**The Mystical Union**

Text: Ephesians 5:31-33

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**Scriptures:** Genesis 2:18-25; Ephesians 5:15-33

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 63, 451, ‘O God beyond all praising’, 221, 180

**Series:** Ephesians (#24)

**Theme:** In concluding his explanation of the distinct roles of a husband and his wife in Christian marriage, the Apostle Paul writes about the great mystery of the union between Christ and His church which is reflected in the ‘one flesh’ relationship between a loving husband and his respectful wife.

**Proposition:** There is blessing in the mystery of the marriage relationship, but even greater blessing and mystery in our union with Christ.

**Introduction**

Have you ever heard an older married couple completing each other’s sentences? They seem to know exactly what the other person is going to say before the words are even formed in their spouses’ mouth. Is this due to some kind of mysterious telepathic capability? No, not exactly. It’s a result of getting to know another person very well over many years. It is a consequence of the intimacy of a union of two minds, two wills, two desires, two people. In a close marriage, the husband more and more understands how his wife thinks, what she likes, what she dreams of and what matters most to her. Likewise, a wife grows in comprehending her husband’s character and his outlook on life. This is part of them ‘becoming one flesh’ (Gen 2:24).

When a wife is left behind a widow as a result of the death of her husband, or a husband outlives his wife, then there is deep grief. Brothers and sisters I have counselled in this situation have described their loss this way ‘it is like a part of me has been removed’. I knew one elderly couple a number of years ago who were especially close in their marriage relationship. She had better hearing and eyesight than he did, but she was much less mobile. Together they made a great team as they complemented each other, even in the infirmity of advanced age. They were married for 63 years. When her husband died, his wife was grief stricken and continued to deeply mourn for him. Some of her family members became impatient with her, telling her it was time now for her to ‘get over it’. I don’t think they ever said to her ‘take a concrete pill and harden up’ but that was certainly the thrust of their ‘pastoral care’. She said to me one day ‘Do you think we were too close in our marriage together?’.

No. They were not ‘too close’. How is that ever possible? Yet, it is true that the closer we are to someone the more acutely we experience losing them. Love is like that. The deep grief of a widow or widower in their loss is a consequence of having lived together with their spouse as ‘one flesh’.

In our text, the Apostle Paul writes about the great mystery of the union between Christ and His church which is reflected in the ‘one flesh’ relationship between a loving husband and his respectful wife. We’re going to look at the union of Christ and His church in our first point:

1. **The union of Christ and His church**

Paul writes in verses 31-32 “*Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church*”. What is the mystery to which the Apostle refers here? There are at least three possibilities:

1. The mystery he has already referred to multiple times earlier in this letter (Eph 1:9; 3:3,4,6,9) and will speak of again in 6:19.
2. The ‘mystery’ of human marriage.
3. The mystery of the relationship between Christ and His church.

Let’s look at each of these possible interpretations in turn:

a) The mystery of the gospel in the letter to the Ephesians is“*...that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel*”. The mystery, now revealed, is how God has united the diversity of nations in one body, in one Spirit, in one Lord, in one faith through Christ Jesus (Eph 4:4-7). This is the mystery which Paul boldly proclaimed (Eph 6.19), but it is not the mystery referred to our text. You can clearly see that from the context here which is about marriage, not about the inclusion of Gentiles in the church.

b) ‘This mystery’ could refer back to the human marriage union as expressed in Paul’s quote from Gen 2:24 “*Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh”.* As I mentioned in the introduction, there are ‘mysterious’ effects as a husband and wife complete each other’s sentences. The ‘leaving’ and ‘cleaving’ of a man and woman who leave their own families to become a new family unit is hugely significant, but in and of itself, it is not a ‘mystery’ in Paul’s use of the word.

c) The ‘mystery’ could refer to how the one flesh union of a man and his wife reflects the relationship between Christ and His church. That would explain Paul’s words ‘*I am saying that it (the mystery) refers to Christ and the church’*. This mystery was not revealed in Genesis 2:24, however there are ‘shadows and types’ in the Old Testament which show human marriage as a pattern reflecting God’s relationship with His covenant people. For example, when God says through His prophet Hosea: “*you will call me ‘My husband’*” (Hos 2:16).

It is the foreshadowing in Genesis 2:24 of the then yet-to-be union of Christ and His church that Paul does refer to as the deep mystery of Christ’s union with His church.

Now consider these questions about this union:

* How could the historical event of Christ’s crucifixion, so far away from us today in both space and time, deeply affect us?
* How can much of what is true for Christ, God’s living risen Son, be true for you and me also?
* How can the church be joined to Christ in a living, vital, organic, enduring way?

All of these questions contain true statements: Christ’s crucifixion does deeply affect us all, brothers and sisters. As Paul has already written in this letter to the Ephesians, we have been made alive together with Christ (Eph 2:5). The church is the Body of Christ, she is inseparably joined to the Lord, her Head. But **how** do these true things occur, but what mechanisms? Now that is a mystery!

In Reformed theology we like to investigate every point of doctrine in detail and be as clear and systematic as Scripture will allow. This is good and wise. However there are some truths which we cannot fully comprehend or explain in great detail, for example the nature of the Trinity, the two natures of Christ and the way in which the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man flow together in such a way that they are never in conflict.

The union between Christ and His church is another area where we cannot fully comprehend or explain the way in which this works. John Calvin, the 16th century protestant reformer wrote: “*that joining of Head and members, that indwelling of Christ in our hearts—in short, that* ***mystical union****—are accorded by us the highest degree of importance, so that Christ, having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed*” (Inst. 3.11.10, pp. 736-37). More recently, theologian John Murray, called our union with Christ “*the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation*”.

The ‘*mystical union*’ between Christ and His church is clearly very important, but what exactly is it? It is referenced more than 160 times by the Apostle Paul with phrases like ‘in Christ’. In Christ, brothers and sisters, we are chosen, called, regenerated, justified, sanctified, redeemed, assured of the resurrection and given every spiritual blessing (Eph 1:4,7; Rom 6:5; 8:1; 2 Cor 5:17; Eph 1:3). Union with Christ is the spiritual reality by which we, as believers, are joined to our Lord in such a way that what is true of Him becomes true for us. Whilst the Bible does not explain the detailed workings of the union between Christ and His church, God has revealed some images, in addition to marriage, which help us grasp the reality more fully.

There is the **viticultural** **image**, from the ancient practice of cultivating and harvesting grapes, which Christ describes this way: “*I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing*” (John 15:5). Here we see the ‘mystical union’ vividly pictured. Those who belong to Christ are ‘in Him’ and He is ‘in them’. It is through this union that Christ gives life and abundant fruitfulness to His people, the Church. In Scripture, a fruitful vine is a symbol of joy and blessing (e.g. 1 Kings 4:25; Ps 104:15).

Then there is the **construction image** which we read earlier in this letter as Paul writes to tell the Ephesians Christians that they were “*fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit*” (Eph 2.19-22). We are united to Christ like stones connected together and built on a foundation stone.

We can also see something of the essence of our union with Christ from **the relationship between a king and his people**. When David was anointed ruler over all Israel, we read that the tribes came and pledged their loyalty to him, saying “*we are your bone and flesh*” (2 Sam 5:1). There was a bond between the David and the people so that when he sinned, as he did when he took a census (2 Sam 24.1-15), the whole nation suffered. However, when he was victorious in battle, Israel prospered. The principle of ‘social solidarity’ is also true within our own country. The decisions of our civil government affect us all, for better or worse.

We see the reality of the mystical union of Christ with His church when Paul, then called Saul, encountered a light from heaven which flashed around him. *Falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting”* (Acts 9:4-5). To oppress the church, as Saul had been doing, is to oppress Christ Himself. There is a real, though mysterious, bond between the Head and His body, the church. The formation of this spiritual union is the work of the Holy Spirit (e.g. 1 Cor 12:13).

The Holy Spirit brings the past saving power of the resurrection of Christ into our lives now by uniting us with Christ (e.g. 1 John 4:13). The Spirit joins us to our Saviour as a living vine is connected to its fruitful branches. With Christ as our Head, we His body are transformed into a new humanity. In our text, the Apostle Paul explains that this mysterious union is pictured in the marriage relationship, which brings us to our second point.

1. **The union of a husband and his wife**

Paul writes in verses 31-32 “*Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church*”. He is drawing our attention to the parallel between Christ’s union with His bride the church, and the union of a husband and his wife in marriage.

Here are some practical out-workings of this marriage union: When a man and woman marry, they acquire each other’s assets and they take on each other’s debts (unless a pre-nuptial agreement states otherwise). Ordinarily they also share the same surname, generally that of the man. They share in each other’s happiness and sorrows. Their wedding vows express the covenant commitment they make to be one flesh in words like these: ‘*for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part*’.

As a man and a woman leave their own families and join together in marriage, they take on a new identity as a couple. They are both significantly affected by their union together, however this does not remove their own individuality. Husband and wife remain distinct beings when they join together to become one flesh. This reflects the truth that in our union with Christ we do not somehow become God, nor does Christ Himself somehow become the church.

**Just as** the human marriage union points to the ‘mystical union’ of Christ and His church, **so also** Christ’s love for His body the church and her response to Him forms the pattern for marriage. This is what Paul brings us back to in verse 33 when he writes: “*However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband*”. In the previous sermon in this series, entitled ‘the Spirit-filled husband’ we saw that: The word translated ‘love’ is the Greek word ‘agape’. 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 selfish gain. This love continuously chooses to serve the person who is loved.

**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), **so** 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.

**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 actually part of his own body. Leading, providing and protecting her, being used of the Lord so that she can become the ‘*very best version of herself*’ in Christ as she grows in grace and knowledge of her Saviour. What are some practical ways in which he can do this as he is influenced by the Holy Spirit?

1. By being considerate, understanding and respectful of his wife as he honours her as God’s gift to him and as a fellow heir of the grace of life (1 Pet 3:7).
2. By being faithful to his wife, and being careful not to put himself in situations where he would be tempted to be captivated by another woman (Prov 5:20) and by being physically available to her (1 Cor 7:3-5).
3. By speaking well of her to others, protecting her and being honest and open with her.
4. By being gentle and tender with her, not harsh or angry (Col 3:19).
5. By praising her and not taking her for granted (Prov 31:28-29).
6. By listening to her so that he can understand both her needs and her desires.
7. By regularly praying with her and studying the Scriptures with her.

When a husband loves his wife with the same kind of love as Christ loves His church, even though his wife is never going to be a perfect woman in this life, he complements her, enhancing their marriage to become more like the relationship between Christ and His church.

There is much more that could be said if we had more time, but let’s move now to the role of a wife now. In the sermon in this series, entitled ‘the Spirit-filled wife’ we heard the call: “*Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord*” (v22). We saw that Biblical submission is **willingly** accepting and yielding to the authority of another person just as Christ humbled Himself through his willing obedience to the will of His Heavenly Father (Phil 2:6-9). We noted that 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 enhancing their marriage to become more like the relationship between Christ and His church. She also demonstrates respect for her own husband, which is what verse 33 highlights. *“let the wife see that she respects her husband”.*

The Greek word translated ‘respects’ can mean ‘fear’ in some contexts, but here means reverence, honour and respect. It is in the present tense meaning that a wife is called to show a continuous respect for her own husband. What are some practical ways in which she can do this as she is influenced by the Holy Spirit?

1. By loving him and any children they have been blessed with (Tit 2:4).
2. By being physically faithful and available to him (1 Cor 7:3-5).
3. By obeying him (Eph 5:22,24; 1 Pet 3:1; Titus 2:5).
4. By adorning herself with modesty and self-control (1 Tim 2:9).
5. By being careful in what she says about him to others.
6. By her good works (1 Tim 2:10; 5:10), being diligent and prudent in her work (Prov 31:13-27) and generous towards those in need (Prov 31:20).
7. By seeking to be led spiritually by her husband (1 Cor 14:35)

One of the possible risks for married couples hearing this sermon is to start thinking and calculating all the areas where they think that their husband or wife is not measuring up to the call of God’s Word. This could then result in bitterness, anger, estrangement, sadness despair and/or conflict. This is not good nor helpful, neither is it the intent of our text. There is a better way.

Husbands and wives, look at yourself not at your spouse. Consider your own attitude and conduct. Accept that you do not always measure up to Christ’s call on your life. Be willing to repent where you have come to see particular areas of sin in yourself. Be willing to confess, firstly to the Lord but also to your husband or wife. Believe that the penalty, the guilt and shame of the sins that you have committed in your marriage have been completely dealt with in and by Christ. Come to Him in faith and trust and see the glorious way in which He loves His church. Grow in Him.

Brothers and sisters, see the glorious way He loves us! Then commit yourself to yield to His will for you in your marriage. He says: “*Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light*." (Matt 11:28-30).

A word to those who do not know Christ as their Lord and Saviour. You do not need to be married to experience the blessing and joy of a close intimate loving relationship. Christ offers this to all who come to Him.

A word to those who are not, as yet married, but desire to be so. Marry only in the Lord (1 Cor 7). Do not settle for less. Commit yourself only to court someone who is clearly, by the evidence of their life, committed to the Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. Then you will be able to be part of a living image of the glorious, mysterious, relationship between Christ and His bride, the church.

A word to those who are not married and who have not, as yet, been led by our Lord to seek a husband or wife. Being single has the advantage of enabling a person to serve the Lord with more undivided focus than someone who is married (1 Cor 7:32-35). An unmarried person in Christ is united to the One who leads and cares for him or her with perfect love.

For believing widows and widowers present, thank God for the years that you had in your own marriages and remember that you are united to Christ in an unbreakable covenant bond of love. You are not alone.

Brothers and sisters, our union with Christ, though mysterious, is real, life-giving and unbreakable.

Just as a husband and wife in a close marriage know more and more what is one each other’s mind, so Christ the Heavenly Bridegroom always knows what is on the minds of those He loved and died for, the church.

As we are influenced more and more by the Holy Spirit to grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour (2 Pet 3:18) we have the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16). We can ‘think God’s thoughts after Him’ (Johannes Kepler) – ‘completing His sentences with our lives’.

AMEN