**Ephesians 5:21,22,25 (21-33)** August 19, 2018

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*Ephesians 5:21 Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*

*22 Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord…*

*25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

Every Tuesday morning, I start looking at the Bible reading for next Sunday’s sermon. Then, after studying God’s Word, I start to think about a message, a sermon.

My feelings about that can be very different from week to week. Many weeks, I just can’t wait to present God’s word to God’s people. Some other weeks I am a little puzzled and wonder, “This is God’s holy word, but what *am* I going to say that is meaningful and practical?” Once in a while I finish studying the reading and I think, “What can I possibly add?! God’s word says so much, so clearly. For me to add anything is just going to get in the way.” And then there are readings like this week’s reading.

I look at this reading from Ephesians 5 and I think… Do you know how our altar guild volunteers gets these big banners up so high on the wall? They have a special pole, not a ten foot pole, but a twelve foot pole*!!* to put them up. That’s what my sinful nature would like to do with this Bible reading. I don’t want to touch it with a ten-foot pole. Maybe a twelve-foot pole, but not even a ten foot one.

Don’t get me wrong. I believe these are profoundly important words, so of the most practical of the Bible. The problem is that there is nothing I can say about marriage and this commandment that someone will not object to. Virtually everything that can be said on the subject of marriage and the sixth commandment is going to make somebody stop listening and think, “Pastor, that might be what you think, but you have no idea what real life is like.” Others will listen to this commandment and be overcome with regret of the past and get lost in their thoughts of what could and should have been—or not been.

Marriage is a great blessing that God gave to people as individuals and humanity as a whole. This is not to say that everyone should or must be married. But God designed us to live in societies that are built on and centered around marriage.

The great good of marriage becomes obvious when you look at the science. It is the consistent and incontrovertible outcome of numerous scientific studies (many of which would prefer to find to the contrary) that children with married parents have better grades, higher happiness, lower unemployment and incarceration rates, lower drug and addiction rates, and a whole host of other advantages . Let no child feel ashamed of themselves because of what their parents have done. That was the parents’ decision, not the child’s. And while not growing up in the ideal home can be problematic, it does not doom anyone. God is gracious.

But even though these are the proven facts, the society we live in will do everything for children except the one thing that would make the biggest difference in society. For all our professed concern for children, nearly every structure of society refuses to advocate life-long monogamous marriages – the marriage structure God sets forth in his word.

I can remember about ten years ago reading something (couldn’t tell you where). You know how we have the Department of Health and Human Services in America. In Britain they have an equivalent. A reporter was interviewing the department secretary. He listed many facts on how strong marriages are best for children. Then the reporter asked why the government didn’t promote life-long traditional marriage for the sake of children. Do you know her response? She said that she and the government would do nothing to promote stable traditional marriages because it is more important that adults have the freedom to do what they want. Basically, “I am supremely concerned about children, as long as no one has to be inconvenienced by the little darlings.” That’s what our world thinks about God’s plan for marriage. “Let me do what I want to do, even at the cost of my children.”

Our reading tells us what God wants husband/wife relations to be. But first I must mention a few other sixth commandment issues that lack time to discuss, but we cannot ignore:

* As our readings from Genesis 39 (remember Potiphar’s wife) and Matthew 5 (“Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully…”) made clear, impure thoughts are offensive sin. Thus the plague of internet pornography (among other things) should be avoided like the plague.
* Living together, that is, moving in with the boyfriend/girlfriend is most correctly called “Living in sin.” “Moving in” is a defiance of God who prohibits sex outside of marriage. God is crystal clear on this issue.
* Marrying a non-Christian is not prohibited in God’s word, but it is spiritual Russian roulette.
* Same-sex marriage may be legal, but no same-sex marriage will ever be a Christian marriage, even if performed in a Christian church for people who claim to be Christians. It disregards God’s definition of marriage.

Having briefly mentioned those issues about the Sixth Commandment, let us concentrate on our reading from Ephesians 5. In contrast to what I have just said, this reading is not a catalogue of sins, nor a scolding. These words today are not directed at the heathen world outside, but at us, God’s children. The tone of this reading is primarily encouragement.

Our reading starts talking about marriage by saying, ***“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”*** We strive for God-pleasing marriages not because of a guilt trip, but out of respect for our Savior. As we do so, we realize that our first responsibility is to our marriage partner. Marriage isn’t about what I get out of it. It’s about me living for another.

We remember what Christ did for us. We remember how he gave himself up for us. We remember that Christ died for all our sins so that we can live lives under his blessing. Everything he directs in our lives is a way he wishes to further bless us. So when our saving God speaks about marriage, we listen. We take it to heart.

God’s Word speaks to wives and says, ***“Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord.”*** The word “submit” has a tendency to be misunderstood. The misunderstanding isn’t about who should be in charge. It’s clear that the husband should be. (There, I told you that I would offend some of you today!) The misunderstanding comes in because we have been conditioned to think that if you are submitting to someone else, you are inferior in value. That is *not* what “submit” means.

I am sure that nearly all of you have seen the Vietnam War Memorial or a replica of it. If you look at the names of tens of thousands servicemen who gave up their lives for our nation, you know what is missing? Rank. Rank is everything in the armed forces. Without rank there would be chaos. Yet rank appears nowhere on The Wall. The rank of the deceased was left off because the designers wanted each casualty to be counted as an equal-valued human life. It’s true, isn’t it? The best commissioned officer is the one who realizes that his basic human value is the same as the greenest E-1.

God says that in his order of a marriage, the husband is the leader, but not of greater value. Practically speaking, this will mean different things in different marriages. In general, a wise husband will listen to and even, dare I suggest it, sometimes have his opinion changed by wise and godly input from his wife. Finally, however, he is the lead. God forbids wives to disrespect their husbands, to use his mistakes to shame him.

Refusal to submit is defiance against God.

And then it comes to the husbands, ***“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.”*** I have repeatedly been told that men have the easy part in this deal. Do you know what it means to “love” in the biblical sense?

21st century love is different from biblical love. The current definition of love is this: “I am emotionally drawn to you because I like something, maybe everything, about you.” Do you hear what that is saying? It is saying that if you or I change and I don’t like who you are, this “love” emotion will be gone and my “love” will evaporate. 21st century love is not a heart and mind commitment to someone no matter what, but an emotional attachment to someone as long as you get something out of the arrangement.

***“Husbands, love your wives”*** is saying that a husband will be concerned about his wife, her well-being no matter what. Every husband looks to Jesus as his mentor; Jesus who was always kind and respectful of his own, and even willing to die for others, both those who loved him and those who did not. Shame on the men who walk out of marriages just because times get tough, or think that their wives exist for their ease, or most of all who are harsh with their wives. Malachi 2:16 says God literally hates that.

***“Wives, submit… Husbands, love.”*** God’s directions for marriage are precisely in directions that we do not want to go! Or maybe it is that our human nature wants to go in precisely the opposite direction that God points us. It is difficult for a woman to battle the temptation to be sneaky and submissive in word, but not in her heart. And a man must always beat down the sinful self-seeking ways that are in us. “Submit” for the wife and Bible-defined “love” for husbands are precisely where we are weakest. These are where we most need Jesus’ forgiveness, and most need God’s Holy Spirit to live in us.

But there is something else to this. There is something profoundly positive about these words of God. It has taken me over 20 years of marriage to get to this point. I used to get close to birthdays and Christmas and then think, “What present should I get my wife?” I would wrack my brain and usually not figure out anything great. I have finally gotten smart. As we go through the year, when I hear something or think of something that might be a good gift idea, I write it down. I want to get a good gift, but I have to be paying attention.

These Bible verses are God’s gift list for your spouse. What is it, over the long-term, that a wife most treasures in her husband? Is it not what God tells husbands to do? ***“Husbands, love your wives”***? A love that continues even when the flower of youth has gone. A true concern in even the un-loveliest moments of life. She loves that!

And what is it that men over the long-term most appreciate in their wives? Is it not what God tells wives to do? ***“Wives, submit to your husbands”***? Not in the sense of “Listen, or else” but wives who respect their husbands as leaders, even when their judgment betrays them. He loves that!

These are not commands to do what you hate doing. Think of these verses as God’s gift advice to you, “Pssst! Hey, dummy! Do you know how to really show how much you care? Wives, respect. Husbands, love!” These words are God’s blueprint for an enduring marriage. Amen.