

Grace to You :: *esp Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Marriage As It Was Meant to Be

Scripture: Genesis 2:24; Deuteronomy 22:6; Luke 1:38; Ephesians 5:22–33; 1 Peter 3:4

Code: A203

Our entertainment-saturated society helps feed all sorts of illusions about reality. The fantasy of the perfect romantic and sexual relationship, the perfect lifestyle, and the perfect body all prove unattainable because the reality never lives up to the expectation.

The worst fallout comes in the marriage relationship. When two people can't live up to each other's expectations, they'll look for their fantasized satisfaction in the next relationship, the next experience, the next excitement. But that path leads only to self-destruction and emptiness.

Marriage is the capstone of the family, the building block of human civilization. A society that does not honor and protect marriage undermines its very existence. Why? Because one of God's designs for marriage is to show the next generation how a husband and wife demonstrate reciprocal, sacrificial love toward each other.

But when husbands and wives forsake that love, their marriage fails to be what God intended. When marriage fails, the whole family falls apart; when the family fails, the whole society suffers. And stories of societal suffering fill the headlines every day.

Now, more than ever before, is the time for Christians to declare and put on display what the Bible declares: God's standard for marriage and the family is the *only* standard that can produce meaning, happiness, and fulfillment.

Divine Directives for Wives

One of the most explicit passages of Scripture that outlines God's standard for marriage is Ephesians 5:22-33. Wives often bear the brunt of that section, but the majority of the passage deals with the husband's attitude toward and responsibilities for his wife. Nonetheless, here's the wife's responsibility before the Lord:

Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything (Ephesians 5:22-24).

Submission in no way implies a difference in essence or worth; it does refer, however, to a willing submission of oneself. Wives, submission is to be your voluntary response to God's will—it's a willingness to give up your rights to other believers in general and ordained authority in particular, in this case your own husband.

Husbands aren't to treat their wives like slaves, barking commands at them; they are to treat their wives as equals, assuming their God-given responsibility of caring, protecting, and providing for

them.

Likewise wives fulfill their God-given responsibility when they submit willingly to their *own* husbands. That reflects not only the depth of intimacy and vitality in their relationship, but also the sense of ownership a wife has for her husband.

Keep in mind that the wife's submission requires intelligent participation: "Mere listless, thoughtless subjection is not desirable if ever possible. The quick wit, the clear moral discernment, the fine instincts of a wife make of her a counselor whose influence is invaluable and almost unbounded" (Charles R. Erdman, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966], 103).

Elisabeth Elliot, writing on "The Essence of Femininity," offers a fitting summary of God's ideal for wives:

Unlike Eve, whose response to God was calculating and self-serving, the virgin Mary's answer holds no hesitation about risks or losses or the interruption of her own plans. It is an utter and unconditional self-giving: "I am the Lord's servant . . . May it be to me as you have said" (Luke 1:38). This is what I understand to be the essence of femininity. *It means surrender.*

Think of a bride. She surrenders her independence, her name, her destiny, her will, herself to the bridegroom in marriage . . . The gentle and quiet spirit of which Peter speaks, calling it "of great worth in God's sight" (1 Peter 3:4), is the true femininity, which found its epitome in Mary (John Piper, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* [Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1991], 398, 532, emphasis added).

Divine Directives for Husbands

After giving the divine guidelines for the wife's submission, Paul devotes the next nine verses of Ephesians 5 to explain the husband's duty to submit to his wife through his love for her: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church" (Ephesians 5:25). The Lord's pattern of love for His church is the husband's pattern of love for his wife, and it is manifest in four ways.

Sacrificial Love

Christ loved the church by giving "Himself up for her." The husband who loves his wife as Christ loves His church will give up everything he has for his wife, including his life if necessary.

Most of you husbands would give verbal assent to that—literally dying for your wife is such a remote possibility for most of you. But I would speculate that it is much more difficult to make lesser, but actual sacrifices for her.

Husbands, when you put aside your own likes, desires, opinions, preferences, and welfare to please your wife and meet her needs, then you are truly dying to self to live for your wife. And that is what Christ's love demands.

Purifying Love

Christ loved the church sacrificially with this goal in mind:

That He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless (Ephesians 5:26-27).

Love wants only the best for the one it loves, and it cannot bear for a loved one to be corrupted or misled by anything evil or harmful. If you really love your wife, you'll do everything in your power to maintain her holiness, virtue, and purity every day you live.

That obviously means doing nothing to defile her. Don't expose her to or let her indulge in anything that would bring impurity into her life. Don't tempt her to sin by, say, inducing an argument out of her on a subject you know is sensitive to her. Love always seeks to purify.

Caring Love

Another aspect of divine love is this:

Husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church (Ephesians 5:28-29).

The word translated "cherishes" literally means "to warm with body heat"—it is used to describe a bird sitting on her nest (e.g., Deuteronomy 22:6). Husbands, you are to provide a secure, warm, safe haven for your wife.

When your wife needs strength, give her strength. When she needs encouragement, give it to her. Whatever she needs, you are obligated to supply as best you can. God chose you to provide for and protect her, to nourish and cherish her, and to do so "as Christ also does the church."

Unbreakable Love

For a husband to love his wife as Christ loves His church he must love her with an unbreakable love. In this direct quotation from Genesis 2:24, Paul emphasizes the permanence as well as the unity of marriage: "For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh" (Ephesians 5:31). And God's standard for marriage *still* hasn't changed.

Husbands, your union with your wife is permanent. When you got married, you had to leave, cleave, and become one with your wife—never go back on that. Let your wife rest in the security of knowing that you belong to her, for life.

Just as the body of Christ is indivisible, God's ideal for marriage is that it be indivisible. As Christ is one with His church, you husbands are one with your wives.

Paul goes on to say, "This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church" (Ephesians 5:32). Why is submission as well as sacrificial, purifying, and caring love so strongly emphasized in Scripture? Because the sacredness of the church is wed to the sacredness of marriage.

Christian, your marriage is a testimony to the relationship between Christ and His bride, the church. Your marriage will either tell the truth about that relationship, or it will tell a lie.

What is your marriage saying to the watching world? If you'll walk in the power of the Spirit, yield to His Word, and be mutually submissive, you can know that God will bless you abundantly and glorify His Son through your marriage.

Adapted from [*Different By Design*](#) by John MacArthur

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