

Husbands *and* Wives: Together at the Cross



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Eph. 5:21–33; Phil. 2:3, 4; Ezek. 16:1–14; 2 Cor. 11:1–4; Gen. 2:15–25.*

Memory Text: “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” (*Ephesians 5:25–27, NKJV*).

In Ephesians 5:21–33, Paul builds on the idea of the submission of believers to each other (*Eph. 5:21*); he then offers counsel to Christian wives (*Eph. 5:22–24*) and husbands (*Eph. 5:25–32*); and he concludes with a distillation of the instruction to both (*Eph. 5:33*).

In this counsel, Bible students today may hear the risen Christ addressing our relationships. We are positioned to do so when we understand Ephesians 5:21–6:9 as Paul's way of actualizing the great theme of the letter, unity, but now for the Christian household. While he offers a strong critique of the flawed social structures of the old humanity (*see Eph. 4:22*), he also celebrates the creation of a new humanity (*see Eph. 2:15*) embedded within the wider humanity with its flawed social structures. From within these structures, believers demonstrate that a new power, the Holy Spirit (*Eph. 2:22; Eph. 3:16; Eph. 5:18–21; Eph. 6:17, 18*) and a new ethic patterned on Christ (*Eph. 4:13, 15, 20–24, 32; Eph. 5:2, 10, 17, 21–33*) have been unleashed, which point toward the ultimate fulfillment of God's plan for His people and the world.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 2.

Counsel to Christian Wives

Paul begins with a hinge passage (*Ephesians 5:21*) connecting *Ephesians 5:1–20* and *Ephesians 5:22–33*, in which he advocates for church members to submit to each other (*compare Mark 10:42–45; Rom. 12:10; Phil. 2:3, 4*). Believers are to do so “out of reverence for Christ” (*Eph. 5:21, ESV*), the first of several times Paul will identify the relationship with Christ as the most important and defining one for believers.

What does Paul mean by exhorting church members to submit to each other? How are we to understand this idea? *Eph. 5:21*.

Paul also invites Christian wives to submit to “your own husbands, as to the Lord” (*Eph. 5:22, ESV*), clarifying that he is discussing the submission of wives to their respective husbands (*see also 1 Pet. 3:1, 5*). When Paul says wives are to do so “as to the Lord,” does he mean a wife is to submit to her husband as though he were Christ; or, instead, does He mean that Christ is the truest and highest focus of her submission?

In view of *Ephesians 6:7*, where slaves are asked to serve “as to the Lord, and not to men” (*NKJV*), and *Colossians 3:18*, where wives are asked to submit to their husbands “as is fitting in the Lord” (*NKJV*), the latter view is to be preferred. Wives are themselves believers who must ultimately honor Christ over their husbands.

In both *Colossians* and *Ephesians*, Christ—and only Christ—is identified as the Head of the church, which is His body (*Eph. 1:22, Eph. 5:23, Col. 1:18*): “Christ is the head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body” (*Eph. 5:23, NKJV*). By analogy, the husband is “the head of the wife” (*Eph. 5:23*), with the church’s faithfulness to Christ serving as a model for the wife’s loyalty to her husband. The passage presumes a loving, caring marriage, and not a dysfunctional one. This verse should not be interpreted to allow any form of domestic abuse.

In light of what we have just read, why is this following counsel so important to remember? If the husband “is a coarse, rough, boisterous, egotistical, harsh, and overbearing man, let him never utter the word that the husband is the head of the wife, and that she must submit to him in everything; for he is not the Lord, he is not the husband in the true significance of the term.”—Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, p. 117.

The Church as the Bride of Christ: Part 1

Compare Ephesians 5:25–27, 29 with the founding story of Ezekiel 16:1–14. What elements of that story does Paul reflect in his own sketch?

As Paul, in Ephesians 5:25–27, 29, shapes his wedding-marriage metaphor for the church and its relationship with Christ, he draws creatively on the customs and roles of an ancient wedding. In relationship to the church as bride, Christ is the divine Bridegroom who:

(1) *Loves the church as bride* (Eph. 5:25). We must never forget that this is heart work for Jesus. He loves us!

(2) *Gives Himself as the bride price*. In the context of ancient wedding arrangements, the bridegroom would “purchase” the bride with the “bride price,” which was usually a large sum of money and valuables, so large that ancient village economies depended upon the custom. Christ pays the ultimate price for the church as His bride since He “gave Himself for her” (Eph. 5:25, *NKJV*). In the incarnation and at the cross, He gives Himself as the bride price.

(3) *Bathes His bride*. The preparation of the bride was an important part of the ancient wedding festivities. As is also true today, it was the bridesmaids and female relatives of the bride who prepared her for the ceremony. Paul, though, imagines the divine Bridegroom preparing His bride for the wedding! It is He who sanctifies and cleanses her “by the washing of water” (Eph. 5:26, *ESV*), a probable reference to baptism.

(4) *Speaks the word of promise*. This cleansing is performed “with the word” (Eph. 5:26, *ESV*), pointing to the word of promise that the divine Bridegroom speaks to His bride, perhaps in the context of the betrothal ceremony (compare Eph. 1:3–14, Eph. 2:1–10, noting God’s promises to believers at the time of their conversion). Betrothal was the ancient version of modern engagement, but was a much more serious set of negotiations, which included a written agreement about the bride price (from the husband) and the dowry (assets the bride would bring to the marriage from her family).

(5) *Prepares and adorns the bride*. When the bride is finally presented to her Groom, she is fabulously beautiful, appearing in flawless splendor (Eph. 5:27). Christ not only bathes the bride; He prepares and adorns her, as well.

How do these verses help us understand the way Christ feels about us? Why should we find this so comforting?

The Church as the Bride of Christ: Part 2

How does Paul use elements of the ancient wedding in appealing to Christians in Corinth? When does the presentation occur? (2 Cor. 11:1–4).

Using one final element of the ancient wedding, in Ephesians 5:25–27 Paul portrays Christ as the One who: (6) *presents the bride (to Himself!)*. In ancient times the bride would be given away by the best man, best men, or her father. Never by her groom! Here, though, Paul imagines Jesus presenting the church as bride to Himself.

Paul uses marriage customs and roles to highlight Christ’s relationship to the church in an unfolding, chronological pattern: (1) *Betrothal*. Christ offered Himself up for the church (as “bride price”) and so became betrothed to her (Eph. 5:25). (2) *Preparation for the wedding ceremony*. The attentions of the Bridegroom continue in His present efforts to sanctify and cleanse the bride (Eph. 5:26). (3) *The wedding ceremony itself*. Christ’s present attentions are in view of the “presentation” of the bride at the wedding (Eph. 5:27). This last element looks to the grand wedding celebration at His return, when Christ, the Bridegroom, will come to claim the church as bride and present her to Himself (Eph. 5:27; compare 2 Cor. 11:1, 2; Col. 1:21–23, 28).

Ancient weddings often began with a nighttime parade (see Matt. 25:1–13). The groom and his entourage would gather at the groom’s home—the couple’s new home—and with grand ceremony begin a procession. Lit by torches and accompanied by joyful, lilting music and great rejoicing, the crowd jostles toward the home of the father of the bride. Gathering up the bride there or meeting the bride’s own procession on the way, the parade would convey the couple to their new home, where the guests would settle into a weeklong feast, culminating in the wedding ceremony, when the bride would be presented to the groom.

When Paul portrays Christ presenting the church to Himself, he alludes to this grand parade and to the moment of presentation. In doing so, he provides a moving portrait of Christ’s return as a future wedding ceremony, when the long betrothal between Christ and His church is complete and the wedding celebrated.

What message should we take for ourselves from all this positive, happy, and hopeful imagery?

Love Your Wife as You Do Yourself

What new argument does Paul use to encourage husbands to practice tender love toward their wives? *Eph. 5:28–30*.

Paul's rules for the Christian household (*Eph. 5:21–6:9*) disclose a challenging social context. In Ephesians 5:28–30, Paul addresses husbands who, following the all-too-frequent pattern of the time, may choose to “hate their own flesh” (see *Eph. 5:28, 29*), abusing and beating their wives. In the Greco-Roman world of Paul's day, the legal power of the “father of the family” (Latin, *pater familias*) was very broad. He could punish harshly or even kill his wife, children, and slaves and be within his legal rights (though exercising such power in extreme ways was increasingly constrained by public opinion).

In Ephesians 5:25–27, Paul has detailed the ultimate example of love, Christ's love for the church, offering a drastically different model for husbands than the usual one. Now, before laying out a new argument, he points again to that great Example, asking Christian husbands to respond “in the same way” (*Eph. 5:28, ESV*) as Jesus, who “gave himself up” for His bride, the church, and attends to her every need (*Eph. 5:25–27, ESV*). Paul challenges Christian husbands to turn from the expected practices of their time and seek to match Christ's tender love.

In Ephesians 5:28–30, Paul adds a new rationale to support the love of Christian husbands for their wives: self-love. Paul offers a truism: “No one ever hated his own flesh” (at least no one thinking clearly). Husbands don't harm themselves or beat up on their own bodies. Instead, they “nourish and cherish” them (*Eph. 5:29, NKJV*). In a bid to eliminate harshness and violence against Christian wives, Paul invites the Christian husband to identify with his wife. You are so much one with your wife, Paul argues, that to harm her is nothing short of inflicting self-harm, and most people in their right minds don't do that.

Returning to the example of Jesus, Paul argues that Christ is Himself practicing tender self-care in cherishing believers who are “his body” (*Eph. 5:29, 30, ESV*). Model your behavior toward your wife, says Paul, on the way you treat yourself and, ultimately, on the way Christ treats you.

Paul cites the example of Jesus to both wives and husbands. What can you learn from Jesus about loving those in your own family circle?

The “One Flesh” Model of Marriage

Study the Creation narrative of Genesis 2:15–25. What happens in the story before the statement concerning a husband and wife being “one flesh” (*Gen. 2:24*)?

A key to applying Paul’s counsel to wives and husbands is to see his citation of Genesis 2:24 (*in Ephesians 5:31*) as the culmination of it. As he meditates on the Creation story of Genesis, Paul considers the needs of Christian congregations and the health of family relationships within them. He hears in Genesis 2:24 a message that echoes down through time. By divine design, marriage is intended to be a “one flesh” relationship, with sexual unity mirrored in emotional and spiritual unity, and emotional and spiritual unity bringing meaning to the sexual relationship.

Note that in choosing Genesis 2:24, Paul selects a statement about marriage made before the Fall and applies it to the relationships between Christian husbands and wives. In our distinctly post-Fall world, rampant exploitation of the sexual relationship between a man and a woman reveals how deeply entrenched in modern cultures is the idea that the sexual union represents subjugation of the woman. Paul argues that the sexual relationship, as reflected in Genesis, is not one of subjugation but of union. It does not symbolize or actualize the dominance of the male but the union of husband and wife, so much so that they are “one flesh.” We may look to both Ephesians 5:21–33 and Genesis 2:24, then, for an important, countercultural, and corrective theology of marriage and sexuality.

In this same context, Paul in the next verse talks about a “profound mystery” (*see Eph. 5:32, ESV*). This includes both sides of the double metaphor Paul has been discussing: Christian marriage understood in the light of Christ’s relationship with His church (*Eph. 5:32*) and Christ’s relationship with His church understood in the light of Christian marriage (*Eph. 5:32*).

Christian marriage is elevated by comparing it to the relationship between Christ and the church. In addition, by thinking of the church’s relationship to Christ through the lens of a caring, Christian marriage, believers gain new clarity about their shared relationship to Christ.

In what ways does Ephesians 5:33 serve as a concise summary of Paul’s counsel in Ephesians 5:21–32? If married, how can you seek to more fully implement these principles in your marriage?

Further Thought: Ellen G. White, “Responsibilities of Married Life,” *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 7, pp. 45–50, and “Mutual Obligations,” *The Adventist Home*, pp. 114–120.

Ellen G. White consistently urges marriage partners to turn away from efforts to control the other: “Do not try to compel each other to yield to your wishes. You cannot do this and retain each other’s love. Be kind, patient, and forbearing, considerate, and courteous.”—*The Adventist Home*, p. 118.

She comments directly on the interpretation and application of Colossians 3:18 (and *Eph. 5:22–24*): “The question is often asked, ‘Shall a wife have no will of her own?’ The Bible plainly states that the husband is the head of the family. ‘Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands.’ If this injunction ended here, we might say that the position of the wife is not an enviable one. . . . Many husbands stop at the words, ‘Wives, submit yourselves,’ but we will read the conclusion of the same injunction, which is, ‘As it is fit in the Lord’ [*Col. 3:18*]. God requires that the wife shall keep the fear and glory of God ever before her. Entire submission is to be made only to the Lord Jesus Christ, who has purchased her as His own child by the infinite price of His life. . . . There is One who stands higher than the husband to the wife; it is her Redeemer, and her submission to her husband is to be rendered as God has directed—‘as it is fit in the Lord.’ ”—*The Adventist Home*, pp. 115, 116.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Imagine someone arguing that Ephesians 5:21–33 is an outmoded passage that no longer addresses Christian relationships since it enforces a model of marriage focused on the authority and domination of the husband. How would you respond? What elements from the passage itself would inform your response?
- 2 What might Paul’s counsel in Ephesians 5:21–33 have to offer to those who find themselves in challenging and difficult marriage relationships?
- 3 Some Christians argue that the Creation story in Genesis 1 and 2 is a mere metaphor and that it doesn’t come close to depicting what really happened, which was billions of years of evolution. What does Paul’s use of the story teach us about how literally he took it?
- 4 Dwell more on the theme of “one flesh.” How does this help us better understand the sanctity of marriage and why married couples must do everything possible to protect that sanctity?

Visiting Inmates in Spain

By GABRIEL DIAZ

Working with inmates is my passion. I have participated in prison ministry everywhere that I have served as a pastor, first in my homeland of Colombia and now in Spain.

Over the past two decades, I have visited four prisons in Spain, including a maximum-security prison for women in the Spanish capital, Madrid. It took three years of talks with prison officials to gain access to this prison of 400 women. Prison authorities finally allowed me to enter the prison for the first time in 2019 and begin leading a worship service from 5:30 P.M. to 7:00 P.M. every Thursday. Only one woman showed up for the first worship service. But she was very eager and willing to listen to me.

“I’m very happy to meet you,” I told the woman. “It fills me with joy to come here. But we need to pray to meet with even more people.”

We prayed to God to bring more people to our Thursday meetings. When I arrived at the fourth meeting, 10 women were waiting for me! Today, 60 women attend the meetings every week. They range in age from 22 to about 70. Our worship program is divided into three parts: songs and prayer; a time for women to share their personal testimonies, called, “Name Your Miracle”; and Bible study.

When I speak to them, I always remind them that God is their Father in heaven. “God sees you as His daughters,” I say.

In all my years of serving as a pastor, I have never witnessed worship and praise like in the prison. The worship and praise are intense. The women are so sincere and honest in their prayers. Sometimes I long for our Thursday meetings even more than Sabbath meetings at church.

Our time together is short; so, each woman can write her personal testimony on a piece of paper, bring it to the meeting, and hand it to me at the end. The letters contain words of praise about how God is changing lives. I have a high stack of letters now.

A group of church members also visit with the women and give them Bible studies on weekends. They can only visit with the women behind glass. They are not allowed inside as I am. But together we are seeing fruit. Several women have given their lives to Jesus, and we also have established contact with their relatives.



This mission story illustrates Mission Objective No. 2 of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s “I Will Go” strategic plan: “To strengthen and diversify Adventist outreach . . . among unreached and under-reached people groups.” For more information, go to the website: IWillGo2020.org.