**The Spirit-filled wife**

Text: Ephesians 5:22-24

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Luke 22:39-46; Ephesians 5:15-33

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 96, 483, 271, ‘All I have is Christ’, 184

**Series:** Ephesians (#22)

**Theme:** In writing to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul applies the Spirit-filled mutual submission of new creations in Christ to the different roles of wives and husbands in Christian marriage, beginning in verses 22-24 with wives.

**Proposition:** Wives, the Holy Spirit’s influence in your life enables you to willingly submit to your own husband, as to the Lord.

**Introduction**

We know that a wedding is an occasion full of joy. One man and one woman willingly vow to be committed to one another ‘*for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part*’. Last week we saw the elation of the gathered multitude around the throne of God as they witness the wedding of Christ, the Heavenly Bridegroom and the church, His bride. “*Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready*” (Rev 19:7).

This perfect heavenly joy is reflected in the love between a husband and wife on their wedding day and the happiness they experience together. For the bridegroom, his bride is the only woman for him, in the words of Song of Solomon 2:2 “*As a lily among brambles, so is my love among the young women*”. For the bride, she mirrors the bridegroom’s love for her: “*As an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my beloved among the young men. With great delight I sat in his shadow, and his fruit was sweet to my taste, He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love*” (S of S 2:3-4). A man and a woman, a groom and his bride, are joined together with great delight in marriage and become ‘one flesh’.

But imagine this: The husband handcuffs his wife, wrestles her to the ground and then kneels on her neck, whilst she, begging for her life, repeatedly says “I can’t breathe’. This kind of awful, violent and domineering abuse is what the word ‘submission’ brings to mind for many: forced submission of people of one race by another and forced submission of women by men.

Surely such forced subjection of one person for another is the very opposite of true love? Yet our text clearly speaks of the submission of a wife to her own husband in the context of a loving marriage. How can we rightly understand this?

Many people today would say that literal interpretation of Bible passages like Ephesians 5:22-33 is both wrong and very dangerous because, well, we know, don’t we?, that the Apostle Paul was something of a misogynist – a person who dislikes, despises and/or is strongly prejudiced against women. Some may concede that the distinct and separate gender roles described in Ephesians 5 might have been the cultural norm back in Bible times, but would say that these roles are most certainly completely outdated in the 21st century. We’ve moved on from that haven’t we?

But even more than this, many would say, the submission of women is deeply damaging to their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Women who have for too long been abused by men and taken advantage of by males who have had the all the privileges of power, financial control, and physical strength. Many might say of this occasion now, “what right does a male preacher have to tell the wives in a congregation how to live their lives in their own marriages, especially when the sermon is all about submission to other males”?

This sermon focusses mostly on the role of a Christian woman in a marriage as a Holy Spirit-filled wife, who is a new creation in Christ and follows on from the call to believers to live life wisely (Eph 5:15). My intention is that the next sermon in this series will focus mostly on the role of a Christian man in a marriage as a Holy Spirit-filled husband. It’s important that you hear both messages. Audio recordings of both will be put up on our website so that if you miss one, you can still listen to both. A balanced understanding of the roles of husbands and wives is very important. So let’s begin with the first of two points:

1. **The wise church submits to Christ**

Submission doesn’t sound like very attractive, does it? A dictionary definition of submission is ‘*to accept or yield to a superior force, authority or will of another person*’. On the 25th May 2020, George Floyd yielded to the superior power and authority of Minneapolis Police officer Derek Chauvin because he was forced to do so. On 15th May 1940, the Netherlands surrendered to the superior military power of Nazi Germany. In 63BC, Jerusalem and Judea submitted to the army of Roman general Pompey. As a result, they became subject to foreign rule. Neither George Floyd, the Dutch in WW2, nor Israel wanted to yield to the will of a superior authority; they were all forced to. What is the motivation of those who are forced to submit? **Fear**.

In verse 24 the Apostle Paul writes that ‘*the church submits to Christ*’. In other words, the church accepts and yields to the authority and will of her Saviour. How then does Christ **enforce** this submission to His authority? Does He punish believers who disobey His Word so that they would submit to His superior force? Does He appoint elders to dominate local church congregations, lording it over those He has entrusted to their care (ref. 1 Peter 5:3)? Does He discipline members of His church so that they would be compelled to come back under His enforced submission?

The answer to all these questions is absolutely not! It is true that when we disobey the Word of Christ, we are likely to suffer pain and distress as a result of our sins. This ‘law of consequences’ is summed up this way in Galatians 6:7 “*whatever one sows, that will he also reap*’. However, Christ does not punish us, brothers and sisters, for our sins, but forgives them, having taken our place under the wrath of God at the cross.

Elders are not ordained in the church to enforce submission to the Word of God, but as faithful shepherds, to call us to willing repentance if and when we fall into sin. This is for our own good. Church discipline is not the enforcing of submission to Christ, but is the painful process of calling a wayward sinner to willingly come and find forgiveness, restoration, peace and joy in the person of Christ the Saviour and within the fellowship of His body, the church.

I hope that you can clearly see that the church **willingly** submits to Christ. From our text, submission must be willing, or it is **not** submission in the Biblical meaning of this key word. This willing submission is expressed through the choices each and every believer continually makes to place themselves under the rule of Christ. **Why** then does the church willingly submit to Christ? The answer is there in verse 25: “*Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her*’. The motivation for willing submission is not fear, but **love**!

Love for the One who loved the church before she loved Him. Jesus said: “*Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends*” (John 15:13). He then yielded Himself up for the church: dying for her. He was never forced to give his life as a ransom for many (Matt 20:28), but laid down His life of His own accord (John 10:18).

We know that Jesus has the absolutely superior power to control anybody and anything in this world. For example, He demonstrated His authority over the Creation when He stilled a violent storm on the sea of Galilee by rebuking the wind and water (Mark 4:35-41). He showed His power over sickness and death when He healed people and brought back to life the dead (e.g. John 11:43). Yet, despite His own superior authority, He willingly submitted Himself to the will of His Heavenly Father who is ‘*the same in substance, equal in power and glory*’ (to quote Westminster Shorter Catechism A6).

As we saw last Sunday evening when we considered the trial which Jesus underwent in the garden of Gethsemane, He went to the cross willingly having prayed: "*Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done*" (Luke 22:42). Christ’s submission to the will of His Father was intensely difficult and painful in Gethsemane. In His humanity He agonised over the decision to yield to His Father’s will. Yet He showed that it is possible for a person to submit themselves to another who is of the same status as them (the same in substance, equal in power and glory), but whose role is different. God the Father is the One who sent His only begotten Son (John 3:16), whereas God the Son is the One who died in the place of many.

As a result of Christ’s willing obedience to His Father’s will, God has put all things in subjection {submission} under His feet’ (1 Cor 15:27, yet Christ remains in submission {subject} to His Father. Paul expresses it this way to the Corinthians (1 Cor 11:3) ‘*the head of Christ is God*’ (see also 1 Cor 15:28) The Greek word translated ‘head’ here is being used figuratively/metaphorically, as it is in our text where we read that *‘the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church*’ (Eph 5:23). The ‘head’ here is a person who has higher authority over another (e.g. Judges 11:11; 2 Sam 22:44; 1 Cor 11:3; Eph 1:22; 4:15; 5:23; Col 1:18; 2:10).

God the Father has authority over God the Son who willingly submits to His commands: the ‘head’ of Christ is God. This is a hierarchy of function, not of being. As we’ve already seen, the Son is not less than the Father, but their roles are different. The willing attitude of Christ to submit is revealed throughout the Bible, but perhaps most clearly in Philippians 2:6-8: “*though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross*”.

Christ calls His church, out of love for Him, to willingly submit to His Word; to follow Him in His pattern of willing submission. He says “*If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever*” (John 14:15-16). The Holy Spirit helps the church to willingly submit to Jesus her Lord by obeying His Word.

Just like you direct your outward body parts like your mouth, hands and feet using your mind which is located within your head, so, Christ, who is the Head of the church, directs the body parts of His church through His Word accompanied by His Spirit. Just like your head is securely attached to your body, so likewise Christ is securely attached to His body, the church. He will not let her go; He is totally committed to her (e.g. John 10:28).

As individual believers more and more come under the influence of the Holy Spirit, we submit more and more to Christ as Lord. In response to this sermon, I plan for us to sing ‘All I have is Christ’, the third verse goes this way:

*Now, Lord, I would be Yours alone*

*And live so all might see
The strength to follow Your commands
Could never come from me
O Father, use my ransomed life
In any way You choose.*

The wise church willingly submits to Christ in everything; ‘In any way the Lord chooses’. The wise believer willingly submits to Christ in everything: ‘In any way the Lord chooses’. Brothers and sisters, let us all ‘*Look carefully then how {we} walk, not as unwise but as wise*’ (Eph 5:15). Those who are part of the body of Christ are called to ‘*be filled with the Spirit*’, living lives of praise, thanksgiving and willingly ‘*submit to one another* *out of reverence for Christ*’ (Eph 5:21).

The section of Paul’s letter following from chapter 5 verse 21 then reveals what this mutual submission looks like in marriage, in the family and in the workplace. Today, we’re focussing mainly on the wife’s role in a Christian marriage, which brings us to our second point:

1. **The wise wife submits to her husband**

The Apostle Paul writes in verse 22 “*Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord*”.; then in verse 24 “*Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands*”. We’ve just seen that the wise church submits to Christ, this is the pattern for the wise wife to follow. It’s important to know that Paul did **not** view women as being of a lower status than men. We can see this from what he wrote to the Galatians: “*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*” (3.28).

The Word of God affirms the fundamental equality of men and women; both genders being created in the image of God (Gen 1:27). This basic parity – sameness of personhood – between men and women has been damaged and corrupted as a result of the Fall, resulting in much exploitation of women by men which sadly continues today in many homes, workplaces and in other settings.

With regard to the fundamental equality of men and women, we see how the gospel of Christ recovers this when we recognise how prominent women, as well as men, were in the earthly ministry of Jesus. However, there were no women amongst the twelve disciples; the Biblical qualifications for elders and deacons are only applied to men (1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9); and commissioned preachers in Scripture are always male. Why is this?

It is not so much because women lack the fundamental capabilities for the roles in Scripture assigned to men, but that God’s revealed will for human beings makes basic distinctions between the functions of men and women. After God had created man and before He had made women He said: "*It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him*" (Gen 2:18). God did not create woman to be less than man, but **different** in her role, just as God the Son is not less than God the Father, but is different in His role.

Did you know that the word ‘submit’ in verse 22 is missing from the earlier Greek manuscripts? Yet the word ‘submit’ is there in all mainstream Bible versions. Perhaps this is some conspiracy of male Bible translators? No, it’s not that. In the Greek, verse 22 literally reads like this: “*Wives to your own husbands, as to the Lord*’. The verb ‘to submit’ is carried over from verse 21 where mutual submission is one of the characteristics of those who are filled with the Spirit.

However, the Bible does not teach an equally reciprocal submission between a wife and her husband, parents and their children, or employers and their employees. In each of these realms of human life there are authority structures which modify the general principle of mutual submission. The very phrase ‘authority structure’ does not sit well with many people, especially in the 21st century post-modern western world. Some Christians interpret this passage in Ephesians to teach ‘egalitarianism’; which is the belief that all people are created equal and should be treated equally by having equal roles and equal opportunities.

However, this view is does not fit with the different roles which are assigned to men and women by God in His Word. Rather than teaching ‘egalitarianism’ the Bible teaches what has been called ‘complementarianism’. This term comes from the word ‘complement’ which means to complete, enhance or make something better.

A marriage is enhanced when the husband takes the initiative and functions as a loving leader of his wife and family. However, the call on husbands to be leaders is not grounded in their ability, nor in their particular culture or background, but in the order in which God chose to create, firstly man and then woman, and the roles He has assigned to each distinct gender in marriage. A husband is called to be wise and to take the initiative in his marriage: a role which is grounded in the creation order (1 Cor 11:8-9; see also 1 Tim 2:13).

A wife is likewise called to be wise and to willingly submit to her own husband as a pattern in their marriage relationship. However, the phrase ‘in everything’ in verse 24 does not mean that a wife is called to be submissive to her husband in absolutely every situation and circumstance. The words in verse 22 ‘as to the Lord’ serve to qualify this submission.

Firstly, as we’ve already seen, just as the church is called to **willing** submission to the Lord, so the wife is called to submit ‘*as to the Lord*’. She is called to submit willingly. As we’ve seen, if it is not willing, it is not Biblical submission.

Secondly, just as the submission of the church to Christ is defined by the Word of God, so the wife is called to submit to her husband in all things lawful. If he acts in ways which are contrary to God’s law, she is not called to submit to him. Here are a few examples:

* If a wife is being assaulted by her husband either physically or verbally, she is not called to endure such treatment. Leaving the home for a time may be the wisest option in such circumstances.
* If a husband is an excessive drinker, a wife may choose to respond with words like these (taken from the ‘boundaries’ book by Cloud and Townsend) “*You may choose to not deal with your drinking if you want. But I will not continue to expose myself and the children to this chaos. The next time you are drunk, we will go to the Wilsons’ for the night and we will tell them why we are there. Your drinking is your choice. What I will put up with is mine*”.
* If the wife is being asked by her husband to do something which God’s will prohibits (e.g. lying, stealing) then she is not called to submit to his leadership in this.

Some wives find being in submission to their own husbands, as to the Lord very difficult. There can be a number of reasons for this within a Christian marriage, including:

* A wife is not willing to place herself under the authority of her husband.
* Her husband does not demonstrate the kind of faithful, sacrificial love that Christ has for his church.
* A wife has been hurt by her husband so many times that she is fearful of placing herself under his influence again.
* Her husband is not willing to lead his wife in the home, in the ways of the Lord.
* A wife is not confident that the Lord will bless her if she willingly submits to her husband out of love for Christ.
* A husband does not want his wife to submit to him, as to the Lord, but wants to have an equal and identical role to her in their marriage.

I could continue to give examples of difficulties within Christian marriages, but my point here is to show you that I know as a Pastor, and as a husband, that submission to the will of a husband is difficult at times for a wife. The Word of God recognises this fallen reality as we see in 1 Peter 3:1-2 “*wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives when they see your respectful and pure conduct*”. I know of a godly Christian wife who has suffered for most of her life in a marriage with a very troublesome man who has caused her much sorrow. She has remained and trusted in the Lord to sustain her through her life. Her marriage has been difficult, but nonetheless blessed.

Sometimes a Christian wife may be married to an unbeliever. Of this situation the Scriptures say: “*If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy*” (1 Cor 7:13-14). Now this text is not saying that a believing wife can save her husband. Christ alone is the Saviour of all who believe in Him! However, a believing wife, filled with the Holy-Spirit has a sanctifying effect on her husband and on her children. This godly influence is enhanced when she willingly submits to her husband, as unto the Lord.

As I’ve touched on earlier, there are circumstances when a wise wife will leave her husband for a period of separation, in order for him to realise his own need to change, although this should never be done by her in a manipulative way. There are also circumstances when a wife may Biblically divorce her husband. The Westminster Confession of Faith (24:5-6), based on Scripture, identifies adultery and wilful desertion.

When a wife willingly submits to her husband, as unto the Lord, even though her husband is never going to be a perfectly loving leader as Christ is, she complements her husband and enhances their marriage to become more like the relationship between Christ and His church. Ladies, submission to an ungodly husband who may be uncaring and irresponsible is very difficult. However, married sisters, a heart of willing submission to your husband is commendable in the sight of the Lord.

The Bible describes a submissive wife as having ‘*the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious*’ (1 Peter 3:4). Wives, would your own husbands describe you as having a ‘*gentle and quiet spirit*’ with a heart that willingly submits out of love, first and foremost, for the Lord? Much more importantly, do you think that the Lord sees that you have ‘*gentle and quiet spirit*’ with a heart that willingly submits out of love, first and foremost, for Him?

Husbands, let us be careful not to put stumbling blocks in our marriages which make it difficult for our wives to obey the Lord in this. The joy of willingly submitting to her husband, as to the Lord, is greatly enhanced when we married men willingly take up our role as Christlike leaders in our homes, giving up our own interests for the wife which the Lord has given to us to love. More about this next time as we focus on the Spirit-filled husband!

Biblical submission is not easy, but it is wise, and it is good and it honours the Lord. Married sisters here today, ‘*submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord*’ as a Spirit-filled wife this is God’s revealed will for you.

AMEN.