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Wives, Submit? Seriously? (Ephesians 5:22-24)

When you hear that I'm talking about wives submitting to their husbands, I suspect that many women and probably some men will think, "Seriously? How can he even *think* of giving such a message? Is he living in the Dark Ages?" But if we believe that the Bible is God's inspired, authoritative Word, then we need to step back from our godless culture and seek to understand *what* the Scripture says about this subject and *why* it says it. What it says is fairly straightforward:

As the church is subject to Christ, so wives are to be subject to their husbands in everything.

That's almost verbatim from verse 24. But because of our modern culture, the command grates on many who profess faith in Christ. Many evangelical "egalitarians" try to come up with explanations that dodge the clear meaning of the text. But a few comments may help us approach it biblically.

First, as with all of God's commandments, the command in our text is *for our good* from an all-wise, loving God ([Deut. 6:24](#)). He designed marriage and so He can tell us how we must live in it if we want His blessing. God is not a cosmic male chauvinist, who is punishing women and rewarding men by commanding these respective roles in marriage! Rather, they reflect His wise and loving care for us as we obey. Although most of us dislike the word "submit," *all* Christians must submit to proper authority: government ([Rom. 13:1](#)); employers ([Titus 2:9](#)); church leaders ([Heb. 13:17](#)); and, family ([Eph. 5:22; 6:1](#)). To live in rebellion to authority is to live in defiance of God Himself, who ordains all authority.

Second, note that the church is in no way degraded by submitting to Jesus Christ. To the contrary, it is to the church's glory to submit to Christ. Even so, it is not degrading for a wife to submit to her husband. Rather, it results in ([Eph. 5:27](#)), "her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless." Submission results in her ultimate good.

Third, a wife's submission to her husband is not a cross that she glumly must bear. It is rather the path of joy. The context here is the joy and thankfulness of being filled with the Spirit ([Eph. 5:18-20](#)). Thus, just as submission to God is the way to true and lasting joy, so a wife's submission to her husband as to the Lord is the way to true and lasting joy.

Fourth, Christian marriage is to be a countercultural witness to a selfish world where everyone is fighting for his or her rights. The world should look at Christian marriages and instantly see the difference. They should see a Christian husband tenderly and selflessly loving his wife as Christ loved the church. They should see a Christian wife joyfully submitting to and respecting her husband, always seeking his good. The world should see Christian children obeying their parents and the parents lovingly and patiently training their children in the ways of the Lord. The difference between this picture and the garbage on TV should cause the world to marvel.

In both the Old and New Testaments, the Bible uses the marriage relationship to picture the relationship between God and His people. Paul shows here that Christian marriage is an earthly picture of Christ and the church ([Eph. 5:32](#)): "This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church." God created man as male and female to reflect His image ([Gen. 1:27](#)). In the Trinity, all three Persons are equally God; but to carry out the divine plan, the Son submits to the Father and the Spirit submits to the Father and the Son. There is perfect love and harmony among the members of the Trinity. There is no rivalry or competition. Even so in marriage, the husband and wife are equal as persons before God, sharing in the grace of salvation ([Gal. 3:28](#); [1 Pet. 3:7](#)). But there is an order of authority and submission to reflect the divine image.

If a husband puts his wife down or is abusive toward her, he is proclaiming the heresy that Christ puts down and abuses His bride. If he is a self-centered dictator over his wife, he tells the world that the gentle, loving Christ is a cruel, self-centered tyrant. When a man abdicates his headship and lets his wife lead, he preaches that Christ does not lovingly shepherd His church and that the church is free to live out from under submission to Christ, again heretical lies. If a husband is unfaithful to his wife or neglects

her by being married to his career or hobbies, he preaches that Christ is unfaithful or indifferent to His church, another falsehood. So as married Christians, our witness to a watching world is very much entwined with how we relate as husbands and wives.

To explain and apply our text, consider four main statements:

1. To submit biblically to your husband, you must be in submission to the Lord.

Ephesians 5:22, “Wives, *be subject* to your own husbands, as to the Lord.” The verb is in italics because it is not in the Greek text, but is carried over from verse 21. In the context, being subject to one another in the fear of Christ is a result of being filled with or controlled by the Holy Spirit. “As to the Lord” does not mean that a wife must submit to her husband in exactly the same way that she submits to the Lord. The Lord is perfect, whereas every husband is far from perfect (all the wives say, Amen!). Rather, Paul means that submission to your husband is a part of obedience to the Lord. If you are fighting against the idea of being subject to your husband, your attitude reflects that you are really fighting against the Lord, who ordained this order in marriage. So you must begin by yielding to the Lord and His inspired Word.

2. To submit biblically to your husband, you must recognize that he is in fact your head.

Verse 23 explains (“for”) verse 22: “For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body.” Note that Paul does *not* say that the husband *ought to be* the head of his wife, but rather, “the husband *is* the head of his wife.” It’s a stated fact, not a command. Some husbands are weak, ineffective, and just plain lousy heads of their wives, but they are still in that position of authority. Douglas Wilson (*Reforming Marriage* [Canon Press], p. 24, italics his) writes, Meditating on this is a very valuable thing for husbands to do. Because the husband is the head of the wife, he finds himself in a position of *inescapable leadership*. He cannot successfully refuse to lead. If he attempts to abdicate in some way, he may, through his rebellion, lead poorly. But no matter what he does, or where he goes,

he does so as the head of his wife. This is how God designed marriage.

The fact of the husband's headship, which is analogous to Christ's headship over the church, has at least two implications:

A. The fact of the husband's headship means that there are gender-based roles in marriage as ordained by God.

While there is a sense in which all believers submit to one another (Eph. 5:21), there is another sense in which wives submit to their husbands, but husbands do not submit to their wives. It is significant that whenever the New Testament addresses the subject of Christian marriage, it *always* commands the wife to be subject to her husband, using the same verb as here. But it *never* commands the husband to be subject to his wife (Col. 3:18; Titus 2:4; 1 Pet. 3:1). The verb means to put oneself in rank under another.

Also, all of the New Testament commands for wives to submit to their husbands are addressed to the wives, *not* to the husbands. The Bible never commands a husband to command his wife to submit. Rather, the headship of the husband is a fact and the wife is to respond to the Lord, who designed marriage in this way, by willingly submitting to her husband.

This is not a culturally-determined role that we are free to discard, since it doesn't fit our culture. God could have created Adam and Eve at the same instant by speaking the word, but He did not. He created Eve out of Adam. From that fact, Paul concludes (1 Cor. 11:9), "for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake." She was to be a helper suitable for him, to assist him in his God-given tasks. So the roles in marriage are not culturally determined, but rather ordained by God at creation. Specific duties in a household are flexible and can be worked out in a marriage for the mutual good of the couple. But the role of the husband as head and the wife as subject to him are fixed.

B. Just as Christ's headship over the church means that He is in authority over the church for her good, so the husband has authority over his wife for her good.

Headship here means “authority” (Eph. 1:22). Referring to an order of authority, Paul writes (1 Cor. 11:3), “But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ.” Biblical authority is *never* given for the advantage of the one in authority or so that he can dominate those under authority. Rather, *God delegates authority for the blessing and protection of those under authority, so that they will become all that God wants them to be.* Also, the one in authority is accountable to God for those under his authority. This does not mean that a husband must make every decision, but he is *responsible* for every decision made. If he is negligent with that responsibility or if he abuses it for his own advantage, he will answer to God!

After explaining the analogy, “as Christ also is the head of the church,” Paul adds (Eph. 5:23), “He Himself being the Savior of the body.” Commentators puzzle over why he adds this here, but it seems to me that he is both assuring the wives and exhorting the husbands. Christ’s headship over the church meant that He gave Himself on the cross to save His people from their sins. While Christ’s role as Savior is unique, there is an analogy: husbands must sacrificially give themselves in love for their wives (Eph. 5:25). They must use their headship to protect and bless their wives, *never* to abuse them. Wives can be assured that they will not be harmed, but rather cared for and loved, when they submit to such godly husbands. Husbands who abdicate their God-given authority in the home leave their wives spiritually unprotected. Thus to submit biblically to your husband, you must be in submission to the Lord. And, you must recognize that your husband is in fact your head, or authority.

3. To submit biblically to your husband, you must understand what biblical submission is (and is not).

First I will offer a definition and then I will describe seven characteristics of biblical submission.

A. Definition: Biblical submission is the attitude and action of willingly and wholeheartedly respecting, yielding to, and obeying the authority of another.

That definition applies to all of the spheres of authority: to God Himself; human government; church government; wives to husbands; children to parents; and workers to employers. It includes our attitude, because it is not to be forced, but willing and wholehearted. Applied to wives, it includes the following:

B. Description: Submission in marriage looks like this.

(1) SUBMISSION INVOLVES RESPECTING YOUR HUSBAND.

When Paul sums up his counsel ([Eph. 5:33](#)), he repeats (from verse 25) that the husband is to love his wife. But rather than saying that the wife must *submit* to her husband, he says that she must *respect* (lit. *fear*) him. A large part of submission involves respect. While books have been written on this (e.g., Emerson Eggerichs, *Love and Respect*, [Integrity Publishers]), at the very least it means that a wife not attack her husband or put him down. Rather, she should get on her husband's team and cheer him on. If he makes a mistake, she can gently correct, but she should assure him of her loyalty and love.

(2) SUBMISSION INCLUDES THE DESIRE TO PLEASE THE ONE OVER YOU.

When I counsel couples whose marriages are in trouble, invariably they are competing with one another. Rather than seeking to please her husband, the wife is trying to win. She wants to make him pay for what he has done to hurt her. But submission means that you want him to be happy. You want to please him. If he likes a particular meal, you fix it often. If he likes the house to be neat, you try to keep it that way. You don't punish him by making him unhappy. You please him in every way possible.

(3) SUBMISSION MEANS NOT SUBVERTING YOUR HUSBAND'S WILL AND DESIRES THROUGH DECEPTION, MANIPULATION, OR WHINING.

I've seen wives who put on a veneer of submission to their husband's face, but then they go behind his back and use subversive tactics to get what they want. Or, they whine or nag him until to get some peace, he capitulates. That is not submission!

(4) SUBMISSION MEANS RESPONDING TO YOUR HUSBAND AS LEADER AND LOVER.

Many husbands feel threatened and incompetent when it comes to leading their wives. If their feeble attempts to lead meet with criticism or apathy, they won't try again. If your husband takes a stab at giving leadership in your marriage, even if it's inept, encourage him! If he makes a suggestion for a romantic evening together, don't criticize his idea! If he dares to share something on his heart with you or a fear that is nagging him, listen sensitively and thank him for it. Be responsive, not resistant!

(5) SUBMISSION DOES NOT IMPLY THE INFERIORITY OF THE WIFE TO HER HUSBAND.

As I said, this would be heretical, because it would imply the inferiority of the Son to the Father, because the Son submits to the Father (even in eternity, [1 Cor. 15:28](#)). A godly husband is to be a good manager of his household ([1 Tim. 3:4, 12](#)). A good manager utilizes and praises the strengths of those he manages. If a wife is better at something than the husband is, a wise husband will recognize that gift and let her use it for their common good.

(6) SUBMISSION DOES NOT IMPLY PASSIVITY.

A wife can be submissive and still actively try to influence her husband for God (as [1 Peter 3:1-6](#) implies). The wife whose husband is disobedient to the Lord is not told to be passive and not influence him. Rather, she is told *how* to influence him by her quiet and gentle spirit. *All* Scripture, including the command to speak the truth in love ([Eph. 4:15](#)), applies to wives as well as husbands. A submissive wife needs lovingly to admonish her husband if he is in sin ([Rom. 15:14](#); [Gal. 6:1](#)). She needs truthfully to communicate her dissatisfaction with her husband's insensitivity or aloofness. She may need to express her opinions vigorously, so that her husband knows exactly what she thinks. Without honest communication, a marriage cannot grow in intimacy.

Submission means that after a thorough, honest sharing of opinions and feelings, if there is still disagreement, the wife must go along with the husband's decision, as long as it is not sinful. But, please note: *he will answer to God* for that decision, and so he should only override his wife's objections after much prayer and with fear and trembling! In our now 43 years of marriage, Marla and I cannot come up with a single example of where I have had to overrule her. We've

always come to mutual agreement as we've talked and prayed through decisions.

(7) SUBMISSION DOES NOT REQUIRE A WIFE TO BURY HER SPIRITUAL GIFTS.

There are many gifted women in the Bible and in church history who have been greatly used of God. Priscilla is often mentioned before her husband, Aquila. She was probably the prominent one in helping Apollos straighten out his theology ([Acts 18:24-26](#)). Timothy's grandmother and mother, played key roles in training him in the Scriptures ([2 Tim. 1:5, 3:15](#)). Women have a huge ministry in influencing their children to follow the Lord ([Titus 2:4](#)). Paul refers to the mother of Rufus as "his mother and mine" ([Rom. 16:13](#)).

Apparently she had ministered to Paul as a mother.

So Paul is saying that as the church is subject to Christ, so wives should be to their husbands. But, he adds one more thing:

4. Since genuine submission to Christ must be total, genuine submission to your husband must be total.

Paul adds two little words at the end of verse 24, "*in everything.*" Why did he add those words? What does he mean?

A. "In everything" means that you cannot create loopholes to dodge the commandment.

Paul knew that we're all prone to try to dodge the difficult commands of the Bible. Many wives will say, "I would submit to my husband if he would just love me as you've described. But how can I submit when he is so selfish and insensitive?" In marriage counseling, this is always the biggest hurdle for couples to overcome. When they stop blaming the faults of their mate and start focusing on their own responsibilities, there is hope!

B. "In everything" includes submission in thoughts, words, and deeds.

Submission and respect begin in your thought life: Do you run down your husband and complain about his shortcomings or do you thankfully focus on his strengths? Are your words encouraging and affirming? Are your deeds supportive and responsive?

C. "In everything" does not include submission to sin.

If your husband asks you to do something that Scripture forbids, you must respectfully decline. If he asks you to view pornography, you must say no. If he asks you to lie for him or cheat on your taxes or stop going to church, you would sin against God to go along with your husband's request. You should resist his sinful wishes respectfully, but you must resist.

D. "In everything" does not mean that you say yes to every demand, if by so doing you are fostering your husband's laziness and irresponsibility.

If your husband is dumping his responsibilities on you or using you as his slave to cater to his laziness, you need to talk to him. He needs to be confronted with his faults in a gracious, but firm manner. To allow him to go on in his sin is not to love him as Christ commands you to do (Eph. 5:2).

E. "In everything" does not mean yielding to criminal behavior, including threats or physical abuse.

If a husband is getting drunk, using illegal drugs, or is abusing his wife or children, he is violating both God's law and the law of the state. Submission does not mean passively tolerating such sin. A wife should call the police and the husband should go to jail. If he professes to be a Christian, she should call the church leaders. A godly wife may need to endure *some* sinful verbal abuse, such as put-downs, name-calling, or cursing, if her husband is not a Christian (this is the clear implication of 1 Pet. 3:1-6). She should talk with him and explain that she would like to be close to him, but his abusive language is damaging their marriage. But if he is threatening her with physical abuse or death, she needs to move with any children to a place of safety and get some godly counsel.

Conclusion

I realize that this is not an easy subject to apply and obey, but I would encourage each of you to grapple with it especially in areas where you may be resisting the Lord. If you're having trouble in your marriage, don't blame your husband or wait for him to start loving you as he should. Instead, do something radical: Submit to your husband in every area, even as the church is to submit to Christ. If you're fighting this portion of Scripture, you're not submitting. And if you're not submitting, the world won't see Christ in your marriage.

Application Questions

1. How can a wife respect a husband who doesn't deserve it? What does respect mean, practically, in this situation?
2. Does the submission of the wife imply that a husband makes all the decisions unilaterally? Would he be a good manager of his household to do this?
3. Are specific tasks in marriage gender-related (earning a paycheck, housework, caring for the children, etc.)? Give biblical support.
4. What if a wife is a better natural leader than her husband is? Must she still submit, even if he agrees to let her lead?

Reference

Steven J. Cole (2017). "Wives, Submit? Seriously? Ephesians 5:22-24." Retrieved on 28 June 2020 from: <https://bible.org/seriespage/2-wives-submit-seriously-ephesians-522-24>