

Mutual Submission and Great Marriages

By Eddie Spencer

Marriage is one of God's great gifts to humanity. It was one of His original institutions (Genesis 1, 2). God has purposed the oneness between a husband and wife to reflect and anticipate the beatific vision of union and eternal pleasures with Him.

The Bible's portrait of marriage is glorious. Consider the majestic marriage picture painted in these words, "*This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. The man and his wife were both naked and they felt no shame*" (Gen. 2:23, 25). This is a picture of life-giving oneness, mutual transparency, and soul-satisfying intimacy. Equally, the Bible is realistic about marriage. Marriage is glorious and it is gut-wrenchingly glorious. It demands sacrifice and selflessness. You will not discover the sentiment and syrup of a quaint Hallmark marriage card. The Bible verse that sometimes comes to mind after a difficult season of marriage is, "*Marriage is a profound mystery...*" (Eph. 5:32). So, how do we develop great marriages that give a glimpse of God's glorious ideal?

Mutual submission. "*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ*" (Ephesians 5:21). Ironically, many Bibles that feature topical headings do not even include this verse in the marriage passage (Eph. 5:22-33)! This verse, while not the relational foundation, lies at the heart of the spiritual foundation of a marriage. Preceding 5:21 is a passage dealing with being filled with the Holy Spirit. Subsequent to verse 21 is the passage on marriage that hearkens back to God's glorious ideal (Gen. 2:18-25). Verse 21 is the cause and affect verse. The cause of a great marriage, one that seeks the joy God intends, is the affect of God's Spirit on the character and attitude of the Christian husband and wife.

God's Spirit produces in the Christian husband and wife the character and attitude of Jesus Christ. What does this look like? An attitude of selflessness, instead of selfishness; a spirit that seeks the best in each other, rather than of our own rights; a character willing to sacrifice, instead of demand. Think about this: What is the root cause of so much marital pain and problems? A pride-producing, rights-demanding selfishness. God's antidote is mutual submission.

How do we learn mutual submission? "*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ*" (Eph. 5:21). The word, "reverence" means "in awe of," "amazed by," or "controlled by" Christ. As we live the Christian life, we grow in our reverence for Christ. The closer we grow in relationship with God, the more we begin to see God and ourselves, sometimes painfully, clear.

Consider the call of the husband. Husbands are called to love our wives as Christ loves the church. (Eph. 5:25). How did Christ love His church? Oh, "*...how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ ... and to know this love surpasses knowledge*" (Eph. 3:18-19). My response (and probably yours as well) to this imperative is often, "Oh God, I cannot love this way. Forgive me for loving myself so much and my wife so little. Grant me, O Lord, more of your love that I may love my wife more deeply." Out of awe of Christ, amazed by His forgiveness and grace, and a desire to be more controlled by Him, we seek Him. His Spirit shows us our sin and insufficiency and refreshes us with His love. It is the glorious paradox of the Gospel. We see how frail and sinful we are and then Christ renews us with His grace and power.

The power of the Gospel produces in us the gentle and strong heart of a servant. It does not take much strength to demand our own rights. It does not take much spiritual character to be selfish and self-centered. These come naturally. A servant-husband with a Christ-like love and a servant-wife with a Christ-like love come only from Christ by His Spirit. His spiritual power produces a mutual submission to Christ and to one another resulting in marriages which experience the joy God intends.