

**“Marriage” – 3, 4**

**XXXIV. Texts that Transform**

**Ephesians 5:22-33**

**“Mutual Duties”**

The most controversial things the Christian community has to say today are all said in connection with marriage and family. Our theological claims are comparatively inconsequential. We claim that Jesus Christ is the only Savior and faith in Him the only way of salvation. Secular society cringes when it hears our religious absolutism. Yet this is only about “religion” and easily dismissed by our secular contemporaries. Marriage and family, however, has to do with the “real world,” with lifestyles, with moral claims, with right and wrong. We live in an era that has facilitated easy divorce, encouraged premarital sex, normalized homosexuality, legalized gay “marriage,” validated transgenderism, and celebrates abortion, even late-term abortion.<sup>1</sup> The sexual revolutionaries of the 1960’s have marched triumphantly right through every major social institution from the media, to the schools, to the churches, to the labor unions, to the civil government, to the military, to the Boy and Girl Scouts. They have redefined marriage, the family, and even gender. At every point we are in opposition. At every point we find ourselves saying no. We who take the Bible and Christian discipleship seriously are in the uncomfortable position of contrarians. Increasingly we are being shamed into silence. Our culture, which prides itself on being open and accepting of all, on allowing those once confined to society’s closets a place at the table, nevertheless maintains its closets and would force those who champion

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<sup>1</sup> See Ryan T. Anderson, *When Harry Became Sally: Responding to the Transgender Moment* (New York: Encounter Books, 2018); Nancy R. Pearcey, *Love Thy Body: Answering Hard Questions about Life and Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 201); Sherif Girgis, Ryan T. Anderson, and Robert P. George, *What is Marriage? Man and Woman: a Defense* (New York: Encounter Books, 2012).

traditional moral distinctions into them. Those who hold to historic Christian moral norms almost daily are being reminded to keep their views to themselves or they may lose their jobs or be disciplined by their profession, or removed from political office. They may be charged with hate crimes or denied their freedom of speech.

This is why we began this discussion on marriage by emphasizing the timeless authority of and sensible distinctions found in the biblical instruction. The Scriptures are as valid today as they were 2000 years ago. We move on now to look more closely at our text itself to see its hierarchical structure and complementary roles of Christian marriage and contrast it with the egalitarian model we hear much about today.

### **Mutual duties**

The Apostle Paul outlines the respective duties of wives and husbands in Ephesians 5:22-33, beginning with wives. As noted earlier, unmistakably the instructions for husbands and wives differ. The Bible by distinguishing between the mutual duties of husbands and wives is recognizing, accommodating and celebrating the intended creational design differences between men and women.

### ***Wives***

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

Wives are to “be subject,” (NASB) or “submit” (*hypotassomenoi*) to not every man, but to their “own husband.” They are to do so as if he were Christ Himself. “Submit,” to him, the Apostle of Christ says, “as to the Lord.” He then draws parallels between the relation of husband and wife and that of Christ and the church:

*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. (Eph 5:23)*

There is no question that Christ is the “head of the church.” In a parallel way, “the husband is the head of the wife.” Christ is both “head” *and* “Savior.” The latter title introduces the idea that the husband’s authority is not exercised for personal satisfaction about for the benefit of another, namely, his wife. He repeats the same again:

*Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. (Eph 5:24)*

*In everything?*

Does the church submit to Christ “in everything?” Of course it does. Is the wife to be subject to her husband “in everything?” Ordinarily, yes. Is there *no* difference between the authority of the husband and that of Christ? Yes, there must be. Christ is sinless and of infinite wisdom and goodness. At no point does He abuse His authority. At no point is He anything other than holy,

righteous, just, and good and wise. His authority is unlimited. The same cannot be said of husbands. *All* merely human authority is limited. There are the things of Caesar and the things of God (Mt 22:21). The same Apostles who tell us to “be subjective to the governing authorities” as “instituted by God” (Rom 13:1) also say, “We must obey God rather than men,” as the Apostle Peter declared to the Sanhedrin (Acts 5:29). When human authority conflicts with God’s authority, we obey God, not the state and not husbands.

Consequently, “In everything” must mean in all things moral in all the various realms of life. It does not mean that she should submit “no matter what.”<sup>2</sup> For example, what if a husband beats his wife? She should not submit to his authority. He is breaking the law and violating his marriage vows. She should appeal to both the *civil* authorities to restrain him and protect her and *church* authorities to sanction him. If he persists in bad behavior, he should be imprisoned by the government and excommunicated by the church. She in turn should be permitted to divorce him on the basis of willful desertion and allowed to remarry (1 Cor 7:15). Bad cases make for bad rules. However, in all things lawful and moral according to God’s law, she must submit to his final authority. She submits “as is fitting *in the Lord*” (Col 3:18), “not *against the Lord*,” as the English Puritan George Swinnock (1627-1673) explains.<sup>3</sup>

As we have noted, the requirement that wives submit to their husbands is not a one-off command, but is repeated or implied in the New Testament multiple times. “The head of the wife

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<sup>2</sup> Swinnock: “in everything that is lawful”(“The Christian Man’s Calling” in *Works*, I:510).

<sup>3</sup> Swinnock, *Works*, I:510 (my emphasis). He continues: “As God must be loved above a husband, so God must be pleased before a husband.”

is her husband” (1 Cor 11:3); “wives, be subject to your own husbands” (1 Pet 3:1); “wives, submit to your own husbands, as is fitting in the Lord” (Col 3:18); “older women... train the younger women... to be... submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled” (Titus 2:5). By way of contrast, *men are never told to submit to their wives.*

### *Resistance*

Why this emphasis? What problem is being addressed in the New Testament? The issue is that yielding final authority to her husband is not an easy thing for a wife to do. It never has been. The curse upon humanity at the time of the fall resulted not only in pain in childbirth for the woman, but also this:

*Your desire shall be contrary to your husband,  
but he shall rule over you.” (Gen 3:16b)*

“Desire” means a desire to dominate or control, as in Genesis 4:7 in which God warns Cain that sin’s “desire is for you, but you must rule over it.” The “desire” of sin is that of domination and mastery. “For you,” can be translated “against you,” as in the original ESV margin note. The desire of a wife to resist her husband’s “rule” and control him. This is what is at issue and the resulting conflict has been present from the Fall. The more recent revisions of the ESV recognize this nuance and so translate “for” as “contrary”: “your desire shall be *contrary* to your husband.”

The struggle to rule the house goes back to the very beginning. The wife can't control her husband through brute strength. She must use subtler means. She may use anger as a weapon. It is remarkable to observe the number of 250 pound men who fear the anger of their 125 pound wives. Or she may pout. Or use the "silent treatment." Many husbands dislike wifely displeasure to such an extent that they'll surrender the complete control of the marriage and family to her. Swinnock tells of wives who "must rule all themselves, or else the house must be made too hot for their husbands."<sup>4</sup> Consequently, she gets what she wants. Things always go her way. She's wearing the pants, as it used to be said.

Words are another weapon. It is not unusual for a wife to be more nimble in the use of the tongue. She can talk circles around her husband. He can't keep up. She overwhelms him with verbiage. She is able to talk him into and out of anything. She exhausts him. He gives up. It is not without reason that the Proverbs warn, "It is better to be on the corner of a roof than in the house with a contentious woman" (Prov 21:9; 25:24). This is why the Apostle Peter tells wives to win their husbands "without a word," rather by a "gentle and quiet spirit" (1 Pet 3:1). "Without a word" must be urged because she will be tempted to win him by a barrage of words.

Then there is the withholding of bedroom privileges This is the ultimate trump-card. When anger fails and verbiage fails, this is a sure winner. Most husbands will capitulate. Out comes the white flag. He'll surrender. Most wives *can* control their husbands and the household. They *can* rule. They *can* lead.

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<sup>4</sup> George Swinnock, "Christian Man's Calling," *Works*, I:506.

### *Letting him lead*

If husbands are to lead, wives must *let* them lead. Notice men are not being told to make their wives submit. The wife is being addressed. She must subject herself to her husband. She must resist the temptation to usurp her husband's authority. If she doesn't, she disobeys God and unmans her husband by depriving him of his God-assigned and God-designed role. Ironically, we confidently can say as well, she will not be happy.

Of course all this is regarded as an excruciatingly out-of-date and hopelessly repressive regime. Yet let's just pause for a moment. To whom is assigned the more difficult task? The wife is merely to let her husband lead. He is to lay down his life for her. Who exactly is submitting to whom? He is to yield up his life for her and all she is being asked to do is to respect him and support his leadership (Eph 5:33). Her three verses are followed by his eight verses. Swinnock says the wife is listed first because "the duty of a wife is most difficult."<sup>5</sup> In some ways, yes, but in most ways, surely the husband's duties demand more. What are those duties?

### ***Husbands***

*Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, (Eph 5:25)*

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<sup>5</sup> Swinnock, "Christian Man's Calling," *Works*, I:503.

The Apostle's directions to husbands are two-fold.

### *Love*

First, husbands are to *love their wives*. Husbands are to abandon self-love and self-interest and love their wives with sacrificial love, with costly love, with bleeding love, with dying love. Love your wives "as Christ loved the church." What did He do? He "gave himself up *for her*." What this means is that he must take responsibility for the well-being of his wife. He must protect her and provide for her. He is to "nourish" her and "cherish" her (5:29). Sacrificial love is a love that suffers so that the loved one need not suffer. A nursing mother sacrifices sleep that her infant might not suffer nutritional deprivation. Her instinct to protect her body which must bear and nurture her young is complimented by his willingness to take risks. A husband endures hours of labor, dangerous conditions, threatening persons, uncertain future, sacrificing health and bodily well-being and even life itself for the sake of his wife. He might rather be elsewhere doing otherwise. He might rather be lounging on the sand, cool ocean breezes blowing against his face, a warm sun baking his skin? He might rather be fishing or hunting or playing golf, or "hanging" with buddies. Yet the husband's sacrificial love forgoes all this, or whatever his dream-life might be, on behalf of his wife.

My grandfather worked for forty years in the Pennsylvania coal mines. He started when he was not yet a teenager driving the mule-cart down into the pits. Aside from the time out to get wounded as an artilleryman in World War I, he spent his entire adult life in the mines. When he

retired after 40 years, they gave him a watch. That's all. He died of black-lung at the age of 69. Every breath he took was labored. One could hear him breathing from the opposite end of the house. "Why did you work in the mines?" I asked him once as a young boy, assuming he chose the mines over a variety of job opportunities. "I had to get food on the table," was his response. This is what husbands and fathers do, even at the cost of their health and longevity.

My father and mother married in March of 1951, moved to California in June, and had two children in 1952 in one calendar year. Gail was born in January and Peggy in December. I came along 2 ½ years later. My father was attending graduate school and working three jobs to support his family. He didn't sleep much. Why did he do it? Because it had to be done to support the family. This is what husbands and fathers do. If there is a suspicious noise in the house late at night, he goes to investigate: he doesn't send his wife. If there is heavy labor to be done, he does it. A good husband lives with his wife in an "understanding way" (1 Pet 3:7). He is physically stronger and because his body is not designed to carry and nourish children, he can take risks that she shouldn't. He works to understand her. He is a student of his wife. She is different that he is. He seeks to understand that difference. She looks at the world differently. She interacts with the environment differently. She has different anxieties and fears. She has different priorities and goals. She has an innate maternal instinct, a nesting instinct, and an innate concern for safety and adequate provision. He understands that instead of ridiculing it. He understands that she is a "weaker vessel" and so vulnerable to physically powerful males and needing his protection. Husbands are to love their wives "as Christ loved the church" and "as their own bodies."

## *Lead*

Second, husbands are to *lead* their wives. Without ceasing to love, they are to lead. Indeed, to love is to lead. They are to love by leading.

*<sup>26</sup> that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, <sup>27</sup> 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. (Eph 5:26, 27)*

Notice that all of the verbs, all the action words are Christ's and hence a pattern for the husband. Christ sanctifies, cleanses, washes, and presents the church so that she might be "without spot or wrinkle,... that she might be holy and without blemish." All the initiative, the loving initiative is with Christ. "In the same way," the Apostle continues, with the same loving initiative husbands are to provide for and protect their wives:

*In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. (Eph 5:28)*

All the effort that the husband expends for himself he is to expend for his wife, as if she were an extension of his own body. Only more so. He unfailingly takes the necessary steps to rest his body, dress his body, bathe and groom his body, please his body, and so on. We all are servants

of our bodies, its needs and appetites. As we attend to the needs of *our* bodies, so we are to attend to the needs of *our wives*. This is what it means for husbands to love by leading. If wives are to submit to their husbands, are husbands not to lead them? Is he not to “manage his own household” (1 Tim 3:4, 5; ESV, NIV, RSV), or “rule” it (KJV, NKJV)? Again, follow the active verbs:

*For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, (Eph 5:29)*

Christ “nourishes and cherishes” the church and husbands are to do the same for their wives. To “nourish” (*ektrepho*) is to provide for. To “cherish” (*thalpo*) is to care for. Yes, a husband is to lead, yet leadership is to be Christian leadership, which means nourishing and cherishing the one being led, which means servant leadership.

Jesus explained what servant leadership looks like in his response to the mother of James and John seeking prominence for her sons in Christ’s kingdom (Mt 20:20-24). He answered,

*<sup>25</sup> “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. <sup>26</sup> It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, <sup>27</sup> and whoever would be first among*

*you must be your slave<sup>1 28</sup> even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mt 20:25-28)*

Worldlings “lord it over” their subordinates. Power corrupts them. It “goes to their heads,” as we say. They become tyrants. “It shall not be so” for Christians. Jesus is the ultimate example of servant leadership. He “served” by “giv(ing) his life as a ransom for many” (20:28). He doesn’t yield his authority. He is still the king of His kingdom. He is still Lord. Yet His lordship is exercised on behalf of his subjects. He becomes their “servant” and “slave.” He doesn’t “lord it over” his subordinates.

To what end are husbands to love and lead their wives? Look again at verses 26-27. The goal is the sanctification of their wives. The parallel between Christ’s sacrificial love for His church and the husband’s sacrificial love for his wife means that his loving leadership aims at her spiritual well-being. Look again at the vocabulary: “that he might *sanctify* her, having *cleansed* her by the *washing*” that she might be “*without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish*” (vv 26, 27).

Husbands, are we having a sanctifying influence on our wives? Are we lifting them up or dragging them down? Because she lives with me, is she growing in holiness or growing in worldliness? Is her spiritual appetite growing or diminishing? Is her aspiration for godliness increasing or decreasing? Is she growing because of my leadership? Is she hungering and thirsting after righteousness? Or am I a dead weight on her spiritual development? Are her

spiritual disciplines strengthening or weakening? Is she maturing? growing in Christ-likeness?  
learning?

### *Contrary tendencies*

Why must men be instructed over and over again to love and lead with Christ as the model? Why three times here, elaborated and illustrated in eight verses, and again in Colossians 3:19 and as implied in 1 Peter 3:7 and 1 Corinthians 11:3-16? Because the fall has impacted them negatively in two ways. They tend to go off the rails in one of two directions.

The first is, men will tend to *shirk all responsibility* that lies beyond their own ambitions and pleasures. They will tend to let their wives do all that they are willing to do. This has been a problem since the fall. Why did Adam eat of the forbidden fruit? “The *woman* whom you gave to be with me,” he says. She is at fault, he claims. He denies responsibility for his actions. He blames her. He even blames God. “*You* gave (her) to be with me” (Gen 3:12). However, in truth, the fault was his. Instead of leading her, he followed. She was *derived* from him, *defined* in relation to him (“a helper fit for him” [Gen 2:18]) and *named* by him, naming being a ruling function (Gen 2:23). Yet he failed to lead. He abandoned his responsibility and his progeny have been doing so ever since.

Why does he leave his dirty socks on the floor? Why are so many wives the spiritual leaders of their homes? Why in many cultures are women virtually made to be beasts of burden? Why is

there a problem with what is called the “underclass” in America today with large numbers of unemployed young men fathering children for whom they take no responsibility while living off the income of their girlfriends and through criminal activity? Why is it that men commit 90% of the violent crimes (murders, rapes, other sexual offenses, aggravated assaults, or armed robberies)? Why are there nine times as many men than women in jail or prison? Why are women three-quarters of all victims of domestic violence? Why has the prostitution “industry” been around from time immemorial and why does it exist almost entirely to service men? Why are men the major consumers of pornography? Again, men and women are different. Women will tend to *usurp* responsibility, men to *shirk* it.

Christianity taught men to channel their enormous energies into marriage and family. It taught men to use their strength on behalf of the weak. We should not be surprised if a *post*-Christian society sees those energies channeled into masculine ego-building activities like promiscuity, risk-taking and violence and then hear our society complain of “toxic masculinity.” Maternal responsibilities seem to come naturally to women. They don’t have to be taught to care for their young. We don’t use phrases like “woman up” or “be a woman” or “make a woman out of her.” Yet we do, not infrequently find ourselves having to tell young men to “man up,” “be a man,” and urge circumstances that will “make a man” out of a male who still behaves like a child.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See Glenn T. Stanton, “Manhood Is Not Natural” in *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity*, Vol. 32, Number 3, May/June 2019, p. 26.

The second tendency of men on this side of the fall is the “abuse of authority.” “He shall rule over you,” God warns (Gen 3:16). Men have been abusing their wives from the very beginning. Rather than lovingly husbanding their wives, they become petty tyrants. The pendulum tends to swing from one extreme to another. The demanding, order-barking, terrorizing husband is proverbial. This is why we say the Christian leadership is *initiative*, not *orders*. A husband leads by placing priority on his wife and family. *Their* care and safety is his primary concern, not *his* comfort, pleasure, recognition, or honor. Consequently, he initiates the steps that must be taken to ensure the physical, material, emotional, and spiritual well-being of his family. He seeks suitable employment. He provides a safe and secure living space. He initiates getting the family to Sunday services. He gathers the family for daily family devotions. He prays for his wife and children. All this takes time and trouble, expends energy, and delays the pleasures, the relaxing or personal pursuits he craves.

Leadership as initiative is servant leadership. The same principle of initiative is, in fact, characteristic of all great leaders. The great generals and captains of industry may or may not have screamed orders. What they all did do was initiate moving their organizations’ resources in such a way as to meet the demands of the battlefield or market. The outstanding generals have anticipated the movement of the enemy forces and initiated positioning their own to meet the challenge. Business leaders anticipate the opportunities the economy presents and marshal the resources of the company to exploit or even create those opportunities. Initiative, not orders, is what makes a leader great. Great leaders are intensely aware of the needs, resources, and opportunities of the family, army, or business they are responsible to lead and initiate the actions that are necessary.

Good husbands are initiators. They have their fingers on the pulse of the family. They have their ear to the rail. They are attuned to the needs of their wives (and children) and expend their energies and resources to ensure their well-being. This does not mean saying “Yes ma’am” to one’s wife’s every demand. Rather, it might often mean that ensuring her well-being will require saying no and as a consequence dealing with her immediate, or even sustained displeasure. This too is an aspect of what it means to love one’s wife by saying no to one’s self.