

Love And Respect

The sermon text for this Sunday is controversial.

Paul's admonition to wives to, "...submit to their husbands" flies in the face of the spirit of our times and strikes many women (and not a few men) as offensive, if not absurd.

Many pastors refuse to preach on this text and some churches won't even allow it to be read from the pulpit, so strongly are they persuaded by the spirit of our times.

However the fact remains that these are God's words, which, as the Holy Spirit has written, are "...able to make you wise for salvation" and are "...God-breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness."

That alone should recommend them to our serious consideration.

Anyway, while discretion may be the better part of valor, I've never been long on either, so here goes: [Read Ephesians 5:21-33]

Paul begins by making it clear that he is suggesting mutual submission on the part of both wife and husband—not unilateral submission on the wife's part.

"Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ."

The meaning of the entire passage hangs on the verbs: "submit" and "love."

According to the dictionary, to "submit" means to voluntarily place yourself under another person's authority; to let that person's consideration and judgment rule your own.

Thus, James urges the disciples to "Submit yourselves...to God."

And "love," in the sense that Paul is using it, means sacrificing yourself for the sake of another person. Jesus says to his disciples: "Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends."

What the two verbs have in common is self-denial.

The Bible calls self-denial “the way of Christ.”

Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

According to Paul's analogy, just as the church, the bride of Christ, submits to the authority and judgment of her Royal Bridegroom in all spiritual matters, so ought wives to submit to the authority and judgment of their husbands in all spiritual matters.

This requires self-denial.

On the other hand, just as Christ offered up his life for his church, allowing himself to be crucified for her sake, so should husbands offer up their lives in service to their wives.

This also requires self-denial.

When both partners deny themselves for the sake of each other, they fulfill the law of Christian love.

They submit to each other out of reverence for Christ.

To look at this from a human perspective, what a wife needs most from her husband is for him to place a higher value on her feelings, her needs and her well being than he places upon his own.

In Paul's words, “...husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies.”

Conversely, what a husband needs most from his wife is for her to place a higher value on his spiritual judgment than on her own and to support his leadership of the family.

Again, in Paul's words, “...the wife must respect her husband.”

In a perfect world without sin, we would be able to do this.

But we don't live in a perfect world; we live in a fallen world where we are all burdened with a sinful nature.

Knowing that her husband's judgment is imperfect, the wife often finds it impossible to respect his decisions.

And, when he fails to receive the respect he craves, the husband retaliates by withdrawing his love from his wife.

Instead of integrating into one flesh, the husband and wife begin to wrestle with each other like Jacob and Esau in the womb over “who goes first.”

This dynamic can play out in a thousand different ways in the day-to-day life of a married couple: the wife disrespecting her husband and the husband withholding love from his wife.

It will probably not surprise you to hear that I have a few modest examples to offer, gleaned from my discussions over the years with a number of husbands and wives as well as from my own marriage.

How does the wife disrespect the husband?

Usually by questioning his competency in areas that are important to his sense of manhood.

Men want to be good providers, reliable protectors and capable leaders for their families.

Their sense of manhood is directly related to their ability to meet the needs of their families in these areas.

The “performance appraisals” their wives give them regarding how well they are succeeding in doing this are extremely important to them.

A husband has a deep need for his wife to show respect for him, during times of success AND during times of failure.

Maybe even **especially** during times of failure.

Shaunti Feldman, a noted marriage counselor and author, writes the following (this is a rather long quotation, so please bear with me): “When I was a year or two out of college, I went on a retreat that profoundly changed my understanding of men and women....For the first session, the retreat speaker divided the room in half and placed the men on one side and the women on the other. ‘I’m going to ask you to choose between two bad things,’ he said. ‘If you had to choose, would you rather feel unloved OR would you rather feel disrespected?’ The speaker then turned to the men’s side of the room. ‘Okay, men. Who here would rather feel unloved than disrespected?’ A sea of hands went up, and a giant gasp

rippled across the women's side of the room. Then he turned to the women and asked, 'Would you rather feel disrespected than unloved?' Almost every woman raised her hand."

Men need respect more than they need love because a man's basic identity, his masculinity, is intimately attached to his sense of competency as a good provider, protector and maintainer.

That's why it is so traumatic for a man to be out of work: he knows he is failing in a fundamental responsibility to his family.

To fail to provide or protect or maintain is, in a man's eyes, to cease to be a man.

When wives habitually question their husband's competency—even in small, peripheral areas of behavior, it takes a toll.

"Why did you do that?" Or, "Why are you doing it THAT way?" Or, "Why DIDN'T you do this or that?" Or, "If you had followed my advice it might have worked."

These kinds of comments chip away at the foundation of the man's self-confidence and self-image, and, in time, erode the foundations of his male identity.

They un-man him.

And what about the husband? What does he do?

Why retaliate of course.

And what better, more effective means of retaliation could there possibly be than to pay back his wife in kind—to withhold from her what she most deeply needs from him, which is his love?

And how do men do this?

They withdraw from the relationship.

Not suddenly or dramatically but gradually and cruelly.

They develop interests in all kinds of other things than their wives.

They become workaholics. Or hobby-holics. Or sports-a-holics. Or porn-a-holics.

They bury themselves in the newspaper or the TV set.

They spend lots of time with “the boys.”

Sometimes the time they say they spend with “the boys” is spent elsewhere.

The bottom line is that they steer themselves away from interacting with their wives and their wives are left alone and unloved.

What a lethal spiral this can make!

Retaliation provokes retaliation: no one knows who started the whole mess; all either party knows is that they are making each other miserable.

And neither has a clue about how to end the vicious cycle.

Well, where there is sin, God has provided a cure.

And the twofold cure for this sin is self-denial and forgiveness.

If we will deny ourselves and take up the crosses of love and respect, God will strengthen our marriages.

In case you haven't figured it out yet, you're not going to fight your way into a good marriage.

If you're waiting for the day when your partner FINALLY says, “*You know, you're right! I've been wrong all these years. Let's do it your way!*”—you're going to be waiting a long time.

No married couple ever argued their way to harmony; they only argued their way to divorce.

What's needed is not self-assertion but self-denial because our SELVES are precisely where the problem lies: our nasty, belligerent, petty selves.

Sin has corrupted us at the very core of our beings and what is called for is not self-correction, but self-mortification and self-denial.

And the wonderful promise of Jesus Christ is that if we will deny our SELVES and take up crosses of loving and respecting each other in *thought* and

word and deed and truth and action, we will find that the yoke is easy and the burden is light.

If we will crucify our selfish hearts, He will create new hearts in us, clean hearts, hearts that are capable of submission and love.

There's more at stake than just us husbands and wives, you know.

Our children desperately need to learn and absorb what it means for women and men to respect and love one another.

For seventeen or eighteen years, a child is an eyewitness to how his parents treat each other.

If they see their mother neglected by an unloving, self-indulgent father, it sinks in.

If they see their father degraded and debased by a disrespectful mother, it sinks in.

The sins of the parents are visited upon the children, and the lethal spiral goes on.

On the other hand, if they see their father sacrificing himself for the sake of his mother and valuing her needs and feelings and well-being above his own, that also sinks in.

And if they see their mother showing respect for his father during times of success AND failure, that also also sinks in.

But we need to be clear about two things.

First of all, we're talking about actions, not feelings.

Marital love, like Biblical love, is not a matter of feeling, but of doing.

If God had simply loved us with great affection and done nothing about it, we would still be in a pickle.

John tells us to love not in word and tongue but in truth and action.

Second, we're talking about gifts, not wages.

If wives put off showing respect for their husbands until they think that they DESERVE it, the husbands will be waiting a long time.

And if husbands put off showing love for their wives until they think that they DESERVE it, their wives will be waiting a long time too.

Respect and love are gifts which are ours to give or to withhold; they are not wages paid out in return for good performance.

Sometimes God's logic flies in the face of human logic. In the Kingdom of God some of our notions of what makes sense are turned upside down.

God has called husbands to love their wives, even when they are unlovable, and he has called wives to respect their husbands, even when they don't deserve respect.

It may sound like foolishness, but the "foolishness of God" is wiser than the wisdom of man.

It's important to remember that.

Amen.

