

And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another in the fear of God.

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Saviour of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church. Nevertheless let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

(Ephesians 5:18–33)

Introduction

A study of Ephesians 5:18–5:33 might be called "The Gospel of Marriage," or "The Good News about Marriage." Biblical marriage is good news because it is grounded in the gospel. Unfortunately, many do not see this. That is why, far too often, emcees and other speech-givers at wedding ceremonies make crass, critical, or demeaning comments about marriage. Shortly after my wife and I were married, my wife was talking to a woman we knew who was asking her how things were going. My wife told her that they were going great. The woman smiled and said, "Talk to me after five years." As I write these words, we have been married 33 years.

The problem is that some people view marriage through the lens of failure, and often with great grief, rather than through the biblical lens of faith and the gospel. Ephesians 5 helps us to do the latter. It helps us to look at marriage through the lens of the gospel, a lens which is given for all of life.

We are frequently tempted to compartmentalise our lives. The gospel, we think, saves us from our sins, but it has little to do with the way we conduct ourselves after that initial conversion experience. The Bible will not allow this. Yes, the gospel is primarily the good news that God saves sinners. IN the gospel, transgressions are forgiven and sins covered. Our iniquities are not counted against us, because they are put to Christ's account and his righteousness is credited to us. But this good news leads to all other kinds of good news.

The gospel affords us a new outlook on life. It affords us a new and powerful affection—what one man called “the expulsive power of a new affection.” The gospel informs every area of our life, for it works to transform every area of our life. It is like an ethical umbrella, which encompasses every area of life—including marriage and the home and the workplace. This is clear in the passage we are studying: Ephesians 5:18–6:9.

My thesis for this study is that the gospel-informed, gospel-empowered marriage (and home) is the God-prescribed norm for his children. Family and home are to be grounded in the gospel, and each in turn commends the gospel. In his helpful book, *The Meaning of Marriage*, Tim Keller writes, “The gospel helps us to understand marriage, and marriage helps us to understand the gospel.” Marriage, God's way, is the gospel way—and it is a glorious way. So, let's do it God's way.

We will take several studies to consider the matter of marriage as it is set forth in Ephesians 5:18–33, but I want to begin here by laying some foundational principles for the specifics that will follow in future studies.

Marriage is Not for Everyone

The first thing that must be said is that marriage is not for everyone. Marriage is a great blessing, but it is not the only blessing. The *Presbyterian Book of Common Worship* correctly notes that “God established marriage for the welfare and happiness of mankind.” As true as that is, it doesn't mean that everyone in the world must be happy to be married—or be married to be happy. True, the Lord deemed it “not good” that the man was alone in the garden (Genesis 2:18), but that was not intended as an absolute statement, as if no man anywhere would ever be happy to remain unmarried.

Marriage is vital for the biblical assignment given to humans to populate the earth (Genesis 1:26–28), but it is not, in and of itself, the ultimate goal of life. Marriage, as Piper has noted, is momentary. There are things that will last for eternity; marriage is not one of them.

I have friends, and have met many other believers, who are not married by are living fulfilled and fruitful lives. John Stott, who died just a few years ago, led a fruitful and

faithful ministry, and was a lifelong bachelor. There is a pastor in another part of our city, into his seventies now, who is carrying out a vibrant, faithful ministry, but is a lifelong bachelor. I have another friend, now retired, who used to work for a large airliner. He is in his seventies and has never been married, but is a man who loves the Lord and witnesses faithfully for him whenever he is given opportunity. There are members in our own church who, now in their late sixties or early seventies, have never been married, but are leading fulfilled and fruitful lives.

The apostle Paul, at least when he wrote his New Testament epistles, was not married. It has been speculated that he was a widower, or that his wife had left him, but we cannot be sure of that. All we know, from texts like 1 Corinthians 7, is that he was single when he wrote. The Lord Jesus Christ was a lifelong bachelor—unless you count as his bride the church! He led a life that was focused on the Father, and he did not need to be married in order to do so.

As a matter of fact, there is even a hint of this within the very text we are studying, for before Paul ever deals with the matter of marriage, he first touches on church ministry. It is entirely possible to be a Spirit-filled, fruitful church member without ever entering into the covenant of marriage. The Spirit-filled life is manifested first in the church, then in marriage and the family, then in the workplace.

I note all of this simply to say that we must beware of skewed priorities. We must never speak of marriage in such a way that those who are not married feel as if they are only half-fulfilled. Marriage does not make you more human. It does not make you more Christian. We must neither minimise nor maximise marriage.

Everyone Must Know about Marriage

Second, although, as we have seen, marriage is not for everyone, everyone must know about marriage. As a household of faith, as the dwelling place of God, as the temple of God, as the body of Christ, every member needs to hear and to learn what God expects of those who are married—especially what God expects of those in the local church who are married.

Bear in mind that, when the Ephesians first received this letter from Paul, it would have been read to the entire congregation. They would not have been segregated into married and unmarried rooms, with only the “applicable” portion read to them. All would have heard these words. Each was therefore responsible for what God revealed. Each was responsible to hold others accountable.

I suspect that many churches, ours among them, have failed in this regard. We have failed to press home the point that *every* church member is expected to know what a biblical marriage looks like, and to help marriages in the church to be and stay biblical. We can do far better at helping and seeking the healing of unholy homes.

So, if you love Christ and his church, learn about marriage, God's way. The overriding injunction of this text is, "Submit yourselves one to another out of reverence for Christ." Line up under Christ and help us to get in line! Meaningful membership will help to promote meaningful marriages and family life.

Since marriage reflects Christ and the church, every member should be concerned about every marriage in the church. How bright is the light shining from our homes? This is every member's concern. It should be every member's prayerful concern.

Marriage, for Anyone, Must Be God's Way

The third principle has to do with the fact that marriage must *universally* be practiced God's way. God instituted marriage, so God alone regulates marriage. Marriage God's way means that he makes the rules, not us. And God certainly has laid down rules for marriage (see 5:30–31; Matthew 19:1–6; Genesis 2:18–25; etc.).

Let me make a few observations about marriage done God's way.

First, marriage, God's way, is between one natural born human male and one natural born human female. When I began my pastoral ministry some thirty years ago, I could simply have said that marriage is between a man and a woman. That is no longer the case. There has been untold confusion created by sin.

Same sex marriage is just the tip of this chaotic iceberg.

We must define marriage as between *one* natural born human male and *one* natural born human female because some cultures and societies accept polygamy. We further specify one *and* one because of things like the growing trend of sologamy, in which a person marries him- or herself.

We must define the participants as *natural born* because of the chaotic confusion created by transgenderism. A recent CNN article told the story of a pregnant man married to another man. As it turns out, the pregnant "man" was born female, but by means of various drugs, has transitioned to look like a man. Not opting for surgical intervention, she still has female reproductive organs, including a womb and a uterus. She has not fallen pregnant by her husband, but because she looks masculine and identifies as a man, she is now

considered to be a pregnant man. In fact, if she was born female, she is a woman, no matter what drugs have made her appear to be.

We must specify *human* because of all sorts of confusion that abounds. A woman by the name of Amanda Rodgers divorced her husband to marry her dog. Jodi Rose married a bridge in southern France.

We specify marriage as between *male* and *female* because of the confusion created over legalised same sex marriage.

If all of this sounds terribly confusing, it is because it *is* terribly confusing. A long time ago, George Orwell wrote, “We have now sunk to a depth at which restatement of the obvious is the first duty of intelligent men.” He was correct then, and never have his words been truer than they are today.

Of course, we must be compassionate in the way in which we approach these matters. We are dealing with confusion, yes, but more importantly, we are dealing with *people*. This confusion is not primarily about issues to be solved, but about people to be loved. I was raised in a church context in which people struggling with gender and sexual confusion were treated in a frankly ungodly manner. They do not need to be ostracised; they need to be evangelised! They need the gospel to penetrate the darkness of their confusion.

We must note that this principle limits biblically recognised marriage to heterosexual marriage. Biblically, there is no such thing as a same sex marriage. And, yes, Jesus did address this. When asked about marriage, Jesus clearly said, “Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?’” (Matthew 19:4–5). For Jesus, marriage was a covenantal union between one man and one woman.

God makes the rules—indeed, *made* the rule—about whom we may love in a one-flesh, intimate way. Margaret Court was in her prime a skilled tennis player, after whom an Australian Open tennis stadium was named. Court recently spoke out against same sex marriage, a move that invited opposition from current and past tennis players, including Andy Murray, who was quoted as saying, “I don’t see why anyone has a problem with two people who love each other getting married. If it’s two men, two women, that’s great. I don’t see why it should matter. It’s not anyone else’s business.”

In fact, it is *God’s* business who marries who. God has instituted marriage as a covenantal union between two people of the opposite sex. There is nothing in Ephesians 5, or anywhere else in the Bible, for same sex marriage.

If that is the case (and it is), the question might be asked, why don't Christians get it? Why are there Christians who are strong supporters of same sex marriage? The answer is simple: *They don't get the gospel!* Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor *homosexuals*, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.

(1 Corinthians 6:9–11)

The gospel cleanses us and sanctifies us. It does not permit us to continue in practices that God clearly defines as sinful.

We must also note that, since God made the rules, to oppose same sex marriage is not "hate speech." In fact, it is love language, for we are lovingly telling people what God says. We daren't grant culture the authority to rewrite the rules. Its foundation of sand will collapse!

On a related note, we must acknowledge that, biblically, the marriage bed is only for those who are married to each other. Cohabitation and premarital sex have become increasingly commonplace in our day, but this is something that God does not approve. To the contrary, while "marriage is honourable among all, and the bed undefiled ... fornicators and adulterers God will judge" (Hebrews 13:4). The writer clearly warns here that those who persist in pre- and extramarital sex are in danger of divine judgement.

While statistics don't determine truth, it is significant to note that, statistically speaking, cohabitation prior to marriage actually increases the odds of the marriage ending in divorce. There is no better way to do things than God's way.

Some will object that they don't need a piece of paper to be married. (Although, strangely, paperwork usually becomes very important when the relationship is severed.) Technically, they are correct. There was no magistrate presiding over marriage in the garden of Eden, or likely over marriage for centuries following that. Biblically, however, marriage is a *covenant* bond. Those who object that they don't need a piece of paper are really just expressing an unwillingness to commit to the person with whom they are living and sleeping. Those who cohabit outside of the covenant of marriage are, according to Hebrews, at risk of God's judgement.

Once again, loving compassion is called for in this regard. We must patiently and lovingly explain to people living in sexual sin why the Bible opposes what they are doing. We must

lovingly confront them with the very real judgement of God. There have been numerous couples in our church over the years who have started attending while living together outside the bond of marriage. When they have seen the truth of God's Word, they have been willing to rectify the situation. Repentance has sanctified their relationship. Sadly, others have refused to do what is right and have chosen instead to leave the church.

The purpose of marriage is to glorify God; therefore, his rules must be obeyed. God is not pleased with lip service. When his old covenant people paid lip service to him with their sacrifices, he warned them that their sacrifices were useless (Isaiah 1:11). Sitting in a church service while blatantly ignoring God's rules benefits you nothing. We must submit to God if we will please him and escape his judgement.

One more principle under this major heading before we move on: Since marriage—one flesh relationship within a covenantal commitment—is a creation ordinance, its rules are binding for all humanity, not merely for Christians. God views every legitimate marriage as “holy” and accountable. A marriage is not legitimised in God's eyes because it takes place in a church building. I have often counselled non-Christians couples to go to a magistrate's court to be married. It is hypocritical to ignore God in all of life, but to suddenly darken the doors of a church building only to be married. A wedding in a church building is wonderful—if it is between a Christian man and a Christian woman. But a wedding need not take place in a church building to be recognised as a marriage by God.

This brings us to the next point.

For Marriage to Be Blessed, it Must Be God's Way

Ultimately, whether it is between two believers or two unbelievers, a marriage will only enjoy God's blessing when it is done God's way. This passage highlights several requirements of marriage God's way. We will begin to examine the first as we wrap up this study, and return to these principles the next time.

Marriage, God's Way, Calls for Reverence

The structure of the original language is interesting here. As we have seen previously, the central tenet of this entire section is v. 18—the need to be Spirit-filled. Being Spirit-filled will manifest itself in the four ways we spoke of previously, the last of which is the submission spoken of in v. 21: “Submitting to one another in the fear of God.”

The NKJV again uses the word “submit” in v. 22 when it speaks of wives submitting to their husbands, but that word is actually supplied by the translators (though implied by

the text). Literally, the text reads, “Submitting to one another in the fear of God. Wives, to your own husbands.” The reverence of v. 21 flows into v. 22 and all that follows.

As noted above, however, the resource required for this reverence is the Holy Spirit: “Be filled with the Spirit” (v. 18). Apart from the Holy Spirit, you will never have regeneration. You will have no reverence or joyful fulfilment of responsibilities. Make sure you are properly intoxicated.

When I was growing up, one of our neighbours was a lawyer. One summer, his office had some desperate filing needs. He hired my brother and I to fulfil this duty. We worked hours in the basement of his firm, sorting out files. We were fairly remunerated for this task.

One evening, there was a knock on our door. The lawyer neighbour was there, highly inebriated, insisting that he had not paid us sufficiently. He felt he must give us more money for the work we had performed. As my dad spoke to him, he eventually said, “My family is such a mess. Why is yours not?” My father had opportunity to share the gospel with him. There was no immediate fruit, but years later both him and his wife came to faith in Christ. However, in that moment, drunk with wine, he noticed something different about a family that was filled with the Spirit.

Solomon wrote, “By the fear of the LORD one departs from evil” (Proverbs 16:6)—including the evil self-centredness. Gazing on God in Christ will give you a whole new outlook in your marriage. Reverence for Christ empowers us to loosen our grip and to let go of our griping. Gazing into Christ’s eyes will help you to keep gazing into your spouse’s eyes! The gospel really does change everything!

When Paul wrote these words about submission and reverence, they were very counter-cultural. They remain very counter-cultural today. But they are the gospel truth. Such reverence produces humility—loving humility—selfless harmony, remarkable purity, and beautiful forgiveness. The gospel reconciles and redeems. And as it has the power to reconcile sinners to God, it has the power to reconcile spouses to each other.

But, again, note the order: A gospel-informing church flows into a gospel-informed marriage, which produces gospel informed children and parents. Therefore, keep the gospel central in home and church. Prioritise personal and family devotions. Pray together. Lovingly exhort one another. Read good literature. Remind yourself and your family daily of this truth. And in it all, be a meaningful member of a gospel-faithful church, for a meaningful marriage cannot be separated from meaningful church membership.

Conclusion

Let a Spirit-filled church inform your marriage, and let it impact your children. And then, in turn, let your marriage and your family inform and impact your church, to the glory of God.

AMEN