

LifeWay Bible Studies for Life Series for May 16: To love and to cherish

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In recent history, an entire decade was described as the “me decade.” Some sociologists and demographers have even used “me” to designate an entire generation. With so much cultural selfishness, it is not difficult to understand why so many marriages are terminated and so many others are in serious trouble. A healthy marriage is a covenant relationship where selfish needs are diminished and the needs of the spouse are elevated.

Understanding submission (Ephesians 5:21-24), understanding love (Ephesians 5:25-30)

The mere mention of the word submission, when used as a character descriptor of a marriage relationship, can foster strong feelings and open the opportunity for misunderstanding which can compromise the very relationship it was intended to protect.

Many are prone to open the discussion of submission with the Apostle Paul’s instruction that wives should, “submit to your husband as to the Lord” (v. 22). Paul’s discussion of the matter begins in the preceding verse with, “Submit to one another out of reverence to Christ” (v. 21).

Paul’s concept of reciprocal submission is the model of Christ’s relationship to the church. Jesus loves his bride, the church. He always has made sure to meet her every need, even to the point of laying down his life for her. In exchange, the church does everything it can for the benefit of the bridegroom.

This relationship of reciprocal submission literally insures adequate provision and care for the bride and the bridegroom because each is committed, not to their own needs, but to the needs of the other.

Understanding mutual submission removes the fear of individual submission which Paul discusses later in Ephesians 5. Paul tells wives to, "Submit to your husband as to the Lord" (v. 22). Paul never envisioned a submission where the wife becomes a servant to her husband or a situation where the idea of submission could be used as a license for a husband to abusively command his wife to fulfill his every command. The proper motivation behind her submission is the recognition of a husband's need to be recognized as the leader of the familial unit.

Men need to feel the respect of their wife and to experience having the wife look to them for leadership. A wife's submission is in consideration of the husband's needs, not an act of subservience. As a wife recognizes and encourages her husband's leadership, she mimics the church's relationship to Christ. It is an act of love (John 14:15) that causes the church to submit to the Lordship of Christ, not a statement of authority.

Paul concludes his treatise on submission with instructions to husbands. Here Paul uses two different representations. He says, "Husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church" (v. 25) and, "Husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies" (v. 26).

True love, as Paul so accurately described it in 1 Corinthians 13, is an unselfish act of completely giving one's self to another. It is Paul's second representation that contains the clearest understanding of Paul's intent. Paul was a clear proponent of keeping the body under submission (Romans 12) but he never suggested submission should occur punitively. A man places his body under submission through an understanding of what is best for his own body. In like fashion, a man submits himself to his wife, through love, because he recognizes she will be blest through it.

Understanding respect and honor (Ephesians 5:31-33; 1 Peter 3:7)

To avoid any idea of differentiation between men and women relational to submission, Paul affirms the initial statement concerning a marital relationship, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh” (v. 31, Genesis 2:24).

Clearly no part of the body can lord itself over any other part of the body. The human body functions best when each part of the body cooperatively operates with the benefit of every other part of the body in mind. Men and women work best in a marriage relationship based on equality and where each looks after the benefit of the other.

Peter also addresses the idea of submission in the first letter to bear his name. Many of Peter’s comments mirror those of Paul. However, Peter does make a significant contribution, at least for discussion purposes, when he says, “be considerate as you live with your wives and treat them with respect as the weaker partner” (1 Peter 3:7).

Many use this as a proof text for a heavy-handed, servant concept of female submission. Peter’s remark concerning “the weaker partner” clearly demonstrates Peter’s acceptance of the culture in which he was raised and no doubt participated in during most of his ministry.

Women in that culture were not considered weaker partners just in marriage, but in every other enterprise as well. The real import of Peter’s statement is in the use of the two words “partner” and “heir” (1 Peter 3:7). Both words carry the idea of equality. Partners are equals regardless of role. Scripture gives assurance to every believer that they have an equal inheritance in God’s riches.

Conclusion

The idea of submission within the confines of a marriage relationship has

been a cultural and theological lightning rod in recent years. That which God intended to be a unifying aspect of marriage has become divisive among many, even denominations. God's intent has always been one man and one woman, equal in every way, to form a lifelong relationship.

While the roles of husband and wife differ greatly, mutual submission allows each to focus on the needs of the other and to make the fulfilling of those needs a primary task.