

What's a Wife to Do? • Ephesians 5:22–24

We are prone to think that we live in unique times. Our ignorance of history leads us to believe that no other generation has faced the problems we face. That dangerous assumption can lead us to question that the Bible is relevant for our day.

This may seem especially true when talking about marriage, divorce and the roles of husbands and wives. The Bible's counsel can appear to be hopelessly antiquated and impossible to make work under contemporary circumstances. The instructions of Ephesians 5:22–24 sound more like words for the puritanical society of Victorian England than America in the 21st century.

But were things so much better in the first century when the book of Ephesians was written?

At that point in history Greek, Roman and Jewish culture and law presented a mixed bag of everything from horrible oppression to frightening liberty. Jewish society often demeaned women. Every morning the ancient orthodox Jew prayed and thanked God that he was not born “a Gentile, a slave or a woman.”

Divorce was common. Back in Deuteronomy 24:1 it tells what happens when “a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house”.

According to Jewish custom, the certificate of divorce had to be correctly written out by a rabbi and handed to his wife in the presence of two witnesses. It stated: “Let this be from me thy writ of divorce and letter of dismissal and deed of liberation, that thou mayest marry

whatsoever man thou wilt.”

There were many different interpretations of what it meant to find “something indecent about her.” The ancient scholar Shammai gave the most conservative interpretation saying that only adultery qualified. In contrast, the Jewish scholar Hillel taught that a certificate of divorce could be given for almost any reason including too much salt on a meal. And, according to Akiba, divorce could be justified if the man found another woman who was more attractive. Whatever the situation, the Jewish woman had no rights; she was considered property.

William Barclay writes:

At the time of Christ's coming the marriage bond was in peril even among the Jews, so much so that the very institution of marriage was threatened since Jewish girls were refusing to marry because their position as a wife was so uncertain.

Greek wives were treated worse! According to Demosthenes:

We have courtesans for the sake of pleasure; we have concubines for the sake of daily cohabitation; we have wives for the purpose of having children legitimately and of having a faithful guardian for all our household affairs.

Often Greek wives had no social life at all. They virtually never left the house. They had their own apartments and only the husband was allowed in.

There were no legal procedures or protections for divorce. Everyone did as they pleased. According to Barclay, “Home and family life were near to being extinct and fidelity was completely non-

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existent.”

The Romans were worse yet! For the first 500 years of the Roman Republic there was not one single reported divorce. The first recorded divorce was that of Spurius Carvilius Ruga in 234 BC. But by Paul’s time things had greatly changed.

The Romans didn’t have a yearly dating system like we have today. Seneca says that women dated the years by the names of their husbands. Martial reports a woman who had ten husbands. Juvenal tells about a woman who had 8 husbands in 5 years. Jerome claimed that one woman in Rome married her 23rd husband and she was his 21st wife.

By comparison, we live in times of relative morality, purity and faithfulness!

It is against that backdrop that Paul presents his view of Christian marriage. It is a sharp and beautiful contrast. This is God’s call for a relationship that is totally different to the sinful ways of the rest of the world. Ephesians 5 is the Christian’s call to a new morality, a new purity a new love, a new way of life. In marriage as nowhere else we are given the opportunity to demonstrate the revolutionary character of the Christian life!

Unfortunately, some have approached these verses negatively and pessimistically. Instead we must see these verses in the positive way God originally intended.

The question for this study is: What’s A Wife To Do? And the answer found in Ephesians 5:22 is: “Wives, submit to your husbands.” Ah, but what does that mean? Let’s find out by defining and describing submission.

In Ephesians 5:22 and 24 the verb that is translated “submit” is not in the original text. It is borrowed from verse 21 and reused since these verses are a further explanation of the command to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

Also, Paul carefully does not use the command “obey” which he later uses in Ephesians 6:1 and 5 when talking to children and slaves.

Submission is “yielding personal pref-

erence”. Just as all Christians are to generally submit to one another, the Christian wife is to specifically be submissive to her husband. This means that she is to have an attitude and a way of life that yields to his desires and preferences. She is to consistently elevate him and try to give him his way.

Let’s do some plain talking about what this means. When a couple first meets and falls in love, they try to outdo each other in pleasing one another. He buys her things. She gives up reading and learns to play tennis because he likes tennis. She reorders her life around him because she loves him. She yields her personal preferences to him.

Unfortunately, this too often changes. She increasingly wants her own way and demands her rights. He does the same thing. They begin to break apart. Simply stated, God instructs wives to keep going the way you started! Treat your husband during the 5th and the 50th year of marriage as you did on your 5th date. Be submission to him!

Most marital difficulties are over little things, not major issues! It is the little rubs of daily habits, snide remarks and competitive attitudes that disintegrate marriages. The infidelity, the dishonesty the verbal and physical abuse that leads to divorce is usually the product of little seeds that have been allowed to grow. God is here talking about the little things. Give in. Yield. Demonstrate your confidence in God’s ability to take care of you. Be submissive!

This does not mean blind obedience in contradiction to biblical truth and moral principle. You are not to be submissive to your husband when he tells you to lie, cheat, steal, deny Christ or anything like that.

Your ultimate allegiance is clearly to God and not to your husband. However, one aspect of demonstrating your allegiance to God is to be submissive to your husband in the yielding of personal preferences.

I see God’s plan working in many marriages. This kind of submission is good and

not bad, strong and not weak, beautiful and not ugly. There is no put-down, no subservience, no treating the other person in a demeaning way. Here are truly marvelous marriages where both partners live in liberty, respect and confidence. It works!

Submission is “allowing headship”. The wife who yields to her husband allows him to be the kind of “head” that God calls upon him to be.

But what does “headship” NOT mean? Husbands are never to become dictators. You will never find a biblical command for husbands to “lord it over” and boss their wives. The wife’s submission is a matter of her surrender of rights and not a husband’s exercise of rights.

The husband’s “headship” of marriage and home is to be patterned after Jesus. Christ is the “head” of the church in that the church can depend on him, is built upon him as the cornerstone and looks to him for help, instruction and encouragement.

Husbands are to be allowed by their wives to take responsibility for leadership in the home, to be the basis for family security and to model the right kind of life. In fact, it is the husband’s responsibility to demonstrate to his wife and children how to be submissive “to one another out of reverence for Christ”.

Leadership, or “headship”, may even mean a husband’s obedience to his wife! God explicitly commanded Abraham to obey his wife, Sarah, in Genesis 21:12 where Abraham was told, “Listen to whatever Sarah tells you.” In the Revised Standard Version of the Bible the command is even stronger when it says, “Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you.”

We create more theoretical problems than there are real problems with this command to submit. The Christian woman who loves the Lord and seeks to obey him will have little dif-

ficulty understanding what God wants and expects.

“Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord” does NOT mean that you are to obey your husbands in exactly the same way that you would obey God. That is obviously unworkable and contradictory to Jesus’ observation that “you cannot serve two masters”.

Your great and ultimate loyalty and obedience as a Christian is to God and to God alone. However, one aspect of your obedience to God is your submission to your husband. Therefore, you are to reckon that your attitude and relationship to him is an expression of your obedience to Christ. It is “as to the Lord”.

As a pastor I seek to serve as best I can. And, I thoroughly enjoy it! But the ultimate reason I am a pastor and I serve is because God has

called me to do that. I serve “as to the Lord”.

Ephesians 5:24 tells us, “Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.” What a super analogy! Christ loves the church. Christ died for the church. Christ lives for the church.

At Wooddale Church we want to please Jesus Christ! We don’t consider that an unpleasant or heavy duty. It’s a joy to be submissive to him who gave so much for us. We give him our time when we gather for worship. We voluntarily give generously of our finances so that others can learn about Jesus Christ. We allow him to make the major decisions of our lives. And I have never heard anyone grumble about any of these things! We do these things because we want to. We do them because we know Christ loves us and because we love him!

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Beautiful! No coercion! No threats! No intimidation! Wives, yours is the privilege of

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showing the church and the world how it is to be done!

This biblical submission does not mean degradation or inequality! Jesus Christ himself, the Son of God, became submissive to God the Father. He was not degraded and he certainly was never less than equal to God the Father. Jesus did it out of trust, choice and the knowledge that it was the best stewardship of his calling.

Wives, join with your sisters through the ages. Be models to your husbands, your children, your church and your world. Show us all

the beauty of being submissive to one another out of reverence for Christ by submitting “to your husbands as to the Lord”.

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