

CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

Colossians 3v18,19.

We all enjoy children's quotes; here are a few on romance and marriage: Kirsten aged 10, was asked, How do you decide who to marry? *"No person really decides before they grow up who they're going to marry. God decides it all way before, and you get to find out later who you're stuck with."* What do most people do on a date? Lynette age 8: *"Dates are for having fun, and people should use them to get to know each other. Even boys have something to say if you listen long enough."* Craig, aged 9 was asked: What would you do on a first date that was turning sour? He said *"I'd run home and play dead. The next day I would call all the newspapers and make sure they wrote about me in all the dead columns."* In answer to the question, How would you make a marriage work? Ricky aged 12 suggested, *"Tell your wife that she is pretty even if she looks like a truck."*

OK, but what has the apostle Paul to say on the subject of marriage? His words are not so amusing but, I suggest they are somewhat more important. **Wives submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.** This is clearly not comprehensive teaching. These are headlines or memory joggers. Epaphras the pastor at Colosse would have taught his people about marriage. Paul himself had also written more fully on the subject in his Ephesian letter, which was almost certainly a circular read out at Colosse too. And, of course his words in vv 12-15 about relationships were relevant to marriage too.

But these two brief headlines are significant, so I need to make a few introductory comments before we look at their substance.

First, Paul uses a word which scares most people today, "submission"! That is why these two verses *must* be taken together. I'm tempted to say of them what Jesus said of a husband and wife: *what God has joined together let no man separate*. If we separate these two verses we lose their impact and we are left with a distortion. This is not a bully's charter. Quite the opposite in fact..

Second, as these words were read to the church there would have been a wide range of people listening. Some were too young to be married others were single. There would be married couples hearing these words together; some would have healthy marriages but others may have had difficult marriages. There would also be married people present without their partners because they didn't share the faith. There would be widows and widowers present still missing their husband or wife. There would be those whose marriages had ended in bitterness and divorce. Some of those present may now be married to their second or third partner. In other words, they were just like any congregation hearing these same things today. So, if this is painful for you and it would help to have someone pray with you, please don't leave today without speaking to your group leader or some other appropriate person.

Third, each of those listening would have been soaked in the thinking of the day about marriage. It is easy to miss how revolutionary these words were back in the first century, particularly for women. In the prevailing Greek culture there was a cynical attitude to marriage. One Greek dramatist said: *“Would that there were some other way of producing children, then men might live in homes free and unvexed by womankind.”* Roman society had seen a gradual erosion of the once highly-prized family unit. Women had come to be objects, possessions to satisfy the appetite of their husband. In Jewish society, women were treated with much more dignity, but there was little friendship and companionship. It was not a partnership of equals.

Into this came the Christian Gospel and the teaching that men and women were equal before God. (Galatians 3v28) Both had rights and responsibilities. Their roles were different, but complementary. The man was to be the godly head of the family, but this could be exercised without him being harsh or superior; and a woman could express submission, willingly and from the heart, without being an inferior species.

So, now we can look at the content of these words, taking them together. **Wives submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord; husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.**

1. Submission to Jesus is the crucial first step for a husband & wife

The word “submit” here, means to yield the place of importance to another. If there is to be godly submission in a marriage then submission to Jesus is the crucial first step for *both* husband and wife. Both need to submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ through repentance and faith. This is fundamental for every person, whether they are single or married. But if we want a marriage to be on solid ground this is where we need to start. Ok, but why?

Jesus said this: *“If any man would come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me”.* (Mark 8v34) Author Richard Foster comments on this: *“Almost instinctively we draw back from those words. We are much more comfortable with words like ‘self-fulfilment’... than we are with the thought of ‘self-denial’. Self-denial conjures up in our minds all sorts of images of grovelling and self-hatred.”* Foster then goes on, *“Self-denial is simply a way of coming to understand that we do not have to have our own way. Our happiness is not dependent upon getting what we want.”* (“Celebration of Discipline’ Hodder & Stoughton)

I believe this gets to the heart of what submission is about. Every husband and wife needs to submit to Jesus to get self-interest dealt with. What Jesus did on the cross makes this possible. It can break the power of self-interest. And then the Holy Spirit is able to put new desires in your heart and give you the inward power to put each other first – to submit and to love.

Here is a real life story which illustrates this. It is told in ‘Alpha News’ (July-October 2009). Park Chan Dou, is a 38 year old from Seoul, South Korea. He was brought

up in the Korean tradition of ancestor worship. While still a schoolboy he began to drink heavily. This continued into university and through his national service. While his friends knew when to stop, he drank until he was *“in a complete state”* and would have no recollection of what had happened. But he never had a hang-over.

In 1997 he married; his wife belonged to a Christian family. Initially she didn't mind him drinking, but after a while she realised how serious it was. When he lost his licence because of drink driving things got worse between them. He began to spend more time out after work drinking with friends, even when they had two sons. He got drunk five nights in the week and hardly saw his children. *“Generally I'd be home by 11 o'clock or midnight, but sometimes if it got a bit more extreme, it would be 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning.”* One night in 2006 he came home late and his wife, who was ill with pregnancy diabetes, had had enough. A huge argument began in the middle of the night. They were both throwing things around the house; *“I even threw our dining table across the room”* he says. One of the sons called for Park Chan's brother who came around and his wife left. She said that life was too tough and she wanted a divorce.

But she gave him one last chance. She suggested he did an Alpha course, exploring the Christian faith and the difference Jesus could make. His wife said that she had been on one herself. She said this was a place where he *“would be able to meet God and receive his grace to start over”*. He did as she suggested, starting in March 2006. Soon after the course began, he says, his drinking rapidly decreased. *“By the time of the Alpha weekend I was only drinking maybe once a week – sometimes not even that. Even when I tried to drink with my friends, it felt like my body was rejecting it.”* During that weekend he was prayed for. He collapsed in tears and had flashbacks of things that had happened in his life, back into childhood. As this was happening he was seeing what a sinner he was and asking God for forgiveness. He says: *“When I picked myself up I felt different, like a new person”*. Later he was prayed for again and he was filled with the Holy Spirit. *“Since that day,”* he says, *“I haven't touched a drop of alcohol”*. His marriage has been restored. His wife and children have seen an amazing change in him. The difference, he says is: *“Now Jesus is the centre of my life, everything revolves around him.”*

The Bible teaches that a husband's leadership in the home will flourish when his life is submitted to God. A wife who sees her husband's life yielded to Jesus will grow in her love and respect for him; she will feel safe with him; she will trust him and find herself enjoying his spiritual headship.

Wives submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. This kind of voluntary submission bears no resemblance to the exploitation and abuse perpetrated on women through the centuries and around the world still. In fact it is given splendour because it reflects Jesus' submission to the Father's will. 1 Corinthians 11v3: *“The head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.”*

2. A husband's strength is demonstrated by loving his wife.

Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. In the culture of the day men could get away with all manner of abuse, and often it was physical. But, Paul writes, a husband is to love his wife *“as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.”* (Eph. 5v25) This is how to demonstrate strength and manliness. And it is much more likely to result in winning willing heart submission from a wife.

Men are not to be preoccupied with asking – “Is my wife submitting to me?” or “Who is the boss around here?” Instead a man should concentrate on loving his wife. Many men are novices at this. Gary Smalley, an American writer, drew up a list of ‘100 ways to love your wife’ (‘The Joy of Committed Love.’) Here are a few ideas.

- Communicate with her – never close her out
- Be interested in her friends
- Ask her opinion frequently
- Let her feel your approval and affection
- Avoid sudden major changes without discussion or giving her time to adjust
- Admit your mistakes
- Admit inadequacies & fears
- Be trustworthy and faithful
- Be creative when you express your love, either in words or actions.
- Take time to notice what she's done for you and the family
- Get rid of habits that annoy her
- Demonstrate your need of her
- Speak well to her and about her.
- Don't expect the band to play whenever you help with the housework!

3. Godly manhood & womanhood are expressed uniquely in each Christian marriage.

There is no list here of who does what in a Christian marriage. Paul simply directs wives with: **as is fitting in the Lord.** In fact we should be wary of lists telling us how to express leadership and submission in marriage. Too often they encourage the legalistic streak in us; they present a cardboard cut-out of manhood and femininity.

Dr. Lawrence Crabb's outstanding book, 'Men and Women: The Giving of Self', deals with this precise issue in relation to the New Testament teaching on headship and submission in marriage.. He writes: *“In marriage, headship is what a man does when he is living as a godly man, and submission is what a woman does when she is living as a godly woman. Headship and submission are neither rules to follow nor roles that demand conformity. Rather they are mature and loving expressions of our distinctive sexuality in the marriage relationshipmore an expression of who we are than a statement of what we should do.”*

Godly headship and submission will be expressed differently in every Christian marriage, in keeping with our uniqueness. Some people blindly follow their parents' model or copy how it works for a particular couple they admire. But every marriage is unique. So be yourselves!

Love God with all your heart and soul and learn to put your husband or wife before yourself. Without having to consult a manual you should find yourself relating in a way which both honours God and takes account of your uniqueness.

John Wilthew. October 2009

Message Summary

CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE: Colossians 3v18,19.

Wives submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. A few introductory comments: First, Paul uses a word which scares most people today, “submission”! That is why these two verses *must* be taken together. This is not a bully’s charter. Second, as these words were read to the church there would have been a wide range of people listening - just like any congregation hearing these same things today. Third, it is easy to miss how revolutionary these words were back in the first century, particularly for women. In Greek culture there was a cynical attitude to marriage. Roman society had seen a gradual erosion of the once highly-prized family unit. Women had come to be possessions. In Jewish society, women were treated with much more dignity, but marriage was not a partnership of equals. Into this came the Christian Gospel and the teaching that men and women were equal before God. (Galatians 3v28) Both had rights and responsibilities. Their roles were different, but complementary. The man was to be the godly head of the family, but this could be exercised without him being harsh or superior; and a woman could express submission, willingly and from the heart, without being an inferior species. So, now we can look at the content of these words.

1. Submission to Jesus is the crucial first step for a husband & wife: The word “submit” means to yield the place of importance to another. If there is to be godly submission in a marriage then submission to Jesus is the crucial first step for *both* husband and wife. Jesus said: *“If any man would come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me”*. (Mark 8v34) Author Richard Foster comments on this: *We are much more comfortable with words like ‘self-fulfilment’... than we are with the thought of ‘self-denial’*. What Jesus did on the cross can break the power of self-interest. And the Holy Spirit is able to put new desires in your heart and give you the inward power to put each other first. (John then told a real life story which illustrates this. It is told in ‘Alpha News’ (July-Oct 09). The Bible teaches that a husband’s leadership in the home will flourish when his life is submitted to God. A wife who sees her husband’s life yielded to Jesus will grow in her love and respect for him; she will feel safe with him; she will trust him and find herself enjoying his spiritual headship.

2. A husband’s strength is demonstrated by loving his wife: In the culture of the day men could abuse their wife . But, Paul writes, a husband is to love his wife *“as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.”* (Eph. 5v25) This is how to demonstrate strength and manliness. And it is much more likely to result in winning willing heart submission from a wife. Men are not to be preoccupied with asking “Who is the boss around here?” Instead a man should concentrate on loving his wife.

3. Godly manhood & womanhood are expressed uniquely in each Christian marriage: There is no list here of who does what in a Christian marriage. Paul simply directs wives with: **as is fitting in the Lord**. Too often such lists present a cardboard cut-out of manhood and femininity. Lawrence Crabb writes: *“In marriage, headship is what a man does when he is living as a godly man, and submission is what a woman does when she is living as a godly woman..”* Godly headship and submission will be expressed differently in every Christian marriage, in keeping with our uniqueness. So be yourselves! Love God with all your heart and soul and learn to put your husband or wife before yourself.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Please read the text and message summary first.

1. A question for those who have been married: what marriage preparation did you have before your wedding? What would have been more helpful?
2. How do you react to the word “submission”? How would you go about explaining a Christian perspective on this word to someone unfamiliar with Biblical teaching?
3. John described some of the attitudes to marriage in the first century in Greek, Roman & Jewish culture. Did you recognise any similarities with today? Say what.
4. What is the big difference between self-fulfilment and self-denial? Why is self-interest probably the biggest enemy of any deep relationship, including marriage?
5. Mel Gibson starred in a film called “*What Women Want*”. OK, ladies, tell the guys what you really want!
6. John talked about how every marriage is unique – and about the danger of a rigid attitude to male & female roles and lists of who does what. Give some examples of ways godly manhood and womanhood might be worked out differently (e.g. handling finances etc) in different marriages
7. If there are those present for whom the issue of marriage is painful, pray for them before closing – but without pressing them for too much detail.