

THE FAMILY MVP

Your Strategic Role in Family Life

Text: Ephesians 5:21-33; 6:1-4

God's Power Comes Under

As we continue today our study of Paul's letter to the Second City of the Roman Empire, I invite you to consider with me some provocative counsel offered to any of us who are part of families. This passage of scripture is so relevant to family life that I recommend it to every young couple, as a possible reading at their weddings. Almost without fail, however, they ask if I have any other suggestions. I go on to point out that no text in the New Testament provides more explicit teaching on the topic of marriage and family life than Ephesians 5. Still, almost no couple chooses it. Why?

The problem is verse 22, the part where Paul says, "**Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord**" (Eph 5:22). An excellent text for Father's Day! But I lose most prospective brides (and older women) right there! And I can understand why. Can't you? At face value, Paul's words bring to mind the sort of God-ordained subjugation of women sometimes practiced in history or pictured so vividly in the popular book and television series, *The Handmaid's Tale*. If truth be told, many men are unsettled by that text too, as it seems to thrust us into a place of supreme authority we're not sure how to handle, or not without incurring a lot of time on the couch!

But this is precisely why we need to wrestle with this text, like Jacob wrestled with God, until he dislocates and realigns our conventional way of walking through family life. If you remember nothing else I say today, please remember this. Ephesians 5 is not about giving men power over women. On the contrary, it is about completely turning on its head the world's conception of the way real and lasting power works in human relationships.

We often think of power as something that one person wields over another person. When we talk about power-plays and rising to power, we are describing the process by which one person or party gains the upper hand -- the ability to control, coerce, or compel response from another. But when Jesus and the New Testament writers talk about power they are thinking of something different. They are speaking NOT of the dominating power that comes from winning a position OVER someone but the kind of creative power that gets unleashed from choosing a position UNDER someone.

Consider how often Jesus sought to emphasize this. "**If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all**" (Mark 9:35). Further along, Christ declared, "**For even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many**" (Mark 10:45).

When the crowds tried to make him a worldly king... or when Satan offered him political dominion over all the worldly kingdoms... Jesus refused the position, though (and I stress this) it would have been his to take by right. Instead he said, it will be by sacrificing myself on a cross that "**I will draw all [humanity] to myself**" (John 12:32). In other words, I will let go of my control, let go of my comfort, stoop all the way down, submit myself even to death and THIS will unleash a power that changes the world. Commenting on how right Jesus was about this, Napolean Bonaparte wrote toward the end of his life: "Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne and I myself have founded empires; but upon what do these creations of our genius depend? Upon force, Jesus alone founded His empire upon love; and to this very day millions would die for Him."

As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. so often observed, the greatest and most enduring power is not the kind that grants a benefit to one and not the other, but a power that eventually lifts everyone up who lives in its light. That's why the passage from Ephesians 5 begins as it does -- with an encouragement to both husbands and wives. It reads: "**Submit to one another, out of reverence for Christ**" (Eph 5:21). Then, just in case we missed his point, Paul gets very specific and personal.

Challenging Instructions

"**Wives,**" he says, "**submit to your own husbands as you do to the Lord**" (Eph 5:22) -- in other words, just as if it was Christ you were serving --- "**For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is head of the Church**" (Eph 5:23). Let me add, parenthetically, that the Greek word translated here as "head" has been the source of a lot of confusion in grasping this text. When we hear the word "head," we naturally think it means "higher authority" as in "head of the department" or "head honcho." When the ancient Greeks and the New Testament writers wanted to speak of headship = in THAT sense they virtually always used the word "archon" = as in "monarch."

It is striking, however, that the word Paul uses here is not "archon," but "kephale." It too means "head," but as in the sense of the "Head of the Nile." Kephale suggests a = "source." In Ephesians 5:23, Paul is invoking the creation narrative from Genesis 2 that tells us that woman's original source was man; she was created from his rib. In like fashion, says Paul, the Church's original source was Christ. Women, the point here is that you, like the whole Christian Church, depend for your existence upon a Source beyond yourself. Husbands and fathers are meant to be one of the major conduits through which God's grace flows into a family's life.

Men, this obviously places a significant responsibility upon us as well. Paul says: "**Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her**" (Eph 5:25). How does Christ love his Bride, the church? He listens patiently and perseveringly to the hopes and hurts of his Bride. He

dedicates himself to doing all he can to encourage and build up his bride. He sacrifices his natural rights and comforts on a cross to meet the needs of his Bride. So, guys, how like Christ is our treatment of our Bride? How are we giving our selves up for her?

If you want to have a great family, then here's what you need to do, says St. Paul: "**Submit to** -- as in serve -- **one another, out of reverence for Christ**" (Eph 5:21). Why do it? Because HE did it. If He who is the greatest of all, the one most worthy of spending his life in the comfy chair while all the rest of creation waited upon him could choose to serve us, then what's the chance you and I might stretch a little bit more to serve the people in our households out of reverence for Him? So, let me close by suggesting two practical ways that you and I can become our Family's Most Valuable Player, as we demonstrate what it looks like to submit or serve.

Practice #1: Entrust Decision-Making to the Other

First, entrust the power of decision-making to the other. That is always the way genuine Love works. "**Behold, I stand at the door and knock,**" says Jesus in Revelation 3:20, "but it is your decision to open the door." God's way is often to trust his beloved with power to decide even critical matters. And if God does that with you and me, it can't be that much of a stretch for us to do that with our spouses. Let me dare to venture an illustration from my own marriage. Our marriage is a pretty traditional one. I make all the really important decisions in our house -- like determining what America ought to do in Iraq and who should be appointed to the Supreme Court. I leave to Amy the less important stuff -- like where we're going to live and how we should raise our children!

Kidding aside, one of the common denominators I see in successful Christian marriages is the willingness of each partner to voluntarily give up to the other particular arenas of authority. Such couples seem to have identified specific areas where the other person perhaps has a giftedness the other lacks in the same measure. I'd like to say that the division of gifts was always predictable -- that women are always the more nurturing, and men always the better breadwinners. More often than not, however, the division is arrived at by experience and negotiation, sometimes changing by agreement as the years go by.

This doesn't mean that a couple doesn't still talk many issues through together. What it means is that there are certain arenas -- say finances or household rules -- in which the husband or the wife are given the tie-breaking vote. Sometimes they will offer that vote even to their children. As Paul says elsewhere: "**Love does not insist upon its own way**" (1 Cor 13:5). When one family member loves the others in such a trusting manner, it increases significantly the probability that the other partners will seek to listen to and incorporate the other's concerns into their decision-making. Where and how could you and I

entrust more decision-making power to the people in our homes?

Practice #2: Give the Other What They Need Most

There is also a second practical way we can serve -- one suggested explicitly in our text for today. We reverence Christ and serve our partner best when we affirm the other at his or her point of deepest need. And what is that point? I am always a bit wary of making generalizations, but because the Apostle Paul dares to, let me simply try and expand on his words. We find his counsel at the close of the passage. "Husbands," Paul says, "**each of you must love his wife as he loves himself**" (Eph 5:28, 33).

It may seem to go without saying, but in order to be freed up to be all that God wants them to be, women need to be loved by their husbands. What I mean is that they need to know that their husbands truly care for them and are working for their good. During our series on the FOUR LOVES, I mentioned Gary Chapman's wonderful book, The Five Love Languages. Chapman says that people tend to recognize love in five different ways. Some of us feel loved through words of affirmation. Some of us through the spending of quality time. Others of us by receiving tangible gifts. Still others through acts of service. And others of through physical touch. Fellow husbands, do we know what our wife's love language is? Do they know ours? Do we know how our children recognize love? Are we speaking their language?

And women, what is it that your men especially need? Paul puts it this way: "**A wife must respect her husband**" (Eph 5:33). Speaking now from the inside track, all I can say is that more than we usually know how to tell you, we need you to tell us that you see our essential competence and contributions. The reason a lot of us are too driven is because we are still working to prove that value. We put on a game face. We try to keep it all together. But deep inside many of us is this voice that says: "You're not quite good enough. Prove yourself again today." Wives, you can mediate the assurance of God to your husband in a way that sets him free to stop striving so obsessively for position and worth. Use this power.

So, let me wrap it up. Men, women, kids: "**Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.**" In practical terms, husbands, love your wives. Wives, respect your husbands. Children, honor your parents. Parents, don't unnecessarily provoke your kids. Don't lord over anyone in your household, but come under the people in your family. For in so serving, you will become your Family's MVP, the one who helps release the power of God in your household -- a power for healing, hope, and wholeness that God wants everyone to know.

Let us pray...

Gracious God, you have given to many of us special people who share our home

or wider life. On this journey we share together, keep us from being blind to their gifts or to the specific ways that we can express our love, respect, honor and care for them. Grant, O God, that through our daily service to one another, we might also bring joy and glory to you who are our Heavenly Home. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

\

PAGE

© Daniel D. Meyer / Christ Church of Oak Brook
PAGE * MERGEFORMAT 4

© Daniel D. Meyer / Christ Church of Oak Brook / 6-22-08
PAGE * MERGEFORMAT 1

Henry George Liddell, A Greek-English Lexicon, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996)