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**A disclaimer from Pastor Stuart**

*My role in the church here is to feed and care for God’s people the best I can. Key to that, in my opinion is teaching and preaching from the Bible; but that is not all a pastor has to do! In fact after the emails, staff admin, hospital visits, community visits, leadership meetings, etc, etc, there sometimes seems to be little time for sermon prep! Years ago I used to agonise over trying to come up with two, often three, totally original sermons each week. But I’ve found that, for me at least, that is impossibility. I’ve learned to be grateful for and to use the gifts God gives to help me – not only the Holy Spirit, but other Bible teachers and preachers.*

*Over the years I’ve discovered that if something teaches, inspires and excites me it’s likely to do the same for those I speak to. So I admit that sometimes I find myself depending heavily on other people’s ideas, at least to ‘prime the pump’ and therefore I claim originality for very little in these sermons. If you look hard enough and wide enough you’ll probably find who I’ve been reading and learning from! I never knowingly plagiarise, but if you find I have, then I apologise. It must have been that what was said was just too good not to use!*

*I am particularly indebted to the likes of John Piper, Sam Storms, Wayne Grudem, John Ortberg & Rick Warren. The Lord regularly uses them to get my spiritual pulse racing. I’m also indebted to many who kindly make their sermons available on the likes of sermoncentral.com and preachingtoday.com. Others who help me include ‘The Doctor’ (Martyn Lloyd-Jones), C.H Spurgeon and any of the Puritans.*

*These sermons are not made available because I think they’re good but in the hope and with the prayer that they may be used by the Holy Spirit to bless others as they have blessed our own church here in Ipswich, UK.*

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**God’s recipe for a Healthy Marriage - Ephesians 5:22-33**

I’ve heard various suggestions for a healthy marriage. Favourite one seems to be some sort of variation on ‘Give and take – I give, she/he takes’ or “*The key to a successful marriage is for the husband to learn that the wife is always right, except for the times when she says she’s wrong, and then it’s for that time only.”*

We may chuckle, but actually making marriage work well is serious stuff, and proves difficult for many couples, as the separation and divorce rates bare out, among followers of Jesus as well as those with little or no faith.

But marriage is God’s idea and his ideal and life works better for all when it’s taken seriously. What we have in our passage this morning are some key instructions from the maker as to how to make it work best!

They are part of the much bigger whole. Remember the big theme running through these parts of the letter is about how we as God’s children, part of the new, redeemed community of God’s people on earth, are to live. We’re called to be different; we’re not called to merge in and carry on as before. To be part of God’s New Community on earth IS to start and to continue is to live differently. That’s the whole point of God saving you – it’s to change your life. Some seem to think this is a recipe for failure – people won’t be attracted to a thing that asks for people to curb and subdue their natural likes and inclination; people these days want to be free to choose what they want and live as they like. So they might, but fact is that the churches in this country that are growing are those who take God seriously and take his word seriously, and don’t try to water it down or explain it away.

So we come to one of the hottest of hot potatoes this morning – the subject of marriage. No subject creates more debate and hot air than this today, in society in general and also in the church. Now, I don’t want today to get into the debate about what marriage is and who it’s for, etc – we will come back to that. Remind me!

We will simply look at God’s instructions for us his people. We take at face value that God’s intention is that marriage is between one man and one woman for life. That’s our starting point, and most of us here probably don’t have any difficulty with that definition. The difficulty that comes up again and again is the ‘for life’ bit! So many marriages, even between good and godly people crumble for one reason or another. Well the good news is that here in these verses we have God’s recipe for a healthy, successful and ultimately happy marriage. He starts with the wife and then addresses the men. Let’s deal with the instruction to wives first.

‘*Wives, submit to your husbands’*! I can almost hear a collective intake of breath! You know what, I think that at face value the overwhelming majority of women will hear that as a negative instruction (I suspect the % will not be so high among men!). But looking at it in black and white this seems to sum up so neatly the problem that many have with the Bible these days – it’s so out of touch with modern life and simply encourages so much abuse of people.

Let me say this clearly – I accept and believe that the church has historically been guilty of using/allowing these words to be used and abused to hurt many people. Women and others have subject to physical and emotional and mental abuse at the hands of men who use this for their own benefit. It’s a stain and shame on the church and should never be.

**And here’s why:** Because it wasn’t the way of our leader Jesus, and it wasn’t what God intended when he inspired Paul to write these words. We need to understand a bit of background culture here. Jesus and Paul both lived in a society which was hugely male dominated. In their day it didn’t matter whether you were Jewish, Greek, or Roman, wives had *no* rights. They were there to look after their husband’s household and children. They would hardly have spoken to their husbands. Adultery was the norm. A woman was considered a mere possession; her legal position amounted to enslavement. Children and slaves/employees were no better.

Taken in that context the way Jesus treated women and the things he said about them *was revolutionary*. He treated them with tenderness, dignity and respect; he often went out of his way to help them, to give them time, and indeed some of his best friends were women. It might not seem like much to us now, but back then it was huge!

And it was the same with Paul – far from reinforcing social stereotypes about men being the most important and women knowing their place, what he does here is to call on the Christian men and women in Ephesus to treat their other halves in a way that was very different to the prevailing culture. Yes, God’s view on marriage and relationships was very different, totally different the generally accepted view of the day. So let’s not think that our situation is any different! It’s always been this way! Paul didn’t say ‘*Well times have changed now, we’re modern and need to move and adapt.*’ No, he called on the followers of Jesus to be different from their unbelieving friends, colleagues and family. So, if we think what he says is tough for us, it was no less for them.

Let’s come to this specific instruction to wives (we’ll deal with husbands next week)

*"Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord.*” Why? *“Because the husband is the head of the wife* …” – **v22-23**

If we’re not to perpetuate old mistakes then it’s imperative that we to do some work to leg work understand what Paul is actually saying here! I need to take you back to the beginning - **Gen 2 & 3**.

* In **Gen 2:20** we see that amongst all the animal creation there was no suitable helper for Adam. So God created Eve out of him; her role? *Helper*, that is, someone who’d share the man’s load, compliment him, do what he couldn’t do, be what he couldn’t be! Deliberately NOT THE SAME! Like Jigsaw pieces, incomplete without each other. Yes, he was to carry ultimate responsibility, but Eve created as equal, to share the responsibility with him. There really wasn’t any sense of superiority or inferiority in A&E’s relationship, and they were the prototype for all relationships.
* But in **Gen 3** this all broke down. One of the consequences of sin is pronounced by God in **v16** (Rd). He will ‘*rule’* over you, he’ll treat her in a way he wasn’t meant to – one of the effects of sin. But she will ‘*desire’* her man - to dominate, to rule, to control. It’s not at all about physical desire! The result of the fall is that men use women, but they will thrive to have it the other way around!

So here is the origin of the battle of the sexes and the root cause of both the friction and abuse that has sadly been experienced ever since. And it’s why this verse is so difficult – it goes against our natural inclinations! Men tend to abuse it as an excuse to dominate, whilst women rebel against it! But neither response is a Christian one.

**So what Paul is doing here is urging us to turn our backs on the effects of the fall and to live as God originally intended! It’s a call to get back to how things were meant to be -** working together as a team.

The husbands responsibility has been, since creation, to work with God in bringing about his purposes on Earth. Eve was given to join him in this. So, yes, the male does have a position of leadership, but not of dominance! He does have a responsibility to ensure God’s will is being done. Every ship needs a captain, every orchestra a conductor, every army a general! Someone has to be responsible – and in human relationships God gave this particular responsibility to the man.

**Does this mean that the wife shouldn’t take initiative or make decisions?** Of course not! It’s ludicrous to suggest that Eve only ever did something that Adam told her to do! They had a common, agreed job and they’d both do whatever was necessary for that job to get done!

That’s how it should be for us as followers of Jesus in our marriages! Both parties working for the same agreed end. May have different responsibilities and that will mean making decisions as to how to get those things done best. Some wives are, not to put it too bluntly, clearly more able than their husband. His responsibility is still, before God to ensure that family keeps on track with God, even though he may not have the lead in how that’s done! Any man can take that responsibility!

I’ve spent some time establishing Bible foundations for marriage roles. I hope has made it easier to see that there is absolutely no place here for male dominance & chauvinism. Next time we’ll look at the instructions for men – which I think are even harder!

Prayer: