

Week 11: Ephesians 5:22–33: Marriage as a Picture

Hook



Main Point: Biblical marriage is a picture of the Church's relationship with Christ.

Q: If people learned everything they knew about marriage from movies, television and social media, what would they believe marriage is supposed to be?

Television has always been fascinated with marriage. *I Love Lucy*, built around the marriage of Lucy and Ricky Ricardo, was the most-watched television program in America for four of its six seasons.¹ *All in the Family*, featuring the often-contentious marriage of Archie and Edith Bunker, held the number-one spot for five consecutive seasons.² Decades later, *Everybody Loves Raymond* turned the everyday frustrations of Ray and Debra's marriage into 210 episodes between 1996 and 2005³ and won 15 Emmy Awards.⁴ Some of the most successful shows in television history have been built around the joys, tensions and humorous misunderstandings of marriage.

Q: Why do you think marriage has provided television writers with so much material?

Marriage is endlessly interesting because it brings two different people into the closest possible human relationship. That closeness can produce tremendous joy, but it can also expose selfishness, magnify differences, and create conflict. Yet marriage is more than material for a television comedy. In Ephesians 5, Paul reveals that God designed marriage to show the world something far greater – the relationship between Christ and His Church.

RECAP: In the first half of the letter to the Ephesians (chapters 1–3), Paul gave us doctrine: how the Gospel transforms us into new creations in Christ. In the second half, he described how to apply that doctrine to our lives and live as transformed people in the church community (4:1–5:21), in the home (5:22–6:9), and in the world (6:10–20).

In how to live in the church community, Paul used two metaphors to talk about living into our identity in Christ: taking off the old self and putting on the new self, and light versus darkness.

In this lesson, he begins to talk about how to live as transformed people in the home, beginning with the central family relationship, marriage.

Week 11: Ephesians 5:22–33: Marriage as a Picture

Book

Main Point: Biblical marriage is a picture of the Church's relationship with Christ.

Ephesians 5:22–25 [Read]

Talking Point 1: In Christ-centered households, husbands lead their families as servant leaders (like Christ), and wives willingly submit to their husband's leadership.

Q: How did Paul connect wives' submission to their relationship with Christ?

Q: What standard did Paul give for men to love their wives? Why?

Paul had just told the Ephesians how transformed people relate to each other in the church, now he moved on to how to relate to each other in the household. Both these descriptions would have been countercultural to the Greco-Roman world, so when they saw Christians living this way, they would take notice. God's design was revolutionary in the way it gave dignity and value to women, children and slaves.

God's design wasn't new; it had been established in Creation, but it would have seemed revolutionary to the Gentile Christians who had been living in the Greco-Roman culture. Christians living by God's design for marriage and family would make them salt and light in the world, showing the world how good, loving and righteous our God is.

In Greco-Roman culture, the head of the household had *patria potestas* (the power of the father) which gave him absolute legal authority over all members of his household, including adult children, to do with as he saw fit. Adult children living with their parents was not unusual; they lived in multi-generational households with the oldest male as the head.⁵ In Greco-Roman culture, it would not be uncommon for heads of household to be authoritarian and domineering.

But in God's design, the head of the household was commanded to lead his family with the humble, self-sacrificing love of Christ. This is just what Jesus said about all leadership positions – the leaders of the pagan world lord their authority over their people, but in God's design, leaders serve their people (Matthew 20:26). Paul wasn't challenging the authority structure of the household but the way the head of household used his power. In God's design, headship isn't the right to control, it's the responsibility to lead. A responsibility defined by self-sacrifice.

This is part of the bigger discussion in this last half of Ephesians, how "new self" Christians are to live in humility, gentleness and sacrificial love. Both God's original design and the pagan world saw men as the head of the household, but God's definition of what it meant to be a good head of the household was completely different from the pagan world. In the Greco-Roman world, a good head of household was authoritarian. In

the church, a good head of household is a servant leader who cares for his family with sacrificial love and does what is best for all the members of his household to flourish.

Christ is our example of servant leadership. Although Christ possessed all divine authority, He humbled Himself by taking the form of a servant and willingly submitting to the Father's will, even to the point of dying for us (Philippians 2:1–8). He did not come to earth to be served, but to serve (Mark 10:45).

On the night of His death, Jesus demonstrated this for us. The One to whom every knee will bow Himself *bowed down* and washed the feet of His disciples, which was the job of the lowliest servant. He was their teacher, their master; they were His servants. They should have washed His feet, but He washed theirs. It was so countercultural, so offensive, that at first Peter refused to let Him do it (John 13:1–17). This is the kind of leadership Jesus modeled for us.

It was in this context that Paul told wives to submit to their husband's leadership. Biblical submission does *not* mean enduring abuse or being blindly obedient to a man who does not love his wife as Christ loves His people. It is a wife's willing choice to place herself under her own husband's God-given leadership as an act of obedience to Christ.

Biblical submission does not mean women have lesser value or are inferior in any way. Both men and women are equally made in the image of God and equally heirs of salvation (Genesis 1:27; Galatians 3:28; 1 Peter 3:7). Men and women are equal; they just have different roles in marriage. Husband and wife complement each other.

Submission should be marked by trust and security, not fear and coercion. A husband who uses his leadership to control, intimidate, or harm his wife is abusing the authority God entrusted to him, not exercising biblical headship. Biblical submission should never require a wife to participate in sin, tolerate abuse, or abandon discernment because her submission is ultimately to Christ. If a wife or her children are in danger, she should seek safety and involve civil authorities as appropriate.

Biblical submission means a wife willingly honors and supports her husband's God-given leadership, not that she gives up her voice in the marriage. She should freely share her thoughts, concerns, and wisdom as they discuss and pray together for God's leading. Seeking his wife's wisdom doesn't make a husband less of a leader; it's part of leading wisely.

The phrase "as to the Lord" tells us that in a godly marriage, a wife's submission is a service rendered to the Lord. It's a joyful service in the same way God doesn't want us to give begrudgingly or under compulsion but with a cheerful heart (2 Corinthians 9:7). God doesn't want wives to submit to their husbands begrudgingly because they "have to." Like all Christian obedience, it should be willing and heartfelt rather than merely

outward or resentful. A husband's Christlike love helps create an environment of trust in which willing submission can flourish.

Q: Describe healthy Christian marriages you have seen in which the husband and wife work together in mutual love and respect.

Q: For women: What is the difference between willing, godly submission to a husband you trust and just giving in or staying silent?

Q: For men: Give at least one example of what it would look like to "give yourself up" to love your wife as Christ loved the Church.

Q: How can servant leadership make the difference for a healthy marriage?

Ephesians 5:25–32 (yes, we're reading v. 25 again) [Read]

Talking Point 2: Christian marriage is a tangible picture of Christ's love for His Church.

Q: How does the marriage relationship reflect Christ's love for the Church?

Q: How does the body illustration help explain a Christian man's love for his wife?

Paul's description of living in Christian community (church and family) is framed by sacrificial love and humility because this is how Jesus loves us. Only within this framework can we understand Paul's instructions for how Christian husbands and wives should love each other.

Greco-Roman culture commonly understood a wife's submission in terms of the husband's authority and the assumed superiority of men. Paul, however, grounds his instructions in the relationship between Christ and His Church (5:22–32). The husband as head of the wife reflects how Christ is the head of His body, the Church, which Scripture also describes as His "bride" (2 Corinthians 11:2; Revelation 19:7–9; 21:9). Paul also used the "body" imagery to explain it. A Christian husband should care for his wife as he cares for his own body. Ephesians says he "feeds and cares" for it, or literally "nourishes and cherishes."

You naturally feed your body when it is hungry; you instinctively take care of your body and protect your body from harm. We all do this without even thinking about it. A man's care for his wife's needs should come just as naturally. Her needs are an extension of his own, because they are one body.

Paul used the terminology of a man and his wife being "one flesh," drawing on God's original design for marriage in creation (5:28–31; Genesis 2:24). Paul then explains that this one-flesh union points beyond itself to the relationship between Christ and His Church (5:32). A Christian marriage is a husband and wife united as one. A man cares for his wife as he does for himself because they are one united flesh. As Christ is the head of

the body He cares for, His Church, so a man is the head of the body he cares for, his family. Though husband and wife have different roles and responsibilities, they are one flesh, one team, working together for the good of the whole team, the whole family. When our marriages look like this, we create a picture for the world of Christ's love for His people. It's the responsibility of a Christian husband to model Christ's love in the way he loves his wife. In the biblical view, leadership is more of a responsibility than a privilege.

This is the same principle God described in the role of a king in the Old Testament. A king of Israel was not to be like pagan kings; he was not to rule on his own authority; he was a representative of God, the ultimate king. He was not to rule for his own glory or power but as a servant of his people. His goal was to ask what he could do for his people, not what they could do for him (Deuteronomy 17:14–20).

When a Christian husband loved his family this way in the Greco-Roman world, people would have taken notice. They would have asked what was so different about that man, why he treated his wife, his children, and even his slaves with such value and loving care. And the Christian man could point to Jesus.

The same is still true for us today when we love each other the way Jesus loves – humbly putting one another's needs ahead of our own, showing one another grace, forgiving one another, being patient and kind, and all the other qualities of *agape* love (1 Corinthians 13:4–8). Our marriages, our families, and our church communities can be a light to the world of the deep and wide love of Jesus.

Q: How do healthy Christian marriages look different from worldly ones today?

Q: How might your marriage improve if you focused more on loving your spouse the way Scripture describes *agape* love in 1 Corinthians 13?

Q: What does it look like to serve one another in marriage sacrificially?

Ephesians 5:32–33 (yes, we're reading v. 32 again) [Read]

Talking Point 3: Love and respect are crucial to a healthy marriage.

Q: How is marriage a “mystery,” as Paul had talked about with other things earlier?

Q: Why are love and respect important in a marriage?

Paul talked about Christian marriage reflecting Christ's love for the Church and ended by saying it is a “profound mystery.” Earlier in Ephesians, Paul used the word “mystery” to describe other things: God's plan to *unite* all things to Christ (1:9–10) and *unite* Jew and Gentile into one body (3:1–11).

In Scripture, a “mystery” is not something unknowable but a truth previously hidden in God’s plan that is now revealed through divine revelation. Paul wasn’t saying it was a mystery to him how anyone could really love his wife as Christ loved the Church. He was saying marriage was designed from the beginning to point us to the relationship between Christ and His people; we just didn’t understand that until God revealed it to us. That’s why he pointed all the way back to creation, saying “they shall become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24).

Marriage was never just about companionship or building a social institution. Paul reveals that God’s design for marriage, established at creation, ultimately points beyond itself to the union between Christ and His Church – a relationship marked by Christ’s sacrificial love (Ephesians 5:25, 31–32).

Marriage is a picture of the Gospel; the roles of husband and wife point to it in different ways. Husbands are called to love sacrificially, reflecting how Christ gave Himself for the Church. Wives are called to respond with loving respect and submission, reflecting the Church’s joyful obedience to Christ. Together husband and wife become a living illustration of the Gospel.

The imagery of marriage runs through the whole story of the Bible. It begins in Genesis, continues through God’s relationship with Israel, reaches its fullest depiction in Christ and the Church, and culminates in the wedding feast of the Lamb, after which God will live with His people forever.

The “one flesh” union established at creation was always intended to foreshadow the greater union between Christ and His people. This is why Paul called it a mystery, a hidden truth later revealed. Adam and Eve could not have known their marriage was a prophetic picture. It is a *profound* mystery because it shows us that God embedded a picture of the Gospel into creation before anyone even knew a need for the Gospel, before they sinned and knew they would need a Savior.

In the final verse of this passage, Paul brought his teaching on marriage to a practical conclusion. Husbands are commanded to love their wives as themselves, and wives are commanded to respect their husbands (Ephesians 5:33). Just as Christ sacrificially loves and leads His Church, husbands are called to lead their wives through selfless, sacrificial love. Just as the Church submits to Christ, wives are called to submit to their husbands’ leadership, honoring and respecting them. Both roles are essential to reflecting the relationship between Christ and His Church.

This does not mean wives are exempt from loving their husbands (Titus 2:4) or husbands from honoring their wives (1 Peter 3:7). Rather, here Paul places particular emphasis on the responsibilities of each spouse within God’s design for marriage.

Ultimately, marriage is about more than personal happiness or family stability. It is an opportunity to display the relationship between Christ and His Church. When

unbelievers observe our marriages, do they see something different from the world around them? Do they see husbands who sacrificially love and lead their wives and wives who honor and respect their husbands? Do they see two people faithfully embracing God's design for marriage, growing together in Christlikeness, and reflecting the love of Jesus to their family, church, and community?

Q: How can strong marriages make a difference in our church community? In our society in general?

Q: What is at least one way you can practically show sacrificial love to your spouse this week?

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Took

Main Point: Biblical marriage is a picture of the Church's relationship with Christ.

Christian marriages will never picture Christ and the Church perfectly, but every husband and wife can take another step toward reflecting that relationship more faithfully.

Complete the statement that applies to you:

- **Husbands:** This week, I will demonstrate love for my wife by _____.
- **Wives:** This week, I will demonstrate respect for my husband by _____.
- **Those who are unmarried:** This week, I will reflect Christlike love and joyful submission to Christ by _____.

Encourage everyone to choose one specific action they can take within the next few days – not merely a general intention.

Close by asking the Holy Spirit to help husbands lead through sacrificial love, wives respond with willing respect, and every believer display the character of Christ in their relationships.

CHALLENGES

THINK: *If you are married:* reflect on your marriage. Does your relationship reflect the unity of Christ and the Church? The sacrificial love of Christ for His people? His people's submission to His authority? Are you both loving each other the way 1 Corinthians 13 describes? Are you bearing the Fruit of the Spirit as described in Galatians 5:22–23? Are you loving each other as your own flesh? Are you living and working together as one flesh, as a team?

If you are not married but are interested in getting married: Why is it important to be careful about whom you choose to marry? To choose someone who understands marriage the same way? Someone who is following Jesus with his or her whole heart and will love you the way Jesus loves? Why is important to work on your own spiritual growth so you can be the kind of person who loves your spouse well?

If you are not married and not interested in getting married: How can this passage still apply to your life? What can you learn about Christ's love for His Church and the unity you can have with Christ? What can this passage tell you about how to treat others in your church community? What can it teach you about why love and respect are important in any relationship?

PRAY: Pray for the marriages of those in the church and even those outside of it. Pray for us to all grow in our love for Christ and one another. Pray especially for those who are struggling in their marriages, especially anyone who may be experiencing abuse, neglect, or any kind of pain. Pray for wisdom for them to know what to do and strength for those who need to escape abuse. Ask the Holy Spirit to grow us in spiritual maturity so we can love each other better. Pray for our marriages to be strong so they can be a light to the world of how God loves His people. If you are a husband, pray for the Spirit to guide you into a deeper, more Christ-like love for your wife. If you are a wife, pray for the Spirit to give you a trusting heart.

ACT: Read through 1 Corinthians 13:4–8 and Galatians 5:22–23 and be honest about how well you are loving others in your life. If you are a husband, reflect on how well you are loving your wife and ways you can love her more sacrificially like Jesus. If you are a wife, reflect on how you can love and trust your husband better through your submission. If you are not married, ask yourself how you are loving your family, friends and church family. Reflect on specific ways you can love your spouse and/or family better this week, then put those into practice.

¹ Lucille Ball Desi Arnaz Museum, “I Love Lucy Fast Facts,” accessed September 2, 2026, <https://lucydesi.com/i-love-lucy-history/fast-facts/>.

² Television Academy Foundation, “All in the Family,” *The Interviews: An Oral History of Television*, accessed September 2, 2026, <https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/shows/all-in-the-family>.

³ J. P. Mangalindan, “Ray Romano ‘Forced’ Himself to Rewatch All 9 Seasons of *Everybody Loves Raymond*: ‘I Was Quite Critical of It,’” *People*, December 5, 2024, <https://people.com/ray-romano-rewatch-everybody-loves-raymond-exclusive-8756715>.

⁴ Television Academy, “Everybody Loves Raymond,” accessed September 2, 2026, <https://www.televisionacademy.com/shows/everybody-loves-raymond>.

⁵ Margareth Lanziner, ed., *The Power of the Fathers: Historical Perspectives from Ancient Rome to the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2015).