

Ephesians: Living in Sync with Reality
Part 13: Fueled for Love

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Ephesians 5:18-33

The Power for Living Like Jesus

“Be filled with the Spirit...”

Ancient Household Codes

This section is borrowing its form from the “household codes” of the Greco-Roman world. These were a form of moral instruction in the ancient world that dates to the time of Aristotle in the 4th Century, BCE. So, **Paul connects with this common form of writing, but then totally spins it in this radical, counter-cultural way.**

But how is this one different?

Ancient household codes aimed to instruct *only* those who were seen as subservient in the Greco-Roman culture – wives, children, and slaves. If anything at all, they only said to husbands, things like: “Well, just don’t abuse your power.” What Paul spends **most of his time on** is what is completely *unexpected*. This text gives *far more* instruction to husbands.

Paul addresses wives, children, and slaves *directly*.

In the ancient codes, they would be addressed like this:

“Husbands, tell your wives to be subject to you.”

“Fathers, tell your children to obey you.”

“Masters, tell your servants to be subject to you.”

But what does Paul do here? He speaks directly to the powerless ones in that society, thus elevating them. He gives them the genuine status of personhood. He honours their agency to be able to act as followers of Jesus for themselves. That’s revolutionary.

Most issues that I see in homes and marriages would be addressed if we adopted the same emphasis this text places – which is primarily on husbands taking their responsibility seriously.

Nancy Pearcey, in her book on masculinity, has this quote from The Gottman Institute: “Statistically speaking, when a man is not willing to share power with his partner, there is an 81% chance that his marriage will self-destruct.”

– Nancy Pearcey, *The Toxic War on Masculinity*.

I. All of you, “Be filled with the Spirit...Submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Within the framework of the ancient household, every person is entreated to “come underneath” every other person to seek their good. Every person is being asked to be a servant, like Jesus was to us.

Paul chooses to use the “middle voice” in the Greek text for the word “submitting.” The middle with “submitting” means this is something you *willingly offer* to others – it’s not imposed or forced. A way to

translate to capture the middle voice might be: "...willingly submitting yourselves to one another out of reverence for Christ" – **Ephesians 5:21b**.

The "actor" or "agent" is only yourself. Submission, in the way Paul says it, cannot be forced. It's what we, as brothers and sisters in Christ, willingly offer one another. And here's the key: it's because it flows out of our reverence for Jesus.

All believers seek the benefit and the good of the other, even above your own desire, or wants.

II. Wives, be filled with the Spirit... Submitting to one another...for example, by submitting to your own husband.

"Submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit to your own husbands as you do to the Lord."

"E.g., [for example] communicates exactly what is indicated by the structure of the Greek sentence: the subordination of wives is an example of the same subordination, which is also shown by the husband's love, the children's obedience, the parents' responsibility for their offspring, slaves' and masters' attitudes toward one another."

– Marcus Barth

"So, we could render the flow from verse 21 to 22 this way: "Submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ, just as wives to their husbands...."

Wives have been living the "underness" of the kingdom for centuries. Now, because of the coming of Jesus Christ and the filling with His Spirit, husbands finally *get to catch up*. So do fathers, and masters. All three parties who held the power also get to live the way of the kingdom [being a servant – cf. Mark 10:43-45]."

– Darrell Johnson

"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.**" – **Ephesians 5:23**

This is in line with what Jesus says of himself in Mark 10:45: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many."

For Jesus, being "head" means "being Savior." And "being Saviour" means "being Servant."

III. Husbands, be filled with the Spirit... Submitting to one another...for example, by loving your wife.

"Husbands [*vocative – mood direct address*] love your wives [*imperative - mood of command*], just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her..." – **Ephesians 5:25**

Here's the revolution. The Greco-Roman household codes, well, none of them ever mention love. But Paul puts it at the centre. The verb *agapeo* is repeated 6 times to husbands. That's the emphasis of this text.

“If Paul were consistent with his times, he would have asked for the wife to sacrifice herself (body) for her husband, her head. But Paul turns social convention upside down, in line with the gospel message that those who are given honor and privilege are to lay it aside in service of others.”

– Lynn Cohick,

Paul mentions that husbands love their wives the way Christ loved the church. This was not just “self-sacrifice”, but death on a cross. The Roman cross was a way to shame someone – to take away their power, to take away a man’s control of his situation.

“In the Roman world, masculinity and authority are closely linked, and a free man would expect to exercise power over women and slaves or suffer shame in the eyes of their community. Jesus invites each follower, however, to pick up his or her cross, embracing the ... [ultimate, end of time] reality that enduring public shame now by serving other will reap eternal reward.”

– Cohick

The way a husband loves his wife, in a ‘cross-shaped way’. And pushes against the common Greco-Roman stereotype of ‘masculinity’ in a serious way. And it pushes against our stereotypes too.

It gets even more radical too. Look at the images that Paul uses for Jesus’ work on our behalf, and calls husbands to emulate: Verse 26-27: “...cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish...”

Paul is describing the jobs that were reserved for the one who was seen as the “lesser” member of the couple in that culture. Jesus is portrayed as doing what? Things that were considered “women’s work”. “Cleansing...washing...doing laundry...” in service of his bride.

“Paul reconfigures the cultural expectations of masculinity expressed within a marriage between the submissive partner (wife) and the superordinate spouse (husband).” – Cohick.

The reconfiguring sets up a whole new way of being ‘husband and wife’ – one that particularly recasts what counts as ‘being a man.’ A great husband is not grabbing for power, or defending his own honour, but laying down his life for the good of his wife and household.

The husband is to love his wife like his own body. What does Paul mean here? It seems he’s working with the second command that Jesus speaks of. “The second is: “Love your neighbour as yourself.”

– **Mark 12:31**

“Oh, how the world would change if we could just live that second command! Each of us makes sure we eat well; now make sure your neighbour eats well. Each of us makes sure we have a place to sleep; now make sure your neighbour has a place to sleep. Each of us makes sure we have a job; now make sure your neighbour has a job.”

– Darrell Johnson.

More still: “By loving her you *are loving yourself.*” Why is that? Because a husband and wife are now “one flesh.” Paul will quote Genesis 2:24, that says “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.”

– **Ephesians 5:31** quoting Genesis 2:24.

So, as a husband, when I love my wife well, I'm not just taking care of her, but of "us" – because we are one. And when a husband loves like that, it becomes very easy for a wife to say, "Of course I willingly submit to him – to come underneath and help him – it's ultimately for *our best*."

Practical Implications:

- 1) Paul assumes that each spouse in the marriage has already settled the biggest questions of life – where their meaning and purpose come from; why they exist; how valuable they are to God.

"The picture of marriage we are given here is not of two needy people, unsure of their own value and purpose, finding their significance and meaning in one another's arms. If you add two vacuums to each other, you only get a bigger and stronger vacuum, a giant sucking sound."

– Timothy and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*

- 2) Each person in the relationship is being asked to do the same thing: "...submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ." This is willingly, humbly, joyfully seeking the good of the other person.

That is, you can only discover your own happiness after each of you has put the happiness of your spouse ahead of your own, in a sustained way in response to what Jesus has done for you. Some will ask, "If I put the happiness of my spouse ahead of my own needs, then what do I get out of it?" The answer is – happiness...It's the joy that comes from giving joy, from loving another person in a costly way."

– Timothy and Kathy Keller

The good news at the heart of Christianity is, as C.S. Lewis put it, that when Jesus sacrificed himself on the cross, to win us back for himself, he was simply acting in character – Jesus did "in the wild weather of his outlying provinces [speaking of here, in his coming to earth]" that which for all eternity "he had done at home in glory and gladness."

- C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*

For those who do get married, the point of it is to be part of the process that makes you more like God. See, marriage is not to make you happy – though sometimes it will. It's about making you holy. The point is to changes us. Makes us like Jesus.

IV. Marriage Points to the Gospel.

The Mystery

Paul moves effortlessly between speaking about marriage – like, giving clear instruction to the husbands about loving their wives with the same kind of love that Christ showed the church; a self-sacrificial love; one that seeks the good of the other, even at great expense to himself.

The mystery is that marriage he speaks of is meant to picture the way Christ loved us; to image his self-giving love. The kind of love, the covenantal, promising, binding sort of love that Christ has for the church – that's what this marriage is modeled on, and points to. That's the 'big story' as it were, and your marriage – a 'very little story' – is to be read in light of, and fit into, the big story. You are living artwork.

The Mission

How Christian people live out the relational design for humanity – how we reflect the love of God in all our relationships, whether through our singleness or marriage, in how we parent – that has a profound impact in terms of bearing witness to the goodness of the good news of Jesus to the rest of the world.

“In essence, what Paul proclaimed in Ephesians 5 came true in practice: loving marriages became a picture to the world of what commitment to a loving God is like. When we walk in wisdom, we flourish. When we let the Spirit of God guide, he leads us to pleasant places.” – Ben Stuart

Discussion and Reflection Questions

Open Up

Can you think of an example of someone who reflected a kind of ‘self-sacrificial’ love for others around them? How do they inspire you?

Dig In

Read **Ephesians 5:18-33**

1. Why do you think it might be significant that Paul’s sentence starts in v.18 and runs through v.23, with the only direct command (Imperative) to “Be filled with the Spirit...”? How might that influence the way we look at this text?
2. The final of the five participles linked to “Be filled with the Spirit” is “*submitting* to one another out of reverence for Christ.” How might this practically work out in how we function as a church community – with every person “coming under” each other?
3. Why might “out of reverence for Christ” be a key part of the “reasoning” for this kind of mutual submission?
4. What stands out to you about the instructions to wives and husbands in light of what we learned in the message above? If you are married, or may be called to that one day, how does this challenge you?
5. In your own words, how would you describe the goal of Christian marriage that Paul presents here?

Pray

Take time to ask God to give you the power you need, through the Spirit, to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Bring the needs of your group to God in prayer and pray for anything you need help with that came out of the study.