

## For Example: Spouse | Kirsten Anonby

Ephesians 5:21-33 | July 17, 2022

In our sermon series this summer we are exploring what it means to follow the example of Jesus in our relationships. Our grounding for the series is Ephesians, a letter where Paul helps us understand what it means to be **In Christ**. It's a letter where Paul makes it abundantly clear that to be a Christ follower is not an isolated, independent experience. No, it's a group thing. Paul helps us to see that to be a Jesus follower is to be radically transformed in how we love one another—how we live in community with each other – being **in Christ** shapes every relationship we have.

Ephesians gives us a picture of Jesus communities that are to be marked by **reconciliation, peace, and unity**. We are reconciled God – and to one another. Our communities are marked by peace, rather than division and conflict. And the Spirit seeks to bring unity, even among diverse people.

Over the next number of weeks we are moving from these broad themes to get more specific – looking at how this reconciliation, peace, and unity looks like in different types relationships. But as we do this deep dive we can't forget the groundwork that's been laid. We are first and foremost Jesus people – we are His – and so in every relationship we ask "what does it mean to be in Christ as a Parent? Child? Boss? Friend? Team-mate? Student? Today we are looking at what it means to be a Christian spouse.

As we enter into this topic I'm acutely aware of a two things:

**First:** Not everyone here is married. My husband David and I got married when we were 36, so I remember the days when I came to church looking for someone to sit with. And I know that many people here are on the other side of marriage and don't ever anticipate marrying again. Hopefully what I share today will speak enough about our common experience of what it means to be human to encourage and strengthen you today.

**Second:** I'm aware that in talking about marriage I'm walking into both private and vulnerable territory. Marriage can be an intensely beautiful place, but it can also be an intensely painful place. *"There is no hurt like the hurt that happens in the place where we love"* – Mike Mason tells us. I've found that to be true, and I'm sure many of you have too. Even in a healthy marriage there is pain. A struggling marriage can be one of the loneliest places on the earth, and the death of a marriage leaves wounds do not easily heal.

And yet, marriage in Christ is a profound gift that blesses and makes us more fully human. Historically we have often made marriage less than what God meant for it to be. Often it has been reduced to a financial or political tool. Today we have reduced it in a different way—we have idolized it as the cure for our loneliness and source of our happiness. And this idolization, ironically, makes it much less than the deep and rich gift it was meant to be.

When David and I were dating there was a book on marriage we never read because we ended up disagreeing about the title: Gary Thomas's Sacred Marriage. The title was fine – but the sub-title said *“What if God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make us Happy?”* – My rigorous, discipleship-oriented, campus pastor self was all for it, but after years of lonely bachelor-hood, David said “no way – I want to be happy.”

Thankfully, in marriage we've found that we were both right. Marriage has made us happy – but it has done so because it has called us to grow. It's given us the gift of companionship because it's pushed both of us to learn what kind of companion the other person needs. It's given us the space to be accepted with all of our brokenness and mess because it's taught us to extend grace – always – because otherwise we might wound the safe place our marriage is. Marriage has enriched both of us because it's made both of us people who are more able to give and receive love -- it's deepened our understanding of what love is. In the end, what we've found is that the holiness that grows in us through faithfully sticking with Christian marriage is the very thing that makes it precious. So much more mundane and practical, but at the same time so much deeper than what we see in a rom-com.

To be a Christian spouse is to step into the deep end of giving up our own will – but it's worth it, because it also pushes into the deep end of being known – and in this we discover more of what Jesus wants for us – we become more fully human.

### ***Contextualizing Ephesians 5:21-33***

People can read Ephesians 5 and think “what does Paul have against women?” At first glance it seems like all the power in marriage belongs to the man. And this text has often been used to argue this very point.

But if we are to engage in good biblical scholarship, we must do everything we can to understand what a text would have meant to the audience it was written to. Only after we understand what it meant to them can we rightly determine how it applies to us.

### **First Century Roman Households:**

- Ruled by the Pater familias – the oldest male.
  - Owned all the property for the home
  - had authority over everyone in the household, including their wife, children, and slaves.
- Age Difference between spouses
  - Men often married around age 30
  - Women would generally marry at about age 12 or 13 – meaning that they moved directly from the rule of their father to the rule of their husband.
- Lack of Rights for Women
  - Wives were to run the household, but legally they were seen as minors for their whole lives.
  - The Pater Familias was seen as having sexual privileges and rights (often extending beyond their wife).
  - There were very few unmarried women. A woman who tried to move beyond the subservient position given her would have been seen as a threat to Roman society.

## **Ephesians 5:21-33 from the perspective of the First Century**

- A woman in the first century listening to the book of Ephesians would have been surprised to have been addressed at all. Many texts before (and after) this only would have addressed the man.
- And he addresses them FIRST. There are 3 pairings in Ephesians – wives/husbands, children/parents, and slaves/masters. Paul in each of these addresses the person with less power first – but in the writing of the day the person of greater importance would always have been addressed first. Paul is subverting the societal order.
- Paul does not tell women to obey their husbands, which they would have expected. Josephus, a Jewish contemporary to Paul – wrote that a wife was inferior to her husband in all things. Josephus calls the wife to obey, and calls for the husband to not abuse his wife.
- Paul is the master of the run-on sentence – so it bears mentioning here that verses 18-23 are all one long sentence. And the main verb is back in verse 18 – to be filled with the Spirit – which leads to speaking to one another with Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, giving thanks, and being submissive to one another in the name of Jesus. In verse 22, when women are called to submit – the word submit is implied but dependent on the word submit in verse 21. So the first and most dominant call was for all people to submit to one another, including husbands.
- Maybe even more radical is the call for husbands to agape (to love) their wives – a self- giving love that is modelled after Jesus' sacrifice for us. This kind of call would have seemed emasculating, because the Greco-Roman picture of masculinity didn't allow for any kind subservience or submission. The manly man taking out the garbage and changing diapers wasn't really a thing in the Greco-Roman world.

## **So, what do I think is going on here?**

- Paul has a tendency to work within the systems of his society and trust the Gospel to change that society. A great example of this is in Paul's letter to Philemon. Philemon was a believer who owned slaves. Onesimus, one of his slaves, ran away, and Paul met him and introduced him to Jesus in prison. Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon with a letter – and in the letter Paul pleads with Philemon to treat Onesimus as a brother in Christ – to treat him as a person. Paul does not rant on about the evils of slavery, but instead points Philemon to what he knows as a Christian – that Onesimus is a brother that Jesus died for – made in the image of God—loved by God. Paul says about Onesimus: *Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord. So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. – Philemon 15-17*
- It's this kind of understanding of what it means to be human that eradicated slavery.
- Similarly, it's the kind of thinking that we read about in Ephesians 5 that has gradually changed our understanding of marriage. Paul is calling the husband – who has all the power – to see their wife as a person in their own right – beloved by God – a person with their own preferences and ideas, a person to be loved -- a person to be served.
- I would argue that the point of Ephesians 5 is less about who is meant to have the power in a marital relationship – and more about what you do when you have power in the marriage.

- Because most of Paul's instructions about marriage are to husbands, who had the agency and power in the relationship. And the instruction in this passage is clear – when you have power in marriage – you are called to follow in the steps of Jesus -- you are called to lay that power down.
- I am not saying that men and women do not have different roles in marriage. Men and women reflect the image of God differently, and the dance of marriage is all about that difference. Our culture wants to eradicate differences between men and women – but the Bible celebrates these differences – male and female together reveal the image of God.
- But we have to recognize that the thrust of Ephesians 5 to its original hearers was not to subject women, but to raise them up. It was not to re-enforce the imbalanced power dynamics of marriage in the first century – but to make marriage about the laying down of power for the sake of the other.

### **Oneness:**

- The radical direction of Christian marriage is towards becoming One with your spouse.
- Paul quotes Genesis 2 when he says: *"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh."*<sup>[c]</sup>
- This is not just referring to sexual intimacy. It's referring to the entire relationship.
- Paul does a good job of describing what this means, starting in Verse 28: *In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church— for we are members of his body. Ephesians 5:28-30*
- Now, if you have all the power in a marital relationship and the whole thing is oriented around you – if, like the head of the household in Roman times, your way wins all the time and your spouse is only there to serve you – then you can hurt your spouse without realizing that you're hurting yourself.
- But if you have opened up the deep places of your heart to your spouse, you learn pretty quickly that to bless your spouse is to bless yourself, and that to hurt your spouse wounds both of you, because you're one.
- And yet we spouses still end up hurting each other– as our broken, sinful selves rub up against each other.
- Oneness of marriage is not meant to be a place of false peace, but it's meant to be a place where each person is allowed to be their full self – to bring their full self to the table. Which means that marriage is full of feisty disagreements, and many moments where, as Proverbs 27 puts it, "as iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another."
- In order for this oneness to actually work, something has to die. And Mike Mason, who is probably my favorite author writing on marriage – suggests that it is either our capacity to love or our ego: He says *"There is an important difference . . . between the marriages that last and are good, and the ones that either break up or drag on in an unresolved tension and neurosis. Both must endure ruin, but the difference lies in the place in which this ruin is experienced. For in those who run away from the intense fire of marriage, the ruin happens in the place in them which is love, and this place, this glorious and mysterious and delicate capacity in them, really does receive a terrible wound, which is sometimes enough to impair it for life. But in the case of those who*

*hang on to love and who see it through to its mortal finish, the ruin that occurs, the internal debacle, is not in the place of love, (although it may often seem to be happening there), but rather in the place, in the palace of the ego. And that makes all the difference in the world. It is one thing to wreck the ego. But it is quite another, and indeed the very opposite, to make shipwreck of the soul."*

### **Mutual Submission**

- There is a lot of nitty gritty in marriage, and the only way to walk through it with someone else is through letting go of our selfishness and our rights. The only way to walk through it is, in fact, to submit to one another.
- Submission to one another is not about always saying yes to the other person. If we are bringing our full selves into marriage we have to bring our desires and needs, our ideas, our hopes.
- But submission is about choosing, day in and day out, to look out for the needs of the person we have married and to seek to meet them—to voluntarily lay down our own desires, our comfort, for the sake of serving the other.
- And submission is about rejecting any impulse to control, to manipulate, and to subject the other.
- Power dynamics have no place in marriage—they rip at the very fiber of what marriage is – because they belittle the humanity of the other person. The oneness of marriage only thrives if each person is doing everything they can to lay down their rights. "The first will be last" Jesus tells his disciples in Matthew 20.
- That's ultimately why I think Paul's goal is not to establish who has the power in a marital relationship, because in a healthy marriage each person casts down their crown in service to the other. Each person lays down their life for the good of their spouse. *Husbands, love your wives, Paul says, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy. Ephesians 5:25-26*
- Love your spouse as you have been loved by Jesus – who gave everything to bless you and to help you to become more holy, more fully human, more fully who you were meant to be.
- Sometimes I look at my spouse and I remember (sometimes with a pang of guilt if I've been feeling angry or resentful) that this is a person that Jesus loves. This is a person that is incalculably precious to Jesus--- it always challenges me – reminds me to handle him with care. But I am so often unable to do that on my own strength. And that's why I'm so grateful for the first verb, all the way back in verse 18. Be filled with the Spirit.

### **Being Filled with the Spirit**

- When I was prepping for this talk I asked a number of people I know who have experienced marriage both as a Christian and as a non-christian what difference Jesus made in marriage. They shared some wonderful answers, but a theme that I heard across the board was a profound gratitude for God's help in marriage. To quote my friend Susan: "it wasn't just up to us anymore." Almost everyone expressed a profound gratitude for the Spirit's help for two reasons:
  - they didn't have to be everything that their spouse needed anymore. Instead they could pray for their spouse and encourage them as they received strength from Jesus.

- And they didn't have to rely on their own capacity to love, the Holy Spirit was there to help them to love their spouse.
- It made me think about what it would be like to try to do this gig on my own – I'm so grateful that I don't have to. We were never, after all, meant to do it on our own. Only by being filled with the Spirit am I able to lay down my will and my ego. It's the Spirit softens my heart and compels me to lay down my anger after a fight. And it's the Spirit that gives me love for my spouse when my own well has run dry. It's the Spirit that gives me eyes to see again and again who my spouse is – not who He is in relationship to me – but who He is in his own right – a person with his own story – a person worthy of love.
- What the Spirit is doing through every healthy marriage is a Kingdom thing that is bigger than the husband and wife. As the husband and wife rely on the Spirit to love one another as Jesus loved them, a household is built that is characterized by reconciliation, peace, and unity. These households can become places of support and blessing for neighbours, for friends, for family, for children, for those who are lonely or alone.

I want to end by saying that, although being a spouse is a particularly intense place of intimacy and submission, the call to submit to one another is for everyone. The road towards Christian maturity calls each of us towards intimacy with others, towards laying down our rights, and towards truly seeing and serving those around us. As we travel this road, whether it's in marriage or in other relationships we become more fully human, more able to love, and more able to be loved. This is the invitation of the Spirit, this is the road to life.

#### ***Discussion Questions:***

- What Christian marriages have you seen that you would like to emulate? Describe what you love about these relationships.
- Ephesians 5:21-33 is a passage with history for many people. What teaching have you heard on this text in the past, or, if it's brand new, what are your first impressions?
- Look back over Ephesians 4:17 – 5:20, the section directly proceeding our text for today. What do you read here that would be helpful counsel for being a Christian spouse?
- What do you think it means to love your spouse as you love your own body?
- Kirsten said that power dynamics have no place in marriage. Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
- How do you leave space in your life to be filled with the Spirit? What does that look like for you? How does the Spirit help you in your marriage/relationships?
- Is there any particular way that you sense Jesus calling you to respond?

#### ***Book Recommendation:***

*The Mystery of Marriage*, by Mike Mason