

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Building Faith at Home Series, Message 2

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The What, Why, and How of a Godly Marriage

Ephesians 5:18-33

Introduction:

A. The example of Ray Mossholder illustrates the high stakes of marriage.

In 1971, Ray Mossholder founded Marriage Plus Ministries. Over the next 30 years it pioneered the way for other marriage ministries, taught millions through TV and radio, and is credited with saving eleven thousand marriages. Yet in 2002, Ray Mossholder filed for divorce from his wife of forty-two years to marry another woman. Ray figuratively described himself as a shoemaker who was so busy that his own wife had to go without shoes.¹ His pastor at the time said he felt a great sadness about how divorce was harming Ray's family and the kingdom of God.²

Now we may not be renowned Christian marriage experts, but our marriages still tell a story. And I know we don't want our marriages to tell a selfish story that wounds ourselves, those close to us, and a watching world. As I think of who sees the story my marriage is telling, I think first of my son. I would hate for Grant's first picture of Christ and the church to be his pastor dad and mom having a selfish marriage that ends in divorce. I also think of friends and family who don't know Jesus. I think of what our neighbors might think if they learned there was a "for sale" sign in front of our house because we were divorcing. What about you - who is watching the story of your marriage? Kids, neighbors, co-workers, friends, family? Wouldn't it be so great if they saw a beautiful love story that pointed to the ultimate love story.

B. The importance of marriage requires us to know what we are to do, why it's worth fighting for, and how we can do it.

The stakes are so high for our marriages. And as Dave, our Senior Pastor, mentioned last week, the Bible doesn't outline eight steps to guarantee a fulfilling marriage - that's not how life works. However, chapter 5 of the book of Ephesians does highlight three things essential to a

¹ I first heard of this story in the book *The Emotionally Healthy Church* by Pete Scazzero, p.43-44.

² Found at <http://www.beliefnet.com/Love-Family/Relationships/2002/02/Marriage-Ministries-Pioneer-To-Divorce-And-Remarry.aspx?p=2>. Accessed February 5, 2013.

godly marriage - what we are to do, why it's worth fighting for, and how we can do it. So if you've got a Bible, please turn to Ephesians 5, Ephesians 5, where we'll examine the what, why, and how of marriage.

This message is the second in a four week series on Building Faith at Home. Last week Dave showed us that if you want to enjoy a grace-based, godly home, it starts with your relationship with God. Now as Dave said, there are no guarantees that your walk with God will spur others in your home to greater faith. However, if you aren't walking with God, you'll definitely miss out on spiritually encouraging your home. After all, you can't pass on to others what you don't possess. Further, if you aren't walking with God, you'll also miss out on experiencing His help when things in your home are falling apart.

Now walking with God is a relevant topic for every home. But if your home doesn't have a marriage, you might be tempted to check out this morning. I hope you'll stay with us. For God's Word is so profound that it can speak those not married, even in a marriage passage.

C. Brief review of Ephesians to orient us to Ephesians 5

Now to better understand our passage let's quickly summarize Ephesians. Chapters 1-3 show that all believing Jews and Gentiles are united in Jesus as one body that enjoys amazing blessings. Then starting in chapter 4, Paul explains how the church is to walk in light of our blessings. We are to love each other, seek unity, use the gifts Jesus gave us to build up others, live moral lives, and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Next Paul explains how we can walk wisely in marriage.

I. What to do - self-give

A. Unmarried should keep in mind God's design for marriage as they assess potential spouses

And to walk wisely, we must know what to do, what kind of story God wants to tell through our marriages. As we look at Ephesians 5, we'll see that the husband and wife are to self-give - each is to give of themselves for the good of the other.

Now if you desire to get married, I hope you'll keep in mind God's design of self-giving as you consider potential spouses. After all, the Author of marriage knows what makes a marriage work. So, when you go to a party, or church event, or work, or wherever, please don't just focus all your attention on the most attractive person, and kinda hope they're godly. Now

I'm not suggesting you marry someone you don't find attractive, but attractiveness is not the most essential quality. And if you're ignoring everyone at the party except for the most attractive person, you're likely missing out on getting to know your best potential spouses. A spouse who will walk with God and bless you for a lifetime. The kind of spouse whose best quality makes them more attractive as they age, not less. A spouse with whom you could enjoy a more fulfilling marriage, and avoid a world of heartache.

B. Wives self-give through voluntary submission (like church) - 5:22, 24

So let's examine this kind of spouse. Please follow along with me in your Bibles, starting in verse 22. ²²Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. ²³For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. ²⁴Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.”

In verse 22 we see that wives are commanded to submit to their husbands. In verse 23 Paul explains the reason for the command - it is because the husband is head of the wife, as Christ is head of the church. Thus, as verse 24 notes, wives should submit in everything.

So, what does it mean to submit? I hope we'll have open minds as we consider the concept, especially if you view it as oppressive. Now at this point, we can only partially answer the question of what it means to submit. That's because Paul is comparing two pictures in this passage. One picture has Christ as head and the church as body. The second picture has a husband as head and a wife as body. Now Christ is many things to the church - He is our savior, our king, our groom, our sacrificial servant, our caregiver, our creator, our leader, our builder, and our friend, to name a few. Because Jesus is so many things to the church, we're got to carefully consider what aspects of Jesus' relationship to the church that Paul is emphasizing, as well as how the church is to respond. Only then can we fully understand what it means for a wife to submit.

However, we can say something about submitting before we see this whole picture. The word “submit” in the original Greek is ὑποτάσσω. Generally it means to “submit”, “subject”, or “subordinate”. In these verses, submit is in the middle voice, which means the subject, in this case wives, does the action to themselves. In other words, submission is the wife's *voluntary*

choice. Now to dig deeper, I looked up ὑποτάσσω in the 10 volume *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* that resides in Dave's office. It said that in the middle voice, ὑποτάσσω "does not so much mean 'to obey' though this may result from self-subordination - or to do the will of someone, but rather to lose or surrender one's own rights or will." So it's saying that submission is not the same as obedience or blindly following your husband's will. It is rather the wife's choice to surrender her own rights. As we see in verse 24, the submission is in everything, so it's a continual posture, regardless of how your husband is acting. However, we should note that wives should not submit to anything sinful and that there is a time and place to respectfully confront a husband about his sin. That's because the wife's submission to Jesus comes first. And Jesus does not want wives to go along with abuse or any other sin, even if your husband pushes you towards it. In that case, you must follow the principle that Peter did in chapter 5 of Acts. There the High Priest told Peter to stop preaching Jesus, but Peter did not. Why? Because as Peter said, "We must obey God rather than man."

So we've seen that the wife's submission is a voluntary choice to continuously surrender her own rights as she subordinates herself to her husband. It's not the same as obedience, although obedience could sometimes be a result. And it's not blindly following your husband's will. And it does not follow a husband into sin. Rather, submission is how the wife is to give of herself for the good of her husband.

C. Husbands self-give through unconditional, sacrificial love (like Jesus) - 5:25-27

How about the the husband? He is also to give of himself, for the good of his wife. Let's see how, starting in verse 25. "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."

Now, in verses 22-24, the husband was compared to Christ and the wife was called to submit. Try to put yourself in the shoes of a first century husband. It's very likely he would expect Paul to explain here how he should rule over his wife. Interestingly, Paul takes things in a different, less power-oriented direction. The husband, in verse 25, is instead told to love his wife as Christ loves the church. The Greek word for "love" (ἀγαπάτε) here can be defined as "to

have a warm regard for and interest in another.”³ It is a continuous⁴ unconditional love, regardless of how one’s wife is acting. After all, verse 25 tells us that the husband is love like Christ loves the church. And Christ keeps nurturing the church, no matter how unloveable we act.

Further, we also see in verse 25 that Christ’s love for the church is incredibly sacrificial, as it says, Jesus gave Himself up for the church. Philippians 2, another passage penned by Paul, describes Jesus giving Himself up in this way: “Jesus made himself nothing, but taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death - even death on a cross!” Husbands, that’s the model for our love, freely giving of yourself for your wife’s sake.

Now look at verses 26. Here we see that Jesus gave Himself up to make the church holy. And look at verse 27 - here we see that Jesus gave Himself up to present us to Himself as a radiant church. Jesus deeply cares about the spiritual growth of His church - He gave everything He had to make it possible. And the husband that loves his wife like Jesus will encourage her to spiritually flourish. He’ll pray for her and with her.

Now that we’ve examined the husband’s call to sacrificially love his wife in the way of Jesus, I hope you won’t make a mistake that I did early in our marriage. Instead of focusing on what God’s Word called me to do as husband, I focused on the fact that I was compared to Christ and Steph was to submit to me. Because I placed my focus there, I subtly justified various forms of selfishness.

For example, when Steph wanted to purchase something for our apartment, if I didn’t like it, or didn’t think it was worth the money, I’d just expect her to give up that desire and adjust her life to mine. No seeking to really understand why it was important to her, no trying to think about if we could do something creative with the budget to make the purchase possible, no serious consideration of giving up something I wanted to buy so we could buy what she wanted.

What an ugly irony. I’m expecting Stephanie to die to herself for my sake, when I’m the one called to love her in the way of Jesus, who died to Himself for my sake. This passage makes

³ *BDAG*.

⁴ I think the Greek present tense here is best taken to have a continuous force, which is supported by the context.

it crystal clear, husbands, that we should not live our role in a way that pleases ourselves or takes advantage of our wives' willingness to submit.

As Dr. Gordon Fee describes it, "Peter's very pharisaic question 'How many times must I forgive?' is now turned into 'What constitutes wifely submission?' Or, 'When husband and wife come to a stalemate in decision making, who has the last word?' One wonders whether Paul would laugh or cry! The gospel of grace and gifting leads to a different set of questions: How does one best serve the interests of the other? How does one encourage the Spirit's gifting in the other?"⁵

The husband does it as he gives of himself through unconditional, sacrificial love. The wife does it as she voluntarily submits in everything. Mike Mason describes the dynamic as, "a sort of contest in what might be called 'one-downmanship' a backwards tug of war between two wills each equally determined not to win."⁶ And as anyone that's been married for any length of time knows, it's an incredibly difficult task.

II. Why it's worth fighting for

A. You are intimately connected - 5:23, 28-31

To do it, you must understand why your marriage is worth fighting for. One reason is that you and your spouse are intimately connected. We see this idea through Paul's picture of a physical head and body. Look at how Paul motivates the husbands to love, starting in verse 28. Please follow along. "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 their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church— ³⁰ for we are members of his body."

Look back at verses 28 and 29 - here we see Paul call the husbands to love their wives as their *own bodies*. Why? because, as verse 28 says, he who loves his wife loves *himself*. Paul is saying, "Husbands, imagine you're a physical head and your wife is the body of that head. You two are so united to each other that when you love your wife, it's as if you're loving yourself." See how he continues the thought in verse 29 - "After all, no one ever hated their own body, but

⁵ *Discovering Biblical Equality*, edited by Pierce and Groothuis, 379-80.

⁶ Mike Mason, *The Mystery of Marriage*, 151.

they feed and care for their body.” Or in other words, after all husband, your wife is your body, and people typically care for their body. Then at the end of verse 29 Paul ties the concept back to Jesus as he points out that this is how Jesus, our head, cares for the church, His body.

And Paul hasn't finished emphasizing the intimate connection of a husband and wife. Look at verse 31, which is a quotation of Genesis 2:24. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” God institutes marriage by having two people become one flesh, an intimate unity. Jesus carries this idea even further in Mark 10, where He quotes the same verse in Genesis. After quoting it, Jesus says, “Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.”

Do you realize that your marriage is a one flesh union joined by God Himself? Imagine your last marital argument. Now in the heat of the argument, did you keep in mind your intimate connection to your spouse? If you did, it probably helped you avoid really escalating the conflict. After all, how stupid would it be to hit yourself with a low blow. Well, that's basically what you're doing whenever you hit your spouse with a low blow in an argument. If instead you keep that sense of connection, of team, it can help you not only avoid escalating conflicts, but even stop some arguments before they begin. After all, why argue when you view it as “us” against a problem, rather than “me” against “you.”

B. Your marriage commitment reflects Christ and the church - 5:32-33

Now not only is your marriage worth fighting for because of your connection, but also because you're reflecting Christ and the church. After making the point that husband and wife are intimately connected in verse 31, Paul goes on to say in verse 32. “This is a profound mystery - but I am talking about Christ and the church.” In the New Testament, the word “mystery” describes a formerly hidden purpose of God revealed in Jesus.⁷ The rest of verse 32 clarifies that it's talking about the formerly hidden purpose of God to intimately unite Christ and the church. Jesus loves the church so much that He sacrificed everything to make us one with Him; and we get to respond by freely giving of ourselves as we submit to Jesus. Married couples, you have the opportunity to reflect this profound, mysterious relationship of Christ and the church. You do it as you and your spouse delight to give to each other.

⁷ Andrew Lincoln, *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol 42, Ephesians*.

Now let's say there's a hypothetical couple, Harry the husband and Wanda the wife. Now this couple has nothing whatsoever to do with me and Stephanie. So imagine Wanda wants to go to the Nutcracker. She enjoys the ballet, and is excited that her co-worker's daughter has a key role in the production. Now Harry's seen the Nutcracker before, and he's thinking, man, the name of that ballet accurately describes its affect :)

Now if Harry thought, well, as husband, I'm called to love like Jesus. So I guess I have to go, but I'll passively aggressively make my Nutcracker joke and be mopey the whole time we're there. If Harry acted this way, he wouldn't be showing the self-giving love we've been talking about, he'd be acting like a victim. And the same would be true of Wanda if she submitted to a desire of Harry's with the same attitude.

But imagine instead that Harry decided to go to ballet, to maybe grow as a person, to enjoy seeing how Wanda enjoys the production and encourages her co-worker, and to enjoy the privilege of reflecting a little bit of Jesus' love. Then Harry would be well on his way to self-giving love. And if Wanda did the same, they would have a beautiful marriage that winsomely points to Jesus and His bride.

C. Robertson McQuilkin illustrates how to picture Christ and the church

I'm humbled by how Robertson McQuilkin displayed Christ's love to his wife Muriel. It helps me see how far I have to go in learning to love. Now McQuilkin resigned as president of a Christian college to care for his wife Muriel because of her Alzheimer's. For 20 years he tenderly cared for her. Here's what he said when he announced his resignation. "The decision was made, in a way, 42 years ago when I promised to care for Muriel 'in sickness and in health . . . till death do us part.' So, as I told the students and faculty, as a man of my word, integrity has something to do with it. But so does fairness. She has cared for me fully and sacrificially all these years; if I cared for her for the next 40 years I would not be out of debt. Duty, however, can be grim and stoic. But there is more; I love Muriel. She is a delight to me—her childlike dependence and confidence in me, her warm love, occasional flashes of that wit I used to relish so, her happy spirit and tough resilience in the face of her continual distressing

frustration. I do not have to care for her, I get to! It is a high honor to care for so wonderful a person.”⁸

What a picture of the unceasing, tender love of Christ for the church. “I do not have to care for her, I get to! It is a high honor to care for so wonderful a person.” How can a man or woman have that kind of ability to love? To love even when your spouse no longer remembers who you are.

III. How can we do it

A. Depend on the Spirit’s work (5:18-21)

How we can do it starts in verse 18 of chapter 5. Please look there with me. “¹⁸ Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, Sing and make music from 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.”

I don’t think its a coincidence that right before he discusses marriage, Paul mentions being filled with the Spirit. Paul knew that only someone under the Spirit’s influence could live out a godly marriage. It is only in the power of God that we can continue to love, even when our spouse acts so unlovable. It is only through experiencing the unending forgiveness of God that we can forgive a really undeserving spouse. That’s why Dave started the Building Faith at Home series by calling us to invite God to change us as we present ourselves as living sacrifices. And a great way to apply this message would be to spend some time in prayer, inviting the Spirit to help you and your spouse to live out the lofty calling of your marriage.

B. Hope in the perfect spouse

And to live it out, Ephesians 5 has also showed us that we must hope in the perfect spouse. Thankfully, in a world with people who wish to be married but aren’t, and people reeling from divorces, and people in hurting marriages, we see that marriage is not the be all end all. It points to something far more significant - Christ and the church. As the Scripture says, Christ is our groom, and we are His bride. And He is the only perfect spouse. Jesus, the spouse who watched us disrespect Him and blame Him for the mess we created with our sin. And in response to that ugly display, He gave everything He had on the cross. As the old hymn says,

⁸ Quoted in *Disciplines of a Godly Man*, Kent Hughes, 33-34.

Jesus did it with love, telling us, “I freely all forgive; This blood is for thy ransom paid; I die that thou may’st live”⁹

He died so that we can be His bride, that He delights to care for. If you feel painfully lonely, He wants to enter with spousal companionship. If you feel guilty about relationship mistakes, He wants to enter with spousal forgiveness. If you struggle with a selfish spouse, He wants to enter with spousal empathy, for He knows what it’s like to have a selfish spouse. And if you struggle to keep your marriage afloat, He wants to enter with spousal love that empowers you to love your spouse.

Conclusion:

A. In marriage we are to self-give

This morning we’ve seen that in a godly marriage each spouse gives of themselves for the good of the other. The wife voluntarily submits, the husband unconditionally, sacrificially, loves.

I think Dr. Sarah Sumner captures the heart of it when she says, “Submission is a relational posture. It means “coming under” her husband in order to lift him up in everything. Conversely, the sacrifice of the husband is a full-time relational posture. For when the wife comes under the husband, thereby lifting him up, he sacrifices himself by giving up his advantage of being over her by exalting her to where he is. In other words, the husband and wife participate together in a dynamic upward spiral of lifting each other up instead of putting each other down.”¹⁰

B. Your marriage is worth fighting for because you are intimately connected and reflect Christ and the church

This giving of self can be incredibly difficult. It’s why you must remember that you’re intimately connected to your spouse, and that your marriage can tell a beautiful story that points people to life in Jesus.

C. You can do it as you depend on the Spirit and hope in the perfect spouse

And you can do it as you depend on the Spirit and hope in the perfect spouse, Jesus. He’s telling us that true life is not found in the short-term satisfaction of self-gratification. It’s not

⁹ John Newton, “In Evil Long I Took Delight”

¹⁰ Sarah Sumner, *Men and Women in the Church*, 171.

found in a 50/50 relationship where you only give if your spouse is giving to you; and t's not found in the temporary thrill of an illicit romance. Those things are shallow. True life is found living a life of Jesus' love.

As Shawn McEvoy described it in a devotional I read, "Complete love to the point of emptying. Unquestioning sacrifice, even for someone who isn't appreciating or understanding what they've been given. A desire only to have communion. An entering into final rest. In other words, a perfect example of the immensity of what Jesus did for me, desired from me, provides for me, and will carry me to."¹¹

We may not yet come close to that love, the love reflected by Robertson McQuilkin. But if you'll let Him, Jesus will help you make a thousand small decisions, day by day, to love. It's no one's nature to love this way, but Jesus can help it become your "second nature." So learn of His love, as we long for the "happily ever after" we'll enjoy at our marriage supper with Jesus. As N.T. Wright says it, "Love is not our duty, it is our destiny."¹²

Let's pray...

¹¹ Quote found at <http://www.faithtalk1500.com/devotionals/article/11640747/print/>. Accessed online on February 8, 2013.

¹² Heard in a sermon by N.T. Wright entitled "After You Believe"