

**And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another in the fear of God.**

**Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Saviour of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. 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. So husbands ought to love their own 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 the Lord does the church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church. Nevertheless let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.**

**(Ephesians 5:18–33)**

## Introduction

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Some years ago, my wife and I went to visit a friend whose husband had left her for another woman. The details were extremely sordid, and as we spoke to her it was clear that she had every biblical ground for divorce. She told us that people kept advising her to divorce him, but she felt no peace about making that decision. Ultimately, she decided against pursuing divorce.

About a year later, her husband repented of his sin and asked for her forgiveness. She forgave him, and took him back. They came to me and asked if I would help counsel them as they sought to rebuild their marriage. I was happy to do so, and God did a wonderful work in restoring their once broken marriage.

Some years later, I was in the United States and talking to a man. I mentioned this couple's surname, and the man to whom I was talking showed some recognition. He asked my

surname, and smiled when I told him. He told me that he was a friend of this couple, and they had told him on a number of occasions over many years that I had saved their marriage. I told the man that I had done no such thing; that I had simply reminded them how to do marriage God's way, and God had saved their marriage.

Previously, we began a study titled "Marriage, God's Way." We did not complete our study, and so we are looking at it again. But there are two other ways in which I am using the word, "again."

First, if your marriage has morphed from God's way, you can experience marriage, God's way, again. Reformation of marriage is always an option for the Christian marriage. In fact, I would argue that a Christian marriage should always be reforming more and more according to the Word of God. This, in many ways, is what makes it a Christian marriage.

There is hope for a Christian marriage. The Spirit of God is sovereign and almighty. Do not underestimate what he can do when husband wife submit themselves one to another out of reverence for Christ, when spouses commit to selflessly serve one another.

Second, marriage, God's way, was revealed six days into world history. It was perfect, and it was purposeful. Paul makes this clear in vv. 31–32.

The point is marvellous: Marriage in Eden was God's doing and for God's display. Piper says, that "foundationally, marriage is the doing/design of God and ultimately, marriage is the display of God." Marriage was designed by God to display his glory, for it serves as the picture of Christ's covenant-keeping relationship with the church.

There is coming a day when God's creation-purpose for marriage will find its full fulfilment, again. Christ will return and there will be no more need for the human picture of marriage, for Jesus will bring his bride to the marriage supper of the lamb. A glorious Bridegroom will then married to his then glorious Bride.

### The Gospel of God and the Gospel of Marriage

Christian marriage, like every other sphere in the life of the Christian, is gospel grounded. And since the gospel is the power of God for salvation, it can save the marriage between sinners – which is every marriage! Paul tells us this in the passage before us.

This is the big picture that we need to keep before us if we will have a marriage God's way; and if we will see our marriages restored to being God's way – again.

My wife and I recently returned a problematic microwave oven to the store from which we purchased it. As we walked in, I overheard a heated discussion between two employees about what it means to be Spirit-filled. Eventually, the one man, very irritably,

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huffed, “You just need to be Spirit-filled!” and then stormed off. One should not speak about being filled with the Spirit with a grimace and anger!

Sometimes, however, when it comes to the matter of marriage – Christian marriage – this is precisely how people speak. A husband might “command” his wife, “Submit, woman!” and a wife might command her husband, “Serve me, husband!” In neither case is the Lord pleased. Rather, God the Holy Spirit is grieved (4:30).

So, how can we do better? It is my contention that the key to having a healthy and happy Christian marriage is keeping the big picture before us.

We saw previously that marriage, God's way, is between a natural born human male and a natural born human female. We also saw that it is not the same as mere cohabitation.

Marriage, God's way, involves consent, a covenantal commitment, and consummation. And since it is a one-flesh relationship, it is until death.

We began to see what marriage, God's way, involves. We began with the “must” of reverence. Verse 21 lays the foundation for all that follows about the Christian home. Of course, this is the result of the fullness of the Spirit (v. 18). As we focus on the Lord Jesus Christ, we are empowered to overcome our default of self-centredness.

Now, let's continue to observe the other “musts” of marriage, God's way.

### Marriage, God's Way, is Rooted in Revelation

As Paul details what a Christian marriage looks like, he quotes Scripture: “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh” (v. 31; see Genesis 2:24). Incredibly, while Paul quotes Scripture from before sin, he argues that that marriage was ordained as a picture of Christ and the church (v. 32).

The revelation of God in Christ betrothed to his bride, the church, is both the defining and directional principle for the Christian marriage.

Negatively, apart from this revelation, our marriages will head in the wrong direction. They will spiral and morph from what God intends. God's definition of marriage (its responsibility, its roles, its restrictions) arises from his revelation of marriage.

As Martyn Lloyd-Jones said long ago, “If we are not clear about the Lord Jesus Christ and the church, and the relationship of the church to him, we cannot understand marriage. It is impossible because it is only in the light of that doctrine that we really understand the doctrine concerning marriage.”

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Mark Dever notes that the purpose of the church is to “increasingly reflect the character of God as the character of God is revealed in his Word.” I believe that this is also the precise goal of a Christian marriage. After all, the relationship between Christ and the church is described as a marriage (Ephesians 5:22–32). Jesus is described as the Bridegroom (Matthew 9:15; cf. John 3:29). Some of Jesus’ parables portray the kingdom of God in terms of a wedding (Matthew 22:2; 25:1–10). Revelation 19:1–9 speaks of the marriage supper of the Lamb. Revelation further speaks of the church as Christ’s bride (21:1–3, 9–10). According to 2 Corinthians 11:1–2, Paul’s assessment of his ministry was to prepare and protect the Bride for Christ. In the eternal state, there will be no marriage (Matthew 22:30), for when the long-awaited consummation between Christ and his bride occurs, there will be no further need of the picture. The substance will have rendered the shadow unnecessary.

### The Purpose of Marriage

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In their excellent book, *This Momentary Marriage*, John and Noel Piper write,

There never has been a generation whose general view of marriage is high enough. The chasm between the biblical vision of marriage and the common human vision is now, and has always been, gargantuan. Some cultures in history respect the importance and the permanence of marriage more than others. Some, like our own, have such low, casual, take-it-or-leave-it attitudes toward marriage as to make the biblical vision seem ludicrous to most people.

The world cannot know what marriage is without learning it from God.

The most foundational thing to see from the Bible about marriage is that it is God’s doing. And the ultimate thing to see from the Bible about marriage is that it is for God’s glory.... Ultimately, marriage is the display of God.

It is designed by God to display his glory in a way that no other event or institution does.

Staying married, therefore, is not mainly about staying in love. It is about keeping covenant.... It’s mainly about telling the truth with our lives. It’s about portraying something true about Jesus Christ and the way he relates to his people. It is about showing in real life the glory of the gospel.

Marriage refers to Christ and the church—every marriage, no matter how pendulum-like because of our sin; every marriage, even if the couple doesn’t care a bit about Jesus. To change metaphors, God designed marriage to be a picture. That makes me ask myself, how clear and well-focused is the portrait of Jesus that our marriage is displaying?

The longer a Christian couple is married to each other, increasingly their covenant union should display the character of God, as he has revealed it in his Word. It is said that the

longer a couple is married, the more they begin to look like each other. But increasingly, they are to look more like Jesus Christ.

Like most married couples, we have a wedding photo album. As I occasionally look at it, I am reminded about that day. I am also reminded about how much I have learned about marital love since that day. I'm actually embarrassed over how selfish and inconsiderate that I was in our early years. But I am also deeply grateful for God's grace in providing me with such a gracious and forgiving wife, as well as for his grace in sanctifying me over these many years. I think that my now very grey head is accompanied with some wisdom. What has helped me is seeking to keep the ultimate wedding portrait before me—a portrait that is unfading and whose colours are gospel hued.

### Doctrine of Marriage

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We need to grasp that marriage is God's design and therefore is informed and encompassed by a *doctrine* of marriage. That is, God has revealed teaching concerning marriage; teaching for which we are obligated.

As we saw previously, this doctrine is for both believers and unbelievers. As with the Ten Commandments, you don't get a moral pass because you choose not to believe—because you choose to defy the laws! For example, a visitor to South Africa from another country is still liable to obey our laws even though his allegiance is not here.

The Christian lives by God's Word (Matthew 4:4; 2 Timothy 3:15–17). We do not live by the whims of the shifting sands of society. God's Word instructs us. We call this doctrine. Ephesians reveals and explains the doctrine of the church. Doctrine is practical. In other words, doctrine leads to duty. The doctrine of the church is practical. The doctrine of the church leads to certain duties.

Once you are persuaded of the doctrine of Christ and the church, then it is a small step to applying this to the duties within marriage. But apart from embracing and submitting to the doctrine of marriage—as revealed in Scripture—you will struggle and experience defeat in fulfilling the duties of marriage. The Christian who dismisses doctrine will fail in his duties. It really does matter what you believe. Belief affects behaviour.

Let's see how this applies in marriage.

Marriage is covenantal precisely because Christ's relationship with his bride is covenantal.

I've been reading a book recently on the history of salt. It's very dry! I purchased it when it was on special for Kindle, because I thought that it might give me some insight to the biblical references to salt. One interesting salt fact that the author makes is that salt is, in a sense, immutable. It cannot be spoiled or ruined. It lasts. When the Bible speaks about a

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covenant of salt (Numbers 18:19; 2 Chronicles 13:5), that is perhaps what is being highlighted: the unbreakable nature of such covenants.

Marriage is forever. It is unbreakable—until death. What God has joined together, men should not put asunder. Marriage requires a cross (cf. v. 25). It requires ongoing forgiveness. Marriages break when there is no forgiveness. We must therefore be willing to forgive one another if our marriages will work.

Marriage, God's way, is indivisible from the church. That is why one's doctrine of the church, and their response to their duties as a member of the church, has profound consequences for marriage. You can be a punctual member with "perfect attendance" and still fail in marital duties. What I am arguing is that, to the degree that each spouse takes seriously the relationship between Christ and the church, their marriage will be blessed. Meaningful membership and a meaningful marriage is intimately connected

Reverence and revelation are vitally connected. They have a symbiotic relationship. Revelation of Christ leads to reverence for Christ and this drives us to even greater revelations of him (see 3:14ff).

### Marriage, God's Way, Requires Regeneration

Reverence must be preceded by the new birth! This entire text pictures a *Christian* marriage and home. The assumption is that God saves households. Paul is writing Christian ethics, which means that these words are for Christians. The very first question to ask, then, is do I know the Lord Jesus Christ?

By way of Christian ethics, consider that Christians should only marry Christians. Paul's words about believers not being yoked together with unbelievers (2 Corinthians 6:14) absolutely applies to marriage. "Evangelistic dating" usually results in miserable marriages. Miracles do happen, but don't count on it.

Parents, be willing to say no. Do not shrug your shoulders and figure that they are old enough to date who they want. You were given to parent them—to lead them, guide them, advise them. Do not sit by idly while they make decisions that will only hurt them in the long run. Remember the biblical parameters of creation and marriage: kind with kind, to produce more of the same kind (Genesis 2:15ff). You can only keep the big picture before you if you are a part of the picture (Ephesians 5:30–32).

Jesus' first miracle was performed at a wedding. The fact that he attended a marriage indicates that marriage was (and is) close to his heart. And as he made a difference at the wedding in Cana, so he can make a difference in your marriage. Hearts that are renewed

by Jesus Christ can produce renewed homes. I personally know of more than one family of which this is true.

### Marriage, God's Way, Assigns Responsibilities

We see in vv. 22–30 that marriage, God's way, assigns responsibilities.

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Saviour of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. 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. So husbands ought to love their own 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 the Lord does the church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones.

(Ephesians 5:22–30)

Healthy, holy and happy marriages don't just happen. Rather, humble and hard work is required. Spirit-empowered, gospel-informed hard work is required. In *The Meaning of Marriage*, Tim Keller writes,

I'm tired of listening to sentimental talks on marriage. At weddings, in church, and in Sunday school, much of what I've heard on the subject has as much depth as a Hallmark card. While marriage is many things, it is anything but sentimental. Marriage is glorious but hard. It's a burning joy and strength, and yet it is also blood, sweat, and tears, humbling defeats and exhausting victories. No marriage I know more than a few weeks old could be described as a fairy tale come true. Therefore, it is not surprising that the only phrase in Paul's famous discourse on marriage in Ephesians 5 that many couples can relate to is verse 32.... Sometimes you fall into bed after a long, hard day of trying to understand each other, and you can only sigh: "This is all a profound mystery!" At times, your marriage seems to be an unsolvable puzzle, a maze in which you feel lost.

The roles spoken of in these verses (which we will consider in detail in future studies) are assigned by God—not cultural convention. Reverse these roles and chaos ensues. Husbands are to lovingly lead and wives are to reverently follow. Husbands are to provide, protect and perfect; wives are to respect and reflect. As they do so, both grow strong in character—strong in Christ. If you disregard the pattern, you'll not enjoy the product. The all-encompassing responsibility is that of helping each other towards holiness

### Marriage, God's Way, is a Glorious Reflection

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Ultimately, as we have seen, marriage, God's way, is a glorious reflection of the relationship between Christ and the church. Godly husbands reflect Christ's sacrificial leadership of the church, while godly wives reflect the church's reverent submission to Christ. This, of course, is the whole point: The Big Picture is the key to what our marriage pictures.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was engaged at the time he was imprisoned by Hitler (where he would eventually be executed), wrote from the military section of the prison in Berlin:

Marriage is more than your love for each other.... In your love you see only the heaven of your own happiness, but in marriage you are placed at a post of responsibility towards the world and mankind. Your love is your own private possession, but marriage is more than something personal – it is a status, and office. Just as it is the crown, and not merely the will to rule, that makes the king, so it is marriage, and not merely your love for each other, that joins you together in the sight of God and man.

Piper quotes Bonhoeffer and concludes that the meaning of marriage “is infinitely great. I say that with care. The meaning of marriage is the display of the covenant-keeping love between Christ and his people.” That is what Paul is teaching us here.

As we look at our wedding photos, they can stir wonderful memories as well as renew our aspirations to recapture and renew. As we look to Christ and the church, we are moved to forgive, to die to self, to sacrificially love, and to respectfully follow, and others are helped to see the ultimate marriage.

Bryan Chapell tells the story of a friend in his church whose wife, unbeknownst to him, had a severe and secret gambling problem. Through various acts of deception, she gambled away their entire savings. He was alerted to the problem by his bank when their accounts were emptied. When a friend suggested that he divorce her, he asked incredulously, “How can I tell my kids about the forgiveness of sins in Christ and not forgive my wife in her sin?”

As we focus on the reality that marriage is a picture between Christ and the church, it is motive enough for us to do marriage, God's way.

In his short but very helpful book, *What is a Healthy Church?*, Mark Dever suggests some questions to ask when considering joining a church. Listen to a couple of them: “Would I want to find a spouse who has been brought up under this church's teaching? What picture of Christianity will my children see in this church—something distinct or something a lot like the world?”

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Interesting. Dever is doing precisely what Paul here is doing: making an intimate connection between meaningful membership in a church committed to doing things God's way, and marriage and family life God's way.

This brings us to our final observation.

### Marriage, God's Way, Results in Children God's way

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Immediately following Paul's exhortations regarding marriage, we read his exhortations regarding children and parenting:

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honour your father and mother," which is the first commandment with promise: "that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth." And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord.

(Ephesians 6:1–4)

We will consider these verses by themselves in a later study, but for now observe that, if you do marriage God's way, you are in a position to raise children God's way.

We do well to observe that the order matters: first marriage, then children! As the children's rhyme goes, "first comes love, then comes marriage, then comes a baby in a baby carriage."

God calls us to align our marriage with the portrait of Christ and the church. When we do, and children are given to us, then this picture, as in marriage, informs and shapes how we raise them. In other words, the gospel is the essential foundation for a meaningful marriage and for a meaningful family life. And we need the Spirit's power to keep us focused on this picture. When this is experienced, and when we persevere in this, then blessings flow to and through the family.

We often hear people complaining about "this generation." The question to ask is simply, who is to blame for it? While not minimising the responsibility of the children and teenagers themselves, we must ask, has the church been faithful with the gospel? What kind of a portrait of God's grace, love, kindness, condescension, forgiveness have we painted for those who look most closely at our portrait in the home?

### Conclusion

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Let a Spirit-filled church inform your marriage and let it impact your children. And then, in turn, let your marriage and your family inform and impact your church, to the glory of God – again and again and again – until death do you part.

## **Marriage, God's Way, Again**

Ephesians 5:18–33

Doug Van Meter

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AMEN