

Submission Myths

Focal Passage: Ephesians 5:21-33

Note: The following has been taken from a Bible study on the book of Ephesians taught by Aprile in Spring of 2006 at Bell Shoals Baptist Church.

Introduction and Foundation

I have a feeling that most of us have been dreading this particular lesson since the very first day we embarked on the study of Ephesians. We knew that we would eventually come face to face with the big “s” word, but who knew it would be this terrifying? I have the picture in my mind of one of those old western movies. It’s finally that time in the movie when the good guy and the bad guy have the chance to duke it out. They walk slowly towards each other, hands on their guns, ready to pull them out of the holsters and shoot. It’s you – the independent, modern woman versus the so-called cruel, oppressive command to submit. You are determined to win, but you are well aware that this one’s not going to die easy.

Okay, so maybe I have over dramatized a little bit, but I think you get my point. Most women aren’t too crazy about the topic of submission. In fact, in the last several years many women have made it their life’s work to somehow prove that the traditional concept of biblical submission has no relevance in today’s culture. I believe that the reason submission has such a negative connotation is because the word is shrouded in myths. I firmly believe that if those myths were dispelled, enabling women to truly understand the biblical concept of submission, they would see it as a beautiful byproduct of God’s extravagant love. For this reason, I am going to tackle this passage by highlighting and dispelling 5 myths related to the topic of submission. Before we get into these myths, we need to understand a few foundational principles.

First, the Bible is the inerrant, infallible, divinely inspired Word of God in its entirety, which means that it is absolutely free from error. Second Timothy 3:16 says, “All Scripture is God-breathed” (NIV). Addressing the human authorship of Scripture, 2 Peter 1:20, 21 says, “But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.” More specifically, Peter supports the authority of Paul’s writings by referring to them as Scripture in 2 Peter 1:15, 16: “Just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters. . . which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction.” The issue of inerrancy is complex and extends far beyond our current discussion. I bring it up here because feminist theology is based in large part on the erroneous “super-market view” of the Bible – take what you want and leave what you don’t. Many suggest that Paul’s writings directed toward women are merely opinions reflecting the male-dominated culture of his time. The reality, however, is that feminists have no grounds for this conclusion regarding Paul’s writings beyond their own personal bias. Before we attempt to embrace a biblical view of submission, we must first acknowledge that every word of the Bible is authoritative and fully reliable – even those words we may find particularly hard to swallow.

The second thing we need to understand is that personal experience is not a valid tool for biblical interpretation. The topic of marriage is an emotionally charged issue because most of us have either been hurt deeply by a spouse ourselves or know someone who has been hurt. It is very easy to allow our negative experiences to shape our view of what Scripture teaches about marriage. Our experiences can easily become a filter through which we view biblical truth. The effect of this is usually a “watering down” or blurring of the firm, clear-cut commands of Scripture. Please understand what I’m saying. I know that we can’t sit in our pretty little classrooms talking about biblical principles as if we live in a perfect world. We have to face up to reality – we live in a fallen world full of fallen people. Because of this, life is messy and applying biblical truths to life can be messy. But in the midst of the mess, the confusion, the frustration, and the deep hurt we might feel, we must uphold and live out the truths of God’s Word with firm conviction and perseverance. As we look at the command to submit, we must look at it with open eyes and soft hearts no matter how we may have been wounded in the past.

The third foundational principle we need to understand is the biblical purpose of marriage. Most people think that happiness (the man and wife completely fulfilling the needs of each other) is the purpose of marriage, which is evidenced by the astronomical divorce rate in our country. In most cases where one spouse no longer makes the other spouse happy, divorce inevitably follows. Though happiness is important, it is not the *purpose* of marriage from God’s perspective. From His perspective, one of the primary purposes of marriage is holiness. The reason why God put you with the man you are married to is because that man is being used by God (whether he knows it or not) to conform you to the image of Christ. It has been said that one of the best gifts God gave you was a full length mirror called your spouse. Had there been a card attached, it would have said, “Here’s to helping you find out what you’re *really* like!” Gary Thomas, author of *Sacred Marriage* writes:

To spiritually benefit from marriage, we have to be honest. We have to look at our disappointments, own up to our ugly attitudes, and confront our selfishness. We also have to rid ourselves of the notion that the difficulties of marriage can be overcome if we simply pray harder or learn a few simple principles. Most of us have discovered that these “simple steps” work only on a superficial level. Why is this? Because there is a deeper question that needs to be addressed beyond how we can “improve” our marriage: What if God didn’t design marriage to be “easier?” What if God had an end in mind that went beyond our happiness, our comfort, and our desire to be infatuated and happy as if the world were a perfect place? *What if God designed marriage to make us holy more than to make us happy?* What if, as [Francis] de Sales hints, we are to accept the “bitter juice” because out of it we may learn to draw the resources we need with which to make “the honey of a holy life?”¹

You cannot understand and appreciate submission until you understand and appreciate the true purpose of marriage. I firmly believe that the Ephesians 5 model of marriage – the wife submitting and the husband sacrificially loving as he leads - is the key to wedded

bliss. In others words, submission and happiness can go together. However, submission doesn't always make me happy. There are times when I feel incredibly inconvenienced by my husband's desires - when every fiber in by being wants to scream, "Leave me alone!" If my sole pursuit in my marriage is happiness, I will forsake my husband's desires, do my own thing, and ruin my marriage in the process. If my pursuit is holiness, I will lay aside my desires, serve my husband, and discover the joy of becoming the woman that God wants me to be. Having the right perspective on the purpose of marriage makes all the difference.

Context and Definitions

In Ephesians 5:1, believers are challenged to be imitators of God. They do this by walking in love (vs. 2), walking in light (vs. 8), and walking in wisdom (vs. 15). Last week we learned that the key to walking wisely is living a Spirit-filled life. The results of such a life are 1) speaking to other believers in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; 2) singing and making melody in one's heart to the Lord; 3) always giving thanks to God for all things; and 4) living a life of submission. This fourth result is the focus of the rest of chapter five and the first 9 verses of chapter 6. In Ephesians 5:21, Paul writes, "Be subject to one another." It is important to note that he is not saying that every relationship is characterized by *mutual* submission at all times. Rather, he is saying, "Let there be submission among you."² In order to be imitators of God, each and every one of us is going to have to submit at various times in our lives. Our motivation for this submission is "the fear (reverence, awe) of Christ." Paul goes on to apply this principle of "submitting to one another" to three sets of relationships: wife/husband, children/parents, and slaves/masters. It is important to keep in mind that we are still in the context of Spirit-filled living. The true test of the Spirit's filling isn't necessarily how we act at church (we all know how to put on a pretty church face!), but rather how we act at home with our husbands and children and at work with our superiors and those under us.

There are four words in Ephesians 5:22-33 that need to be defined: *submit*, *head*, *love*, and *respect*. "Submit" (NIV) or "be subject to" (NASB) as it is found in Ephesians 5:22 literally means "to order oneself under a leader."³ In addition to Ephesians 5, wives are commanded to submit in Colossians 3:18: "Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting to the Lord." The same command is issued in 1 Peter 3:1, 2: "In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior." In all of these passages submission is presented as "a wife's divine calling to honor and affirm her husband's leadership and carry it through according to her gifts."⁴ [Note: Nowhere in Scripture is a husband commanded to submit to his wife, which dispels the idea that husbands and wives should submit to each other. Husbands are to love their wives (Eph. 5), live with them in an understanding way, and show them honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life (1 Peter 3:7).]

The reason that wives are to submit to their husbands is "the husband is head of the wife, as Christ also is head of the church" (Eph. 5:23). An entire library could be filled with the pages that have been written about the word "head" because it can either mean "source" or "ruler, authority." Those who argue for equal roles for men and women

support the meaning of “source,” because it dilutes the traditional concept of male leadership and submission. Though there has been much controversy, “it is better to view ‘head’ not as inherently denoting either authority or source, but rather ‘preeminence’ or ‘prominence’ with the *context* emphasizing authority *or* source” (emphasis mine).⁵ In this context, the headship of the husband is compared to the headship of Christ over the church. Therefore, the issue at hand in Ephesians 5 is clearly not origin or source, but authority. The husband is to be the servant-leader **over** the wife.

The husband is to exercise his authority in sacrificial love, “just as Christ also loved the church and gave himself up for her” (vs. 25). The word used for *love* in this passage is the word Paul has used throughout the book of Ephesians. It is unconditional, sacrificial love given irrespective of merit and it seeks the highest good for the one loved. It is the kind of love described in 1 Corinthians 13: 4- 8: “Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.” It is the kind of love that is produced as one walks in the Spirit (see Gal. 5:22), which is quite fitting given the fact that just a few verses before husbands are commanded to love their wives, they (along with all believers) are commanded to be filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18).

The fourth key word in this passage is *respect*. Verse 33 says, “Nevertheless, each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself, and the wife is to see to it that she **respects** her husband.” The Greek word translated *respect* in this verse is often translated “fear.” The meaning goes beyond merely esteeming or honoring someone to *reverencing* them. This couples well with the definition of submission that was offered earlier. With these definitions straight, we can now turn our attention to 5 myths related to submission.

Five Myths Regarding Submission

Myth #1: Submission indicates inferiority.

The Bible makes it clear from the very beginning that though men and women are designed to fulfill different roles, they do not possess different levels of worth. Both men and women were created in the image of God. Genesis 1:27 says, “God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male **and female** He created them” (emphasis mine). God did not create Eve to be Adam’s servant. She was created to be his helper: “The man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field, but for Adam there was not found a **helper** suitable for Him” (emphasis mine). Eve was designed to be a counterpart, not a slave. The New Testament also affirms that men and women are of equal value in Galatians 3:26-28: “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” First Peter 3:7 commands husbands to show their wives honor as “a fellow heir of the grace of life.” This same verse refers to women as “weaker,” but this should be understood as physical weakness. It has nothing to do with value. In summary, the difference between men and women has to do with the **roles** they have been given to

fulfill. Men are to be servant-leaders. Women are to compliment their husband's leadership by being helpmates or counterparts. Throughout the Bible you see God using women in extraordinary ways to accomplish His purposes. In the eyes of God, women are not "second-class."

Myth #2: Submission means silence.

There are times when submission does mean silence, but not always. A lot of women feel that embracing submission means dumping their ability to voice an opinion. They view the command to submit as a command to shut up. What we need to understand is that submission extends far beyond what does or doesn't come out of our mouths. Submission isn't just an action, it's an attitude. In 1 Peter 3:1 women are commanded to submit to their husbands. Just a few verses later this instruction is given: "Your adornment must not be merely external . . . but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God" (vs. 3, 4). Submissive wives can voice opinions, but their opinions will be worded in the right way, spoken in the right tone, and offered at the appropriate time so that the husband's role as leader is not dishonored. I don't think there is a person on the face of this earth that is more different from me than my husband Greg. This is one of the reasons I am so attracted to Greg, but needless to say, there are many times that our opinions conflict. When this happens, I first think hard about whether or not I should say anything at all. (We ought to choose our battles wisely!) If I feel it is an important issue I will go to Greg and say something like, "Honey, would it be okay if we talk about this?" If he says "no" because he has already made his decision, I need to drop it. Ninety-nine percent of the time, however, he is willing to talk. With a very gentle tone, I express how I feel and why I feel that way and ask him to reconsider his decision. Many times he does, but when he doesn't I need to hand the issue over to the Lord and lovingly go along with my husband's decision. I will be honest and tell you that this is nearly impossible unless I am walking in the Spirit. When I'm not walking in the Spirit, things don't quite go this way and God is not honored. (I will address how submission relates to a situation involving a sinning husband later.)

In order to be the submissive women that God wants us to be, we must be very careful what we say. We have already learned that our speech should be edifying, appropriate, and beneficial (Eph. 4:29). When it comes to voicing an opinion, submission doesn't mean silence – it means sweetness. If we will maintain a sweet, gentle attitude we can and should make a regular practice of telling our husbands what's on our hearts. We must keep in mind, however, that as the head of the home, our husbands have the final word.

Myth #3: Submission is conditional upon the husband's behavior.

In Ephesians 5:22-33, 3 verses are devoted to the wife's responsibility to submit while 9 verses are devoted to describing the kind of love that a husband should have for his wife. Clearly, the husband has a huge responsibility! Because of this, it is very easy to say, "I will start submitting when my husband starts loving." This may be logical, but it isn't biblical. The responsibilities of husbands and wives are not conditional upon the

behavior of one's spouse. Ephesians 5:22 says, "Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord . . . as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything." There is clearly nothing conditional about this command. The key phrase is "as unto the Lord." Our motivation for submitting is not to be our husband's love (though a loving husband makes submission a lot easier). We ought to practice submission out of a desire to please the Lord. If you are married, you are married to a sinner who will often fall short of his responsibility to sacrificially love you. You may even be married to a man who hasn't even heard of the book of Ephesians and would have no idea what you were talking about if you started telling him about how Christ loves the church. This does not nullify your responsibility to submit. In fact, the Bible makes it clear that your submission could be the very thing that God uses to lead your husband to a deeper knowledge of Him (see 1 Peter 3:1).

Myth #4: Submission has no limits.

Like I said in the introduction, life in this fallen world is messy and because of that, applying biblical truths to certain situations can be messy. Applying the concept of submission to a marriage in which the husband wants the wife to participate in sinful behavior is one of these "messy" situations. Ephesians 3:24 says that wives ought to submit "in everything." Many have taken this to mean that submission has no limits – if the husband says it, the wife must do it, **period**. This is a perverted notion of submission that has no biblical support. The command to submit "in everything" must be viewed in the context of the entire Bible.

Before we look at the limits of submission, we need to understand the difference between being asked by your husband to do something you'd rather not do and being asked to do something that goes against what God has commanded. In 1 Peter 3:1 Peter writes, "In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands." The phrase "in the same way" refers back to the previous verses about Christ's suffering: "For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed" (1 Peter 2:21-24). This verse is the foundation for godly submission in difficult circumstances. What Peter is making clear to wives is that submission often involves suffering. You may be inconvenienced, disappointed, and even saddened as you submit to your husband because you believe his decision is foolish and/or because it's simply not what you want to do. This has no bearing on the command to submit. In this case, the wife must obey her husband and endure the suffering, entrusting herself to her heavenly Father who judges righteously (see 1 Peter 2:23). However, being asked to do something that is against what God has clearly stated in His word is different. *A woman must never follow her husband into sin.* One commentator has put it this way:

We have to be very careful not to overstate this biblical teaching on authority. It does not mean that the authority of husbands, parents and

masters is unlimited, or that wives, children and workers are required to give unconditional obedience. No, the submission required is to God's authority delegated to human beings. If, therefore they misuse their God-given authority (e.g. by commanding what God forbids or forbidding what God commands), then our duty is no longer conscientiously to submit, but conscientiously to refuse to do so. For to submit in such circumstances would be to disobey God. The principle is clear: we must submit right up to the point where obedience to human authority would involve disobedience to God.⁶

So, what does a woman who has been asked by her husband to participate in sinful behavior do? She needs to tell her husband that God has not given him the authority to force her to participate because it contradicts what God has said in His Word. Though she should not submit by participating in the sinful action, she must maintain an attitude of submission that was addressed earlier. Even in her refusal to participate, she ought to express her longing to honor the leadership position that God has given her husband. One common issue that Christian women face is dealing with a husband who desires to use pornography to "spruce up" their sex life. Though the use of pornographic material for this purpose is very common today, God has made it clear that "marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure" (Hebrews 13:4, NIV). Sex is something that is to take place between a husband and wife. No other people - whether physically present or present via the TV or internet - are to be involved in the sacred sexual union. A woman simply cannot comply with her husband's wishes in this case. She can, however, maintain a sweet disposition that honors her husband, not because he necessarily deserves to be honored, but because it honors God. She must resist the urge to "preach" a lengthy and impassioned sermon on why the use of pornography is so wrong. She should instead bring the burdens of her heart to the Lord.

Cases involving abuse are much more complex than this. A woman should never subject herself to physical, verbal, or emotional abuse, but rather seek the help of law enforcement (in the case of physical abuse) and church leaders (see Matthew 18:15-17 and 1 Cor. 5:3-13). Separation is often advised. Questions regarding divorce must be handled biblically and with great caution.

Myth #5: Submission doesn't really make a difference.

Many women have a hard time embracing submission in difficult circumstances because it doesn't seem to make any difference. In fact, they feel things would be a lot better if they just did their own thing. I want to refer to 1 Peter 3:1 one more time. Remember that the command to submit in this verse is in the context of a passage on suffering. Peter tells wives to submit to their husbands even when it gets really hard "so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives." My heart aches for women who are married to men who do not know the Lord or who know Him but refuse to walk in obedience to His Word. I have cried and prayed with so many women who desperately desire for their husbands to become the loving servant leaders that God has designed them to be. The temptation for these women is to get "preachy" with their husbands and assume the role of the Holy

Spirit in their lives, which inevitably turns their husbands off to the things of God. What Peter tells us is that the greatest and most effective sermon a woman can preach to a rebellious husband is the sermon of submission.

For many women the call to submit is a call to suffer. If you are one of those who have answered that call, be encouraged by the truth that it is making a difference whether you see it or not. I encourage you to look past your husband's failures and focus your gaze on your heavenly Father who sees your pain and is pleased beyond measure by the fragrant aroma of your sacrifice.

Ultimately, our ability to submit to our husbands is directly related to our trust in God. So often, I am tempted to nag, to insist that things be done my way, or to manipulate my husband into doing what I want him to do. This insistence on getting things done my way and on my timetable, along with my unwillingness to relinquish control over my husband reveals that deep down I don't really trust God with the details of my life or my husband's life. If I did, I would be able to humbly let go of my will and confidently submit to my husband knowing that no matter what mistakes he makes, our lives are ultimately in God's hands. My husband is head over me, but God is head over us both. As you and I seek to obey this command to submit to our husbands, may we be able to say with full assurance, "But as for me, I trust in You, O Lord, I say, 'You are my God.' My times are in your hand" (Psalm 31:14, 15) Believing that Scripture is really the key to biblical submission. Submission requires letting go. Letting go requires trust.

For more information on biblical manhood and womanhood, visit the Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood's website at www.cbmw.org. This site serves as an invaluable resource for me on this topic.

¹ Gary Thomas, *Sacred Marriage*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 13.

² Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 717.

³ *Ibid.*, 716.

⁴ John Piper and Wayne Grudem, *Fifty Crucial Questions: An Overview of Central Concerns about Manhood and Womanhood*, (The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood 1992), 15.

⁵ Hoehner, 739

⁶ John Stott, *God's New Society* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 218, 219. (This quote was taken from a reference in an article entitled "The Mystery of Marriage (Part 1)" by Kent Hughes at www.bcmw.org)

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