

**Sermon File # 1136**

**Scripture Text: Ephesians 5:21-33**

**Sermon Title: *Successful Marriages***

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**Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.**

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## ***Successful Marriages***

### **Introduction:**

Open your Bibles with me to Ephesians 5, beginning with verse 21. Earlier this year we worked our way through most of Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, which was probably also intended to be circulated among several churches in the surrounding area of Asia Minor (present-day Turkey). In the first three chapters of Ephesians, Paul writes a doctrinal section that expounds the richness of God's saving grace to us in Christ. After this exposition of what God has done for us, beginning with chapter four he explains what we must do now in response to his grace. We noted the imperative of the unity of the church and also its giftedness. Paul also set forth how we are, as God's saved and transformed people, to live differently from this fallen world and are to live in the light of the kingdom of God.

One of the key passages in Ephesians is 5:15-20, where he gives the foundation for successful kingdom living in relationship with one another in our daily lives. In the remaining verses of his letter, Paul tells us how we can build on that foundation, beginning with marriage, then parenting, in our work relationships and in spiritual warfare against the powers of darkness.

Today we look at the important relationship of marriage.

Read **Ephesians 5:21-33**.

Although marriage was the first institution created by God and has been the foundational relationship of society throughout civilization, there is probably no human institution under greater threat and in greater crisis, at least in our Western Society. It's not simply that the secular world is jettisoning marriage for cohabitation, or that same-sex marriage is increasingly recognized by governments and even some churches. The truth is, even marriage between evangelical Christian believers is under greater threat than ever. Statistics show that divorce is as widespread among evangelicals in my home country (USA) as it is among the general population. The greatest threat to marriage is the apparent ignorance of or disregard for the biblical and spiritual principles and dynamics that make marriages successful in every way God intended.

Paul is addressing a culture that also was unfriendly to marriage, at least in the way followers of Jesus understood to be God's purpose for the marriage relationship. Because of its importance for Christian living, Paul spends a lot of space and ink in this letter to explain what makes for successful marriages. He is saying that for those of us called to become part of God's new and redeemed society, there must be a greater understanding of and commitment to Christian marriage. Successful marriage is not only a benefit to the church, but it is a witness to the world around us.

Even in our secular, post-Christian culture, sociologists are pointing the blame for troubled children and youth at parents who separate and divorce, leaving their children with feelings of rejection and abandonment. When we as followers of Christ have access to the ingredients for successful marriage, we are failing in our witness when we don't present the good news of Jesus as having the answers the world needs for successful marriages and family life.

In our text, Paul is saying that as followers of Christ we...

### **Have the resources for marriage**

Looking at the context of this passage we can see the resources we have for successful marriages, beginning with our...

#### *Life in Christ*

Paul is writing this letter to the church, addressing followers of Jesus. No doubt some of these disciples were converted after they had married and perhaps their spouses had not yet been converted to Christ. But in any case, Paul is reminding them that, whatever position in which they find themselves, we who follow Jesus have life in Christ and that means we have a life-transforming relationship with him and an encouraging, supportive fellowship in the church community.

The first chapters of Ephesians set forth the new life we have in Christ, having been saved by grace and given spiritual blessings and riches in him. We've experienced and continue to experience his transforming power, the same power that raised Christ from the dead (1:20). We've been saved by grace and as God's workmanship we are enabled to do good works, including the good work of a successful marriage (2:10).

With this new life in Christ, we are strengthened with power through the Spirit and are rooted and established in love (3:16f). We are enabled to live as children of light, in contrast to the surrounding world of spiritual darkness (4:17ff). As he does elsewhere, in Ephesians Paul refers to the virtues of godliness that are made possible because of our being united with Christ and having received a new nature in him (4:31f; 5:8ff; Galatians 5:22f). God, who created the institution, the relationship of marriage, is the one who enables it to be a successful relationship, just as he intended from the beginning.

Because of our life in Christ, we are given the indwelling presence of the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, who enables us to grow in this Christ-likeness and in this spiritual wisdom Paul writes about (5:15ff). Paul then commands us to be filled continually with the Holy Spirit (5:18), which is the key to living a wise and godly life. To be filled, as we noted some weeks ago, is to be controlled by the Holy Spirit, who gives us the grace and desire to be submissive and servant-hearted toward one another (5:18-21). This attitude of submissive servant-hood toward one another is the attitude, the mind of Christ (as in Philippians 2:1-8), that is the key to life with one another in the church and also to married life.

Throughout the Scriptures we read about our need for God's mercy and grace and his ongoing forgiveness. Those who have experienced God's forgiveness, mercy and grace are not only obligated to forgive others, but our new nature makes us inclined to forgive. There is no place on earth where you will need to practice more frequently acts of mercy, grace, humility and forgiveness than in the home. By the power of the Spirit, married couples can say to one another throughout their life together on earth these words that are very important to a successful marriage:

"I was wrong" and also the words, "I am sorry."

Paul writes to a church that no doubt had marriages that were mixed, with believers married to unbelievers who had not yet been converted to faith in Christ. But the ideals of a successful marriage are more easily achieved when both husband and wife have this new nature and power of the Spirit in their lives. Paul warned believers against being unequally yoked with unbelievers, noting the disparity and impossibility of spiritual fellowship between those in the light and those in spiritual darkness (2 Corinthians 6:14-18). Thus, God's will is for believers to marry believers. But also, for those already in mixed marriages, the believing spouse is to seek to win the unbeliever by her or his prayers and godly example, and not by "hen-pecking," that is, harassment (1 Corinthians 7:10-16; 1 Peter 3:1-7).

Successful marriages are not the product of the resolve of individuals or even couples in isolation, but rather who draw upon the resources of...

### *Life in the Body of Christ*

For those with unbelieving spouses, the church family is a vital resource for supporting the believing spouse in prayer as she or he faces special challenges. The church is also a key resource for witness to the unbeliever, in providing, through the example of Christian marriages, encouragement for the unbeliever to come to faith in Christ.

Life in the Body of Christ is important for other reasons as well. Paul has just described in the previous passage how the church is to be a Spirit-filled body, encouraging one another through singing and other expressions of worship and fellowship (5:15-21). Not just through personal spiritual growth, but through being a part of the Body of Christ do we have the strength and encouragement God will give us (Hebrews 10:25). Older women in the church are to train the younger women how to love their husbands and in how to support them with kindness (Titus 2:3-5).

Successful marriages are connected with the Body of Christ for sake of accountability. Our relationship with Jesus is personal but not private. Any follower of Jesus must be in fellowship with a local Body of Christ, the context for worship, fellowship, service and accountability. This is why an official marriage relationship, which begins with a public wedding ceremony, is vital. In Scripture we see the importance of marriage as a covenant commitment closely aligned with the community of faith, both in the Old and New Testaments. Living together apart from this marriage covenant, witnessed and affirmed by the church, is never within God's will and must be regarded as immoral, even though the couple may truly love one another.

Cohabitation apart from marriage is a widespread phenomenon in this Western culture and the church must decide how to address it. We certainly need to reach out to unmarried couples living together, accepting them in love and sharing God's truth with them, always in love. If they are unbelievers, we should share Christ with them. If they are believers, we should instruct them gently in God's will and purpose for a God-blessed marriage that makes itself accountable to the Christian community. If the cohabiting couple desires marriage, then we should offer hospitality so the couple can live separately until their wedding day, thus gaining a greater appreciation for the intimacy of marriage and a more meaningful relationship that is fully committed with accountability to the Body of Christ.

When marriages become troubled and the relationship is threatened by separation or divorce, the church needs to reach out to the couple. And then, if one sins against the other by initiating divorce, there needs to be church discipline in the spirit of humility as well. But hopefully before marriages become troubled, there needs to be pre-marriage instruction as well as mentoring and modeling by older couples.

In the context of a church family, which engages in Spirit-filled mutual submission and servant-hood, as followers of Christ we...

### **Fulfill the responsibilities of marriage**

Successful marriages don't just happen, nor do they survive, much less thrive, on romantic feelings alone. Successful marriages happen to involve a lot of work and a lot of mutual responsibility, on the part of the husband and the wife.

Paul begins by articulating first of all the responsibilities...

#### *Of wives*

A lot of wives will cringe at the thought of this admonition from Paul. Perhaps during their wedding ceremony the minister used the old traditional English wedding ceremony and thus the word "obey" and charged the wife to obey their husband in all ways. This unquestioning obedience simply seems unreasonable and unworkable.

First of all, we need to appreciate the cultural context of this passage and realize that Jesus and his apostles, such as Paul and Peter, did much to elevate the status of women. In first century Rome and also Judaism, wives were little more than the personal property of women and household slaves. The world ought to appreciate, though it does not, the role of the Christian faith in elevating the role and the status of women, both in the church and in the world. Here in our text as elsewhere, women are accorded a place of respect and importance in the home, as well as in the church and in society in general.

As within the church, there is a role for both men and women to play. Some interpreters see a "hermeneutical projection" in Scripture, which ends with an affirmation of gender equality, both in the church and in the home. Yet it seems that there remains, not an order of importance, but an order of functional leadership within the home that serves the purpose of order and harmony.

In our passage Paul charges wives to submit, not in slavish obedience, and certainly not in the context of an abusive relationship, but rather in a willful acceptance of the role of leadership given to the husband. This submission is not unquestioning and slavish acquiescence to a husband's tyrannical whims and dictates, but is rather an acceptance of his leadership role and a willingness to follow him as a partner in a supportive role.

This is the way *The Message* paraphrases Paul's charge to women in verses 22-24:

"Wives, understand and support your husbands in ways that show your support for Christ. The husband provides leadership to his wife the way Christ does to his church, not by domineering but by cherishing. So just as the church submits to Christ as he exercises such leadership, wives should likewise submit to their husbands."

Wives' submission to their husbands is thus a glad and grateful response to a husband who loves and cherishes them as Christ does his church, with faithful and unconditional love. A wife who is a follower of Jesus Christ realizes he has established the leadership role of the husband and she will honor and support him in that role, realizing that as she does she is actually submitting to Christ and is acting in a way that honors Christ himself and that allows Christ to work in the life of her husband.

Such submission is not being a doormat or a punching bag for abuse, but is rather being a pillar of strength and support, assisting the husband in becoming an effective spiritual leader.

Paul had some things to say to wives, but note how much more he had to say about the responsibility (116 words to 41)...

#### *Of husbands*

Husbands are to love their wives with the same kind of love Christ loves us, a selfless and sacrificial concern for and involvement in meeting the needs of our wives. This is agape love, the love that God has defined for us through Christ and his cross. Yes, wives are to follow and support the leadership of the husband, but the husband is charged to love the wife as Christ does the church. Not many wives would resist that kind of loving leadership, no more than an obedient follower of Jesus would resist his leadership and authority over us.

How do husbands express the love of Christ toward their wives? In meeting their needs, Paul answers, whether those needs be material, emotional, social or spiritual. Our text speaks about husbands loving and caring for their wives as we love our own bodies and as we love ourselves. This isn't a call for husbands to love themselves more. This comes naturally. Yet, it's the grace of God and the work of the Spirit to cause us to attend to the needs of our wives as much as we tend to our own needs.

To love our wives in this way necessitates communication, which is a great need and lack in many marriages. We husbands need to listen to our wives, in what they say and sometimes in what they don't say, to be attuned to their needs, which sometimes may be simply for our attention and to know that we're actually listening to them.

Romantic love is usually what draws people together and leads to their marriage commitment, and it's not uncommon for couples to allow that romantic feeling to wane. But marriages don't depend on romance, but rather upon a lifetime of commitment to each other and upon the grace of God and our commitment to him and our commitment to one another before him. The best way to restore romance and lost intimacy in marriage is through loving action in behalf of one another.

I heard of a man who bragged about how he *ran things* around his house, hoping to create the impression he was the boss in no uncertain terms. When asked what he meant by "running things," he changed his tone of voice and

meekly admitted he ran the vacuum, the dishwasher and the clothes washer and drier. That's certainly not a shameful admission, but rather an indication of a husband's willingness to help around the house, which he should do, especially and often if the wife is also working outside the home.

I remember a pastoral counselor telling our congregation that it's easier to act your way into feeling than to feel your way into acting. If you wait around before you or your wife feels romantic again, you may wait a long time. But if you act lovingly, considerately and thoughtfully toward your wife, you are more likely to see her responding positively to you. Commitment is the glue and agape love is the essence of the marriage relationship. However the wife responds, or however the husband is feeling emotionally, unconditional, serving love is the language of marriage and the key to a husband's leadership.

Again, I like the way *The Message* paraphrases these verses in our text:

"Husbands, go all out in your love for your wives, exactly as Christ did for the church—a love marked by giving, not getting. Christ's love makes the church whole. His words evoke her beauty. Everything he does and says is designed to bring the best out of her, dressing her in dazzling white silk, radiant with holiness. And that is how husbands ought to love their wives. They're really doing themselves a favor—since they're already 'one' in marriage" (25-28).

Again, Paul addresses this challenge to all the husbands in the churches, including those married to non believers. The believing husband's unconditional love is a witness to his unbelieving wife, which is the "strategy" that Peter applies to Christian wives' winning their unbelieving husbands to faith (1 Peter 3:1-7).

So, how do the responsibilities of submission/support and loving leadership work? They should work as well as a dynamic, thriving and loving church follows the will and leadership of the Lord. And I believe that leading and supporting within the marriage of believers is within the context of verse 21, with the admonition to submit to one another. I think of the leadership of us husbands, not as an autocratic dictatorship, but as the ability to win the trust and confidence of our wives.

For example, in any major decision, and in a lot of smaller ones, I'm wise enough to realize I don't have all the answers, and I want the consent of my wife. If I've failed to receive her assent and agreement in buying a house or an automobile, anything that affects our budget and stewardship, then I've not been a good leader. I don't want to plan a vacation unless my wife shares a mutual interest and enthusiasm. If I simply overrule her, I'm definitely less likely to enjoy "our" vacation.

And a good marriage is a lot about enjoyment. Thus marriages are successful if they...

## **Enjoy the rewards of marriage**

Marriage is not a relationship to be endured with begrudging obedience, but is one to be celebrated as a gift of God for two people, who experience...

### *Pleasure*

I believe God created the marriage relationship, not just for the purpose of procreation, but also to provide the pleasure of companionship and sexual intimacy. The Wisdom literature of the Old Testament, especially Proverbs and Song of Songs, speak of this pleasure husbands and wives are to have in one another. Paul refers to this pleasure, I believe, when he refers to man and woman becoming one flesh through the marriage relationship that is expressed in sexual intimacy. This being made one flesh before God through physical intercourse is the reason sexual intimacy before (fornication) and outside of marriage (adultery) is sinful and an affront to a holy God (1 Corinthians 6:12-20).

Because of this gift of intimacy and sexual pleasure, which is fully enjoyed and guilt-free only in the context of marriage, couples are to share this gift with one another with mutual consideration and never are to use sex as a weapon for bribery or punishment (See Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 7:1-7).

Marriage is gives the pleasure of sexual intimacy and also companionship, which speaks to the matter of...

### *Partnership*

Marriage is a companionship by which husband and wife become best friends, able and eager to share common interests. Often opposites attract, they say, but also married couples should find ways they can share their opposite dispositions to become complementary to one another. The more romantic natured spouse can help the more pragmatic partner to loosen up and the more pragmatic one can help the romantic to be a bit more practical and down to earth. In any case, marriage is life-long partnership.

One purpose of marriage given at the creation of man and woman is procreation. "Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth'" (Genesis 9:1), which is the one command of God that mankind has universally and abundantly obeyed. But there is an added dimension for God's people. It's not enough just to have children, but to bring them up in the training and the instruction of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4), a command we will look at more closely next Sunday, Lord willing.

The Prophet Malachi condemned Israel's covenant unfaithfulness, including the breaking of the covenant of marriage through divorce, which Malachi says the Lord hates. The prophet added that marriage is a covenant that God recognizes through making two people one in flesh and in spirit. And the reason for this oneness in flesh and spirit is to create godly offspring, which the

Lord is seeking (Malachi 2:13-16). Marriage is a partnership in producing godly offspring, parenting that results in discipleship of children who honor the Lord with their lives.

Successful marriage enjoys the blessings and privileges of two people, encouraging one another in spiritual growth, in rearing children who will honor the Lord, and in serving the Lord together through kingdom partnership. Paul set the marriage choice in the context of whether or not one can serve the Lord better by remaining single (the choice for which he opted) or by marrying and finding a partner who would be a true helpmeet in kingdom living and serving (1 Corinthians 7:29-35). Jesus himself spoke of marriage and singleness (remaining “eunuchs”) as different and distinct callings within the kingdom (Matthew 19:11f).

God calls people to singleness and also into marriage, and both life situations are uniquely suited to serve the Lord. In our text, Paul seems to indicate that as Christ’s love for the church is an example of the love husbands are to have for their wives, he also would say that through a loving marriage, a couple reflects the love of Christ before the world (32f). It’s great to see how God uses married couples in this church to serve as examples to youth and to encourage those with marriage troubles to work out their problems and build strong marriages themselves, by the power of the Spirit, who is the key to the success of our marriages.

### **Conclusion:**

Just as good, healthy marriages that reflect Christ’s love and care, so the failure and breakup of marriage is a negative witness to the world, which already devalues marriage. I pray that we at IBC will stand for and encourage the kind of marriages that will honor God through providing a good example to our young people and our surrounding culture.

Having said that, we need to minister to those among us who have experienced the pain of divorce, particularly those who have been victimized by divorce. We need to provide opportunities for healing and the rebuilding of lives and ministry also to single parents and their children, including them fully in the fellowship and ministry of the church.

We also need to affirm the choice and even the advantages of a single life in the kingdom of God, which we have noted was Paul’s preference and of course the status of our Lord Jesus. Although marriage is affirmed in the creation account as normative, being single is not an abnormality but a viable option for a God-honoring life of kingdom living and serving. And we who are married not only value our singles, but we also need your ministry and fellowship and also your prayers for our marriages. Although IBC has been a very productive meeting place for singles who eventually married in this church, we need to resist the urge to “play cupid” as we say, making every single think she or he is targeted for marriage and that our job is to help them find a marriage partner

ASAP! Of course, we should encourage singles who are looking for their life partner to seek to follow God's will for a believing partner.

Another factor I will probably expound upon next Sunday (from 6:1-4) is the condition of married couples who are childless, either by choice or by physical factors. We need to affirm their worth in the kingdom and the role they can play as surrogate parents and/or as ministry partners who have made their childless choice in obedience to the leading of the Lord.

I know there is one couple, who will be marrying this next Saturday, who have asked us for prayer for them. Indeed we will pray for them, that first of all they share a faith commitment to our Lord Jesus Christ, and that they make their marriage vows as a sacred covenant and commitment before God.

I invite others who wish to join them here at the front for a prayer for the renewal of your marriage vows before this congregation. Others of us may stand silently beside our spouse and affirm in prayer our commitment to faithfully keep our vows and to seek God's success in marriage through the power of the Holy Spirit. You singles, please pray for us as part of your spiritual family here at IBC. Pray that we will, by the power of the Holy Spirit, build successful marriages that honor God and reflect his glory in this world.

### **Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:**

1. What do you think is the "social status" of marriage in this Western, post-Christian culture? What do you think has contributed to this estimation of the importance of marriage?
2. What would you say to an unmarried couple living together that says marriage isn't important and a wedding ceremony is just a traditional ritual?
3. Read Ephesians 5:15-21 and list the resources available that serve as the foundation and support for successful marriages.
4. Write in your own words your understanding of what it means for the wife to submit to her husband.
5. What is the responsibility of the husband toward the wife? Why do you think Paul wrote 116 words to husbands and just 41 to wives?
6. Describe what you think are the rewards of a loving marriage partnership.
7. From our text (5:21-33), write a definition of a successful marriage. If you are married, take a look at how your marriage is succeeding and

share with your spouse your evaluation and ask God to help you grow toward success.

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