

“True Romance”
Ephesians 5:22-33
November 16, 2008

INTRODUCTION:

I have only read two Jane Austen books in my lifetime, and I noticed that both had a similar plot. A mother and her single daughters in late 18th century England are experiencing some kind of setback in life. They are in a quandary about marriage partners for the single daughters, at least one of whom turns out to be very insightful. Then a rich, eligible bachelor turns up and falls in love with one of these daughters and desires to make her his wife, even though he would be marrying below his social class. But before the wedding can occur, there are a series of challenges to be met which at times make any wedding look very unlikely. Before the close of the book, all challenges are overcome and the book ends with a wedding. Wendy has read all the Jane Austen books and tells me that they all have a similar plot.

There is a similarity between Jane Austen plots and modern American views of marriage. The similarity is that both focus on the wedding rather than the marriage. Jane Austen books end with a wedding, and Americans tend to spend much more time and money preparing for a wedding than for a marriage. The Bible, on the other hand, devotes a great deal more attention to marriage. Ephesians 5 is one of the classic marriage passages in the Bible, and Paul is careful to tell both husbands and wives how they ought to conduct themselves for the prospering of the marriage. We’re going to look this week at Paul’s commands for the husband, and next week at his directions to the wife.

Paul’s commands can be summarized by saying that the wife is to submit to her husband’s headship. Since Paul treats these roles under his directions to the wife, we are going to follow his pattern and do the same next week when we look at the role of the wife. We are looking at the husband’s role today, and interestingly, when Paul gets around to telling the husband what to do, he never tells him to exercise authority over his wife. That doesn’t mean that Paul didn’t believe in the headship of the husband, because clearly he did. But Paul would not have the husband spend his effort on enforcing his authority. Instead, he would have the husband focus himself on the task of loving his wife. The central duty of husbands is not to exercise authority but to love their wives. Then as Paul tries explaining what that love should look like, he reaches for the greatest example of love ever demonstrated in the universe—the love of Jesus. I want us to focus on two aspects of Jesus’ love that Paul says are to characterize a husband’s love for his wife.

I. Extending Grace and Forgiveness

Husbands are to love their wives with grace and forgiveness because Jesus has loved in that way. **“Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her”** (v. 25). What does this love look like in the everyday, nitty-gritty side of marriage? There are several answers to that question.

First, to love your wife with Christlike grace and forgiveness means that the husband is the one who should initiate reconciliation. The scenario is familiar and common to all marriages between sinners. A fight erupts between a husband and wife. Hurtful words are spoken, leading to retaliatory words from the other, and before long things escalate into a full-blown fight. Someone storms out and both husband and wife are left to stew over the argument. Do you stew over these things the same way I do? What I do is to rehearse the argument in such a way that I am the innocent victim and Wendy the guilty perpetrator, all the while selecting certain truths and ignoring others in order to make sure it comes out this way. Then I rehearse what I should have said and what I will say again when given the chance to address whatever topic was being discussed. Such a mindset will only lead to more hurt, more retaliation, and the relational death spiral. There is only one way out of this death spiral, and that is for someone to initiate reconciliation. Either the husband or the wife has to move toward the other with a heart that is willing to see and confess its own sin and move toward the other person in reconciliation. It is never wrong for a wife to make this first move, but it is the duty of the husband to do so. Like Christ, he is to initiate reconciliation.

A second aspect of this Christlike love is to respond to a wife’s sin with forgiveness instead of anger and retaliation. Listen to the story Bryan Chapell tells in his book *Each for the Other*.

Far into their elderly years a man in our church nurtured his wife’s spiritual growth despite her resistance to his care. Because of some perceived slight by members of the church early in their marriage, the wife refused ever again to attend. Her resentment of the church grew as his attendance remained faithful for decades. Some mornings he walked to church because she had hidden the car keys. One Sunday she cut all the buttons off his church suit to discourage his attendance. His example never wavered. Without anger he cared for her, and without speeches he demonstrated how much he valued his worship of the Savior.

She paid no attention until age made him an invalid and he could no longer walk. His faith did not waver, however, and she finally began to consider what had kept his character and conduct so caring through the many years of her own resentment. From his bed this husband led his wife to an eternal relationship with God. Months later, when a sudden illness caused her to precede him in death, the husband grieved but also rejoiced in the knowledge that he would soon be with her to share a relationship of deeper love than they had known in this life (p. 62-63).

Anyone who’s ever been married knows how difficult it is to act with such forgiveness instead of retaliation. I’m not talking here about the cheap, short-lived forgiveness that pretends no real offense has occurred. True forgiveness is costly. A husband has asked his wife repeatedly not to put her makeup on while driving

the car. Then one day it happens. While doing what he asked her not to do, she doesn't see the line of cars stop ahead of her in time, and the resulting rear end collision costs money the family doesn't have. The husband wonders how they will pay the deductible for the repair of their own car and the higher insurance premiums that will follow. Though it is not fair that he should make sacrifices to do so, forgiveness requires precisely that he does so. Forgiveness does what is not fair, paying the debt someone else has incurred. Whenever there is a sin, a debt occurs, and someone has to pay. In marriages, what often happens is that the person offended makes the other one pay for their sin. No offense on the part of the other is ever allowed to slip by unnoticed, and it is noticed in such a way that the offending party is often made to pay many times over. Forgiveness occurs when the offended party steps in and is willing to pay. I'm not talking just about a payment of money. Your wife, trying to be funny, says something about you at a social gathering that hurts you deeply. There are only two options available to you. Either you make her pay in some way, or you take the loss yourself. But someone is going to have to pay. A forgiving husband is willing to make that payment himself.

There is only one source for this kind of forgiving heart, and that is to know the forgiveness of Jesus. We sinned, and he paid. He didn't just pay a small amount, but with his life. Only those who have tasted of his grace and forgiveness are empowered to extend it to others.

II. Taking Responsibility, Not Control

Paul mentions a second way that a husband's love is to be like that of Jesus. Jesus' love was purposeful, aimed at accomplishing something. Jesus gave himself to the church, **“that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word”** (v. 26). Obviously, Paul's point is not that husbands can cleanse the sin of their wives. Rather, he is drawing out the analogy with Jesus' love to make the point that part of what it means for a husband to love his wife is that he must be focused on bringing good results into her life. The husband's headship is not a matter of taking control, but of taking responsibility.

This point is made again in verses 28-29. **“In the same way husbands should love their 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.”** What is a normal response when someone injures himself? You're doing something with a knife and accidentally cut yourself. A normal response is to stop what you're doing and take steps to bring healing to your body. And you compensate for the injury until it heals, perhaps using your other hand in order to allow the cut to heal. Christlike love requires that husbands take just such an approach. I don't mean to suggest by this that our wives are these weak, injured creatures who always need the help of their superior husbands. Rather, the point I believe Paul is making is simply that the proper use of the husband's headship

is to lead his wife to flourish in every way, doing whatever it takes to bring that about. He doesn't back away when she becomes a trial to him, but gives special attention to help her during such times, just as he would with his own body.

The opposite of this is when a husband, out of his own insecurities, uses his wife to feel better about himself. He approaches his wife as if he is in competition with her, and he always manages to make her feel guilty for any problems that may exist in their marriage. He is seeking to make himself flourish, not his wife. The result of this is seen in the following words of a Christian woman, as she wrote about her husband.

I hate him. I hate him because he made me feel worthless, inadequate—like a nonperson, a slave. I could never do anything that made him happy. I always came short of the mark. I was always desperately working to win his approval. I hate him for the crummy way he made me feel about myself. I don't know whether I will ever get over the hurt he caused in my life (Chapell, p. 42).

While her response leaves something to be desired, this husband has clearly abused his wife in an emotional way. He has not sought to lead her to a place of prospering.

One of the common scenarios of divorce runs like this. A husband neglects to take responsibility to see that his wife flourishes. Because he has neglected his wife, he eventually becomes bored with the relationship. So one day he announces to her that he wants a divorce, giving as the reason that he does not love her anymore and has not been happy in the marriage for quite some time. He states further that he believes God wants him to be happy, and he knows that he can no longer be happy in this marriage. His conclusion then is that he is divorcing because God wants him to. There are at least four very serious sins involved in this. First, he has failed to use his headship to help his wife flourish, with the result that his marriage has suffered greatly. Second, in an effort to escape a guilty conscience, he has misrepresented God himself, claiming that God condones his actions. Third, he treats in an unholy manner his marital vows before God and abandons his wife. And then to add insult to injury, he does all this in a way that makes his wife feel that there is something wrong with her. She is just not the kind of woman he can love, leaving her to conclude that there must be something wrong with her.

What should a husband in an unhappy marriage say to his wife instead? I would suggest something like this. "I have not been happy in my marriage for quite some time, but have just recently come to the insight that it is my own fault. I have used my headship role selfishly instead of seeking to serve you and help you flourish. I have seen that my self-centeredness runs so deep that I'm not even sure I know the first thing about how to do that. But I want to learn, and I believe that with God's help I can. I have already asked God to forgive me, and I am now asking you to do the same."

CONCLUSION:

Before ending, we need to consider for just a moment verse 32. **“This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.”** Paul is saying that marriage is a picture of Christ’s love for his bride, the church. He calls it a mystery. George Knight explains the mystery like this:

This means that when Paul wanted to tell the Ephesians about marriage, he did not just hunt around for a helpful analogy and suddenly think that “Christ and the church” might be a good teaching illustration. No, it was much more fundamental than that: Paul saw that when God designed the original marriage He already had Christ and the church in mind. This is one of God’s great purposes in marriage: to picture the relationship between Christ and His redeemed people forever! (*Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, p. 170).

There is much more at stake in our marriages than we know. The ability of the world to see Jesus is more important than anything else in marriage. Consider the story of Florence and Bill, a retired couple in a rural town where the local Wal-Mart has become the center of the social life of the community. Bryan Chapell pastored the church where this couple were members, and he describes their relationship as follows:

Florence... practically made the [Wal-Mart] store her second home. Shopping for “a few things I need” became a daily excuse to meet friends along the aisles, take grandchildren on shopping outings, or just share enough conversation with acquaintances to get up-to-date on the latest town happenings.

Florence’s husband, Bill, was a retired carpenter who loved the outdoors. He enjoyed time at their nearby lake house, fishing and puttering. Each of them spent their days doing what they loved, though their love for each other was their deepest delight. That deep love showed itself when Florence’s age no longer allowed her to drive herself to Wal-Mart. Now isolated from friends and family, she grieved when her daily excursions came to an end. But the grief did not last long.

Bill did not really understand his wife’s enjoyment of Wal-Mart shopping nor did he desire to join her in it, but he soon recognized how much she missed it. One day he decided to forgo his time at the lake house. He drove Florence to Wal-Mart and stayed with her until she was ready to leave—which was not soon. On the many subsequent days that Bill took Florence to the store, he also took along a folding lawn chair. They would amble down the aisles together until Florence would strike up a conversation with a friend or stranger. Then Bill would unfold the chair and sit in the aisle until Florence was ready to proceed to the next conversation.

As he sat in the aisle, silently beaming at the enjoyment of his wife, Bill became the darling of our community. All knew his outdoor enjoyments. All knew, too, the quality of the man revealed in his sacrifice of his pleasures for hers (p. 69).

A lawn chair is a good symbol of God’s call to husbands here, a call to loving service of their wives. It is a call that requires sacrifice, but one that points others to Jesus.