

Small Group Leaders Notes

Ephesians 5:21-33

Context

Unity under Christ - This is the big theme of the book (1:9-10, 2:11-22, 3:10-12, 4:3-6, 4:12-13.) God's great plan is to bring unity under Jesus and the church is where we see this happening. The church is God's masterpiece and is meant to be the place where God's glorious plan is displayed not only to a watching world but the heavenly realms. If a church is to be united under Christ then one of the things it will need is united marriages under Christ.

Living a Life worthy of the calling - In chapters 1-3 Paul explains the wonderful calling that is ours as Christians. God has called us to be part of the church, his masterpiece. Then in chapters 4-6 Paul tells us what it looks like to live a life in keeping with our calling. The church is the bride of Christ and so if we are married then our marriages are to reflect the marriage of Christ and the church.

Being Filled with the Spirit - In 5:18 we were told to be 'filled with the Spirit.' This is the big theme running throughout the rest of chapters 5-6. Being filled with the Spirit is not just about speaking to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs... (5:19) it's also about wives submitting to their husbands (5:22), husbands loving their wives as Christ loved the church (5:25), children obeying and honouring their parents (6:1-3), Fathers bringing their children up in the Lord (6:4), slaves obeying masters (6:5) and masters treating their slaves well (6:9.) Being filled with the spirit is actually more down to earth and day to day than we might at first think.

Spiritual Warfare - Having spoken about submitting to the authorities that God has ordained (in marriage, family and work) Paul finishes the letter on the theme of spiritual warfare (6:10-17.) He seems to move from very ordinary things (marriage etc) to very extraordinary things (spiritual warfare) but the two are closely linked. We have already seen from 4:26-27) that Satan is active in every day disagreements and anger. Marriage, Family and work are the sorts of ordinary environments where spiritual warfare actually takes place and Satan seeks to bring hostility and division in marriages, families and workplaces.

God's Design for Human Marriage - Genesis 1-22 give us God's design for marriage. Marriage is to be between one man and one woman for life. Men and women are equal in status and value because they are equally made in the image of God. Yet men and women are not the same, they are different with different roles. They are equal but different and their differences compliment one another. This equality and difference is to be reflected in the marriage. The wife is to submit to the husband because in God's design for marriage the husband is to be the head. But as the head the husband is not to be a bully who rules. Instead because his wife is his equal (in Adam's language she is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh) he is to love her as Christ loves the church.

The Eternal Marriage between Christ and his Church - Time and again in the Bible the covenant relationship between God and his people is expressed in terms of marriage (see Hosea and Revelation 19.) God made human marriage not as an end in itself (which is how we so often view it) but as a picture of God's relationship with his people. Human marriage is just a temporary shadow of the permanent eternal marriage between Christ and his church.

Tricky Bits

Marriage is a very emotive subject - The subject of 'Marriage' is one that contains both great joy and great pain depending on who we are talking with. Some in your group will be happily married, others will be unhappily married, some will be unmarried and happy, others will be unmarried and deeply hurting as a result. This is therefore a subject that needs to be handled with great care and sensitivity. How you speak and lead the group is vital. You may want to adapt the questions below to sensitively suit your group. You may also want to start the evening by acknowledging that this is a very difficult subject to talk about and emphasise that we want to be gracious, loving and building one another up as we study this passage.

Submission and Authority - The idea of a wife submitting to her husband is not popular in our society today. There will undoubtedly be some in your group for whom this idea is very hard to accept. You will need to have carefully thought through what this passage is saying and what it is not saying before you start. You will also find it helpful if you have thought through some of the likely objections to this passage and what you will say. I would strongly recommend listening to Mark's excellent sermon on this passage where he helpfully unpacked the passage and what the Bible means by submission. (You can find the sermon here <http://bec.uk.net/resources/sermons/app/series/everyday-life-ephesians-5-6>)

What about v21? - Some take v21 and argue that it means that this is teaching that every Christian should submit to every other Christian. This can't be what Paul is saying because in 5:22-6:9 he goes on to give asymmetrical commands. As Christopher Ash argues it means, 'Submit to one another in all the contexts in which submission is appropriate: that is, the contexts I am about to explain to you.'

Big Idea - Human marriage is a temporary shadow of the permanent marriage between Christ and his church

Applications

For Wives - Submit to your husband because of Christ

We need to be clear what this does not mean. Submission here does not mean something that you are forced to do. Wives are not to submit to their husbands because they are big bullies. Biblical submission is voluntarily to place yourself under the loving leadership of another. Similarly submission does not mean that women are inferior to men. As Genesis 1-2 make clear men and women are equal but different.

This is not saying that wives should submit to their husbands if their husbands tell them to do something that is illegal or against God's word. It is also not saying that wives are to be silent doormats who never express their opinions.

Instead wives are to submit to their husbands as the church submits to Christ. Notice that they are to submit to their husbands as you do to the Lord. In other words (to use Mark's phrase) "They are to look through their husbands and see Christ" Jesus is the perfect man, and perfect husband who will always love them and never let them down. They are to submit to their husbands not because they deserve it but because Christ calls them to. We must remember that Christ is not only the model to husbands of what it means to be a loving head. He is also the model to wives of what it looks like to submit. The Son always

perfectly submits to the Father's will (think Gethsemane.) Jesus is therefore not calling wives to do something that he is not prepared to do himself. It is because he submitted himself to the headship of his Father that he went to the cross to make us his bride.

For Husbands - Love your wife as Christ loves his church

The first thing to notice is that where wives are told to submit, husbands are not told to rule. We might instinctively think that ruling and submitting go hand in hand but instead love and submission go hand in hand. Again Jesus is both the reason and the model for this love. Husbands are to love their wives as Christ loves the church. It is because Christ has laid down his life for us that he has the right to tell us how we are to behave.

It is not just that husbands are to love their wives, that love is given a shape... the cross! Christ's love for the church is a sacrificial life. He gave up his life for the church. This is the level of love that Christ calls husbands to have for their wives. Husbands are to lead in marriage but their lead/headship is to be one of loving, sacrificial service. Again they are to love their wives this way regardless of whether their wives deserve this kind of love. The church didn't deserve Christ's sacrificial love and yet he freely gave it any way.

Notice too that husbands' love for their wives is not only meant to be sacrificial it is also meant to be sanctifying (v26.) Husbands are to strive to help their wives grow in holiness and godliness. This is to be a key expression of a husband's love for his wife. Leading her and loving her in such a way that she grows more and more like Christ.

For Everyone - See human marriage for what it is meant to be

Whether we are married or not there can be a tendency today to either idolise marriage or to dismiss marriage. To those who are tempted to dismiss marriage this passage reminds us that marriage is a wonderful thing. Marriage is a God-given picture of the relationship between Christ in the church. This gives marriage great value. But... we must not fall into the other trap which is to idolise marriage. So often whether we are married or not we treat marriage as if it is the greatest thing ever. We treat human marriage as if it is the ultimate relationship and the place where all our desires for love, safety, security, companionship and intimacy will be found. When we do this we idolise marriage and expect it to carry a burden of expectations that it was never designed to carry. Marriage is a good gift from God but it is not the ultimate gift from God. It can be a place of love, intimacy and companionship but it is meant to point us on to the ultimate marriage where perfect love, intimacy and safety are to be found. Whether we are happily married or not, whether we are happily single or not, we must all remember that human marriage is the shadow, Christ and the church is the reality!

Questions

You might want to start by acknowledging that this could be a difficult subject to talk about for some in the group and to emphasise that we want to build one another up with what we say.

Starter Questions - In what ways is marriage idolised today? In what ways is marriage downplayed today?

As normal there are no right or wrong answers here. Instead we want to get people talking and thinking about how marriage is viewed today. You can think about how it's viewed by society as well as how it is viewed by Christians.

1. What is the connection between human marriage and the marriage between Christ and the Church?

Human marriage is a picture/shadow of the true everlasting marriage between Christ and his church. When human marriage works well it displays something of the relationship between Christ and the church. Husbands are to sacrificially love their wives as Christ loved the church. Wives are to submit to their husbands as the church submits to Christ. Instead of looking to society to show us what marriage should be like we are to look to Christ and the church.

2. In practice what will it mean for those of us who are wives to submit to our husbands?

a) What will it not mean? Are there any limits?

b) What will it mean to do it "to the Lord?"

This discussion could go in all sorts of directions so you will need to be prepared. You will also need to be prepared to step in and redirect the discussion if you feel it is going down the wrong path. It might be helpful to start by thinking what this does not mean? What is this not telling wives to do? What is this not saying about women? Then you are in a position to move on to think about what this is positively saying about wives and submission.

Spend some time thinking about the motivation for submission. The motivation doesn't come from how great one's husband is. The motivation comes from how great Jesus is, that's the sense of v22.

3. Have a look at Mark 14:35-36 and 1 Corinthians 15:24-28. How does Jesus' submission to the Father alter our view of submission?

These passages show us that submission is part of the Trinity. The Son willingly submits to the loving headship of the father. The Father never submits to the Son, instead the Son submits to the Father. He does so willingly because he knows that his father loves him. Notice that Christ submits not just when it is easy but when it is costly. When Jesus calls us to submit whether that is a wife submitting to a husband, a child submitting to their parents or a citizen submitting to a government, he is not asking us to do something that he has not done first!

4. What will it look like in practice for husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church?

a) What sort of love will they have for their wives?

b) What will they want for their wives?

Here the key is to really focus on the costly sacrificial nature of Christ's love. Husbands are not getting off lightly here. They are to come to marriage not seeking to be served but to serve, to lay down their lives in love for their wives. With that sort of attitude in place we can then think practically about what this will look like. Notice too that the focus is on sanctification. As the head of the marriage husbands are to approach every decision lovingly thinking about what will help their wives to grow in godliness and become more like Christ. It should be a joy and a pleasure for a wife to submit to her husband because he loves her so selflessly.

5. How does this passage stop us dismissing marriage?

6. How does this passage stop us idolising marriage?

These two final questions tie the whole study together. They are important because they help us apply the passage to all of us whether we are married or not. All of us will at times have a wrong view of marriage. Some of us will idolise marriage while others of us will dismiss it. This passage helps us to see both the great value and dignity of marriage because it is a picture of Christ and the church. This passage also helps us to see that marriage is not ultimate. So many of us (both married and unmarried) need to be reminded that God has something better than human marriage for us. He gave his Son to die for us to make us his bride. It is as we enter into and grow in a relationship with Christ that we find our deep longings for love, intimacy, safety and belonging are truly met.