Christ in Marriage and Family

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Ephesians 5:21-33

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The Inklings were a literary group associated with the University of Oxford in London in the 30s and 40s. Wouldn’t you loved to have been in a group with J. R. R. Tolkien who brought new chapters of his forthcoming book *Lord of the Rings* to read and discuss?

C.S. Lewis joined this literary group as a promising author and confirmed atheist. Lewis had dismissed the Bible as something archaic and old-fashioned. How could this ancient book have anything relevant to speak into his everyday life?

One Inkling, Owen Barfield, called Lewis on his “chronological snobbery,” which is the attitude that anything old is inferior to whatever is new. Lewis took Barfield up on his challenge to read the Bible. It changed the trajectory of Lewis’ life. Lewis became a fierce proponent of reading old books, such as the Bible, to understand the illusions of our modern era.

People write-off the Bible because of passages like Ephesians 5. People accuse Paul of being a male chauvinist. So-called “new atheists” have a field day with the Apostle Paul. They accuse him of being misogynist and oppressive to women.

I challenge the assertion that Paul is demeaning to women. I would argue in the opposite direction. The Christian gospel as articulated by Paul is the best thing that ever happened to women. More about that later.

Marriage may be a difficult sermon topic for some of you. It may engender longings in you who want to be married. It may also trigger painful memories of loss through death or divorce.

While it may not seem that a sermon on marriage is relevant to single people, it is in everybody’s best interests to talk about marriage. Promoting healthy marriages benefits everyone, whether or not we are married.

Paul begins, “Submit to each other out of reverence for Christ” (5:21). There is a debate among biblical scholars whether this verse goes with the previous section on being filled with the Spirit or introduces the section addressed to husbands and wives. I would liken verse 21 to a hinge that connects Paul’s admonition in verse 18, “Be
filled with the Spirit,” to his ensuing instructions to married couples. This verse serves as a transition. People filled with the Spirit submit to one another out of reverence for Christ in all relationships, including marriage.

The sheer number of words addressed to husbands stands out to me in this passage. I count 41 words written to wives and 116 words directed to husbands. Paul has three times as much to say to husbands as he does to wives.

This section, in verses 25-33, directs husbands three times in quick succession to love their wives. He begins, “Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church” (5:25). In the middle section he writes, “Husbands ought to love their lives as they do their own bodies” (5:28). He closes the passage in much the same way, “Each one of you must love his wife as he loves himself” (5:33). These last two verses recall Jesus’ words about loving your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:39).

Verse 25 functions as a one-sentence summary of this whole section addressed to husbands: “Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” Paul begins the fifth chapter in much the same way: “Walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us” (5:2).

The Greek word used for love is agapao, which is the Greek word for self-sacrificial love, the kind of love with which God loves us. Jesus loves his followers (the church) by laying down his life for them. His sacrifice on the cross reconciles people us to God. Love makes sacrifices. It goes all out for other people.

There is not a considerable difference between these two injunctions to love your wives and submit to your husbands. Submit means to subordinate oneself and yield to someone else. Love means to lay down your life and place yourself under someone else. Both words implore husbands and wives to yield to each other.

On Hunter Mill Road near my home is a one-lane bridge. As I approach the bridge in my car, there is a yield sign directing me to defer to drivers coming in the opposite direction. The driver coming in my direction is
directed to yield also. Both drivers yield to each other (at least in theory). What a great image to describe marriage. Yield to each other. Show consideration and respect for each other.

I never realized how selfish I was until I got married. I was so accustomed to living for myself that it was a huge adjustment to think for someone else. It still is, even after 43 years of marriage. My natural inclination is to be self-centered and self-referencing. Christ’s design for marriage requires me to move beyond myself. Christ calls me out of my self-centeredness toward self-sacrifice.

If you doubt that you are self-centered, I have a sure-fire way to verify your self-referencing manner in real life. Whenever you look at a picture, who is the first person you look for in the picture? Be honest now. You look at your picture first.

I have three observations to make of this passage. First, Paul treats husbands and wives as full partners in Ephesians 5. While this seems no big deal in our day, the very idea of marriage as partnership was unimaginable in the Greco-Roman era. Wives were property, not partners. The first century historian Josephus reflects the attitude of his time when he writes, “The woman is in all things inferior to the man.” As I said, the Christian gospel as articulated by Paul is the best thing that ever happened to women.

Second, note the number of times Christ is cited in this passage. “Wives, submit to your husbands as in the Lord” (5:25). Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church” (5:28). Seeking Christ has enormous potential to bring couples closer together.

Third, the call to lay down our lives entails forgiveness. Christ’s sacrifice on the cross means forgiveness for us. Whenever you bring two deeply flawed people together, forgiveness must be a critical component.

I bought this book *Uh-Oh; Some Observations from Both Sides of the Refrigerator Door* at a used bookstore for $4.98. I bought it because the title intrigued me. What Robert Fulghum writes about marriage is worth it. He writes about an earlier argument with his wife: “Last night I went for a walk in the darkness of early autumn…
Drawn back to the cabin by the yellow glow of a reading lamp in the living room, I stood outside the window for a long time and looked at my wife curled up on the couch sewing a hem in a new pair of wool trousers for me. For seventeen years, she has been my companion, my friend, my co-conspirator.

“Yesterday, we were outraged at one another over something that seems trivial now, but the fire of anger is not quite cooled beneath the surface ashes. Yesterday, I made her cry in frustration. Yesterday, she was mad at me. I know I drive her crazy sometimes. She’s not easy to live with either. Yesterday, old grievances were flung off the shelf where they are somewhat shakily stored…As I watch her through the window, I see her smile as she carefully fixes my trousers, perhaps thinking to make one leg longer than the other in revenge.

Yet today, we walked up the road to pick sweet corn from a neighbor’s patch and walked back down the road hand-in-hand in our usual way. We’re good at forgiving. We have to be. The weather of love comes and goes and we must let it. It is a required condition of loving someone and being loved back. What we need most in marriage is forgiveness.”

His last line bores into me. “What we need most in marriage is forgiveness.” Christ offers us forgiveness on the cross. What we offer each other is forgiveness also.

Over the past two-plus months, we have been preaching our way through Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. I am impressed with the way this letter hangs together. Let me take you back to what Paul writes in the fourth chapter. While these thoughts relate to those of you who are married, they apply to everyone. If you have tuned this sermon out because you are single, pay attention to what Paul writes in the fourth chapter. These words have application to every relationship that matters to you.

“Each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body” (4:25). Tell the truth. Tell the truth as kindly as you know how, but do not keep secrets from each other.

“In your anger, do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your wrath” (5:26). Paul delineates between anger and sin in this verse. Not all sin equates to anger, but the danger is allowing anger to mutate into bitterness and resentment. Better to stay up and make up, than go to bed mad and allow anger to do more damage.
“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouth, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs” (5:29). This is huge. James writes about the power of the tongue to heal or hurt. Maybe you have heard the expression, “Loose lips sink ships.” They sink marriage and friendship also.

There you have it. Speak truthfully. Keep short accounts. Build up and do not tear down.

I conclude this morning by asking Pastor David and Connie to come forward. They have it on their hearts to speak truthfully about a challenge they face in their married life. We need to become more truthful about challenges we face in marriage and family life. I don’t know who said, “Be kind, for everyone you meet is carrying a heaven burden,” but I believe it.