

## **Wives, Marriage, and Submission**

Scripture: Ephesians 5

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### **Wives, be subject to your own husbands, (5:22a)**

**Wives** is not qualified, and therefore applies to every Christian wife, regardless of her social standing, education, intelligence, spiritual maturity or giftedness, age, experience, or any other consideration. Nor is it qualified by her husband's intelligence, character, attitude, spiritual condition, or any other consideration. Paul says categorically to *all* believing wives: **be subject to your own husbands**.

As indicated by italics in most translations, **be subject** is not in the original text, but the meaning is carried over from verse 21. The idea is: "Be subject to one another in the fear of Christ [and, as a first example,] **wives, ... to your own husbands**." As explained in the previous chapter, *hupotasso* means to relinquish one's rights, and the Greek middle voice (used in verse 21 and carried over by implication into verse 22) emphasizes the willing submitting of *oneself* God's command is to those who are to submit. That is, the submission is to be a voluntary response to God's will in giving up one's independent rights to other believers in general and to ordained authority in particular—in this case the wife's **own husband**.

The wife is not commanded to obey (*hupakouo*) her husband, as children are to obey their parents and slaves their masters (6:1, 5). A husband is not to treat his wife as a servant or as a child, but as an equal for whom God has given him care and responsibility for provision and protection, to be exercised in love. She is not his to order about, responding to his every wish and command. As Paul proceeds to explain in considerable detail (vv. 25–33), the husband's primary responsibility as head of the household is to love, provide, protect, and serve his wife and family—not to lord it over them according to his personal whims and desires.

**Your own husband** suggests the intimacy and mutuality of the wife's submission. She willingly makes herself **subject to** the one she possesses as her **own husband** (cf. 1 Cor. 7:3–4). Husbands and wives are to have a mutual possessiveness as well as a mutual submissiveness. They belong to each other in an absolute equality. The husband no more possesses his wife than she possesses him. He has no superiority and she no inferiority, any more than one who has the gift of teaching is superior to one with the gift of helps. A careful reading of 1 Corinthians 12:12–31 will show that God

has designed every person for a unique role in the Body of Christ, and the pervasive attitude governing all those roles and blending them together is “the more excellent way” of love (ch. 13).

As with spiritual gifts, the distinctions of headship and submission are entirely functional and were ordained by God. As a consequence of Eve’s disobedience of God’s command and her failure to consult with Adam about the serpent’s temptation, God told her, “Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (Gen. 3:16). The desire spoken of here is not sexual or psychological, both of which Eve had for Adam before the Fall as his specially created helper. It is the same desire spoken of in the next chapter, where the identical Hebrew word (*tʔshûqâ*) is used. The term comes from an Arabic root that means to compel, impel, urge, or seek control over. The Lord warned Cain, “Sin is crouching at your door; it *desires* to have you [that is, control you], but you must master it” (4:7, niv ; emphasis added). Sin wanted to master Cain, but God commanded Cain to master sin. In light of this close context meaning of *tʔshûqâ*, therefore, the curse on Eve was that woman’s desire would henceforth be to usurp the place of man’s headship and that he would resist that desire and would rule over her. The Hebrew word here for “rule” is not the same as that used in 1:28. Rather it represented a new, despotic kind of authoritarianism that was not in God’s original plan for man’s headship.

With the Fall and its curse came the distortion of woman’s proper submissiveness and of man’s proper authority. That is where the battle of the sexes began, where women’s liberation and male chauvinism came into existence. Women have a sinful inclination to usurp man’s authority and men have a sinful inclination to put women under their feet. The divine decree that man would rule over woman in this way was part of God’s curse on humanity, and it takes a manifestation of grace in Christ by the filling of the Holy Spirit to restore the created order and harmony of proper submission in a relationship that has become corrupted and disordered by sin.

Eve was created from Adam’s rib and ordained to be his companion, to be, as Adam himself beautifully testified, “bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh” (Gen. 2:22–23). God’s curse did not change His basic plan for mutuality in the marriage relationship or for the functional authority of the husband over the wife. Man was created first and was created generally to be physically, constitutionally, and emotionally stronger than woman, who is “a weaker vessel” (1 Pet. 3:7). Both before and after the Fall and the consequent curse, man was called to be the provider, protector, guide, and shepherd of the family, and woman called to be supportive and submissive.

In a parallel passage to Ephesians 5:22, Paul said, “Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord” (Col. 3:18). *Aneko* (to be fitting) was sometimes used of that which was legally binding,

as in Philemon 8, where Paul uses it in reference to legal propriety. The word refers to that which is the accepted standard of human society.

Any society that has taken either the obvious nature of women or the Word of God into consideration has fashioned its best laws in line with His. Laws against murder find their source in the Ten Commandments—just as do laws against stealing, adultery, perjury, and so on. The wife's submission to her husband is a divine principle that has been reflected to some degree in the legal codes of most societies.

For the past several hundred years western society has been bombarded with the humanistic, egalitarian, sexless, classless philosophy that was the dominant force behind the French Revolution. The blurring and even total removal of all human distinctions continues to be masterminded by Satan so as to undermine legitimate, God-ordained authority in every realm of human activity—in government, the family, the school, and even in the church. We find ourselves victimized by the godless, atheistic concepts of man's supreme independence from every external law and authority. The philosophy is self-destructive, because no group of people can live in orderliness and productivity if each person is bent on doing his own will.

Sadly, much of the church has fallen prey to this humanistic philosophy and is now willing to recognize the ordination of homosexuals, women, and others whose God Word specifically disqualifies from church leadership. It is usually argued that biblical teaching contrary to egalitarianism was inserted by biased editors, scribes, prophets, or apostles. And the church is reaping the whirlwind of confusion, disorder, immorality, and apostasy that such qualification of God's Word always spawns. Many Bible interpreters function on the basis of a hermeneutic that is guided by contemporary humanistic philosophy rather than the absolute authority of Scripture as God's inerrant Word.

Peter taught exactly the same truth as Paul in regard to the relationship of husbands and wives. "You wives, be submissive [also from *hupotasso*] to your own husbands" (1 Pet. 3:1a). The idea is not that of subservience or servility, but of willingly functioning under the husband's leadership. Peter also emphasized the mutual possessiveness of husbands and wives, using the same words as Paul—"your own husbands." Wives are to submit even when their husbands "are disobedient to the word, [that] they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior" (vv. 1b-2). Instead of nagging, criticizing, and preaching to her husband, a wife should simply set a godly example before him—showing him the power and beauty of the gospel through its effect in her own life. Humility, love, moral purity, kindness, and respect are the most

powerful means a woman has for winning her husband to the Lord.

When the wife's primary concern is for those inward virtues, she will not be preoccupied with "adornment [that is] merely external—braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses." Rather her concentration will be on "the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God" (1 Pet. 3:3–4; cf. 1 Tim. 2:9–10).

Modern society has elevated fashion almost to the point of idolatry. Clothing stores, newspaper and magazine advertising, and television commercials are like giant billboards that continually proclaim, "We covet clothes." Expensive, often ostentatious, jewelry for both men and women is becoming more and more prevalent as a means to flaunt material prosperity and glorify self. We are continually goaded to put our bodies and apparel on parade.

Scripture does not forbid careful grooming and attractive attire. Being sloppy and unkempt is not a virtue. Proverbs 31 commends the "excellent wife" who works diligently and whose "clothing is fine linen and purple" (vv. 10, 22). But inordinate attire worn for the purpose of flaunting wealth or attracting attention to ourselves is an expression of pride, the root of all other sins. It is contrary to and destructive of the humble and self-giving submissiveness that should characterize every Christian.

The preoccupation of believers should be with the spiritual adornment of the inside, "the hidden person of the heart," not the physical adornment of the outside. The wife's "gentle and quiet spirit" that comes from obedience to the Spirit's control is "imperishable" and is "precious in the sight of God" (1 Pet. 3:4). The Greek word for "precious" is *poluteles* and pertains to that which is of extraordinary value. It is the term used of "the alabaster vial of very costly perfume of pure nard" with which the woman at Bethany anointed Jesus' feet (Mark 14:3). God is not impressed with gold, expensive gems, and fashionable clothing, but with the woman who is genuinely humble, submissive, gentle, and quiet.

In the feminist movement, as well as in less extreme groups, we see women loudly and vociferously proclaiming their ideas, opinions, and rights in regard to virtually every issue—many times in the name of Christianity. Even when their basic position is biblical, their manner of advocating it often is not. God specifically excludes women from dominant leadership over men in the church and in the home, and whatever direct influence they have—which can be highly significant and powerful—should be by way of encouragement and support.

Holiness has always been the foremost concern of godly women. “For in this way in former times,” Peter goes on to explain, “the holy women also, who hoped in God, used to adorn themselves, being submissive to their own husbands. Thus Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, and you have become her children if you do what is right without being frightened by any fear” (1 Pet. 3:5–6). Just as Abraham was the symbolic father of the faithful (Rom. 4:11, 16), his wife, Sarah, was the symbolic mother of the submissive. Because Sarah had no fear of obeying God, she had no fear of what her husband, or any other person or circumstance, might do to her. God will take care of the consequences when His children are obedient to Him.

The Mishnah, an ancient codification of Jewish law and tradition, reflects the prevailing Jewish beliefs and standards that were accepted in Jesus’ day. It describes the wife’s duties as those of grinding flour, baking, cooking, nursing her children, spinning wool, laundering, and other such typical household chores. The husband’s responsibility was to provide food, clothing, shoes, and such things. He often gave his wife a certain amount of money each week for her personal expenses. Many women worked with their husbands in the fields or in a trade—as did Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:2–3). A wife was allowed to work at crafts or horticulture at home and to sell the fruits of her labor. Profits were used either to supplement family income or to provide her with her own spending money. But if she worked apart from her husband in the marketplace or at a trade she was considered a disgrace. Apart from her household chores and possible work with her husband, a wife was also responsible for getting her sons ready for school (often taking them personally to prevent truancy), caring for guests, and doing charitable work. At all times she was to adorn herself properly, for the sake of modesty as well as nice appearance. The wife who faithfully carried her responsibilities was held in high regard in her family, in the synagogue, and in the community.

We learn from Paul that some of the women in the Corinthian church probably had become misled by the vocal and influential feminists of the city and began going out in public without a veil. The New Testament does not prescribe the wearing of veils for all women. Though it appears to have been the norm in Corinth (cf. 1 Cor. 11:4–6), there is no reason to assume that Christian women in all the rest of the early churches wore veils. Apparently in Corinth the only women who traditionally did not wear veils were prostitutes or feminists, both of which groups had no regard for God or for the home. In that culture veils were a sign of moral propriety and submission, and failure to wear them a sign of immorality and rebelliousness. In that cultural circumstance Paul advised women to cover their heads “while praying or prophesying” (1 Cor. 11:5), lest they be considered to be rebelling against God’s ordained principle of submissiveness. Paul did not here establish a permanent or universal mode of dress for Christian women, but reinforced the principle that they should never give to their society even the suggestion of rebelliousness or immorality. (For a more complete discussion of this vital

passage, see the author's commentary 1 *Corinthians* [Chicago: Moody, 1984], pp. 251–63).

In his letter to Titus, Paul teaches that “older women likewise are to be reverent in their behavior, not malicious gossips, nor enslaved to much wine, teaching what is good, that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be sensible, pure, workers at home, kind, being subject [*hupotasso*] to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be dishonored” (2:3–5). Not only are older Christian women to be reverent and to avoid gossiping and excessive drinking, but they are to be engaged in teaching younger women. Older women are to teach younger women the requirements and priorities of Christian womanhood—especially in regard to their husbands and children. Husbands and wives alike are commanded to love each other and to love their children. Not to obey those clear commands is to dishonor God's Word.

For younger wives, to be “workers at home” is an especially great need in our day. One of the tragedies of the modern family is that often no one is home. There are in excess of fifty million working mothers (and the number constantly rises) in the United States, of whom at least two-thirds have school-age children.

The term “workers at home” in Titus 2:5 is from the compound Greek word *oikourgos*, which is derived from *oikos* (house) and a form of *ergon* (work). *Ergon*, however, does not simply refer to labor in general but often connotes the idea of a particular job or employment. It is the word Jesus used when He said, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to accomplish His *work*” (John 4:34, emphasis added) and, on another occasion, “I glorified Thee on the earth, having accomplished the *work* which Thou hast given Me to do” (17:4, emphasis added). It is the word the Holy Spirit used in commanding the church at Antioch to “set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the *work* to which I have called them” (Acts 13:2, emphasis added). Paul used the word in relation to Epaphroditus, who “came close to death for the *work* of Christ” (Phil. 2:30, emphasis added) and in relation to the work of faithful Christian leaders in Thessalonica (1 Thess. 5:13). In other words, it is not that a woman is simply to keep busy in the home but that the home is the basic place of her employment, her divinely assigned job.

In his first letter to Timothy, Paul commands “younger widows to get married, bear children, keep house, and give the enemy no occasion for reproach” (5:14). A woman is to be the homekeeper, the one whose divinely assigned job is to take care of her husband and children. God's standard is for the wife and mother to work inside, not outside, the home. For a mother to get a job outside the home in order to send the children to a Christian school is to misunderstand her husband's role as provider as well as her own duty to the family. The good training her children receive in the Christian school may

be counteracted by her lack of full commitment to the biblical standards for motherhood.

In addition to having less time to work at home and to teach and care for her children, a wife working outside the home often has a boss to whom she is responsible for pleasing in dress and other matters, complicating the headship of her husband. She is forced to submit to men other than her own husband and also is likely to become more independent in many ways, including financially, thereby fragmenting the unity of the family. She is also in danger of becoming enamored of the business world and of finding less and less satisfaction in her home responsibilities.

One of the great attractions of many cults for young people is the prospect of a family-like group in which they feel the acceptance and love they never received at home—frequently due to the mother's absence. Many studies have shown that most children who grow up in homes where the mother works are less secure than those whose mothers are always home. Her presence there, even when the child is in school, is an emotional anchor. Working mothers contribute to delinquency and a host of other problems that lead to the decline of the family and of the next generation. It is not that mothers who stay at home are automatically or categorically more responsible or spiritual than those who work. Many mothers who have never worked outside the home have done little to strengthen or bless the home. Gossiping, watching ungodly and immoral soap operas, and a host of other things can be as destructive as working away from home. But a woman's only opportunity to fulfill God's plan for her role as wife and mother is in the home.

Even widows or women whose husbands have left them are not expected to leave their domain and children to work outside the home. Paul declared, "If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Tim. 5:8). The reference is to the extended as well as the immediate family of a Christian man, and in the context pertains particularly to widows. If a woman has no husband and no financial resources of her own, her children or grandchildren are to take care of her (v. 4). If she has no children old enough to support her, the other men in her family have the obligation (v. 8). If she has no male relatives to support her, a female relative who has adequate resources is to care for her (v. 16a). If she has no such male or female relatives, or if they are unable or unwilling to support her, the church is obligated to care for her (v. 16b). The basic principle is that she should be cared for by other believers and not be forced to support herself by an outside work. As He was hanging on the cross, during the last moments of His life, Jesus took time in His agony to provide for His widowed mother by giving her into the care of John (John 19:26–27).

Widows who were over sixty years old, who had proven their faithfulness as wives and mothers, and who were known for their good works and their service to strangers and to fellow Christians, were put on the official widows' list (1 Tim. 5:9–10). We learn from extrabiblical sources that the widows on this list were fully supported by the local congregation and served the church in official ministries, as what might be called staff widows.

Younger widows, however, were not to be put on the list. They were likely to fall in love again and want to get married, forsaking their commitment to the ministry (vv. 11–12). They would also be more inclined to be lazy, and become “gossips and busybodies” (v. 13). Consequently, they were to be encouraged to “get married, bear children, keep house, and give the enemy no occasion for reproach,” as some of them had already done in turning aside to follow Satan, perhaps in sexual sin or mixed marriage (vv. 14–15).

From the time of its inception, the early church recognized the high priority of its obligations to provide for widows. In order for them to be more carefully and fairly cared for, the apostles appointed the first deacons to be “in charge of this task” (Acts 6:3). Those chosen were among the most godly and capable men in the Jerusalem church and included Stephen and Philip.

If a woman still has children at home, her primary obligation is to them. If she has no children or they are grown, she has a responsibility to help teach the younger women and share the insights and wisdom she has gained from her own walk with the Lord. She should invest her time in teaching younger women much as she taught her own children. As a godly influence working in and out of her home, she bequeaths a spiritual legacy to succeeding generations even beyond the influence on her own family.

Some Christian women may have no choice but to work because they have no provider in their family and their church is unwilling to help them. But the great majority of women who work outside the home do so for the sake of some imagined need for personal fulfillment or extra income to increase their standard of living, rather than to provide for family necessities. Many young mothers leave their three- or four-month-old babies with baby-sitters in order to return to work so they can earn more money or sometimes just to get away from the responsibilities of the home. Some Christian churches, schools, and other institutions foster that practice by providing child care centers and nursery schools for mothers who work.

If the standard of living a family has cannot be maintained without the wife's working outside the home, that family should consider carefully whether their standard is God's will for them, and surely



should not confuse the economic benefits of their presumption with blessing from God. Not only does the large number of working women damage the home but also the economy, by contributing to inflation and loss of jobs that men would otherwise fill.

Just as with the drinking of alcoholic beverages, the Bible does not specifically forbid a wife to work outside the home. But the biblical priorities are so clear that they can only be obeyed or rejected openly, and each woman must choose how she will honor those priorities.

When Samuel was still an infant, his father, Elkanah, wanted his mother to take the child and go up with the rest of the household to sacrifice in Jerusalem. But his mother, Hannah, replied, “I will not go up until the child is weaned; then I will bring him” (1 Sam. 1:21–22). Despite the importance of the yearly sacrifice, she knew that her primary responsibility at that time was to care for her baby. Realizing her priorities were right, Elkanah responded, “Do what seems best to you. Remain until you have weaned him; only may the Lord confirm His word” (v 23).

The industrious and gifted woman who has time and energy remaining after taking care of her household responsibilities can channel them into many areas of service that do not take her out of the home on an all-day basis. The godly wife of Proverbs 31 took care of her husband and children, shopped carefully, supervised various business and financial dealings, helped the poor, gave encouraging and wise advice, was a kind teacher, and was highly respected by her husband, children, and the community (vv. 10–31). Yet she did all of that while operating primarily out of her home. With modern means of communication and transportation as well as countless other resources that the woman of Proverbs did not have, Christian women today have immeasurably more opportunities for productive, helpful, and rewarding service—without sacrificing the priority of their homes.

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