Pastor David M. Choi

**Defining Marriage Through Christ**

Calvary Baptist Church of New Haven

September 8, 2019

**Scripture Reading:** Ephesians 5:21-6:9

**Introduction:**

We are, once again, making our way through the book of Ephesians, and we are now very close to the end. Throughout this series, we’ve been exploring the question of what it means for us to *be* the church. And the way we’ve done this is by going to God’s word in this text, and by placing our entire church – its existence as well as its practices – under God’s critical scrutiny.

To review, remember Paul divides Ephesians into two main parts. In the first half, Paul gives us a theology in which we discover the church’s *origin* in Christ’s redemptive work and its *sustained life* in the reconciling activity of God’s Spirit. [Our vertical relationship with God.] In the second half, Paul then moves on to a discussion of ethics. Here, he focuses on *how* that theology concretely works itself out in practice through the Spirit. [Our horizontal relationship with others.] Don’t forget that this isn’t random. By starting in the place that he does, Paul is reminding us just how spiritually bankrupt our practices really are – or will be – *unless* we are first rooted in Christ and are made genuine participants of his kingdom. Or, to put it in simpler terms, being the church does not begin with *what* we do; it begins with *who* we belong to.

Now, some of you may find this review to be a bit repetitive. And that’s fine. But what you cannot say is that it is unimportant. Reading scripture responsibly means we go back to the beginning, again and again, so that we read each passage in its biblical context, and so that we understand how Paul arrives at certain conclusions as well as how those conclusions fit into the larger gospel narrative. But it’s especially important that we do this now, because today we have a behemoth in front of us.

The passage we read for this morning is one of two main passages in the New Testament, which are collectively known as the household codes. [The other passage can be found in Colossians 3:18-4:1.] The household codes are Paul’s written instructions to Christian believers who are in specific kinds of domestic relationships: wives/husbands, children/parents, and slaves/masters. And in these passages, what Paul is doing is he is showing the church how the gospel fundamentally reconfigures the way we relate to one another inside of these domestic relationships.

This morning we’ll mainly be focusing on the section pertaining to marriage and the marital relationship of wives and husbands. For now, I’ll be sidestepping the other two relationships, as, for most of us, it’s pretty obvious that children should obey their parents, and that the slave-master relationship is not as directly relevant, given that ours is not a slave economy as Paul’s was. But even so, I had us read the entire passage, because this section on marriage is so easy to misinterpret if we do not carefully read it in its immediate and broader contexts.

This won’t be your typical sermon on marriage. One of the reasons is that I myself am not married, and so, due to my lack of first-hand experience, there’s a limit to what I can say. Moreover, you can go online and listen to better sermons preached by people who actually are married and have experience. And so, to go about defining marriage, we won’t be starting with wives and husbands, as marriage sermons typically do. We’ll be starting with the church. Specifically, we’ll start by tending to the broader landscape of this passage, so we can see how this passage is interacting with Ephesians as a whole. Afterwards, we’ll then zoom in on marriage, and consider its mystery and intended purpose of reflecting Christ and the church as wives submit to husbands and as husbands love their wives. And then to close, I’ll gives us some points for application.

**Mutual Submission and Its Meaning:**

If you’ve been following along, and have been keeping up with us in our readings for Ephesians, Paul’s transition into the household codes, at this point, may seem fairly abrupt and somewhat out of place. And there are two main reasons for that. First, Paul is talking about the church proper in prior chapters, but then, all of a sudden, he shifts into a discussion of domestic relationships. And related to that, Paul goes from talking about how we are all equal and made one in Christ to how we should actually acknowledge certain social hierarchies. So, the question is how do we deal with this tension?

For some of the so-called experts, or New Testament scholars, the way they try and solve this issue is by saying that Paul himself could not have written this, because it’s just too incompatible with the rest of what he says. To me, though, that sort of solution is too easy, and frankly I find it a bit lazy, because it flattens nuance. And as we’ve seen, Paul is anything but a flat writer. I think if we read this passage in context it does make sense. And so, in these next few minutes, we’ll briefly consider that context in order to see how this fits into Paul’s overall message.

Starting with v.21 then, we see Paul exhorting every single member of the church to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Or, to give a better translation: “Submit to one another out of *fear* for Christ.”[[1]](#footnote-1) What Paul is saying is if believers are truly filled with God’s Spirit, then this will manifest itself in their mutual submission to one another. But what does it mean that we submit to one another?

Simply, it means we renounce our rights for the sake of others, in the way we see Christ renounce his rights for us through the cross, so that now I count the needs of others as more significant than my own, and so that I now see the maintaining of the unity of the Spirit, and the oneness of the church, as more important than my own happiness.[[2]](#footnote-2) It means no one is above anyone else, because Christ died for all and is now in all.

*However* – and here’s the important caveat – just because we are all called to submit to one another does not mean we are called to submit to one another in the same way. For Paul, mutual submission does not negate social distinctions. For this reason, there is variety with regards to what submission looks like. For instance, I, as your pastor, submit to you in going about my work as faithfully as I can, by preaching, teaching, praying, and guarding the sacraments. You submit to me by respecting the spiritual authority of the pastoral office that is endowed to it by Christ. You see? I submit to you out of fear for Christ, and you submit to me out of fear for Christ. But the way this happens is within a clear structure, which has been ordained by God.

To give one more example, in 1 Peter 5:5, it says, “You who are younger, be subject [or submit] to the elders.” And then notice what Peter says immediately after that: “Clothe yourselves, *all of you*, with humility toward one another…” In the church, younger Christians ought to subject themselves to older Christians, because they know older disciples are God’s gifts to us, and we have much to gain through their faith and wisdom. Yet, older disciples are called to submit as well, but in a different way. They submit by being humble and by exercising leadership that helps lead younger disciples to Christ. So, you see? We are called to submit to one another, but mutual submission *coexists* with a hierarchy of roles.[[3]](#footnote-3)

But in case it wasn’t clear, hierarchy in this sense has nothing to do with human value. Nowadays these concepts are so culturally charged, especially in our own hyper-liberal environment, that, for some of us, when we hear hierarchy we automatically correlate it to human value. But that’s not what’s happening here. Here, hierarchy is about showing deference where deference is due, because God is not a God of disorder but a God of peace.[[4]](#footnote-4) So, contrary to some of our cultural intuitions, the bible says if we want to understand the real meaning of relationships, we have to develop biblical intuitions. And a part of that is realizing that authority and hierarchy are not always bad. In fact, God has placed such things in our lives, because without proper authorities and hierarchies we cannot grow and flourish as God’s people.

**The Revolution of Mutual Submission:**

Now, the last thing I want to quickly highlight is the revolutionary character of what Paul is saying. Since we’re reading this text as moderns, who take basic notions of freedom and equality for granted, it’s easy for us to forget just how revolutionary Paul’s message is. Which is why we need to remember the time and place of Paul’s writing. Specifically, we need to remember that Paul is writing from prison in ancient Rome, in the first century to churches that are undoubtedly living within patriarchal societies and slave economies.

Keep in mind, that for them whatever rung you were born into on the social ladder was simply a matter of fate. There was no escaping it; there was no hope for changing it. So, for instance, if you were born female, you had no other choice but to accept male abuse and mistreatment, because those were the cards dealt to you by the gods. But then one day the gospel arrives on the scene, and it begins to overturn all of these social norms, social norms that have been codified by Roman law and pagan religion, because it wasn’t just women who now needed to submit to men, but it was men who now needed to submit to women.

Peter Brown, a renown historian from Princeton University, gives us a breath-taking view into what was happening around this time. With the arrival of the gospel, he writes, “Christians rethought [the social norms] in profound [distinction] from [Roman] society that took [slavery] for granted. [Christians] also now dissociated themselves from a view of the cosmos that seemed to support a chill indifference toward the brutalities accepted in the name of destiny.”[[5]](#footnote-5) So, do you see what’s happening? Because of the gospel, men are now beginning to lay aside once-held patriarchal views that they stood above women, and because of the gospel women are now having their eyes opened for the first time to see their God-given value, dignity, and worth in equal proportion to that of men.

In preparing for this sermon, I was dialoguing with Hawkins, and he reminded me that “the gospel is a lot more egalitarian than we think.” And he’s right. In an ancient world where it was taken for granted that men stood above women, Paul charges believers to mutually submit to one another, which now effectively does away with every societal form of male domination within the church. But notice how this differs from the way our culture approaches the issue of women empowerment. In Christ, freedom and equality are found not in self-absorbed autonomy nor in male-spitefulness. Rather, it is found in surrender, as both women *and* men submit to one another.

To Rome’s pagan society, it made sense that women should submit to men, but it was unthinkable that men should also submit to women, especially given the fact that many of the women, in this time period, were slaves.[[6]](#footnote-6) What we are witnessing in 5:21 is the inbreaking of God’s power as it restores human relationships, while not forgoing proper gender dynamics, and while not overlooking our creaturely distinctions.

Paul exhorts believers to submit to one another out of fear for Christ, because their mutual submission is, in fact, a form of witness. That is, in mutual submission, Christians remind each other how Christ deals with them, and by doing so they are being witnesses of the gospel to the world. In short, within the church, Christ has brought forth a revolution by calling Christians to submit to one another. However, mutual submission occurs within proper hierarchies and gendered distinctions – not apart from them.

**Household Codes:**

With all of this in mind, we should now be able to see what’s going on in our passage. In this passage, Paul is taking an extra step. That is, he is showing us how the gospel doesn’t merely redefine our relationship with other believers, but how its reach even extends to all of our most personal, private, and intimate relationships, namely, with members of our own household!

As we saw, Paul points to three specific kinds of household relationships. But this is now where we need to be very careful. In the history of biblical interpretation, a lot of preachers have preached this passage as socially normative and relationally absolute. What I mean by that is some people think that simply because Paul mentions these relationships that he is at the same time endorsing them. This is perhaps nowhere else more obvious than the way slaveholders in the antebellum south weaponized Ephesians 6 – and other biblical passages like it – in order to justify the institution of slavery.

In reading this passage, though, it is incorrect to hear Paul as endorsing any of these relationships or claiming them to be somehow relationally absolute. Rather, what he’s doing is a lot more modest and far more subversive than that. He’s saying given the existence and the reality of these relationships, this is how we ought to relate to one another *in light of the gospel*.[[7]](#footnote-7)

A lot of people ask, “But why not just condemn slavery and reject it outright?” Even if Paul did explicitly condemn slavery, it probably wouldn’t have much of a difference, because, again, slavery is foundational to the Greco-Roman economy. Moreover, the gospel is not about stirring anarchy; rather, the power of the gospel is in maintaining social and political order *while* changing it from within.

Paul knows he doesn’t need to cause riots. All he needs to do is plant. Because as the gospel becomes planted in our relationships, it will (super)naturally do its work of transforming some and destroying others. Of course, it doesn’t happen overnight, in the same way the abolishment of slavery, the desegregation of schools, or women’s suffrage didn’t happen overnight. Nonetheless, Paul is showing us how the gospel is working throughout history towards a more just and harmonious way of relating to one another.

**Wives, Submit to Husbands:**

Having said all of that, we now zoom in on marriage. For Paul, marriage is a gift given to us by God: for man and woman to enter into covenant relationship with one another for the sake of reflecting in their marriage relationship the spiritual reality of Christ and the church. In v.32, we see that this is God’s intended purpose for marriage; therefore, marriage can only be what’s supposed to be when both wife and husband are in Christ. Now, assuming that they are, Paul explains how wives and husbands respectively go about doing that.

In v.22, Paul writes, “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.” Notice, in the context of the church, a general submission is to take place amongst all believers. However, in the context of marriage, the *direction* of submission is unilateral.[[8]](#footnote-8) That is, wives are to submit to husbands, not husbands are to submit to wives. Second, in the context of marriage, the *nature* of submission to husbands is *qualitatively* different from say the manner in which wives submit to their small group members.

Notice, Paul’s theological explanation for this is embedded within his instructions. He says as wives submit to their husbands, which in the broader context of the New Testament is paralleled with obedience [1 Peter 3:5, 6] something about this reflects a deeper spiritual reality. It says husbands reflect Christ in the marriage relationship and wives reflect the church. And so, by submitting to their husbands, wives are reflecting the divine reality of how the church ought to submit to Christ by members submitting to one another.

The motivating factor in doing so is still out of fear for Christ. Wives, submit to your own husbands, *as to the Lord*. Husbands occupy a position of spiritual authority in their households, and it’s that spiritual authority that wives are primarily called to submit to. However, a husband’s Christ-role in a marriage relationship doesn’t mean he becomes Christ in any literal sense, nor does it mean he is all of a sudden indisputable. Husbands are obviously imperfect, and they remain sinful. Nonetheless, insofar as husbands are seeking Christ, Paul says submit. Not because your husband is Christ, but because submitting to your husband is one of the primary ways you have now been called to serve Christ.

Now, I want to pause here for a moment and disabuse us. One of the ways this passage has been grossly misapplied – predominantly by white, male, conservative preachers – is by turning this passage into a blanket statement and command of how women ought to ordinarily relate to men. That is, in reading this passage, they somehow oddly conclude that women *in general* should submit to men. Paul, however, is addressing very specific people here. He is talking to Christian wives, not single women, or even single Christian women. Moreover, nowhere in the New Testament do we ever find a command that women must submit to men, at least not in any unilateral sense. Only within the marriage relationship.

The other important thing to note, which I’ve already mentioned, is that here Paul is exhorting Christian wives to submit to their *Christian* husbands. In other words, Paul assumes that wives in the church are married to Christian men. Which means if you are a woman, and you are Christian, and are of age, then you should be seeking marriage with someone who is already himself a mature Christian, because if marriage is going to fulfill its intended purpose, and be all that God had created it to be, true marriage requires the spiritual maturity of both wife and husband. And this leads us to what Paul now has to say about husbands themselves.

**Husbands, Love Your Wives:**

In vv.22-24, Paul has depicted husbands as heads of their household. However, he moves on to explain more fully what that headship entails and what that headship looks like. Notice what might happen if we stop reading at v.24. Husbands might get the idea that Paul’s exhortation is for them to rule over their wives. For most men, our minds naturally go there, and this betrays just how much our ways of relating to and thinking about our female-counterparts are shaped by the fall. It reveals to us just how much we need the grace of God’s Spirit to sanctify us. But when Paul’s contemporaries heard him say this, they were probably thinking something similar. They were probably thinking that he was reinforcing the patriarchal norms of the Greco-Roman culture.

But he qualifies his statements of headship by saying this: “Husbands, *love* your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her…” Again, due to our vast historical, social, and cultural distance it’s difficult for us to hear just how subversive this is. But if you look at the ancient manuscripts of the Greco-Roman household codes, it is noteworthy that that word, love, is altogether missing. That is, loving ones wife was not considered to be a part of the husband’s duties.[[9]](#footnote-9)

So, when people are reading and hearing this letter from Paul, they are hearing it as something highly unconventional. To this, Harvard theologian, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, writes, “The patriarchal-societal code is theologically modified in the exhortation to husband… Patriarchal domination is thus radically questioned with reference to the paradigmatic love relationship of Christ to the church.”

Many of us might be wondering what real difference this makes. Sure, it may have been culturally and socially subversive in Paul’s time, but all of us know that husbands should now love their wives. But what Paul is saying here is just as subversive in our time as it was in his time. In an age of pornography, romance novels, and erotic films, the basic notion of love, which is written into our cultural DNA, is that love is sex and that sex is transactional. Therefore, love has been reduced to feelings and attraction, whereby it actually propounds some of the very things that Paul is trying to undercut, namely, that women are sexual objects to be used by men, and that women should just expect men to treat them this way. So, yes, love does seem to be a greater part of our social milieu, but it’s certainly not biblical love.

The other thing to point out is that while we seem to know that husbands should love their wives it’s contradicted by the fact that many people in our day and age are finding marriage to be highly limiting and repressive. And the reason for that, as Tim Keller points out, “is because there has been a change in our culture to the understanding of the purpose of marriage.” Whereas marriage used to be the free choice of two parties entering into contractual union to subordinate individual desires for something far greater, marriage is now all about my personal self-fulfillment. And this shift in our understanding shows why more and more people today are finding marriage to be undesirable. Statistically it shows. In 1960, seventy-five percent of all US adults were married; today it’s less than fifty percent.

This is why what Paul is saying here is culturally subversive and unintelligible to so many moderns. First, Paul is saying you can’t experience genuine love with a partner outside of a marriage that is rooted in Christ. And second, husbands are to love their wives not in the way culture selfishly defines it but in the self-giving manner by which Christ has shaped it through the cross. Husbands, men, hear now this excerpt from St. John Chrysostom:

Do you want to your wife to be obedient to you, as the Church is to Christ? Then be responsible for the same providential care of her, as Christ is for the Church. And even if it becomes necessary for you to give your life for her, yes, and even to endure and undergo suffering of any kind, do not refuse. Even though you undergo all this, you will never have done anything equal to what Christ has done. You are sacrificing yourself for someone to whom you are already joined, but Christ offered Himself up for one who turned her back on Him and hated Him. In the same way, then, as He honored her by putting at His feet one who turned her back on Him, who hated, rejected, and disdained Him, as He accomplished this not with threats, or violence, or terror, or anything else like that, but through His untiring love; so also you should behave toward your wife. Even if you see her belittling you, or despising you and mocking you, still you will be able to subject her to yourself, through affection, kindness, and your great regard for her.[[10]](#footnote-10)

**Points for Application:**

First, Paul does not begin with a discussion of marriage, but he begins with a discussion of the church. There is no hope for a proper marriage that reflects the mystery of God’s wisdom, and his intended purpose for it, unless your marriage is born out of the church itself and is held accountable by it. In the church, we are all called to submit to one another because we as a church submit to Christ as our Lord. And marriage is meant to be a microcosm of what takes place within the church. Therefore, wives cannot submit to husbands and husbands cannot love wives rightly if they first haven’t learned how to submit to the church-body in fear of Christ. In other words, the connection here with what Paul’s said before is that if your mutual submission amongst believers is genuine then it will show by how husbands love their wives and by how wives submit to their husbands.

Second, Paul is giving us a picture of two things: what we should aspire *to* as a potential marriage partner, and what we should look for *in* a potential marriage partner. For us to live into Christ’s design for marriage means we begin taking seriously our search for the sort of person who can submit, or for the sort of person who can love self-sacrificially. Moreover, it means we start forming the mental, emotional, and spiritual habits of making faithful judgments with respect to a person’s faith and character. Is this someone who knows how to submit? Is this someone who will have absolutely no regard for himself but will love me akin to how Christ gives himself up for sinners and the church?

Third, many of us come from broken homes with divorced parents, parents who are non-Christians, or parents where only mom or dad is Christian. Many of us also have friends or siblings or colleagues whose marriages are struggling. Through Christ’s vision for marriage, may we know how to pray for such marriages. May we know how to encourage and support our friends and parents, and the broken marriages within our church. We ask God for reconciliation and healing. We ask God for these marriages to fulfill their intended purpose.

Fourth, we need to remember that Paul doesn’t think that marriage is for everyone. In evangelical churches, though, we have a tendency to idolize marriage, and have even gone so far as to make it a primary site for salvation. We raise our children and condition our young adults into believing that marriage is a matter of course rather than a serious calling. We have to remember that marriage is not a given; it’s a calling that needs to be discerned and prayed over. In the same way, singleness and celibacy is not a given, but is a calling that needs to be discerned and prayed over.

Having said that, it’s ironic that for a sermon on marriage I would be closing on this note. But it’s true. The church desperately needs to regain a vision of singleness and celibacy for the Christian life, and of spiritual family and friendship. We need to realize that the greatest blessings in life are not strictly found in the sexual intimacies of marriage, child-rearing, or whatever. Rather, it is experienced in Christ, and Christ alone is enough. We are saved by Christ, not by marriage. Lord knows we need more people to remain single, and faithfully respond to his calling for singleness, for the sake of greater gospel witness and ministry.

If you are married, or ever do get married, remember your marriages won’t last. In the final days, your marriage vows will be dissolved, for in our union with Christ they will have at last fulfilled their purpose. And if you are single, and remain single for the rest of your life, remember that there is a better marriage waiting to happen. Indeed, your singleness won’t last forever. Christ will one day claim his bride, and, for the life-long singles who lived by faith alone, I trust you will be handed a reward, and experience a kind of satisfaction, that will undoubtedly make the rest of us envy.

1. Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 366. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Lincoln, *Ephesians*,365. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Lincoln, *Ephesians*,365. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 1 Corinthians 14:33 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Peter Brown, “Rome: Sex & Freedom,” *The New York Review of Books*, December 19, 2013, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2013/12/19/rome-sex-freedom/. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Brown, “Rome: Sex & Freedom,” 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, trans. Ross M. Wright (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 145-146: “The fear of Christ (5:21) both justifies these relationships and guarantees that they are not absolute relationships… The restoration of the human orders of creation occurs through an indirect attack upon these relationships in their current state – not externally but internally and from the roots. It attacks them by allowing them to remain.” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. “Husbands, love your wives” is a form of submission, but in a weaker sense. Here, Paul’s explicit use of submission language for wives only suggests that there is a stronger type of submission that ought to be happening in the direction of wife to husband. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Lincoln, *Ephesians*,374. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. St. John Chrysostom, *On Marriage and Family Life*, trans. Catherine P. Roth and David Anderson (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1986), 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)