

Sermon for August 19, 2018  
"The Body of Christ: Christian Marriage"

Ephesians 5:21-33

I have heard many sermons on this passage, many go like this: "God has a plan for our lives. If we fail to conform to God's plan then we are in rebellion against God. God knows what is best for us. If we would only accept God's guidance, given to us in the scriptures then we would be happy.

"Wives obey your husbands. This is God's will. He is the spiritual leader in the household. You are subject to him just as the church is subject to Christ. Do all that he says." At this point some even deal with the sticky problem of a wife who is married to an unbelieving man. Should she do what he tells her to do even if it is wrong? The answers to this question are legion!

Then the preacher says, "Husbands, love your wives. Pamper them as you would your own bodies. Take care of them. But always remember you are the boss." At this point the preacher usually digresses and considers issues like whether the husband or the wife should handle the finances.

I have also heard many reactions to sermons like the one above, they usually go something like this: "God does not have a plan for marriage. A marriage is a socio-cultural phenomenon. It differs from culture to culture and from century to century. In ancient Rome there were many different kinds of marriages. Some were little more than agreements to produce heirs and support for the mother. Some verged on slavery. Marriages are not created by God, they are created by humans. Therefore there is no divine blueprint for how marriages should and should not be. They should and can be whatever we decide they are.

"Now as for this wives obey your husband stuff. Women have rights too, even in the church. A wife should have just as much say in things as a husband does. Read Genesis; she was created in God's image just as much as any man. Anyway, we as conscious 21<sup>st</sup> century people don't have to take seriously something written almost 2,000 years ago."

Then the response begins to show how the above point of view is carried to extremes. They point out that this male dominance is often used as an excuse to justify spouse abuse and other unchristian actions. Or that it is ridiculous for a Christian to even seriously ask if a wife should obey the unchristian commands of her husband. "What if he told her not to go to church? What if he said, 'Don't read the Bible?' What if he said bow down before this idol? A wife is not a slave. A wife is a person loved by God for whom Christ died and she is responsible for herself."

Of course I have exaggerated both of these points of view, but I have done it to make a point. I believe both points of view have their merits, but they also have their weaknesses. In my Christian walk I have come a long way on some things, this is one of them. At one point or another I would have agreed at least in part with each of the points of view I just characterized. Through this long journey I have learned some things. And as I live as a Christian in the midst of a marriage, I am learning every day.

One of the things I have learned is that God does have a plan for marriage. But unfortunately when people try to articulate this plan they often end up proclaiming their view or the culture's view of marriage instead of God's. Many people believe that God has a plan for marriage, but when they search for that plan they unwillingly read their own view into the Bible. The traditional view that "the man is the head of the household" often ignores the fact that this passage begins by telling both husband and wife to submit to each other. At the same time those who react against the traditional view often end up espousing a partnership as the model for marriage. This is nothing more than a twentieth century invention. And it is based on ideals of individual rights, not Christian ideals of servanthood.

I have learned that God has a plan for marriage, but I have also learned that there are many plans for marriage. There are as many different understandings of marriage as there are peoples and times. In Colonial America you can see that marriages were often times a way for a husband to get domestic help

and heirs. In the 20th century marriage is ideally an expression of romantic love and personal dedication. Even in the pages of the Bible there are different understandings of marriage. The Old Testament Patriarchs like Father Abraham had more than one wife. Yet the New Testament introduces, but does not demand, the ideal is that a man should be husband to one wife. The question is which plan for marriage is God's? There are many definitions for marriage, what is the Christian one.

I believe that the Christian definition of marriage is outlined in this passage of Ephesians. We have been making our way through the book of Ephesians and we are nearing the end. We have learned that God blesses us and calls us into the Body of Christ. We have learned that God has broken down the walls between us to make us one in the Body of Christ. We've learned of the power of the love of God given to us to share as the Body of Christ. We have learned of our need as the Body of Christ to trust in the grace of God. We have heard the call to imitate God in Body of Christ. Today we have a lesson not just about marriage but about all relationships between people in the Body of Christ.

This passage begins by saying, "Be subject to one another out reverence for Christ." "Be subject to one another." This is the heading under which the rest of the discourse is written. It doesn't say merely wives be subject to your husband. It is a mutual subjection. It doesn't say "be equal partners." "Partnership" is a modern concept based on individual liberties. Under this concept each person has a vote. If their vote is not counted then their liberties have been denied. Being subject to one another does not mean you act like one another's equals. It means you act like one another's servants. "Mutual subjection" is more like Chip and Dale: "You first." "No you." "Oh I wouldn't dream of it. You go first."

But Paul's opening sentence doesn't just say, "be subject to one another." It says be subject to one another "out of reverence for Christ." Every Christian definition proceeds from and returns to Christ. So does the Christian definition of Marriage. This mutual subjection Paul speaks of is not something we do simply out of obedience. It is something done out of love, it is an act of worship. Because we are Christians and we are in Christ we subject ourselves to one another.

Now you may say, "Well preacher in the next verse it says wives be subject to your husbands. But it doesn't say husbands be subject to your wives. All it says is that we should love them." It also doesn't say that wives should love their husbands either, but I am sure we all believe that they should. The love that Paul is talking about here is not just love as the world thinks of love. In the world people say, "I love your car. I want it." It connotes merely a desire for something or someone. Paul says, "Husband's love your wives as Christ loves the church." So how does Christ love the church? Read on. By dying for the church. Jesus loves by giving himself up to death.

The Christian definition of marriage is basically that we love one another as Christ loved us. That love is a sacrificial love, it is a love that serves. Husbands, when was the last time you loved your wife by serving her. Wives when was the last time you loved your husband by sacrificing for him. That is what love in Christ is all about, service and sacrifice. And a Christian marriage is a relationship of trust where both parties submit to, serve and sacrifice for the other. Ideally a Christian Marriage should be an example of the love that God calls us to.

But this discussion of husbands and wives is just the beginning. It goes on to talk about the relationships between parents and children and between slaves and masters which is often translated into bosses and employees for our context. All these relationships should be governed by being subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. As the Body of Christ we should always be seeking to be Christ like in our relationships.

Now, concerning marriage, if you are waiting for me to tell you who balances the check books, or who makes the decisions, you have missed the whole point. I don't think the Bible tells us who should mow the yard, or who should keep the children. God only tells us the most important things and expects us to trust the Spirit to guide us through the rest.

But it does tell us who is in charge in a Christian marriage. And it's not the husband! At the head of any Christian marriage is Christ. If Christ is at the head, then all the other details can be worked out.