

# Session #9: Ephesians Chapter 5.21-33

Compiled and written by Theresa Lisiecki

## **Vision for Sacramental union of Husband and Wife 5:21-33**

In this present age of women's growing independence and acceptance as equals to men, what we are about to study will challenge some, anger others and should be the basis of great discussion. To take any one part out of the context of the whole is doing grave disservice to the teachings of St. Paul and the true message he is trying to offer. As Catholics we understand that Marriage is meant to be a sacramental union. In other words, it is an outward sign of God's presence and grace. One of the primary basis for this teaching comes from this passage. If one is going to get the most out of our conversation focus less on "*wives be submissive to your husbands*" but all your energy in reflecting on the relationship of Christ to His Church.



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This next section for our study has four parts:

1. An appeal to all members of the community (5:21)
2. Instruction to wives (5:22-24)
3. Instruction to husbands (5:25-32)
  - a. Call to love wives as Christ loves the Church (5:25-27)
  - b. Love your wife in the way you care for your own body (5:28-30)
  - c. The unity of husband and wife, Christ and the Church (5:31-32)
4. Concluding comments to husbands and wives (5:33)

## **An appeal to all members of the community 5:21**

**5:21 Be subject (subordinate) to one another out of reverence to Christ**

We ended last

week by stepping into this verse because grammatically this phrase belongs to the sentence that began in 5:18. In Ephesians 5:18-20 we have those characteristics that belong to a person who is filled with the Holy Spirit. But we look at it today because it is a hinge statement also impacting our study today. In looking at the Greek word (*hypotassi*) we could also put the phrase *defer to* in place of the word subject. Whatever the word the idea here is first, to recognize that within each person the presence of God rests much like the Holy Eucharist in a tabernacle. If we recognize that in dealing with any person, be they sweet or sour, kind or cantankerous, angelic or angry, Christ is present as well. In understanding that Christ is in our midst with the face of the other than we can defer to them in the case of conflict. Before we go any further let's take a moment to talk about what being subject, subordinate or submission is NOT.

In my own research for today I ran across an online article by John Piper ([www.desiringgod.org](http://www.desiringgod.org)). He offers six attitudes for us to consider when understanding a modern day relationship of submissiveness. Basing his discussion of 1 Peter 3:1-6 six he challenges the often-wrong assumption of how the world defines being subordinate or submissiveness to others. It is NOT about abdicating completely to the other's authority. Scripturally it is recognizing that in a world of equals, someone has to lead, but leadership is about placing the other a your primary concern. I have said often that I am more than willing to submit to a husband, a government or religious authority that knows and loves me as Christ does. Willing to die for my salvation. In the meantime we do the best we can. So with that thought here are John Piper's appropriate attitudes in understanding what biblical submission is NOT.

1. **Submission is NOT agreeing with everything:** *God has made you with a mind. You have to think. You are a person, not a body and not a machine.* You're a thinking being who is able to process whatever facts and information that have been place before you. Your opinions and ideas matter. The intent of this passage and the scriptures as a whole if for us to work as a team. But each and every one must actively give their all if the Body of Christ is to function fully.
2. **Submission does NOT mean leaving your brain behind.** Similar in content as number one, here we are speaking about leadership. Whether it be priest, president or spouse becoming one takes work – one Church, one nation, one family. A wise leader always takes into consideration others opinion and views, their needs and feelings. But when consensus cannot be reached or even if everyone agrees but in leadership you know better, someone has to make the decision. Among the Polish community in Detroit I have heard it said that Poland fell at the beginning of WWII because everyone was the general. Leadership is taking the initiative but placing the needs and wants of those he or she serves as primary.
3. **Submission does NOT mean you do not try to influence.** Two negatives make a positive so the upshot of this point is that to be subordinate or subject means you still have a responsibility to influence the outcome. But, in recognizing Christ in the other the influence must be respectful and courteous. As was said in point one, your opinion and/or ideas matter.
4. **Submission is NOT putting the will of the other before the will of Christ.** As believers our primary allegiance is to our Lord. In knowing what our Lord wants from us, without serious reason, we are in the state of sin if we CHOOSE to ignore that. Example: When my daughter was involved in competitive cheer they were required to attend a weekend training camp that began Friday night and ended late Sunday afternoon. She cheered for a Catholic High School. No accommodations were made for Mass. What do you do? Submit to the will of a teenager who doesn't want to be seen as different or follow what we know is the will of Christ.

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5. **Submission does NOT mean getting all of her spiritual strength through the other.**

Psalm 139:13 tell us that God created each one of us uniquely, *you knit me together in my mother's womb*. Isaiah 43:1 tells us that God called us by name. *I have called you by name; you are mine*. In God calling us uniquely to Him, then we must respond uniquely. Imagine a family of clones with everyone acting and responding the same. Family life is messy but it is in the messiness that we find beauty. God is our hope. God is our strength.

6. **Submission does NOT mean living or acting in fear or pain.** Again, whether it is within the Church, the nation or a marriage, God intends for the relationship to be complimentary with all minds thinking and all voices heard; and that leadership place the needs of the other before their own desires and wants. Abuse or victimization is NEVER of God.

With that said let us move on to looking at the code of conduct for wives in a marriage. But, before we do we must understand that these next three verses are in context of the whole passage.

### **Submission of Wives 5:22-24**

Before looking at the individual verses we should take a couple of things into consideration. Why is St. Paul offering a teaching that would be considered the norm in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century? In a Greco-Roman or Jewish household women were considered property and therefore subject to the will and wishes of the male leadership. If St. Paul had that same attitude he would have addressed the following verses to the husband calling for their leadership in forcing submission. But, he addresses these verses directly to the women, to the wives. We can deduct from this that he understand them as free persons who can choose for themselves.

#### **5:22 *Wives, be submission to your husbands***

Scholars offer that the Greek implies that the wife's submission is a free and voluntary gift in the relationship, not degrading herself or being forced into servitude or happening by coercion. This gift is done as an understanding of submitting to her husband as one submits to Christ in devotion and leadership, but it should never be unconditional always placing God's will before her husband's. We read in Acts 5:29: *Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority*. This verse in light of the whole passage and other verses from St. Paul's writings we can know that St. Paul understands the sacramental nature of Christian marriage as a loving partnership between spouses of equal worth and dignity. *There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus*. Galatians 3:28. St. Paul is asking them to yield as a sincere expression of their submission to Christ. This said submission that is victimization, exploitative or abuse to the wife is NOT supported in scripture of the Catholic Church. Reread the six points of what submission is not.

#### **5:23 *For the husband is the head of his wife***

Just as a body can only have one head, at some point in the partnership there will be times when someone must take the lead, and

for St. Paul that is the husband. We must understand this verse in light of St. Paul as both a Jew and a 1<sup>st</sup> century citizen. As a Jew, St. Paul would understand the relationship between husband and wife from his study of Genesis 2 and the creation of man and woman. His understanding was that man was created first and the woman is made by taking a rib from the man's side (1 Corinthians 11:3, 8-9; 1 Timothy 2:12-13). *Paul, saw no contradiction between this social order and the first story of creation, which teaches that men and women were both created in the divine image and are of equal dignity.* (Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture.) That said modern study of the text from Genesis (2:7), some scholars believe that a better translation of the passage would be: *then the Lord God formed a being from the dust of the ground, and breathed into it's nostrils the breath of life; and the being became a living creature.* Please note that it isn't until the second being is created to accommodate the first being's loneliness that they are identified as man and woman. As a 1<sup>st</sup> century citizen having the husband as the head of the household would make for a more compatible relationship with the world. But, he adds an important nuance: ***just as Christ is the head of the church, he himself the savior of the body.*** This nuance draws our attention further into chapter 5:25: *Husbands, love your wives as Christ loves the church.* And what did Christ do for the church: In obedience to God, placed the needs of the church above his own comfort, wants and needs to the point of suffering on the cross.

**5:24 be subordinate...in everything**

St. Paul ends this teaching by repeating himself; but I repeat, the subordination is neither compulsory nor passive. It is an active choice by the wife "in practice" or discipline of subordinating oneself to God's will. As for the word "everything", we need to understand it in light of what we have already talked about. As we are about to study, if the husband loves his wife as Christ loves the Church then he will respect, honor and cherish the wife as an equal partner in the relationship. The words "in everything" need to be understood as a statement of principle rather than a norm that allows for no exception.

**Leadership of Husbands 5:25-30**

We now turn to the appropriate code of conduct for the husband. In verses 25-31 St. Paul gives us two models to show what that commitment should look like:

1. As a sacrificial gift of himself (25-27).
2. With the same care as they care for their bodies (28-32)

**5:25 as Christ loved the Church**

Men who truly understand this passage have expressed that it is one of the hardest verses in the bible. Not because of the call to love their wives but because of the extraordinary expectation of the level of commitment. While there are those husbands who would die for their wives and children, the challenge to love as Christ loves means in their daily commitment it is a challenge to ALWAYS put their wives best interests at the forefront of every decision. To daily cherish them and always seek for their good is a burden with our sinful nature. While there may be cause to physically die for the other, it is the death of the ego and personal desires that come every day that is what is expected in this teaching. The love

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St. Paul speaks of us not *eros* or romantic/sexual love. The Greek word used here is *agape* meaning the “great love” attributed to God. It is a love that comes from a choice of the will and does not depend on the wife’s worthiness or personal response. This is the love that Jesus had for us when he went to the cross. We didn’t earn or deserve his sacrifice and as a gift, has been spurned by many. But knowing Christ still went to the Cross. A husband’s mission is to work hard to build up his wife, marriage and family seeing the home as a “domestic church”. In St. Paul’s vision of the partnership in marriage the husband is not to demean or dominate the wife and family for selfish ends.

In the following verses we are given the reason for the sacrifice of the husband based on what Christ did for the Church. There are two overlapping reasons

**5:26 to sanctify her... with the word.** First reason is that by the love and devotion of the husband he works to make the wife holy by “teaching” her (and the family) the elements of faith just as Jesus when he walked this earth. Scholars offer that **the word** is to be understood as scripture or the Word of God. Husbands are to make their wives holy by “bathing” them in the ways of faith and it is to be a servant leadership. To understand this we look to Christ. Just before his death, with His disciples gathered around him, *Jesus got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.* (John 13:4-5). Jesus became subordinate to his disciples and took on the form of a slave washing their feet. According to St. Paul the husband, in serving his family in love and humility brings them all closer to God. I know of a minister that each Sunday at the family meal he re-enacts Jesus washing the feet of his disciples with the whole family. For him it acts as a weekly reminder that his role in the family may be the head, but it is all about service.

**by the bath of water** In the first century it was the custom for the woman to bath in the waters of the bath of one of the Greek gods as a way of purifying herself for the marriage ahead. The second reason St. Paul gives for the headship of the husband is that he is responsible for loving his wife and family with a purifying love. Love that purifies is a love that makes one stronger to be fully themselves and to move further and further away from sin. So, just like Jesus the family is able to present themselves before God **in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing... she might be holy and without blemish** (verse 27).

**5:28 He who loves his wife loves himself** St. Paul brings his teaching to husbands with a final analogy, the love of their own bodies. St. Paul is urging husbands to take as much concern as they have for their wives as they have for themselves. One scholar suggested that we understand this sentence as one would a saying like: *Happy wife, happy life.*

**FINAL COMMENT ON HUSBANDS:** St. Paul recognizes an order in family relationships, he does not focus on husbands exercising authority but rather on husbands adopting a humble attitude

and given their lives over in sacrifice to nourish, cherish and loving relationship with their wife and children. St. Paul wants husbands to stand as Jesus in the family.

### **Oneness as Husband and Wife 5:31-32**

We just discussed the two models that St. Paul puts forward for husbands to love their wives: First, as Christ loved the Church and, second, as they love their own bodies. In his concluding remarks regarding husbands and wives we will see that in fact they are one model.

#### ***5:31 the two shall become one flesh***

Some will recognize this verse from Genesis 2:24. After creating the man who shares with God his loneliness, God creates for him another taking a rib from the man to do so. Upon completion of his work God offers these words. The man's response? *This one, at last, is bone of bones and flesh of my flesh* (2:23). In St. Paul's use of this story he is telling us that this is the image of a holy marriage – two becoming one.



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is a hard journey to get to this point because it is not one person completely subjugating themselves to the other but two whole people becoming one unit. Although they remain distinct persons, the two not share one life, they form one family, their interests and future well-being are profoundly intertwined and through God they are made one.

*This explains what Paul was really saying when he exhorted husbands to love their wives “as their own bodies”. The two have become one. Just as Christ is the head of the Church, his body, so also the husband is the head of the wife, who is, metaphorically speaking, the “body” of her husband. Just as Christ “nourishes and cherishes” the Church (5:29) because we are members of his body” (5:30), husbands should care for their wives in like manner, since “he who loves his wife loves himself.” (5:28).*

Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture: Ephesians

Do you realize how radical a teaching this is!? St. Paul is taking women out of the category of property, which was the basic understanding of women in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, and placing them almost on par with the husband. St. Paul is not talking about the husband as being the head as “in authority over” in the way we might talk about the military or the government. In the metaphor we must look at the whole – the head cannot be separated from the body for both will die. They are one unit. If one suffers the other suffers. When we give an award, it is not just to the head, the whole body is recognized. In a relatively healthy body the head and the body are in constant dialogue and teamwork. Which is why the Catholic Church requires an annulment for a sacramental marriage – to separate what God has brought together is to put an end to something living. This assumes that the couple entered into this union willing to be fully cooperative with God's spirit in their lives. By the way an annulment does not

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### **5:32 This is a great mystery**

The Catholic Church understands mystery as something we can always draw deeper into, know more about. A mystery is God's hidden plan revealed in Jesus Christ and discovered by humanity over time. St. Paul is saying that there is much we can learn about the relationship of Christ to His Church through a true sacramental marriage, but it is a process. A true sacramental marriage is based in both living daily an attitude of service to the other and the family. It is not about what they individual want but what God wills and the family needs. And, they not only draw on each other for strength, healing and direction, but more importantly on Christ who is the true head of the Body. So, in conclusion both the husband and wife are subordinate to one another, and both are subordinate to Christ.

### **Concluding Comments 5:33**

#### **5:33 In any case**

Before moving on from this topic of husbands and wives St. Paul returns to summarize the relationship between spouses. Since he ended this section in a discussion on husbands, he begins with them. St. Paul has used the image of husbands loving their wives as Christ loves the Church, and loving them as they do their own bodies. Here he offers a third image: **love his wife as himself**, continuing the idea that husband and wife are one. But it should sound familiar because it mimics what Jesus said in regard to the two great commandments: *Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'* (Matthew 22:37-39). In his address to the wife he changes his tone a bid by asking them to **respect her husband**. The Greek word that is translated into "respect" literally means "fear", but scholars agree the fear that St. Paul is asking for is similar to the fear one is called to have in the presence of the Lord. (Remember the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit from your Confirmation?) The fear of the husband is similar to the fear we have before God. Love is the foundation. On it we build respect and awe. Finally, in understanding who God is and who we are not we submit or fear the Lord.

In summary of today's study:

*According to John Paul II, the "essence of the love of a husband is to lay down his life for his bride." This kind of "love excludes every kind of submission by which the wife would become a servant or slave of the husband, an object of one-sided submission. Love makes the husband simultaneously subject to the wife, and subject in this to the Lord himself, as the wife is to the husband". Ephesians 5:21-33 can be summed up as follows: "The Bridegroom is the one who loves. The Bride is loved: it is she who receives love, so as to love in return." While both are called to love and to subordinate themselves to the other, the meaning imprinted in their bodies is for the husband to initiate the gift, and for the wife to receive the gift. Her subordinating herself means "the experiencing of love." Both fundamental equality and the difference between men and women are grounded in God's creation of humanity in his image...*

Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture: Ephesians quoting St. John Paul II *On the Dignity and Vocation of Women*

**Reflection Questions:**

1. After this study do you have a different appreciation of what marriage is in the eyes of God and St. Paul? Be specific – in what ways do you see sacramental marriage as different than civil marriage.
2. Give some practical ways that a wife could/should respect and love her husband, and a husband could/should love their wife.

**Catechism of the Catholic Church**

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Sacramentally married: 1642  
Equal in dignity: 369, 2203  
Husband and wife as equal: 369.1605,  
Church as Bride of Christ, 773,795  
Christian Marriage: 1602, 1612-17,  
Sin and domination in marriage: 1606-1608  
Self-denial in marriage: 1615  
Marriage in the Lord: 1612,1615-17  
Church as the Bride of Christ: 757, 772-73, 796  
Conjugal love: 2360-2365,  
Respect for one's own body and that of others: 1004  
Marriage as mystery: 772,1602,1613-1616  
Becoming one flesh: 1605  
Sacramental marriage: 1621-1623, 1627

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- [Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: Acts of the Apostles](#) by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch
- Agape Bible Study: Gospel of Luke by Michal Hunt. [Agapebiblestudy.com](http://Agapebiblestudy.com)
- [Acts: The Spread of the Kingdom](#) by Jeff Cavins and Sarah Christmyer