

Ephesians 5:18-33: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Ephesians chapter 5 verses 18 to 33 And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Wives, submit to your own husbands as to the Lord, for the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

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, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body.

Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother, and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

[1 : 26] However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. In the second half of Ephesians chapter 5, Paul moves from more general moral teaching to Christians, to teaching specifically directed to different classes of persons within households, to wives, husbands, children, servants and masters.

Here we find another example of the household codes of the New Testament. A very similar example of such a code can be found in Colossians chapter 3 to 4. Indeed, the very movement of Paul's argument here, from a discussion of God's indwelling through song to a household code, is the same as we find there.

There is much in these codes that seems very similar to what one might find in non-Christian household codes of the time. However, while much might appear very similar on the surface, when one lifts the bonnet or the hood and examines what is beneath it, one can observe that the engine and much else has been completely switched out.

It works according to very different principles. Paul contrasts being drunk with wine with being filled with the Spirit. Both are things that change your state. And he makes similar points here to Colossians chapter 3 verse 16.

In both cases, he's talking about a form of being filled. And the parallels are instructive. Being filled with the Spirit is paralleled with the Word of Christ dwelling in you richly.

[3 : 0 0] And in both cases, this is achieved or expressed in the singing of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. The expression of joy in our hearts. The way that the Word of God in the form of song conscripts our hearts' desires and encourages us to be people who meditate and memorise the Word of God.

Who hold it within our hearts as something to delight in and to reflect upon. This, for Paul, is what it looks like to be filled with the Spirit. And in both cases, continual and extensive thanksgiving is the purpose of it all.

In continual thanksgiving, the self continually renders itself back to God in gratitude for God's gifts. Verse 21 is a transitional verse. It moves from Paul's teaching concerning being filled with the Spirit onto his instruction in the household code.

There's a reference to submitting to each other. While there might be a sort of mutual submission, it clearly isn't symmetrical. What it means varies by person and context. And Paul goes on to explore this in the sections that follow.

The shape of what submission means for the child differs from what it means for the wife or the servant. However, there may also be the suggestion that husbands, fathers and masters also need to exercise a sort of submission appropriate to the nature of their relationships.

[4 : 1 7] Relationships where submission would not usually be included as an element. Their authority is not denied, but it may be radically reconfigured. Rather than lording it over others, they should act out of consideration for others, serving each other in love, following the teaching of Philippians chapter 2 verses 3 to 4.

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

And of course, this follows the example of Christ. Submission to others occurs out of reverence for Christ. This is not grounded in the natural claims of the other party so much as in honouring our Lord.

Such mutual concern and privileging of the interests of the other party would completely transform the dynamics of the relationship, even when the essentially hierarchical structures are maintained and even positively affirmed by Paul.

Wives are charged to be subject to their husbands as an expression of their appropriate service to the Lord Jesus. The relationship here is not just about, or perhaps not even primarily about, the private relationship of the couple themselves, but about the broader posture of the wife to her husband within the life of the household and its surrounding community.

[5 : 3 2] She should honour and show deference to him in the way that she relates to him personally and privately and speaks of him to others. Mature persons who are under the guardianship of others should be concerned to show them due honour and deference, to be responsive to them, and through encouragement and respectful candour to help them to fulfil their duties to us well.

Paul is not here teaching a slavish obedience, but a willing self-subjection. And he draws a parallel between Christ's headship and the husband's headship. We should think back to Paul's earlier description of Christ's headship in chapter 1 verses 20-23.

He raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.

And he put all things under his feet, and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. We can easily think of headship without recognising its character more as something exercised over us on our behalf.

We are to be subject to our head, but our head's authority is exercised in a way that strengthens us, rather than suppressing us. It makes all the difference that our head, Jesus Christ, is seated at God's right hand in the heavenly places, placed over all other rules, authorities, powers and dominions.

[6 : 56] This authority is exercised in a loving manner on our behalf. As we submit to it, we are empowered by it. Paul draws a parallel between Christ being the head of the church and being its saviour as his body.

As the saviour of the body, he's the one who acts on its behalf and delivers it and provides for it. The husband has been charged to act towards his wife as Christ acts towards his bride, the church.

Consequently, it is important that the woman or the wife respond to him accordingly. The husband's position relative to his wife is not merely by virtue of his greater power, but also by virtue of the Lord's intention, and she must honour that.

Husbands must follow the example of Christ. While Christ is clearly over the church, he willingly places the interests of the church ahead of his own and gives himself up for her. He does not lord it over the church.

Note that Paul never says that the husband is to exercise authority over his wife. Rather, the instruction is to love, an instruction that is repeated in three ways. The wife should give in her willing subjection what many unworthy husbands were inclined to demand and to coerce, and the husband in his initiative of love should give what many wives would be desperate to obtain and would try to manipulate.

[8 : 12] Christ is not subservient to the church, but he manifests humility in the way that he acts towards her. He is the lord of the church, but his lordship is one that ministers to the church.

He is presented as washing his bride. His bride is not perfect, but his loving gift of himself and his service of the church will bring out the church's beauty. Both wives and husbands should see themselves as loving servants of their spouse, seeking not to manipulate or to control, but through their respect and love accentuating and eliciting those virtues and those things that are good or glorious in their spouse.

The washing of water is a sort of washing of the bride to prepare her for her husband. Here Christ himself humbly performs this for his bride, and a reference to baptism should not be difficult to recognise.

The intense unity and intimacy of marriage should break down the competing interests that are so often pitted against each other within it, as Wendell Berry has powerfully expressed it. Marriage, in what is evidently its most popular version, is now on the one hand an intimate relationship, involving, ideally, two successful careerists in the same bed, and on the other hand a sort of private political system in which rights and interests must be constantly asserted and defended.

Marriage, in other words, has now taken the form of divorce, a prolonged and impassioned negotiation as to how things shall be divided. During their understandably temporary association, the married couple will typically consume a large quantity of merchandise and a large portion of each other.

[9 : 46] The modern household is the place where the consumptive couple do their consuming. Nothing productive is done there. Such work as is done there is done at the expense of the resident couple or family, and to the profit of suppliers of energy and household technology.

For entertainment, the inmates consume television or purchase other consumable diversion elsewhere. There are, however, still some married couples who understand themselves as belonging to their marriage, to each other, and to their children.

What they have, they have in common, and so, to them, helping each other does not seem merely to damage their ability to compete against each other. To them, mine is not so powerful or necessary a pronoun as ours.

This sort of marriage usually has at its heart a household that is to some extent productive. The couple, that is, makes around itself a household economy that involves the work of both wife and husband, that gives them a measure of economic independence and self-employment, a measure of freedom, as well as a common ground and a common satisfaction.

Husbands should love their wives as their own bodies, recognising that they are one flesh with them. To love and minister to the needs of your wife is to strengthen yourself. The married couple are to recognise that fundamental unity.

[11 : 02] The subjection of the wife to the husband is not the surrender of power to another party, but a willing yielding and deference to one by whom she is to be strengthened. The love of the husband is not the wasteful squandering of his strength and attention upon another party.

The husband isn't what some have called a simp. His loving ministering to his wife is ultimately a building up of himself as one flesh with her. Throughout all of this, Paul cannot help but show the gravitational force that Christ and his redemption exerts upon his thinking concerning this and all other matters.

Even when talking about husbands and wives, he is constantly talking about Christ and his redemption. Our relationships are modelled after Christ and ordered to the service of Christ.

Indeed, Paul suggests that the fundamental text concerning marriage in Genesis 2, verse 24 is ultimately about Christ and the church. In Christ, we discover that marriage was always a type of something greater, of the unity of Christ and the church.

The unity of husband and wife in marriage is not just a metaphor, but is a created type of the union of the son and his bride that comes at the very climax of history.

[12 : 16] A question to consider. Paul's vision of marriage is one of profound, asymmetrical reciprocity, where husbands and wives stand in very different kinds of relationship to each other, yet both put the other before themselves and in the manner proper to their positions are able to serve each other in love.

What are some of the ways in which the biblical teaching here and elsewhere challenges many of our cultural notions of marriage?