

The Two Will Become One

Ephesians 5:21-33

Key Verse: 5:31-32

“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery - but I am talking about Christ and the church.”

In the previous passage we studied the importance of growing in godliness in order to bring about unity in the church. In today's passage Paul continues to teach us how to live out unity, but he shifts his attention to the Christian household. God made each of us as a new creation in Christ and together we are his new humanity - the church. All of our relationships are new. In the Christian household in Paul's day, the relationships between husband and wife, parents and children, and masters and slaves were made new. The status of women and children had been little better than slaves. The Roman father could sell his children into slavery and even kill them. He could abandon his wife at his caprice. And there was no recourse for the broken-hearted women and children. When we think about Paul's teaching in the context of his times, it was really revolutionary. It is still revolutionary today. It challenges our culture and urges us to lay a right foundation in building relationships on the truth of God. Among them, the relationship between husband and wife is fundamental. If they are not one, the church cannot stand and society will surely disintegrate. However, when they have harmony and peace, the family is healthy and the church, as well as the society, becomes strong. So it is very important for husbands and wives to become one as new creations in Christ. May our Lord Jesus have mercy on us and help us understand this profound mystery and practice it.

In verse 21, Paul gives a general principle that applies to all relationships in the Christian household. It says, **“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”** The word “submit” in this context means “a voluntary attitude of giving in, cooperating, assuming responsibility, and carrying a burden.” This submission is not one-sided, but mutual. Christians should not be too self-assertive, but rather submissive to one another. Being submissive may seem impossible for sinful human beings. But when we follow the example of Christ it is possible. Christ never forces anyone to follow him. He wants us to make a willing choice. He himself demonstrated submission for us. He said in Mark 10:45, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Christ bought each person with his precious blood. Each one is more valuable to him than all the riches of the world. When we realize how much Christ loves and values each person, we, too, should be submissive as we

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listen to, serve and build each one up in faith. In the following verses, Paul applies this principle to wives (22-24), and husbands (25-32), and gives a conclusion in verse 33. As we study these teachings we should not apply them to our spouses, but to ourselves. Those who have no spouse can apply them as the bride of Christ, as a member of his body.

First, exhortation for wives (22-24). Let's read verse 22 (women only), **“Wives submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord.”** Hearing the word “submit” can arouse anger in a woman, especially in the USA. Of course, we need to understand the historical injustices women have suffered as a gender. And the Bible teaches that women are equal with men as beings made in the image of God (Gen 1:27). That said, the teaching to “submit” is very clear. It is not a general teaching for women to submit to men, but for wives to submit to their own husbands. This refers to keeping the order established by God. It is not a statement about value, but a defining of a wife’s position in the Christian household. A wife can follow this exhortation when she recognizes the Lord's sovereignty in her family. Thus, “as you do to the Lord” is included in this verse. A Christian wife can grow in submissiveness to her own husband as she submits to the Lord.

In verses 23-24 Paul tells the reason for this submission: **“For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.”** A husband and wife are compared to Christ and the church. Christ is the head, and the church is his body. The head and the body are inseparable. Without the head, a body becomes like the headless horseman. Suppose the heart says to the head, “I don't want to pump blood anymore. Stop telling me what to do.” What happens? The whole body will perish. Likewise, when wives are rebellious to their husbands, conflict and chaos ensues. Children become wild without proper discipline. There is a saying, “Men conquer the world, but women conquer men.” Consider this: “One woman raises a man well through a twenty year labor of love. But another woman can ruin him in twenty minutes.” Of course, the first woman is his mother and the second may be his wife. This tells us the importance of a wife’s role. A wife can raise her husband as a great man. Or she can make him a fool and a failure. Generally, a man’s future depends on his wife. In times of difficulty, when a man comes to his wife and shares his burden, she should not correct, criticize and rebuke him. Rather, she should share words of encouragement, compliment his good points, recognize his leadership as head of the family, and make an environment for him to rest in peace. Then the husband can renew his strength to love his wife from his heart and provide healthy leadership for his family. Practically speaking, however, it is hard

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for a wife to submit to a husband, who has a different idea. How can she overcome conflict and submit? It requires prayer and a decision of faith.

One famous preacher in Korea, Pastor Dong Rhee¹ tells the story of his wife. He said that she was more generous and understanding than he was. He never heard her complain about others or blame them. One day he asked, “How can you not blame others? Do you hate no one?” She said, “As a human being, how can I not blame and hate others? However, when someone hurts me, I come to God and pray for mercy upon them.” One day, Pastor Rhee came home and found that his wife was crying in tears in her prayers, “Have mercy on him...have mercy on him....” He wondered who she was praying for. It was him. He had no idea that he was the source of her agony. But she silently took her great conflict with him to the Lord in prayer. In this way she found the strength to encourage him.

Catherine Marshall² was married to Peter, a famous preacher in the 1940s. As he served God night and day, his health began to deteriorate and he had a mild heart attack. To preserve his health, Catherine tried to change his lifestyle. But this led to escalating tension between them. Finally, through a time of tearful prayer, she entrusted him to the Lord. After that, there was peace between them and she could encourage him in his ministry. Many women want to change their husbands. It may be better to entrust them to the Lord, help develop their good points, and pray for them.

Second, exhortation for husbands (25-32). Some ethical systems, such as Confucianism, only stress the duty of a wife in marriage. But the Bible speaks to both wife and husband. In fact, Paul directs more words to husbands. Those who feel that a wife's duty is too challenging should realize that a husband's duty is also very challenging. In verses 25-27 Paul tells husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church. In verses 28-32 he tells husbands what this means practically.

Let's read verse 25 (men only). **“Husbands love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her....”** After exhorting husbands to love their wives, Paul immediately mentions Christ's love for the church. Christ's love for the church should be practiced exactly by husbands toward their wives. So we need to understand how Christ loved his church and the purpose of his love. The word “love” in verse 25, comes from the Greek word “agape,” which is God's love. This love is sacrificial, takes the initiative, and is unconditional, self-effacing and giving. The words “gave himself up for her” recall Christ's incarnation, life of serving, and death on the cross. To think of practicing this love is overwhelming. Before anyone can practice this love, we must first receive this love from Christ.

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When a husband is moved by Christ's love, he can practice this love toward his wife. This is why a husband must have an intimate love relationship with Christ. In this respect, husbands are brides and Christ is our bridegroom.

Verse 23 says that the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ is the head of the church. The husband has authority as a leader. The problem is how to exercise leadership. Intimidation, through physical and verbal abuse, is not an option for Christian husbands. Christ never abused anyone, ever, not even once. Rather, Christ gave up all his privileges, honor and glory, and humbled himself. He made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness (Php 2:6-7). This tells husbands what kind of effort is necessary to understand their wives. As Christ humbled himself to become a man in order to experience what we experience and to see things from our point of view, husbands must humble themselves to truly understand their wives. This is more than listening to their words. It involves understanding their feelings and heart's desires. Understanding is not the end. Rather, it is the beginning of serving. Christ served his church as a servant. Christ served his disciples by bearing their weaknesses with long-suffering patience, healing their sinsicknesses, washing their feet, and inspiring them with hope. He took the initiative, his love was one-sided, and it was to the end. Finally he died on the cross, shedding his blood to cleanse us from our sins. In this way Christ exercised his authority over the church. Husbands can exercise authority over their wives only through this kind of love. Wow! This seems too challenging. Yet, let's not give up, but practice it by God's mercy and help, following Jesus' footsteps. Then we can grow little by little until the image of Christ is formed in us.

In verses 26-27 we find the purpose of Christ's love for the church: **"...to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless."** The first thing Christ does for the church is to make her holy through the word and baptism which cleanses our sins and gives us new life in the Spirit. Then he presents her to himself as a glorious, beautiful bride without any stain, wrinkle or blemish. Such a bride is extremely happy and joyful.

When a husband practices self-sacrificing love, following the example of Christ, it is not a losing business. Verse 28 says, **"In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself."** Paul has already explained how Christ loved the church by giving himself up for her to make her his holy, beautiful bride in a happy union (25-27).

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Likewise, when a husband loves his wife sacrificially it builds up their own happy union. In essence, he is building up his own body. We human beings feed and care for our bodies (29). We try to eat healthy food, exercise as much as we can, and sleep well. When we are sick, we take medicine. When we care for our bodies, they grow strong and are useful in doing many things. Likewise, when husbands love their wives they build up their own happy family. There is a saying, “Happy wife, happy life.” When asked about how to have a successful Christian marriage, John MacArthur said in regards to his wife, “Whatever will bring her joy and be to her benefit, I will submit to do, happily, because all I want is her joy and spiritual benefit. It's that simple. It's not complicated. It's not brain surgery. Do I always achieve that end? Ask her, she will tell you no. But do I always desire that end? Of course; I submit to her joy, to her fulfillment, to what blesses her and encourages her and exercise my leadership in that way.”³

Verse 30 says, “**...for we are members of his body.**” Christ feeds us with the words of God and cares for us with his love as members of his body. When a husband receives Christ's love he can learn how to love his wife, being mindful of her.

In verse 31 Apostle Paul quoted Genesis 2:24 in order to support his teaching about a happy union between husbands and wives. This is what God intended from the beginning. Verse 31 says, “**For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.**” After God created the Garden of Eden, he established the first family and put them in the garden to work for the glory of God. God established the family for his purpose. So a husband and wife should become one in love in order to carry out God's glorious mission. Adam expressed his love for Eve with a poem: “**This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. So she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man.**” The Bible says that Adam and his wife were both naked and they felt no shame. It means they became one in love. However, since sin entered the world a dark cloud hovered over this family. They lost connection with God and with each other. They did not trust each other and their relationship became a heavy burden. God's original purpose for the family was thwarted. But God never fails. God sent Christ into the world and established the church through him. Now Christ is the bridegroom and the church is his bride. Through Christ, God reconciles all things to himself and restores the unity of his creation. Through Christ the relationship between a husband and wife is restored and the two can become one. Before marriage a husband and wife are totally different people. They are two. After marriage they become one. Mathematically it does not make sense. One plus one equals one? Then what does it mean that they are one? They are one

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in love - not human love, but Christ's love. This is only possible when Christ is Lord of the family. Christ makes husband and wife one and restores the glorious purpose of God to them. Christ works through their relationship to sanctify them both. The restoration of the family is an important part of bringing unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ (1:10). This is why Paul says, **"This is a profound mystery - but I am talking about Christ and the church"** (32).

Paul concludes in verse 33: **"However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband."** After talking about a profound mystery, Paul brings us back to reality to emphasize what we should practice. Husbands must love their wives as they love themselves, and wives must respect their husbands. Love and respect are two sides of the same coin. Love is giving oneself to another. Respect is to value the other highly. Love and respect are based on Christ's love. Without Christ's love, we can hardly love and respect others. So Christ must be at the center of a husband and wife's relationship. When each one has an intimate love relationship with Christ, they find the strength to love and respect each other. Then they can grow. Love begets respect and respect begets love. This leads to a profound unity, which ultimately reflects the Holy Trinity.

As husbands learn how to love their wives and wives learn how to respect their husbands, their families become harmonious and peaceful. Then God is pleased to dwell there. This family becomes truly blessed and a source of blessing. We see a beautiful picture of this in Abraham's family in Genesis. Through many years of struggle and by God's discipline of love, both Abraham and Sarah could give up their own ideas about their family and accept God's promise from their hearts. When they were united in God's love and purpose, their home became the dwelling place of God. They became God's friends and the instrument of his salvation work in the world. This is what God wants to do for each family in Christ. When this kind of family spreads here and there, the world can be changed. Let's pray that husbands and wives may become one in love and that God's blessing may overflow in our land.

1 Dong Won Rhee, "Short Story, Long Effects," 2001, Luke Press: Seoul, Korea.

2 Tucker, Ruth. "Private Lives of Pastor's Wives," 1988, Zondervan: Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA.

3 <http://www.gty.org/resources/sermons/80-382/the-willful-submission-of-a-christian-wife>