

Making Love Bloom Again – Part 1

The Key to Marriage: Love and Respect

Ephesians 5:21-33

April 30, 2006

This morning I'm starting a new series entitled "Making Love Bloom Again: Men, Women, Sex and the Glory of God." I realize that issues like marriage, singleness and sexuality can dazzle us with bliss or they could crush us with feelings of failure, hurt and bitterness. So let me give one Gospel ground rule: we're not here to beat you up this morning with religious shame. The Gospel is the story of God's grace offered freely and lavishly to broken, sinful people. Back up with me to Ephesians 2:1. "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins..." That's a serious problem. Our sin makes us spiritually dead inside. But listen to the good news in verse 4: "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in our transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved." That is good news! Christ not only forgives us; he makes us alive.

And then the life of Christ begins to work its way into every corner of our life – including our marriages, our singleness and our sexuality. A man named John Stott, a brilliant pastor and Bible scholar, put it this way: "(The church) ceases to be a credible concept if it is not itself subdivided into human families which display God's love ..." In other words, it has to make a difference in our homes and our marriages. And in case you're thinking, "I'm a single person so this doesn't apply to me." Yes, it does. The whole church is interested in healthy marriages. As we'll see in two weeks, a marriage between a man and a woman reflects something to all of us about God's love for the church. So every marriage has huge implications for all of us.

Okay, let's be honest: many people don't like the passage we just read. Some people find it frightening or irrelevant or repressive and maybe even ridiculous. Perhaps that's your view. What is God trying to tell us in this portion of Scripture? Let me "cut to the chase" because unlike most portions of the Bible, this passage already has a tidy, concise summary. See verse 33 again - "However, each of you must also love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband." So we could summarize this passage in four words: Husbands, love! Wives, respect! Love and respect are the keys to a vital marriage. It's in the Bible and its even verifiable scientific research. For instance, Dr. John Gottman spent twenty years studying over 2000 couples and he concluded that all the long-term marriages were "carried along by a strong undercurrent of two basic ingredients: love and respect." Viola – it's Ephesians 5:33 all over again. We'll call this the "Love and Respect Cycle."

Unfortunately, many marriages quickly degenerate into the "Crazy Cycle." Someone has described the Crazy Cycle this way: A wife's deepest need is the need for love. Imagine an air tank delivering air via a long tube. A wife needs to breathe in love. If a husband steps on the air hose, if he does not love her for who she is, if he restricts the flow of air, she will react – and many women will react verbally. She may nag her husband, criticize

and browbeat him. Underneath it all, though, she is giving him a message: “I don’t feel loved by you!” Of course, although it’s very clear, most husbands can’t decode this message. It just sounds like, “I don’t respect you. You are a failure.” And, wives, here’s a clue: men don’t like being failures. We want to be heroes. So you have incredible power to hurt us right where it counts.

The husband also has an air tank delivering air via a long tube. He needs to breathe in respect. If a wife steps on his air hose, he may react verbally or physically, but more than likely, he may just withdraw and go ice-fishing or watch ESPN for hours on end or view t on-line porn or work at the office – anything to avoid the craziness of his wife. He’s giving her a message: “You don’t respect me – and it hurts. It wounds my spirit.” But she can’t decode the message. All she hears is, “You don’t love me. You won’t talk to me. You don’t pursue me. You’re just a mysterious castle and you won’t let me in.” And, husbands, here’s a clue: your wife wants to be pursued; she wants someone to know her and listen to her and cherish her. So you have incredible power to hurt her.

Someone has called this “the crazy cycle.” It’s the opposite of Ephesians 5:33. Let me be honest: my wife and I have spent time in the crazy cycle. Praise God, by God’s grace, we’ve broken out of the crazy cycle – and by God’s grace we aren’t going back to the crazy cycle. But how do we steer clear of the crazy cycle? How do we live out Ephesians 5:33 - Husbands, love; wives, respect?

We’re going to explore that question over the next three Sundays, so stick with us. If verse 33 is the summary statement, let’s look at the whole flow of this portion. First, let’s look at how husbands are called to live out their end of the “Love and Respect Cycle.” Read verse 25. The one word to summarize the husband’s role in marriage is love. It occurs three times – verse 25, 28 and 33.

Now you might think this would come naturally – why, of course, I love my wife. This passage seems to say that as men, in our fallen and sinful state, the first thing that pops into our heads is not, “How can I love and cherish my wife?” It’s usually something more like, “How can I get my needs met?” Generally speaking, most cultures on the face of the earth have a streak of what’s called misogyny, a hatred for or contempt towards women. Misogyny leads to sexual exploitation and forced prostitution (which is a huge problem around the world today), sexual abuse, violence against women. But it also leads to a more subtle depreciation of women so that their opinions, perspectives, feelings or ways of relating are less important than a man’s. For instance, in the world that Paul addressed, women had obligations to their husbands, but husbands, did not have obligations to their wives. But here we find something radical: husbands, love your wives.

And it’s not describing any kind of love: this is Christ-like love – “just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” Jesus is the only model for Christian husbands. Sometimes people assume that Christian marriage is based on a military model: the husband is the field lieutenant and the wife is the private, or maybe at least the sergeant with the children. Or maybe it’s more like a corporate model: I’m the CEO and my wife

is like my executive assistant. Or it's a football model: I'm the quarterback; I call the plays, but I will get some input from my "teammate."

No, there is only one valid model: it is Jesus and the way he loved the church. As the head of the church, how did he lead? Well, certainly he led by providing vision, telling the church, "Come on, church, look at where we're headed." But this passage emphasizes something else: Christ sacrificed for his bride, the church. He laid down his life. He bled. He opened his life up to discomfort and suffering. For what purpose? See verse 26, "to make her holy" and verse 27, "to present her to himself as a radiant church." He laid down his life so we would shine with God's beauty and holiness. He died so we could thrive, so we could radiate his glory and beauty (see verse 27).

That's the point behind the statement in verse 23 that says the "Husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church." What does it mean to be the head? It implies authority and leadership, but those words are never used up front. Back up one chapter to 4:16 which describes Jesus' role as the head of the church – "From him (Christ) the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love ..." Did you hear that? Jesus has a title – Head of the Church. And as the head, his basic job description is to hold it all together (he's like the ligaments in your knee that keep the parts working together) and to help us grow and to build us up. So, husbands, here's your job description: you hold the marriage together, creating the context so your wife can grow and be built up. Guys, we make sure that this happens. The buck stops with us.

Now some of our wives' inability to thrive may be their fault. Women, just like men, have an insatiable inner emptiness that only the Living God can fill. So if my wife says (which she wouldn't, by the way), "If you really loved me, you'd buy me a massive, brand new yacht and every night we'd cruise around Port Jeff Harbor" or "if really you loved me, I would never be lonely or insecure again," that is her issue, not mine.

But the question I have to ask myself is this: How am I helping my wife thrive in her relationship with Christ? So how do we know if they feel secure because we are holding things together and that they are truly radiating God's beauty? I know of only one way to make this personal and practical: ask your wife and then listen to her. (And women, be prepared to avoid the crazy cycle because your husband will only hear, "I don't respect you."). I never asked, but my wife told me anyway. At one point in our marriage I was struck by this thought: my wife is not thriving in our marriage. She feels unsafe and overwhelmed. Lights and sirens went off inside my head. It shattered my image of my ability to love well. But it did something else: it led me on a path to end the crazy cycle in our marriage. It gave me one powerful truth: I need to listen to my wife more often.

This is just an extension of verses 28-29. I love the fact that the Bible is so practical and earthy. Basically, these verses mean: "Husbands, pay attention to your wife. It's not that hard: you already pay attention to your own body. When you're hungry, you eat. When you're thirsty, you drink. So, in the same way, start to pay attention to your wife's needs and dreams and goals and hurts." (Story about the Kansas couple caught in a twister,

roof blown off, spinning out of control. “This is the first time you’ve taken me out with just the two of us.”).

There’s a reason why I begin here with husbands. You are the Head of the marriage, which means this: You do your part first. Don’t wait for your wife to start doing her part. You make it your job to change the crazy cycle. And realize that you can do your part – even if you’ve failed, even if you had lousy role models, even if you feel inadequate and powerless. Remember: you are filled with the Holy Spirit. You belong to God the Father and you are God’s beloved one. You are loved in the depths of your brokenness and inadequacy and fear. You are loved by God the Father. You belong to a brotherhood of other men who are trying to follow Jesus. Seek them out and know that it’s okay to say, “I have not loved well, but God is helping me to love like Jesus.” Don’t let shame stop you because Jesus is not ashamed to call you his brother (Hebrews 2:13).

You see, for far too long I waited around for my wife to do her part. *Come on, woman, would you start putting Ephesians 5:22-24 into practice.* But she just wasn’t coming along. And then I slowly started listening to my wife, loving her for who she is, loving her like Christ has loved me, opening myself up to bleed and suffer on her behalf, rather than just protecting myself. I started taking my job description seriously, and viola, then I suddenly realized that my wife was coming along quite well.

Now what does it mean for a woman to respect her husband? Let’s back up to verse 21: “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” If you read back to verse 18 you’ll find a command attached to this which says, “Be filled with the Spirit” or “be continually filled up with God’s Spirit in your life.” We are a community of people who are continually being filled up with the presence and power of God. Marriage isn’t just about Matt and Julie trying hard to love each other; it’s about Matt and Julie learning to walk in the power of the Holy Spirit. One of the results of being filled with the Spirit is that as followers of Jesus, we are called to submit to one another. And it isn’t just for our sakes: it’s out of reverence or respect for Jesus himself.

So then verse 21 leads into verse 22 – “Wives, submit (the word submit is not in the Greek text but it is implied from verse 21) to your husbands as to the Lord.” Now, remember, we just heard the Bible say clearly that all Christians are to submit to one another. So does that mean that I have to submit to my wife? Yes. I’d find it odd if I had to submit to everyone in the body of Christ except my wife. For instance, when my wife tells me, “Matt, you were very harsh with that person, or you need to stop being so cheap, or you are not loving your family well or your schedule is out of control” and I listen to her and make adjustments in my life, I am submitting to her.

On the other hand, at the minimum, we have to be honest and say that only wives are told to submit to their spouse, not vice versa. What does that mean? Well, let me tell you what it doesn’t mean?

- It doesn’t tell you anything about roles. It doesn’t say who should control the money or do the dishes or get a masters degree first. Actually, if a husband is

laying down his life for his wife, he will want her to radiate Christ's glory to the best of her ability.

- It doesn't say that a wife should *obey* her husband. Women, like men, obey Christ. Everything flows from that. We submit to others – in this case, a wife to a husband – only “out of reverence for Christ.”
- And it doesn't mean that a wife should always agree and never challenge her husband. We are called to lovingly confront one another (Galatians 6:1 and Ephesians 4:15). I shudder to think of the man I would be if my wife didn't have the courage to confront me with my sin.

So what does it mean to submit to your husband “in everything?” I'm not an expert at this, but let me take a stab at that question:

- ❖ Once again, we're given a summary of a wife's job description in verse 33: respect. You don't do this because you always like your husband or you think he's the brightest crayon in the box. No, you respect him because Jesus asked you to do it. I realize there may be exceptions to what I'm about to say (i.e. domestic violence, infidelity, etc.), but generally speaking, if you're thinking, “I can't possibly respect my husband,” imagine Jesus right before you, his arms are outstretched, his eyes are full of tenderness and he asks you, “Would you respect him for me? If you can't do it for him right now, would you do it for me?”
- ❖ Respect means that you'll see your husband for what he is – a broken man, a flawed man, a man in flight from God, but also a man whom Christ longs to redeem and renew and fill with His holy power. Respect means that you won't just sweep the brokenness under the rug, and you'll even lovingly confront him with the truth of how his life hurts you and others. But respect also means that you won't stop aching and yearning for Christ to get a hold of this man's heart.
- ❖ Respect means that you may know how to shoot arrows into the chinks in your husband's armor, perhaps even piercing his vulnerable heart, but you choose not to shoot the arrows. The arrows may be put-downs, criticisms, naggings, or just plain cruel comments. You know where it hurts, but you don't use your weapons against him – because it means that you'll be destroying a man for whom Christ died.

In her novel entitled *Dinner at the Homesick Diner*, author Anne Tyler has the main character Beck explain to his son Cody why he (Beck) got a divorce.

She wore me out,” he told Cody finally.

“Wore you out?”

“Used up my good points. Used up all my good points.”

“Oh, at the start,” Beck said, “she thought I was wonderful. You ought to have seen her face when I walked into a room. I made her so happy! When your mother and I were first married, everything was perfect. It seemed I could do no wrong. Then bit by bit I guess she saw my faults. I'd never hid them, but now it seemed they mattered after all. I made mistakes and she saw them. ...didn't get ahead in my work, put on weight, drank too much, talked wrong, ate wrong, dressed wrong, drove a car wrong. No matter how hard I tried, seemed like everything I did got muddled. Spoiled. Turned into an accident.

- ❖ And respect means that you firmly believe that God is working through your husband. As Jesus is the Head of the church, the one who holds it all together and makes the life flow so that we all grow up in him; even so, Christ's life flows through him to you. Now you may say, "Are you crazy? You don't know my husband. He's not there for me. He doesn't love me as Christ loved the church." At that point, we have to cling to the sovereignty of God, the beautiful idea that God can take even our ashes and turn it into a work of art. Romans 8:28. Respect means that I stop living like a spiritual orphan and start living like a daughter of God. Spiritual orphans are alone in the world, thrown back on their own resources. No one will take care of them. So when their husbands don't take care of them, they're angry and resentful. But a daughter of the Father knows that even when her husband is imperfect, even when he does not pursue her, even when he's distracted and selfish, she is deeply loved, she is well-cared for, she has dignity and honor and blessing – and no one can take that from her. She may still ache and long and yearn because she lives in a fallen world, but she is secure in her Heavenly Father's love for her.

You see, any one who has been married for at least a month knows that in order this cycle of love and respect depends on a power outside of our selves. It depends on Gospel-centered lifestyle. The good news is that God wants to give us the resources we need to live and love well. That is the Gospel. God has promised to bless us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (see Ephesians 1:3-7).