

The Submissive Wife

Scripture: Ephesians 5:21–25; Colossians 3:18

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Earlier this year, Mark Oden preached a controversial sermon to his congregation in southeast England. He titled his message “Marriage and Women,” which included a plea for the wives in his congregation to “submit to their husbands.” In the aftermath, some irate wives—along with their disgruntled husbands—vowed never to attend the church again. One female attendee said she was disgusted by the message, adding: “How can they talk that way in the twenty-first century?” Another quipped, “What kind of medieval sermon is that?” Pastor Oden, himself a married father of three, responded, “I am passionate about helping people to have healthy marriages. I did not set out to unnecessarily offend people, but I stand by what God has said in His Word, the Bible.” That pastor’s passion to cultivate healthy marriages, coupled with his courage to present the truth is regrettably rare in many churches of our day, but the response of his audience is not.

For the July 2010 edition of *Sojourners* magazine, feminist scholar Anne Eggebroten wrote an article titled “The Persistence of Patriarchy,” in which she described her recent visit to Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California. Eggebroten was pleased with John MacArthur’s sermon and even commented on the kindness of the members who were eager to meet and greet her. What she was *not* pleased with was the church’s views on female roles within the home and church. With unconcealed resentment, she described Grace church as a place where “God is male, all the pastors, deacons, and elders are male, and women are taught to live in submission to men.” As Eggebroten’s article progresses, one gets the impression she visited the church looking for sad, dejected women who begrudgingly accepted their role in the home. If that’s the case, she came to the wrong place—as her article demonstrates. After talking with several joyfully submissive wives in the reception area, she became frantic to escape—at least that’s what it sounds like. She writes, “It’s time to get out of here, I tell myself. I’m feeling tense, as if I might cry or launch into a diatribe.” She finished her rant by quoting a barrage of other liberal feminist “Bible scholars” who, through agenda-driven interpretations, heap contempt on God’s Word by claiming the church is mistaken in its understanding of what St. Paul *really* meant. Sounds familiar, doesn’t it?

A multitude of other current examples could be listed, all demonstrating the same thing—the issue of authority and submission in the home is not appealing to our fallen culture. Society has been victimized by a godless, Christless, non-biblical philosophy of living perpetrated through the centuries and energized by Satan himself.

What we’re seeing in our day was also true of the philosophy behind the French Revolution, which was a humanistic, egalitarian approach to life. The French believed they could have a society with absolute equality—a classless, godless type of humanistic existence. That atheistic mindset now dominates Western civilization: no sexes, no distinctions, no authority, no submission, and no humility. And rather than reject that philosophy, many churches often *reflect* it, falling prey to the lies of our age. Much like the angry multitude in Psalm 2 who defied the Godhead, we live in the midst of a godless society that sees God’s divine order for life and family and cries out, “Let us tear their fetters apart and cast away their cords from us!” The world views God’s design for the family—and women—as a threat, and much like Anne Eggebroten and her liberal friends, it seeks to redefine and

overthrow that design altogether.

That brings us back to Ephesians, and the most important portion of this post—what does *God* say about women's roles in the home? After all, He created the family, designed woman, and established her roles and relationships within the family. If God is the engineer, we'd better stick to His plans. What are they?

After making a statement about mutual submission in the fear of Christ (Ephesians 5:21), Paul proceeds to answer an important question: How can we submit to one another in the context of a family, while still recognizing the God-ordained roles of headship and authority? Beginning with Ephesians 5:22, Paul answers that question. Remember, he came to the idea of submission because that's what epitomized the character of the person who is truly Spirit filled. Then he outlined how mutual submission should work in a family.

Paul's instructions for family life in Ephesians cover several verses, beginning with 5:22 and running through 6:4. He was writing under the Holy Spirit's guidance, of course, so this was not merely the apostle's private opinion (2 Peter 1:21-21). God Himself inspired the very words of the text, including the order. Paul spoke here to wives first, then husbands, children, and parents.

The admonition to wives is simple, covering just three verses: "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. 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 5:22-24).

Several key ideas in that text are worth pointing out immediately. First, the word translated "submit" doesn't actually appear in the Greek text of verse 22. The idea is clearly implied, however, from the command of verse 21, which instructs all believers to submit to one another. Remember, wives aren't being singled out and consigned to a second-rate status. There's a sense in which *everyone* in the family must submit to everyone else. Verse 22 simply begins a practical explanation of how *wives* ought to demonstrate their submission.

Second, notice that Paul started and ended this short section by specifying *whom* wives should submit to: "their own husbands" (Ephesians 5:24). Women as a group are not made serfs to men in general, and men aren't automatically elevated to a ruling class over all women. But Scripture calls each woman to submit in particular to her own husband's headship. In other words, the family itself is the primary arena in which a godly woman is to cultivate and demonstrate the attitude of humility, service, and sacrifice called for in verse 21.

Third, the command is general and sweeping. It's not limited to wives whose husbands are fulfilling *their* function. It's not addressed only to wives with children, wives of church leaders, or even wives whose husbands are faithful believers. It's categorical and unconditional: *wives*. Anyone who fits that classification is obligated to obey the command of this verse by submitting to her own husband.

What, precisely, does this command require? The Greek word for "submit" (*hupotasso*) means "to line up under." It has the idea of placing oneself in a rank lower than someone else, but in no way does it imply any essential inferiority. Nor does it demote the wife to a second-class status in the home or marriage. It speaks of a functional ranking, not an inferiority of essence.

Notice also that the word *submit* is not the word *obey*. What it calls for is an active, deliberate, loving, intelligent devotion to the husband's noble aspirations and ambitions. It does *not* demand blind, fawning, slavish kowtowing to his every whim. The Greek word for "obey" would be *hupakouo*, and that is what Paul demanded of children in Ephesians 6:1 and slaves in 6:5. But a wife is neither a child nor a slave, waiting on her husband while he sits in an easy chair and issues commands ("Hand me the remote!" "Get me something to drink!" "Fix me a snack!" Fetch my slippers!"). Marriage is a much more personal and intimate relationship than that. It's a union, a partnership, a singular mutual devotion, and that truth is emphasized by the words "your *own* husband."

The expression itself suggests a tender partnership and mutual belonging to one another. Why wouldn't a wife *willingly* respond in submission to one whom she possesses? Paul was subtly pointing out the reasonableness and the desirability of the wife's submission to her husband.

This is a role that God Himself ordained for wives. In Genesis 3:16, God said to Eve, "Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." On the one hand, marriage is the perfect union of two people who become one flesh (Genesis 2:24). On the other hand, God has clearly ordained that the husband should be head in that relationship. For the sake of unity and workability, the woman is to be subject to the leadership of her husband—not as a slave but as one who is provided for, cared for, and made secure by her husband. It does not have nearly as much to do with what she does for him as what he is responsible to do for her.

Even nature seems to affirm the proper order. Men normally have the advantage of greater physical and emotional strength, while women usually have a more tenderhearted strength and character that equip them to be a support and encouragement—helpers suitable to their husbands.

We find a parallel passage in Colossians 3:18, where Paul also instructed wives to submit to their own husbands. But there he added a brief phrase that sheds light on why this command is so important: "Wives, submit to your own husbands, *as is fitting in the Lord*" (italics added). The word translated "fitting" means "seemly, proper, or right." It is an expression commonly used of something that is legally or morally binding. Paul seems to be pointing out that the headship of the husband and the submission of the wife are an accepted law of virtually all human society. (That has certainly been the case in most societies for the vast majority of human history, and it was most definitely true in Paul's time.) Paul was suggesting that it is "fitting"—and recognized as such throughout the history of human culture—*because* it is the divine order. It is "fitting in the Lord." This is a very strong expression about the propriety of the husband's headship.

Scripture is both clear and consistent. Every time the Bible speaks about the role of the wife, the emphasis is exactly the same. This is not some chauvinistic private opinion of the apostle Paul, as some have suggested. Nor is it an unclear principle that's only vaguely suggested in Scripture. Every passage that touches on the subject of the wife's role says essentially the same thing (Titus 2:3-5; 1 Peter 3:1-2).

Of course, if every husband loved his wife as Christ loved the church (Ephesians 5:25), there presumably would be less resistance to the biblical teaching on the role of wives. But some husbands, rather than presenting a Christlike model of leadership to which their wives joyfully submit, instead play the part of an idle tyrant. Unbelief, anger, passivity, abuse, ridicule, laziness—all those

sinful attitudes cause many wives to question God's charge to submit. But God's Word answers with stunning clarity. We'll take a look at that next time.

In the meantime, here's a question for the discussion thread: What barriers prevent wives from seeing the beauty of submitting to their husbands?

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