

Dear friends in Christ Jesus:

A four-year-old girl was having a difficult time grasping the concept of marriage. So, her father opened his wedding photo album, thinking visual images would help. He pointed out the bride arriving at the church, the wedding ceremony, the recessional, and the reception. “Now do you understand what marriage is?” he asked. “I think so,” his daughter replied. “That’s when Mommy came to work for us, right?”

It’s not just four-year-olds who struggle to understand what marriage is. Many treat marriage as a kind of business partnership with a bit of romance thrown into the mix. So long as both partners are happy and the union is profitable the partnership continues, otherwise it dissolves. But since marriage is not a man-made invention, we need to turn to God’s Word to find out what marriage is all about. Our study of Ephesians today will give us **A God’s-eye View of Marriage**. What we’ll learn is that marriage wasn’t just intended as a way to fill the earth with people and to provide them with caring families. Marriage is also meant to illustrate the deep bond that exists between Jesus and his Church.

The first thing that we learn about marriage is that it is a union between a man and a woman. That needs to be said these days, doesn’t it? More governments are granting marriage licenses to same-sex couples. But that isn’t God’s plan for marriage. So, when this topic comes up among your friends, I encourage you to share what the Bible says. You don’t have to do this in a preachy sort of way, just calmly and quietly let others know that there are many in the world today who still hold to the traditional definition of marriage. Why? Because you believe that there is a God, and you believe this God speaks to us through the Bible. And in the Bible he is clear about what marriage is: it’s to be a life-long union between one man and one woman. And why insist on that? Because, just as following the user manual for your new electronic gadget will give you the best results, so following God’s plan for marriage will yield the greatest blessings.

What about divorce then? Where does that fit into God’s design for marriage? Well, it doesn’t—at least it wasn’t part of God’s original plan. When God brought Adam and Eve together as husband and wife, he intended them to live together forever. Neither were to abandon the marriage because they got tired of the other. Of course, that would have never happened had Adam and Eve not sinned. But even after they sinned, God’s will for them was to remain married until God himself ended the marriage by taking one of them home to heaven.

It was only because people started to break the marriage union for trivial reasons that God intervened and allowed for divorce in two cases: marital unfaithfulness and desertion. When one breaks the marriage by being unfaithful or by continually deserting the other, the “innocent” spouse is not bound to remain in that relationship. Getting married isn’t like signing up for a cell phone plan. You can’t just change providers after a couple of years because you didn’t like the service. When you say, “I do,” you are promising to live with and love your spouse through thick and thin until death parts you.

Your chance of maintaining a life-long relationship will greatly increase if you remember how marriage is supposed to work. Listen again to the key verses of our text. **“Wives, submit to your own husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, just as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he himself is the Savior. Moreover, as the church submits to Christ, so also wives are to submit to their husbands in everything”** (Ephesians 5:22-24).

Now this is where it gets “sticky” for many. What does Paul mean that the wife is to **submit** to her husband? Many think it means that she must simply obey her husband in all things. What’s interesting, however, is that Paul didn’t use the word “obey” like he did a few verses later when speaking about a child’s relationship to his father, and a slave’s relationship to his master (Ephesians 6:1; 5). Instead, he used the word **“submit”** which means to line yourself up under someone else. “See, there you go, Pastor. Paul is demeaning women. He doesn’t even tell them to ‘Stand *by* your man,’ but ‘Stand *under* your man’!”

Before you get too worked up, look at the parallel Paul draws. He says that the wife is to submit to her husband as the Church (believers) submits to Christ. Is it a hardship for believers to stand under Jesus? Not anymore than it is a “hardship” to stand underneath an umbrella during a downpour. In fact, it’s a blessing to

stand there. Likewise, it's a blessing for believers to stand under Jesus and to submit to his authority because it means that we are in perfect position to benefit from his love and protection.

But no husband is perfect like Jesus. So why would any woman want to stand under a man who loves and protects her imperfectly? Because this is God's will for the wife. To reject what God says about your role in marriage is to reject God himself. To submit to your husband doesn't mean that you're not a valued member of the marriage team. God created you to be a helper (Genesis 2). You wouldn't be helping your husband or your marriage if you don't speak up and point out to your husband that there is a better way to cook the carrots, to raise the children, or to spend your household income. But when you do speak up about such things you will want to do so in a respectful manner, for the sake of Jesus. And yes, your husband is imperfect, but your Jesus knows that. He will step in and provide anything your husband fails to provide. Trust him on this.

If you're still not convinced that submitting doesn't somehow make you inferior, consider this. The Bible says that Jesus submitted to Mary and Joseph. Jesus did this even though he was the perfect Son of God and could have daily pointed out Mary and Joseph's faults and shortcomings. By submitting Jesus wasn't saying that he was inferior to Mary and Joseph. He submitted to them because this was God's will for him and because it's what was best for the family. It's like when the big 18-wheeler submits to you and lets you merge into the lane ahead of him. He could simply run you over or drive you off the road. But for the sake of good order he yields to you and lets you merge into traffic. Likewise, dear sisters, you might be intellectually and even physically superior to your husband, but that doesn't give you the right to usurp his role as leader. Instead use your gifts to serve, just as a hospital orderly uses his strength to gently move patients from bed to bed, not throw them around as if he needs to prove his superior strength.

But now what exactly does it mean that the husband is the head of the wife? Well, headship is not lordship. That's absolutely clear, for Paul says, **"Husbands, love your wives, in the same way as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her"** (Ephesians 5:25). Paul does not say that husbands are to *rule* over their wives but that they are to *love* them by serving and being willing to give their own lives for their wife. Consider this ancient explanation of this verse from Chrysostom, a preacher who lived 1600 years ago in present-day Istanbul. Chrysostom says to husbands:

Pay attention to love's high standard. If you take the premise that your wife should submit to you, as the church submits to Christ, then you should also take the same kind of careful, sacrificial thought for her that Christ takes for the church. Even if you must offer your own life for her, you must not refuse. Even if you must undergo countless struggles on her behalf and have all kinds of things to endure and suffer, you must not refuse. Even if you suffer all this, you have still done not as much as Christ has for the church. For you are already married when you act this way, whereas Christ is acting for one who has rejected and hated him. So just as he, when she was rejecting, hating, spurning and nagging him, brought her to trust him by his great solicitude, not by threatening, lording it over her or intimidating her or anything like that, so must you also act toward your wife. Even if you see her looking down on you, nagging and despising you, you will be able to win her over with your great love and affection for her." (Chrysostom, *Homilies on Ephesians*, 20:5.25, ACCS 8:195)

Guys, our roles as the head means that we are to be *servant-leaders*. Just as Jesus kept looking for opportunities to prove his love to the disciples, like when he got down on his knees to wash their feet, so we will want to keep looking for opportunities to show our love to our spouse. An easy way to do that is to get into the habit of asking your wife, "What can I do for you now?"

Servant-leader. Servant-helper. That's God's design for marriage—a design inspired by Jesus' relationship with us. Take seriously God's view of marriage—the only view that matters because it makes marriage as fulfilling as it can be. Amen.