

A Mutual Marriage Pastor Morgan Murray West Valley Church

Scripture: Ephesians 5:21-33

Introduction

This morning we are continuing our series in Ephesians, and we are continuing to reflect on how we are to live in light of the resurrection. Ephesians 5:21-33 is our text. I'll just be honest and say that I would not have chosen to preach on marriage on the second Sunday of Easter during a pandemic. That said, I'm one of those people who believes there are no accidents. For reasons that I hope will become clear to you personally and to us as faith community, the Holy Spirit has determined this the Word we need to hear.

Here's what I hope you will take away from this study.

1. We have an urgent need to be filled with the Holy Spirit.
2. This infilling is urgent because it is the only way we can Love the way God loves.
3. God's love is unlike any other, because it is expressed as mutual self-giving and submission.

Theme: Because of the resurrection, we are able to be filled with the Holy Spirit and live in mutual submission to one another just like God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit live in mutual self-giving love.

Eph 5 is one of those fun texts that pastors are sorely tempted to avoid. I wanted to avoid it when a couple came to my office and specifically asked that I in their wedding. I had never met them before, but they wanted to get married in our sanctuary. (Our church had enormous bay windows that looked out on spectacular, burnished red boulder formation that caught fire in the last light of an Arizona sunset.) This was going to be the second marriage for both of them, and they were adamant that they wanted a "biblical marriage" this time. When I suggested that the best way toward that goal was pre-marital counseling, they apologized and said they couldn't do it because of their work schedules. But they promised that they would get counseling after they got married.

I believed them. So I performed the ceremony, gave them a charge from Ephesians 5, and prayed for a blessed union.

The marriage didn't last the honeymoon. As soon as they were away together, all unresolved issues between them – as well as the baggage they'd brought along from their past – came bursting to the surface. The ceremony was on Friday and they were back in my office on Monday – not speaking to each other and emotionally shut down.

Looking back, I wonder if they believed that the right magic words - spoken in church, by a minister, on their wedding day - would somehow solve everything.

For the rest of us, the problem is that we like to “change the font” on this text. We want to make some parts bold in 20 point font. Other parts we want to ignore as the fine print. We unconsciously underline some parts and draw a line through others. When we do this, we reveal how deeply influenced we are by our families, our culture, and our education. Perhaps more than any other, this text serves as a Rorschach test to modern people. We read our fears, our hurts, and our regrets into it.

Before we dive in, we need to notice how it flows directly from what precedes it. This requires a bit of a grammar lesson:

The word “Submit” is the last verb in a list of activities that Paul connects to being filled with the Holy Spirit. Our NIV translation reads the verbs as present active, like this:

18 Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. 19 Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, 20 always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 21 Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. 22 Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord.

But in Greek this is all one long sentence, and the verbs are present participles, like this:

“Be filled with the Holy Spirit, speaking... singing.... Making music... giving thanks... [and] submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ, wives to husbands as to the Lord.

Notice how this changes the energy and urgency of this text. The emphasis is on being filled with the Holy Spirit. Submitting isn't the big deal, being filled with the Holy Spirit is! It is only as we are filled with the Holy Spirit that we are able to worship God wholeheartedly, to live gratefully, and to give our power away for the sake of others as Christ gives himself away for us.

Okay, so let's read what Paul teaches about what a Spirit-filled Marriage looks like, and how it gives a window into the loving character of God and of Christ's kingdom:

21 Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

22 Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her 26 to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, 27 and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. 28 In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church— 30 for we are members of his body. 31 “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” 32 This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. 33 However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

In this section of Paul's letter, the first present tense imperative verb comes in verse 25:

Husbands love your wives as Christ loves the church.

And you thought all Paul cared about was getting wives to submit. How late 20th/early 21st century of you!

The notion that wives should submit to their husbands strikes some people as old-fashioned, or patriarchal and chauvinistic, or just plain dumb. It might surprise you to know, however, that Paul's words were no less controversial when they were first penned than they are now, but for exactly the opposite reason. To instruct wives, children and slaves to submit to the Man of the House was common advice, expressed by many philosophers and teachers of the day as the recipe for a harmonious and stable society. In fact, there began to be a lot of concern within Roman society about “strange” religions from the East like Judaism and Christianity, b/c they were viewed as a threat to traditional Roman culture. As funny as it sounds to today, Christianity was seen as a threat to Family Values! Paul is trying to offer a conciliatory word to those who were afraid of those radical Christians. At the same time, he wants to challenge a basic notion of Roman life, namely, the absolute authority of the male head of the house.

He does this by introducing an altogether new idea into the nature of marriage and of life in general: Mutual submission. God's Spirit-filled people will spend their lives “Submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Paul can do this because he has come to understand that there is a higher, greater authority that rules the Christian family – higher than the oldest or strongest person in the family, higher than the culture or the government of which the family is a part: The authority of Christ himself.

Whenever we have a choice of putting Jesus in charge or someone else, Paul says, “Pick Jesus.” It will mean that the person in charge has demonstrated himself trustworthy with the most intimate, vulnerable parts of us. Jesus Christ does not use his power or status or intelligence to dominate us or manipulate us. God in Christ only loves us, and brings the full power of that love to bear in order to nurture us and grow us up into best fullest versions of ourselves. And when we are filled with the Holy Spirit, that is how we love as well.

So when the Paul goes on to say, “wives should submit to their husbands in everything,” he has in mind a marriage in which a wife can feel confident that she will not be taken advantage of. Because of this, she submits by honestly expressing her hopes and dreams, as well as her doubts and concerns. She does so, not in an effort to make him solely responsible for the health of the relationship, but in order to reveal her heart that wants to trust him, wants to be share the most vulnerable and intimate parts of herself, and wants her husband to know that she believes in his ability to make godly decisions that will foster spiritual health.

Then we come to the part of the text that would have made the hearts of wives leap for joy and the ears of husbands tingle: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” This was totally new! Never before had an ethical code of conduct placed any obligation on the man, much less an obligation to love! In a society where women, children and slaves were little more than property and legally less a full person, the idea that the Man of the House was obligated to love his wife—in fact to love her as he loved his own body – would have been provocative to say the least! A husband is to be to his wife as Christ has been to the church, acting not out power but humility. In so doing, he is to reveal the love of God through patience, understanding, longsuffering, vulnerability, and sacrifice even to the point of death. This is a husband’s mission: To place the spiritual health of his wife above all else, asking at every opportunity, “How can we trust God and love each other more deeply - even in this difficult situation?” He will do this because he knows her spiritual health and well-being is his highest good. When she thrives, he thrives. At its best, a marriage becomes a “third thing” that is not the wife, nor the husband, but something greater because it exists solely as an expression of self-giving love.

It sounds easy when I put it like that, right? It’s anything but. And as many a couple celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary will tell you, it’s pretty much impossible unless Jesus is in charge.

Is there a word for the rest of us who aren’t married? Paul concludes his reflection by quoting Genesis 2:24 which says,

31 “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.”

He then says,

32 This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.

Wait... Has been Paul been talking about wives & husbands, or Christ and the church? The answer seems to be BOTH. He has gotten so caught up in thinking about the power of loving mutual submission that he can't keep track of which relationship he is talking about it.

To the best of our knowledge Paul never married, but he was deeply invested in his churches. He was no romantic: He knew how messy marriages and churches could be. But there is a deeper mystery at work here, so Paul is anchoring his argument in the first family and the first scriptures. Jesus refers to the same scripture in his teachings about divorce. I said earlier that aren't any magic words that a pastor can say at a marriage ceremony to make sure the couple lives happily ever after. But there is a "deep magic" associated with the marriage union that goes back to the garden. The interdependence between a husband and wife reflects the interrelationship of the three members of the Trinity. NT Wright uses the word "echoes" to describe such things: Such unions echo God's own character and remind us that the Image of God or imago dei is most perfectly seen in a community of people who are mutually submitting to one another in love.

I said at the beginning that we have an urgent need to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Now you know why. We need it because we can't practice this Trinitarian kind of love without it. It is the only way we can Love the way God loves.

For Paul's first readers, this love was unlike anything they had heard of because it is expressed as mutual self-giving and submission. Two centuries later, it is still rare inside the church as well outside it.

What shall we do then? We are going to PRAY.

We are ask God for a fresh infilling of the Holy Spirit so we can continue to live in mutual submission to one another.

We are going to ask God to bring more young married couples into our midst so that we can pray for them and encourage them with this Word.

We are going pray for the marriages of our children and our grandchildren that are under incredible pressure right now.

Let us pray.

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