**The Spirit-filled husband**

Text: Ephesians 5:25-30

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**Scriptures:** Ephesians 5:15-33

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 181, 432, 119:41-48, 216, 33

**Series:** Ephesians (#23)

**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, continuing in verses 25-30 with husbands.

**Proposition:** Husbands, the Holy Spirit’s influence in your life enables you to love your wife as Christ loved the church.

**Introduction**

Some of the challenges of being a man in the 21st century are summarised in this article by blogger Dustin Wax: ‘*Masculinity has been constructed over the last century almost entirely around the idea of men as providers and protectors, and frankly, women don’t need that any more. Women are waiting longer to get married, and are more often the initiators of divorce – with their own incomes, they can afford to be pickier about their spouses, both going into marriage and when deciding whether to continue their relationships’.*

*‘This has all happened in the context of larger social changes that have eliminated a great many jobs that were traditionally the sole province of men – the manufacturing and heavy labour jobs that relied on a powerful physique and a kind of working class swagger, most of which have been either automated or off-shored. At the same time, a new knowledge economy has sprung up, privileging communication, creativity, and self-motivation over brawn and emotional control. While there’s no inherent reason why women should do better in these emerging businesses than men, the fact is that men have largely given over the field while wasting time twiddling our thumbs over the loss of jobs where “men could be men*”’.

If we are to under what it is Biblically to be a husband in a Christian marriage, we must begin with Christ, **not** with our 21st century gender-fluid technological culture, because the Lord Himself is the pattern that all men who are Holy Spirit-filled faithful husbands must follow, not the ever-changing ideas of the world. The fact that Christ alone is the pattern for Christian married men is clear from verse 25 “*husbands love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her*”. Our two points this morning flow from this modelling of the husband’s role after the person and work of Christ:

* Firstly, Christ, the Head, loves His body, the church
* Secondly, the wise husband loves his wife, as himself
1. **Christ,** **the Head, loves His body, the church**

What is love? Various answers have been given to the question. Some are more helpful than others, here are the best answers: “*Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends*”. (1 Cor 13:4-8) Jesus said, “*Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends*” (John 15:13).

The word translated ‘love’ in 1 Cor 13, John 15.13 and in our text is the Greek word ‘agape’. This ‘agape’ love is unconditional, not sentimental. It is intentional, not aimlessly blind. It is decisive, not impulsive. It is sacrificial not demanding or selfish. Biblical agape love is the love of choice, the love of serving with humility, the highest kind of love, the noblest kind of devotion, the love of the will under the influence of the Holy Spirit. At its root, it is not motivated by superficial appearance, emotional attraction, or sentimental relationship.

This love chooses as an act of self-sacrifice to serve the person who is loved. Agape love may involve emotion, but always involves action. This is true love that gives without restraint. It is ‘prodigal’, in the sense of being extravagant, lavish, unstinting, unsparing and generous. It is an ‘*unconquerable benevolence*’, as the Scottish minister and theological professor William Barclay once said; “for *nothing the other person can do will make us seek anything but their highest good and to never feel bitterness or desire for revenge. Though the one loved even injure us and insult us, agape love will never feel anything but kindness towards him (or her). Agape love gives and gives and gives*”.

In Scripture this is the love that God is Himself ([1 John 4:8](https://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/1%20John%204.8),[16](https://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/1Jn%204.16%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)), that God shows to others ([John 3:16](https://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/John%203.16), [1 John 4:9](https://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/1%20John%204.9)) and that God enables His children to have through the influence of His Holy Spirit. Agape is not a human affection, but a divine love. Agape love is the greatest virtue in the Christian life (1 Cor 13:13). It is ‘not an easy thing to acquire or a light thing to exercise’. John McArthur has helpfully commented that "*Agape love centres on the needs and welfare of the one loved and will pay whatever personal price is necessary to meet those needs and foster that welfare*."

It is not surprising that ancient Greek literature throws little light on the distinctive New Testament meaning of agape love. Why? Because this love is other than worldly, it is the heavenly love of God. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul writes: *“Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.* True, agape, love is seen most clearly, most extensively, most painfully at the cross where Jesus willingly laid down His life for His friends. Why did Jesus die? Because “*Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her”.* (It is with this highest Christian virtue of intentional, unconditional sacrificial agape love, that a husband is to love his one wife).

Theologically, Christ’s loving sacrifice at Calvary enables the justification of sinners like you and me. Justification is, in the words of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, (A33) “*an act of God’s free grace in which he pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in his sight for the sake of the righteousness of Christ alone, which is credited to us and received by faith alone*”.

Do you know the love of Christ? If you do, then you will love Him as your Saviour and obey Him as your gentle humble Lord (1 John 4:19). Brothers and sisters, we are made right before God only because of God’s love; the love of Christ for His church. His love is extravagant, extensive generous, prodigal. This love did not cease at the cross. Having saved the church He then prepares her for the fullness of glory yet to come.

Imagine a bride cast into the open field as an abandoned baby, unloved, unwanted, unclean, wallowing in her own blood and destined for death. That is the vivid and offensive image of Old Testament Israel which the Lord revealed through His prophet Ezekiel (chapter 16). But, because of His great agape love, the Lord covered the nakedness of His ugly bride, washed her, anointed her with oil, clothed her in fine garments and she became very beautiful. In this picture of agape love, the Lord’s saving of the life of His bride mirrors her justification and his cleansing and beautification of her reflects her sanctification.

Verse 26 of our text is not so easy to understand (ref. 2 Peter 3:16), as Paul writes about the reason for Christ’s sacrificial love for His church at the cross: *“that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word”.* The Greek word translated ‘sanctify’ here is in a tense (aorist) which generally means a one-off action. It is also true that a number of times in the New Testament sanctification is spoken of as an act accomplished in the past as much as justification is once and for always in Christ ( e.g. 1 Cor 1:2; 6:11, 2 Tim 2:21; Heb 10:29.

An error arose in the early New Testament church which was based in part on Ephesians 5:26 (also Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16; Gal 3:27; 1 Pet 3:21) by joining the idea of a one-off sanctification with ‘the washing of water’. This heresy was then perpetuated by the Roman Catholic church resulting in much financial gain and increased worldly power for that institution. This false teaching is called ‘baptismal regeneration’. This is the idea that the sacrament of water baptism is effective in imparting grace to the person who is baptised so that they are regenerated, being saved as a result of this ‘washing of water’. It’s a very attractive concept, especially for parents who desire to make sure that their children are saved. Who would not want to be able to secure the salvation of those they love just by applying some water to them in baptism?

However, what we would humanly like and what the Lord reveals in His Word can be two different things. So let’s look closely at verse 26, which as we’ve said is not an easy verse to understand rightly, however, comprehension is far from impossible.

**Firstly**, look at the following verse (27) which explains how the word ‘sanctify’ is used by identifying the aim: “*so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish*”. The goal of sanctification is perfection, for the church to be ‘holy and without blemish’. This end result has **not yet** been reached, brothers and sisters, we, as part of the church are still a somewhat spiritually ugly bride, having many imperfections, ‘spots’ and ‘wrinkles’. The Protestant Reformation recovered the Biblical meaning of this process of becoming more holy. This is helpfully summarised in the Westminster Shorter Catechism answer 35: “*Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace by which we are renewed throughout in the image of God and are enabled more and more to die to sin and live to righteousness*”.

**Secondly**, notice that the ‘washing with water’ is ‘with the word’. The cleansing work of Christ in the life of the saved, justified, regenerated believer is **not** performed with physical water but with the Word. The water of baptism is a sign and seal which Christ gives as sins are washed away and as the pollution of ongoing sin in a person’s life is progressively removed. It is the Word of God, when accompanied by the Holy Spirit which is the ‘means of grace’ by which spiritual growth in Christ’s bride takes place.

So now we can see how Christ, the Head, loves His body, the church: Firstly, His agape love is **sacrificial and redemptive**: He gave Himself up for His bride, the church; He saves His people from their sins (Matthew 1:21); He gave His life as a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28). Secondly, His agape love is **transformational**: He works through the power of His Word applied to the human heart by the sanctifying Holy Spirit to bring about change: growth in godliness, ongoing development of Christlikeness. It has been said that ‘*true love helps another person to become the best version of themselves*’. There is much truth in that statement. This is what Christ does for those He loves. He sanctifies them through His Word.

In Christ, brothers and sisters we progressively become the ‘very best version of ourselves’. We do not lose our individual personalities, but we are changed. This is also what a Spirit-filled husband helps his wife become: the very best version of herself in Christ, which brings us to our second point.

1. **The wise husband loves his wife, as himself**

The role of the husband in marriage is described in verse 23 in these words: *‘the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church*’ (Eph 5:23). As we saw in the last sermon in this series, the Greek word translated ‘head’ here is being used figuratively (or we could say ‘metaphorically’), as a figure of speech. 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 (1 Cor 11:3). This is a hierarchy of function, not of being. Christ, God the Son is not less than God the Father. Together with God the Holy Spirit, they are all three ‘*the same in substance, equal in power and glory*’ (Westminster Shorter Catechism A6).

As the ‘head’ of the home, a husband is the ‘leader’ of his own wife. A key part of good leadership is setting a good example in attitude, speech and behaviour. We see this principle with elders in the church who are to shepherd God’s people ‘*not domineering over those in (their charge), but being examples to the flock*’ (1 Peter 5:3).

As people like you and me grow up to become adults we generally find that we adopt some, perhaps even many, of the patterns and habits of our parents. For example men can tend to the type of husband their own father was to their mother. Men, this can be helpful if you were blessed with a godly human father, but conversely, very unhelpful if you were not.

Notice that the Scriptures do not call men, as husbands, to pattern themselves after their parents, instead the model for their lives is to be the Lord Jesus; as Paul writes in verse 25: *“Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church”.* Having described the saving and sanctifying work of Christ, our text says: *“In the same way husbands should love their 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 Christ does the church, because we are members of his body” (v28-30).*

The agape verb translated ‘love’ is in the continuous present tense here: meaning that the ongoing pattern for a husband is to love his own wife without interruption. This is reflected in the words of the traditional marriage vows: ‘*for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part*’. The abiding love of a husband for his own wife is to be ‘as’, ‘in the same way’ that Christ loves His body, the church.

This clearly does not mean that the husband is called to do what only Christ can do; to be a sacrificial substitute on behalf of God’s people and to save his own wife from her sins. Neither does this mean that a husband is called to sanctify is wife as Christ does His bride through the ministry of the Word and Spirit. However, the work of Christ is to be the **pattern** for the loving work of a husband towards his wife.

**Just as** Christ was willing to ‘*take on the form of a servant’ in order to ‘look… to the interests of others*’ (Phi 2:4,7), **s**o a husband is to serve his wife by looking after her interests.

 **Just as** Christ cares for His body, the church, **so** a husband is to ‘*nourish and cherish*’ his own wife, who is joined to him in marriage. She is very much a part of him and he of her as ‘*the two become one flesh*’ (Eph 5:31). The Greek word translated ‘nourishes’ means to ‘promote the growth of’ by providing what is needed for body and soul. The Greek word translated ‘cherishes’ originally meant to keep warm, like a brooding hen does for her eggs and then her hatched chicks. This word conveys the idea of tender provision and protection with love and care. Putting all this together, the husband is to be a loving leader of his own wife, looking after her interests and nourishing her body and soul so that she can grow as he provides for her and protects her.

The Biblical principle is ‘prescriptive’. (A prescriptive approach to something involves telling people what they should do, rather than simply giving suggestions or describing what is done). However, our text does not give specific details as to how a husband loves, nourishes and cherishes his wife in every situation and circumstance. The Bible is not prescriptive about how different married couples work out the details of their respective Biblical roles. If I was to stand here and tell individual married men exactly how to lead their own wives in detail, then I would be giving details that the Scriptures do not reveal. However, I do want to be as helpful as I can be so here are some questions which are often asked about marriage:

* Should the husband be the primary ‘breadwinner’ – earning the bulk of the family income?
* What should a husband do if his wife refuses to follow his lead?
* What should a wife do if her husband does not really lead his family either spiritually or otherwise?

Let’s look at each of these practical questions in turn, remembering that the Scriptures are not prescriptive in all the details. Regarding the husband as the primary financial provider, the words of 1 Timothy 5:8 are helpful and relevant: “*if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever*”. This verse implies that a husband and father is expected to provide for his family, to know their needs and to plan how to care for them. However, some women do work, both today and in Bible times. For example, the wise wife in Proverbs 31:10-30 was an industrious woman who cared for her household and contributed to the household income through her businesses. We also know that husband and wife Aquila and Priscilla worked together as tentmakers (Acts 18:3). Today in New Zealand, wives who make more money than their husbands are not as uncommon as in the past. A working person deserves to be paid fairly for the effort they put into their labour, irrespective of gender (ref. 1 Tim 5:18). For those without children, both spouses typically work.

There may be exceptional circumstances where a husband is not earning financially. For example: if he is injured, disabled, or unable to find work, or studying, or preparing himself for another vocation. Diligent, consistent effort at any and every job, paid or unpaid, is God-glorifying (Col. 3:23). A man and a woman who puts everything into his and her work is to be commended, irrespective of which one earns more than the other. However, a problem arises when husbands let their wives carry the financial load while they give minimal effort. This is slothful, lazy, irresponsible and unbiblical behaviour (2 Thess 3:10). Being a biblical married man consists of spiritual leadership in the home, sacrificial service to your wife and children, and having an industrious work ethic.

Let’s look at the second question now: What should a husband do if his wife refuses to follow his lead? This is a difficult situation, but the Word of God gives direction. Irrespective of his wife’s attitude and behaviour, a Christian husband is called to love her unconditionally, not to cease leading and loving if, or when, she refuses to follow his lead. For a wide variety of reasons a wife may find submission to her husband very difficult, especially if she has not been blessed by seeing a good of example of this in her own mother’s willing submission and/or her father’s loving leadership as she grew up.

The Apostle Peter’s words are helpful, not only in this situation, but generally: “*husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honour to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered*” (1 Peter 3:7).

When a husband does not seek to understand his wife as they go through the many circumstances and challenges of life together, he may become embittered, resentful, exasperated and angry. Paul exhorted the married Colossian men this way “*Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them*” (Col 3:19). The Greek word translated here ‘harsh’ has the literal meaning of pointed, sharp, or the idea of making water bitter to the taste. A resentful, exasperated, angry husband can make a marriage bitter, but an understanding husband can bring sweetness to any marriage; even one where his wife struggles to submit to Him, as to the Lord.

Husbands, remember that the church herself has lacked in submission, respect and love for her Lord throughout history, yet Christ continues to love her, protect her, provide for her, and help her to become the best version of herself: holy and without blemish.

Here’s the third question again: What should a wife do if her husband does not really lead his family either spiritually or otherwise? Is the wife then free to stop submitting to him? No. As with her husband, the Lord’s call is not conditional on the behaviour or attitude of the other party. The Apostle Peter’s words are helpful here also: “*Likewise, 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*” (1 Peter 3:1-2).

Just as Christ’s Body, the church, is inseparably joined to Christ, the Head, So, the husband is in to be inseparably (‘till death do us part’) joined to his one wife. He is to love his wife as though she were part of his own body. Nourishing and cherishing her, leading, providing and protecting her, being used of the Lord so that she can become the ‘very best version of herself’ in Christ. Men, this is a high calling. Married men, we must look to Christ for our own lead as we willingly lead our own wives sacrificially, in an understanding way, helping the woman that the Lord has blessed us with to become more and more Christlike in her own character as we also grow in ours. This is the pattern which Christ has laid out for us with His life and which He enables us to follow as we are influenced by the Holy Spirit.

AMEN.