

August 25 Lesson 13 (NIV)

A COVENANT OF LOVE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Hebrews 12:7–13

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Ephesians 5:21–6:4

EPHESIANS 5:21–33

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.

KEY VERSE

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.—Ephesians 5:21

COVENANT IN GOD

Unit 3: Covenant: A Personal Perspective

LESSONS 10–13

LESSON OUTLINE

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HOW TO SAY IT

CorinthiansKo-*rin*-thee-unz (*th* as in *thin*).

EphesiansEe-*fee*-zhunz.

EphesusEf-uh-sus.

EpistlesEe-*pis*-uls.

LeviticusLeh-*vit*-ih-kus.

PhilippiansFih-*lip*-ee-unz.

tabernacle*ta*h-burr-*nah*-kul.

Introduction

A. Not Like the Movies

Year after year, star-studded romantic comedies are released by Hollywood for public consumption. People meet, at first hate each other, then share experiences, grow as human beings, and fall blissfully in love. Usually, though not as often as once was the case, the couple's adventure ends in their marriage.

This, the entertainment industry tells us, is what marriage is. Two people are “meant for each other” in their mutual fulfillment. Their romance makes everything right. Their marriage serves as nothing except the exclamation point on their romantic experience of self-fulfillment.

Of course, most married people, and probably most unmarried people, will say that this view of marriage is nonsense. Yet the focus on romantic self-fulfillment still powerfully shapes people's understanding of marriage.

In New Testament times, marriage was as much misunderstood as it is today, though the misunderstanding then was not like ours now. Today's text has much corrective for both.

B. Lesson Context

Our text comes from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. This is known as one of Paul's four Prison Epistles, written while he was in the custody of the Roman military. (The other three epistles designated as such are Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon.) Ephesians was written to Christians in the city of Ephesus, a large, grand city on the west coast of Asia Minor. Paul chose Ephesus as a base for evangelistic efforts in that area. He spent nearly three years in the city (Acts 20:17–21, 31).

The letter itself falls into two parts: a discussion of the nature of the gospel (chapters 1–3) and a discussion of how to live in light of the gospel (chapters 4–6). The second section makes clear that the Christian life is an outgrowth of the Christian faith. It begins with an exhortation to “live a life worthy of the calling you have received” (Ephesians 4:1). That is, the recipients were to live according to the gospel message by which God made them members of his people. The story of Jesus—the one who gave his life for the sake of those alienated from him, the one who now reigns in the heavenly places—determines the life of the Christian. To walk in a manner worthy of the Christian calling is to live as did Jesus, imitating him by living to bless others, not oneself (5:1, 2).

Our text falls in the middle of this practical discussion, as Paul sets forth what many refer to as a “household code.” He discusses each of the common roles in a household—the family and any servants who worked in it—of his time. Throughout the discussion, Paul speaks within the relationships that people commonly knew in that period. But he does something far different from merely affirming the common social order: he infuses every household role with the story of Jesus.

I. Transition (EPHESIANS 5:21)

21. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

This statement concludes a discussion of Christians' shared life in which they (we) instruct and encourage one another as empowered by the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:17–5:20). Thus Paul introduces the household code (see the Lesson Context) seamlessly from the discussion he has just concluded.

Paul uses the word that is translated *submit* a total of 23 times in his letters. It occurs in contexts of relationships with God (Romans 8:7), with the higher powers of earthly authorities (Romans 13:1, 5; Titus 2:9; 3:1), with spiritual leaders (1 Corinthians 16:15, 16), of Christian wives with husbands (1 Corinthians 14:34; Ephesians 5:24 [below]; Colossians 3:18; Titus 2:5), and others.

The phrase *to one another* establishes the context. One theory is that this phrase (which is a single word in the Greek) means “everyone to everyone.” But this theory is overturned when we consider how Bible writers actually use this word, which occurs right at 100 times in the New Testament. Those uses reveal that the best understanding is “some to others” (examples: Luke 12:1; John 13:14; 1 Corinthians 11:33; Galatians 6:2; James 5:16).

Submission to others runs counter to our most stubborn impulses. We naturally want to act for our own benefit, which we assume is in conflict with others' benefit. Paul says, however, that it is the realization of God's existence that compels us to submit. Such realization results in a holy *reverence for Christ*.

II. Wives and the Lord **(EPHESIANS 5:22–24)**

A. What to Do (v. 22)

22. Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord.

The expectation of *wives* to *submit* themselves to their *husbands* is not unusual in Paul's time. People from all corners of the ancient world would say the same. What is distinct is that Paul adds *as you do to the Lord*. A Christian wife submits not because it is the cultural custom or expectation, but because she also submits to the Lord Jesus. So her relationship with her husband is to be likened, in some sense, to her relationship with the Lord.

Outside of a Christian perspective, a wife might see submission to a husband as something she does so that she will get in exchange what she needs in the marriage. No, Paul says, this relationship is not based on exchange. The wife's focus on her husband is that of a disciple who is focused on serving the Lord.

We must be on the alert lest the concept of submission be wrongly taken to imply inferiority. All humans are equal before God, and all men and women have equal access to the salvation offered through Christ (Galatians 3:26–29). But such equality does not negate the fact that God has ordained gender roles. Those roles are based in the order of creation (1 Timothy 2:12–14), not cultural practices.

B. Why Do It (vv. 23, 24)

23a. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church,

The wife's submission to her husband is to transcend social convention and reflect the relationship of the church to Christ. The church's submission to Christ is complete and unqualified. Earlier in Ephesians, Paul compared the church with a body and Christ with the head of the body (Ephesians 1:22; 4:15). Paul follows a common metaphor that uses this picture of the head and body to illustrate authority.

23b. his body, of which he is the Savior.

Again, the point is not to reinforce the cultural norm of submissive wives. Paul reminds us that for Christ and the church, the head of the *body* is also *the Savior* of the body. Though we often think of the word *Savior* strictly as a religious term, in Paul's time it is most common as a political term. Great kings and generals are called savior because of the brave, noble deeds they do to benefit their people.

Christ, of course, is the Savior who displaces all others. But he does so by sacrificially giving his life, unlike all others. We understand from this statement that Paul's picture is of a gospel-shaped relationship between a man and a woman who are both faithful disciples of Jesus. In this way, the wife submits to a husband who imitates Christ's self-giving humility for her benefit. He has authority because he is Savior, not tyrant.

This observation reminds us that Paul is not addressing dysfunctional relationships. Wives of abusive or neglectful husbands are not called to endure their abuse and demonstrate submission to

it. Only with the repentance and commitment of both partners, including their commitment to forgive each other, can Paul's description of marriage exist.

24. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

Paul repeats his point to make clear that he is describing distinctly Christian marriage, not conventional marriage grounded in cultural expectations. The grateful, lavish service that *the church* renders *to Christ* will be the pattern by which the Christian wife submits to the Christian husband.

So as people look at Christian marriages, they should see transformed relationships. Such marriages are based not on social conventions or even mutual benefits. Rather, they are founded on Christ's sacrificial love for the church and the church's response of service. People will see in such marriages a metaphor of the gospel.

III. Husbands and Christ

(EPHESIANS 5:25–32)

A. Pattern to Repeat (v. 25)

25. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her

Now the instructions turn to husbands, as the comparison with *Christ* and *the church* continues. For *husbands*, who have been granted primacy in marriage by order of creation (again, 1 Timothy 2:12–14), their wives' submission to them must draw self-sacrificial *love* in return. That means seeking the wife's good first, even at great cost to oneself. Christ's sacrifice was complete: he gave his life. It was gracious: he died for unworthy sinners. It was generous: it brought blessing to others. This is Christ's full expression of love, and it is the pattern by which the Christian husband loves his wife.

B. Results to Anticipate (vv. 26, 27)

26. to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word,

Paul continues to use Christ's love for the church as a pattern for the husband's love for his wife. In so doing, he focuses on what Christ accomplished by his love. That love prompted the Lord to give himself in death to make forgiveness possible. The church is made clean (justified) by the loving self-sacrifice of Christ, purged of the stain of sin by Christ's loving surrender in which the innocent one took the penalty of the guilty. This *cleansing* has made the church a distinct people: we have been and are being set apart (sanctified) to belong to God, by Christ's act. As a bride is set apart in marriage to belong to her husband, so the church is set apart for Christ (Revelation 21:2).

This comparison sets the agenda for the Christian husband. His love for his wife is to aim for the same outcome as Christ's love for the church, that the wife should fully express her purpose and identity as God's person. The husband loves the wife not for his own gratification but to contribute to her growth and maturity as a person of God. The husband's love expresses the good news of Jesus, both in its self-sacrificial nature and its deeply God-focused aim. This makes the Christian marriage distinct from marriage as practiced in any time or culture.

27. and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

Christ's loving sacrifice makes the *church* a reflection of Christ's glory—his true, praiseworthy nature that is revealed in his death and resurrection. Like a bride beautifully adorned for a wedding, the church is adorned with the glory of Christ, made his by Christ's gift of grace and mercy. Christ's cleansing of the church and making it whole can be compared with an animal without imperfection that was offered in sacrifice in the tabernacle (Leviticus 22:21; Numbers 19:2).

The perfection of Christ's own sacrifice becomes the hallmark of the church's identity and life. The church is remade in Christ's image to belong fully to him, to be *holy* or set apart to belong to God by forgiveness and transformed lives (see 1 Peter 1:18, 19).

This again becomes the focus of the husband's love for the wife. His is not to focus on himself and his own needs. Rather, his focus is to be on his wife's fulfilling Christ's aim that she become fully his in faith, forgiveness, and life. He wants her not to be adorned to enhance his own prestige but with Christlikeness (1 Peter 3:3, 4). Both husband and wife thereby become living sacrifices (Romans 12:1).

C. Fact to Accept (vv. 28–32)

28. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.

Paul develops another comparison. The church is Christ's own body, as Paul has said before (Ephesians 1:22, 23; 4:15; 5:23). Christ's identification with his people is part of what Paul learned on the road to Damascus. Jesus asked Paul, a persecutor of the church, "Why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4). When Paul (as Saul) persecuted the church, it was as if he were persecuting the Lord personally, because the Lord is so closely identified with the people for whom he gave his life and in whom his Spirit lives. *Husbands* are to view *their wives* in the same way. As Jesus repeated the command in calling for his followers to love their neighbors as themselves (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39), husbands have a particular call *to love* their wives as they love themselves. Even more than in other relationships, spouses are identified with each other, belonging to each other as to no other person (1 Corinthians 7:4).

29. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church—

Paul appeals to common sense: people naturally take care of themselves. That is conventional. What is unconventional is the Christian's sense of self. Christ's identification with his church expands our understanding of ourselves. As *Christ* sees *the church* as his body, a spouse is to see self in a marriage partner. The focus, then, is not on one's own needs but the needs of the other who is truly one's own self (Philippians 2:1–4). This is exactly how Christ has regarded the church in his humble self-sacrifice on her behalf (2:5–11).

30. for we are members of his body.

Christians are called to identify "self" in others, to treat others with the same love with which they naturally treat themselves, because of common identity in Christ's *body*. All parts of the body live to serve the other parts (1 Corinthians 12:12–26). The unity between Christ and his people is so powerful that it transforms our most basic understanding of ourselves.

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."

Paul now quotes from Genesis 2:24, the explanation that follows the account of the creation of woman from man. There God shows the man that he has no partner who corresponds to him, who is like him (2:18–20). So God creates the woman from the man's own flesh, effectively dividing the human nature into two kinds, male and female (2:21, 22). The man then reinforces his identity with the woman as he exclaims that the woman is his own bones and flesh (2:23).

This creation account explains God's design in marriage. The man and woman form a coequal partnership as two bearers of God's image (Genesis 1:26, 27). Each is fundamentally different from the other, yet corresponding to one another. Their union brings together the two expressions of the image of God, male and female, that God created at the beginning. No other union features this combination of mutual self-identity and difference. No other except one, that is. See the next verse.

32. This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.

Husband and wife stand as divinely designed entities. They are the same in terms of being created in the image of God, but obviously different as male and female. Together they form a corresponding union, a partnership equal in worth while differing in roles. Although we are not God, his Holy Spirit indwells us (Acts 2:38, 39). The image of God with which we are stamped has been and is being restored.

But the roles of *Christ and the church* are distinct. The partnership between the Lord and his people is that of the Lord's sending and empowering combined with the church's being sent and being empowered (Matthew 28:19, 20) as we are commissioned to do his work. As we do, we complete the mission that Christ inaugurated when he became like us in our humanity, suffered death in our place, and overcame death in his resurrection (Colossians 1:24–26). Paul calls this a *mystery* as he uses that term elsewhere (Ephesians 1:9; 3:3, 4, 9; 6:19). What God had intended from the beginning is now revealed through Christ.

The exclusive covenant bond of partnership between husband and wife points to the greater bond between the Lord and his people. What an extraordinary, solemn, challenging assertion the apostle gives us!

IV. Summary (EPHESIANS 5:33)

33. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

This is Paul's summary to husbands and wives in Christian marriages. Such marriages are to demonstrate the love of Christ, in contrast with the lesser loves that humans have created for themselves. Christian marriages are to be worthy of the calling by which Jesus' followers are called.

Conclusion

A. A Beacon of Light

This pattern set forth by Paul in today's lesson challenged the ways people viewed marriage in his day. For people of pagan background, marriage placed the wife under the husband's control for the benefit of the husband. The idea that marriage was for something other than the benefit of

the husband was foreign. Yet to walk in a manner worthy of the good news of Jesus demanded that the pagan concept be replaced.

Romance is terrific. The Bible celebrates it (see the Song of Songs). But romantic love is not the foundational stuff of a Christlike marriage. The Christian couple abandons cultural expectations of marriage and replaces them with Christ's expectations. That will mean not the seeking of fulfillment of self but the losing of self to the Lord.

B. Prayer

Lord, teach us to love as you love, with grace, forgiveness, and persistence. We pray this in the name of the one who died in our place. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Love without self-sacrifice— isn't.¹

¹ Miller, P. L., Taylor, M. A., Thatcher, T., & Weatherly, J. (2018). [A Covenant of Love](#). In R. L. Nickelson (Ed.), *The NIV Standard Lesson Commentary, 2018–2019* (Vol. 25, pp. 441–447). Colorado Springs, CO: Standard Publishing.