

**Introduction:**

- A. Marriage is not an easy thing to understand. Years ago I heard someone observe how out-of-whack it is that it is far easier to get a marriage license than a driver's license. Marriage is hard sometimes. I know. We've been married 37 years. One reason marriage is hard is that we don't really know how to think of it. Sometimes in premarital counseling I'll ask couples who their marriage models are; whose marriages do they admire? For some it is their parents or grandparents. For others, friends or mentors. But no one has ever mentioned the model I want to show you today—Christ and his bride, the church.
- B. At the end of the passage of Scripture we'll study today, the apostle Paul quotes the most important verse in the Bible on marriage, from **Gen. 2:24**: *"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh."* Then Paul says, I imagine with a hush, *"This is a 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."* Wait, Paul. Are you saying that great verse on marriage is actually about Christ and the church?
- C. The letter of *Ephesians* was written to help us understand how rich and significant the church is. Now near the end of this letter, Paul tells us that for the church to shine brightly in this dark world, Christ must transform us as husbands and wives, parents and children, servants and masters because that's where the world sees us up close and personal. Two weeks ago I showed you what is so unique about Christian submission. I told you that Jesus took that scowling, heavy-handed word 'submit' and baptized it in a servant's basin of water. Last Sunday, Raymond Wunderlich and I talked through some of the practical implications of these commands which Paul gave to wives and husbands. Now today, we go through this passage once more, but we are here especially to see a **marriage model** every Christian couple can and must use. Turn to **Eph 5:22-33**.

**I. IF CHRISTIANS ARE TO UNDERSTAND MARRIAGE PROPERLY WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHRIST AND HIS BRIDE, THE CHURCH**

- A. V.23 says, *"Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior."* Christ is his bride's authority, leader, and shepherd because, for one thing, he is her Savior. *"You are not your own,"* Paul wrote elsewhere, *"you were bought with a price."* Consequently, Christ's bride, the church, submits to him gladly with no other coercion from Christ but his abiding and persevering love.
- B. V.26-27 says, *"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 other words, Christ loved his bride when she was unlovely, unpromising, unresponsive, stained and wrinkled. **Jesus married down.**

In **Ezek. 16** God tells his people a story, how when they were born they were abandoned, umbilical cord uncut, bloody and naked, in an open field. *"Then I passed by,"* says God, *"and saw you kicking about in your blood, and as you lay there in your blood I said to you, 'Live!' I made you grow like a plant of the field, you grew up and developed and became the most beautiful of jewels."* Then God says that later he passed by and looked at her *"and saw that you were old enough for love... I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you... and you became mine."* God tells how he dressed her—his people—in the most beautiful garments and jewelry, fed her the finest food and *"your fame spread among the nations on account of your beauty, because the splendor I had given you made your beauty perfect, declares the Sovereign Lord"* [v.14]. But, tragically, God says she threw all that away to pursue other lovers, *"acting like a brazen prostitute."*

That story stands behind this passage in Eph. 5, for here Jesus finds that bride—Jews and Gentiles alike—stained and wrinkled, and cleanses her *"to present her to himself as a radiant church."* God has reclaimed us as his people and sent his son to make his shabby and soiled people beautiful and radiant again. Right now, we are in that engagement time when Jesus' bride is bathing in the clean water of

the gospel. When Christ returns we will rise to meet him like a bride coming down the aisle, and *the splendor he has given us will make our beauty perfect*.

Let's dwell on this a moment: Do you know why marriage is so hard sometimes? Because through it, Christ is cleansing both wives and husbands to be his bride. When we try to fulfill our God-given roles of submission and sacrificial love, we see how weak and unholy we are. That whining selfishness, that growl of pride, that deep-set wrinkle of meanness that we see, well, Jesus is working those ugly things out of our lives. You have to see it before you can change it. And marriage is wonderfully designed to help us see our weaknesses, and give us little room to escape. Illus.: I have a cartoon of a couple sitting with their pastor to discuss their wedding. The guy is saying, *"We'd like you to leave out the poorer, sickness, and death parts—they're a little dark."* True enough, but it is those dark parts of marriage where Christ is cleansing his bride—husbands and wives alike. (And, I might add, it is similarly true in the dark, hard parts of single life.)

- C. V.29 says that Christ feeds and cares for his church because she is his body. Paul gets that from that verse in **Gen. 2:24** that says a husband and wife become one flesh—one body. Since Jesus has married the church, he and they are one body! Oh, we say that God loves us, but do we see this picture?! **God in Christ loves us so much that he marries us!** He joins himself to us and calls us one, as husband and wife. That's how God describes our relationship! Husband and wife. **Christ feeds and cares for us as his church because if we're not healthy, he suffers; if we do not shine brightly, his light is also dimmed.** As our husband, he has bound his strength to our weakness. His success depends on us. So he takes care of us.
- D. The marriage of Christ and his church is the paradigm for Christian marriages [P. O'Brien]. The relationship of Christ and the church is not *like* our marriages; our Christian marriages are *like* the marriage of Christ and his bride, the church. That means a Christian husband's love is to be redemptive and nourishing, making his wife clean and healthy. It means that a Christian wife's submission to her husband is fulfilling, in the way that the church's submission to Christ is fulfilling. We as a church are at our best when we are gladly submitting to Christ, and what's more, Jesus himself is at his best when we do that. **A Christian marriage is a miniature of the church and Christ.**

So now to us as Christian wives and husbands:

## II. THE CHRISTIAN WIFE SEES HER ROLE BY LOOKING AT CHRIST'S CHURCH (5:22-24)

- A. V.22: *"Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord... [v.24] Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything."* Then, in summing up down in v.33, *"the wife must respect her husband."* A Christian wife submits to her husband in everything because her husband, supervised by Christ, is a man on a mission. This discussion of a wife's submission is usually cast as an issue of whether or not a wife must do as she is told. But honestly, in our marriage and other marriages I know, that's almost never the issue. I know that wives of really domineering husbands have to work this out and it is hard (and we tried to address that last week), but I don't think that's really the point here.
- B. Your husband wants deeply to make a difference in this world—he wants to bring something to it; to bring some small measure of order, to push back some boundary, to solve some problem. Illus.: We moved to western Pennsylvania in 1984, in the depths of the steel mill crash. There were thousands of people out of work—men and women alike. But it was the men who often didn't cope well. It was the men who were getting drunk and doing crazy things, who were dangerous. I think it was because **men without work have lost a sense of who they are.** I don't think that is so deeply true for women.

Go back to Adam in the Garden of Eden? **Gen. 2:15** says, *"The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it."* Then v.18, *"The LORD God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.'"* Then it says that God brought all the animals to Adam to name them, and again it says, *"But for Adam no suitable helper was found... Then*

*the Lord God made a woman... and he brought her to the man.” Adam could not do what God put him here to do without a “suitable helper.” That is still true. Wives come alongside their husbands, respectful of his calling and desire, and become that “suitable helper.”*

That doesn’t mean a wife is a husband’s first mate, or administrative assistant. It goes far deeper than that. A godly wife submits herself to helping her husband “work the garden and take care of it,” to help him “name the animals” in life somehow. How she helps him takes lots of different forms, but a Christian wife is God-equipped to do that—to help her husband find his way to doing something that matters, and the wife who does that finds that role deeply satisfying and good, because God gave her that desire. That’s what submission is really aiming to do.

- C. Wives, can you do that? Can you help your husband be braver? Can you help him find his way? Can you help him bend this God-given desire within him to God-given purposes in his life? Actually, I’m sure you *can*. Will you?

### III. THE CHRISTIAN HUSBAND SEES HIS ROLE BY LOOKING AT CHRIST (5:25-33)

- A. The first lesson a Christian husband learns from Christ is that his wife’s weaknesses become the focus of his love. We believe that, through the cleansing power of Christ working through a husband, you can help your wife become a holy and healthy person. Other husbands may see the flaws and needs of their wives and wonder if they made a mistake. **Christian husbands know that this is why they love.**

Working in league with Christ, husbands can be agents of powerful and deep change in their wives, not through criticism or complaining, but through grace. When we show grace—forgiving, not keeping score—that grace *heals* our wives. Grace cleans and blesses. Grace gives your wife space to grow holy. Husbands learn that the loving sacrifices of listening, serving and prayer work wonders—not just in keeping the peace, but in making a woman radiantly beautiful, from the inside out. **Many husbands think the best thing they can do is to keep their wives happy. Not true. Jesus shows us that the best thing we can do is help our wives become holy!**

When we do that, the wife benefits, of course, but so does the husband. Jesus did this for us so he could “*present [us] to himself as a radiant church.*” His delight as well as hers. A godly woman is a husband’s greatest joy and delight, and like Jesus, he can have a hand in bringing forth that beauty.

- B. There is another aspect of the husband’s role. **V.28-29** says, “*He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it.*” When a husband is too busy or too tired to care for his wife, he is going through life with his hands tied behind his back. We saw before that if a man is to do what God has set before him in his work, his family, his outside relationships, he needs “*a helper suitable for him.*” His wife is that helper. She is not his gofer; they are one body. “*The two will become one flesh.*”

When a man’s wife languishes, when she is weak or fearful or sinning, he is half the man he could be. A wise husband invests time and sacrifice in his relationship with his wife because, ultimately, it is good for him as well as being good for her, when she grows in holiness and health. We’re in this together. After all, if Christ’s bride must be healthy in order for *him* to be effective in the world, then surely we also must take care of our brides, not only for their good, but for our own!

- C. Husbands, is this how you think about your marriage? Could it be that you approach marriage just trying to keep the peace, just trying “to keep the little woman happy”? There is no room in this picture of marriage for an overbearing, domineering husband, but neither is there room for the passive, “whatever-you-say-dear” husband. Our model is Christ; Christ with his basin and towel, Christ dying to love. How can we be husbands, then, who won’t even do the dishes or vacuum the floor, who won’t turn off the TV to listen or go for a walk together, who never pray for our wife’s holiness or health or talk of Scripture together? Thankfully, we, too, are the bride of Christ, and he will help us become holy and clean, too, through the word-washing of the Gospel. But it is time—*high time*—we stepped up to our responsibilities.

**Conclusion:**

So there you have it. When the Bible says in Gen. 2:24, *“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh,”* the marriage God had in mind was his own. Adam and Eve, Lee and Susan, we’re all just miniatures of the marriage between Christ and his beloved bride, the people of God.

When a Christian wife needs a model, she is to look at what God has made the church to be. And when a Christian husband wants to know what he should be like, he is to look at Christ, the perfect husband. That is a marriage made in heaven!