

"Successful Marriages in the 21st Century" Colossians 3:18-19 6/5/94

READ Colossians 3:12-19 (RSB/SDB)

Re-read Col 3:18a "Wives, submit to your husbands"

Few statements in Christianity create more uneasy feelings than that one.

For twenty or more years we have been inundated with instruction in our schools, programs in our entertainment world, and even advertising that tell us such a concept as "submission of wives to husbands" is at best archaic and at worst a basis of all kinds of abuse.

Our young men and women have grown up in an era that teaches that such submission leads to women being treated as non-persons who are nothing more than decoration or slaves.

In one of the hotels I was in during the last two weeks I watched part of a documentary of sorts on golf-great Arnie Palmer.

Part of the program was an interview with his wife of over 35 years.

She described their early years together, as he pursued his career in golf and they traveled and moved a great deal.

What I found interesting was how this nearly 60 year old woman, who in spite of apparently a good relationship she and Palmer have, found it necessary to nearly apologize for her willingness to follow her husband's lead and build her life around his.

So pervasive in our culture is the idea of autonomy and independence and individualism, even in marriage, that this woman described her relationship to her husband as apologetically "old fashioned".

I thought, "how sad".

Here's a woman who is perpetuating the idea that to give her life for her husband is at least out of step if not wrong somehow.

I am convinced there is a great deal of confusion in our culture and even among Christians as to what are the proper roles of men and women.

Our young men and young women are confused about whether there even are roles related to being a man or a woman, a husband or a wife.

Even some evangelicals have joined the chorus with the secular culture saying there are no roles in marriage or the church that are specifically male or female.

They have rejected any idea of a unique leadership role for men in the home.

The popular thinking seems to suggest there are only two options open in marriage relationships:

1. A controlling, domineering, selfish husband with a doormat wife or a "trinket" wife (kind of the media portrayal of Donald Trump and Marla Maples) OR
2. A totally egalitarian, leaderless marriage with no unique roles for husbands or wives based on their gender.

But what is God teaching in Colossians 3:18-19? - a whole different perspective on marriage.

Marriage as the Bible presents it, is neither authoritarian nor egalitarian. It is a man and woman uniquely charged by God with roles and responsibilities in the marriage that differ from each other and yet so perfectly compliment each other that the relationship grows and matures resulting in increasing satisfaction and joy in each other.

"Wives, submit to your husbands; husbands, love your wives."

Look at the context in which this instruction about husbands and wives is given:

The Apostle has just written of the "new life" that is ours in Christ.

Back in chapter 2:13 he reminded us that we were dead in our sins but now have been made alive in Christ.

And he begins chapter 3 by reminding us that since we have this new life in Christ we can live very differently than before.

In verses 5 & 8 he lists some of the ways of the old life that we are to be done with - notice they are all matters relating to relationships.

And in verses 12-14 he lists some of the ways of the new life - and again notice they are all about relationships.

And probably in no relationship more than in marriage are these attitudes and actions more clearly manifested

Husbands and wives get bogged down in hostility - blaming each other for each other's lack of happiness.

OR husbands and wives treat each other with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience and truly do become a source of the other's happiness and thus their own happiness.

Through verse 17, you will notice, Paul has not yet specified any particular relationships.

But beginning at verse 18 through chapter 4:1 the Apostle sets forth three relationships: wife and husband; child and parent; and slave and master.

God has called us to a new kind of attitude and action toward each other and now he puts that into the context of the most practical and basic of relationships.

FIRST he writes about how wives and husbands work out this new life God has called us to.

The text tells us there is a God-ordained framework for marriage through which this new life is lived out.

He is about to tell us exactly what kind of responsibility husbands and wives have toward each other that will foster the relationship he wants for them.

Paul is taking the great spiritual themes of the first 2 1/2 chapters and bringing them right down into the dailyness of life - "wives, submit to your husbands and husbands, love your wives."

Let's take a look at each of these phrases and see what Paul is teaching.

"Wives be submissive to your husbands as is fitting in the Lord."

When Paul says "be submissive...as is fitting in the Lord" he is appealing to their new relationship to Jesus.

Now that they belong to Christ, now that He is Lord of their lives, they will do what he wishes - what is proper according to his design and desire.

For a wife to live under the Lordship of Christ means she will submit to her husband and that is what is fitting or proper in the Lord.

But what does "submit" mean?

It does not mean a mindless, spineless doormat asking "How high? when told to jump.

Do you remember Edith and Archie Bunker in the television show "All in the Family"?

It was intended by the writers that we would be appalled when Edith would scamper to do Archie's bidding as he would dictate his demands from his chair in front of the T.V.

We would all laugh, somewhat embarrassed, when she would scurry about mumbling mindlessly as she did what he commanded.

It was a good example of everything a marriage wasn't supposed to be.

Unfortunately the implication was that the corrective to this all-too-true and prevalent description of marriage, was an emancipation of the wife.

If only she would stand on her own two feet and tell him where to get off.

If only she would start taking care of herself and taking charge of her own life and living out her own wishes.

But God calls wives to submission not to some kind of emancipation.

And the "submission", here directed by God, is not thoughtless acquiescence to abuse, it is not domestic slavery.

23 times, Paul uses the word "submit" in his letters.

Over 40 times the word occurs in the N.T.

And the word carries an overtone of authority and submission to that authority.

The word means to place oneself under authority - to acknowledge someone's' rightful authority over you and to yield to that authority.

As it is used here in Colossians 3 it obviously indicates a voluntary submission.

For Paul does not tell someone else to subject the wife - to force her into submission BUT it calls on her to place herself under authority.

Placing ourselves under authority (submitting) is something God often calls his people to:

Look with me please at I Peter 2:13 READ

Not only did Peter give this instruction but so did Paul:

In Romans 13:1 he wrote "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities."

Clearly the specific example there is regarding civil government but the principle is one of subordination to authority.

Now look at I Pt 3:1 READ

Taking the principle of submission to authority, Peter applies it directly to wives.

I want you now to turn to the book of Ephesians chapter 5.

As you find Eph 5, listen to Titus 2:3 "The older women (in the church) are to train the younger women to be subject (or submit - same word) to their husbands."

Now in Ephesians 5 we come to the most well-known verses on the matter - v 22-24.
READ

The most casual perusal of this text, when compared to the Colossians text, will demonstrate that what we have here in Ephesians is a fuller treatment of the same instruction given in Colossians.

And here in Ephesians we are given not only the basic instruction ("wives submit to your husbands") but we are given the rationale, the reason:

"For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church."

In 1st Corinthians 11:3 God gives the same word, I quote: "Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God."

I have given you all these verses to demonstrate that the N.T. clearly teaches an authority and subordination in relationships.

Now in recent years there have been a number of good people who have made an effort to understand this words "submit" to mean something other than "yielding to authority" and the word "head" to mean something other than "authority".

But on the whole their arguments are unconvincing in the face of the overwhelming evidence of Scripture that this word "head" means authority and leadership and the word "submit" means yielding to that authority.

It is true that many times, even in the church and sometimes especially in the church and among Christians, there has been abuses of authority.

But I know the answer to the abuse of authority is not to redefine the words of the Bible but the answer is in determining what God meant all along.

To the feminists and even to the evangelical feminists the word "subordination" has means denigration as if a person cannot be equal and subordinate at the same time.

They somehow insist that personal role and personal worth must go together.

But that is not true.

When we were studying the Gospel of John together some months ago we saw time and time again, Jesus stating his equality with the Father.

In chapter 5 he reiterated this concept that He and the Father were one and he was fully equal to the Father and yet in verse 19 he spoke of his subordination to the Father.

As we saw then, Jesus was equal in being and yet subordinate in function or role.

Clearly Jesus had no difficulty with being equal and subordinate at the same time because those words speak to two separate issues: one to personhood (equality of being) and the other to role (subordinate in function).

Jesus didn't for a minute believe that his subordination to the Father reduced him to a non-person, or to the status of a slave, or in anyway denigrated him.

Likewise, wives may submit themselves to their husbands without reducing their personhood, without taking the posture of a slave BUT by choosing to function in the God-ordained order of husband-wife relationships.

If we grant that "submission" and "headship" have to do with subordination and authority, and

If we grant that such submission doesn't necessarily reduce a person to slavery or less personhood,

We still haven't answered the question of what that "submission" looks like in everyday terms.

Some would like an answer as specific as wives are supposed to do laundry, care for children, make most of the meals, decorate the home, and get their husbands drinks when they're watching the NBA finals.

Clearly that is not what the Bible has in mind.

Others would like it to be a little more general as in wives are supposed to accept their husbands decisions without argument and then work as hard as they can to accomplish the husband's arbitrarily determined goals.

Clearly that is not what God has in mind.

But I don't think it is best to define submission in terms of specific behaviors because each husband-wife relationship is a little different.

Each person differs in intelligence, in natural abilities and in giftedness from the Lord AND SO in one marriage compared to another the husband and wife may do things very differently.

BUT fundamental to submission is an attitude:

I like the way one Bible scholar put it: "Submission on the part of a wife to her husband is her disposition to yield to her husband's authority and her inclination to follow his leadership. (Piper Discovering)

It is a choice she has made and by her actions it is apparent to her husband that her disposition, her basic posture, her first desire, the normal and usual way she acts is to yield to her husband's authority.

It is a choice she has made and by her actions it is apparent to her husband that her inclination, her predisposition, her bent, her propensity, the way she leans is to follow her husband's leadership.

We say it's a "disposition" and "inclination" because no authority is absolute.

She should never follow her husband into sin.

The husband does not replace Christ as her supreme authority.

"She will not steal with him, get drunk with him, savor pornography with him or develop some scheme with him." (Piper p 47)

Sometimes a wife may have to stand with Christ against her husband but she does so with a desire to see him change so that she may follow him.

She stands against him only with a clear demonstration that she doesn't like resisting his will and that she longs to yield to his authority again.

I'm not suggesting all situations demanding a decision to yield or resist are easy to recognize.

Most often they are not.

Much of life is lived with a great deal of ambiguity but the principle is that a wife has chosen to yield her will to her husbands.

Now I've already stated there are limitations to that principle and certainly I am not suggesting that she yield her will without him having the benefit of her counsel.

I believe a wife is responsible to give all the input she can in the decision making process with her husband AND foolish is the husband who does not heed the counsel of his wife.

But when an impasse is reached between them, apart from him asking her to sin, a wife's disposition is to yield to her husband's authority.

When I think back to 30 years ago tomorrow, June 6, 1964 when Barbara stated her vows to me - marrying me,

I can only now imagine how frightening that must have been for her.

Hitching her wagon to my star and me with night blindness - not literally.

But with my immaturity and selfishness (some of which I wonder if I will ever outgrow) she had reason to fear.

Therefore though her love was real, her faith could not most be in that young man who stated his vows to her but in her Lord who called her to risk - to risk loving and demonstrating that love in submission to her husband's authority and leadership -

And trusting her God that she would find her greatest fulfillment and joy in marriage through that relationship of submission.

"Wives submit to your husbands as is fitting in the Lord."

But that is not the whole of the instruction God gives regarding husbands and wives.

We read verse 19: "Husbands love your wives and do not be harsh with them."

Now this is the complement to submission.
This command completes the relationship.

For a wife's submission without a husband's love is abusive.
Just as a husband's love without a wife's submission is abusive.

You see, love and submission call each other forth.
Love elicits submission and submission elicits love.

Again the Ephesian letter written after the Colossian one gives a fuller definition of the husband's role.

READ Ephesians 5:25-28

What will give a wife freedom and confidence to submit to her husband?
Knowing that her good is a primary motivation in his life.

Paul makes clear that the model for a husband's love for his wife is Christ's love for the church.

And that love is sacrificial and deliberate.

When selfish desires are sacrificed at the alter of his wife's needs and even desires, a man loves his wife.

When a man places as a primary goal in life the development of his wife's abilities, gifts and person, he loves his wife.

When a man deliberately acts to help his wife grow in Christ - he loves his wife.

Again I borrow from John Piper: ([discovering...](#) p 38)

A man's love for his wife expresses itself not in the demand to be served but in the strength to serve and to sacrifice for the good of his wife.

A man's love for his wife does not presume superiority but mobilizes the strengths of his wife along with his own.

A man's love for his wife does not have to initiate every action but feels the responsibility to provide a pattern of initiative.

A man's love for his wife accepts the burden of the final say in disagreements but does not presume to use that authority in every instance."

Men, I think there is room for a lot of repentance in the way we have treated our wives.

Our selfish, authoritarian ways have been partly responsible for the unbiblical and yet understandable backlash that we are witnessing in our country and churches.

And I do not believe we will see a restoration of biblical submission on the part of wives until we see, first, a restoration of unselfish, sacrificial, and deliberate love on the part of husbands.

Gentlemen, I say this carefully but sincerely, we must woo, not seduce, but woo, encourage, properly entice the women of this country back into a trusting relationship of biblical submission -

And it will only happen as men learn to lead with love.

On the back of your bulletin is a quote that I think summarizes this need and call for loving leadership: READ

I've already mentioned that tomorrow is Barbara's and my wedding anniversary.

I can provide you no better example of biblical submission than my wife of 30 years.

Her steadfast patience with my slow growth,
her love for me in all my attitudinal ugliness,
her disposition to yield to my authority even in my immaturity,
and her inclination to follow me even through a lot of selfishness,
have time after time shouted to me - "Jerry, this love is precious.
Respect it, honor it, respond to it, grow through it and love in return.

Nothing has more called forth my love than her example of loving biblical submission.

Before you all, I wish to honor her today.

Barbara will you please come to the platform

Apart from my spiritual rebirth, I consider you God's greatest gift to me.

When I think of my sinfulness and my too often selfish ways, I often think in profound amazement - "she loves me."

Thank you for you love, your patience, your willingness to come alongside me, to walk with me through life.

I cherish you. (Flowers)

PRAYER

Benevolence offering

Benediction: "Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." AMEN