wife" as Christ is the head of the church. Jesus demonstrated for us what leadership or headship means. It means to be a servant. So the husband as the head is to serve his wife with the same sacrificial love with which Christ served the church.

Paul's words turned the world in which he lived upside down. In the ancient Middle East (as well as today) women were considered property. They had no rights. They could be easily divorced at the whim of their husbands. They were not to even be addressed in public by men. Paul addresses women directly: "Wives, submit to your husbands." By addressing them directly he has just raised their status to equality with men. He tells husbands to love their wives using the highest expression of love: agape. He does not tell them to love their wives with eros or romantic love. He tells them to love them with agape—which means a love that seeks the welfare of the other. Paul describes agape love in I Corinthians 13: "Love is not self-seeking. It keeps no record of wrongs. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."

Paul spends three times as many verses talking to husbands about loving their wives. He makes it clear that agape love means a self-sacrificing love. He is taking the hierarchical view of marriage and turning it on its head. He spends more time explaining that to the men because he knows that is where the change needs to be initiated in a male dominated society.

Wives serve your husbands in everything. Husbands serve your wives in everything. It is not a matter of hierarchy—one ruling over the other. It is a matter of submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. We affirm and support each other's gifts. We look for ways to draw out the best in each other. We put aside our own interests and desires to help the other fulfill their interests and desires.

Marriage is a profound mystery. Two persons committed to share all of life together and help each other toward the goal of becoming like Jesus Christ. The more like Jesus we become, the more we serve others. Are you living by the old order of the fallen world or by the new order of the Kingdom of God?