

EPHESIANS 5:22-33  
A LOVE LIKE JESUS' LOVE!

A little girl is sitting on the floor playing with her dolls; she's playing happy families, mum, dad, children are all there; her mum is sitting watching her and listening to the story she's telling with her dolls. Only when we begin to listen ourselves to the little girl do we discover that this is far from happy families; there's an angry husband, whose dinner wasn't made when he wanted it and a wife who tries to explain and stand up to his bullying, but he takes his fists to her and beats her. The little girl has watched this; for her this is what marriage means. A cultural stereotype is born and will be taken on into the next generation. Our friend told me the story of the children visiting her flat because she would look after them rather than leave them on the street till it was time to go home, asking "What do you do when Gordon hits you?" He didn't, but these children just assumed this was normal male behaviour! A cultural stereotype is carried on into the next generation; programmes like Zero Tolerance become necessary because domestic violence carries on and will carry on until attitudes change and let's be clear, until male attitudes change!

Statistics will tell us that in 2008 there were 28,903 marriages and that is the lowest number of marriages in Scotland since 1895 and the lowest rate/1000 ever, 5.6/1000 of population. Also in 2008 there were 9333 divorces in Scotland. People will say that a piece of paper makes no difference to the relationship and so they will simply live together, knowing that they can walk away if things go sour. So we develop a new cultural stereotype in Scotland that somehow says marriage is old-fashioned, an institution in which people imagine themselves to be trapped.

How do we break these cultural stereotypes? How do we change the culture of Scotland away from these views of marriage to a better view? Do we just leave them and allow these things to go on and on, as if there is nothing we can do? It certainly feels as if we're swimming against a very strong tide to try to teach something different! Yet, for many people there is something about marriage that no other kind of relationship has and can give. How do we communicate that? I don't know the answer, but I do know that rather than condemn and criticise, we have the responsibility to model that quality of relationship in the way we live and behave. We will not always get it right and that is true of all of our relationships! So, if you're not married and never have been, yet there is something here for you too: to pray for your married friends and to learn a model for your relationships; because while today's reading in Ephesians 5 is certainly addressed to husbands and wives, there is something here about all of our relationships with other people.

*"Submit to..." (5:21)* Here's a general principle for our relationships. Last week, we said that 'submitting' is one of four words that follows on from "being filled with Spirit"; when the Spirit of God is at work in us, one of the ways His influence is seen is in the way we submit to one another, to live humbly and caringly in our relationships. When the Spirit is at work, God's people will submit to one another in humility and not try to bully, harass, or domineer one another. Then Paul goes on to give three examples, three every-day areas of life where that can be seen and needs to be seen; marriage, family life, and at work. We don't count any of these as particularly 'spiritual' areas of life; Church is not even mentioned, but these three everyday areas of life, are the places where we spend most of our waking hours and in these places and in these relationships, the influence of the Spirit is to be seen. Today, let's look at marriage.

I suspect Paul begins with the cultural stereotype of marriage: he says what people might expect him to say, but then he gives it a huge and very Christian twist. So stay with me here; it is important to get to the end, rather than get stopped and

sidetracked half-way! The principle is that things are mutual. When the letter was first read in Ephesus and the men heard “*Wives...*” (v22) they would nod wisely and say ‘that’s right; that’s what women should do’, but when Paul didn’t stop there and went on “*Husbands...*” (v25) the smug smiles would disappear and all of a sudden there are two sides to this responsibility; it is mutual and we need to see the two sides to coin and hear what Paul actually says rather than what we think he says or how his words have been twisted and misused. They both mean the same thing; here we have two ways of saying the same thing and wives and husbands have to submit to one another. It is mutual!

“*Wives...*” (v22f) Here is the cultural stereotype of marriage in the first century: Jewish culture treated women not as people but as things; she had no legal rights and was absolutely her husband’s possession to do with as he pleased. In Greek culture the husband left his wife to run the home, to care for the children, but he found his pleasure elsewhere; there was no such thing as family life. In Rome marriage on the way to complete breakdown. So when Paul says “*Wives submit...*” he seems to be perpetuating this culture of male domination. It is clear that these words have been abused by some to perpetuate a sense of male dominance and as an excuse to enforce male domination; Paul has been used as excuse for men to tell women what they expect of them and enforce these expectations by violence.

But there is another side to this coin: *Husbands...*” (v25, 28) The model for male behaviour in marriage is what? The bossy, bullying, arrogant individual who gets his own way? No! The model for husbands’ behaviour is the self-sacrificial love of Jesus. This is hugely different from the First century culture’s expectations of male behaviour; the first century male could command and order his wife about; he could kill her if he wanted and there would be no comeback! Christian male behaviour is very different; this is hugely counter to the culture of the day, just as it is hugely counter to the way many people think today about relationships. We think that relationships are for what we can get out of them and when we stop getting anything, it is time to end the relationship; for the Bible, relationships are about what we give and contribute mutually with Jesus as our role model.

The wife’s interest should focus on her husband and the husband’s interest should focus on his wife. It is expressed differently, but that is mutual responsibility of marriage. “*Wives submit...*” (v22) There is a God-given sense of order in relationships, whether we call it authority or leadership and the wife’s relationship to her husband is compared to the Church’s relationship to Christ; He is the head and the Church loves Christ and when that love is in our hearts, we’d do anything for Jesus. That is the wife’s love for her husband; she would do anything for him and her focus is on her responsibility to him. Even Christian wives whose husbands were not Christians were to love their husbands well and win them over by their love rather than their constant nagging!

“*Husbands, love...*” (v25f) The husband’s focus is to be on his wife and what he can do for her. There is no bigger, stronger, deeper, more challenging role model than Jesus here, especially since Paul picks out Jesus’ sacrificial love on behalf of the Church. How did Jesus show His love for the Church? He died; He laid down His life for His Church; He gave Himself, all that He had, for the salvation of His Church. That is the kind of love with which the Christian husband is to love his wife. There is to be no bullying, no bossy authority, no battering into submission, but a focus on her welfare; what will make her blossom and bloom, what will allow her to be herself in the fullest possible way; that is the husband’s concern for his wife because that was Jesus’ concern for the Church. Christ didn’t crush the Church, but loved her in this

way so that she could become everything He wanted her to be. That is to be quality of the husband's love for his wife. Anyone tells you this is easy...

Love, mutual submission, is be characteristic of all of our relationships. To love someone is to recognise someone else's worth and value. Love says that "I value the other person so highly that I want to sacrifice myself for his or her self, in order that he may develop his selfhood, or she hers, more fully. Now to lose oneself that the other may find his or her self – that is the essence of the gospel of Christ." (John Stott) I don't know about you, but I find this hugely challenging and yet immensely significant. How do we break down damaging cultural stereotypes? I don't know, but I do know that here is one way of knocking bits out of the wall, by modelling a different kind of relationship, a kind of relationship modelled by Jesus and for us to imitate, in marriage or wherever we meet people.

Two of Jesus' key disciples show us how easy it is to get this wrong. James and John were amongst the first disciples and were surely key close friends of Jesus amongst the many hangers-on! They came to Him one day and said "*let one...*" (Mk 10:37) In other words, "Jesus, we want seats numbers one and two in the kingdom, next to You; we want to be, not just at the top table, but at the top of the top table!" Wow! What a request! We can't aim any higher than that; that is it! The peak! The pinnacle of ambition! Jesus turned it round: "*Can...*" (10:38) Are you willing to suffer? Willing to give? "*For even...*" (10:45) Jesus didn't come to be the top dog; He came to be a servant, to serve and give His life. That's the model for our relationships; the badge we should wear – the cross? The other badge could be the basin and the towel, because Jesus washed His disciples' feet?

I believe in marriage. I'm not always very good at it! Martin Luther, the great sixteenth-century German reformer, who had spent his early adult years in a monastery, said that being married was a more arduous spiritual discipline; and that was nothing to do with having a troublesome wife! Forget any thoughts of demanding your rights; focus on your responsibilities. Don't live by the "me first" rule, but serve others. Wives and husbands have particular, clear responsibilities of mutual submission to one another in love. Wherever we meet people, Jesus is our role model. There is so much more that we could say; this is the ideal; but we recognise that not all life is like this; there are times when we get it horribly wrong and it's not always our fault; there are times when we despair of the world we're living in. That doesn't mean we should give it up or throw it away; God has given us marriage as place for mutual love, a place where our real self can flourish. Let us be filled with God's Spirit!