

CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH

Ephesians 5:22-33

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

August 26, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The epistle lesson for the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost continues our series through *Paul's Letter to the Ephesians*. This week we are considering chapter 5, verses 22 through 33. It is on page 829 of the pew Bible. This text is not exactly what you would call "politically correct" now days. If you don't understand what I mean, you soon will. It might challenge you. It might even offend you. But when God's Word does that to us, we start by submitting to God's Word, and then we seek to understand it. If we can understand it, great. And if we can't, we still submit to God's Word. This is part of what it means to have a God. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From Ephesians 5, beginning at verse 22, we read in Jesus' name.

²² Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.

²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. ²⁸ In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, ³⁰ because we are members of his body. ³¹ "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." ³² This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. ³³ However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

You might hate this text. And you might be angry at me already simply for reading it. "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord" (5:22). If any public figure quoted this verse, it would be an instant scandal. If you ever have a prestigious career you want to torpedo, just tweet this verse out and see what happens.

So what do we do when the Bible says something that disagrees so fundamentally with the prevailing wisdom of our society? What do we do when our own feelings rage against it?

I hope we can adopt the attitude that we first submit to God's Word, and then we seek to understand it. I realize this is hard to do. It's hard to decide to agree with something when we already disagree with it. To do so is to force our minds to think something they don't want to think. This is hard for anyone. So if submitting to God's Word is too hard for you, at least listen

to what it says before you reject it. And ask yourself: *Is the Word God speaks through his apostle Paul really the thing I hate? Or do I hate this because it kind of sounds like something else I hate?* At the very least, we should try to understand this text for what it says before we reject it. And if you'll be open-minded enough to try to understand this text first, I think you will see that it's not actually the thing you hate.

And remember, this text is a whole. It's a complete unit. The first part does not exist without the second part. So don't reject the first part until we get through the whole thing.

The first part is the part that offends us. And there's really no way to explain away the parts about wives submitting to their husbands or husbands being the head of the wife. Many scholars have tried to find a way to prove that Paul doesn't actually mean what he says. But it never works. It can't be done any more than you can prove that two plus two equals banana. The more honest ones will simply say that Paul was a child of his times or just plain misogynistic.

But Paul was neither of these things. When we stop and consider what this text actually says, we find that the Christian teaching on marriage elevates both the role of husband *and* wife. And by not viewing them as identical, we affirm the unique value of each office. If we disregard Paul's teaching, we disregard God's plan for marriage. But what might be even more significant is that we would throw away a beautiful sermon about Christ and his Church. Because, at it's very best, that's what marriage is. It's a sermon about Christ and his Church.

Now Paul does teach a hierarchy within marriage. And that's the thing that doesn't fit in our culture. We have this picture of a heartless and domineering husband who expects his wife to attend to his every desire. But that's not the kind of hierarchy Scripture teaches. It's not a tyrannical hierarchy. It's not a hierarchy of domination. And the hierarchy does not mean the wife is inferior. Let me explain.

The existence of a hierarchy does not imply inferiority on the part of the person under the head. Male and female are distinct, but neither is inferior to the other. Husband and wife are different, but neither office is inferior to the other. They are distinct, but equal in value.

In the world we might think of hierarchies as demonstrating superiority or inferiority, but that's not the way it is in the Kingdom of God. I'll give you a few examples to prove it.

We start with the Trinity. Within the Trinity there is a Father and a Son. There's also a Holy Spirit, but we're just talking about the Father and the Son right now. God the Father is the head over God the Son, and the Son submits to the authority of the Father. But their divine natures are equal. They are equal in power and wisdom. They are both eternal. They are both perfect in every possible way. Everything that can be said of the Father's divine nature must also be said of the Son's divine nature. And this is so central to Christian theology that when someone denies this or teaches otherwise, we call him a heretic and kick him out of the Church. We recognize the hierarchy within the Trinity, but we also insist that Father and Son are equal.

Or we think of Jesus Christ growing up as the son of Mary and Joseph. This was actually a case of the superior person being under the authority of inferior persons. And yet Jesus "was submissive to them" (Luke 2:51), and this was the right thing to do, because this is the hierarchy God instituted within the family.

The same thing is true of Jesus' submission to the Roman government. He was and still is the king of heaven and earth, but he was also a subject of the Roman Empire. He wasn't even a citizen; he was less than that; he was a mere subject. So he submitted to them by paying the taxes they required (Matt. 22:21). He even submitted to their decision to kill him.

What all these examples demonstrate is that being in submission within a hierarchy—especially one ordained by God—does not indicate inferiority, and we should never think that way.

The value of male and female is not determined by their roles, and it's not determined by the hierarchy. Now this is important, so I want you to pause and think about this: where does the value of male and female come from? Think about it biblically. Where does the value of male and female come from? It comes from creation. The value of male and female was determined by God at creation when he created both male and female in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). It's not just male, and it's not just female. It's male *and* female, created distinct from one another, but both created in the image of God. That's where the value of male and female comes from. The hierarchy within marriage does not determine the value.

Now we might still bristle against this notion of a hierarchy. But pay attention to how Paul describes it. It's not a tyrannical hierarchy. The husband is not to dominate the wife. We see this right in the text.

The relationship of husband and wife is one of three relationships Paul deals with here. The next two come in chapter six, where he tells children to obey their parents (6:1) and bondservants to obey their earthly masters (6:5). Those are also relationships of submission within a hierarchy, but the word that best describes those relationships is "obedience." Paul tells children and servants to *obey* their parents and earthly masters. But he doesn't give that command to wives, and that's significant. Now it doesn't mean that wives should be *disobedient*. But there's a different way Paul describes the marriage relationship. There's a totally different concept that defines submission within marriage. It was radically countercultural, even in the ancient world, and it still is today.

Instead of thinking of this submission primarily in terms of obedience, we should think about it in terms of reception. More than anything else, submission means receiving the husband's love.

Now that's probably not what we think of when we hear the word "submit." But we get this idea from the relationship between Christ and his Church. Jesus Christ sacrificed himself. He gave himself up for the Church. And the Church's submission to Christ—first and foremost—means receiving that love. Love and submission are bound up together.

So there are two complementary commands. "Wives, submit to your own husbands," is connected to, "Husbands, love your wives" (6:25). The two commands work together.

Now notice that these commands are not conditional. It's not, "Wives, submit to your own husbands *if they love you*." And it's not, "Husbands, love your wives *if they submit to you*." It's simply, "Wives, submit to your own husbands," and, "Husbands, love your wives." Both commands are *unconditional*. So wives are not commanded to make sure their husbands love them, and husbands are not commanded to make sure their wives submit to them. It's really a matter of trusting the other person to live and act as God has commanded them.

And we know that both sides are going to fail ... a lot. This is one of the places where the analogy of Christ and his Church breaks down. In earthly marriage, forgiveness runs both ways. We sin against each other ... a lot.

But that doesn't get either side off the hook. We fulfill our obligations to one another, not because the other side deserves it, but out of reverence for Christ and submission to him. So, husbands, if your wife doesn't submit to you, you still have to love her. And wives, if your husband doesn't love you, you still have to submit to him. If someone is abusive, or if fulfilling your obligation would lead to sin, that's a special circumstance; that's not what we're talking about here. But in normal circumstances, when you stay and live your vocation, you actually teach your spouse about Christ and his Church.

Now when we consider this analogy between earthly marriage and the union of Christ and the Church, we might think that Paul is using the relationship between Christ and his Church as an illustration for marriage. But it's really the other way around. The relationship between Christ and his Church is the pattern, and earthly marriage, at its very best, is a picture of that greater marriage. So we do gain practical insight from the pattern Christ sets with his Church. But greater than the wisdom marriage receives from this pattern, is the sermon marriage preaches about the greater marriage of Christ and his Church. Our marriages should be a perpetual sermon of the love of Christ for his Church and how the Church delights in that love.

So what do we know about this marriage between Christ and his Church? Primary to this discussion is the question, *who serves whom?* And don't think about this with your natural wisdom. Natural wisdom is wrong on this issue. Think about it biblically. What did Jesus say about who serves whom? Jesus said concerning himself, **"The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"** (Mark 10:45).

And on the evening before Jesus' death, when they were in the upper room and feet needed to be washed, do you remember who took the role of the servant? It was Jesus who knelt down to wash his disciples' feet. And when Peter objected to this reversal of roles, Jesus would have none of it. He said, **"If I do not wash you, you have no share with me"** (John 13:8). Jesus loved us by serving.

And this gives us a pattern for all authority structures. It's not just a pattern for marriage. Marriage? Yes. But this is also a pattern for all forms of authority, including parenthood, government, the workplace—everything.

The unique thing about the Christian concept of authority is that the person in authority is always the servant, and the structure of authority always exists for the benefit of the person under it. And this is countercultural wherever you go.

About the only place this is seen naturally is in the family. Parents have authority over their children, but who benefits from that authority structure? Ideally, everyone benefits, but the children are the big winners. And that's the way every authority structure is designed by God to work.

Tragically, the world sees things differently. The world tends to function on a "might makes right" philosophy. If a person has enough power and influence to become king, then he gets to tell everyone else what to do. But a good ruler uses his authority to serve.

In business, whoever has the wealth enjoys the benefit of that wealth. That's how capitalism works. But God's will is that business owners should use their businesses as a means to serve their employees and customers.

And in marriage, natural wisdom looks at it and says, "Well, the husband is usually bigger and stronger; therefore, he gets to make the rules and boss the wife around." That's a complete distortion of God's design. It is reprehensible on biblical grounds, because it paints Christ as a tyrant, and so we reject it.

But God's will for how husbands should treat their wives is radically different. Every husband must consider himself a servant to his wife, for this is what Christ is to the Church. So the hierarchy that God has built into marriage is not an unlimited sandwich ticket for husbands. The husband is really the servant, not the wife. Now this doesn't mean the husband always does whatever the wife wants. If that were the case, then he wouldn't be the head anymore. He loves and leads by serving and sacrificing himself. So he is both the head and the servant. It doesn't really make sense when we try to understand it in worldly terms. It only makes sense when we understand it as a picture of Christ, who is both the head of the Church and the one who serves. Christ loved by sacrificing himself for the Church. And he did this on his own volition, without ever being asked to do it.

Now you might be thinking, *Well, doesn't the Church love and serve Christ too?* And you would be right. The Church does love and serve Christ. Likewise, the wife also loves and serves her husband. They both love each other and they both serve each other. This is the way it's supposed to be. But if we define the Church by how she loves and serves Christ, then we would define the Church by the Law. But the Law is not what makes the Church the Church. The Gospel makes the Church the Church. The Church becomes the Church by receiving Christ's love. And marriage between husband and wife is a reflection of this, and so it is a sermon about Christ and his Church.

Now when we talk about Christian love, always remember we don't understand it as an emotion. Even when Paul tells husbands to love their wives (5:25), he doesn't use the word that describes romantic love. He still describes love as self-sacrifice. It's a love that is patterned after the sacrifice of Christ for his Church. Jesus Christ "gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word" (5:25-26).

This, by the way, is an obvious reference to Baptism. And we're reminded by this that Baptism is something Christ does. We don't wash ourselves in Baptism; Jesus does the washing.

And Jesus does this for the whole Church "so that he might present her to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish" (5:27).

When you stop and think about this, you realize it sounds like an odd wedding ceremony, because Jesus is the one who gets his bride ready, and Jesus is the one who presents her to himself. Typically the bridesmaids get the bride ready. Or maybe it just used to be that way; I don't really know. And the father of the bride presents her to the groom. But the Church doesn't have anyone besides Christ. The Church has no friends in the world. And without Christ, the Church has no father either. So Jesus does everything, because he's the only one there to do anything. So he clothes the Church in his own perfect righteousness and presents her to himself spotless and without blemish.

CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH (Ephesians 5:22-33)

Now I should point out that it's only the Church that is the bride of Christ. And it is only the Church as a complete body that is the bride of Christ. The individual members of the Church are not brides of Christ. Jesus doesn't have *brides*. He has *a* bride. Individual members of the Church can be called brothers and sisters or children of God, but we cannot be called brides of Christ. And this gets forgotten sometimes. Even the song I chose for our closing hymn seems to forget this. But we'll put the most charitable construction on it and say that when it says, "Rejoice you are His ransomed bride" ("O Let Your Soul Now Be Filled with Gladness"), it means *y'all*, and not *you* individually. Just keep that in the back of your minds. You'll see what I mean. Remember that there is only one bride.

Now it is still true, of course, that Jesus loves each of us individually and with the same self-sacrificial love. But he doesn't present us to himself as individuals. He presents the Church to himself as his bride. We as individual Christians have the joy of being members of this Church. It means that we are redeemed, and sanctified, and cleansed, and washed, but not alone. It means that Christ delights in us, but not just you, or me, or one of us. We have the joy of sharing this with one another. The way a husband loves his wife, and the way a wife delights in that love—well, actually, it's much greater than that—that's the way Christ has loved us. And we as members of the Church delight in that love. He has given himself for us, so that we might be his own. This is his joy, and this is his glory. And it becomes the Church's glory too, for she is Christ's bride. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.