

Christian Marriage

This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church

- Ephesians 5:32

Why Marriage Is So Controversial

There's nothing that is quite so embattled and uniquely sensitive as the topic of marriage. This is because people understand intuitively that marriage is about more than personal romance or social order. Marriage taps into something we all hunger for: love that is vulnerable yet changeless, everlasting, and without qualification.

The Christian faith insists that there really *is* such a thing as that kind of love, and that marriage is meant to provide a miniature portrait of it. Or, if you like, marriage is an aroma that wafts from God's banquet table. It does not provide ultimate satisfaction, but gives tantalizing evidence that we are such creatures that long to be satisfied with whatever we are smelling.

The purpose of marriage, according to the Bible, is to show us what kind of relationship God wants with human beings: a relationship in which two "others" are united in complete vulnerability and everlasting love.

This lesson aims to give practical instruction on a Christian marriage, answering the question: How does a Christian navigate life as a married person? This is the issue on Paul's mind when he wrote Ephesians 5:18-33.

What Christian Spouses Should Know and Do

1. What Christian spouses should *know*.

a. The meaning of marriage

If Christopher Columbus could sail to North America without understanding which continent he was on, it's surely possible for someone to sail into marriage without understanding what he or she sailed into. Unless we have a firm understanding of what marriage *is*, we won't know what to expect of it, or how to act within it. The Bible presents marriage as *a lifelong covenant between a man and woman in which they function as a unit to fulfill their God-given calling together*. (For details on this definition, see last week's sermon.)

b. The most important thing about marriage

Most books and seminars on marriage assume that the most important thing about marriage is being "happy"—where happiness is only vaguely defined. This theme is absent from Paul's discussion on marriage in Ephesians 5. Here we find no promise of having a happy marriage. Instead, the most important thing about a Christian marriage—is Christ.

c. The different roles within marriage

In anything that is good, useful, or beautiful—a speech, an engine, a flower—we find component parts functioning according to their nature. This is true of social units as well. Within an orchestra, there are instruments that play a part according to the sound they can make. On a sports team, different players occupy different positions. Even within God's Triunity, there are distinct Persons who fulfill unique roles. The same is true within a marriage, and this is the principle behind the roles within marriage. The

husband is to serve as the head, responsible for the couple as a unit within society, and the wife allows him to make decisions according to this role.

2. What Christian spouses should *do*.

It is by embracing these roles as a matter of their allegiance to Christ that the husband and wife are to function within their marriage. But we should bear in mind that one's role as husband or wife *builds on and does not cancel out* his or her role as a human being and as a Christian. The

a. As human beings

Husbands and wives owe each other the dignity and respect any human owes another. It is tragic and inexcusable when husbands and wives treat complete strangers with more respect than they do each other. Spouses, no less than total strangers, must consider the question Jesus answered: "Who is my **neighbor?**" **Is one's spouse any less my neighbor simply because he or she is a spouse?**

b. As Christians.

One top of this, husbands and wives should treat each other with no less love and honor than fellow Christians should treat each other. The responsibility to consider others more significant than myself (Philippians 2) to forego anger and forgive (Ephesians 4) applies equally to husband and wife as to Christian to fellow Christian. Moreover, the wife's responsibility to exhort (Hebrews 3) is not canceled out by her duty to "submit" (see explanation below).

c. As husband and wife

On top of their duties as fellow human beings, and as fellow Christians, husbands and wives must relate to each other in the way described in Ephesians 5.

The wife - That the wife should "submit" does *not* mean that she should put up with abuse, nor that she must defer all decisions to her husband. Neither does it mean that she may have no opinion about things or (as mentioned above) that she may not seek to point out areas in which he needs to grow. Again, all the responsibilities that apply to every Christian also apply to the duties husbands and wives have toward each other. To "submit to your own husband" means that the wife recognizes that of the two of them, it is her husband who bears responsibility for the totality of the marriage unit, and allows him to make decisions accordingly.

The husband - That the husband is to love his wife means that he sacrifices his own preferences and desires—even his own life—for her good. It does not mean to passively indulge in her wishes, but that, like Christ does for the church, he nourishes and cherishes his wife.

Discussion

1. What are some common misconceptions about the roles of husbands and wives in Christian marriage?
2. What does the Bible teach about the purpose of marriage? How does this differ from other views of marriage in society today?
3. Why is Christ the most important thing about a Christian marriage? How does this perspective affect the way Christian spouses approach their relationship?
4. What are the different roles within a Christian marriage, and how do these roles reflect God's design for marriage?
5. What does it mean for the wife to "submit" to her husband in a Christian marriage? How can this be practiced in a way that honors both spouses and reflects God's design for marriage?
6. How does the biblical view of marriage as a picture of Christ's love for the church impact the way we view and approach marriage?