

TJW, HT, 13.4.08, 9.15am & 11am, Ephesians 5.21-33

Open up the Bible to Ephesians chapter 5, so that we're ready to look at it together in a few moments. [PRAY].

There are a couple of things in that Bible-reading that make most modern people wince: "the husband is the head of the wife" - "wives should submit to their husbands".

Surely that kind of attitude ought to be dead?

Haven't we had a great social movement to put aside the repression of women - to give women equal rights in voting, in employment, and in the law? Is the Bible really wanting to roll all that back?

For committed Christians, while that was being read you may have been quietly grateful that you didn't bring a friend to church today to hear that kind of stuff from the Bible - what would they have thought of it?!

If you're not a Christian, you may have been thinking: "Wow, so they still are that old-fashioned in church, are they?"

Because of course here's what happened: within marriage - our parents and grandparents may have been happy with patriarchy - with men dominating women - but we are now expected to prefer partnership, with marriage as a union of two equals, who share all the roles together - and surely that seems better to many of us.

But yet still, many men and women are confused about their roles. Many wives have to work to help pay the mortgage. Other wives choose to work so that the family can have the luxuries we all expect to have. But if they have children they often feel torn between family and work.

And men no longer feel that they can have the role that our fathers and grandfathers often had - as boss of the family. Our wives now share in a lot of the things that used to be the husband's domain - bread-winning, and decision-making - so what distinctive role do men have?

There are plenty of people who think that there's a crisis for men nowadays, in knowing what their role is.

Into this confusing, changing social world, God speaks radical words about marriage. Let's be clear - what he says is not the same as old-fashioned patriarchy. And it's not the same as modern 'partnership'. It's a profound truth about marriage, from the God who created us - the God who created - more profound than anything else about marriage that we'll hear in the world around us.

And let me say to the many here who are not married - we'll see, as we go, that what God says here in chapter 5 of Ephesians about marriage is one aspect of what he says in the whole of this letter to every Christian, whether you're married or single.

So look in chapter 4, at verse 17 [READ 4.17-24].

That applies to every Christian, married or single - and the instructions to husbands and wives are just the application of that universal teaching to marriage in particular.

So let's dive in - and see what God says first of all to husbands.

1. Husbands, God says - here are two commands about how to behave towards your wife - **love and sacrifice.**

Look with me from verse 25 in chapter 5 [READ vs.25-27].

How did Jesus Christ show his love?

He did the ultimate - he gave up his own life, suffering death in our place. And if we unite ourselves with him, we escape from eternal death, and the way into to a new life with God is opened up to us.

That is how Christ loved you: he loved you enough to sacrifice everything for you.

If you want to be a good husband, your love for your wife must follow the blueprint of Christ's love for you.

This is what God is talking about when he says in verse 23 - do you see that there? - that... [READ].

Christ is the head of the church. And that gives him real authority - turn back a page to chapter 1 to see how this idea of Christ as head first comes up in this letter - 1.22 [READ 1.22-23].

But, back in chapter 5 verse 23, what is he like, the one who has this authority? "Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is..." what? The tyrant? The one who looks after his own interests? No - "...of which he is the Saviour" - the one who gave everything he had, to win for us a spiritual benefit that we could never earn for ourselves.

And the husband is to be the head of the wife in just the same way.

So the husband's 'headship' is not the authority to dominate his wife - to crush her so that her life fits in with his.

His headship is the duty to love her so much that he will sacrifice everything for her good - especially her spiritual good.

Headship is really all about responsibility.

For the Christian husband, that should be enough motivation to sort ourselves out. A faithful Christian wants to model himself on Christ in every part of his life - including copying Christ's loving sacrifice as the head in his marriage.

But actually, as if that weren't enough, there's another motivation here. See verse 28 [READ vs.28-31].

The Bible's key phrase for what happens when a man and woman get married is that they become 'one flesh'.

Sex is the great physical expression of that - symbolising the union of two lives.

So if you're 'one flesh' with your wife, then if you don't love her the way you should, you're really harming yourself - because she is 'one flesh, one body', with you.

If you stamp all over one foot with your other foot, you're hurting yourself.

A husband who is unloving to his wife is being unloving to part of himself.

This is tough for husbands to hear, isn't it? You should know that I have to preach this to myself, as much as to any husband here.

I reckon that there are two big mistakes Christian husbands can be tempted to make: shirking, or bossing.

Bossing is the obvious one. That's the old patriarchy. "You'll have my tea on the table when I want it. I'll make all the big decisions around here. I'll spend the money on what I want - because I earned most of it."

Shirking, though, is a bit more subtle than bossing - but it's just as dangerous. The shirker is the dutiful husband who goes to work, and keeps his head down when he comes home.

He basically leaves things at home to his wife, while he hides behind the paper, or in front of the Playstation. If the kids come to him for something, he'll say most times: "Ask your mother."

If he's a Christian, he'll only ever pray with his wife when she suggests it.

But do you see that real headship is neither bossing nor shirking.

Real headship is this: The Lord has given me the responsibility for my wife's spiritual good.

Is she run down, physically and spiritually? I need to give her some time to relax, and read her Bible, or pray with a Christian friend.

If we have kids, I'll gladly take the kids off her hands for a day.

Have we been forgetting to read the Bible and pray with the kids for a couple of days? It's my job to make sure I switch the telly off, put the newspaper down, and get back into the habit.

Have we started to miss a few Sundays at church as a couple? It's my job to talk with my wife about how we put that right, and keep church as a top priority.

(I know that that issue is pretty much sorted out already for us in my marriage - but you see the point.)

That's headship - taking loving, sacrificial responsibility for your wife's well-being - especially her well-being in her relationship with Christ.

And husbands: God has given us each other to keep each other up to the mark on this. If you see a Christian friend bossing his wife, or shirking with the family, tell him that that's not on. Do it privately and gently - but tell him - because it's a serious responsibility, to be the head.

Now I need to say to singles that in fact God also calls on you to behave in this same way towards every other believer. Look at the very beginning of chapter 5 [READ 5.1-2].

What God says to husbands, he says to you about all your relationships with other Christians: out of love, sacrifice your own desires so that you can build them up in following Jesus Christ.

Husbands: love and sacrifice.

And now what does God say here to wives? Verse 22 [READ vs.22-24]. And verse 33 [READ].

2. Wives: submit, and respect.

It's already clear what submission is not, isn't it.

It's not inferiority. It's not being a second-class citizen.

It's not having to respect every stupid, lazy, unkind thing your husband does. A wife is her husband's equal in status and value; she simply has a different role from him in marriage.

So I guess you can see what true submission is.

It's grateful acceptance of your husband's headship when he takes responsibility for your well-being, and for your growth as a Christian.

And it's modelled on your relationship with Christ.

You gratefully submit to Christ who died to save you.

In the same way gratefully submit to your husband when he tries to live up to the responsibility for you that God has given him.

I said that there are two big mistakes that husbands can make - bossing, and shirking.

And I reckon that there are two big mistakes a Christian wife can make, too: either being a doormat, or superwoman.

The doormat lets her husband dominate. She accepts whatever he says and does, however unkind or stupid.

That's a pretty obvious mistake, letting your husband get away with abusing his role - and it's not what God means by 'submission'. But being superwoman is just as big a mistake - the problem is, again, that it's more subtle.

Superwoman has decided that she's better at most things in family-life than her husband is. So she squeezes him out, because he's pretty useless, and she just gets on with it.

She decides when they'll come to church and when they won't.

She controls the family diary, and of course it's the family diary that sets the family priorities.

She takes on the responsibility to make sure that the kids pray at night, and he doesn't feel he can get involved.

And if she's with her friends or family, she'll moan about how useless he is. (Some women I know have said that they're amazed by how much time women spend moaning about their men, when they get together.)

He may be the head, but superwoman is going to be the neck that turns the head wherever she wants.

Do you see that just as a faithful Christian husband has to learn to take responsibility, so a faithful Christian wife has to learn to make space for him in family-life to help him be the head?

If he's not a natural leader and initiative-taker, and you as the wife are, you'll really need to help him.

And again, if you're not married, there's a message for you here.

You see, what is said here to wives is really true for every Christian in the way we treat one another - look over at 4.29 [READ].

Every time the Christian opens their mouth, we should be thinking: even in what I say I've got to submit myself to others - to respect them - so that what I say is for their good, not mine.

For any single Christian, hoping to be married one day, the best preparation for being a faithful married Christian is to be put your best efforts into being a godly unmarried Christian.

Husbands: love and sacrifice. Wives: submit and respect.

This is God's profound truth for marriage.

Now, just a word on different circumstances that people are in.

I've already said something to singles.

But what if you're a Christian man married to a woman who's not a Christian?

This is still a direct message for you, isn't it, here in Ephesians 5?

Do all in your power to love her sacrificially, so that she has every chance to see Christ's love modelled in you.

What if you're a Christian woman married to a non-Christian man, who may not be striving for your spiritual good?

Turn on a few pages to some verses that speak directly to you - 1 Peter 3.1-2 [READ].

Be as godly and pure with him as you can, so that he has every chance to see the power of Christ in your life.

And what if you're a Christian married to another Christian, and you know that one of you, or both of you, is failing really badly in your marriage?

If you're the one who's messing it up - take just one step this week to sort it out. Tell the Lord the problem. Tell a wise Christian friend. Do something.

If it's your spouse who's messing up, talk to them. Talk together, if you can, to a wise Christian you trust. Don't pretend nothing's going on. Do something.

Because marriage matters. See, finally, verse 31 [READ vs.31-32].

The deep union between Jesus Christ and his people is the great model on which marriage is patterned.

Husbands: follow the blueprint of Christ's loving sacrifice; wives: model yourself on the Christian's joyful submission to Christ.

That's not patriarchy - it's not pretending men and women are really the same when they're not - it's real partnership, that allows us to be the men and women that God made us to be.