

Ephesians: What's God Saying to You? What are You Going to Do About It?

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I. Introduction

Ever notice how difficult marriage is? I mean it's hard. Why must it be so difficult? It's so difficult and puzzling that it leaves many in its wake. Some people avoid it like the plague; others flock to it as if they're hypnotized. But once they taste it, once the honeymoon is over, it turns into a nightmare. They wish they never married. They wonder why they ever married that person in the first place and they look for a way out. Is this marriage? Is there such a thing as a truly happy marriage, a marriage full of love and respect?

II. Ephesians: What is God Saying to You and What are You Going to Do About It?

Chapter 5

Having told us who we are in the first 3 ½ chapters, that we're something altogether new with a new mission and a new life, God urges us to begin living like it, to live our new identity in Christ. To live by His truth instead of the lies that once held us. It's as if we are now wearing a permanent new body called Christ, which we are. When we see, it's His eyes we see through; when we hear, it's His ears we listen through; when we speak, it's His mouth we speak through. When we love, it's His love that drives us. Our union with Jesus is so complete that His Spirit lives inside us. Therefore, we must wake up and walk in His light instead of Satan's darkness. There's no time to waste; we must give His Spirit full control of our lives. If we allow Him full control, His guiding voice will become our greatest desire: we'll long to hear it, sing it, and share it with others. And it will also transform the way we see authority and submission.

As we delve into this crucial passage of Scripture on marriage, whatever preconceived ideas we have about this passage, we need to set those aside. Whatever baggage we bring to it, that too must be set aside. That is, many of us have been given a good, bad, or indifferent view of marriage by our parents, friends, past relationships, a marriage expert, a TV show, a book, the culture, etc. That's what the world and our life taught us about marriage. But now we're going to hear what God thinks of marriage. We want to know from Him what it is, what the roles are, and how to succeed at it.

What is marriage for? If your definition of marriage contains any selfish motive, i.e., if you're getting married for what it can do for you (whether it's love or status, i.e., you think it will get you the right family, the right neighborhood, the right kids, the right career, the right position in society, etc.), then you're in for a very rude awakening. The purpose of marriage is not for you to get something but for you to give something. The marvelous thing about this is that when you sacrifice your life this way for your spouse, when you allow yourself to be an instrument in Jesus' hands that He will use to make your spouse better, He will give you the world in return. That is, He will give you all the love, respect, and fulfillment you ever dreamed of in a marriage.

5:21, you might be wondering why we're starting with a verse we already covered and not with God's command to wives to submit in 5:22. The reason is that 5:21 is directly connected to 5:22, in fact 5:21 governs the following verses all the way down to 6:9. In fact, this whole passage on wives begins in 5:18, which is KEY to not only understanding the passage on wives and husbands (and the other relationships that follow), it's key to being able to actually comply with God's demands, which are quite impossible without Him. In 5:18 God tells us that if we're going to succeed at marriage, parenting, or in our work life, then we must allow His Spirit to control our lives. If we're going to play the role of husband or wife, His Spirit must be the one guiding us not our desires, wants, and opinions.

If we don't understand that 5:22-6:9 is connected to 5:18-21, then we'll miss the power we need to obey all those commands. God's not telling wives, "Do this" and husbands, "Do that," and so on. No, this is us walking with God through our marriage; it's us and Him doing the work together. So in 5:21-33 God is saying to wives, "If you allow My Spirit to control you, I'll give you an awesome marriage. This is what your marriage will look like: you'll willingly submit to him and he'll willingly put himself second always. He'll be as concerned about you as he is about himself. But you can't even begin to do what I'm asking without My Spirit." And this is the first safeguard that God gives to wives who are worried that they'll be taken advantage of, abused, or ignored. That is, marriage is God's institution and it cannot be done without Him (people try all the time, but I don't recommend it). Thus, God is in control, not the husband (or the wife). And the first thing God says is that being able to do it requires that they (both husband and wife) first submit to Him, 5:18. The second safeguard God provides the wife is in the phrase "one another" in 5:21. This phrase means that it's not just the wife but the husband who must submit, i.e., as she must submit to him, he must also submit to her (and we'll see what that means when we get to him). So God doesn't give the husband free reign to do whatever he wants; he must always consider his wife. Recall that we're supposed to emulate our Lord's selflessness, 5:2. And "in the fear of God" means that both parties do their submitting because of their complete respect for the Lord's authority over their marriage (or parenting or work life).

5:22, what does "submit" mean? Some think it means "obey," which has even been used in wedding ceremonies. Is that what "submit" means? NO. First, it wouldn't work for the rest of the relationships to which mutual submission applies, i.e., parents aren't supposed to obey their kids nor are masters their slaves. Second, the original word doesn't mean "obey," it means to make someone submit to your authority. But since it's stated passively, it means to willingly submit to someone's authority. And this is the third safeguard God provides wives, i.e., your husband cannot force you to submit; you have to willingly submit to your husband's authority and headship (Men, God is giving you a clue: you can't force her to submit; she must *want to* submit, which means you must figure out what you need to do to get her to *want to* submit to you). And this again is a reminder that both parties need to first submit to the Lord's Spirit if they're going to have any hope of succeeding.

"to your own husbands," notice what God is actually saying here. Many believe that God has a subservient view of women because of passages like this. But notice, God is not saying that all women must submit to all men, i.e., that all women are inferior to men. He's saying that in marriage, the wife is to be subject to one man, her husband. And this is the fourth safeguard: God never wants women to feel subject to all men and therefore inferior to them. No man must ever make a woman feel inferior and she must never let him.

"as to the Lord" means complete submission. That is, as a Christian wife respects the Lord's authority over her life, so she must see her husband in her marriage and family.

Side Note: many think this passage and others like it are misogyny. It's actually the opposite: life for women in the ancient world was not one of liberty and equality. They had no say so over their lives; their husbands had right over them and they had no recourse if their husband abused or abandoned them. Even in our modern era, women weren't equal and free. During the 1800's and on into the 1900's women fared no better. Men were in control and their only options were get a menial job or become a housewife who busies herself with keeping a pretty house and a pretty appearance. Into this culture of misogyny, God speaks and makes women equal with men in one key area: submission. It's not just that she must submit to him; he must submit to her, which protects her from every abuse. She now has a say concerning everything in the marriage, sex, money, family matters, big decisions, small decisions, parenting, etc., etc. Everything that she has an opinion on, the husband has to consider seriously and not ignore.

5:23, why must the wife be subject to her husband's leadership and authority? Because those are the roles that God assigned every man and woman in marriage: he is to be the head, the leader, the authority in the marriage, and she is to be the one under that leadership. And lest there be any confusion, God makes an analogy to Christ and the Church: as Christ is head of the Church, so is the man to be over the woman in marriage (Genesis 2:18;¹ 1 Corinthians 11:3). This is also why God doesn't allow women positions of authority in the church (1 Timothy 2:11-15). In these two areas, marriage and the church, the man is to be the authority because he is playing the role that God plays in both, i.e., Jesus is the authority over the Church and is the Head in His marriage to His bride, the Church, 1:22-23; 4:11-16; 5:25-32.

"Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the Body," here we find the fifth safeguard for wives. It's actually a double-safeguard: first, husbands are to realize that their role is not Tyrant but Savior. That is, just as Christ gave up His life for the benefit of the church—He did and does everything to save her—husbands are to do likewise, which means they must not do anything contrary, like abuse. Second, if a husband abuses his wife, she has recourse, i.e., she can inform an elder or another trusted member of the church concerning her husband's abuse (à la 1 Corinthians 12:26) because as a member of the Church, her husband is under Jesus' headship and authority and He will hold him accountable for abusing his wife.

5:24, just as the Church willingly submits herself to Christ's leadership and authority, so God is urging wives to do regarding their own husbands. And here again, God's choice of words are not active but passive, i.e., He desires that wives willingly submit to His Spirit so that He can enable them to willingly submit to their own husbands "in everything," which means that her husband will have the final decision in everything. But as we've seen God has placed many safeguards to protect the wife from any abuse...and He's not done placing safeguards.

III. Conclusion

...submitting to one another in the fear of God.

¹ In Genesis 2:18 the Hebrew word for *comparable* (NAS/NIV, *suitable*) means *that which is opposite yet that which corresponds*. It's as if when Adam looks at Eve, he will see himself, yet she's different. And notice that even here, as his helper she is a bit of his equal, i.e., she's the same as he is yet different.