

February 24, 2013

Proverbs 31:10-31 / I Peter 3:1-6 / I Cor. 7:1-9 / Ephesians 5:21-24
 The Submission of Wives to Their Husbands: Stop Fighting, Show Respect

Today (as I mentioned last week) we come to the 3 verses in Ephesians which women tend to dislike most -- and for good reason. Because what is stated here has often been taught in such a way that women both inside & outside the church have taken it as insulting and devaluing / or at the very least, suggesting that women are somehow inferior to men / or become inferior to their husbands when or if they marry.

In fact, I would NOT be exaggerating to say that some women literally hate these verses. If all I were to do was read them in a class at a secular college or university (such as Penn State or UPenn) in a way that were to suggest I in any way affirmed that husbands were the head of their families, and the role of wives in the marriage relationship was to submit to their husbands in everything -- many would laugh, or boo, or hiss, or simply get up and walk out of the class -- making very unkind statements toward me on the way out! And all that simply for suggesting that I in any way affirm what Paul says here.

As I also mentioned last week, I've had women in attendance at weddings I performed, roll their eyes simply because I read these verses! And that was before I made any comments one way or the other regarding how we are to understand or apply them.

And you know why? Because picture many women have been fed the in reference to wives submitting to their husbands is a mousy, brow-beaten woman, barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen, jumping into action when her husband snaps his fingers, demands his slippers, and a cold drink with some pizza, as he lounges in his easy chair, talking with his friends, and watching the football game. That's what many think he's advocating (despite Prov. 31)!

Yet, its an unfortunate caricature and so far from anything Paul had in mind (as I hope to show) that he would have laughed at the absurdity of anyone who would have suggested that's what he meant!

And as I go on to counter that notion, I won't restate anything I said last week, except to remind you on the main point: That the text itself both supports and advocates SOME SENSE in which both husband and wife, are both called to "submit to one another." This entire passage, as I pointed out, is about some type of mutual submission from beginning to end.

That's why I gave you the literal translation, and pointed you to the New Living Translation, which best conveys the flow of the text when it says: ***"And further, submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. For wives, this means (that is, this "submitting to one another" or mutual submission means) submit to your husband's as to the Lord..."*** and so on.

Before going on in v. 25 to say: ***"For husbands, this means (that is, this "submitting to one another" or mutual submission means) love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and laid down His life for her..."***

And once again, because there is so much we need to cover to correctly understand these verses, let's dig right in and see how this idea of mutual submission applies to the wives, before we go on in the next couple weeks to see how it applies to the husbands.

And let's start **FIRST** with v. 22, which as I've already shown, is dependent on v. 21 for the idea of submission found in it, since in the Greek text the word "submit" doesn't even occur in v. 22, but is borrowed from v. 21, making the literal translation: ***"Submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ, wives to your husbands as to the Lord..."***

And here, I need to tell you (after many, many hours of study!), that the determining factor of how one interprets and applies these verses seems to rest almost entirely on how one views the relationships mentioned.

For instance, people who understand the relationship between wife and husband / child and parent / slave and master / in a hierarchical way / or see them as expressions of dominant vs. subordinate individuals / where these are all part of the social authority structures -- tend to oppose to any idea of "mutual submission."

They take Paul's command to, "submit to one another," more in the sense of, "the one of lesser rank submits to the one of higher rank." Or in other words, the command to submit (even though it says, "to one another") is not mutual, but directed to the "subordinate" person only. That is, the command to submit applies only to wives, children, and slaves, and NOT in any way to husbands, parents or masters, because those relationships denote a hierarchy of rank, role, or status -- and not relationships of mutual love, and concern based on need-meeting.

Yet others, like myself, see these relationships as being between people who are, by virtue of being made in the image of God, and by virtue of election, grace, redemption and adoption as children into the family of God -- equals.

Thus, this second group sees the call to "submit to one another" as applying to all the groups mentioned -- including the husbands and parents and masters, and not just the women, children and slaves (though obviously, as the text also makes clear, that submission looks different for each group of people).

Wives, for instance, are called to "submit" to the need of their husbands to function as the God-ordained head of the family and to respect him in that role (vv. 23 and 33), while husbands are called to "submit" to the need of their wives to be sacrificially loved and cared for and cherished as the one who has become "one flesh" with her husband (vv. 25-31).

Thus, the three scenarios are:

- 1.) Hierarchical, where the wife submits to the husband, but the husband does not in any way submit to his wife.
 - 2.) Egalitarian, where husband and wife submit to one another (in keeping with the passage).
 - And 3.) Radical Feminist, where no one really submits to anyone
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Then, **SECONDLY**, we must now ask what that call for "mutual submission" looks like for the WIFE, if it is NOT (as I suggest) to be taken in a hierarchical type of way (like the military) / where the husband is the chief and the wife is the subordinate / but instead, as a love-based, voluntary, need-meeting type of submission between two people who are complete equals, but simply carry out their submission to one another in different ways.

So how is that "submission" to be carried out?

1st) It is to be carried out, "as to the Lord." NOT "to her husband as a lord (little "l") as Aquinas translated it, but "to her husband as to the Lord." It's Paul's way of saying that for the Christian wife, submission to her husband is to be carried out, not as if her husband were "the Lord" or "a lord," but as if she were doing it for Jesus. Because submitting to one's husband is to do what Jesus (thru the Apostle Paul) asks wives to do, when they do it, they are ultimately doing it for Jesus -- the true and perfect husband and the Eternal Lover of your Soul.

It's all part of what Paul means when he says in 1 Cor. 10:31: "***And in whatsoever you do, do it all for the glory of God.***" / Or again, "***Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord...***" (Col. 3:23) / Or to use the words of Jesus, "***For in whatsoever you do to one of these, the least of my brethren (that is, the poor, naked, and imprisoned) you have done it unto Me.***" When you do it to them, you do it to Him, because He has commanded us to do so.

And why does Paul ask wives to submit "as to the Lord"? Because I dare say there are times when every wife struggles with this whole submission thing -- especially when she questions the intent, or the wisdom, or the motivations, behind what her husband is asking her to go along with.

And that's really what submit means: "To stop fighting" and "agree to a plan of action." In fact, considering the reference to "the two becoming one flesh" in v. 31, it would seem to suggest that "submission" essentially means walking as one -- which you can't do if you're fighting! Submission then, is an expression of unity -- marital unity.

And it makes it so much easier for the wife to "submit" when she realizes that in doing so she is really -- in the ultimate sense -- doing it for Jesus! Not to her husband "as if he's the Lord or a lord," but to her husband, as if to the Lord.

And, here, let me say: Although this passage does NOT say a wife's submission can be conditioned upon her husband first loving her, as if Paul were to say: "You can withhold it until you see his love for them expressed in or through it," it

is true all the same that her willingness to submit is helped in every possible way when she knows from experience that he has her best interests in mind.

The times I've seen wives fight and resist and refuse to submit to their husbands lead most often: Are the times they thought he was doing what he did with a total disregard for her needs, or best interests, or a total disregard for welfare of the kids, the family, or their future well-being.

Show me a wife who KNOWS DEEP DOWN (from personal experience) that her husband always has her, and the entire family's best interests in mind before he makes any major decision, or pursues any major course of action, and you will find a wife who STRUGGLES TO UNDERSTAND why other women have such a big problem with this issue of submission.

It's the wives who question their husbands motives, or love for them, or decision-making wisdom, who have the hardest time with this command. It's the wives who have been abused, or mistreated, or trampled on, or left in the lurch... Husbands who never consulted them, nor sought their input or opinions on anything -- husbands who acted like dictators -- that find it the hardest to accept this injunction.

And rightly so. For this is NOT a text that would ever encourage a wife to submit to a husband's abuse or mistreatment, or sit back and watch as her husband leaves his family in shambles.

Even when Paul says in v. 24 that "**wives are to submit to their husbands in everything,**" we know from Scripture itself, that it doesn't mean, "everything." For if any husband were ever to command his wife to take drugs, or prostitute herself, or harm herself, or steal, or lie, or do anything God explicitly forbids, she is under the divine obligation to refuse to submit -- just as all Christians are when anyone asks us to do anything immoral -- be it a boss, a pastor, a politician, a military leader, or whoever.

In all such cases our course of action is found in Acts 5:29: "**We must obey God rather than man.**" As Hoehner states, this command "**certainly would**

not mean that a wife should submit to her husband in anything that is contrary to the commands of God... In other words, the wife is NOT to submit to her husband in anything sinful -- including abuse."

And it's not just wives. No Christian is ever called to offer unconditional allegiance, or unconditional submission, to another human being. That is reserved for God alone.

It doesn't matter who the person is (or who they think they are) if someone asks you to do something immoral, or contrary to the explicitly stated will of God, you are called by God to disobey -- even though you may have to pay a price for doing so. And many Christians have.

Listen: ***"Everything" means everything that's not harmful / abusive / destructive / or sinful. / Everything that's moral / wise / good / upright / godly / and does not conflict or put you at odds / with the commands of God.***

2nd) You need to know that by this command Paul is establishing a new (or Christian) alternative to the prevalent view of marriage in his day. For in the Roman Empire of that day, wives were NOT subject to their husbands -- they were subject to their father's as long as he was alive -- even after they were married.

In other words, in the Roman Empire the rule was this: "Wives obey your fathers as a lord so long as he is alive." It was called the "*patria potestas*" (the father's power) / or in reference to marriage, it was called, "*sine manus*" (marriage that's not really marriage)."

As Barclay points out, under this law, ***"a father had absolute power over his family. He could sell them as slaves; he could make them work in his fields (even in chains), and he could take the law into his own hands and punish as he liked -- even inflicting the death penalty on his children. ["He could," as Hoehner adds, "legally put to death any of his children for serious transgressions," and, "This control over his children continued even***

after they were married.]" "The power of the Roman father extended over the child's whole life, so long as the father lived" (Barclay).

Thus, the Roman wife was NOT subject to her husband in marriage / she was subject to her father -- to the point that a father could even initiate the divorce of his daughter from her husband if he wanted to! That's why I say that Paul's injunction here in v. 22, establishes a new order for Christian marriage -- one which is more in keeping with the biblical creation mandate where a wife leaves her father's home and cleaves to her husband, since in marriage they become "one flesh."

It's one of the reasons that Christianity was seen as disruptive to the social order or the social good. Because in Christianity the social order was both challenged and changed.

And you can just picture the hostility in Roman dads as a result. They were used to dictating and controlling their daughters lives until the day that they died (even having the legal right to kill their daughters if they didn't obey them), and all of a sudden having their daughters (because of this religion called Christianity) -- siding with their husbands instead of them! This was radical stuff, folks! It was totally counter-culture!

And in that sense, far from oppressing women, Paul is actually freeing grown daughters from the lifelong dictatorship of their fathers / and establishing for Christian couples a more biblical model for marriage / where the wife is FREED to follow the lead of her husband -- the man with whom God has made her to be one flesh in marriage.

Then **THIRD**, this submission is a submission to the husband's headship, direction, oversight or servant leadership over his family. In fact, I need to point out that in terms of children and slaves Paul uses the word "obey" / but in terms of wives, he uses the word "submit" -- which is softer in its tone. That is, the wife is not to be seen like a child or a slave.

And in v. 23 Paul tells us the reason the wife is to submit to her husband is that the husband is, ***"the head of the wife, as Christ is the head of the Church,***

His body, of which He is the Savior.” And what does that headship involve? Verse 25 shows us: It involves the husband -- so loving his wife -- that he lays down his life for her, to make her holy and radiant (vv. 26-27).

Thus it becomes very clear why she is to stop resisting or fighting His headship. Because as “head,” God calls husbands to do everything they can to lift up and build up and sacrifice themselves for their wives.

God calls husbands, as the divinely appointed servant-leaders of their homes, to serve their wives in love -- just as Christ, the head of the church, and its Savior, came not to be served, but to serve, and offer His life as a ransom for many -- thereby setting the standard for husbands.

So imagine, if you will, a husband doing what Paul says he’s supposed to do as “head” of the wife. He’s to sacrifice himself for her, out of love, and do all he can to build her up or lift her up (so to speak). So picture, as he’s trying to lift her up -- what would happen if she fought him and resisted him as he was seeking to do that. It would frustrate him and hurt her.

You see, if you go to the commentaries, you find that many people fight over what the word “kephale” or “head” (in the Greek) means. Does it mean “ruler,” or “leader,” or “source” (since you can come up with evidence for each one)?

Yet you know what? In all my research, I found not one person who pointed out that the best way to understand what “headship” means, is to look at the verses that follow, where Paul actually tells us what the husband (as head of the wife) is to do for her in carrying out that headship! (vv. 25-33).

Because when we do that, we discover that the greatest expression of “headship” is sacrificial love. It’s laying down one’s life for their wife -- showing us that the best choice out of those 3 definitions is “leader.” And not just leader, but a sacrificially loving servant-leader!

So what is Paul doing? He’s asking wives to submit to their husbands’ headship, which means, their sacrificial and loving oversight of their families and spouses. / Which should cause us to ask, why would any woman want to fight her husband’s headship when that headship involves his taking the lead in

seeking to love her and build her up?! Why would she want to make it harder for him to do that, by resisting him as he seeks to love her and sacrifice for her?

Just as Christ's headship over the Church involves His being her Savior, so also the headship of the husband (though he will never be her Savior) is taken from the example of Jesus, and expressed in seeking her greatest good and her well-being. If he's not doing that, then he's not exercising his headship in a biblical manner.

And I must add this: You wives need to remember that you married a sinner, and thus he will never exercise that loving headship perfectly. And at least in part he will never exercise it perfectly, because he also married a sinner who sometimes makes it difficult for him to do his job!

Then **LAST**, Paul summarizes what submission means for the wife, as well as what headship means for the husband, when he brings this section to a conclusion in v. 33, and says, ***“However, each one of you [husbands] must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.”***

Husbands are called to love their wives, and wives are called respect their husbands. And thus, what I'd like to do in the time remaining is flesh out what it means for a wife to “respect” her husband. Because for you wives, respecting your husbands is the greatest expression of “submission.”

So **1st**) Respecting your husband means guarding your heart, and your romantic affections for him, and not letting your feelings wander after other men. For that would be to disrespect your husband and the vow you made with him and to him in marriage.

As I have asked each bride in every marriage I do: Will you have this man to be your husband, to live together in the covenant of marriage? Will you love him, comfort him, honor and keep him, in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others, be faithful to him as long as you both shall live? That's what it means to respect him --"forsaking all others till death do you part."

2nd) Respecting your husband means valuing him and honoring him in front of your kids and when in public. I mentioned to a few people last week, that Nancy and I visited our favorite restaurant (the Olive Garden down past Montgomeryville) a while ago. And when we were there, the table behind us was filled with women (7 or 8) who spent the entire time ripping their husbands to shreds. "He's a jerk; he doesn't listen; he's terrible at this; he doesn't do that; you'd think he was a kid; he's not a good lover," and on and on and on for almost two hours, each one taking turns.

It was so bad (and they were so loud about it) that at one point I wanted to stand up and give them a John the Baptist type rebuke! I felt like standing up and saying: "*And what makes you think you're such prizes?*" Made me very thankful for Nancy.

And I'm NOT saying wives can never share your frustrations about their husbands with anyone. But if you do (Paul would say) it needs to be in a respectful way, and never in a public put-down session.

Because husbands (or men in general) have a great desire or need to be respected. And the woman who realizes that, and capitalizes on that, will find her husband all more intent on loving her.

Disrespect him -- in public or private -- and you'll have a very disgruntled, irritated and unhappy husband. But respect him (especially in public or in front of the kids) and he will love you for it! Because generally speaking a man would much rather be respected than loved -- and Paul knew that.

Then **Last**) Respecting your husband means submitting to your husband's sexual advances -- as much as is humanly possible! For as Paul says in I Cor. 7:4, "***The wife's body does not belong to her alone, but to her husband, and the husband's body does not belong to him alone, but to his wife.***"

And again, it's for mutual, sexual, need-meeting. Like it or not, it's a big part of marriage. Refuse to meet your husband's need for sexual intimacy -- for an extended period of time -- and you'll not only have a very unhappy husband, you'll be leading him into temptation. It will never make infidelity excusable, but it does make the struggle more understandable.