

How to Make Your Marriage Work 1

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Key Scripture

Ephesians 5:22-25 (ESV) Wives, submit to your own husband, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

Sermon in One Sentence

True marital success is not found in cultural clichés or fleeting feelings, but in a cruciform submission and sacrificial love patterned after Christ and the Church.

Introduction

According to recent surveys, nearly 40% of Americans believe that marriage is becoming obsolete. Divorce rates, though slightly down from historic highs, remain stubbornly high, hovering around 40-50% for first marriages. Even among those who stay married, many describe their relationship as merely "tolerable" rather than thriving. It seems that for many, the dream of a lifelong, fulfilling partnership often devolves into a struggle, a compromise, or a profound disappointment. We long for something deeper, something that truly works, but where do we find the blueprint?

The world offers countless manuals, self-help books, and relationship gurus, each with their own set of strategies for a "happy" marriage. Yet, for all the advice, the yearning for a truly thriving, God-honoring marriage persists. This morning, we turn to a timeless source, a divinely inspired blueprint for relationships that not only endure but flourish—a blueprint found in God's Word, specifically in the apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

Historical & Biblical Context

The book of Ephesians is a profound theological treatise penned by the Apostle Paul during his imprisonment, likely in Rome, around 60-62 A.D. He wrote to the church in Ephesus, a bustling Roman port city known for its temple to Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, and a hub of paganism and syncretistic beliefs. Paul's overarching message in Ephesians is the incredible spiritual blessings believers have in Christ (chapters 1-3) and how these theological truths should translate into practical, holy living (chapters 4-6).

The section on marriage (Ephesians 5:22-33) comes within the larger context of Paul's exhortations for believers to "walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called" (Eph. 4:1). He has already spoken about unity in the body of Christ, putting off the old self, and walking as children of light. Now, he applies these overarching principles to the most intimate of human relationships: the marriage

covenant. It's crucial to understand that Paul is not prescribing cultural norms of his day, but rather elevating marriage to a sacred, Christ-centered institution, utterly counter-cultural then and radically counter-cultural now. He is presenting marriage as a living parable of Christ's relationship with His Church, offering a divine framework for human love that transcends time and culture.

Main Point I — The Wife's Humble Strength: Submission as to the Lord

Scripture: Ephesians 5:22-24 Wives, submit to your own husband, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

In our modern, egalitarian society, the word "submit" often evokes images of oppression, silence, or subservience. However, in the biblical context, "submission" (ὑποτάσσει) in relation to the wife is not about inferiority, lack of voice, or blind obedience to an authoritarian dictator. Instead, it speaks of a voluntary ordering, a humble deference, and a recognition of a God-given structure within the marital relationship, mirroring the church's eager and joyful submission to Christ. This submission is "as to the Lord"—meaning it is an act of worship, an expression of faith and trust in God's design, not primarily an act of subservience to a man.

This instruction is framed by the overarching call for all believers to "submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Eph. 5:21). The wife's submission is therefore not unique; it is a specific application of a universal Christian principle of humility and mutual respect. Her strength lies not in dominating or controlling, but in graciously embracing her God-assigned role, which allows her husband to more fully embrace his. It is a powerful, spiritual act that fosters unity, order, and partnership, trusting that God's design leads to flourishing.

Main Point II — The Husband's Sacrificial Love: Headship as Christ to the Church

Scripture: Ephesians 5:25 Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

If the world often misunderstands "submission," it even more profoundly misunderstands biblical "headship." Paul immediately qualifies the husband's headship by calling him to an astonishing, impossible standard: "love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." This is not a call to dictatorship, but to servant leadership, self-sacrifice, and relentless devotion. Christ's headship over the church was demonstrated not by demanding entitlements, but by pouring Himself out, by suffering, by ultimately dying for her. He did not abuse His authority; He leveraged it for the benefit, sanctification, and redemption of those He loved.

Therefore, for the Christian husband, "headship" means taking responsibility, initiating acts of love, providing, protecting, serving, and sacrificing for his wife's well-being and spiritual growth. It means being willing to lay down his desires, ambitions, and even his very life, for her good. This kind of love is not based on fleeting emotion, but on an enduring, covenantal commitment—a proactive, selfless, agape love that

seeks the absolute best for his wife, even when it costs him dearly. This cruciform love, a love unto death, is the divine measure for every Christian husband.

Main Point III — The Marriage's Ultimate Purpose: A Living Picture of Christ and the Church

Scripture: Ephesians 5:31-32 "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.

Beyond the individual roles, Paul elevates the entire institution of marriage to a profound, mysterious, and sacred purpose. Quoting Genesis 2:24, he reminds us of the foundational principle of "one flesh" union, which goes far beyond physical intimacy to encompass a complete spiritual, emotional, and relational bond. But then he declares, "This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church." Marriage is not just about two people finding happiness together; it is a divinely ordained institution designed to visually represent the Gospel itself.

Your marriage, whether thriving or struggling, is meant to be a living, breathing parable of Christ's unwavering love for His church and the church's devoted response to Him. When a wife graciously submits, she beautifully portrays the church's reverence for Christ. When a husband sacrificially loves, he powerfully demonstrates Christ's redeeming love. This ultimate purpose elevates marriage from a private arrangement to a public testimony, calling both spouses to view their roles not as burdens, but as privileged opportunities to reflect eternal realities to a watching world. When our marriages "work" according to God's design, they become powerful evangelistic tools, testifying to the beauty and truth of the Gospel.

Illustration

A few years ago, I heard a story about a couple celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary. When asked the secret to their long and happy marriage, the wife chuckled and said, "It's simple. Every morning, we wake up and decide we're going to put each other first. Oh, and we always remember what my grandmother told me: 'Marriage is like a garden. If you want it to flourish, you have to keep weeding, watering, and tending to it, even when you don't feel like it.'" The husband smiled and added, "She's right. And for me, it's always been about trying to be the kind of husband Jesus would be to His church. Some days I fail spectacularly, but every day, I get back up and try again, for her, and for Him." Their simple, profound words echo the biblical truth: marriage works when we consistently choose a cruciform love and submission, tending the garden in obedience to God's design, even when it requires sacrifice.

Practical Application

1. Pray for Humility and Selflessness. This week, take time daily to pray specifically for God to cultivate humility in your heart (whether husband or wife) to embrace your biblical role and to put your spouse's needs and spiritual well-being above your own.

2. Husbands: Initiate an Act of Sacrificial Love. This week, identify one practical way you can "give yourself up" for your wife. It could be taking on a chore she usually does, planning a surprise to bless her, or

intentionally listening to her heart without interruption. Make it something that genuinely costs you time, effort, or preference.

3. Wives: Practice Respectful Deference. This week, identify one area where you can intentionally and willingly defer to your husband's leadership or decision, even if it's not your preferred outcome. Do so with a heart of respect, trusting God's design for order in your home.

4. Discuss Your Marital Purpose. Set aside time this week to discuss with your spouse (or reflect personally if single) what it means for your marriage to be a living picture of Christ and the Church. How can your union better reflect the Gospel to those around you?

5. Read and Re-read Ephesians 5:21-33. Commit to absorbing these verses, reflecting on their meaning, and discussing them with your spouse. Allow the Word of God to challenge and transform your understanding of marital love and submission.

Discussion Questions

1. How has our culture's view of "submission" or "headship" differed from the biblical understanding we discussed today, and why might that be a challenge for believers?
2. What does it practically look like for a wife to "submit as to the Lord" in a way that respects her individuality and dignity?
3. How can a husband effectively "love his wife as Christ loved the church" in today's demanding world, especially when he feels depleted?
4. If marriage is meant to be a picture of Christ and the Church, what specific aspects of the Gospel story should our marriages be telling to the world?

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank You for the sacred gift of marriage, and for Your divine blueprint found in Your Word. We pray for husbands and wives, that You would empower them by Your Holy Spirit to live out these profound truths. Grant us the humility to submit and the grace to love selflessly, for the glory of Your Son, Jesus Christ, in whom all true love originates. Amen.

Benediction

Now may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we do for you, so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints. Amen.