

Love and Respect

Ephesians 5:21-33

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God is the Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. When Jesus prayed in John 17:11 that “they might be one, even as we are one,” he was hoping for the church to experience the unity in diversity of the Holy Trinity. Christians do not believe in three gods; we believe in one God who exists in three persons. None of these persons is greater than the others, but they are co-equal, co-eternal, distinct as persons but bound together as one. Another way to put it is that God is a God of relationship. And within the Trinitarian relationship of God is a marvelous mutual submission. The Son glorifies the Father and submits to the Father’s will. The Father glorifies the Son and gives him all he has. The Spirit takes all that the Son has and declares it to us and glorifies the Father. Each person of the Trinity glorifies and serves the others in mutual submission and love.

Jesus prays that his church might reflect and engender the oneness and unity of the Holy Trinity in our relationships with one another. Paul says, “The body is a unity, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ.” (1 Corinthians 12:12) The Holy Trinity wants the church to form one body; to build a community of unity and diversity through mutual submission. This fulfills the command we are given in Ephesians 5:1, “Be imitators of God...” In this new community we must accept our differences, affirm our equality and commit to love and respect for each other.

The Holy Trinity stands behind the Biblical teaching on marriage in Ephesians 5:21-24:

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

What the persons of the Trinity do for each other and what the members of the church are called to do for each other is exactly what husbands and wives are to do for each other. Unity in diversity can only happen when relationships are built upon mutual

submission. It is when we give ourselves away to each other in unconditional love and service that we find ourselves living in joyful oneness.

The Bible ennoble marriage by using the analogy of Christ and the Church. When Christ gave himself up on the cross, he did not diminish in dignity or power, instead he acquired greater glory through his sacrifice. Likewise when the church submits to Christ as Lord and Savior, she does not lose stature or dignity or power, instead she gains it. In the Bible you do not climb the ladder to success and power through self-assertion and self-aggrandizement; you descend to success and power by becoming a servant of others. The Bible is asking women to give themselves away to their husbands in this very same spirit.

Husbands play the role of Christ in this analogy from Ephesians 5:25: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." This is to say that husbands are to be leaders in marriage. Too many men today are absent as leaders in marriage. An alarming statistic is that 65% of children born in America are born out-of-wedlock and are likely to be raised in fatherless families. Even where men are present, they often withdraw emotionally and defer leadership to their wives, becoming little more than shadows or ghosts in their households.

What is the leadership Christ requires of men in marriage? Jesus sets the bar for men in Matthew 20:25-28:

Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

The leadership of the husband is not about dominance, oppression and coercion. It is about servant-hood. Here is the idea in a nutshell: men are to give themselves up for their wives. Give up their ambitions, their power, their status, and even their lives. The idea is inescapable: marriage only works when husbands and wives truly give themselves away to each other on a daily basis.

Four times in this passage husbands are specifically asked to love their wives. The word used for love here is agape—the Greek word the Bible uses to describe the unconditional love of God. By contrast the wives are not asked to love their husbands.

They are only asked to respect their husbands in Ephesians 5:33. I believe that this points to a fundamental difference in the basic emotional and spiritual needs of men and women.

A woman's primary need is for love, and that is why men are so assiduously commanded to unconditionally love their wives. For women love is closeness and communication. It is warmth and expressiveness. It is understanding and reconciling conflict. It is loyalty and support. Men do not naturally bond with people in this way. You will never hear a husband say to his buddies, "Hey, come on over Saturday, and I'll show you pictures of what my groomsmen wore at my wedding." So the word of God takes pains to ask men to get out of their comfort zones and do something extraordinary to meet the spiritual and emotional needs of their wife. Speak and act in loving ways towards her. Tell her you love her. Cook dinner for her when she is late. Give her compliments. Write her notes. Open car doors for her. Take her out to eat. Treat her in ways that show she is special. Speak gently to her. Pray with her. Talk with her. Serve her needs around the house. Remember birthdays and anniversaries.

Wives on the other hand are admonished to respect their husbands. Ephesians 5:33 says "...each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband." Respect and honor are what motivates men. It is their primary emotional and spiritual need. "R-E-S-P-E-C-T, find out what that means to me" was a song written and recorded by Otis Redding as a message to his wife long before Aretha Franklin made it famous. Given a choice between being alone and unloved in the world or feeling disrespected and inadequate, most men would choose to be unloved over disrespected. Most women love their husbands because this comes most naturally to them, but what truly touches a man's heart is to have the respect of his wife.

The key to a healthy and whole marriage is to understand the differing needs of men and women and to enter into a cycle of love and respect.

But here is what usually happens: When a woman feels unloved, she scolds or criticizes her husband, hoping to draw him closer to her. Men interpret the scolding as disrespect, and so they stonewall and withdraw. The woman in turn interprets the stonewalling as hostility—more unloving behavior. She then ramps up the criticism, and

a vicious cycle is born. But she will never get the love she wants by showing more disrespect, nor will he get the respect he wants by being more unloving and withdrawn.

It only takes one spouse to break this cycle. Which one should it be? The answer is the one who is the most mature. When a husband shows love to his wife, it motivates her respect, and when a wife shows respect to her husband, it motivates his love, and a virtuous circle begins. They are bonded together in love and respect. A unity in diversity that reflects our creator and redeemer: the Holy Trinity; a oneness that answers our Lord's prayer that we be one even as the Trinity.