

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“Submit and Love”

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“Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord” (Eph. 5:22).

“Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (v. 25).

No one has ever asked me to preach on this text. I’ve done hundreds of weddings, and I always ask the couple to choose the texts, and I give them a list of suggested texts, and this is one of them, one of the few that speaks at length on Christian marriage, but, for some reason, no one has ever chosen it. I dangle it out there like bait, without so much as a nibble.

And whenever the text does come up for regular weekend services, I wish you could see the body language that I see. “Wives, submit to your husbands, as to the Lord.” The slowly folding of the arms and the frowns. It’s as if I were trotting out a sermon on money!

The word “submit” doesn’t play well in our culture. I understand that. Who wants to submit? Therefore, many Christians are embarrassed by this text, and if they could, they would excise it from their Bibles. In effect, they already have by convincing themselves this is just the first century world view, and it no longer applies to marriage in 21st century America? But that’s a slippery slope. Anything you don’t like in the Bible could be cut out, crumpled up, and tossed into the garbage. And many Christians have gone that route with the Bible. Besides, this was not the first century world view, but rather a radical departure from it. More on that in a bit.

Well, let’s have a look at it, and maybe by the end, you won’t think so poorly of it. If we stay open, if we allow the Word of God to speak, rather than stopping our ears to it, it may have some things to teach us, and could even improve our marriages.

To submit as it is used here in the Bible means to lay aside one’s own interests for the sake of others. It means to place oneself under the authority of another. Here, it is voluntary in nature. It’s not because of suppression, but love and trust. And it’s a relationship characterized by mutual submission. Submit to one another the text says. Stand-alone submission can be dangerous. One way submission is rarely healthy or good. But mutual submission between Christians? That’s the best of all possible relationships.

Verse 21 says “Submit to one another out of reverence to Christ.” That is, any Christian, male or female, wife or husband, is to submit himself to every other Christian, whether this be a man or a woman. It means giving precedence to others over yourself.

Then verse 22 carries on. “Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is head of his wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.” This is not a text that says women are inferior to men. This is a text on a Christian wife submitting to her Christian husband. It’s yielding to him in love and respect, not subjugation.

It may make us bristle, but let’s think about this. God isn’t asking wives to do anything that He hasn’t already done Himself. Submitting is an expression of love and respect. In Luke 2, Jesus (God’s Son) submitted to His parents. As an adult, Jesus laid aside his own interests for the sake of others all the time, so much so that there were days when he didn’t even have time to eat or sleep. Laying aside His own interests, His own needs, the Son of God attended to the needs of the crowd. He submitted Himself to them. Jesus submitted Himself to the governing authorities too, even to Pontius Pilate, and those who crucified Him. It’s putting the needs of others before your own.

It’s a different way of looking at the world. People don’t like this text in part because they’re thinking about marriage in worldly ways. What can I get out of marriage? Is it more advantageous financially to just live together, or to get married? How can I get the happiness I want, and the comfort and the respect? Will marriage help me achieve my goals in life? That’s how the world looks at marriage, so let the world tell its sad, sad story about marriage and its failures, how wives seek to rule their husbands and refuse to submit; how husbands tyrannize their wives, ignore them, cheat on them. It is the wisdom of this world to dominate others, rule over them, stoop below them only when you have no other choice. So let the world tell its sad story. The Bible says there is another way.

“As the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.” The church subjects herself voluntarily, joyfully. It’s how we show the Lord we love Him and trust in Him. So, wives, submit to your husbands, voluntarily, joyfully. It’s a way to show him you love him and trust him. There’s nothing shameful about this, nor does submitting to your husband make you inferior to him. If we say that the husband is the “head” in a marriage, then we may say the wife is the “heart”. Is one more important than the other? No – both heart and head are necessary for life.

Now, you husbands, brace yourselves, because here comes Paul and he has more to say to you than he does to your wives. First, there’s that mutual submission you must attend to. “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Yes, that means you too. You get no free passes from submitting to your wife. It’s a way to show you love and respect her. But Paul carries on, “Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church.” How did Christ love the church, His people? He gave Himself up for her and

gained for Himself a holy people. He laid aside His own interests and gave up everything for His bride on the cross, to cleanse her of sin.

Husbands, that's how you are to love your wives. Once again, it's a different way of looking at things. Look at your wife through the Gospel lens, not what you can get from her, or demand from her, not how you can manipulate her, but what you can give up for her, for her sake.

Paul's words are radical here, not just in light of culture today, but back then too! Do you remember how the Jews regarded marriage back then? Any husband could divorce his wife for any reason, even for the most trivial of reasons, or for no cause at all. And she had no recourse and could very easily end up destitute. The non-Jewish world around Paul was no better; in fact, it was worse. And so it is today. But God has something far better in mind for His institution of marriage.

Husbands, love your wives. Paul's not much interested here in flowers and chocolates. In the Bible, love is something you do as opposed to how you feel. This is not about falling in love. It's about behaving in love. It's a verb, not a noun. Paul is applying to marriage what Jesus already taught about love. Remember, Jesus said, "Love your enemies" (Mt. 5:44). Clearly, Jesus is not thinking of love as a feeling, but as a decision to do something *in spite of* how we feel. So, in the context of marriage, it's about loving and serving your wife even when she's not being very loveable, giving yourself up for her, just as Christ gave Himself up for the church. Every Christian bride or wife will **want** to submit to a husband who loves her as Christ loved the church.

Jacklyn was asking me what text I was preaching on this weekend, and I told her: "Wives submit to your husbands." She smiled and asked, "What if the husband is being a jerk?" Seriously, what if the husband is a jerk?

We know God doesn't want a woman to live in an abusive relationship. That would also be the time to find a good Christian counselor. Otherwise, Paul doesn't have much to say about that. Apparently, and within reason, he wants the Christian wife to submit to her Christian husband even if he is a jerk. "Husbands, love your wives." What if the wife is being unloveable? Paul doesn't address that either. Husbands love your wives even if she is being difficult to love. Maybe as we submit to and love one another, it will make it harder for the other to be a jerk. Maybe it will help the other to put off the old self through repentance, and put on the new, created after the likeness of God (Eph. 4:22ff). Maybe it will help us to love one another as Christ has loved us (Jn. 13:34). Remember, while we were yet sinners, still hostile to God, and enemies of God, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son (Rom. 5:10).

St. John Chrysostom lived in the fourth century. Listen carefully to what he writes about how husbands should love their lives as he comments on this text.

"Pay attention to love's high standard [here]. If you take the premise that your wife should submit to you, as the church submits to Christ, then you should also take the same kind of careful, sacrificial thought for her that Christ takes for the church. If you must offer your own life for her, you must not refuse. Even if you must undergo countless struggles on her behalf and have all kinds of things to endure and suffer, you must not refuse. Even if you suffer all of this, you have still not done as much as Christ has for the church. For you are already married when you act this way, whereas Christ is acting for one who is hating and rejecting him. So just as he, when she was rejecting, hating, spurning, and nagging him, brought her to trust him by his great [sacrificial love], not by threatening, lording it over her or intimidating her or anything like that, so must you also act toward your wife. Even if you see her looking down on you, nagging and despising you, you will be able to win her over with your great love and affection for her" (*Ancient Christian Commentary on the New Testament*, Vol. 8, p. 195).

That's from the 4th century, and, as with Paul, it was a radically counter cultural.

Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved His people. Even when they rejected Him, mocked Him, demanded His crucifixion, He didn't flex His muscles. He didn't subjugate them, or do the power job on them. He gave up everything for them and laid down His life for them and us. So too, even when your wife is paying no attention to you, does not respect you, spurns you and rejects you . . . love her anyway, as Christ loved his bride the church. Don't shout at her. Don't make demands of her. Don't belittle her or push her around. Love her. Serve her. Sacrifice your own interests for her. You'll win her over. Any husband who lives up to these standards will have a wife who will gladly submit to him.

As you know, Jackie and I were married in early November. And after talking about it, we did request this text be used as the Epistle lesson. We were married at St. John's in Wheaton. It's a church that adds little quotes in the margins of the bulletin, often from that the Early Church Fathers, or from Luther, and so we requested that that wonderful quote from St. John Chrysostom (that I just read) be included in the bulletin.

During the reception, one of my favorite people in all the world came up and greeted us. Katrina works for the Federal Bank in St. Louis. She is smart, successful, funny, and very progressive in her politics. Katrina said some kind words about the service and the music, and also said, "I liked the little quotes in the margins." And I asked, "Did you see that Chrysostom quote?" She said, "That's the one I loved the most." Then she laughed and said, "You put that in there with people like me in mind, didn't you?" I laughed in response, but it was the truth, and she said again, "I loved that quote!"

Any husband who loves his wife like Christ loved the church will have a wife who gladly submits to him, even as the church gladly submits to Christ. It's how we show the Lord we love Him. So, husbands, love your wives as Christ loved His bride the church. Amen.