

Turning Points – Marriage

This month we're talking about turning points in our lives. Parenting adult children, caring for aging parents, dealing with crises, etc. Today we're talking about marriage.

Now, just a few things before we dive in.

First, I want to remind you that every week we want you to **send us any questions** you have about these topics. Questions about the biblical passage, or things that are unclear, or maybe you want advice on a specific situation in your life.

Whatever question you have, you can go to gracechurch.us/thegoodlife and send it in. And then, on week 5, Tim, Amy, and I will give mini sermons to respond to your questions.

Another thing I want to say. Today's topic is marriage. And I have been married for a whopping three and a half years. So, no. **I am not a seasoned** expert on the topic.

Now, I tend to think Liv and I have a pretty *healthy* marriage, but come back to me after we've been married for *50 years* and I pour out my wisdom. Today we're going to focus on what Scripture has to say, and I have just as much to learn as anyone.

Finally, I want to acknowledge two groups of people here at Grace.

First, **those of you who are single** here at Grace. Whether you've always been single or you're single again, you can feel really excluded when this topic comes up. I would know. I was single till I was 34.

So if that's you, I gave a **sermon about singleness** back in 2017 that I happen to be pretty proud of. So if you're curious, go back and watch that. I put the link in the app notes.

Also, this is a series about our **whole spiritual family**. So even with a topic like this, you can learn what your married brothers and sisters in Christ are facing, and hopefully, how to support them even as they support you.

The other group of people I want to acknowledge are those of you who have experienced great **pain or abuse or loss** in marriage. I know this can be a painful topic. Maybe it feels like reopening old wounds. So if you'll allow me, I'd like to pray for you before we begin.

[PRAY]

MUTUAL SUBMISSION

Grab a Bible and turn to **Ephesians 5:21**.

A bit of background before we dive in. In Ancient Greece and Rome, **philosophers** spent a lot of time talking about society. What's the best way to live? How should people behave?

One of the ways they did this was through something called "**household codes**," breaking down the different roles in a family and how each person should behave.

"Fathers should have dignity... Wives should be pure... children should be virtuous... servants should be hardworking..."

And when we look in the Bible, we see that writers like Peter and Paul do the exact same thing. What we're reading in Ephesians 5 and 6 is a household code - something which would have been very familiar to his first readers in Ephesus and surrounding cities - what is today western Turkey.

However, as Tim mentioned last week, the things Paul writes about here were **wildly countercultural**. Parents, have *compassion* on your children? Masters, *respect* your slaves? What?!?

This is not how household codes normally go. Paul is totally upending

his readers' expectations. Not because he's trying to be clever, but because this kind of radical living, Christlike relationships, should be normal in the kingdom of God.

It was wild stuff. Today's passage about marriage is no exception.

Ephesians 5:21-33

And further, submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

For wives, this means submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For a husband is the head of his wife as Christ is the head of the church. He is the Savior of his body, the church. As the church submits to Christ, so you wives should submit to your husbands in everything. For husbands, this means love your wives, just as Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her to make her holy and clean, washed by the cleansing of God's word. He did this to present her to himself as a glorious church without a spot or wrinkle or any other blemish. Instead, she will be holy and without fault. In the same way, husbands ought to love their wives as they love their own bodies. For a man who loves his wife actually shows love for himself. No one hates his own body but feeds and cares for it, just as Christ cares for the church. And we are members of his body.

As the Scriptures say, "A man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one." This is a great mystery, but it is an illustration of the way Christ and the church are one. So again I say, each man must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

Now, right out of the gate, I have to acknowledge something. This passage, specifically verse 22, has caused **a lot of pain in the modern church**.

"Wives, submit to your husbands." This verse, which is usually taken completely out of its surrounding context, has been used as a license for abuse, for neglect, even for violence.

It breaks my heart (and it would break Paul's heart) to know that these words have caused women to not seek help when they're being

abused, to blame *themselves* for their husbands' sin, or to suppress their own God-given skills and gifts and callings.

If that's a part of your story I am so very sorry.

We do **damage to the text** when we take it out of context and don't acknowledge the world behind it.

So let's talk about the world behind the text and see if we can get a better understanding of what Paul was actually saying.

First, the ancient Middle East - the world behind the text - was a **highly patriarchal society** where women were treated as little better than property and men dominated their households.

The philosopher Aristotle and the Jewish historian Josephus both taught that women were naturally inferior in character.

Some ancient marriages required **complete obedience** of the wife, to the point of needing permission to even visit their own family. Some wives weren't allowed to be seen by other men. Men could divorce their wives for just about any reason, leaving the woman with nothing.

So if that was the kind of culture Paul was writing into, then what is he actually saying here?

Well, first look at verse 21. This is the key to the entire passage. He says to everyone reading this letter, "**submit to one another** out of reverence for Christ."

What he's describing is what he talks about all the time in his letters. **Self-giving love**. Putting yourself below another person to lift *them* up. It's the bedrock of all Christian relationships and it's the foundation of this whole household code.

First, he starts with wives. Verse 22 doesn't even have a verb in it in the

Greek. It's just a continuation of that thought. "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ... wives, to your husbands." And this is important to Paul.

Remember, in the ancient world men alone received education, men provided for their families. Men were the protectors. Women, on the other hand, were insanely vulnerable.

The idea of ancient Christian women **throwing off their patriarchal shackles** may sound liberating to us, but realistically it would have been a death sentence back then.

I believe Paul is saying "wives, submit to your husbands. Christ saves the church. Your husband will protect you. **Don't use your newfound freedom in Jesus to tear into two what was meant to be one.**"

So Paul gets that out of the way. "Wives, obviously, submit to your husbands. You can't go it alone. Now husbands? We need to talk." The entire rest of the passage is focused on them.

Look at verse 25. The same foundation is there. "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ..."

"For husbands, this means love your wives, just as Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her." Ah yes, loving your wife means *death*. **Self-sacrifice**. Think about that. In ancient Ephesus:

Husbands - the unquestioned masters of the family - the kings of their castle - must give up their very lives in their love for their spouse. Mutual submission in a highly patriarchal society meant **a deep and profound dying to self for a husband**.

For wives in ancient Ephesus, this meant not rocking the boat. For husbands, this meant **a complete renunciation of power**.

Verse 28. "Husbands, you know how you feed and build and protect and

care for your **body**? Yeah, you need to treat your wife the same way. Your focus should be on **helping her thrive.**”

Believe me when I say this would have left Paul’s readers *flabbergasted*. This is no ordinary household code.

Paul always writes about self-giving love, and his take on marriage is no exception... In short,

A godly marriage is a race to the bottom.

And in the ancient world husbands had a really long way to go.

You can see why it’s crazy we make “wives, submit to your husbands” the big idea of this passage. What Paul says to *wives* should be sending shockwaves through our imagination.

Again, understanding the world *behind* the text gives the Bible so much more depth and meaning.

RACE TO THE BOTTOM

Now, what about the world *in front of* the text? What about our world? How do we take these words of Paul and apply them to our lives - to our marriages - in modern times?

Well, many believe this passage is pointing to some sort of **universal truth about the ideal roles** of men and women in all marriages in all times in all places. And that’s worthy of a much longer conversation.

But I believe what this passage is calling us to is something even bigger than marriage roles. It’s calling us to a posture that every married couple should take. So that’s what I want to focus on. Not just roles for husbands and wives.

Here’s why. We live in a culture where **gender roles** are not as uniform as they were in the ancient Middle East. Sometimes women are the

breadwinners and men stay home with the kids. Sometimes wives are the ones making family financial decisions because they're better equipped for it.

We still use that cliché, "the one who wears the pants in that relationship," right? Well, it's 2020 America. Everybody wears pants.

Whether we agree with these changing cultural norms or not, we have to acknowledge **expectations for marriages have changed.**

Sure, there are still plenty of domineering and controlling men in our culture just like there were in ancient Ephesus, but sometimes the roles are reversed. There are plenty of marriages where it's the wife who is the emotionally or physically abusive one.

My point is this. I don't think **our takeaway from Ephesians 5** should just be about gender roles. I believe our takeaway should be that this passage is a call to radical, self-giving love regardless of our cultural norms.

It's a call to self-sacrifice in our marriages, to mutual submission, to loving your spouse the way that Jesus loves us regardless of who wears the proverbial pants.

A godly marriage is a race to the bottom.

Yesterday, today, and always.

So here's what this means. For some wives, yes. You need to submit to your husband. You need to let him care for and protect you. Don't let your freedom in Jesus tear into two what was meant to be one.

But there are other wives who need to listen to the second part of this passage. You need to stop domineering and start loving your husband like Jesus loves the church - with a self-giving posture. Your takeaway from this passage is not subservience, it's sacrifice. Husbands, some of you need to recognize that - just like ancient husbands

- **you trample all over your wife.** You need to hear these words of Paul and take a good, long look in the mirror.

Do you have a posture of self-giving love in your marriage? Are you building her like you're building your body? Are you dying to yourself so that your wife can thrive?

Husbands, the call to submit is just as important for you. **Mutual submission.** Don't tear into two what was meant to be one.

In all of our marriages, we have the opportunity **to show the world an entirely new way to live.** Regardless of our nationality or our cultural norms, we can show our friends and neighbors and family what it means to love like Jesus.

It's a race to the bottom.

APPLICATION

So what does this look like today? How can we apply these ideas in our marriages?

Well, again, **I'm no expert**, so I can't give you tons of advice based on decades of experience. But I can give you some principles I'm *in the process of learning* which I believe come right out of this passage.

And couples? I'm hoping this gives you some food for thought.

1) Always honor and respect your spouse, especially in public.

If you're married, you likely know your spouse better than anyone. Because of that, it is very easy to make a joke at their expense when you're out with friends. To tell a story that humiliates them for a cheap laugh.

It's tempting when you're **with the boys or with the girls**, to gripe about your spouse's shortcomings or to demean them.

I know it seems like harmless talk. You don't really *mean* it. But Jesus said it best:

Luke 6:45

“What you say flows from what is in your heart.”

When you **honor your spouse** in public and in private, when you lift *them* up, you're practicing self-giving love and it *will* strengthen your marriage because it will change your heart.

2) Seek to *delight* your spouse; don't just avoid hurting them.

Paul's analogy about caring for the body in verse 28 is a good one here. It's one thing to wear a seatbelt and not run with scissors. It's another thing to work out and eat healthy and get enough sleep. Building your body and not *harming* your body are not the same thing.

We could look at our marriages the same way. Don't just try not to hurt your spouse's feelings. Don't just try to not get in their way. **Don't just do the minimum** to prevent them from being upset.

Look for ways to bring them joy. To build them up. Do the things they love. Practice *their* love languages, not just your own. **Give them the things and experiences they delight in.**

How is this self-giving love? Well, very often the things your spouse enjoys are not the things that *you* do.

My wife loves **candles**. Like, a lot. I don't get it. But I just bought her two candles from her favorite candlemaker which both include a donation to an animal rescue organization. There we go. Instant delight.

Yes, this kind of posture takes time, it takes energy. It doesn't just happen. But imagine what your marriage would look like if this was how you both built one another up day after day...

[Video: Tik Tok]

The next one is tough.

3) Commit to do the heavy lifting... together.

Whether you have been married 5 weeks, 5 years, or 5 decades, one thing is clear: **stuff comes between you**. It just does. Arguments, shame, misunderstandings, life circumstances, tragedy, you name it...

Sometimes it's your fault, sometimes things just happen.

Every time, **it's as if a heavy stone is placed between you**. One stone after another until a wall starts to form.

The easiest thing to do in that situation is to just ignore it. "The wall's not that high. It's not that big of a deal." But of course you keep doing that and one day you'll look up and realize **you can't see over the wall anymore**.

The only way to avoid that is to commit to **do the heavy lifting together**. Removing those stones one by one. This takes a lot of self-sacrifice.

Having the hard conversation when you'd rather just go to bed. Apologizing instead of getting defensive. Being honest about how your feelings were hurt. Going to counseling together. Taking responsibility for your actions.

That wall doesn't have to form. And if it's already there that wall *can* be torn down. But you've got to be willing to break a sweat. Both of you.

"Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." Do the heavy lifting.

Finally, I have one suggestion for everybody here, married or not:

4) Look for ways to lift up the marriages around you.

None of us are an island. We are meant to be **spiritual family**. As you can tell by now, true, lasting, self-sacrificial marriages are no cakewalk. They take dedication and endurance and creativity and humility.

None of us has the strength to do it alone.

So whether you are single or married, young or old, look around at the marriages in your life. **If they are in a race to the bottom, what can you do to cheer on their progress?**

Can you do something **practical**? Watch their kids so the couple can spend time together?

Can you **call them out** if they're dishonoring each other? Or lovingly point out the wall forming between them?

Can you **pray for them** consistently? And let them know you are praying?

None of us is an island.

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Godly marriages are a race to the bottom. Which in the upside down kingdom of God, is really **a race to the top**. A race to look more and more like our Savior, Jesus.

Let's be a community which shows the world the beauty of self-giving love.

[PRAY]