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SERMON RESOURCES

Sunday, September 1, 2013

Marriage Roles, Part I: Different, But Equal

Central Text:

²¹ submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

²² Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.

Ephesians 5:21-23

Marriage in Old Testament Context:

9 Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. 10 For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! 11 Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? 12 And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken. Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 (ESV)

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. Why do we often assume that anything other than identical roles in marriage means that one partner is more valued or powerful than the other? Do we perhaps apply our understanding of duties and assignments from the work environment to our home life?
2. Why do you think God goes into detail, telling husbands they must sacrifice for their wives just as Jesus did for the Church?
3. It has been said that husbands must actually go further than Christ did by doing what He never did nor could do for the Church: apologize. How is apology in a way the ultimate sacrifice for one's mate?

A couple of important questions addressed:

(Answers to these questions are written by Dave Desforge, Lead Pastor of Grace Community Church / Mills River, NC)

What does the Gospel say about "submitting" in an abusive relationship (emotionally, verbally or physically)?

Any time abuse of any kind is at hand, seek professional Christian counseling.

There are two things to remember about 'submission' in Ephesians 5. First, that our submission to our spouse is a sub-submission: that is, our marital submission is a consequence of our submission to Christ and secondary to it. We are never called to submit to a spouse in a way that would mean nonsubmission to Christ. Another way to say that is that our spousal submission should never involve sin or participation with it. To submit to significant and ongoing abuse would be participating in our spouses sin (psychologists call it enabling or co-dependency).

Second, submission is simply a form of love and should never contradict it. To serve and love someone should be rather synonymous. As we've seen in the sermon series, we often apply non-biblical, cultural ideas to the word 'submission'. Submission in Ephesians is one special way loving like Christ takes shape in marriage. And, how exactly did Christ love or serve? By doing what was in the person's best interest, not always by doing whatever they wanted, which was often harmful to others and/or self-destructive. So sometimes Jesus put people before Himself, by confronting or conflicting with them (as He does with us all): for example, the women at the well, Peter, and Simon the Pharisee. Standing by and letting someone's sin run rampant is not loving them, nor is it serving them. Often, in a twisted, unfortunate sort of way, it is serving ourselves. For instance, in some cases it can be that a person is using the abuser's sin as a way to assuage their own guilt (perhaps a sort of relational martyrdom).

So much can be said for striving toward a humble spirit that focuses on placing your spouse's needs first. The problem is that at some point a decision will have to be made that, for whatever reason, could not be met with "mutual admiration". My experience is that if you have children, this is just a matter of when. Someone is going to have to be held responsible to "make the call".

How would I respond to that?

I really do feel for your question. I've been in the children stage myself and it is not easy! As I respond, I am not assuming anything about what you might or might not personally believe, since we haven't talked. I am merely replying in a general sort of way.

You are right that there are many practical problems and difficult decisions to be made in marriage. I hope this question will be answered somewhat by the diagram (see Bulletins for Oct 2-16 2005) and my two or three sermons on the differences in the mutual submission of husband and wife, but some comments can also be made here that rarely have time to be made in even a series of sermons. I believe what I have been presenting is the Gospel's third alternative to either conservative or liberal cultural interpretations.

Please understand that I am not an advocate of egalitarianism or mutual submission without differences. This is not simply because it might lead to an impractical immobility of 'mutual admiration' or what I call the 'Chip and Dale syndrome'. But because Ephesians 5 clearly differentiates how a husband and wife carry out their mutual submission differently. I have spoken about why I believe that is given Paul's lofty view of God, and His plan for unity and love.

The important question is how does Ephesians 5 spell out the differentiation in our mutual submission? What matters is not what secular or religious culture says our roles should be, but what God says and doesn't say. As I see it, Paul is not here trying to provide us a management solution or division of labor, however helpful that could be, but a far more glorious vision. So, to me the typical way marriage roles are presented cheapens or misses the real point, which is to say, misinterprets Scripture.

What is the Bible, particularly Ephesians 5 REALLY saying? Notice that Paul does not, though he easily could, give details about who should take charge, nor does he tell the husband to lead, or to make

decisions. Neither does he say anything about the husband's or wife's rights. There is only one command to the husband here, repeated and emphasized again and again. It's more about disposition and accountability to love than decisions. He paints broad strokes about how to relate to one another and our respective responsibility. He does not say the husband's responsibility is to make the hard decisions, but that he is to love his wife sacrificially. In fact, the husband is depicted here as more responsible for love and serving than the wife. And the wife is told not so much to defer to his family decisions as to cooperate and respond to his movements to sacrificially love her. I believe it is vital to focus on that vision. If we are to talk in terms of the responsibility for the spiritual leadership of the home, then it is that the husband is accountable to set the pace for unconditional, sacrificial, Jesus-imitating love in the family. The wife should feel served by the husband, and prioritized above his own or anyone else's interests, and the rest of the family should be able to clearly see it.

This does not mean there is no practical application as to decisions, just that we ought to be careful not to read and interpret the Bible through culture but vice versa. What might be that application then? For one thing, part of what mutual submission and love means is that a couple ought to know and care

enough about each other (and communicate deeply as part of that) that by far most decisions are mutual.

A second implication is that a husband ought not to view his role in a cultural way and assume the posture of supervisor but servant. So, it is not so much that everyone in the family should recognize my higher position but my lower: that I exist to put them all above myself. Lord have mercy! Thus, my disposition should be that I will do whatever will best care for my wife. And, part of the point is that

wives are people too, and, like husbands, come in wonderful colors of variation of personality and gifts and experience and woundedness. If my wife is served well by my making a difficult decision, then I will do so. But, there may be times when it may be best for her that I encourage her to make the decision with my full support, or that we agree we can wait to decide together. Sometimes children most need to be told that a united decision will be forthcoming. I regret now that there were too many times when I believe Maggie felt dismissed by my decisiveness -- when in actuality the situation was not nearly so critical that immediacy was the only option. The simple, unmistakable point is that loving my wife is always the goal, and is not somehow less important when we are dealing with our kids. Although it isn't just pragmatic, I think that has more impact on the children in the long run. What is most important is that they see Christ in and through us. In my experience, many marital issues between couples with children revolve around bitterness, where one or both spouses feel disrespected and unloved due to parenting issues.

Certainly, as a husband, another application is that I ought to be striving for what most of us men fail miserably at, which is to be an avid listener of my wife: knowing not only her thoughts but her heart. As you mention, with kids especially, many decisions must be spontaneous and immediate. So, I believe it is most wise for there to be plenty of anticipative conversation between spouses. I ought to be able to respond quickly as a husband when needed because I know and my wife trusts that I know her heart so

well. Such conversations might include talks like: "Maggie, as those times come up, what are your feelings for how we should handle it? I want to care for you, how would you most feel that? I am willing to take the heat and make the hard choices and wash your feet, how about a signal as to when you would most like me to do that? Can we agree even now on times when it would serve you well for me to do that? Can we agree that when I or you make a disagreeable decision that we will talk it out later when the kids are not around?" So, I don't think wife-loving leadership is so much making a decision to which she should defer, as much as being willing to make decisions when needed to which she would feel died for and in which she would willingly yield to my sacrifice.

Since I believe the husband's love is to be active and in a sense courageous, there are times when I just make a judgment call and step in boldly and decisively. But I think this should be done with enough humility to know that I may have been wrong, and especially that my wife may have felt 'unserved': meaning that I ought to be open to her feedback and criticism as part of how I sacrifice for her. Now if all this sounds much less tidy than the usual interpretation, it is. I tend to look for the same lines to color inside with marriage that I tend to look for with every other area of faith. I believe God resists that. And,

if this sounds hard, it should. In fact, it will require faith and repentance and prayer and the Spirit. And, isn't that sort of the point of the Gospel?

Notice, though, that I have emphasized a uniqueness of role while resting it on a foundation of mutual love and submission. I have tried to suggest how a husband might implement his calling to love, serve, and in a sense submit more. I find that view different than either the conservative or liberal interpretations I've heard and closer to those interpreters who are focusing on the context of Ephesians.

Perhaps we can all pray for each other?

Additional Resources and Art Forms:

So, I need help. I think my marriage is in trouble, and I need someone to talk with. Contact Pastor Steve at (828) 655-1399 or shawkins@brcmarion.org. We provide pastoral counseling as needed, completely in confidence. We also provide referrals to licensed Christian therapists who can help you. There is no charge for counseling provided by our pastors or for referral to a licensed counselor. Standard rates apply for outside counseling.

Questions about your spiritual journey? Need to talk with someone?
Email Pastor Steve: shawkins@brcmarion.org