

Mar 23/25 Leader's Guide

Ephesians 5:18b, 21-33 "Spirit-filled Relationships"

This section of Ephesians is in the form of a household code. They were common in the ancient world to direct the patriarch of the household in how they should rule as husband of a wife, father of children, master of servants. Using the form of a household code Paul shows how the gospel, the good news of Jesus, the life of the Spirit transforms each of those relationships.

Read Ephesians 5:18b, 21-33

The only command within this passage is vs. 18 – be filled with the spirit. All the other verbs are participles, meaning they are implications of being filled with the Spirit. The key participle for us is vs. 21 – submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. To submit is to stand under. All of our relationships as followers of Jesus are to be marked by mutual submission.

1. What would relationships of mutual submission look like? What motive does Paul give for this?

Bending over backwards to learn and serve the needs of the other. When both of you are doing so – relationships flourish.

Paul gives the motive as "reverence for Christ", and to the wife he says "as to the Lord" – so the submission is done in relationship to Jesus alone – we submit as an act of worship.

2. (22-33) What are the postures each spouse is to have toward the other? [For Paul it is Jesus who defines and embodies headship so bring Ephesians 4:15-16 and Mark 10:42-45 into your discussion at that point]

The submission as spoken of above.

Husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church. Paul defines headship in 4:15,16 in that Jesus equips the church with everything that it needs to flourish. In Mark he speaks of his headship, his authority, as different from the authority of the world. Jesus defines his authority as one of service – the son of man came not be served but to serve and to lay down his life as a ransom for many. Headship then is about service with an eye to the flourishing of the other.

Love as Christ loved the church and gave his life for her. The word love is the word agape, self-giving love in action. It invites the husband to lay down everything, his career, his ambition, his resources, his time with an eye to seeing her become everything God desires her to be.

3. How would this teaching have spoken into the cultural norms around marriage in the first century?

Here is the unedited portion of the sermon where Tim spoke to the cultural norms and how this teaching transformed first century household relationships.

So what picture of marriage did these household codes give? what cultural norms is Paul speaking into here?

Well the commentator William Barclay is unmatched when it comes to giving cultural background – and in his commentary he names three major cultural influences - Jewish - Greek - Roman

In the Jewish culture a man got up every morning to pray the daily prayers – one of those prayers was this - I thank you God that I was not born a gentile – a slave – a woman – and why would you thank God not to be a woman in that culture? – well - by law a woman was not a person but a thing – her husband’s possession to do with as he will – divorce laws at the time – were such that only men had the right – could be finalized on the spot with a simple witnessed note – were so lax that she could be put away for even ruining his dinner – a divorced woman’s life was often utter destitution.

The state of marriage in greek culture was even worse - a wife was not even allowed to enter the front part of the home to be seen by guests – there was no real companionship between husband and wife - the wife was expected to run the home – care for legitimate children – no better than a slave - while her husband found companionship and pleasure elsewhere.

The state of marriage in Rome - worse still – absolutely no expectation of faithfulness on the husbands part - divorce was rampant – one historian wrote a girl was completely under her father’s rule – a wife completely under her husbands

The historian Rodney Stark reflects on this reality by sharing a letter written from a Roman husband to his wife – the husband was away on business – and was writing to say to her – I know that you will have a child while I’m

away - if it is a boy let it live – if it's a girl – leave it out to die.

With this common practice of female infanticide – there were an estimated 30 – 40% more men than women in the Roman empire – how do you address this imbalance – marry off women younger – 12 was considered a marriable age

Now how would Ephesus hear this? – we may bristle that a wife is called to submit – but let us see that Paul invites her into a relationship of mutual submission – husband stand under your wife – wife stand under your husband – we may bristle that the husband is called the head – but let us see that for Paul it is Jesus who defines and embodies headship – as a love that lays down all for the sake of the other

In a society where the husband could put away his wife at any time - for any cause and leave her utterly destitute – free to find pleasure anywhere else – Paul reminds them that marriage is faithfulness – permanence

Paul is putting forward a vision of marriage that was utterly transformative to the norms of his day - As one commentator put it - it is impossible to exaggerate the cleansing effect that Christianity had on home life in the ancient world - the benefits it brought to women – historian Rodney stark again points out the reality that the Christian community put an end to female infanticide – took in the baby girls left out to die - held up the permanence of marriage and faithfulness within it - cared for those left destitute by divorce – Christian women married much later than their pagan counterparts – were leaders in house churches – deacons in the movement - the gospel radically changed 1st century household relationships.

4. What are some of our current cultural norms around marriage? What is seen as the purpose of marriage in our culture?

Here is an unedited portion of the sermon where Tim reflected on this – there is more to say around this but this might provide a “jumping off” point for your discussion:

Culturally we approach marriage with that same consumer mentality – we have a sense of what kind of life – what kind of future we would most desire personally – and so we look for a spouse who can help us actualize that – so we'll prioritize compatibility - romantic passion – sexual chemistry – attractiveness – do they have the job – the resources – the drive to help me be all that I want to be – we believe that if we find someone completely compatible it will work – the problem is there is never a mr. or mrs. Right –

you will always marry the wrong person – for you really don't know them when you marry them – but because you love them you'll fill in all the gaps of what you don't know with all the things you would hope for – but at some point your marriage will hit a crisis – what kind of crisis?

Well – we're culturally committed to egalitarian marriages - where each person has their equal rights – but in a consumeristic self-fulfillment view of marriage this egalitarianism usually works itself out in a Tit for Tat negotiation for each persons self-fulfillment – and at some point one or both of you will not be meeting the others desires for self actualization the way you once did and a crisis will occur – with a demand for renegotiation – if that renegotiation is successful – well the marriage may continue – if not...

5. (vs. 27) What does Paul see as the purpose of Christian marriage?

That in marriage we would take on the goodness of Jesus – reflecting the new humanity we have in Christ. Reflecting his love, grace, mercy, kindness, love.

That Marriage would reflect the love that God has for us in Jesus.

6. How does an environment of mutual love and submission allow for the new humanity to be cultivated? How might we foster this in all of our relationships?

Tim Keller in his book – the meaning of marriage relates a story he shares when conducting marriage services – he says - think of an old bridge over a stream. Imagine that there are structural defects in the bridge that are hard to see. There may be hairline fractures that a very close inspection would reveal, but to the naked eye there is nothing wrong. But now see a ten-ton mack truck drive onto the bridge – what will happen – the pressure from the weight of the truck will open those hairline fractures so they can be seen. The structural defects will be exposed for all to see because of the strain the truck puts on the bridge. Suddenly you can see where all the flaws are. The truck didn't create the weakness – it reveals them.

When you get married – your spouse is a big truck driving right into your heart. Marriage brings out the worst in you. It doesn't create weakness – though you will often blame your spouse for it – it reveals them.

This is not a bad thing though – for Christian marriage at its heart is spiritual friendship – in light of what is revealed it is about speaking the truth in love

– forgiving one another - building one another up – inviting one another to live into the new humanity – supporting them as they do so – this is the kind of relationship we are all invited into as church – relationships of mutual love and submission where the new humanity might flourish - Paul here is simply working that out within marriage.

7. Paul does not give us rules for marriage, nor does he give us a framework (egalitarian or complementarian), he gives us a picture, a picture of a marriage, a picture of Jesus our spiritual spouse loving us and laying down his life for us and invites us to be filled with the Spirit and look at Jesus. Discuss

Paul is saying to us – in marriage – in any relationship - be filled with the Spirit – and look at Jesus.

For on the cross Jesus gazed upon our unloveliness and did not pull away but laid down his life - so that when we gaze upon the unloveliness in the other – we can say – I will - I will love you none the less

Be filled with the spirit and look at Jesus – who came not to be served but to serve and lay down his life a ransom for many – shaping us to submit – to stand under one another.

Be filled with the Spirit and look at Jesus – who gave his life to win for us a new humanity – that in an environment of mutual love and submission we may put on that humanity.