

Habits of a Healthy Marriage

3rd Weekend after the Epiphany – Color: Green – January 22/23, 2005

Sermon Background Study

Ephesians 5:21-33 (from Eugene Peterson's paraphrase *The Message*)

Out of respect for Christ, be courteously reverent to one another.¹

Wives, understand and support your husbands in ways that show your support for Christ. The husband provides leadership to his wife the way Christ does to his church, not by domineering but by cherishing. So just as the church submits to Christ as he exercises such leadership, wives should likewise submit to their husbands.

Husbands, go all out in your love for your wives, exactly as Christ did for the church—a love marked by giving, not getting. Christ's love makes the church whole. His words evoke her beauty. Everything he does and says is designed to bring the best out of her, dressing her in dazzling white silk, radiant with holiness. And that is how husbands ought to love their wives. They're really doing themselves a favor—since they're already “one” in marriage.

No one abuses his own body, does he? No, he feeds and pampers it. That's how Christ treats us, the church, since we are part of his body. And this is why a man leaves father and mother and cherishes his wife. No longer two, they become “one flesh.” This is a huge mystery, and I don't pretend to understand it all. What is clearest to me is the way Christ treats the church. And this provides a good picture of how each husband is to treat his wife, loving himself in loving her, and how each wife is to honor her husband.

We continue our series, “Loving for Life.”

This week, we bring together the biblical understandings of love and of marriage, as we consider some of the Bible's teachings on the keys to a healthy marriage.

In the first week of this series, we learned that *agape* love is (1) a bond of total trust and commitment, (2) about actions, not feelings, and (3) sacrificial. Last week, we saw that God created marriage as the union of one man and one woman into one flesh. We learned that marriage is covenantal and bound up with our discipleship. Marriage is a union that reflects God's love and is a sign to God's love in the world. In today's passage from Ephesians, Paul puts all this into practice as he points Christian husbands and wives to a marriage modeled upon Christ.

Paul's Troublesome Household Codes

Certain passages from Paul's letters have gotten a lot of attention lately. One hot issue in some denominations has been around Paul's use of the word “submit,” as in today's passage: as the church “submits” to Christ, wives are to “submit” to their husbands. Today's passage from Ephesians is from one of several household codes that we find in Paul's letters (Col 3:18–4:1; Eph 5:21–6:9; 1 Pet 2:11–3:12; 1 Tim 2:8–15; 5:1–2; 6:1–2; Titus 2:1–10; 3:1).

Household codes were common in the ancient world. They outlined duties and responsibilities for the management of one's private affairs. What is most striking about Paul's codes is that for every instruction Paul gives the wife or the children, he's got four instructions for the husband! Why? Because the greatest challenges posed by the Christian life fell on the husband.

In the Greco-Roman world of Paul's day, the male head of household was all-powerful, the *paterfamilias*, the head of the family. According to Roman law, the *paterfamilias* even had the power to decide whether newborn infants should live or die. For Paul to tell the *paterfamilias* that he is to love and cherish his wife and family as Christ loved and cherished the church – well, I bet that went down hard. Sacrificial love would not have been the *modus operandi* of most Greco-Roman husbands. Actually doing as Paul instructs would require the *paterfamilias* to set aside willingly all the privileges and prerogatives accorded him by Roman law and social norms.

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¹This sentence is not specifically referring to husbands and wives. It bridges the previous section and the household code that begins with today's passage. All Christians are to be courteously reverent to one another. In English translations, the Greek verb is rendered variously as “submit,” “be subject to,” and “be subordinate to.” Curiously, the next sentence lacks a verb in the Greek. Thus, the sentences could read something like this: “Out of respect for Christ, be courteously reverent to one another; wives to husbands as to the Lord.” You can see the challenge that is posed to translators!

Cherish is the word

In today's passage from Ephesians, Paul is nearly swept away with metaphor and image. This alone should tell us something about marriage. It is not easy to convey the nature of a healthy Christian marriage. Word-pictures and analogies are more helpful in this than analytical lists and observations. We use Peterson's paraphrase today because the freedom of a paraphrase allows Peterson to express artfully the incredible images painted by Paul in this passage.

Look at the verbs. What do they tell us about the habits of a healthy marriage? "*Understand . . . support . . . cherish . . . submit . . . go all out . . . give . . . bring the best out . . . feed . . . pamper . . . love . . . honor.*" I'm no marriage counselor, but I'd be surprised if a professional could do much better with

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Still, for many of us, the word "submit" falls hard, conjuring up words like "subordinate" and "sub-par." How do we handle Paul's instructions written to a world so different from our own? What would Paul say to husbands and wives today?

Unquestionably, Paul lived and wrote within a patriarchal world which often saw women as inferior. Further, the Greek word that Paul uses clearly implies a hierarchy of authority. But if this is all we hear, we miss Paul's dramatic reshaping of marriage relationships among the believers.

In his ministry, Paul does not seek to overthrow the social structures that dominated the ancient world. Paul never advocates the end of slavery. Slavery was a "given" in the ancient world. Likewise, Paul can't conceive of a world in which wives do not defer to their husbands. *But*, Paul does challenge these new Christians' beliefs about the proper exercise of authority and the meaning of power. Indeed, we see this in the responsibilities he gave to women in his ministry, such as to Phoebe and Priscilla.

For Paul, husbands are to take the lead in the marriage and in the household, but their model for what this means is Jesus Christ. And for Paul to speak of Christ is to speak of the cross, of Jesus' loving sacrifice for others. Yes, Paul writes, husbands are to take the lead but there is never room for arrogance, bullying, or abuse. They are to love their wives sacrificially and faithfully, just as Jesus loves his people. Paul carries on the Old Testament image of marriage as metaphor for God's relationship with his people.

In the end, as Jesus did when confronted by the Pharisees about divorce, Paul returns to the book of Genesis and the "mystery" of a man and a woman becoming one flesh. It is interesting that Paul doesn't pretend to understand it (a wise man!), but writes that what is clearest to him is that husbands are to treat their wives as Christ treats the church – with complete, self-abandoning, self-giving love. And wives are to honor and respect their husbands as they honor and respect Christ. An admittedly tall order for us all!

this than Paul. It is important for us to see that Paul is working outward from the biblical perspective on love. True love looks to the good of the beloved. True love is built upon a foundation of trust and faithfulness, from which one can go all out.

Sometimes in a marriage we are tempted to wonder how far we ought to go in pampering or supporting our spouse. If we go too far, don't we run the risk of being taken advantage of or otherwise being abused? But if our marriage is truly founded upon trust and faithfulness, then we can set aside such concerns. I am very blessed that I never have worry about pampering, loving, trusting, or supporting my wife too much. I need only be concerned that I cherish her as much as I am able. You see, I know that Patti will never take advantage of me or abuse the love I've entrusted to her. Indeed, trust is such a necessary underpinning to a strong marriage that the Bible devotes enormous attention to the importance of sexual fidelity, but more about that next week.

Praying together

Though Paul does not speak of prayer in this passage, he would certainly expect married couples to pray together. How many of us do?

Praying as a couple is something that I've learned from Patti. Praying together, aloud, is something we do every night. It is the last thing we do every night. We hold hands and Patti does most of the talking. She is better at verbalizing what is in her heart than I am. And she is better at remembering our lists of joys and concerns. It doesn't matter so much which of us is doing the talking, what matters is that we pray together.

Commonplace advice for married couples is never to go to sleep angry with each other. Easier said than done! But I've learned that there is no better way to set aside any lingering anger or resentment than simply to pray together. If you are married and do not pray together, I hope that you will decide to do so and make it a habit of your own healthy marriage.

Daily Bible Readings

(Two other household codes; advice on marriage from Proverbs; The old life and the new)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Colossians 3:12-4:1 Read v. 12-17 as preparation for understanding Paul's instructions to households that begins at verse 18.</p>	<p>Day 2 1 Peter 2:11-3:12 Living and loving as servants. As with Paul, bring some understanding of Greco-Roman households to your reading of 3:1-7.</p>
<p>Day 3 Proverbs 5 "Rejoice in the wife of your youth"</p>	<p>Day 4 Proverbs 31:10-31 This comes from a section that contains advice from a mother! This is an ode to a capable wife.</p>
<p>Day 5 Ephesians 5:17-5:2 As Christians, we have shed our old lives and put on new selves. Paul helps us to understand the shape of this new life – in our marriage and in our other relationships.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

January Book Recommendation: *Jesus and His World* by Peter Walker

We are using this book for two Bible Academy classes: *Meeting Jesus* and *The Gospel of Luke*. This book is an excellent introduction to the life, the times, and the world of Jesus. Walker is obviously a student of N.T. Wright, whose work I have used extensively in these Background Studies. And it has lots of great maps and photos! This is available in our bookstore.

Some recommended books on marriage

Rev. Doug Meyer has compiled a list of seven books on marriage that you might find helpful:

- *Creating a Good Relationship*, William J. Lederer
- *Bringing Home the Joy*, Dr. Kevin Lehman
- *As for Me and My House*, Walter Wangerin, Jr.
- *Recreating Marriage with the Same Old Spouse*, Sandra G. Bender
- *Hidden Keys of a Loving, Lasting Marriage*, Gary Smalley
- *Love is a Decision*, Gary Smalley & John Trent
- *Do it Yourself Marriage Enrichment*, Warren Ebinger

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

You might begin by taking a few minutes to read again today's passage from Ephesians. What advice about marriage does this passage contain? You might make a list of the healthy habits you can find in this passage.

Then, make a list of healthy habits that you and others would offer to nearly- and newly-marrieds. What have you learned about making marriage last – either from your own marriage or by observing others? What have you learned to be unhealthy habits? What are the warning signs of a marriage in trouble? Make a list of those.

The book of Proverbs is the distilled, accumulated “street wisdom” of the Israelite community? What is your own distilled wisdom about marriage? What are your top three healthy habits and your top three unhealthy habits?

Finally, in what ways do the habits of a healthy marriage relationship differ from the healthy habits of other relationships? Do they differ at all? What, if anything, makes the marriage relationship unique?