HIGHLIGHT: Ephesians 5:21-33

21 submitting to one another in the fear of Christ.

22 Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord, 23 because the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church. He is the Savior of the body. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives are to submit to their husbands in everything. 25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her 26 to make her holy, cleansing her with the washing of water by the word. 27 He did this to present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or anything like that, but holy and blameless. 28 In the same way, husbands are to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 For no one ever hates his own flesh but provides and cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, 30 since we are members of his body. 31 For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. 32 This mystery is profound, but I am talking about Christ and the church. 33 To sum up, each one of you is to love his wife as himself, and the wife is to respect her husband.

EXPLAIN

Leaders: Feel free to use any of the “Explain” materials to guide discussion as it is needed or to expound on a certain area of the text as it comes up during your Life Group time, but the purpose of this section is to deepen your own personal understanding of the Word. Your members have access to all of this material as well.

As Paul explains the tenets of a Christ-centered marriage, he makes his point obvious: marriage is not about the people getting married, but is about bringing glory to God. As we approach our marriages with this mindset, it will affect how husbands and wives treat one another.

v.22 Paul begins by addressing wives not because they were the most in need of council, but because he wanted to address the concept of submission first—it leads out of what he was talking about in the previous verse. The verse doesn't actually say the word “submit”, but it follows logically from the thought he began in the previous sentence, so the obvious context of this verse is submission—first, wives to their husbands.
Submission is a tricky topic to talk about today, as it carries baggage like dominance, oppression, and power struggles. Paul does not ask wives to blindly follow every decision their husbands make. Markus Barth put it: “The submission to and respect for the husband, to which the wife is specifically admonished...is by no means the submissiveness of a pussycat or a crouching dog. Paul is thinking of a voluntary, free, joyful, and thankful partnership, as the analogy of the relationship of the church to Christ shows.” Husbands and wives are one unit, one team. Neither of them should consider themselves more important than the other.

v.23 Paul compares the way that men have “headship” to the way Christ has headship over the Church. The way that Christ demonstrated His headship was through care for His people—ultimately by laying down His life for them. When Paul calls the husband the “head” of the wife, he means that it is the husband’s job to ensure his wife is protected, that her needs are met, and that she feels cherished.

vv.24-25 The twin statements here, that wives are to submit to their husbands as the church submits to Christ and husbands are to love their wives as Christ loves the church, work in unity with each other to show the true nature of the marriage union. Marriage is the picture of the relationship Christ has with the church. In essence, the relationship could be summed up like this: “Wives, submit to your husbands, because they are going to be doing everything they can to put your needs above theirs.”

vv.28-30 In the middle-east during the first century, women were regarded with little more respect than an indentured servant. Their testimonies were not valid in court. Their opinions were not regarded as worth hearing. They were tasked with living under the oppressive thumbs of their husbands and male leaders without so much as raising a protestation. In a lot of ways, Paul’s words to husbands would have been deeply troubling and humbling to the Christian men in his audience. Proportionally, he spends twice as much time talking to the husbands as he does the wives, perhaps because they needed to correct some long-entrenched ideas about the way women were to be treated. It is difficult for us to understand today just how revolutionary these concepts are.

Paul doesn’t rely on his own opinion, though. He points men toward the behavior they should emulate: Jesus’. Jesus was humble and wise; He was gentle, kind, and tender-hearted. He literally laid down His life for the church. If husbands imitated Jesus, the way they treated their wives would change dramatically—and their headship would be a joy to submit to.

v.32 The crux of this passage comes here: marriage is not just about the people being married, but it is a picture of Christ and the Church. As believers model a marriage that functions as God intended it to function, the world will be able to look on and see a picture of Christ inside of it. There can be no higher calling for a believer!

APPLY

Your Leader Guide will have material that the member guides do not have. The bolded material is what the people in your group will have, the other material is only for you to help guide discussion.

This guide can be as strict a script or as general a resource as the leader needs it to be.

1. What stuck out to you or challenged you in what you heard in the sermon or read in the text?

2. What do you think the world thinks the point of marriage is? How do you see marriage being talked about in the news, in culture, and even among your unbelieving friends?
Marriage is all over the news lately. Gay marriage. Celebrity marriage. Marriages between people and inanimate objects. Remember: people have been perverting God’s gift of marriage for almost as long as marriage has been an institute. What society does with marriage is not our concern; we have the privilege of displaying God-honoring and Christ-centered marriages to a world in which dysfunction is the norm. God gave marriage to us and gave us guidelines for how a healthy marriage should function. When we use that gift not as a way to gratify ourselves but to bring glory to Him, it will be a shining example of the gospel in action to a dark world.

3. What do you think of when you hear “submit”? What does biblical submission look like?

An analogy may help. The head is in charge of what the body does. If you do something stupid, the question is not, “What was your hand doing?” it is, “What on earth were you thinking?” However, if the head is working but the body refuses to respond to it, there is something wrong with the body that needs to be fixed. When a wife submits to her husband, she acknowledges that her husband will be held to account for the actions of the family. They are not unbalanced on different rungs of power; rather they are two different people with different, equal roles, working together for the purpose of sustaining the oneness brought by their marriage.

4. What do you think biblical headship looks like? What qualities should mark it? What kind of response do people have to a humble and gracious leader?

Paul makes numerous comparisons between the way a husband should behave and how Christ led by example. If you look at the sacrificial love and leadership which Christ modeled, these are the characteristics expected of a godly husband. It is a high calling, and one that he can only fulfill as he grows in his own personal relationship with Jesus.

5. How is the kind of love Paul talks about in these verses different from the way the world defines what love is? How should Christian marriages demonstrate the Gospel to those who might not otherwise see it?

RESPOND

Take a few moments to respond:

• If you are unmarried, how can you practice Godly submission this week?
• If you are married, go on a date and have an honest discussion. Husbands: ask your wife, “In what ways do you receive love the best in our marriage?” Wives: ask your husband, “How do you feel most respected in our marriage?”

Encourage one another through email, text messages, or coffee dates throughout the week to build up and encourage each other.