

Ephesians 5 and Marriage

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 27 June 2021

Preacher: Lexi Mairone

[0 : 00] Good evening. Thanks, y'all. I have been giddy smiling under my mask for the last few minutes because I love a good key change.

So whoever did that arrangement, thank you. You've made my day. Hi, my name is Lexi, and I am a member of the Table Church's preaching cohort as well as a leader on our justice and compassion team.

And I'm really honored to be preaching to you all tonight for the first time in person, live and not through a recording. Thanks, y'all.

I will give a little bit of a notice. I'm recovering from a cold. It's not COVID. Thanks be to God. But if I have any lingering congestion, don't worry, and I'll put my mask back on as soon as I'm out of here. So if you hear any sniffles, that's what's going on. So we've been going through a series called Misunderstanding Paul. And if you know about Paul, you know that he's written a significant portion of the New Testament, mostly through letters to particular churches.

[1 : 05] And not only are they hard to understand, but they've often been used by Christians to justify harm done to marginalized groups of people.

And the goal of this series has been to take a second look at some of these hardest passages and say, can we understand them differently? So far, we've talked about Paul and what he has to say or not about the queer community, what he has to say about women in leadership, as well as slavery. And I would say that if you've missed any of these sermons, they're all on our website and they are phenomenal. So please go check it out. Tonight we're talking about marriage.

And you may have heard marriage sermons before, often filled with really helpful advice from a seasoned married person. I am not that person. I've been married for just over one year.

And this is not that sermon. We're not talking about advice here. We're talking about and wrestling with the different and hierarchical roles that Paul seems to assign male and female partners in a marriage.

[2 : 12] I will say up front that Paul's writing on marriage and gender assumes a gender binary, and it assumes marriage is between a man and a woman. This was the norm for him, and this is the context he was writing in.

So I'm going to be using a lot of gendered husband-wife language, and that's what's happening there. So the conversation around gender in the Bible is often framed as a debate between complementarianism on one side, which sees genders as inherently different and that they should be ordered in a hierarchy with men over women in all spheres of life, and particularly within the church and within families.

And on the other side, we have the view that's called often egalitarianism, which rejects the notion of hierarchy based on gender. You might be familiar with this.

If not, I'm introducing these terms because I'm going to use them just a little bit and then toss them aside because they are tongue twisters. So the theology behind complementarianism rests on an interpretation of the biblical arc that starts with creation and says that at creation, God decided that Adam was appropriately the leader in his relationship with Eve, and that in the fall, all of these distortions were introduced.

We know that. We have that framework, too. But in marriage, they say that the distortions that were introduced were that there were bad husbands who were bad at leading and bad wives who were bad at following, and that caused a lot of problems.

[3 : 42] So through Christ and through the redemption that we have in Christ, husbands ought to take up their God-ordained role as the authority in their marriages and that women should take up their God-ordained role submitting.

They also take really seriously the need for marriage to only be between a man and a woman, and this is because in a same-sex relationship, if you have two men, one of them is going to have to submit, and that's a problem.

And if you have two women, one of them is going to have to lead, and that's a problem. And how do we make sense of that? So we just don't. We say, let's not do that. Whew, man. It's already kind of heavy stuff.

So in practice, what does this look like? What does a complementarian relationship often look like? In my experience, it's been kind of benign in the sense that the way that submission and authority shows up is only in these theoretical scenarios where the husband and the wife fundamentally disagree on a decision that has to be made, so the wife submits to her husband's decision, and they move on.

So for a lot of couples who believe in this kind of theology, it kind of works because it doesn't really ever apply. However, this theology can be taken to an extreme that's really harmful, an extreme that says, wives, even if your husband kind of sucks, even if he's, like, irresponsible or even abusive, you have to stay because your role is to submit, and in that submission, your witness will help point him back to his role as the authority.

[5 : 19] This is harmful. This is really harmful. And it's a problem, and I think that Paul would think it's a problem, and I'll unpack that a little bit more. But whatever the practical interpretation of complementarianism, and I will say, like, there are many.

People draw these lines and assign these roles in a lot of different ways. There are so many different ways to interpret it, but it rests on this argument that the Bible, and specifically Paul, affirm a hierarchy of genders.

However, the scriptures around gender are so confusing that scholars have been arguing about them for ages, and they still have not reached a consensus. Complementarians argue that theirs is the plain reading of scripture, but a lot of theologizing has to happen to get from what's on the text to these kind of theologies about gender.

And like Pastor Anthony said last week, we cannot surrender the scriptures to those who would do harm with them. So we're going to try not to surrender the scriptures this evening.

I'm not going to offer a point-by-point rebuttal to the complementarian view, even though I think that's a worthy pursuit. It's done a lot of harm, like, let's dismantle it, cool, and if that's what you're called to, I'm, like, behind you.

[6 : 41] But I'm not going to take this approach this evening because I have a hunch, I'll say it more confidently, I'm, like, sure that I'm not talking to a room full of complementarians.

Heidi's nodding vigorously. We are a community that deeply values equality and inclusion.

However, sometimes we believe this in spite of the Bible and not because of it.

Or maybe we say, Jesus' ministry is the model for inclusion and equality, but Paul, he's a little iffy.

But if we continue to hold our values and say, I don't think the Bible supports it, what we're doing is we're surrendering these scriptures to those who would do harm.

I need to confess that I've actually done this quite a lot. I'll be honest, when I come across a passage that has to do with gender or the relationship between husbands and wives, I tighten my core like I'm about to be punched.

I have this, like, tense muscle sort of situation. And it's a learned behavior. It's, like, the self-protection thing. And I wonder if that resonates with some of you. Some more nodding.

[8 : 01] Cool. Maybe you don't feel the need to protect yourself when you hear these passages. Maybe you feel, like, disgust or content. Like, how could they possibly believe that?

My husband, Connor, graciously gave me permission to share this story from when I was preparing for this sermon. And I was just thinking one evening, like, maybe we just need to accept that because the Bible is a product of its time and Paul is a product of his time, like, there's just going to be some misogyny there.

Like, maybe it's just there. And he was like, yeah, yeah, no, that's true. And I'll show you where.

And he pointed to this passage in 1 Peter. So it's not Paul, but this was the conversation.

And I don't want to pretend it was about something different. So he said, he read this. Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel.

I'm not good at impressions. You might have noticed that. But believe me, I'm trying to get across. It was like a giant verbal eye roll.

[9 : 08] And I get it. It's good to be grossed out by misogyny. I'm glad my husband is grossed out by misogyny. But what if it's not misogyny in this passage?

What if, this is a big what if, because I haven't studied it a whole lot, but what if Peter was actually talking about women being weaker, not in the sense that they were made that way by nature or by God, but that society had made them weaker by denying them political and economic rights.

And in this situation, they had to become dependent on their husbands or their fathers or whoever the male head of household was, and in this way were weaker. And therefore, Christian husbands were called to give even more honor because of their marginalized position in society.

Maybe. Maybe. Like, maybe that's what it was. It's an interpretation that is available to us if we want to go in that direction and learn more.

But we don't often go there. We often say, oh, weaker vessel. Peter must be saying that God made women worse than men, whatever. And that's because we bring our assumptions to the text.

[10 : 14] Before we even open the page or we might read two words and say, I already know what this is going to say, and I don't like it, and I don't want to wrestle with it. So what I want to invite us to do this evening is to just allow the text to say something different.

Let's get curious about it, and let's see whether it does say something different. Because wouldn't it be great if it did? Okay.

I'm going to read a passage now that is at the center of the debate around gender and marriage in the Bible. And it will be up on this screen, but if you want the reference, it's from the letter to the Ephesians, chapter 5.

I'm starting at verse 21. Thanks, Skylar. 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.

[11 : 23] Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her by the washing of the 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 the 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 a profound mystery, but I'm 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. I appreciate a lot that Paul says this is a profound mystery.

He knows that he is a very confusing guy. And this passage might be familiar, too, because it's very commonly read at weddings, usually for couples who want to live into traditional gender roles or think that they should do so.

[12 : 39] And this is just fun aside, but when I go to a wedding and I hear this passage or I see it on the program, I like to look at the bride and the bridesmaids and just see what happens to their faces.

That's all I have to say about that. Here's the problem. I think we often get mixed up thinking that Paul in Ephesians is creating an institution and theologizing about it in this passage.

That he's using this analogy between Christ and the church in order to, like, put forward marriage as this very unique Christian institution that we should respect and revere, etc.

And maybe some of those things are true. I would say, yes, we should respect it, revere, whatever. But it doesn't really make sense that that's what Paul is doing in this passage.

And here's why. Directly after talking about wives and husbands, Paul addresses children and fathers and slaves and masters. Even though in our Bible we have a very convenient chapter break between the section on wives and husbands and the rest, they're all really one passage and they have one central point.

[13 : 53] And if they do really all have one central point, here's the point that I think it is. It's that first sentence from verse 21. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

So that is the point Paul is trying to make. And the rest of the things he says is in support of that line. So I believe that what Paul is doing is actually calling out in the Ephesian community the three kinds of relationships where power imbalances are showing up the most strongly.

And this is to the detriment of the church. And Paul is therefore correcting them. In Rome, the household consisted of a male Roman citizen and his wife and his children and his slaves.

And in this society, the husband was the head of the household and he held all of the political and economic rights on behalf of his family. And he was responsible for the family being good Roman subjects and paying taxes and maintaining order.

The wife had no rights, nor did the children or the slaves. And as we've seen throughout history, this kind of power imbalance can lead to misuse and even abuse of that power.

[15:11] So in focusing on the household, Paul is saying husbands, fathers, masters. In other words, you male Roman citizen, heads of household, you have too much power.

It doesn't suit our lifestyle here in our church where we are equal in Christ. You are at risk of misusing this power and we need to talk about it. I know that this, for some of you, can feel super different from how you've understood this passage before, but it's not unfamiliar when it comes to Paul.

Paul very commonly criticizes the moments where the church is gatekeeping or using their power in a way that is harmful. If we think back to Paul's letter to the Galatians, he calls them foolish and asked, Who has bewitched you?

Those are the words he used. Because the Jewish Christians were trying to force Gentile Christians to be circumcised in order to be part of God's family.

Paul asks, who has bewitched you that you're spreading this thinking around? And he says, As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

[16:24] There is no longer Jew or Greek. There is no longer slave or free. There is no longer male and female. For all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Circumcision historically was a way for the Jewish people to be distinct from and set apart from the rest of society. Baptism, Paul is saying, is a way that we are united and made equal.

Paul says that in Christ, all markers of power and gatekeeping are gone. They don't apply. So we shouldn't be surprised that when Paul is encouraging the Ephesians to live a life worthy of their calling, that he's reminding them of their equality in Christ and addressing the places where that equality is not being honored.

So if this is why Paul is talking about marriage, let's talk about what he says. We know very well that Paul affirms the submission of wives to their husbands.

I was at brunch with some members of this church this morning and someone asked me, what are you preaching on tonight? And I said, oh, marriage, Paul. And they were like, oh yeah, wives, submit to your husbands. And I was like, yes, but like, that's not the whole thing.

[17:37] And I think that's a problem. Sometimes that's as far as we get into them in the passage and we just stop listening. And if Paul were a good complementarian, what he would say next is, husbands, have authority over your wives.

Exert your power over them in a Christian way. He doesn't say that. He says, husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

And husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.

Paul doesn't tell men to have authority over their wives, but to love them in the same way Christ loved the church.

And we know what that looked like. Christ lived his life as a servant. He washed his disciples' feet. He was obedient to the point of death. It doesn't sound like authority.

It sounds an awful lot like submission. And let's look again at what Paul says to wives. Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord.

[18:49] 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.

We know that in Roman marriage, wives are already submitting to the authority of their husbands. And the justification for this comes from ancient philosophers like Aristotle, which pains me to say because I love his ethics, but he's got some messed up stuff too.

Skylar, if you could put up the next slide on the screen. Thank you. Okay, so Aristotle says, For the male is by nature better fitted to command than the female.

All human beings differ as widely as the soul does from the body. Slaves are by nature slaves. For the free will the slave, the male, the female, the man, the child. And Josephus, another writer, philosopher, says, The woman says the law is in all things inferior to the man.

Let her accordingly be submissive, not for her humiliation, but that she may be directed, for the authority has been given by God to the man.

[20 : 05] So in these times, the philosophical understanding was that wives should submit to their husbands because of their lesser status, either by nature or by God.

And while Paul does affirm the submission of wives and encourages them to keep doing what they're doing, it's not because they are inferior, either by nature or by God. He's encouraging submission because that's what the Christian life looks like.

Submission is what the Christian life looks like. Again, this shouldn't surprise us. Both Jesus and Paul have said over and over to live like the poorest, like those at the bottom of society, as servants.

Jesus says, whoever wishes to be great must be like a servant. So Paul is encouraging wives in their submission, but he's edifying it.

He's setting it up as an example for the rest of the Ephesians. And he's saying, submission is good for wives, but only in the context where their husbands are also submitting, loving the way that Christ's love.

[21 : 11] To be honest, this is a hard lesson for me to learn, both in my brain and in practice. I've been married for just over a year, as I mentioned.

And I've shared with a few friends, like, any time my relationship slightly resembles traditional gender roles, I get uncomfy. Very uncomfy.

For example, I was talking to a friend, like, you know, maybe I'll get a job in a new city. Don't worry, it's not happening anytime soon. And, you know, my husband, good feminist guy, he'll follow me there enthusiastically.

But in a conversation where Connor was just browsing what opportunities were out in the world, the idea of following him for his career gave me the ickies.

It doesn't make me a good partner. We all know that equal partnership requires a give and take. That means sometimes it's my turn to give, but not because I'm a lesser partner or inferior by nature, but because I'm an equal partner.

[22 : 21] I can give and submit joyfully because I know my husband is actively seeking opportunities to give to and submit to me. And even though this passage is written to women who have way less power in their marriages than women have in their marriages here today, it still comes as an encouragement to me to continue on in loving Connor more than I love myself and seeking his needs first.

And that's good because he does the same. So, Paul is affirming the submission of wives, which is not a surprise to his audience because they know that's what wives do.

And at the same time, he's affirming the submission of husbands to their wives, something new to his readers' ears. Something new that only makes sense in light of our equality in Christ.

Sure, Paul could go even further and abolish the institution of marriage and say, it has these inherent power imbalances that are just going to cause too many problems. Let's get rid of it. But just like he's not trying to invent the institution of marriage or very many, if any, institutions, that's not kind of what Paul is about. He's also not trying to abolish them. He knows his place.

[23 : 36] He knows he's not going to overthrow the Roman social order. It's not what he's about. But what he is doing is he's inviting the Ephesians who are already in marriage to live more faithfully.

And that's classic Paul. He always says, where are you right now in your life and how can you live more faithfully? So what does this mean for us?

Man, what we can learn from this passage is that Paul challenges those who hold power over others. He challenges those people to empty themselves of their power because of our equality in Christ.

So I ask you to reflect. How are you holding power over others? And do you have an opportunity to relinquish it? Are there debts that you can forgive?

Are there people who drive you around or deliver your groceries that you could treat more humanely, maybe tip more? We know that those services are a little exploitative.
[24 : 44] Are there people around you fighting for rights that you already have and that you can put your body next to theirs and join the fight? We can also learn from Paul that submission and giving of oneself is the essence of life together as Christians.

It's not reserved for wives. It applies to all kinds of relationships and marriages. Same-sex relationships, couples who aren't married and don't want to get married, friendships, roommates. You could think of other relationships where you experience this kind of mutual submission. Whatever relationship it is that you're thinking of, the ways that you are submitting and serving and sacrificing are good.

They're Christ-like. Don't resent them. That's a word for me. Finally, beyond this particular tricky, confusing passage that I've hopefully convinced you is about submitting to one another, Paul has so many other good words to offer on how to be in relationship with one another. And what I'd like to do, if you will participate, is invite us to read through some of these words from Paul together as a call and response. There will be words on the screen.

[26 : 04] I'll read the ones that are in like, yeah, the little text. Then you can read the ones in the bold text. And then we'll wrap up. Why don't we stand for this, actually?

Thank you. Wow. You have a lot of power when you're on this stage. It's awesome. Cool. Let's dive in. As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. In humility, value others above yourselves. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.

Rejoice with those who rejoice. Mourn with those who mourn. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Be humble and gentle.

Be patient, bearing with one another in love. Follow God's example and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.

[27 : 11] Be filled with the Spirit. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. God, we ask that you please give us the grace and strength to embody this call in all of our relationships, and particularly in this beautiful community.

Amen. Thanks, everyone. virtual confidence. Starts with wisdom. Protect with wisdom. conflicts. contempt. attendance. Understand, similar or anything.
Parent-based Watch the