

The Meaning of Marriage

Rich Nathan
February 2 & 3, 2019
Marriage Matters
Ephesians 5:18-33

Before I begin, I wanted to let you know that in just a few weeks, we're going to be starting our yearly All Church Campaign. For those of you who have been here with us over the last few years, we do these All Church Campaigns every year during Lent to bring a real laser-like focus upon discipling the whole church from little children to empty nesters around a common theme together.

This year, we're going to have a capital component as part of our all church discipleship campaign. The capital component will ask for increased giving over the course of three years. You'll hear a lot more about the capital campaign over the next few months.

We want to raise money for four targets.

Slide (he's going to comment on each one before transitioning the next on the list)

- New campuses
- New buildings
- New leaders
- New missions

Over the next six years, we want to start five new campuses around central Ohio to reach various neighborhoods and different ethnicities within our city with the message of the gospel.

Second, we want to raise money for new buildings – either refurbishing old buildings or helping these new campuses get into a facility.

Third, we want to raise up new leaders. We're going to start a residency program here at Vineyard Columbus to train up the next generation of pastors and church planters.

And finally, we want to do new missions. We want to raise money to send more people out around the globe to engage in church planting in Muslim contexts and also in post-Christian secular contexts.

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New campuses

New buildings

New leaders

New missions

As we've done in prior campaigns, there's going to be a significant small group component. We're asking everyone who considers themselves part of Vineyard Columbus to get involved in a small group during this campaign.

You know, I've been a follower of Jesus for 45 years now and almost for that entire 45 years, Marlene and I have been part of a small group. I'm the senior pastor and we're still in a small group. Marlene and I can receive prayer and pray for others, worship God, study the scriptures with a small group of people. Small groups have stood by our side as we had our children, when we've experienced loss, when we've gone through difficulties in life. Being part of a small group is not something I'm just recommending to you that I don't personally do. Marlene and I consider small group participation to be a vital part of our spiritual lives. This year, I'm asking every one of you to get involved in a small group.

Folks, if you're in a group, particularly if you're a small group leader, over the next few weeks – the people sitting next to you, if you come forward to receive prayer – will you ask people, "Are you in a group?" If they're not, why not invite them to your group? You can always find a small group by looking at our small group finder on our website at:

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<https://www.vineyardcolumbus.org/small-groups>

You can start your own group. As in prior years, we're going to have lots of opportunities to HOST a group. HOST of course means:

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H – heart for people

O – open up your home or space

S – serve a snack

T – turn on your DVD player

We have information about hosting out in the lobby. You're going to hear a lot more about the campaign over the next several weeks. We are starting sign-ups for HOSTs today. Check that out in the lobby.

Today I'm starting a new series on the family, titled "Family Matters". To begin this series, I'm going to start by talking about the meaning of marriage.

You know, there are lots of jokes about marriage. The comedian Rita Rudner said,

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"I love being married. It's so great to find that one special person you want to annoy for the rest of your life."

She also said,

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"Men who have a pierced ear are better prepared for marriage – they've experienced pain and bought jewelry."

Albert Einstein said,

Slide (with pic)

"Men marry women with the hope that they will never change. Women marry men with the hope that they will change. Invariably, they are both disappointed."

The singer Eddie Cantor said,

Slide (with pic)

"Marriage is an attempt to solve problems together which you didn't even know you had when you were on your own."

The writer Erma Bombeck said,

Slide (with pic)

"Marriage has no guarantees. If that's what you're looking for, go live with a car battery."

And the playwright Neil Simon gave this bit of marital advice,

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"Take care of him. Make him feel important. And if you can do that, you'll have a happy and wonderful marriage. Like two out of every 10 couples."

Of course, there are more positive views of marriage. Winston Churchill said,

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"My most brilliant achievement was my ability to be able to persuade my wife to marry me."

The great Protestant reformer Martin Luther said,

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"Let the wife make the husband glad to come home, and let him make her sorry to see him leave."

Mignon McLaughlin, a journalist from the first half of the 20th century, said,

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“A successful marriage requires falling in love many times, always with the same person.”

Today, we’re going to explore the longest sustained discussion of marriage in the whole Bible – the Apostle Paul’s statements about marriage in Ephesians 5. Before we read the text, let’s pray.

Slide Ephesians 5:18-33

¹⁸ Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, ²⁰ always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

²¹ Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

²² Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. ²³ 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. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷ and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. ²⁸ In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church—³⁰ for we are members of his body. ³¹ “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” ³² This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. ³³ However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

I want to begin by talking about

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The structure of marriage

If marriage was a patient in a 21st century hospital, we know where we’d find marriage without asking at the front desk. It would be in the ICU. Many marriages are dead or dying. Others are just clinging to life. Unfortunately, one of the most popular diagnoses given by conservative Christians regarding why marriage is in such a sorry state is that we have too many unsubmitive wives. We’ve got too many women who are pushy and opinionated and trying to wear the pants in the family. We need to reinstitute

“Christian marriage” where the man is the king of his castle and his opinion always rules the day.

It is absolutely the case that millions of Christian women have been beaten over the head with Ephesians 5 by husbands who constantly remind their wives of their duty to submit. Often when the average Christian discusses Ephesians 5, what we hear is “Bottom line, when we get into a dispute the husband’s opinion ultimately wins.”

I’m not overstating this. Many people within the conservative Christian camp say that this text gives the husband the right to rule his wife simply because he is male. Sure, he should be loving and take his wife’s feelings into account. And sure, the husband ought to be a good listener. Sometimes he may reverse his opinion based on his wife’s thoughts and perspectives. But when the rubber meets the road the husband gets to run the house simply because of his gender. The husband doesn’t have to earn his right to rule. He doesn’t have to be more competent in making this particular decision than his wife. It’s a given because of his gender he can ultimately do what he wants, even if he’s selfish or he doesn’t know what he’s doing. When push comes to shove, lots of people say the Apostle Paul is teaching that the husband ultimately gets to call the shots.

There are three problems with this view that the Apostle Paul was teaching that the basic structure of marriage is the husband is the boss. He may be a nice boss, a considerate boss, a firm boss or he may be an inconsiderate, screaming boss, but the husband is the boss. Let me share the three problems with this view.

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The text doesn’t go where we expect it to go

Let me try to bring this down for you. The real problem with Eph. 5:21-33 is that the text doesn’t go where we think it ought to go when we read the words “head” and “submit.” Let me explain. In the ancient world, there were in many philosophical writings something called household codes. These described the proper ordering of the relationships of individuals in ancient homes. The bottom line in all of these ancient philosophical codes (there are many of them), was that the good husband was to be like a benevolent dictator. They were to rule their home, or govern their home with warmth and kindness. But the husband rules.

Now, the apostle Paul writing in the ancient world, uses the model of the philosophers’ household codes—the duties of wives to husbands and husbands to wives; children to parents and parents to children; slaves to masters and masters to slaves. He uses similar words—the word “head” and the word “submit,” but he doesn’t go where the ancient philosophers go. Not once in this text does the apostle Paul say to husbands, “Husbands, rule your wives.” Or, “Husbands, govern your wives.” Or, “Husbands, lead

your wives.” Or “Husbands, be the spiritual leader”. Or, “Husbands, oversee your wives” much less “husbands, dominate or domineer or be a benevolent dictator.”

When Paul explains, what he means by head and submit, he never uses the word “rule.” Instead, he uses the word “love.” Three times in this text, the command to husbands is to love your wives. Verse 25: *Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church.* Verse 28: *In the same way husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies.* And verse 33: *However each of you must also love his wife as he loves himself.*

So, for those who say, “Well, Paul is basically saying that when push comes to shove the husband gets to make the call.” My first response would be, “This text doesn’t go where we expect it to go.” Paul never defines headship as the right to rule or govern or be the boss or the king of the castle. He describes headship in terms of the duty to love.

Here’s the second thing.

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The text doesn’t include the word “submit” in verse 22

The NIV translation says:

Slide Ephesians 5:22

²² Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord.

But literally the text should read this way:

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Submitting to one another in reverence for Christ. ²²Wives to your husbands as to the Lord.

Verse 22 does not start a new thought. That’s why when I read you the text, we need to start way back in verse 18.

Slide Ephesians 5:18

¹⁸ Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit,

Paul says if you’re filled with the Spirit – three things will result. First, you’re going to love to worship. Second, if you’re filled with the Spirit, you’re going to find yourself saying thank you to God a lot. And third, if you’re filled with the Holy Spirit, you’ll practice mutual submission with each other.

Slide Ephesians 5:21

²¹ Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Mutual submission in Ephesians 5:21 was absolutely unknown in the first century outside of Christianity. What Paul is saying here by “submit to one another” is radical. It is revolutionary. It was spitting in the face of a culture that prized hierarchy and power in relationship. The Greco-Roman world understood one sided submission. Power and authority exercised by one person and submission by another. This is what they believed would hold the society together. One person ruled and the other person submits.

One writer compared the Greco-Roman world to the Jim Crow south, saying this:

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“[The Greco-Roman World] were similar to the expression that was often heard among those who wanted to preserve the status quo during the Civil Rights struggle: If people “knew their place” and stayed in their place we would not have such social turmoil and dislocation.”

Sadly, that’s what a lot of conservative Christians say to wives today. In this marriage, you’re getting out of your place – speaking up, threatening the status quo, getting uppity. Paul blows the whole power structure up and he says, “I want husbands and wives to submit to each other.” The idea that the husband makes the final call and when the rubber meets the road he’s the boss is undermined by three problems.

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- The text doesn’t go where we expect it to go
- The text doesn’t include the word “submit” in verse 22

The Apostle Paul says, “Yes, let’s work within the basic relational framework of our culture. But let’s do so in a way that completely redefines those relationships in terms of mutual respect, mutual authority, mutual regard and mutual love.”

Practically, mutual submission is the way that Marlene and I have operated in our marriage for 43 years. We have shared responsibility and authority for virtually every major decision we have ever made in our lives. Whether we’re talking about big purchases like cars or houses or vacations, whether we’re talking about big gifts to the church or financial help for family members who are struggling, big life changes like career or big decisions for the kids or how we’re going to relate to our in-laws or which holidays we’re going to have with which in-laws or which school the kids would go to – it’s mutual, mutual, mutual.

We don’t always agree with each other. We argue more than many nice Christians because we’re both opinionated and we both believe that we can persuade the other person if they would only listen long enough. What we don’t do, what we have almost never done is have one of us decide to do something important that will significantly

affect both of us or that will significantly affect our family. Our approach is that we're in this together.

I've talked about the structure of marriage, I want to move on and talk about the purposes of marriage from this text.

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The purposes of marriage

Why did God invent marriage to begin with? From this text, it's apparent that marriage is designed to be a kind of gymnasium. It's meant to be one of God's main training grounds to teach us some things. Like what? The Apostle Paul three times says that marriage is designed to teach us to love.

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To teach us to love

Slide Ephesians 5:25

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her

Slide Ephesians 5:28

²⁸ In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.

Slide Ephesians 5:33

³³ However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

Love is not a natural thing. At least, not the kind of enduring, sacrificial love demanded by scripture. Lust is natural. Desire is natural. Romance is natural. But marital love described here in Ephesians 5 is not a natural thing. It must be trained into us.

Katherine Ann Porter puts it:

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"Love must be learned, and learned again and again; there is no end to it. Hate needs no instruction, but waits only to be provoked."

When a spouse says, "I never loved you." There is a reason why they want a divorce or they want to separate. When a spouse says, "I never loved you" that's meant to be hurtful. They intend to say, "I never really found you lovable. I never found you worth loving." But the statement "I never loved you" isn't an attack on the other spouse. When you say, "I never loved you" you aren't saying something about the other person. You're saying something about yourself. You're saying, "I'm a terrible lover. I never

learned how to love.” Love is something that we need to learn how to do. It’s easy to imagine ourselves to be good lovers. We claim to love people – you’ve got a loving heart. But do you love depressed people or messy people or people who forget things or people who put on weight? How about unemployed people or unhealed people or annoying people? Because you’re going to encounter every one of those people in your marriage.

God doesn’t ask us to love people in general. He asks us in marriage to love the person who is right next to you. Marriage is designed to teach us to love in very concrete, very specific ways. The Apostle Paul says, “Let me tell you what love is.” Love is not a feeling. It’s not always being on the mountain top with your spouse. It’s not the movie version. I can’t wait to get into the house so we can start ripping our clothes off.

The Apostle Paul defines love this way. He says

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Love is giving up your life.

Slide Ephesians 5:25

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her

What does it mean to give up your life? To practice self-sacrifice. To learn to love the way Jesus loved us. The truth is, brothers and sisters, we’re rarely asked to jump in front of a bullet for our spouse or to race back into a burning house to carry them to safety while the roof collapses on us. Almost all of our self-sacrifice is contained in small, incremental choices.

I’ll put it in financial terms. God doesn’t ask us to sacrifice \$100,000 at a time for our spouse. Most often, self-sacrifice required in marriage is paid out \$0.25 at a time. I will do the dishes when both of us are really tired. I will get up with the baby when I would prefer to sleep. I will rearrange my schedule to go to the Parent Teacher Conference so you can keep your work commitments. I will pick up the dry cleaning or pay the bills or clean the toilet or walk the dog or bite my tongue when you complain about the same thing again and again. Most often, self-sacrifice doesn’t look like “I will give you one of my kidneys.” It most often looks like “I will give you a couple of drops of blood.” But the pinprick still hurts.

Paul also defines love as,

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Love is practicing the great commandment

Slide Ephesians 5:33

³³ However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

You know, Jesus was once asked, “What is the greatest commandment in all the law of God?” He said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength. This is the first and greatest of all the commandments.” Then he went on to say, “The second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Most people who are familiar with the Bible have heard this great commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. When it really comes down to it, how do we actually love our neighbor as ourselves? I mean, how do we treat our neighbors as we would treat ourselves? It sounds like a really nice thing to do, but who do you actually treat with the same care and concern as you treat yourself? About whom in the whole world would you say, “Sure, you can have all the money in my bank account. Whatever I earn, it’s not just mine, it’s also yours. Sure, you can have my car. If you bang it up, I will treat that the way I would treat my own accident and pay for the accident out of my own pocket as if I did it.”

About whom in the whole world would you say, “You can determine how I spend my time and my vacation and where I live and what I do for my career. You can shape my thoughts about how many children I’m going to have and how I raise those kids and when and where I’m going to retire and every other major and minor decision. I invite you to shape my thinking about all those things because I’m going to treat you as I treat myself.” With whom do we really practice this great commandment – to love our neighbor as ourselves? I believe God created marriage to be among the rarest places on earth where we actually get to practice this great commandment in this world, in this life, in real time. It’s not just words. It’s not some heavenly ideal that no one is ever going to do. In marriage, God says, “Let’s do it.”

Marriage is God’s gym. It’s God’s way to train us and teach us to love. And marriage is God’s way to teach us holiness.

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To teach us holiness

Slide Ephesians 5:26

²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word,

You know, some people go into marriage thinking they’re not going to have to change that much. Maybe a little bit. I’m completely aware of those minor areas that I need to change. I realize I need a little improvement here, a little bit of a nip and tuck there. People entering marriage thinking that they’re not going to need to change much are in for a rude awakening.

Marriage forces us to face character issues that we would never have to face otherwise. Because you always have someone else watching you. As a single person, you can go into your apartment and if you want to be a slob you can be a slob. If you want to sulk, you can sulk. If you want to sit in front of the television and eat a gallon of ice cream, you can sit in front of the television and eat the ice cream. But if you're married, it's not just invisible God watching you all the time. There's this other pair of eyes. You're always under scrutiny by your partner.

Gary Thomas wrote a wonderful book on marriage years ago that I would highly recommend titled *Sacred Marriage*. I love the subtitle.

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Book cover

The subtitle is *What if God Designed Marriage to Make us Holy More than to Make Us Happy?*

If the purpose of marriage is to always be happy, then your only option is basically to get a new marriage every two or three years. But if a main purpose of marriage is to make us holy then God uses our spouses to operate on us, often without anesthesia. Marriage forces us to deal honestly with our character flaws. It holds up a mirror to us to show us how petty we often are, how impatient, selfish, self-consumed we can often be. God uses marriage to teach us holiness.

Let me read this text again and speak to husbands:

Slide Ephesians 5:25-27

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷ and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

Husbands, let me ask you some questions. Husbands, if you are sitting here with your wife, look at your wife. Is your wife becoming more beautiful inside than she was when you first married her? Is she more spiritually mature? More secure? More emotionally healthy? More holy because of you and your love? Or is she growing in spite of you and in spite of your love? Is your wife a better person, more reflective of Christ's purposes for her as a result of living with you? Or would you say, husband, in all honesty, my wife is more beaten down, more defeated, less joyful, more angry, less full of faith, more discouraged? Husband, if you look at your wife and you say, "Over the years, my wife has gotten worse, this isn't the lovely woman I married." Then what responsibility do you have?

I would ask the same thing of wives. Is your husband more holy, more secure, more full of integrity, more of a lover of Jesus because he's living with you, because of your encouragement, because of your love? You know, when a person lives in an atmosphere of put downs, neglect, emotional coldness and distance, when a person lives in an atmosphere of constant criticism or withdrawal or abuse, a person living like that will often shrivel up and die.

Whatever else we're to do with each other's marriage, certainly one of the main things we're to do is to promote each other's spiritual health and holiness. People who live in an environment of love and respect and prayer and encouragement and attentiveness will get better. And those who don't won't.

Marriage is God's gym. It's God's training ground to teach us to love, to teach us holiness. And finally, marriage is meant.

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To point beyond itself to Christ and the church

Throughout this text, the Apostle Paul keeps drawing the analogy between husband and wife and Christ and the church. There's so much in this text about that pointer, but I just want to look for a moment in closing at verses 31-32.

Slide Ephesians 5:31-32

³¹ "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." ³² This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.

Paul sees marriage as a wonderful picture of the union of Christ and his church. What we're talking about here is the faithfulness of God, sticking with us through thick and thin. There is a forever-ness to the love of God that faithful, committed love in marriage points to.

Think of what the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13. He tells us that love never fails. Love never collapses. It's never defeated. It's never destroyed. It never falls apart. Everything else passes away – our youth, our beauty, our career, our ministries, our health. Everything in this world passes away.

There was a theologian from the Reformation who, at the end of his life when his body was old and frail, spoke about the love God had for him in Jesus Christ. On his death bed, he said this:

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“My hearing is gone, my smelling is gone, and my sight is going: my speech and feeling are almost gone; but the lovingkindness of God is the same, and will never depart from me.”

Do you believe that God’s love will never leave you? That nothing can ever separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord? Most of the world doesn’t believe that. Many Christians don’t believe that. God appointed Christian marriage and the faithful enduring love of Christian marriage to be a pointer to shout to an unbelieving world, to shout to an unbelieving church that there is such a thing as a love that never fails.

Married people, does your marriage point people to Jesus and his persevering love?
Let’s pray.

The Meaning of Marriage

Rich Nathan
February 2 & 3, 2019
Marriage Matters
Ephesians 5:18-33

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