

HUSBANDS AND WIVES

by Ray C. Stedman

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. {Eph 5:21 RSV}

Here is the divine solution to the problem of conflict between individuals, those areas of friction where life is rubbed raw, and the ugly sores of violence and conflict often erupt. The solution consists of the recognition of two very powerful and transforming factors which, if recognized in any situation of conflict and carried out, will resolve that conflict. In our previous message we tried to challenge ourselves to take this very seriously.

Those two factors, remember, were these:

First, life is so constructed that we cannot find fulfillment without another person being involved. We are not made to satisfy ourselves. Though each of us has within us a drive to fulfill ourselves and to find satisfaction, we make a very grave and serious error if we think that we can ever do that apart from reacting and relating to another person. It is this matter of human relationships that the apostle is now taking up in Ephesians 5, the relationships of husbands and wives, of parents and children, and of employers and employees. We vitally need these relationships. Life is made this way. One of the fundamental mysteries of life is that we cannot achieve our own satisfaction if we try to do so, but we can only achieve it if we seek to attain not our own benefits but the benefits of another. This is why Paul says, "Subject yourselves to one another."

The second factor, which makes the first one possible, is that you can only subject yourself when you see a third party present in every situation -- the Lord Jesus Christ. It is therefore not a case of "you against me" or "me against you," but it is a case of Christ being present. In the case of a Christian, the great issue is the matter of my relationship to him, and my obedience to his word and to his will. This touches the matter of motivation. I never can submit to another if it is a case of "you versus me" or "me versus you," for then, as we saw last week, my pride comes to the fore and I get stubborn and rationalize my position and justify myself, and so the conflict is perpetuated. But when we see that it is a matter of loving obedience to the One who first loved us and gave himself for us, and who now lives within us as our Lord, our God, this then becomes the primary relationship, and it is easier, much easier, to give up our fancied rights in order that we may be obedient to that which is first -- our relationship to Christ. So the apostle sums it all up in that wonderfully concise statement, "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ," {Eph 5:21 RSV}.

Now Paul applies this to specific relationships, and the first one he takes up is that of husbands and wives. There is no area of life in which conflict is more widespread than this. The oldest battle of all time is the battle of the sexes. The longest war ever waged is the war that goes on between husbands and wives. We need only remind ourselves that a few months ago we were informed by the newspapers that in San Mateo County there are more divorces each year than there are marriages. In Santa Clara County it is almost as bad. This one significant statistic points up the fact that marriage is the greatest area of conflict among human beings, far surpassing the statistics of war.

Now, I grant you immediately that this area of conflict is far less among Christians. Certainly the statistics of divorce are less. But even in Christian homes the degree of squabbling, bickering, coldness, bitterness, and even violence that is encountered by any marriage counselor is simply unbelievable. In no other area of our national or family life are we more desperately in need of help than in this area of conflict between husbands and wives. The atmosphere in many a Christian home is no better than that of an armed truce. I suggest to you, therefore, that there is nothing more important than that we thoughtfully hear these illuminating words of the apostle as he applies this tremendous formula for peace, "Subject yourselves to one another out of reverence for Christ," to this specific relationship of husbands and wives.

Paul begins with wives in Verse 22:

Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives be subject in everything to their husbands. {Eph 5:22-24 RSV}

We must remember that this is an application of the general principle. Subjection, therefore, is not merely to be on the part of one alone, but, in the case of Christian husbands and wives, is to be done by both. The husband is to subject himself to the wife as much as the wife is to the husband. The method will differ according to the sex, but the principle is the same for each. It is well to bear this in mind. What the apostle will now go on to spell out for us is what, exactly, this means for each one. How does the wife subject herself to the husband, and how does the husband, on the other hand, subject himself to the wife, out of reverence for Christ?

With the wife he simply repeats the word he has used, "Subject yourselves to your husbands, as to the Lord." This would clearly imply that, for the wife, the basic meaning of the word applies to her. The basic meaning of the word for "subjection" (or "submission" in the King James Version) is "keep yourself under," "put yourself under the authority of," or, as some versions translate it, "adapt yourself to," "adjust yourself to the to the authority or will of another." The apostle is saying to the wife, "Adapt yourself to your own husband, adjust to him."

This is the fulfillment of the initial word of the Creator when he said of the woman that she was to "be a help meet for man," {Gen 2:20 RSV}. She is not to be his rival nor, least of all, his slave, but his willing, loyal helper to accomplish his aims and his goals. It is not the other way around. God never intended the man to fulfill his wife's aims and goals. It is quite the other way. She is to be his help meet and his partner in what he, under God, is led to do in life. The woman is made essentially to be a follower. All of nature and all of Scripture confirms this. It is in this role that woman finds fulfillment.

The apostle links this immediately with the reason for such subjection:

Wives, be subject to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. {Eph 5:22-23 RSV}

The key phrase here is "as to the Lord." The wife is subject to her husband not because her husband is such a wonderful creature, but because she has a previous and primary relationship to her Lord. The phrase "as to the Lord" does not mean that the wife is to worship her husband as though he were the Lord -- despite the fact that many a bride has set a burnt offering before her husband! It means she is to yield to her husband, and such yielding is pleasing to the Lord. It means her primary relationship is not to her husband, but to her Lord. What he asks of her is that she yield herself to the will and aims of her husband.

A Christian woman wrote me some time ago asking, concerning this passage, "Would this mean that my submission to my husband is a kind of gauge or a measure of the degree to which I am submitted to Christ?" It is exactly that. The submission of a wife to her husband in the proper areas of his authority is precisely the gauge of her submission to Christ. This woman goes on to write, very insightfully,

I realize that my submission to my husband is not my gift to him, to be received gratefully on his part, and to be returned in kind. Nor is it to be a subtle form of blackmail. (See how submissive I was in this circumstance, Lord? Now what about seeing some results!) In fact if I were submitting to him as unto the Lord I wouldn't care what the results were -- that's his business. Actually, a woman is never more free to be herself than when she is most joyfully submissive to her husband's authority. What a relief to be free to be what I was made for!

There is a woman who has caught the full intent of this word addressed to the wife, "Wives, submit yourselves to your husband's authority."

It is all a matter of headship, and headship means authority. There are other headships mentioned in Scripture. In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he writes these illuminating words:

But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God. {1 Cor 11:3 RSV}

If you want to understand what it means for the man to be head of the woman then analyze what it means for God to be the head of Christ: "The head of Christ is God." If you search the Scriptures which describe the Lord Jesus in his relationship to his Father as he walked on earth, you will discover that there are four elements involved in the headship of the Father.

There is, first, identity. Jesus said on one occasion, "I and my Father are one," {John 10:30 KJV}. The Scripture says also that, when a man and a woman are married, they become "one flesh," {cf, Gen 2:24, Matt 19:5-6, Mark 10:7-8}. There is an identity of person which is involved in this whole matter of headship.

The Lord Jesus, on another occasion, said, "My Father worketh, and I work" {John 5:17 KJV}, i.e., we cooperate together. In the area of work, headship obviously involves a mutual cooperation. So the husband and wife are to cooperate.

Then there are other passages where the Lord Jesus says of his Father, "I always honor my Father" {cf, John 8:49}, and, "It is the Father who honors me," {cf, John 8:54}. There is a mutual sharing of honor which indicates again what headship means.

Finally, there is that passage where the Lord says, "My Father is greater than I," {John 14:28b KJV}. In words full of mystery he suggests that, despite the identity of person, there is a difference of authority, for he says, "I do always those things that please him," {John 8:29b KJV}.

So there we have headship interpreted for us:

- Identity as to nature,
- Cooperation as to work,
- Honor as to person, and
- Subsistence as to final decisions.

That is headship. That is what it should mean to a wife to be subject to her husband.

At this point wives say, "How far should I go in this? You don't know the kind of brute I live with!" Scripture answers that with one phrase, "Wives, be subject to your husbands in everything." Now, I did not write that; the Apostle Paul wrote it! He wrote it inspired of the Holy Spirit, and he means it -- "in everything."

It hardly needs to be said that this excludes moral wrong. No husband has the right to ask of his wife something which is morally wrong. This is always taken for granted as excluded from admonitions such as this in Scripture. But in all other areas the wife is to allow the husband to make final decisions. There is plenty of indication elsewhere that the husband is to expect and encourage his wife to express her desires, to speak her viewpoint, or to argue the matter and to bring out what she feels is the right way, for otherwise how can she be a helper to her husband? But in the ultimate decision she is to honor his choice. This is essentially what this means: "in everything."

Now the apostle holds up the relationship of the church to Christ as the example:

As the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives also subject in everything to their husbands. {Eph 5:24 RSV}

Immediately I can see a gleam in the eyes of some wives who say, "Exactly! And how is the church subject to Christ? In so many cases it is very rebellious, and, if this is the way we're supposed to be subject, then, I'll gladly qualify!" But it is obvious that the apostle does not have in mind here the actual reality of the church's subjection to Christ, but the ideal of it. How does the church want to be subject to Christ?

Perhaps we have it spelled out best for us in our hymn books. The Bible is the Lord's word to the church, the

hymn book is the church's word to the Lord. If we read our hymns we will see reflected the hungerings and yearnings of the church to be subject to its Lord.

I suggest, therefore, that it might be helpful for wives to take those hymns and apply them to their own relationship to their husbands. Not, of course, in the sense of worship, as I have already suggested, but in the matter of submissiveness. The next time you, as a wife, have difficulty accepting your husband's ultimate decision, perhaps it might be well to go around the house singing,

- "I'll go where you want me to go, my dear, I'll do what you want me to do."
- "Have thine own way, love, have thine own way."
- "All the way my husband leads me. What have I to ask besides."

Now there are also some songs you should never sing, such as "Sound the battle cry," or "The fight is on" -- but, for the most part, the hymn book well reflects this admonition of the apostle.

Now Paul turns to the husbands:

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one." This is a great mystery, and I take it to mean Christ and the church; {Eph 5:25-32 RSV}

All is said in one phrase, "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church." The rest is an elucidation of that.

Perhaps there is no word in our modern parlance which needs more interpreting than this word *love*. It is grossly misused today. It is used to describe everything from sordid sexual passion to patriotic emotion. But here it is defined for us in a very illuminating phrase which is set in apposition to it. The apostle does not merely say "Love your wives as Christ loved the church," but he goes on to describe what that love is: "... and gave himself up for her." That is what love is! That is the way the husband is to be subject to the wife. He gives himself up for her. It does not mean he is to give in to her, for that is her role toward him. If he did that he would be subjecting himself to the wife as the wife is supposed to subject herself to the husband. But his form of subjection is different. It is not to give in, but to give up -- to give himself up for his wife. No husband is playing his proper role in marriage until he learns to give himself up to his wife, to open his heart to her, to share his emotions and dreams, his thoughts and disappointments, his joys, to fully expose himself to his wife. And there is nothing that makes a woman happier than to know that she fully enters into her husband's life. That fulfills her, and it fulfills him.

Now, as in the case of the wife, the apostle holds up to us the example of Christ. "Love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." His self-giving was deliberate and purposeful. Our Lord did not give himself up for the church without certain objectives in mind, and those purposes are three-fold. The apostle lists them for us that we might draw the parallel and understand what it means for a husband to give himself up for his wife. He says the Lord Jesus gave himself up for the church,

- First, that he might sanctify her,
- Second, that he might present the church to himself in splendor, and
- Third, that he might fulfill the mystery of his own being,

as is suggested in Verse 30: "because we are members of his body."

These same goals apply to the husband and wife relationship:

The husband is to give himself up for his wife in order that he might sanctify her.

Well, what does that mean? Basically, as we have seen in other messages, the word "sanctify" means "put to the proper use." I have already reminded you that anything can be sanctified. This is not a religious word. I am sanctifying this pulpit by using it for the purpose for which it was intended. You are sanctifying those chairs upon which you are sitting. The organ was sanctified a few moments ago as the organist was playing upon it. The piano, too, was thus sanctified. Anything that is put to its proper use is sanctified, and that is what that word means here.

The Lord Jesus gave himself up on the cross in order that the whole church, those who would be redeemed by his grace, might be put to the proper use for which God intended man and woman, might be called back to the original function and purpose of humanity. This is also to be the goal of the husband. He is to give himself up for the wife in order that she might fulfill her womanhood, her purpose.

Now, he must know what that purpose is. That is why the Apostle Peter, in his parallel passage to this says, "husbands, dwell with your wives according to knowledge" {1 Pet 3:7 KJV} -- not according to guesswork, not according to your present feeling, but according to knowledge of what a woman is supposed to be.

Let me share a great secret with you men. It is something I learned from the Scriptures, for I would never have learned it from life, though it is confirmed by life: Women cannot understand themselves; only men can understand women. Ah, but ladies, do not feel bad -- men cannot understand themselves either; only women can. How often we realize that our mates know us better than we know ourselves! So the man is to give himself up in order that the woman might fulfill her womanhood.

The purpose of womanhood is twofold:

First, it is to be a helper to her husband. But it is impossible for someone to help you unless you let them. If a husband excludes his wife from his thinking, she cannot be his partner, she cannot be his helper. At the deepest level of her being she will sense that she is being deprived of that for which she was made. That is what creates this restiveness uneasiness and sometimes perverseness of women which frequently puzzles so many husbands. When these attitudes are displayed by wives, it is usually because the husband is denying his wife her right to be a woman and the opportunity to fulfill her womanhood. She is to be his helper.

Second, she is to contribute beauty to his life. That is what women are for. That is why they are much more beautiful than men. They are intended to contribute beauty at every level, not only beauty of form, but of spirit as well. That is why, again, Peter says that a woman should seek after that "quiet and gentle spirit which is, in the sight of God, of great price," {cf, 1 Pet 3:4b RSV}. That is what a woman can uniquely contribute to life. But it is the husband who opens the door of opportunity for a woman to do this by sharing himself with her. Notice that the apostle points out that the instrument by which the Lord sanctified the church was the word, "the washing of water with the word." By the Word of God, by talking to the church, by telling it things, by opening up its eyes to the understanding of reality -- that is the way the Lord sanctifies his church. "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free" {cf, John 8:32} -- to be what you ought to be.

The same is true in a husband and wife relationship. It is the husband's talking to his wife which makes it possible for her to fulfill her role as a helper and a beautifier. He must, therefore, give himself up in this sense, share with her, discuss with her, talk about things. Even though there may be obstacles to communication, he must find a way around them, for his responsibility is to open up and share with her.

I read once of a judge in a divorce action who said to the husband, "You mean to say that what your wife tells me is true, that you actually have not spoken to her for two years?" The man said, "Yes, sir." The judge said, "Why is that?" He replied, "I didn't want to interrupt her!"

I rather suspect that such marathon talking indicates a wife who is trying to fill a great vacuity in her life.

In Verse 27 we have the second reason why the Lord gave himself up for the church:

... that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. {Eph 5:27 RSV}

This is right in line again with what the Apostle Peter reminds us. "Husbands," he says, "give honor unto the wife, as to the weaker vessel," {cf, 1 Pet 3:7 KJV}. The husband must find ways by which he honors his wife, glorifies her, exalts her in the family circle, and in his own thinking. This is his role, his job in marriage, to give himself up to the end that his wife might be honored, not only in the family circle but outside as well. It requires, above all, that he show her simple courtesy.

I heard recently of a truck driver whose wife was required to fill out some kind of a form. For her occupation she wrote down "housewife," and he objected. He said, "You're not a HOUSEwife, you're MY wife." That went a long way to cementing their relationship in that marriage.

Look at the face of a woman who is loved by her husband and you will see a glory there that cannot be duplicated. An honored wife fulfills womanhood. To accomplish it, husbands should be infallibly courteous to their wives. We are always courteous to those whom we seek to honor. It means the avoidance of sarcasm or contemptuous language, and the avoidance of criticism, at least bitter or sharp or unwarranted criticism. It does not mean that there cannot be a discussion of areas of difference, or a bringing out of matters which need to be brought to attention, but it does mean to avoid any semblance of that which would disgrace or dishonor or in any way degrade the wife.

The third reason why Christ gave himself up for the church was in order to fulfill the mystery of his own being. That is described in a lengthier section as the mystery of being members of his body. As the apostle says, "Husbands should love their wives as their own bodies, for he who loves his wife loves himself. And no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it." Thus again he brings in the example of Christ. Christ did this. He loves us and continually gives himself up for us because he cannot help it; we are part of him, we belong to him. We who are Christians are part of his body in this mystery, this amazing mystery of life. To substantiate it, the apostle quotes a verse from the first chapter of Genesis:

"For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one." {Eph 5:31 RSV}

That is not simply beautiful language. There is a basic, fundamental reality behind this: Husband and wife are not just two people rooming together. Their lives actually do blend into one another. They actually become one. It is, therefore, true that what hurts the wife damages the husband. It cannot help but do so. If he is bitter toward her, it will eat like a cancer in his own life and heart. That is why, if you have had a squabble with your wife, you may find yourself unable to do your work properly that day. This works with regard to the wife toward the husband as well. They are one flesh.

In Dr. Henry Brandt's helpful book *The Struggle For Peace* he tells of a woman who came to him because of a great fear she had of going into supermarkets. She would be terribly frightened whenever she went into a supermarket. She came to him for help in this problem and he relied, as he always does, on the wisdom of Scripture. Remembering the verse, "Perfect love casts out fear," he began to look for a violation of love in her life, for fear comes when there is something inhibiting the flow of love. He said to her, "Whom are you mad at?" Finally she was able to realize that she was angry at her husband for an incident which had occurred a number of years before in a supermarket when they had had an unpleasant flare-up. As a result, she was emotionally disturbed whenever she went into a supermarket. When she dealt with her lack of love, her fear left. What happened, because of her injury toward him, reflected right back on herself.

This is also true of the husband toward the wife. If we would understand this and realize that injuring our mate is the same as taking a hammer and pounding ourselves on the head, or neglecting some part of our own body, we would stop trying to hurt one another. Injury to our mate is bound to come back upon us in some physical, soulful, or spiritual injury.

The final point the apostle makes here is given in verse 33:

... however, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. {Eph 5:33 RSV}

Notice that he puts this on the basis of each person in the marriage relationship fulfilling his responsibility to Christ, regardless of what the other does. That is the key. It is not "wait until he starts loving me, and then I'll submit to him," or "wait until she starts submitting to me, and then I'll love her," but it is essential to your responsibility before Christ, regardless of what the other does. To do so breaks through the vicious circle of marriage conflict and serves to restore peace and permit the other to fulfill his responsibility.

I have seen such unilateral obedience work wonders in marriage relationships. Husbands and wives have been brought together, harmony restored in bitterly divided homes, grace and peace made to reign where there has been battle and conflict, violence and ugliness before.

Therefore, husbands, love your wife as yourself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

Prayer

Our Father, let these words be illuminated in our hearts and lives by the understanding of the Spirit. May we give ourselves to thinking them through and to working them out in practice in our lives. What good is it if we should understand it here in this meeting place, but refuse to put it into practice the next time a conflict arises? God grant to us the willingness and the grace to be obedient to the Lord Jesus who is with us in every circumstance and every relationship of our life, regardless of what the other person does. We ask in his name, Amen.

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