

In our ongoing sermon series on Paul's Letter to the Colossians we have come to a passage which gives some of God's requirements for the relationship between husbands and wives and between parents and children and between bond servants and their earthly masters. Today we will consider what this passage teaches about the relationship between husbands and wives. Verse 18-19, "Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them."

The world, of course, considers the biblical command for wives to submit to their husbands to be degrading to women. And that is not surprising because the world is walking in darkness and ignorance regarding what truly belongs to human flourishing. Furthermore, there are many things in the Bible which are quite the opposite of what we might naturally think because of the affect of sin on our thinking. God's call for wives to submit to their husbands is not something that we would naturally think of as being the way to flourishing for Christian wives. Because of our sinful natures, we are not inclined to think of submission as a good thing especially for ourselves.

The instinct of our fallen sinful nature is to resist authority – to assert our independence – to grasp for personal freedom to do as we please. We realize, of course, that we cannot have complete freedom and live together in society, but our natural inclination is to grasp for as much freedom for ourselves as possible. And, of course, there is a place for some measure of personal freedom. The Bible certainly does not teach that there is no place for us to make our own decisions. The good life as the Bible describes it includes large areas where we are free to make our own decisions. The only one whose authority over us is absolute is God and God's laws give us plenty of room to make our own decisions. God did not create us as puppets, but as responsible creatures whose goal in life is to use the freedom that he gives us in ways that glorify him and contribute to fullness of life for ourselves and others.

But submission to authority is an important theme in the lives that God is calling us to live. And submission to legitimate authority belongs to the freedom that we receive in salvation. In salvation we are set free from the power of sin and thus freedom as the Bible understands it is freedom to obey God's laws. In biblical terms sin is slavery and obedience is freedom. To be truly free in biblical terms is to submit to God's laws freely and gladly because we love God and we love his character as reflected in his law. An important aspect of biblical freedom is gladly submitting to the authorities that the Lord has placed over us. And that is part of the context in the light of which we must understand Paul's command here that wives submit to their husbands. The submission that God requires here is part of the blessedness of life as God designed it and it is one of the blessings of the salvation that Jesus won for us by his defeat of the tyranny of sin.

That is not to say that this biblical teaching has not been distorted and abused. That is assumed in the last part of verse 19 which tells husbands not to be harsh with their wives. Husbands have often treated their wives very badly. Christian husbands have sometimes used this teaching to mistreat their wives. Submission has often been understood to mean that husbands can order their wives around and that wives should just wait

on their husbands hand and foot. Christian husbands have often been harsh with their wives. There is a reason that Paul here commands husbands not to be harsh with their wives.

So that is part of the context for understanding the submission of wives to their husbands. Whatever it is, and we will consider that in a moment, it is not something that allows husbands to dominate their wives, it is not something that is demeaning to wives, it is not something that allows husbands to use their wives, it is not something that God has ordained in order to give husbands personal servants, it is not something that exists for the husband's pleasure and ease at the expense of his wife.

One of the keys to the whole relationship is the fact that husbands are commanded to love their wives. And what that means is spelled out in more detail in Ephesians 5:25 tells husbands to love their wives, "as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." That puts the whole submission thing in a very different perspective than the idea of a wife being dominated by her husband and treated as a personal servant. The kind of love that God is requiring of husbands towards their wives means that they are to serve their wives to the extent of giving their lives for them. The love that husbands are to show their wives is to follow the example of Jesus giving his life for the church and in Mark 10:45 Jesus speaks of giving his life in terms of service. He says there that he came "not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Husbands, of course, do not give their lives as a ransom for their wives. That part is unique to the meaning of Jesus giving his life for us. But the Bible does call husbands to love their wives following the example of Christ in him giving his life for the church. So husbands are to serve their wives by giving their lives for them.

Jesus give another insight into what this looks like in John 13:1-20 which is the story in which Jesus washes his disciple's feet. In verse 14 Jesus says to his disciples, "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet." It is very significant that Jesus does not think that humbly serving his disciples in anyway takes away from his status as their Lord and Teacher. This is an awesome insight when it comes to understanding the glory of God. One of the most astounding things about God is that his glory includes his willingness to wash his disciple's feet and to serve them by giving his life for them. Jesus is the Lord of glory. He is the radiance of the glory of God according to Hebrews 1. He is worthy of worship. All things exist for him and he is the preeminent one. And that glory is in no way diminished but rather enhanced by his willingness to wash his disciple's feet.

Now Ephesians 5 fills out more of what it means for a husband to love his wife as Christ loved the church. Verse 26-27 of Ephesians 5 says that the love of Christ and his giving of his life for the church was "that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish."

Jesus's love for his church moves him to make her holy and to make her beautiful. Jesus is at work in his church to save her from her sin and to enable her to live beautiful lives to the glory of God. What we always need to remember about this is that Jesus' work of delivering us from sin is about enabling us to live life as it was meant to be lived and so it is about enabling us to live lives that are pleasing to God and lives that are pleasing to God are always full and satisfying for us. The wonder thing about living the life that is pleasing to God is that such a life is always rich and satisfying and rewarding for us. So when Jesus works in his church to make her more and more holy, that is so she will be more and more pleasing to God, but it is also that she will be more and more blessed in her life.

Jesus is telling husbands to love their wives following his example here. Again, we have to understand that husbands cannot do for their wives everything that Christ does for the church. Husbands cannot save their wives from sin. Husbands do not have the power to renew their wives hearts. Husbands are sinners along side of their wives so that they are part of the church that Jesus is making holy and without blemish. Husbands are not sinless like Jesus. They are not like Jesus who from the position of his own sinlessness is working to make a sinful church holy. The kind of relationship that the Bible is prescribing here is not that of a sinless husband whose task it is to make a sinful wife holy. It will probably not go over very well if husbands take that attitude towards their wives. "I am holy and my job is to root out all the sins in your life."

So husbands are not like Christ in every way and what they are to do in loving their wives is not exactly in every way to the love of Christ to his church. But husbands are to follow Christ's example in some ways. Perhaps the most helpful way to think of this is to say that husbands are to give their lives to help their wives to flourish. What Jesus is doing for his church is to enable it to live the most joyful and satisfying life to the glory of God. Husbands are to give themselves in love for their wives for the same reason. Later on in Ephesians 5 Paul makes the point that Christ nourishes and cherishes the church and that husbands are to nourish and cherish their wives.

Husbands are to help their wives to be holy, but have to remember that holiness is much more than things like sexual purity and personal devotions – it is about all of life – it is about developing and using your gifts to the glory of God. It is the opposite of being stifled. True holiness is about the flowering of each unique individual to the glory of God. And so it is about human flourishing to the glory of God. Sin is dehumanizing. Holiness is living to the fullness of what God has made us to be as human beings made in his image.

And to nourish and encourage that is what it means to love our wives as Christ loved the church. What Christ is working towards in his church is not a constricting of life, but the flowering and flourishing of human life and that is what we are to seek to encourage in our wives. We are to encourage our wives to be all they can be to the glory of God.

Now we have to be careful here because it is possible to interpret this as a license to nag our wives – to point out their faults and to call them to repentance every time we see them do something that is not holy. This

command to love our lives as Christ loved the church may not be interpreted as our calling to be correcting our wives all of the time. We need to remember that Christ's way of encouraging holiness in the church is very much focused on encouragement, instruction, and example. There is a place for correction, but what Jesus mostly does is encourage us to grow in holiness is to nurture our love and thanksgiving.

Husbands must always remember that while we are to follow Christ's example by loving our wives as Christ loved the church, we are not Christ, we are not sinfulness like he is and that means that our wives have a very important role in our sanctification. Our wives are also our sisters in Christ and so they are also called to correct us when necessary and to encourage our sanctification.

But the call to husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church is about the husband's calling and so seeking his wife's spiritual growth is an important part what that means, but what I want to make especially clear is that holiness is about all of life and being all that we can be as unique people made in the image of God and that involves our wives using and developing their gifts to the glory of God. And that involves encouraging and valuing the wife's contribution in the relationship and decision making in the home.

The husband has a role of leadership in the home. Loving as Christ loved the church requires sacrificially nurturing the potential of our wives for the glory of God and their own fulfillment and joy. There is leadership there, but it is Christ-like leadership which is sacrificial and gentle and wise and gospel saturated. It is about building up and it is the opposite of constricting. It is leadership, but it is servant leadership.

What does that look like concretely? Thinking about how Christ nourishes the holiness of the church, teaching the word of God which is the gospel is at the heart of it. That teaching will involve family worship and receiving the teaching ministry of the church, but it also involves the teaching that happens in our conversations about things. A lot of teaching happens as we live life together and discuss things and respond to things in life. This teaching will go both ways because if we are encouraging our wives to be all they can be, we will encourage and value what they have to teach us.

But in terms of the husbands role of leadership, the call of husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church involves learning so you can teach. It involves taking your own spiritual growth seriously which includes growth in knowledge so that you can build your wife up in holiness by the way you talk about things in your day to day lives as well as family worship. Loving our wives by encouraging them to flourish to the glory of God involves teaching God's truth in everyday conversation, which is not spouting Bible verses every other sentence, but speaking about life in the light of biblical truth so that our wives are built up by that informal teaching. That of course, will include listening to and learning from our wives, but the call for husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church give husbands extra responsibility in this area.

Closely related to this is our example. The Bible places a great significance on example in the whole area of Christian growth. Christ is often presented as our example and Paul often spoke about his own example and

called church leaders to be examples for the flock. One of the ways that husbands love their wives as Christ loved the church is by living life in such a way that it encourages our wives towards holiness. There is a saying that religion is more caught than taught. That might be somewhat of an overstatement, but there is an important biblical truth in it. We influence others for good or for ill by our example and one of the key ways for husbands to love their wives and nurture their holy flourishing is by being an example of holy flourishing.

So the command to husbands to love their wives is a command to nurture them, to encourage them to be all that God has equipped them to be. It involves putting our wives before ourselves. It involves sacrifice. It involves nurturing and cherishing. It is the opposite of selfish. It is seeking to true wellbeing of our wives in the gospel.

And that is the context in which the submission of wives is to take place. And that puts the whole matter in a very special biblical light. Of course, that does not take away all the challenges for wives. And Christian husbands are very flawed in the ways they live out their love. But still it must make a big difference to understand what kind of love God is calling husbands to show to their wives. The kind of relationship that God is looking for is not one of a wife submitting to a husband who is domineering and harsh, but one in which the husband is reflecting Christ's love for his church. Unfortunately some Christian wives must somehow show submission to husbands who do not reflect Christ's love for his church very well. I'm not going to get into that because that is a whole subject in itself, but let's just say for now that if that is a really problem, a wife can confront her husband with his biblical calling and if necessary get help from the church.

But let's think about this call for wives to submit to their husbands in a more normal situation where the husband is trying to love his wife as Christ loved the church. What is that submission? What does it look like?

Here is how Douglas Moo puts it in his commentary. "[T]o 'put oneself under' the authority or direction of someone."

First of all it is an acknowledgement that God has called husbands to lead. It begins with submitting to the Word of God and the clear biblical teaching that it is God's will that husbands take the lead in a marriage relationship. Humans beings are all created equal in value and worth. Men and women are equally made in the image of God. Marriage does not change that. There is no difference at all between husbands and wives in terms of value and significance. But God has instituted authority structures in human relationships for our good and one of them is in the marriage relationship. The submission of wives to their husbands begins with acknowledging that.

But it is more than just acknowledging that. It is loving that. The result of salvation is that we begin to love God's law. We submit to God's law not grudgingly but enthusiastically because we come to see that God's law is about the best possible way for humans to live and to flourish. Salvation would not be such a glorious thing

if it meant that we now follow God's law grudgingly. Salvation is about living life to the full. And so the submission of wives to their husbands includes enthusiasm for this arrangement.

And that means wanting the husband to lead. If Christian wives love the God-ordained relationship between husband and wife, they will want to be led by a loving husband. They will want their husband to step up to their God-given responsibility and provide loving leadership for their wives. They will want husbands who are serious about their own Christian lives and who study the word of God and who are engaged in the life of the church so that they equip themselves to provide godly leadership. They will want husbands to make decisions, not about every little detail, but about the big things that determine the Christian character of the home.

Submitting to leadership does not mean having nothing to say. It does not mean that decisions are made by a husband without any input from the wife. But submission does mean that the wife is looking to the husband to be the leader and to make the big decisions. In actual practice where the husband is loving his wife and the wife is gladly submitting to her husband, all of this is so natural that it is hardly noticed. Life is discussed. Decisions are discussed. But in the end, it is the husband who says, "Ok we will do it that way." And again, leadership does not require micromanaging everything that happens. Husbands loving their wives means giving them plenty of space to make decisions within the context of the overall submission of the couple to Christ.

One thing that is very significant here is that the command to submit is addressed to wives. The command comes from God directly to wives. "Wives, submit to your husbands." God does not command husbands to make their wives submit. It is interesting that the command to husbands is not even directly to lead, but to love. So the submission here of wives to their husbands is first of all their response to God. This is very beautiful in Ephesians 5 which says in verse 24, "Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands." The submission of the church to Christ is a glad submission motivated by love and thanksgiving. It is a thank offering. And the submission of Christian wives to their husbands is in the first place an offering to Christ and then a voluntary offering to their husbands. The emphasis from the way the command is structured is that the submission is given by the wife rather than demanded from the husband and it is given as a response first to the love of Christ, but also to the love of the husband.

The text says that this is fitting in the Lord. "Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord." The phrase, "in the Lord" describes what it means to be a Christian. All Christians are in the Lord in the sense of united to Christ. And the word "fitting" here seems to be related to the biblical wisdom tradition which has to do with the world as God designed it. Wisdom is about living in harmony with the way that God has designed the world to work. The book of Colossians has quite a bit to say about wisdom in relationship to Christ. For instance 2:3 says that "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" are "hidden" in Christ. So by saying that it

is fitting in the Lord for wives to submit to their husbands is to say that it is in harmony with the way that the marriage relationship is designed to work.

That is given here as an encouragement to wives to submit to their husbands. It fits with God's design. It belongs to the way that God designed for marriage to flourish. And it belongs to life lived in union with Christ – in the Lord.

So husbands are to love their wives and wives are to submit to their husbands. This belongs to the life that belongs to salvation in Christ. All of these commands about the Christian life are rooted in the exposition of salvation in Christ that Paul has expounded in the first part of the letter. This belongs to walking in Christ "rooted and built up in him and established in the faith" (2:7) This belongs to the life that flows from having died with Christ and having been raised with him.

It is a high calling. To love our wives as Christ loved the church is a great responsibility. To submit to our husbands as the church submits to Christ is not easy matter. Thankfully we strive to grow in faithfulness, as those who are in Christ. Our sins are forgiven. Christ's righteousness is ours. We are embraced in love for Christ's sake. And in the confidence of being embraced in God's love and favor and in the knowledge that the power of Christ through his Spirit is working in us, let those of us who are married delight in the vision of the marriage relationship that God is calling us to and seek by God's grace to embody it more fully.