

Introduction to Christian Ethics Part 2
Course Developed by Ron Habinski in 2002/2003
for
An Adult Bible Class, at Greenbelt Baptist Church, Ottawa

Unit #2 – Marital and Sexual Issues

Key Instructions for Husbands and Wives

- Few would deny that marriage is the most important voluntary human relationship.
- It is the foundational building block of all human relationships and societies.
- It is also the longest lasting voluntary relationship of our lives, if we honour God's command that the marriage bond not be broken.
- One would think that as our Creator and the Inventor of marriage, God would know the sorts of problems that are most likely to arise between a husband and wife.
- The owner's manual for any car or truck is hundreds of pages long.
- But if we were to collect all the instructions given to husbands and wives in the Scriptures, it might be difficult to fill 25 pages, even if we were to include the full text of the Songs of Solomon and the poem at the end of the book of proverbs that describes the ideal wife and mother.
- It seems remarkable that God, who created us in His image and invented marriage, has provided so very little detailed instruction for husbands and wives.
- It might be said that having created Adam and Eve for each other and brought them together, God left them to muddle along in their relationship as well as they could.
- Of course, there are many general ethical teachings in scripture that husbands and wives should try to follow in their relationships with one another.
- An example of this is found in the love chapter, 1 Corinthians 13, which describes the life controlled and guided by love.
- It is practically guaranteed that this chapter will be read Church weddings.
- And yet it is quite clear, in its context, that this passage is not specifically addressed to husbands and wives, but to all followers of Christ.
- God certainly knows what husbands and wives are most likely to struggle with and need help with.
- Consequently, it would seem that the few instructions that He has given to husbands and wives ought to be pondered, and taken very seriously by all believers.
- When we look for portions of Scripture that deal with how Christian husbands and wives should relate to one another, and treat one another, there is really only one portion of any great length that comes to mind.

Q: Can anyone name the passage I am referring to?

A: The last eleven verses of Ephesians chapter 5.

(1 Cor 7 deals with sexual intimacy within marriage, separation & divorce.)

- Without even reading this portion, I think a Christian knowing the subject it deals

with should be inclined to listen to it attentively and take it seriously.

- Let's read this portion together, starting at verse 22.
- As we read it, I suggest that you look for the two or three words that sum up the instructions that this portion gives.

Q: What one or two words sum up the instruction this portion gives to believing wives about how they should relate to their husbands?

A: "submit" and "honour"

Q: What one word sums up the instruction this portion gives husbands about how they should relate to their wives?

A: "love"

(Col 3:18f concisely repeat the gist of this Eph 5 passage.)

- The two words addressed to wives here, "submit" and "honour," really offend many people, both Christians and non-Christians.
- In the context of this class, I am not really concerned about objections brought by non-Christians who have never truly purposed to submit their wills to Jesus.
- This passage is addressed to believers, and it is their response to it that is at issue.
- I am concerned about the objections brought against the plain meaning of this portion by believers, because such objections impact upon their general teachability.
- There are four standard lines of objection to this passage that I have encountered.
- I think it would be helpful to explore each of them briefly, because exploring objections to a Biblical teaching can help to bring that teaching into clearer focus.

1. The first objection to the plain sense of this passage is that *the words "submit" and "honour" apply to the husband just as much as they do to the wife.*

- In support of this view, verse 21 is cited as proof that husbands and wives should submit *to each other*.
- But that is not what verse 21 says or means.
- Verse 21 is included in a section of ethical teachings for all believers that includes the first 21 verses of chapter 5.
- Verses 22 to the end of the chapter form a separate section of instructions that are for husbands and wives.
- Similarly, the first 10 verses of chapter 6 contains specific ethical instructions for children, fathers, slaves and masters.
- Then in verse 10 Paul returns to the theme of general ethical instructions for all believers.
- What verse 21 of chapter 5 means in its context, a passage providing general ethical instructions for all believers, is that *all believers should submit to one another*.
- At first glance this might seem a strange idea.
- When a brother in Christ announces that he is going to have a coffee and invites me

to join him, I don't feel obliged to have one because he is doing so and invites me to join him.

- So when is it that I must submit to a fellow believer, and when does he have to submit to me?

- We must each do this when we sense that the other Christian is standing for what is right, and expressing God's will or God's viewpoint.

- This can happen at a church business meeting when we all sense that the view a Christian brother or sister has expressed is the will of God.

- Sometimes parents recognize God's own wisdom on the lips of their children, and are compelled by conscience to do what their child says they should do.

- In the same way, a husband should, indeed, submit to his wife, when he recognizes that she is standing for what is right or good or true.

- But the problem with taking this idea as an objection to the teaching that wives should submit to their husbands, is that it sets one Scripture against another, in order to empty the second scripture of its intended meaning and force.

- What Ephesians 5 is saying to wives is that apart from the *general Christian duty of mutual* submission, they owe their husbands *a special sort of submissiveness* because of their authority as husbands.

- Because of that same authority, verse 33 says that they also owe them honour or respect *<phobeomai - to show an honour or respect in recognition of the authority and power of the one honoured>*.

(- It may be objected that 1 Pe 3:7 says that husbands should treat their wives with honour / respect *<time>* as joint heirs of the gracious gift of life, but the word used in Ephesians 5:33 is a different and stronger one.)

- The issue then is whether a wife should recognize her husband as having a special God-given authority over her that she does not also have over him.

- It is quite clear that the answer of this portion to that question is, "Yes."

- Readers may or may not be comfortable with this idea or receptive to it, but it seems clear that it is taught here.

2. A second objection to the apparent meaning of this passage is that *the word, "submit" means to submit or subject oneself voluntarily, and that does not mean that the wife should submit or obey when she is not personally inclined to do so.*

- The problem with this objection is that it trifles with the sense of the passage.

- The word "submit" is in the imperative; it is a command, not an invitation to do as one pleases, to go along with one's husband if and when one is personally inclined to do so.

- The Greek word used here, *<hupotassomai>* means *to subject oneself, be subjected or subordinated to or obey.*

- In the Bible it is used for subjection to parents (Lk 2:51), to masters (Tit 2:9), to secular authorities (Ro 13:1; Tit 3:1), to Christ (Eph 5:24), and to the will of God or

the law (Ro 8:7; 10:3).

- Are we to submit ourselves to all these authorities only when we feel inclined to do so?

- The same Greek word is used in the Gospels to say that *demons were subject to or submitted themselves to the apostles when the apostles spoke to them in the authority of Jesus' name* (Lk 10:17).

- Would anyone seriously suggest that this submission of the demons was purely voluntary, and that they only submitted to the apostles to the extent that they felt like it or were personally inclined to do so?

- I don't think so!

- The idea of submission in Ephesians 5 passage is explained by the words, "*as the Church submits to Christ.*"

Q: Now in what sense does the Church submit to Jesus? Do we think that we need only submit to Him when we feel inclined to do so?

A: Of course not!

- We make it our rule of conduct to submit to Him unconditionally, whenever He asks us to, however we may feel about obeying Him, because we recognize His authority over us.

- And when we disobey Him, our consciences testify to us that we are in the wrong.

3. A third objection to the apparent sense of this passage when it instructs wives to submit to their husbands is that *Paul is simply repeating a morally objectionable idea that he learned from his culture, not from Christ.*

- *Paul was misled, and we should not accept what he says here as God's will.*

- The answer to this objection is that Paul is teaching as an authorized apostle of Jesus Christ, an emissary sent and authorized to speak on Jesus' behalf.

- That is how he introduces himself in the opening verse of this letter: "*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.*"

- We must choose whether we accept or reject this claim, but let's not agree with it when we like what Paul is saying and disagree with it when we do not.

- That amounts to making ourselves judges of the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures, and robs the Scriptures of any meaningful authority as God's word.

- By the way, the apostle Peter teaches the same principle in 1 Peter 3, and in that chapter he goes so far as to say that believing wives should be subject to their husbands *even when their husbands are unbelievers.*

- In teaching that Peter is going even further than Paul does in Ephesians 5.

- Is Peter's authority on this subject to be rejected as well as Paul's?

4. A fourth objection to what this passage says is that, "*When it says that a wife should submit to her husband in everything, it does not mean everything.*"

- However, the intended sense of verse 24 is quite clear when we read it:

“Now as the Church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.”

- Now it is true that when the Bible uses words like ***all*** or ***every*** there are often valid exceptions to the point being made, exceptions that are mentioned elsewhere in the Bible.
- Making a list of exceptions every time a general point is made in teaching would simply weaken the effectiveness of the point being made, so generally exceptions are not listed in the Bible.
- But knowing that there may be exceptions to Biblical principles does not relieve us of the responsibility of understanding what is meant when the words like ***all*** or ***everything*** or ***everyone*** are used.
- In this passage it is clear that if ***everything*** does not quite mean ***everything***, it still means quite a lot.
- ***The point of the word as it is used here in Ephesians 5 seems to be that husbands have a general-purpose authority as husbands that wives should take seriously and honour when their husbands' exercise that authority.***

Q: What really lies behind the objection that ***everything*** cannot mean ***everything***?

A: It seems to me that the objector imagines a bossy, unreasonable tyrannical husband who gives his wife orders constantly on every conceivable subject.

- But the kind of husband this passage describes is not like that any more than Jesus was.
- This husband is supposed to be governed and led by love as Jesus was.
- Jesus is the example that the believing husband is supposed to pattern himself after, and even Jesus did not constantly issue commands to His disciples.
- In fact, His commands were very few and far between, and those few that He gave were obviously grounded in love, wisdom and holiness.
- The key point to note about the teaching in this passage is that ***it creates a standard of conduct for both the husband and the wife, and not just for the wife.***
- To object that this standard will be unworkable or unbearable for the wife, because the husband will be overbearing, domineering, unreasonable and harsh is to miss the point of the ideal that is being described here.
- The fact is, that what this portion demands of wives is a very difficult and challenging standard of conduct.
- And the balancing command given to the husband is every bit as difficult and challenging.
- He is to love his wife in the completely unselfish and self-sacrificial way that Jesus loves His Church.
- He is to make her welfare his constant concern, loving her as much as he loves his own body, and taking as good care of her as he does of himself.
- In fact, he is to lay down his life for her.

- Would it be an unreasonable burden for a wife to be subject to this sort of husband?
- The wife is instructed to regard her husband as bearing the authority of Jesus.
- The husband is commanded to be constantly guided by the very love of Jesus.
- These are matched and balanced commands, and either one becomes very difficult if the other one is not obeyed.
- If either the husband or the wife refuses to follow their personal instruction, the other partner is still obliged to be obedient to his or her instruction although that may be very difficult.
- Being constantly submissive to someone as loving as Jesus would not be a dreadful burden.
- But being constantly submissive to a tyrant must be a dreadful load to bear.
- Along with tyrannical husbands, there are selfish, wilful, bitter women who daily manipulate and connive, and whose mere glance could sour a glass of milk.
- Their Christian husbands are commanded to be unselfishly loving and giving with them at all times.
- Now there is a God-given challenge!
- Of course, this challenge becomes much less painful if a man has the kind of wife who daily tries to be as responsive to him as the Church tries to be with Jesus.
- ***but let's be clear about one point: the standard of conduct established in this passage is very difficult and challenging for both husbands and wives.***
- Both may often find themselves falling short of living up to it.
- ***But that does not invalidate or change the standard for the other partner.***
- This is the kind of far-reaching, challenging and principle-based teaching that we would expect to receive from Jesus or one of His apostles.
- It really surprises me that most of the objections against this passage come from women or those who see themselves as the defenders of women.
- I guess men prefer to not directly challenge the idea that they should love their wives self-sacrificially.
- But if we were honest about it, we would say this command made us feel very uncomfortable, because we know ourselves and how often we put ourselves first.
- ***But what if this two-sided pattern really is God's will for married couples?***
- ***And if it is His will as this portion clearly indicates, how could God have said so more clearly and concisely than He has?***

- Christian marriages are what both inmates daily make them, - no more and no less.
- At times they may feel like a prison or a palace.
- We all know that Christian marriages are not all patterned on the ideal or model described in this passage.
- Marriages based on a different view of how a husband and wife should relate to each other may work tolerably well for a couple.
- There is no denying that.

- But those who deliberately work at accepting God's expressed will for their marriages will please Him, and can expect to be blessed for their obedience.
- That is why I will continue to stand for what this passage so clearly teaches.

QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS?