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Sermon Series: *Jesus' Wife, No. 2*

Man and Wife

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Ephesians 5:25-33 [NIV]

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷ and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. ²⁸ In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church – ³⁰ for we are members of his body. ³¹ “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” ³² This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church. ³³ However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

We're in Ephesians, Chapter 5, this morning. If you'd care to turn back there with me, we'll get there in just a minute. Chapter 5 of the Apostle Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus.

There is a game that some people play when they are students. Some of you, when you were in school, I'm sure did *not* play it – you're far too upright and honest.

But others of us did, and that is the game of trying to get the teacher or professor *distracted* so that they wander off the day's topic and begin talking about something else.

Will anyone admit to playing that game from time to time?

I remember several teachers I've had, from Sunday school to high school and all the way through grad school, who were susceptible to falling victim to this. A few well-placed student questions, at best loosely related to the topic at hand at the beginning of the class, could cause the teacher to drift off topic so far that they were nowhere near where they intended to be by the end of the class time.

And I knew students who were very good at that game; in fact, they were particularly skilled at making that happen.

Why'd they do it? Why try to get a teacher off-topic?

Usually because what teachers talked about from their hearts was far more interesting than their lecture notes – as truthful and important as they may have been.

Still, we knew that what was communicated “by the way” was way more engaging than the planned topic of the day.

It's the difference between what you *ought* to say and what you *really believe*.

It's the difference between talk from the *head* and talk from the *heart*.

That part is true in classrooms, in sanctuaries, in conversations of family and friends.

It's also true in writing, even in papers and reports and books.

People who read scholarly books, where extensive footnotes are used, will tell you that, typically, the footnotes are far more interesting than the actual text. And that's because in the text, the author is bound by the structure or the logical progression of his method – of what she's doing.

But authors can say *whatever they want* in the *footnotes*. There's more *randomness*, more *opinion* maybe.

Footnotes are where authors can “let their hair down,” so to speak, and that draws people in.

And that's what we have happening here in our text today.

The Apostle Paul is, here, deep in a presentation of, more or less, what being like Jesus looks like in the life of a believer – specifically regarding how a follower of Jesus relates with other people.

And that was much needed because, you see, those converted Jews in the early church still tended to be exclusive and to *separate* themselves from the Gentile believers. That's one reason we see so much in Paul's letters like this about the importance of Christian *unity* – about what *faith* in Jesus *does* in *relationships*.

And here, Paul begins speaking specifically about what faith in Jesus does in the *marriage* relationship.

About this passage here, William Barclay writes, “No one reading it in our day can fully realize how great it is.”

And he's right. And here's why: through the centuries, the Christian view of marriage has come to be accepted, even if not fully, then certainly to the point that we tend to forget how radically Jesus changed views on marriage from what they had become before His time.

You see, the Jews had come to have a very low view of women. Women had no legal rights whatsoever. In the Jewish morning prayer, there was a line that every Jewish man read that said how thankful he was that God had *not* made him “a Gentile, a slave or a woman.”

In *theory*, the Jew had a *high* ideal of marriage, but by the days of Paul, divorce had become tragically easy.

Deuteronomy 24 says, “*When a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, let him write her a certificate of divorce and send her out of his house.*”

As you might imagine, the whole issue there turns on the phrase, “something indecent,” which, through the years, was opened to a wide range of interpretation, including simply if he were to find a woman he felt more attractive.

This sort of thing, combined with the legal status of women, put the very institution of Jewish marriage in peril. Jewish girls were refusing to marry at all because the position of the wife was so uncertain.

That was marriage in the Jewish world.

But it was worse in the Greek world, where prostitution was more or less an essential part of life. In the Greek mind, wives did not exist for friendship or companionship or even pleasure. Wives existed for the sake of managing children and household affairs. Friendship, companionship and pleasure were found elsewhere, and the idea of marital fidelity was nearly extinct.

Wives actually led fairly secluded lives, and especially from their husbands. Socrates said, "Is there anyone to whom you entrust more serious matters than to your wife – and anyone with whom you talk less?"

And, as in the Jewish world, the only security the Greek wife had regarding divorce was that, in divorce, her dowry must be returned.

That was marriage in the Greek world – but it was even worse in the Roman world.

For the first 500 years of the Roman republic, there was not one single case of divorce recorded. But by the time of Paul, Roman family life was a wreck.

Seneca writes that "women were married to be divorced and divorced to be married," and that they, "dated their years by the names of their husbands."

Juvenal tells of one woman who had eight husbands in five years.

Jerome declares that there was a woman in Rome who was married to her 23rd husband – she being his 21st wife. Even Elizabeth Taylor can't touch that.

Although there were certainly instances of fidelity, it's not an overstatement to say that the whole atmosphere of the ancient world was adulterous.

We think things are bad today, morally speaking. But our perspective is limited. In truth, we're squeaky clean compared to the ancient world, and it's important to remember this because this is the moral and marriage background against which Paul writes.

We may find some of what he writes surprising – some are even offended by it, but set in its context, it's a beautiful and absolutely radical call to fidelity and purity and actual companionship in marriage. It is a call to marriage the way God intended it at Creation.

And we see best the full force of its beauty in the footnote, the footnote being these verses that are our text today.

You see, the point Paul is making is about Christian unity as shown through the Christian marriage relationship; however, it is the surprising *illustration* he uses. He leaves the man and woman figures for a moment and gets almost carried away by this illustration, this footnote, about marriage being like that relationship of Jesus and His people, the Church. That is what is so profound and striking and engaging here.

People, especially today, tend to get all hung up on the human part of this: how to understand headship and submission and all that.

But you know, the real thing we ought to be focused on here is the Christlikeness of it all, and especially what that means in being a man – a husband. The husband as a Christ-follower – as part of Christ's body.

And that's the funny thing about this, you see? A Christian husband is a man, who is also a wife, because a Christian husband is also the bride – the wife of Jesus.

So how is a husband to be a man and a wife?

The answer is found in the character of Jesus.

Paul says simply, there in verse 25, "**Husbands, love your wives.**"

"Husband, love your wife."

A statement – a command, really – that's so simple, but that was so utterly shocking to Paul's original hearers – we can't even imagine.

In all of that Jewish or Greek or Roman world that I described, for a man to be told to *love His wife*: that was a nearly completely foreign, almost unheard of, consideration.

But there was more, because you have to understand that the specific word Paul uses for "love" there, *agape*, makes it even more remarkable.

He says:

"Christian husband, you are to love your wife with a special kind of love. *Agape* love is not love like love of your sister, as a part of your family; and it's not mere physical or sexual love; and not just love like that you would feel for a friend or companion."

"Christian husband," Paul says, "you are to love your wife in a completely self-giving way. You are to give yourself up for the sake and well-being and good of this woman who is your wife."

That's what *agape* love is. It's an essentially, uniquely Christian notion, and it was so utterly foreign to men – to husbands – in Paul's day, because men (husbands) did not act like that. They did not live like that.

They did not feel like that.

They were not connected like that.

They did not give like that where their wives were concerned.

That was simply not how marriage relationships worked, so they had no category for such a statement. There was nothing in their culture that encouraged that sort of thinking in any way.

And the Apostle Paul knew it, which is why he launches into and gets carried away by this illustration – this footnote to what he's trying to say.

He's saying,

"Guys, I know you don't know how to do this. I know this hasn't been part of your 'husband training' in any way. I know you've not seen this practiced by earthly husbands anywhere around you. I know your dad and granddad did not do it like this. I know this is a new, radical thought, so let me give you an example. Let me give you *the* example of how to 'agape-love.' Here it is, OK? Here it is:

You are to treat your wife – you are to do for and with your wife and you are to love your wife – as Jesus, your Savior, loves His Church – His people – including you.

You are to be to your wife as Jesus is to His followers, including you.

"So how, specifically, has Jesus loved me?" a cynical, first generation, Christian husband might ask.

Almost as if he'd anticipated it, that's the first question Paul's description of Christ-like love answers there in verse 25: "***Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her.***"

It's all one thought to Paul. If he'd been speaking instead of writing, I think he'd have said this all in the same breath: "***Love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her.***"

Self-sacrifice, you see? Sacrificial love.

That's *agape*.

Jesus gave up His agenda, His glory, His preferences and ultimately His life – for His wife.

And *that* is the *way* – by *definition* that must *become the way* – of the *Christian husband*.

Now, Jesus did not worship His wife. Some men do that. Jesus did not. Jesus did not worship His wife, or set her up on some artificial pedestal.

On the contrary, Jesus fully recognized her weaknesses, her needs, her least beautiful features and characteristics. But still, He chose to give everything He had in order that she become all she could be – all that God created her to be: pure and holy and beautiful.

That actually became Jesus' purpose, you see?

Paul goes on with his illustration – his footnote, because once he starts talking about Jesus, it's hard for him to stop. He writes, "***Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her – to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.***"

Jesus' purpose was *to make His bride all God created her to be*, and short of committing sin Himself, there was nothing He would withhold. There was nothing He would not do in order to make that happen.

That is *agape* love: the giving of self for the *sake* and the *good* of *another*.

And that is how a Christian husband – a man who is also a wife of Christ – is to be like Jesus. It is how he is to treat his earthly wife.

Thus sayeth the Lord through the Apostle Paul.

So, Christian husbands, what sort of man – and wife – are you? Can love like this – the love of Jesus? Can that sort of love be seen in the way you treat your wife?

If you're brave enough – if you're man enough, maybe you could ask her.

I might say, just quickly, that this is one reason Paul says that wives are to respect their husbands, because it could be easy for a shameless wife to utterly abuse and take advantage of this kind of love – to take it for granted, just as we can, at times, take Jesus' love for us for granted.

But just think, though, of how easy it would be for an honest and true wife to submit to someone who loves like that. That sort of love, when it's actually practiced and

lived: it takes all the steam out of the arguing and posturing that sometimes arises over these verses.

But you know, there's more.

Remember how I said at the very beginning that one of Paul's main purposes for writing most of his letters was a call for unity among believers?

Well, he returns to that theme here – in marriage, and he does it in a profound way, again taking Jesus as his illustration. There in verse 28, he writes, "***In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for it, just as Christ does the church – for we are members of his body.***"

You notice that Paul doesn't say husbands should love their wives "as they love themselves." Paul doesn't say that because, to him, that's still too much differentiation between husband and wife, you see?

Instead, Paul says husbands should love their wives "***as being their own body.***" There is no separation in Paul's words. The husband and wife are unified. They are, as he mentions in the next verse there quoting Genesis, Chapter 2, "***one flesh.***"

What does this have to do with Jesus?

Paul explains that in the next verse – verse 32, where he says, "***The great mystery is, though, that I speak of Christ and the church.***"

Jesus and His bride, the Church, are one. His bride is His body, and so those who receive Christ are one with Him.

That's who we are in Jesus.

This gets at what Jesus spoke of, and prayed for, in John 17, where He said, "***I pray for all those who will believe in me – that they may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us – I've given them the glory that you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one.***" Listen, "***I in them and you in me.***"

The love of Jesus for His bride.

The selfless giving of Jesus for His bride.

The unity of Jesus *with* His bride.

Jesus in His bride and His bride in Him.

Paul says to Christian husbands, "There's your model. That's what marriage is designed to be."

Could there have been a more shocking – more radical – idea presented by Paul about marriage in his day?

And what about our day?

Can you imagine how healthy marriages and families would be if they were built on love like this – love that not just *says*, but *lives* the statement, "***I'm out for your good, no matter what it costs me.***"

That's love like Jesus had and demonstrated for you and for me – His wife, His bride, you see?

There would be no divorce in the Church if every husband, and every wife, for that matter, loved like Jesus.

But beyond that, think of what marriages and families like that would say to our world about the power of God at work in us? Think of the power in that witness!

The ability of two broken, imperfect people to love each other self-sacrificially.

That is part of the reason that Jesus shares His love with us. That's part of why Paul wrote, and it is why Jesus prays, at the end of His prayer there in John 17: He asks God that "they be brought to complete unity – to let the world know that you have sent me."

To be a man who is also a wife: a part of the Church, the bride of Jesus. To be a man who is also a wife is to say to your wife, above everyone else, "I love you, so I choose what's best for you even if it means hurt or damage to me."

That is love, Jesus style.

That is love for the husband who will be the wife of Christ.

Men, do you love your wife like that?

Will you make love like that your aim? Your goal?

You say, "That's impossible – I don't have that in me."

And I say, "You're partly right. You don't have it in you, but it's not impossible, because Jesus has it in Him, and so He can put it in you."

Will you let Him? Will you let Him love through you?

To begin a new chapter of Christlikeness.

To improve your marriage and family.

To be obedient to His call.

To show the world Jesus is real and powerful in our world.

Men or women, it doesn't matter. If you want Jesus to help you love as He does, He is willing to do that. You

need to invite Him. If you want Jesus to help you love like this, pray with me, just pray with me.

Closing Prayer:

Father, we recognize that we may not have it in us to love like this, but Father, we want to be men and women who love as You love. That is your call on our lives as followers of You, and You will provide the way. You give us all the resources that we need. What you ask is that we open ourselves to You, and let You pour into us whatever it is that we lack in order to love as You love. Lord, we recognize there may be some things in us that are keeping that from happening, and so we also give You permission to examine us and to call things to our minds and to our hearts that need to change in us so that there is room. Maybe there are things we need to give away so there is room to hold the love that You want to pour into us.

May we be willing vessels in every way, Holy Spirit, come and fill your Church. Fill all who are willing; fill all who are open, men and women alike, but particularly men, husbands, or husbands to be. Lord, help us to love as You have set the example. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

Closing Song: *Jesus, Thine All-Victorious Love*

Benediction:

May each of us willingly receive the *agape* love of God so we have love enough to love others – and so reveal Jesus in powerful ways to our love-starved world.