

SECOND READING: Ephesians 5:20-33 (NIV)

²⁰ always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

²¹ Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

²² Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. ²³ 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. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing[Ⓜ] her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷ and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. ²⁸ In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church— ³⁰ for 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.”[Ⓜ] ³² This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. ³³ However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

FIRST READING: John 13:31-34

³¹ When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³² If God has been glorified in him,[Ⓜ] God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³ Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ ³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God

“The Love of Christ”

Have you ever read something in the Bible that really sits wrong with you, that you’ve thought, “what in the world does THAT mean”? “Why is THAT in the Bible?” Well, you’re not alone, and there are many reasons for this. First, the Bible was written by human beings, flawed ones, like you and me, with their own baggage and issues that they brought with them when they wrote. But it also is because passages of scripture have their own contexts...contexts within their time and place and also within the larger passage in which they are written. This is why it is said that *“context is king,”* and, *“a text without a context is a pretext.”* *“Thou shalt not cherry pick”* is a good piece of advice. For the remainder of the summer, we’re going to bravely tackle yet another sermon series, this one, entitled, “Troublesome Bible Passages”. Through it, we will consider some of the passages at the very top of the “troublesome” list, beginning first with this passage from Ephesians 5.

This scriptural passage with its words, “submit” and “head”, has unfortunately been badly misused throughout the centuries to support patriarchal subjugation of women! It still is. The words sound cruel and oppressive even to our ears, and it’s all pretty confusing because we know that the Bible is not a place that “funds nor finds sympathy for the mistreatment of women”.¹ So, we need ask, why does the author Paul, who elsewhere lifts up women, use these caustic words? *Repeat.* Well, scholars tell us that for him they are not caustic but instead very appropriate; he is co-opting them, in fact, from elsewhere to describe Christ, the One to whom he is ultimately pointing readers. And they convey a radical, liberating message, which is also one of his intents. So, no matter what marriage or non-marriage relationship we are in, let’s look at this first at the passage in regard to the role of the wife and then that of the husband.

“Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord, for the husband is the head of the wife.” “Submit” is a key word here. It does not mean “be lesser than” nor does it mean “obey”. No, scripture is clear that both genders are created equal...both in the image of

¹ Bill DeJong. *“God’s Blueprint for a God-Centered Church. The Love of Christ”*. <https://blessingshamilton.ca/sermon/ephesians-5-v21-33-the-love-of-christ.html> (accessed 7-28-23).

God. And nowhere in the Bible does it say, “*wives obey your husbands*”!² No, “submit” or the concept of submission is understood in its relation to the headship of the husband. And simply said, the headship is by God’s design. God has assigned the genders roles, fact.³ Adam was created first, given information about the tree of knowledge which he was to pass on, and he was made to protect, to step on the head of the serpent. Eve was created second, out of Adam’s side, not out of his foot, but his side, as a helper... to provide the skills that Adam was lacking.⁴ Ad'am (meaning man) was not made to power over the weak or to be the superior to the lessor, not to control or dominate, but to care for, to love and to be responsible for. Eve (meaning mother of life) was not made to be haughty and self-absorbed, but to want the best for her partner, to assist, support and serve him in the purest sense of the word. This is what submit means, to serve, wanting the best for the other.

And this is how “*wives submit to your husbands*” connects to the previous verse which is more basic, addressing us all. It instructs us saying, “*Submit to one another*”. We are all to want the best for each other...to mutually love, serve and be responsible to each other. This is not just a secret for a successful marriage, but for a successful society, certainly for a successful church. And our submission to one another, our love for each other, person to person, husband to wife is to be done “*out of reverence for Christ.*” Yes, out of reverence for Christ.

So, how is it? How is that being submissive to one another reveres Christ? How is it that the husband’s love for his bride reveres Christ? Well..... it is not because this is what Christ did? Is it not what Christ did for us, for all of us? Christ did this and more when he assumed the role as head of the church, which Paul describes in this passage. Some scholars say “head” means “source” like a spring is the head of a river, and this certainly is true, but I agree with others like Rev. Dr. Bill DeJong, who note that the word, “love” , “agape love”, is used seven times here. They suggest the full meaning of “head” is based then in that kind of love which is

² Edward Markquart. “*Be Submissive to one another out of reverence for Christ*”. <https://www.sermonsforseattle.com/book/ephesians> (accessed 7-27-23).

³Bill DeJong.

⁴Bill DeJong.

selfless and sacrificial.⁵ Christ loves his church by teaching us, washing us, and pushing us to develop our full potential. Christ loves his church by liberating us from what holds us captive. And, ultimately, he loves us by giving his life for us, by dying for us. Christ is the head of the church because he loves us with a selfless, sacrificial love. It is the model for all of us as we are submissive to one another, and it is the model for the husband in a marriage. *“the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church...Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.”* Yes, husbands are to love their wives with the selfless, sacrificial love of Christ.

Ok....so I wonder a couple of things about this hopefully now not so troubling passage. I wonder how many husbands in our society, in our world, these days read this scripture this way? To be head means to love to the extent to be willing to die for one's wife. It is not to manage, to make all the decisions, and win all the disagreements. It is not to be controlling, to power over, to subjugate. It is not to be a cruel ogre! I wonder how often this passage is used to pressure a wife to stay in a marriage to an oppressor? Well, it dare not be! A wife is asked to **“submit”** to a lover, not an ogre, and a husband is to love to the extent of dying for his wife!

I wonder also how many women in the Church, understand how very radical this passage was...is? Paul often gets the bad rap of being a chauvinist, but notice that he here addresses women directly! In his culture, Roman, Greek or Jewish women were property, with only one purpose in the home. Here, he is recognizing them, addressing them as free moral agents, giving them the choice to voluntarily choose to submit.⁶ Wow. And to ask men to be subject to women...oh my! That was a great challenge to the system.⁷ A radical concept! A revealing truth as to whom God created women to be. *“It is,”* as Rev. Dr. Francis Wade says, *“a revolution that we have been very slow in supporting.”*

I wonder finally how many people can stand back and see the larger picture, the deeper meaning of this passage, that is, that it is actually about our marriage as disciples of the Church,

⁵ Bill DeJong.

⁶ Bill DeJong.

⁷ Francis Wade. *“Be subject to One Another”*. https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002589/be_subject_to_one_another. (accessed 7-27-23)

to our Lord, Jesus Christ. With human marriage as an example, with personal relationships between each other as an example, it is about the spousal marriage of Christ to the Church. It is about the committed and sacrificial love of Christ for his people. Brothers and sisters, people will disappoint us, abandon us, crush us, but Christ will never leave us, will never forsake us, nor disappoint us. Our marriage to Christ is forever, and what we know now is a foretaste of the days to come with him in glory in the company of the saints in light.

I will close with a beautiful story of a couple who had had a long marriage before the wife in the marriage succumbed to Alzheimer's Disease. Her husband cared for her to the very end in their home. Each morning he'd wash her, dress her, and sit her neat and tidy at their dining room table for breakfast. I do believe there was some nursing support as well, but I was present numerous times to see him carry her very gently from the table to her place on their covered back porch. She had a padded yellow rocking chair there, and they'd sit together soaking up the sun and listening to the birds sing. He'd read her the newspaper with a voice that gently reflected a seasoned love that was nearly palpable. After she passed away, the family came to celebrate her long life and the couples' wonderful time together. But in the days which followed, 3 days to be exact, something very special happened... something that the family was so struck by that they took a picture and gave a copy to the Sr. Pastor in our church. It was a picture of a white dove, a white dove that took up residence on the back of her chair, the one out there on the porch. It reportedly stayed all day, was there at night when the family went to bed and there when the family awakened in the morning. Even when they tried to shoo it away, it clung to the back of that chair. The pastor framed the picture and put it in his office.

Brothers and sisters, while contextual differences and word choices sometimes cause us confusion, the underlying message in Scripture that we are to mutually love and serve one another with a selfless, sacrificial love should not. Let us go from here, with our purpose clear and our hearts at peace, standing on the truth that clings, that is there when we go to bed at night and when we get up in the morning...that we are loved by our husband, the Christ, with a love that will never, ever end. Amen