

The Loving Husband: A Portrait of Christ

Scripture: Ephesians 5:22–33

Code: B100902

Jodi is fed up with her husband. She refuses to cater his every need and put up with his abusive treatment any longer. “My husband has been a dominating spouse since the day I met him,” Jodi says. “Frank treats me like a slave.”

Frank complains, “I don’t understand why my wife just won’t obey me like she said in her wedding vows. I’m the man. She’s the woman. It’s her job to serve me, and I’ve got the Scripture to back it up.”

Sadly, stories like Frank’s and Jodi’s are common in our day. A controlling husband drags his wife to the Bible and rubs her nose in his favorite passage—“Wives, submit to your own husbands.” But if Frank had continued reading, the Scripture would have dealt a death-blow to his sinful attitude—“Husbands, *love* your wives just as Christ also loved the church *and gave Himself up* for her” (Ephesians 5:22).

Frank’s domineering, chauvinistic attitude is the experience of many women who feel more like their husband’s doormat than the beloved, cherished bride of Christ. Even worse—beyond the damage to husband, wife, and children—a bad marriage is a poor testimony about Christ and the church.

By God’s design, marriage presents to the world a picture of Christ’s relationship to His bride, the church. But marriages like Frank’s and Jodi’s sinfully distort that portrait into a gross misrepresentation. Is Christ a petty tyrant like Frank? Does His abuse turn the church into an embittered spouse like Jodi?

Wives, maybe you’ve never viewed your marriage from that perspective. God intends your submission to your husband as a living illustration of the church’s submission to her Lord. That is precisely the reason Paul commanded wives to submit: “For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything” (Ephesians 5:23-24). So, here’s a probing question: Wives, what message are you sending to the world? What does your submission to your husband say about the church’s submission to Christ?

Husbands, your turn.

Husbands, are supposed to be a living illustration of Christ, who “loved the church and *gave Himself* for her” (Ephesians 5:25, italics added). Notice that the stress is entirely on Christ’s sacrifice and service for the good of the church. Take a look at the passage again:

That He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be

holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself.

For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church. Nevertheless let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. (Ephesians 5:26-33)

Remember, Paul’s theme in Ephesians 5 (from verse 21 on) is *mutual submission*. When he introduced the husband’s headship in verse 23, he was not changing the subject. He was not saying everyone else needs to submit to the man, who as the head of the family gets to impose his will and his desires on everyone else. Not at all. Paul’s whole point here is that a husband best shows Christlike headship by voluntary, loving sacrifice and service on behalf of the wife—which is as much a form of *submission* as the wife’s allegiance to her husband’s leadership and the children’s obedience to their parents.

The sinful tendency of fallen men is to dominate their wives by brute force. Even some Christian men are guilty of being too heavy-handed with authority. They practically lord it over their wives, as if marriage were designed to be a master-slave relationship. Some, like Frank, have even tried to claim that Ephesians 5:24 supports such a notion, because it urges wives to be subject to their husbands “in everything.” But that perspective of the husband’s role is antithetical to the pattern of headship Christ gives us.

Anyone who thinks that way simply needs to read further into Ephesians 5. When Paul turned his attention to husband’s he didn’t say, “Husbands, rule your wives; order them around; command them; exercise authority over them; dominate them”—or anything of the sort. He told them to love their wives as Christ loves the church: sacrificially, tenderly, meekly, and with a servant’s heart. This is how husbands are to show submission to their wives.

Authentic love is incompatible with a despotic or domineering approach to headship. When Paul commanded husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church, he was in effect forbidding them to exercise severe or abusive authority over their wives. If the model of this love is Christ, who “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28), then the husband who thinks he exists so his wife and children can serve him couldn’t be further off the mark.

It is significant, by the way, that husbands are not commanded in this passage to rule over or lead their wives. They are simply told to *love* their wives. In fact, love dominates that entire passage in Ephesians, appearing five times throughout Paul’s short list of instructions to husbands.

Consider the implications of a *command* to love. This suggests that genuine love is not merely a romantic feeling or an involuntary attraction. It involves a willful choice. For that reason, it’s in the form of an imperative. Far from being something we “fall into” by happenstance, authentic love involves a deliberate, voluntary commitment to sacrifice whatever we can for the good of the person we love.

In 1 Corinthians 13:4-8, the apostle Paul outlined the characteristics of true love. Notice that none of the features of true love are involuntary, passive, or feelings-based. In fact, Paul used active verbs wherever possible, rather than adjectives, underscoring the truth that love is both dynamic and deliberate.

Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.

So, when Paul commanded husbands to love their wives, he was calling for all the virtues outlined in 1 Corinthians 13, including patience, kindness, generosity, humility, meekness, thoughtfulness, liberality, gentleness, trust, goodness, truthfulness, and long-suffering. It is significant that all the properties of love stress selflessness and sacrifice. The husband who truly loves his wife simply cannot wield his authority over her like a club. Far from being overlord of the family, the godly husband and father must make himself servant of all.

That's not easy. In fact, it's impossible for unbelievers to obey Paul's command in Ephesians. Only a converted, Spirit-filled husband can love his wife as Christ loves the church. And that's the only way others will see a true picture of the Savior.

So, that's God's blueprint for marriage—it's a picture of Christ and His relationship to the church. In what ways have you seen the world, or even the church, distort God's original design? Take it to the comment thread.

Available online at: <http://www.gty.org>

COPYRIGHT (C) 2024 Grace to You

You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (<https://www.gty.org/about#copyright>).