Ephesians 5:32
Read Ephesians 5:22-33

The Mystery and Meaning of Marriage

A sermon by
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Theme: God has revealed to us that human marriage is the type and Christ and the Church are the Antitype. Only when this is understood will human marriage work the way it is supposed to.

Word Count: 3,724
Ephesians 5:22–33 (ESV)

22 Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.

23 For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.

24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

25 Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,

26 that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,

27 so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

28 In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.
29 For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church,

30 because we are members of his body.

31 “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.”

32 This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

33 However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

Introduction:

The text I have just read is obviously talking about marriage.

- But why should we talk about marriage today? After all, not everybody here is married.
• Why talk about marriage? Won’t such a topic embroil us in controversy? After all, same-sex marriage has been legal in the USA since 2015, so wouldn’t it just be easier to “let love win” when raising a controversial topic?

• Why talk about marriage? Pastor, I know marriage is supposed to be something wonderful, but honestly, my marriage is really painful right now...and my parents are divorced. Couldn’t we just move on to a different topic?

I hear and understand all these concerns, but I am convinced we need to talk about marriage for two reasons that are found in our text today in Ephesians 5:32.

First, if we don’t understand marriage, we won’t have any way to understand the gospel that Christ came to save us.
Second, if we don’t understand the mystery and meaning of marriage, we won’t know how human marriage is supposed to work.

This is not a sermon series...

I should add a qualifier to what I’m going to share with you today. I read from Ephesians 5:22-33 a moment ago because I wanted to establish the context, but the essence of this sermon is focused upon vs. 32. There is so much that can and should be said about the other verses here, but this is not a sermon series, it is a single sermon, so let me remind you about what I am NOT going to focus upon in Ephesians 5.

A. I don’t have time to explain to you that vs. 21 which some people say is referring to “mutual submission” is actually referring to submission as it works itself out in specific relationships, such as, husband-wife; parent-child; or master-servant.
B. Nor do I have time to focus upon the nature of a wife’s submission to her husband who represents Christ to her and what such submission should look like when it appears that submitting to a human husband seems to be in conflict with the biblical command that we must obey God rather than men. (cf. Acts 4:19)

C. And sadly, I don’t have time to unpack what it means for a husband to love his wife and to explain the twin reasons for this command in that he represents Christ to her and that she is actually to be loved as he loves his own body.

   All these things are extremely important to understand, but it calls for a longer time together. But we must not let the perfect be the enemy of the good. Our focus this morning is to keep the main thing, the main thing.
If we want to understand the mystery and the meaning of marriage, we must start with vs. 32. Did you notice how vs. 32, revolves around this intriguing declaration: *This mystery is profound. This mystery is great.* What is so mysterious about marriage?

**Ephesians 5:32 (ESV)**

32*This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.*

**Ephesians 5:32 (Westcott-Hort)**

32τὸ μυστήριον τοῦτο μέγα ἐστίν, ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω εἰς Χριστὸν καὶ [εἰς] τὴν ἐκκλησίαν.

**Genesis 2:24 lead up**

To begin to answer that question, we need to pay attention to the immediately preceding verse (vs. 31) to see what catapulted the Apostle Paul into all this talk about a great mystery. In vs. 31, Paul quotes from the Old Testament passage, Genesis 2:24.
Ephesians 5:31 (ESV)

31“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.”

However, here is something that is rather easy to miss, but is still important. Note that vs. 31 has no introduction. To see what I mean by that look at two other places in Ephesians where Paul quotes from the OT...

Ephesians 4:7–8 (ESV)

7But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift.

8THEREFORE IT SAYS, “When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.”

Or check out...

Ephesians 5:14 (ESV)

14for anything that becomes visible is light. THEREFORE IT SAYS, “Awake, O sleeper,
and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”

But there is no “therefore it says”, no introduction stating “this is why it says” in Ephesians 5:31. Please pay attention to the fact that Paul had just written in vs. 30: “because we are members of his body” and that caused Paul almost like a reflexive knee-jerk reaction to immediately quote Genesis 2:24.

Paul is saying WE ARE UNITED WITH CHRIST LIKE A NECK IS UNITED WITH OUR HEAD. And having said that, it shoots Paul into the most descriptive passage about marriage in the OT, namely, Genesis 2:24. And how does Genesis 2:24 conclude? “…and the two shall become ONE FLESH.”

Now Genesis 2:24 is foundational for understanding marriage. The verse could be pictured this way:

Put up triangle on screen.
Genesis 2:24

A husband and wife are to leave father and mother. They are to cleave or hold fast to one another. And in the midst of this process they become one flesh.
Now this term “one flesh” certainly includes the fact that in marriage there is a sexual union. The sexual union is essential to marriage and it’s the central way in which marriage is different from all other friendships. (And I might add as a parenthesis here folks, if your marriage has become sexless, you need to get help to fix this, so please don’t procrastinate, get help.) However, there is a whole lot going on in this term ONE FLESH besides sex.

God’s plan, according to Ephesians 4:4, is to make us all one with each other in the Body of Christ. And this “one body” which we see imperfectly displayed in the Church now, is a foretaste of a re-united universe, where everything is summed up in Christ according to Ephesians 1:10. A husband and wife, by becoming “one flesh” take a step towards that wonderful unity of all things which is going to find its fulfillment in Christ.1

Folks don’t let me lose you in the weeds of these details. Try to capture the vision of where Paul is taking us: The apostle has just declared that we as believers are members of Christ’s own body and that immediately leads him (without any introduction) to quote the most famous passage about marriage in the Old Testament, which ends with this glorious vision of ONE FLESH. And then, Paul, almost breathlessly, can’t wait to shout out THIS MYSTERY IS GREAT...and I am saying that IT REFERS TO CHRIST AND THE CHURCH.

**Mystery:**

OK, let’s stop and catch our breath for a moment as we try to understand how Paul uses this word “mystery”.

- We are not talking about something that is difficult or **impossible** to explain. E.g. “I don’t know, it’s a mystery.”
• We are not talking about a novel or a movie with a murder involved where the audience is trying to figure out “whodunit?”
• Rather, the Bible uses the term “mystery” in a very special way. In the Bible “mystery” refers to something that was hidden in the past, but now is revealed in a new and amazing way.

You can see an example of this earlier in Ephesians 3:4ff. Look with me...

Ephesians 3:4–6 (ESV)

4When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ,

5which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.

6This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.
Here Paul explains that in the OT God chose a special people, the Jews to display His glory to the nations. But now since, the coming of Christ, God has brought people from many nations to be called His people, so that both Jews and Gentiles are saved through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

That’s one mystery in Ephesians 3 about the unity of God’s people, but the mystery in Ephesians 5 is about marriage. Now, does the imagery of God being married to His people appear in the OT? Yes, it does.

We find this marriage imagery in places like Ezekiel 16 or Jeremiah 3. Indeed, the entire Book of Hosea is built around the imagery of God calling out to His people to not be an adulterous wife.

But here is what is brand new that is revealed in the New Testament. When the time had fully come, God the Father sent His Son Jesus Christ into this world as a tiny baby, but after Jesus grew up and lived a
perfect life, he voluntarily gave his life up on a cross to pay for your and my sins.

The message of the New Testament is that God has come and transformed an adulterous and messed up people and made us the brothers and sisters of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Here’s the way Ephesians 5:25-27 summarizes it:

**Ephesians 5:25–27 (ESV)**

25 Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,

26 that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,

27 so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

Another way to look at what’s new in this mystery is to remember what Jesus told two of his disciples who were walking down
a road on the very day that He rose from the dead. They didn’t recognize him at first, but Luke 24 shows us how he shocked them by explaining how the whole Bible is about Jesus (cf. Luke 24:25-27). It’s all about Jesus!

And here is something else the Bible tells us: The whole purpose of the Christian life – that life you are trying to live and sometimes it’s really, really hard, and you wonder how can anything good come out of this – yes, friend, the whole purpose of this life is to make you look like Jesus. If you don’t believe me, look at Romans 8:28–29 (28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. 29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.
The Bible is all about Jesus. The whole purpose of your life is all about Jesus. It is all about Jesus!

The Big Picture of Marriage:

Hang with me, folks, because I don’t want you to miss the big picture. The big picture is the gospel. Jesus has come. As John 3:16 puts it:

**John 3:16 (ESV)**

16“**For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.**

And the Apostle Paul sums up this mystical union that we are to have with God, where God says, “I will be your God and you will be my people.” under the big picture of marriage. It is a cosmic display of our Creator calling us to “to say yes, to the dress”\(^2\). Listen to Revelation 21...

\(^2\) The name of a USA television show in 2019.
Revelation 21:1–4 (ESV)

1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.

4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”
Marriage is not so much about human companionship as it is about the good news of the gospel. Human marriage derives its meaning from the union between Christ and the Church, not the other way around.

The Marriage House:

Ephesians 5 is not the only place in the Bible that teaches us about marriage. Allow me to show you an illustration that I came up with to illustrate how the Bible describes the different aspects of human marriage. I call it the Marriage House.

(There are copies of this illustration available for you by the front door if you want to examine it more closely.)
Marriage House drawing. Leave on screen through full explanation.
We can learn several things from the six sides of this Marriage House:

1. **Marriage is a life-long covenant.** God opposes divorce, it is supposed to last until death. Likewise, living together is not the same as marriage.

2. **Marriage is between one man and one woman.** Same-sex marriage is not a biblical option. Biologically, the parts don’t fit together and spiritually, Christ is symbolized by the male, and the Church by the female. God created two genders and only two genders because marriage requires complementary partners not identical clones.

3. **Marriage is for raising godly children.** We are to be fruitful and multiply but not simply as rabbits, rather, the reason God made parents was to raise up a new generation who are disciples of Jesus.

4. **Marriage is for companionship.** It is not good that the man be alone. God created marriage for companionship, the most
unique companionship of all, for this is my lover and this is my friend as Song of Songs 5:16 puts it.

5. **Marriage is for sexual purity and pleasure.** The Bible screams “Sex is good and wonderful” but it equally screams the only place it belongs is in marriage.

6. **Marriage is for a stable society.** The family is where we first learn to obey authority. If marriage falls apart, so does society. Your marriage is about more than you and that’s why we take those vows before God and other witnesses.

Now these six sides of the marriage house are all important and they illustrate how a marriage works, but they aren’t just a list of 6 things for a happy marriage. That’s because every house must be built somewhere.

You could have the most perfect children and you and your spouse could enjoy all kinds of recreational companionship, and your sex life could
really be humming. But that won’t guarantee that your house has any value.

Folks, do you remember what the three most important rules of real estate are? Location...location...location.

It matters where you build your house. You can build it on a beach in the Bahamas the day before Hurricane Dorian hits, or you can build it on the Rock of Gibraltar. Houses may look the same, but what you use for a foundation matters.

In our Marriage House illustration, the only rock that will save you is to build your house on Jesus Christ and to let the example of Christ and Church guide the way husband and wife live.

Would you like some simple marching orders for how you are to live the Christian life? They really are quite simple, just two, and they were delivered by the Lord Jesus as the first and second great commandments: Love God, Love your neighbor. (cf. Matthew 22:34-40)
So, if you are a husband, what does it mean to love your neighbor? If you are a wife, what does it look like? It’s the same commandment, it just expresses itself with a different pattern.

The husband is to love his wife. He sacrifices for her. He refuses to be harsh with her. He cares for her as tenderly as he does his own body.

The wife is to respect or submit to her husband. She does this out of obedience of Christ, her true head, not because her husband never makes mistakes, but because without fear she trusts in the fact that God’s authority is honored by the way she respects her husband.

Love and respect --simply flip sides of the same commandment. Both marriage partners are given an example to follow through studying Christ and the Church. When love and respect are neglected, the crazy cycle develops, when they are
observed the rewarded cycle spins for God’s glory.³

Do you see the big picture yet, my friends? Marriage is bigger than you or your marriage. Marriage is about Christ and the Church. Marriage was created to show us the glory of God as our Savior came to earth to redeem a bride for himself.

But what if you aren’t married this morning? What if you never will be? What does this text have to say to you? I hope you haven’t missed the point! It has everything to say to you. God is your husband. He is a bigger and better husband than you will ever find on this planet. Christ is your bridegroom. You came into the wedding hall with filthy and shabby clothes, but at the cost of his life, he purchased the purest white cloth to cover your sins with. You may die without ever experiencing sexual union with another person. But if you trust in Jesus Christ as your Lord and

Savior, you will be loved and known more deeply than you can ever imagine. You will enter into an intimacy that human sex is only a weak picture of. For I declare to you, by the authority of the Word of God:

**Isaiah 54:5 (ESV)**

>5For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called. Cf. Is. 62:5

A wedding story...

Allow me to end our time together with a true story. It is a story that took place in this room. The year was 2008. It was the first year this congregation was worshipping in this new sanctuary, having formally worshipped in the fellowship hall.

The exact day was August 29, 2008, I remember it because it was the day of Blake and Joni’s wedding. Jan and I had been in Annapolis for a year and we hadn’t worshipped yet in this room. Pastor Travis
was officiating with the vows, and I was preaching the wedding sermon. But first I had to walk Joni down the aisle.

As some of you know, Joni is given to crying and as an old man, I was having less control over my emotions than I used to. I knew that if Joni started crying that I would start crying and then I’d never get through my sermon.

So, there we are in the back. The doors swung open, the room was filled with people and Joni started to tear up. I panicked. I had to do something to help her or all would be lost...

At once, I turned to my daughter on my arm and I said to her in the sternest voice possible: “Joni, this is not about you. It is about Jesus! Suck it up!”

And she did and I did, and the wedding was beautiful.

Dear friend, I say to you no matter how deep your marital pain is this morning, no matter how much you may be longing
for a marriage partner that you cannot find, dear friend, Ephesians 5:32 would remind us all: **This is not about you. It is about Jesus! Suck it up!**

1 Corinthians 2:9 (ESV)

9**But, as it is written, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him”—**

**Benediction:**

Ephesians 3:20–21 (ESV)

20**Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us,**

21**to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.**