



HUSBANDS AND WIVES AT HOME AND IN THE CHURCH (PART TWO)

EPHESIANS 5:25-33

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There is a sense in which I address this issue of male headship with a measure of reluctance and hesitation. It isn't because I'm in doubt about what Scripture says on the subject or because I'm uncertain about my own beliefs. It has to do with the widespread misunderstandings about headship and submission.

Many think that headship and submission mean that a wife must sit passively and endure the sin or the abuse of the husband, as if submission means she has no right to stand up for what is true and good or to resist her husband's evil ways. I addressed this in the previous sermon on vv. 22-24. Perhaps some of you come from families in which the husband was an insensitive bully and where it was assumed that it was the wife's "duty" to tolerate this silently. God's word does not call upon a wife to acquiesce to brutality or thievery or abuse. I am so sorry if that is the example that was set for you in your family growing up. It may be difficult for some of you to acknowledge that your father was a bully and that your mother was a passive victim of his abuse.

I know that there are both men and women who look at someone like me or other complementarians and say to themselves, or perhaps even say to others, "My dad is a mean and aggressive bully who belittles my mom and ignores her needs and those complementarians hold to a view that says that's ok or that there's nothing she can do but quietly 'submit' and put up with it; after all, he's the head of the house."

It's hard not to be offended by such a horrible distortion of the truth. I assure you of this: that is **not** biblical headship; that is **not** biblical submission. And that is **not** my personal view.

Some of you may think that a husband can get away with whatever he wants in the name of headship, as if that word or concept endorses and encourages his sinful behavior, such that the wife has no recourse but to "submit" to his dictatorial and destructive ways. I, and I trust, all complementarians, utterly reject and grieve over such a terrible distortion and misapplication of the principles addressed in this message.

On more than one occasion I've had women tell me horrible stories of neglect, tyranny, abuse, abandonment, and even adultery on the part of the man, the husband, and then say: "How could you possibly embrace complementarianism, a view that permits and perhaps even encourages such sinful behavior." Let it be said once and for all: I don't! ***Can complementarianism and the notion of male headship be perverted and distorted by selfishness and sinful oppression? Yes. Even as egalitarianism and the denial of male headship can be perverted and distorted into a rejection of any differences between male and female.***

What is Marriage?

A good place to begin is with the meaning of marriage (Gen. 2:24; Mt. 19:5; Mark 10:7-8; Eph. 5:31). I would define marriage as ***the enjoyment of spiritual and physical unity based on a life-long, covenant commitment***. Again, that does not mean there are no biblical grounds for divorce. There are, but I can't address that issue in this one sermon.

Marriage is a unity of both *flesh* and *spirit*. It is a mutual commitment in which husband and wife share their bodies, their spirits, their possessions, their problems, their insights and ideas, their goals and gripes, their sadness and happiness. Ideally, nothing should stand in the way of this mutual experience.

In order for true, biblical unity to occur, both husband and wife must understand what the Bible means by *headship* and *submission*. The failure to appreciate these truths has contributed immeasurably to *disunity* and eventual *dissolution* of countless marriages.

Headship

The Greek word for "Headship/Head" (*kephalē*) has generated an almost unbelievable debate that has resulted in multiple books and articles. The word generally has three meanings in Scripture: (1) a physical head (1 Cor. 11:7); (2) source or origin (possibly, Col. 1:18); and (3) a person with authority (Eph. 1:22). The most frequent use of the word when used of human relationships is that of one who has authority over another. Authority can be abused and twisted

to serve a man's sinful ways. But when done biblically and with an understanding of what it truly means, it can be beautiful.

Misconceptions about the Nature of Headship

First, husbands are never commanded to rule their wives, but to love them. The Bible never says, "Husbands, take steps to ensure that your wives submit to you." Nor does it say, "Husbands, exercise headship and authority over your wives." Rather, the principle of male headship is either simply asserted or assumed, and men are commanded to love their wives as Christ loves the church.

Nowhere does the NT tell husbands to make their wives submit. I had a man once say to me, "Sam, no matter what I do or say, I can't get my wife to submit to me." My response was simple and straightforward: "Where in the Bible does it ever say that you are to make your wife submit? That's not your job." Although the word "themselves" is not in the Greek text, the verb to submit is in the middle voice. The latter means that submission is something the wives are to undertake on their own. Again, this reminds us that "it is not the husband's responsibility to ensure his wife's submission or to subjugate her. Moreover, this submission is offered only to her *own* man, not to men generally" (Campbell, *Ephesians*, 147). Or, in other words, "a wife's submission to her husband is to be a voluntary act of self-yielding" (ibid).

Second, headship is never portrayed in Scripture as a means for a man's self-satisfaction or self-exaltation. Headship is always other-oriented. I can't think of a more horrendous sin than exploiting the God-given responsibility to lovingly lead by perverting it into justification for using one's wife and family to satisfy one's lusts and thirst for power.

Third, headship is not the power of a superior over an inferior. Human nature is sinfully inclined to distort the submission of the wife into the superiority of the husband. That some, in the name of male headship, have done precisely this cannot be denied, but it must certainly be denounced. We must also remember that the abuse of headship is not sufficient justification for abandoning it. Rather, we must strive, in God's grace, to redeem it and purify it in a way that honors both Christ and one's spouse.

Fourth, headship is never to be identified with the issuing of commands. Headship does not mean you can sit around and demand that she wait upon you hand and foot. It doesn't mean you can expect her to respond to your constant demands that she serve you. Don't wait for her to ask you to take out the trash or help with cleaning the kitchen or picking up your dirty socks. Do it immediately and instinctively. Men, every time you walk past a dirty, dish-filled sink, don't order your wife to clean it up. Instead, do it yourself. You will be amazed at her response to your decision to serve her in this way.

Fifth, headship does not mean that the husband must make every decision in the home. Unfortunately, some men have mistakenly assumed that it undermines their authority for their wives to take the initiative in certain domestic matters. This is more an expression of masculine insecurity and fear than it is godly leadership.

Identifying the Essence of Headship

First, headship is more a responsibility than a right. A "right" is something we tend to demand or insist upon as something we are owed. This can all too often make for an authoritarian and self-serving atmosphere in the home. When headship is viewed as a *sacred trust* in which the husband is "called" by God to lead and honor and sacrifice for his wife, the tone and mood of the home is radically improved.

Second, headship is the authority to serve. John Stott explains:

"If headship means 'power' in any sense, then it is power to care, not to crush; power to serve, not to dominate; power to facilitate self-fulfillment, not to frustrate or destroy it. And in all this the standard of the husband's love is to be the cross of Christ, on which he surrendered himself even to death in his selfless love for his bride" (232).

The man who lovingly serves his wife is not a wimp. He is the embodiment and expression of Jesus Christ and the way he loves his bride, the church.

Third, headship is the opportunity to lead. If Jesus is our example of biblical leadership, it will help to take note of how he led his disciples.

- Jesus led by *teaching* his disciples (Acts 1:1-2)
- Jesus led by setting an *example* for his disciples (John 13:15)
- Jesus led by spending *time* with his disciples (Mark 3:13-14; Acts 4:13)
- Jesus led by *delegating authority* to his disciples (Luke 10:1-20)

Fourth, headship is Scripturally limited. Husbands have never been given the authority to lead their families in ways that are contrary to the Bible. On a related note, if a wife is ever asked or told by her husband to do something that violates Scripture, she is not only free to disobey him, she is *obligated* to do so.

Fifth, headship does entail the responsibility to make a final decision when agreement cannot be reached. This final decision, however, may on occasion be to let his wife decide. No. Gentlemen. Contrary to what you may think, this latter option does not undermine the husband's authority. If anything, it enhances it.

Sixth, headship entails gentleness and sensitivity. See Col. 3:18-19 where Paul exhorts husbands not to be "embittered" against their wives. The idea is that of "friction caused by impatience and thoughtless nagging" (Moule). Men, you are never justified in carrying a grudge against your wife for something she did or failed to do.

Seventh, headship does not give men the right to be wrong. Simply because God has invested in the husband the authority to lead does not give him the freedom to lead in ways that are contrary to God's Word.

Eighth, headship means honoring one's wife. See 1 Peter 3:7.

Ninth, headship means loving and caring for one's wife as much as we love and care for ourselves. See Eph. 5:28-29.

Men, think about how you rigorously defend your right to play golf or to watch a game on TV or to hang out with other male friends, or to work on some hobby in the garage, in spite of your wife's desperate need for your help. Do you just as rigorously defend your wife's right to be shown sincere and loving attention as well as her right to expect you to help with basic chores around the house? If you are insistent on taking care of yourself, are you equally insistent that she does so as well?

Tenth, headship means loving and caring for one's wife as much as Christ loves and cares for us. See Eph. 5:25-27. I shouldn't even have to say a single word about how men are to love and cherish and serve their wives. All I need to do is point to v. 25a. Christ's love for us has several characteristics:

- It is **unconditional** (Rom. 5:8)
- It is **eternal** (Rom. 8:39)
- It is **unselfish** (Phil. 2:6-7)
- It is **purposeful** (Eph. 5:26-27)
- It is **sacrificial** (Eph. 5:25)
- It is **demonstrative** (Rom. 5:6-8)

"Christ 'loved' the church and 'gave himself' for her, in order to 'cleanse' her, 'sanctify' her, and ultimately 'present' her to himself in full splendour and without any defect. In other words, his love and self-sacrifice were not an idle display, but purposive. And his purpose was not to impose an alien identity upon the church, but to free her from the spots and wrinkles which mar her beauty and to display her in her true glory. The Christian husband is to have a similar concern. His headship will never be used to suppress his wife. He longs to see her liberated from everything which spoils her true feminine identity and growing towards that 'glory', that perfection of fulfilled personhood which will be the final destiny of all those whom Christ redeems. To this end Christ gave himself. To this end too the husband gives himself in love" (Stott).

The way Jesus related to women in general is a model for all men:

"They [women] had never known a man like this Man – there never has been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronized; who never made jokes about them, never treated them either as 'The women, God help us!' or 'The ladies, God bless them!'; who rebuked

without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unself-conscious. There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything 'funny' about women's nature" (Dorothy Sayers).

I have a question for all men, including myself. Have you ever paused long enough to ask your wife, sincerely and passionately,

"Honey. Does the way I treat you and the way I speak to you make your heart come alive? Does my response to you when you ask me to do something remind you of how Jesus responds when we ask him to do something? Does my behavior both in private and in public enable you to come alive as a woman, or does it suppress and hinder you and make you feel second rate?"

I suspect that there may be some men here today who respond by saying: "But Sam, you have no idea how irritating she can be, how demanding she is, how ungrateful she is when I do things for her. Her nagging is driving me crazy!" Oh, my, you poor helpless soul. My heart breaks for you. Yes, I'm being profoundly sarcastic. How do you think Jesus responds to you when you irritate him or demand things from him or fail to express your gratitude for all he has done for you?

Loving our Wives in Today's Man-Centered Society

How can a man love his wife in today's world? Sadly, many of the ways in which love can be shown are now interpreted as expressions of male superiority. There was a day when opening the door for a woman or standing up when she enters the room or holding her chair for her as she sits down was seen as a fundamental courtesy. But now it is often greeted by the response, "Why are you doing that, you male chauvinist? Do you think I'm incapable of opening the door for myself?"

To love your wife as Christ loved the church, we need to note the second half of v. 25 – "he gave himself up for her." It was our Lord's will to endure unimaginable pain and suffering on the cross for you and me.

Men, if people were to watch how you treat your wife both in public and in private, would they ever be prompted to say, "Wow, that man really loves his wife. Look how he gives up his preferences to honor her. Look at the way in which he prioritizes her safety. Look at how he foregoes his personal habits and hobbies in order to bless her. Listen to the way he speaks of her when he's surrounded by his friends. There is no snide comment about the strange or weird nature of women. There are no words of criticism. When his buddies laugh about their wives, he blesses his wife with words of affirmation and gratitude."

Men, are you willing to forego time in front of the TV or on your smart phone to devote yourself to helping her clean the house and take care of the kids? Jesus gave up his very life for his bride, the Church. In what ways do you sacrifice yourself to bless your wife? How much time do you devote to helping her grow up as a Christian woman?

When she fails or falls short in some way, do you respond with derogatory comments or mocking laughter? Jesus never treats his bride that way. Do you praise her in public or ridicule her? Do others hear you compliment her or do they hear you running her down? Do you instantly turn off the TV when she needs to talk to you? Do you look her in the eyes and make it clear that she has your undivided attention? Do you rid your life of anything that might be a hindrance to her spiritual growth?

"My goodness Sam. You are really being hard on men." You're darn right! Because far too many men are constantly hard on their wives.

How much time do you spend at the gym or in front of the mirror? Are you as attentive to her needs and appearance as you are to your own? Does she have to ask you to take out the trash, or do you do it spontaneously? Are you a slob when it comes to putting away your dirty clothes or do you take time to help her keep the house clean? Do you criticize her in front of the kids or praise her? ***If someone were to ask your children, "Does your dad love your mom the way Jesus loves the church?" how would they answer?***

Why, in v. 32, does Paul refer to marriage as a “mystery”? This word does not refer to a complicated murder plot in an Agathie Christie novel. He’s not saying that marriage is hard to understand or that it is obscured so that we can never fully grasp its significance. A “mystery” is a hidden purpose of God that is only now revealed to us. During the time of the OT the deepest beauty and significance of marriage remained unknown. And that beauty and significance is that marriage is designed or intended to be an image of Jesus Christ and the Church. Marriage is crafted by God “to be a living drama of the covenant-keeping love between Christ and the church” (Piper, 75).

The one-flesh union between a man and his wife is the reason why when a man cares for his wife, he is, in fact, caring for himself. They are one. What he does for himself, he does for her, and vice versa. In much the same way, we are one with Christ Jesus. In v. 30 Paul makes this clear: “we are members of his body.” Just as wives are our own flesh, the church is Christ’s own body. Since Christ is one body with the church, we who are husbands are one body with our wives.

This is why so many fail to understand what marriage is about. It is a copy of an original. The original or the reality is Christ’s marriage to his church. The copy is the human marriage between a husband and wife.

I’ve actually heard some men say that they are reluctant to serve their wives and sacrifice for them because it will only empower and encourage them to take advantage of their husbands. “She will think less of me if I am always the one who gives and sacrifices and foregoes my personal preference.” I assure you, that is not true! Men, are you afraid that by serving your wife in a sacrificial way you will forfeit your role as the head of the home? Are you afraid she will exploit your kindness and deferential ways to get things for herself that she otherwise wouldn’t. Forgive me while I pause and shed a tear for you! Yes, once again I’m being sarcastic. Well, not entirely.

If you doubt all this, look with me at John 13. There we read that Jesus bound himself with a towel and got down on his hands and knees and washed his disciples’ feet. It was a task typically assigned to servants in the house. It was ugly and entirely unpleasant. At no time did the disciples say to themselves, “Oh, I guess this means that he is not our leader. To do something so profoundly humble and servant-like must mean we are in charge and he is to submit to us.” No!

When Paul says in v. 21 that we are to submit to one another out of reverence to Christ, he is not saying that we should be quick to reverse roles, as if some of the time the husband is the head of the wife and other times he must submit to his wife. We, the church, submit to Christ. Christ, the head, does not submit to us.

Headship is not a right that empowers men to control or abuse or bully their wives. If our headship as men is to be like that of Christ to the church, it is the responsibility to love and lead like Christ loves and leads us.

There is no necessary connection between being a leader of your wife and being smarter than she is or more competent. The fact that her IQ is significantly higher than yours doesn’t mean you can’t lead. “What women rightly long for is spiritual and moral initiative from a man, not spiritual and moral domination” (Piper, 89). If you struggle to read the Scriptures aloud to your family, you can still lead them. Simply say: “Hey kids. Mom is going to read the Bible to us again.” Believe it or not, that is leadership!

Loving your wife as Christ loves the church means that if you are walking in Bricktown late at night and are confronted by a thief with a knife, you don’t run behind your wife and encourage her to take him out!

Paul’s point in vv. 26-28 is that you, men, have a God-given mandate to love and lead and encourage and bless your wife so that she can become everything God wants for her. And this also means that you must studiously avoid doing anything or saying anything that might serve as a deterrent or obstacle to her growing in godliness. And often it isn’t so much what words you speak, as it is ***the tone in your voice***.

“But Sam. What if I find myself falling out of love with my wife? How can I obey what Paul says here if I don’t find her attractive any longer? What if she irritates and annoys me? What if she stops loving me? How are we supposed to cultivate a healthy, Christ-exalting marriage when that happens?”

Yes, sadly, it is true that husbands and wives often fall “out” of love for one another. But we must remember that staying married is not exclusively about staying in love. It is also about covenant keeping. That doesn’t mean love isn’t important. After all, in v. 25 Paul commands us to love our wives “as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.”

What it does mean is that falling out of love is no excuse to abandon your spouse. Pray fervently that the Holy Spirit will continue to kindle the fire of love and affection in your heart for your spouse. But when life turns ugly and there isn't enough money and each of you annoys the heck out of the other with your personal habits and quirks, don't conclude that marriage is a failure.

Once again, that is not to say that there aren't instances where either separation or divorce are permitted. I recognize three grounds for divorce: adultery, abandonment, and severe abuse (be it emotional, verbal, physical, financial, or sexual), the sort of abuse in which one partner in a marriage repeatedly and unrepentantly breaks the vows of the covenant.

Even when she is behaving toward you in some way that is frustrating and perhaps sinful, you take the initiative in exemplifying the patience and forgiveness of Christ. That is how Christ has loved you.

If she identifies patterns of sin in your life, especially those that have ripple-effects in the lives of those around you, do not immediately brush her off or become defensive. Rather acknowledge the gracious gift that her wisdom and insight can be to your own sanctification.

She is your number one priority, more than friends, work, parents, career aspirations, and hobbies, but of course, not of greater importance than Christ Jesus is to you. In fact, if Jesus means anything to you, you will happily give up all your personal priorities so that she might be blessed. Christ didn't lay his life down for anyone else—only the church.

You may never, ever use your authority in any way to hurt or abuse her, for Christ has never abused you. Love her more than your professional ambitions, more than your cherished dreams, more than your adolescent expectations of marriage, more than your strongly held convictions about who should do what with the toilet seat (up or down!), or how an onion should be cut or who wronged whom first in that last argument.

If I could summarize in one word the reason why men fail to be the loving head and sacrificial leader of their wife and family, it would be: ***selfishness***. The antithesis of loving your wife like Christ loves the church is selfishness. It is the single greatest threat to a godly, Christ-exalting marriage.



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