

## On Ephesians 5:22

By Beth Tuohy (with the invaluable editing input of my favorite person—that's John, by the way)

Marriage is hard. Working to honor God's guidance on marriage helps, but it doesn't guarantee complete success. Too, we all bring outside influences to the marriage table. Our own ideas, largely impacted by culture, can get in the way sometimes.

Ephesians 5:22 stands as a bone of contention for many people. Likely, they genuinely want to know God and do what He says. This piece, though, about submitting to husbands, can smack of “the patriarchy.” To be fair, some have used Eph. 5:22 as a standalone to subvert women. Paul is not one of those. In fact, we today can easily understand the need for Paul to write these words to the Ephesian church. Interestingly, the cultural mores of 21<sup>st</sup> century America compare fairly evenly with those of ancient Ephesus.

Ephesian society revered Artemis, the Greek goddess of nature and fertility, whose Temple in the city was known as one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Polytheism, imperial cult (emperor) worship, and Artemis worship were the backbone of the economy and the culture in ancient Ephesus. So much so that we read in Acts 19:21-40 of “a major disturbance” involving Paul and idol-makers (c. 53-55 A.D.). In any case, the immense reverence for Artemis translated into a social environment very favorable to women. Whereas other ancient cities saw them as property of men, those in Ephesus esteemed women, offering them considerable freedom (not unlike our Lord Jesus).

Furthermore, as in most ancient cities, honor and wealth drove the culture; the higher a person's status, often tied to material wealth, the more worth they had in the eyes of society. Lying and manipulation in the course of maintaining honor for oneself or one's group, then, was perfectly acceptable. Not so in the church. Paul's letter to Ephesus some 10 years after he ministered there gives us a glimpse into the distinctions the church was (is) to have.

For Christians, honor for self was not to be the end goal (see Eph. 4:17-25) and wealth was to be spent in pursuit of the good of others. Paul writes about “riches,” using the Greek word πλοῦτος, ploutōs, five times in Ephesians in reference to “the riches of His grace” (1:7; 2:7), “riches of His inheritance among the saints” (1:18), “the unfathomable riches of Christ” (3:8), and “the riches of His glory” (3:16). Paul clearly laid out a distinction for the church in this.

It was into this environment that Paul wrote his directive to wives in 5:22. Within a discourse on the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to help God's people “walk as children of

light...discerning what is pleasing to the Lord” (5:8-9), Paul gets to the heart of the need. Women in Ephesus had been trained to behave a certain way which worked to dishonor not just the people around them but the Lord Himself.

The submission Paul required did not align with subjugation, as “the patriarchy” is accused of doing today. Rather, within the framework of humility and reverence for Christ, the church was taught mutual submission for the good of all, that the church might become unified under Christ as head.

Paul used a literary pattern typical of the time to discuss specific relationships. Greek ethics commonly instructed men on how to govern their families and households. Paul used the same pattern—husband and wife, parents and children, masters and slaves—but pivoted from a sense of domination to a call to mutual benefit. Did Paul’s call to distinction necessarily mean women were to be considered “lesser” than men? Of course not, especially if we consider that just one verse before this, Paul directs the church to “submit... to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

The phrase, “as to the Lord,” does not mean that wives submit to husbands as they submit to the Lord; instead, her submission is her service offered *to the Lord*. Keep in mind, too, that instructions to husbands follow and remind him to love his wife as Christ loved the church. Jesus gave Himself up for His Bride. That kind of love requires much of the giver.

Again, Paul highlighted distinctions the church was to demonstrate, no matter the norms and pressures of society. The customs of legitimizing falsehoods, glorifying wealth and status, and taking advantage of freedoms in ways that suppressed others were not to gain or maintain footholds in the church. The order God created from the beginning was to guide the church.

So, why that order, the husband as the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church (5:23)? God has given men and women different characteristics, capabilities, and capacities. We are not the same. In marriage—which is the relationship considered here—a man and a woman fill different roles. When we push back against those roles, all hell breaks loose. Literally. That is not to say that society gets to define those roles for us. God does. We get to do the work to determine what He says about them and then put them into practice in our own homes.

Our culture tells us to put God’s Word into our own perspectives rather than work to understand what the original author (who, ultimately, is God through Paul in this case) meant, thus, what the scripture means. We suppose one who reads Eph. 5:22 in isolation could rightly be offended. But when that verse is read in literary and historical context and with the heart of God in the forefront of the mind, we can’t help but see the beauty in the

words that build relationship and work to create unity in marriage, which is a picture of Christ with His Bride, the church. The alternative is division along the lines of sex or, worse, us today thinking we know better than God, which leads us to neglect interacting with certain uncomfortable parts of His Word. We can all probably agree that God never sows division in His people, and we are fools if we think we know better than He does.

Which brings us to today and this article about marriage. The foundational element in every relationship for the Christian is his or her relationship with God. We cannot know Him if we do not understand His Word. (See Matt. 13:19). Far too many simply read and impose their own ideas on scripture. We must not do that. If we know God's character is only good, then any passages that cause us to shy away or make an exception must be dealt with. Faith and truth depend on it.

Though mystery may still remain, and we may not fully understand all that confuses us, we can avail ourselves of many tools. Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias, commentaries, lexicons, different Bible versions, books and articles that deal with a passage or concept...all of these things (and more) can help us properly understand God's Word. When we do, we get closer to His heart—in knowledge and obedience. And as you draw nearer to God, you can't help but draw nearer to your spouse.

Some helpful references we used for this article:

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