

The Proper Ordering of a Godly Society

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[0 : 0 0] But we're going to turn now to our reading for this morning, and Edward is continuing his series through the letter of Ephesians. And we have plenty of visitor Bibles available at the side, at the back, so please do grab a Bible if you don't have one with you.

And we're in Ephesians chapter 5. And that's page 978, if you have a visitor Bible.

Ephesians chapter 5, and reading from verse 15. Ephesians 5, verse 15. Ephesians 5, verse 15.

Ephesians 5, verse 15.

As to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

[1 : 5 6] Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

In the same way, husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body.

Therefore, a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.

This mystery is profound, and I'm saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother, this is the first commandment with a promise, that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land.

[3 : 3 0] Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart as you would Christ, not by the way of eye service, as people please, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with the good will as to the Lord and not to man, knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free.

Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.

Well, amen. May God bless to us his words this morning. Well, good morning, everybody, and good morning to those at Bath Street and at Queen's Park as well.

Well, let's turn together to Ephesians chapter 5 and verse 15. Our passage runs down to chapter 6 and verse 9. And my title is The Proper Ordering of a Godly Society.

And by that phrase, a godly society, I mean the church, not the nation. In the 2,000 years since Christ ascended and the church was born, bold Christian leaders have had great visions of Christianizing whole nations and have been met with some success in various parts of the world, not least in certain European countries, including our own, where we've had, still have national churches, where the monarch is styled defender of the faith and governor of the national church.

[5 : 35] In other words, state and church have been linked together in a formal way. And vestiges of that linking still remain. Coronations and state funerals take place in one of the cathedrals in London.

Not in a mosque, not in the open air, but in a grand building dedicated, in theory, to the advancement of the Christian faith. And prayers are said at the beginning of each working day in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

And those prayers are distinctly Christian prayers. They're not multi-faith prayers. But that kind of linkage between church and state is no part of the vision of the apostles who have given us the New Testament.

Paul and Peter and John had no vision of Christianizing the machinery of government in the Roman Empire. They taught the church to respect and honor the government and to regard the government as God-ordained because it was the enforcer of law and order.

And law and order is a distinctly biblical principle. But at the same time, the apostles were well aware that the government could turn against the church and persecute it, which indeed happened with increasing viciousness as the first century advanced.

[6 : 52] So in a letter like Ephesians, Paul is not opening up a vision of a Christianized nation or a Christianized Roman Empire. He's teaching the church how to live as a godly society within a surrounding culture which is antagonistic to the gospel.

Paul is not blurring the distinctions between the church and the surrounding pagan culture. He is powerfully sharpening those distinctions because only in this way could he teach the church how to live a distinctively Christian life.

And in the second half of Ephesians, in chapters 4, 5, and 6, Paul is building up in the strongest possible way the contrast between the godly society, that is the church, and the godless way of life in pagan Ephesus.

Just look back for a moment to chapter 4 and verse 17. Now this I say and testify in the Lord that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do in the futility of their minds.

They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.

[8 : 07] But that is not the way you learned Christ. So in verses 17 to 19, Paul is describing the way that the pagan Gentiles lived in the Roman Empire.

But you, Paul is saying to the Christians at Ephesus, you must forsake that way of life entirely and live, just look back to chapter 4 verse 1, in a manner worthy of the calling to which you've been called.

So in chapters 4, 5, and 6, Paul is teaching the Christian life, Christian ethics, how to live a radically new life, which will involve, just look at chapter 5 verse 2, which will involve walking in love as Christ loved us.

In other words, a way of life that follows the example of Jesus himself, who loved us and gave himself up for us. Now just to give a brief recapitulation of how Paul teaches Christian ethics.

We saw a few weeks ago how Christian ethics are based on and entirely derived from the gospel itself. And the gospel is expressed in a series of indicative verbs, where Paul explains how God has done this and this, how God has acted to save his people through sending Christ, how the Lord Jesus has rescued his people by bearing the penalty of our sins on the cross, by rising from death and thus overcoming the power of death on our behalf, and by his ascending into heaven, a mighty act of power that declares his sovereignty over all things.

[9 : 44] Now that is the gospel. It has been accomplished. It is done. It's good news. Those are the gospel indicatives. They show us what has been accomplished by Christ, who is sent by God.

And then they lead directly to the ethical imperatives, which is why Paul says in chapter 4, verse 1, therefore, you must live in a manner that is worthy of the calling to which you've been called.

The gospel indicatives produce the ethical imperatives, and we respond gladly because we're so grateful for what God has done for us. Then a couple of weeks ago, we saw another aspect of Paul's ethical teaching method, and this is the way in which he tells the Ephesian Christians what they now are, what their real status is now that they belong to Christ.

And then he says, this is what you are, so now live accordingly. You'll find this, for example, at chapter 5, verse 8, where he says, at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.

So walk as children of light. You are light. That is your real status. So live that way. Let it be seen in your conduct that you are light, that the darkness has departed from your lives.

[11 : 03] And the same teaching method shows up in chapter 5, verse 1, where he says, you are beloved children of God now. So be imitators of God and follow the example of Christ.

So Paul's method is, be what you are. Now, I want to point out a third aspect of Paul's ethical teaching method this morning, and that's his way of saying, and he says this again and again, not this, but that.

Not this, because this is part of the old pagan way of behaving, but that, which is part of the true Christian life. So he's sharply contrasting two ways of behaving, the first to be thrown out, the other to be embraced.

Let me show you some examples just from within chapter 5. Verse 4, Let there be no filthiness, nor foolish talk, nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving.

So he's saying not that way of life, but rather this way of life. In verse 11, Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.

[12 : 20] So reject one course, follow another. Verse 15, Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise, but as wise.

It's a very simple contrast. Expel un wisdom and embrace wisdom. Verse 17, Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

He's saying expel folly, embrace the mindset that wants to understand the Lord's will. Verse 18, Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit.

Out with drunkenness, in with the desire to be constantly filled with the Holy Spirit. Now it's a very simple way of teaching, isn't it? Not this thing, but that thing. And once you begin to see this, you start to notice it everywhere in the New Testament's ethical teaching.

The other apostles use it. Jesus uses it. For example, here's a famous one of Jesus. Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break through and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven.

[13 : 31] It's a very straightforward way of teaching the Lord's people how to live. Not the way of pagan darkness and degradation, but the way of light and love and truth and self-control.

Now I'm so grateful that the Lord makes these distinctions so plainly and so clearly, because I'm a simple Simon. I can't cope with subtle argumentations. I need to have a straightforward, not this, but that.

Then I know where I'm up to, and I begin to see the Christian way of life, and how different it is from the gloomy darkness of godless paganism. I'm just getting a bit warm.

Not this form of clothing, but that form of clothing. Good. Right. Go up your loins, as the Bible says.

Now let's turn to our passage for today. We're going to see several not this, but that constructions in verses 15 to 21. But when we get to the sections on husbands and wives, children and parents, and slaves and masters, there is still an underlying, unspoken, not this, but that structure to Paul's teaching.

[14 : 43] Because what he teaches about marriage, about family life, and about the workplace, demolishes and overturns the normal thinking and practice of the world.

Both the godless world back then, and the godless world of the 21st century. And Paul teaches a radically different way of life. So we'll start by looking briefly at the three not this, but that's of verses 15 to 18.

Verse 15. Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise, but as wise. Paul's verb walk there, which he uses again and again in this letter, that word refers to the ongoing habitual conduct.

Of ourselves. Right foot, left foot, right foot, left foot. Walking day after day. 24-7, 365-12. Paul says, look carefully how you walk.

The implication is that there are dangers, toils and snares all around us. In the streets of our own city, you have to look pretty carefully how you walk, don't you? Otherwise you'll trip over an uneven paving stone, or you'll fall into a ditch excavated by Scottish power.

[15 : 53] Paul is saying, walk carefully. Don't tackle life like a bull in a china shop. Think carefully. After all, anything that is really worth doing requires care.

We all take trouble over the things that matter most to us. Our friendships, our families, our work, our hobbies. But notice Paul's, not this, but that.

He says, not as unwise, but as wise. One modern Bible translation puts it like this. Be most careful then how you conduct yourselves.

Like sensible people, not like simpletons. So we need to learn to take the Christian lifestyle very seriously, to think about the way we live.

In verse 16, you'll see Paul draws out one particular implication of the principle of living wisely. He says, making the best use of the time because the days are evil.

[16 : 51] Now we're all very capable of using our time lazily and haphazardly. I am very capable, I can tell you, of being lob by name, slob by nature.

In fact, when I was at school, some of my best friends used to call me slob rat. I was, I have to confess, a feather-brained youth. I suspect that some here this morning may be feather-brained youths.

Paul says to all of us, leave aside a feather-brained approach to life and become wise. Look carefully how you walk. Then the second, not this but that, comes in verse 17.

Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Now that's a very similar instruction to the previous one, because folly and un wisdom are much the same thing.

The subject of folly is opened up for us in the book of Proverbs in the Old Testament. And the fool, who is mentioned many times in the book of Proverbs, the fool is not in some formal sense an atheist, but he has no intention of taking God seriously.

- [17 : 57] He doesn't fear God. He doesn't think that God matters. And in our verse 17 here, Paul is contrasting the God-doesn't-matter approach with the life that is seriously concerned to understand the Lord's will.

The Christian mind is taken up with the question, what is God's will for the world and for the church? In the Lord's Prayer, we pray, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

In verse 17, Paul's main concern is that we should get to know God's mind. And there's only one way of doing that, and that is by opening up our minds as much as we possibly can to the teaching of the Bible.

The more the Bible is allowed to penetrate our thinking, the more clearly we shall understand the Lord's will. In verse 17, Paul is not thinking about the Lord's will concerning our important personal decisions.

Should I take this job? Should I follow this career? Should I live in Birmingham or Dundee? Should I marry Jessica or Euphemia? Now those are big and important questions, and we need godly wisdom and good advice as we face those questions.

- [19 : 10] But Paul is more concerned with the principles than with the details. We're going to see in a few minutes that he's concerned not so much with whom we marry, but how we conduct ourselves in marriage.

Not so much with what job we take, but with how we conduct ourselves in the workplace. Now, I'm not saying for a moment it doesn't matter who you marry. It matters a great deal.

But Paul is not going to tell you whether to propose to Jessica or to Euphemia. But he is going to tell you very clearly, once you've married one of them, and you can't marry both of them, how to conduct yourself as a godly married man.

So verse 17, Paul is saying, reject the folly of being indifferent to God, and learn to understand the will of the Lord, his will that you conduct yourself in a way that pleases him.

Well, now our third, not this but that, comes in verse 18. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit.

- [20 : 17] So Paul is again contrasting an aspect of pagan Gentile life with the new life of those who are learning to follow Christ. Drunkenness, like sexual immorality, was a major feature of life in Ephesus, as it is a major feature of life in modern Britain.

Paul is not laying down some law that all Christians should be teetotalers. The Bible doesn't insist on that. Jesus sometimes drank wine, as did Paul himself. The problem Paul is confronting is drunkenness, heavy drinking.

Now we all know that sometimes people who are real Christians, who are really seeking to understand the Lord's will, become alcoholics for various reasons.

It is possible, due to the pressures of life, to slip gradually into alcoholism without realizing what's happening to you. Such brothers and sisters need our support and our help, not our rejection and condemnation.

They know that alcoholism is a serious problem, but there is real hope for them. For example, here in Glasgow, there's the fine work of the organization called Hope for Addiction, run by Terry McCutcheon, one of our own elders, who many of you know, and who is himself a Christian rescued from addiction.

- [21 : 40] Real help is available for the restoration of a person's self-esteem and happiness and health. But the problem needs to be recognized before a person goes to seek help.

Now, Paul is highlighting the dangers of drunkenness. And in the immediate context of verses 15 and 17, he's showing us that willful heavy drinking is part of the lifestyle of folly and lack of wisdom.

So he's saying to the Lord's people, don't go there. Now, when you first read verse 18, you can't help wondering whether Paul is comparing and contrasting two different types of heady experience, two different types of inebriation.

As if he's saying, don't get inebriated on wine, but do get inebriated on the Holy Spirit. As though the singing and melody making of verse 19 involves reeling and rocking and, oh, praise ye the Lording, and working yourself up into some kind of trance-like fervor.

That is not what Paul is doing. He's not comparing two types of inebriation. Alcohol is a depressant. It's not a stimulant.

[22 : 55] Caffeine is a stimulant. That's why a cup of tea or coffee brightens us up. But alcohol depresses and reduces the activity of the brain. It slows you down. It reduces your ability to function as a human being.

So to some extent, it dehumanizes you. But to be filled with the Holy Spirit enhances our humanity and enables us to live lives of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

That's how Paul describes the fruit of the Spirit's presence in our lives in Galatians chapter 5. So we're bound to ask, How then can we be filled with the Holy Spirit?

Is there some technique for it? Like learning to light a gas hob in the kitchen? Or learning to inflate a car tire? No, certainly not.

If it were a question of learning some technique, that would mean that we were the Master and the Holy Spirit was our servant. With us summoning Him to do things for us.

[24 : 01] With Him appearing like a genie out of an oil lamp and saying, Your wish is my command. No, the Holy Spirit already lives in the heart and mind of every Christian. It's He who has caused us to be born again in the first place.

He is the third person of the Trinity. He's the very life breath of God. And somehow, in a wonderful way that we can't fully understand, He brings the presence of both the Lord Jesus and God the Father into our hearts and souls.

He brings us to life. Paul has told us back in chapter 4, verse 30, not to grieve Him by sinful behavior. And now in chapter 5, verse 18, He tells us to be filled with Him.

And the verb Paul uses is a continuous present, meaning to go on being filled with Him day after day. So how can we help that to happen?

Well, first, by consciously forsaking sin. We can't expect to be filled with Him if we're grieving Him. And second, by filling our minds with the words which He Himself, the Spirit, has inspired.

[25 : 10] And that is the words of the Bible. If we drink in the Bible frequently and regularly, sucking in its sweetness, like bees drinking nectar from flowers, we shall be filled with Him.

And it will show by His fruit being displayed in our lives. But it will also show in the ways which Paul teaches us in the verses that follow.

Because verse 18, just look down into your text again. Verse 18 acts as the introduction, not only to verses 19, 20, and 21, but to the sections on wives and husbands, children and parents, and slaves and masters.

Everything from chapter 5, verse 19, to chapter 6, verse 9, is a demonstration of what it means for God's people to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

And the key to understanding this is in the verbs that Paul uses. So look with me at verse 18. Be filled with the Spirit, he says. So what does that mean?

[26 : 14] Well, I'll show you what it means, says Paul, by using a string of present participles. That's the verbal form that ends in ing. So verse 19, as the Spirit fills us, we find ourselves first, addressing one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.

Second, singing and making melody to the Lord with all our heart. And third, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And fourth, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. Now, friends, it is most unfortunate that the editors of the English Standard Version that I'm using, and I guess most of you have got open, it's a very good version in so many ways, but it's unfortunate that they have put a thumping great paragraph break between verse 21 and verse 22, because that badly obscures the flow of Paul's thought.

With that paragraph break, it looks as if verse 21 is concluding a section. It looks as if verse 21 is instructing all Christians to submit to one another in all circumstances.

But that is not at all what Paul is saying. Verse 21 is actually the headline that introduces the large section that runs from chapter 5, verse 22, to chapter 6, verse 9.

[27 : 42] So what Paul is saying is that as Christians are filled with the Spirit, they learn the proper ordering of a godly society, which is not that everybody in the church submits to everybody else, but that Christian wives submit to their own husbands, children submit to their parents by obeying them, and Christians who are slaves submit to their masters.

The idea that verse 21 means that everybody constantly submits to everybody else is plainly untenable. For example, could Paul possibly be teaching that Christian parents should submit to their children?

Oh, Dad, fetch me a large plate of bacon and eggs, please. Don't forget the brown sauce. Of course, son. Is there anything else I can do for you? Yes, it's my seventh birthday coming up.

I'd like a new football. Can Paul possibly be teaching mutual reciprocal submission of that kind? Could he be teaching masters to obey their slaves?

Of course not. Paul is teaching the church how to order its social life according to a God-given, God-ordained, and deeply beneficial principle of proper authority and proper submission to authority.

[29 : 02] Verse 21 is not teaching everybody to submit to everybody else. It's teaching all of us to recognize the God-given structures of authority which lead to happiness in marriage and in family life and in the workplace.

Submission means gladly recognizing and accepting the God-ordained order of things and adapting oneself to fit in with that order rather than chafing against it.

So the Christian wife learns to recognize that her husband, verse 23, is her head. He is the one responsible for leadership in the marriage and she acknowledges that he is the leader and she is the helper.

And therefore her role is to accept gladly and to acknowledge gladly that in difficult circumstances he must make decisions and she must accept and go along with his decisions.

Not resentfully, but gladly because that is God's order for happiness in marriage. Otherwise, wedlock can become deadlock. Now I want to spend most of what remains of our sermon time today on Paul's teaching about Christian marriage.

[30 : 15] We will look briefly at the first nine verses of chapter six as well. But they are somehow a bit easier to digest. It's this husband and wife relationship that Paul gives most of his attention to.

And that suggests that we would be wise to follow his example. So let me first give two introductory points about marriage. First, Paul assumes and teaches that men and women are different from each other.

Now, of course, the Bible teaches this from start to finish. We see it first in Genesis chapter one, verse 27. So God created man in his own image. In the image of God, he created him.

Male and female, he created them. So the human race was created in the image of God and it seems that God's image could only be adequately portrayed in a human race consisting of two genders.

An all-male human race would have been inadequate. An all-female human race equally could not have mirrored the image of God properly. Two types of human being were needed, men and women who corresponded to each other and complemented each other.

[31 : 31] And throughout the Bible, men and women are seen to be of equal worth, equal dignity, and equal status. Men are not better than women, nor are women better than men.

But equality of status and worth does not mean that men and women have identical roles. The two sexes are equal in status, but differentiated in function.

Now we see this differentiation of function emerging clearly in the second chapter of Genesis. Adam is created from the dust of the earth, but Eve, his wife, is created differently from Adam's own being.

And the Lord describes her as a helper fit for him. So clearly, Adam on his own was not sufficiently able to look after the Garden of Eden.

The Lord says, it is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper fit for him. So both sexes were needed to run the world. Now in the modern world, as we know, there's been for decades a relentless movement which seeks to blur the distinctions between men and women, even to eradicate them.

[32 : 47] And this movement has reached its high point, maybe low point, in the idea of transgenderism, where it's thought that you can somehow turn a man into a woman or a woman into a man.

That is an idea which flies in the face of all the scientific data. The truth is that each of us is born male or female. No amount of surgery or hormone treatments can alter a person's given gender.

Each of us is as God has made us. Men and women are different from each other, and the Bible consistently assumes and teaches that truth. And this means that men and women do not have identical or interchangeable roles in marriage and family life, or in the way the church's life is organized.

Men and women are different. Then secondly, we need to recognize that authority does not equal tyranny.

Yes, the husband is the head of the wife, but his way of exercising that headship is by loving her and caring for her, not by riding rough shod over her and making her fearful.

[33 : 59] He is not taught by Paul to be a domestic tyrant. Now, in the modern Western world, the whole idea of authority and respect for authority has been greatly undermined, with growing forcefulness, I think, since the end of the Second World War.

In Western culture, the great cry has been, I want to be free. Freedom is my cry. It comes endlessly in pop songs, doesn't it? I want to be free from restraint, free from somebody telling me what I must do.

Now, some of these cries for freedom have been very much needed. For example, the cries of black people in the United States of America or the Republic of South Africa, desperately needing to be freed from subjugation by white people.

Cries of freedom, cries for freedom of that kind are absolutely needed. And while the oppression of black by white has by no means been fully overcome in those societies, there has been progress, and we rejoice in it.

But rebellion against proper authority is a different matter altogether. And we see that everywhere in the West. Schoolchildren chafing against the authority of their teachers, making school life very difficult.

[35 : 14] Children at home, resenting the authority of their parents. And large sections of society treating with disrespect those who are put in authority for the good of society.

Doctors, members of parliament, police officers, members of the royal family. Nobody would dare make fun of them in public until 30 or 40 years ago. Let's rebel against authority.

That's been the growing mood in the Western world since the middle of the 20th century. And all of us have been caught up in that mood and with the feelings that it generates.

And the fact of our living in this anti-authority culture greatly affects the way that we react to the structures of proper authority that the Bible teaches us.

It means that we pull against them. We suspect them. We're uneasy about them. So before we dive into our passage about husbands and wives, we need to ask, where does the authority spoken of in Ephesians 5 and 6 come from?

[36 : 17] And how is it intended to be used? Well, the answer is, it comes from God. And therefore, it is to be respected and gladly welcomed. And as for its intended use, it is always given for the benefit of those who are asked to submit to it.

It is not given to suppress them or to subjugate them. It's given to bless them. And if Christian wives and Christian husbands are willing to accept Paul's teaching, our marriages will be greatly blessed.

It's not only the wives who are to accept Paul's teaching, it is also, brothers, the husbands. So let's turn to verses 22 to 23. In verse 22, Christian wives are asked to submit to their husbands.

Now that's a command that presents immediate difficulties to men and women like us who've been brought up, as we all have, in an era of women's liberation. Because that word submission suggests subjugation and the word subjugation suggests tyranny.

married men harshly ruling their wives with a rod of iron. That kind of scenario is a million miles from Paul's thinking. And we begin to see that as we observe Paul's teaching about the husband's role.

[37 : 41] If we don't grasp what Paul is saying about the husband's role, we'll never understand Paul's injunction to the wife to submit to her husband. So what do we learn about the husband's role?

Verse 23, for the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its savior.

So the husband's role towards his wife is to be the mirror image of Christ's role towards the church. Christ, says Paul, is the head of the church.

If you look back for a moment to chapter 4, verse 15, you'll see that Christ, as the head of the church, pours his strength and grace into the church so that the whole body of the church grows strong and is built up in love.

Well, that's a good start for the husband, isn't it? If Christ, as head of the church, pours love and growth into the church, the husband's role as head of his wife is to nourish her and strengthen her in love.

[38 : 44] But look at the end of our verse 23. Christ is himself the church's savior. Yes, he is the church's lord, but he demonstrates his lordship by saving the church.

And if the husband is to model himself on Christ as savior, he will learn to care for his wife deeply and to protect her. He doesn't save her from the penalty of her sins.

He can't save her that way. Only Christ can do that. But he develops a saving and protecting attitude towards his wife. Then Paul develops his thinking in verse 25.

Husbands, he says, love your wives. Now, that was a revolutionary idea in the first century. In the ancient world, disdain for women was universal.

Women were looked down on in the Jewish world and even more so in the pagan cultures of ancient Greece and Rome. In Jewish law, a woman was not a person, but a thing.

[39 : 46] She had no legal rights. She was absolutely in her husband's possession to do as he willed. And in the Roman world, it was even worse. A wife was her husband's chattel.

Having no legal rights, her position was that of a slave and her status was described, just brace yourself, her status was described as imbecilitas.

That is a status of imbecility. I hate even to mention that horrible word because it is so demeaning. But I've mentioned it so that we can feel the electrifying force of Paul's command to husbands to love their wives.

Love them. They're your equals. They're not things or chattels, let alone imbeciles. But Paul goes straight on to tell Christian husbands in a most dramatic way what loving their wives will mean.

Look at verse 25. Love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. In other words, you're going to count your wife's life of more value than your own.

[40 : 52] You will be prepared to die for her. So if you and she are on the Titanic as it's going down, you put her life before your own.

You say to her, Darling, there's one more place in the lifeboat. You get into the boat. I'll stay where I am. Now, it won't usually be quite as drastic as that, but that is the principle.

The husband is to be willing to lay down his life in order to save his wives. That is a searching standard, isn't it, brothers? Does that demean the wife?

On the contrary, it raises her to a position of great honor. And look on to verses 26 and 27. Christ laid down his life for the church, his bride, so that he might sanctify her and cleanse her and make her utterly beautiful without spot or blemish or wrinkle.

And in the same way, verse 28, husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. Now, we all naturally look after our own bodies, as verse 29 puts it, just as Christ looks after the church, which is his body.

[42 : 00] So when the husband loves his wife, he's looking after her. He wants her to flourish. He wants her to blossom like a rose into the full flower of her human capacities.

So we husbands are not to cramp our wives' lives, but to help them to use their abilities and, as much as is possible in this sad world, to enjoy life serving the Lord enthusiastically.

You do sometimes see Christian married couples. I certainly haven't seen this in our church, I'm glad to say, but you do sometimes see Christian married couples where the wife looks somehow sad and shrunken and cowed.

Now, it may be that she's not very well, but it may be because her husband is ruling her with some kind of hidden iron rod. Now, if that's the case, he needs to read this passage.

Christ nourishes his bride, and the Christian husband is to nourish the life and joy of his bride. Because the two of them, man and wife, belong so deeply together.

[43 : 05] This is why in verse 31, Paul quotes from Genesis chapter 2, Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.

So they are one. Is that not a profound equality? They are united, not simply in sexual union, but in everything. Their whole lives become deeply intertwined, like two trees planted closely together, whose branches weave in and out of each other and support each other when the rough gales of life begin to blow.

So let me try and express Paul's teaching about Christian marriage in two succinct points. First, the wife's submission is to be given to a lover, not an ogre.

Paul is not saying wives submit, husbands tyrannize. Paul is saying wives submit to a husband who loves. And notice that Paul's call to the husband to love his wife comes three times in this passage.

That's how emphatic he is. Verse 25, husbands love your wives. Verse 28, husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. And then verse 33, let each one of you love his wife as himself.

[44 : 26] If married men are willing to obey Paul's teaching, loving, cherishing, nourishing our wives, why should our wives be reluctant to submit to us?

With this kind of submission, the points at which it really counts are those moments in life when husband and wife disagree over some significant decision. For example, where should we live?

How should we use a sum of money? How should we look after aging parents? The big decisions of life. If the wife knows how deeply her husband loves her, even if she disagrees with his view of some particular decision, she will learn to accept his view and accommodate herself to it.

Not resentfully, but graciously. And that is one of the secrets of being happily married. The wife learns to submit to the husband and the husband learns to love her.

Then secondly, Christ's love is to be the model and pattern of the husband's love. And so important is this point that again Paul expresses it three times.

[45 : 34] Verse 25, husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church. Verse 29, just as Christ does the church. And the implication is there in verse 32.

The one flesh union, this profound mystery, refers to Christ and the church. Now it seems to me that the weight of this passage is angled more towards the husband than the wife.

Paul is asking the husband to display an extraordinary degree of love towards his wife towards his wife as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

So brothers here who are married, younger brothers who are not yet married but perhaps will be one day, this is a big ask. We brush aside Paul's words at our peril. I know that my love for my wife falls short of this standard.

In fact, next time she and I are on the Titanic, I shall be put to the test. But the standard is there not for us to brush aside but to think about deeply.

[46 : 38] We need to get this teaching deeply into our bloodstream. A friend of mine once said to me, Edward, do you know the secret of a happy marriage in two words?

I said, no, I don't. He said, self-denial. Now when you think about it, both husband and wife are being asked by Paul to deny themselves.

Wives, put your husbands before yourselves by learning to submit to them. Now that's a self-denial. Husbands, put your wives before yourselves by laying down your lives for them.

That is a self-denial. Is this a standard that any of us can live up to? We'll all fall short of it but it's the standard nonetheless and God gives it to us because his concern is that Christian marriages should be deeply happy and not damaged or corroded by unresolved disagreements and resentments.

Now just the briefest look at the first nine verses of chapter six. Verse one, children, obey your parents in the Lord for this is right and verse four, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

[48 : 01] So God's ordering of a godly society concerns the happiness of family life as well as marriage and Paul is very clear that children will flourish when they submit to their parents but that is not going to happen unless the parents train them to be obedient.

Here's an example. It's about six in the evening. Tea is finished and it's bedtime for six-year-old Freddie. Freddie, would you like to come up for your bath now?

No. Here's another approach. Freddie, it's bath time now and then straight to bed. Oh, but I'm not tired. That may be so but you're coming upstairs with me right now.

The child needs to know that the parents' instructions are fundamentally non-negotiable. The American evangelist Billy Graham, I heard him say this on more than one occasion, he used to say that if children know that they are deeply loved, they are capable of accepting a great deal of discipline and underlying that loving discipline, verse four, is the parent's duty and especially the father's duty of teaching the child to know the Lord.

Then slaves, verse five, there were millions of slaves, I think something like 30 million slaves in the Roman Empire in those days and many members of the early churches were slaves who'd become Christians.

[49 : 33] And Paul again urges submission and obedience. Obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling. Now it was no fun to be legally enslaved but Paul says in verse six, do your work as servants of Christ with a good will.

Yes, you're serving your human master at ground level but ultimately you're servants of Christ. And in our own places of work today, let us serve those who are set over us.

Some bosses are kindly, others are not and they behave badly towards their employees. But Paul's message is, verse seven, render service with a good will, not resentful, not sticking your tongue out at your boss when his back is turned because you're serving him at ground level but your real master is Christ and it's Christ that you need to please.

So what Paul is doing here from chapter five, verse 22 to chapter six, verse nine is teaching us how to conduct ourselves in the three great social relationships which are at the heart of human society.

Marriage, family life and the workplace. And Paul's great point is that when wives learn to submit to their husbands and husbands learn to love their wives, when children learn to obey their parents and parents learn to discipline and teach their children, and when employees learn to serve their employers and their employers practice care and consideration towards their employees, we are then seeing the true features of a godly society.

[51 : 17] Not a godly nation, the devil grips the world too tightly for us to hope to see a Christianized nation, but a godly society within the nation, a society which will speak powerfully to the surrounding nation.

And it all stems from chapter five, verse 18. If we are filled with the Holy Spirit, the result will be that we make joyful melody, that we're full of thankfulness, and we shall learn and practice the proper submissions that God gives to his people for our security, our peace, and our happiness.

Well, let's bow our heads and we'll pray together. Our dear Father in heaven, how we thank you that you are a God of order, and that your ordering of the people of Christ is designed to bring us peace and security.

Help us, we pray, to bend our wills to yours, not reluctantly, but gladly. And please give to each of us the joy of walking in your way so that the surrounding culture will take note of your goodness and will be drawn to follow your Son, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.

Amen.