Walking as Family

Believers are to demonstrate God’s love in their family relationships.

I have written in previous session introductions about the importance of Christian family life. I count it as one of God’s greatest blessings to me that I grew up in a Christian home. Mom and Dad loved the Lord, loved each other, and loved their three children. We weren’t only spiritually focused at church; we were spiritually focused at home too. My parents led us in Bible reading and prayer together every evening. Even after I started dating, they stayed awake until I came home so that we could read Scripture and pray together. (My knowing this ensured that I always arrived home by curfew!)

Nancy, my wife, also grew up in a Christian family. Her parents served in their church’s deacon ministry, so it was not unusual that Nancy made a profession of faith in Christ and was baptized as a preteen. She was active throughout her teenage years in the church’s youth group.

Nancy and I met and began dating while I was a seminary student in Fort Worth, Texas. We learned quickly that we shared the same biblical values about dating and marriage. We soon fell in love, married, and began our family life together as husband and wife. Like all married couples, we’ve had to work at making our marriage stronger, but our similar backgrounds helped. We’ve enjoyed a rich journey through life together. Recent health challenges for both of us have not pushed us apart but have pulled us together as a family.

The biggest joy of our marriage came with the birth of our only child, a son. Our own experiences growing up as children in Christian families gave us valuable wisdom for parenting. Today our son also is married, and he and his wife have a daughter—our first grandchild. My son’s family is following the Lord, and Nancy and I are delighting in the grandparent adventure.

I am aware that not every Christian family has the same background in faith that I had. In the Bible passage for this session, Ephesians 5:22–6:4, Paul addressed the issues of marriage and parenting, while knowing that most
Ephesian believers had grown up in non-Christian families. His counsel was valuable for believers then and remains beneficial for believers today.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

EPHESIANS 5:22–6:9

As Paul continued his focus on applying the doctrinal truths he had expounded in the first three chapters of the epistle, he turned to the theme of believers’ exhibiting Christian grace and love in their homes. Paul realized that churches can be no stronger, spiritually speaking, than the families that comprise the churches. He later wrote to his coworker Timothy in Ephesus in regard to the necessary character qualities of church overseers that a potential overseer must be a proven family leader. Paul’s reasoning was that “if anyone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of God’s church” (1 Tim. 3:5). Strong Christian families help make for strong gospel churches!

In Ephesians 5:22–6:9, Paul addressed three typical pairs of relationships within Christian families: wives and husbands, children and parents (fathers in particular), and servants and masters. (The apostle addressed these same relationships also in Colossians 3:18–4:1.) In first-century Greco-Roman culture, servants were considered members of a household for those families who could afford to have them. Today, we can helpfully apply the principles Paul expounded concerning this pair to the relationship of employees and employers. In this session, we will focus primarily on instructions for the two pairs of relationships that we often refer to as immediate family members.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

WIVES (Eph. 5:22-24)

Paul instructed Christian wives about how they could strengthen family unity. He called on them to submit to their own husbands. He pointed to the church’s relationship to Christ as the model.

VERSE 22

Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord,

This text is fascinating and has been the subject of much discussion. To begin with, the verb submit does not actually appear in this verse in the Greek text.
It does appear in 5:21, however, and 5:22 is rightly understood as extending the principle of mutual submission introduced in 5:21. Thus, most English Bible translations supply the verb submit in 5:22 to clarify Paul’s instruction as to how Christian wives can put the submission principle into action. The Greek verb rendered submit literally means “to place under.” In the context of Christian relationships, it takes on the meanings of “being subject to,” or “accepting the authoritative leadership of” someone. With these points in mind, Paul’s instruction for Christian wives to submit to their husbands can be further expounded.

First, the submission of Christian wives to their husbands is one example (among other possible examples) of believers’ “submitting to one another in the fear of Christ” (5:21). Willing mutual submission in the body of Christ is a clear demonstration of the Spirit-filled life. Likewise, for a Christian wife to willingly submit to her husband’s spiritual leadership is a result of that wife’s obeying the Spirit’s guidance in her daily living.

Second, in the family context each Christian wife is expected to accept the authoritative leadership of only her own husband. Paul did not instruct all wives—or all women for that matter—to willingly submit to the directives of all men. The apostle was concerned with establishing good order and unity in the home, just as he was concerned with good order and unity in the church.

Third, the submission of Christian wives is as to the Lord. This statement does not mean that every Christian husband is equivalent to the Lord. Rather, it means that the Christian wife submits to her husband as an act of obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ. She realizes that her willing submission to her husband pleases Christ because her humble action is Christlike.

VERSE 23

because the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church. He is the Savior of the body.

Paul next provided a theological rationale for a Christian wife’s willing submission to her husband. In God’s design for marriage, the husband is the head of the wife. The apostle was affirming that husbands and wives have different roles in marriage. He was not saying that wives have less worth or dignity than their husbands. The Greek term translated head can refer to anything from a literal head (on a body) to a building’s cornerstone. Figuratively, it can refer to a ruler, a chieftain, or someone having leadership responsibility and authority.

Paul clarified the Christian husband’s headship in the family by comparing it directly with Christ’s being the head of the church and the Savior of the body. Paul had previously declared Christ’s headship over the body of Christ.
(the church) in Ephesians 4:15: “Let us grow in every way into him who is the head—Christ.” The Lord Jesus is in authority over the church, a truth that is basic to our understanding of the Son of God. Christ is the perfect head because of the work that He accomplished on the cross as the Savior. The importance of the Christian wife’s submission in the marriage relationship can thus be expressed in this way: Jesus took on responsibility for saving and leading the church; the church has the responsibility of believing in and submitting to Him. Paul then drew out the implications for Christian marriages.

VERSE 24

Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives are to submit to their husbands in everything.

There should be no hesitation for the believer to affirm Paul’s statement that the church submits to Christ. Can a local congregation that refuses to come under the authority of Christ even be called a church any longer? Paul would say no. The apostle took for granted that Christ’s lordship over the church is always perfect.

Next, however, Paul reasserted the principle that Christian wives are to submit to their husbands in everything. Just as a congregation wholeheartedly commits itself to Christ, so the wife is to commit herself wholeheartedly to fulfilling her God-given role in her marriage. On the other hand, throughout history too many husbands (including some Christian husbands) have used Paul’s teaching as a club to force their wives into an almost subservient status—to be a slave rather than a helpmate. Forced subservience and willing submission are radically different realities. Further, Paul was not denying that women could participate in meaningful work outside the home. He would only have expected that the wife function in the workplace (including political life) in a way that did not hinder her from fulfilling her crucial responsibilities as a Christian wife and mother.

Paul’s previous statement in 5:22 that a Christian wife is to submit to her husband “as to the Lord” implies that she should never be pressured to behave in a way that is sinful. Further, the Christian wife’s submission to her husband’s leadership in the family does not mean that she cannot contribute to family decisions, plans, and finances. In Proverbs 31:10-31, the Old Testament picture of an ideal, God-fearing wife, the wife “works with willing hands” outside the home (31:13), “speaks wisdom” (31:26), and “watches over the activities of her household” (31:27), leading her children to “rise up and call her blessed” (31:28) and her husband to praise her. Paul was surely familiar with this biblical portrait of a faithful, believing wife.
HUSBANDS (Eph. 5:25-33)

Paul instructed Christian husbands about how they could strengthen family unity. He called on husbands to love their wives, giving themselves sacrificially for their well-being. Christ’s love for the church is the model.

VERSE 25

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

Paul’s command for Christian husbands to love their wives is in a grammatical form that emphasizes continuing action. In other words, Christian husbands are to keep on loving their wives. The term that Paul chose to describe spousal love (Greek, *agape* [ah GAH pay]) refers to sacrificial, self-giving, Christlike love. It is the type of love that the apostle described in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 as “patient,” “kind,” “not rude,” “not self-seeking,” “does not keep a record of wrongs,” “rejoices in the truth,” “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things,” and “never ends.” Christian husbands who consistently demonstrated this kind of love for their wives in Paul’s day would have stood out against their cultural context as starkly as such loving husbands today would stand out against the modern marital landscape.

Paul looked no further for a perfect model of husbandly love than the example of how Christ loved the church. Christ’s love for His church was not just an emotion, a feeling. Christ defined the nature of *agape*-love when He gave himself for her. Here Paul was referring to the demonstration of love revealed in the sinless Christ’s willingness to be beaten, ridiculed, falsely condemned, crucified, and buried on behalf of sinners. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15: “For the love of Christ compels us, since we have reached this conclusion: If one died for all, then all died. And he died for all so that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for the one who died for them and was raised.”
VERSE 26

to make her holy, cleansing her with the washing of water by the word.

In this verse, Paul explained further that Christ’s willing sacrificial death on the cross had a loving purpose. He died so that believers (the church as the bride of Christ) might be made holy. The word rendered holy literally means “set apart.” Yet, to be set apart for God has a moral, spiritual impact in people’s lives. The phrase cleansing her with the washing of water by the word points to the atoning result of Christ’s sacrificial death. In Christ, believers are cleansed from their sins. Just as a bride bathes on her wedding day to present herself clean, even so believers’ faith in the crucified and risen Christ makes them pure and holy for the Lord. The words washing of water by the word can refer either to Christian baptism as a dramatic picture of the believer’s being cleansed or to the powerful attraction of the gospel message in drawing the unbeliever to forgiveness (cleansing) in Christ.

There is an implication here for Christian husbands. While no husband can atone for his wife’s sins or carry the full responsibility for his wife’s spiritual life, the Christian husband can love his wife in such a way that she longs to become more holy or Christlike in her daily life.

VERSE 27

He did this to present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or anything like that, but holy and blameless.

Christ had an even longer range purpose for giving Himself in sacrifice on the cross. That purpose is to present the church to himself in splendor in the end time. Revelation 19 develops a similar image of the bride of the Lamb being presented to Christ: “She was given fine linen to wear, bright and pure. For the fine linen represents the righteous acts of the saints” (Rev. 19:8).

In Paul’s theological understanding, the present church age represented a period of betrothal and preparation. The age to come will be the period of marriage. Now (in this present life) is the time for believers to shed all features of the old life (without spot or wrinkle or anything like that) and to put on garments (attitudes and actions) that are holy and blameless.

VERSES 28-30

In the same way, husbands are to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own flesh but provides and cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, since we are members of his body.
Having described the splendor and purpose of Christ’s love for the church, Paul applied the divine model in his instructions to Christian husbands. He repeated the command that husbands are to love their wives. In this instance, however, he gave an additional point of comparison. Not only should Christian husbands love their wives as Christ loves the church but also as their own bodies. In the previous analogy, Christ is the head of the church and the church is His body. Similarly, if the husband is the spiritual head of the family (see Eph. 5:23), then the wife, in effect, represents the couple’s “body” just as the church represents Christ’s body. For the husband to mistreat or hurt his wife makes no more sense than if he were to attack his own body. Conversely, the faithful, loving Christian husband cares for his wife just as he knows he must care for his own body in order to survive and thrive (he who loves his wife loves himself).

Paul was speaking from general human observation when he said that no one ever hates his own flesh. Generally speaking, an individual provides and cares for his physical well-being. By extension, then, it is only right that a husband would keep on providing and caring for his wife. To not do so was utterly foolish. Once again, however, Paul strengthened the analogy by connecting it to Christ’s relationship with His body, the church. The Lord continually provides and cares for the church. Since all of us who are believers are members of His body, we can be certain that He will always provide and care for us. What a powerful model for Christian husbands to follow!

**VERSES 31-32**

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

To further bolster his teaching concerning Christian husbands and wives, Paul pointed to Genesis 2:24 as the basis for describing the mystery of husband-wife unity. At the dawn of human relationships in the garden of Eden, God established a principle designed to unite the husband and wife in a sacred bond. To this day, many couples have this principle declared openly as part of their wedding vows: For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.

Every wedding is the creation of a new and separate family. Both the husband and the wife must give priority to their new relationship. The words the two will become one flesh describe the mysterious and sacred nature of this relationship. As the new “head,” the husband must put behind his former life in which he was dependent on his parents’ provision and care. Likewise,
the wife as the new “body” must also transfer her supreme love and devotion to her husband. The husband and wife thus become, as it were, one flesh—that is, one united, mutually devoted new family. This sacred union not only refers to sexual intimacy but also involves the couple’s unity in their spiritual, mental, and emotional capacities. A man and a woman are made truly one only in the bond of marriage.

Paul again took an opportunity to declare that the supreme model for and explanation of the mystery of Christian marriage was Christ and the church. As Christian families practice and grow in spiritual unity, they thereby help strengthen the unity of the churches in which they worship and serve. At the same time, every church that experiences and demonstrates a growing unity among the members provides a powerful example to its families of the unity that Christian husbands and wives can (and should) experience in their homes.

VERSE 33

To sum up, each one of you is to love his wife as himself, and the wife is to respect her husband.

Paul emphasized a final time his basic instructions for each Christian husband to love his wife as himself and for each Christian wife to respect her husband. These are the practical results that Spirit-filled husbands and wives can expect in their marriages.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Marriage” on pages 1059–1061 in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded. Why is it important for both wives and husbands to have a proper understanding of the nature and purposes of marriage?

CHILDREN (Eph. 6:1-3)

Paul gave instructions to the children. He called on them to honor their parents. He reminded the recipients of the epistle about the fifth commandment, noting that God promises to bless those who honor their parents.

VERSE 1

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, because this is right.
Paul probably assumed that his epistle would be read aloud in one or more of the Ephesian church’s worship gatherings. Further, he likely knew that some, if not many, of the church’s families had dependent children. Paul’s command for children to obey their parents was clear and simple. Paul urged the children to do what their parents told them to do. This was the best way they could fulfill the fifth commandment to honor their fathers and mothers. The apostle then went on to give other important motivations for children to obey their parents.

First, the phrase in the Lord indicates that obeying one’s parents was a way that even children could exhibit Christlikeness. Second, Paul stated that for children to obey their parents is right. The Greek term rendered right also means “just” and “correct.” It is not only common sense but also the logic of human experience that children need their parents’ wisdom and guidance during their childhood years. If children consistently disobey their parents, how could there ever be a stable family? A stable society? How could the new generations ever grow and survive?

**VERSE 2**

**Honor your father and mother, which is the first commandment with a promise,**

In the fifth commandment, God directed children to honor their parents. The concept of honor surely included obedience, particularly in the relationship of dependent children with their parents. Even when children have become adults, they are still responsible to honor their parents in the sense of treating them with respect and seeing to their care when that becomes necessary.

For the children of Ephesus, Paul pointed to still another motivation for obeying their parents. The fifth commandment was, in fact, the first commandment (of the ten) with a promise. Obeying one’s parents brought a blessing for the keeper of the command.

**VERSE 3**

**so that it may go well with you and that you may have a long life in the land.**

Keeping God’s commandment to obey one’s parents generally will have good results. First, doing so makes it much more likely that the remainder of one’s life will go well. That is, children who follow their Christian parents’ guidance are less likely to make the terrible mistakes or wander into the dangerous situations that childhood inexperience and recklessness do not take into consideration. Second, obedience to parents increases the probability that children will go on to experience long life in the land. This blessing refers to
more than just a long lifespan. It also refers to the stability and endurance of the society as a whole. A nation characterized by rebellion, chaos, and family disintegration will not endure long.

**PARENTS** (Eph. 6:4)

Paul addressed parents—fathers in particular. He called on them to demonstrate godly discipline and to train their children in God's ways.

**VERSE 4**

**Fathers, don’t stir up anger in your children, but bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.**

Growing up in a Christian family should be a joyful experience for both parents and children. Paul directed his instructions to **fathers** in particular as the spiritual leaders of the family. Certainly Christian mothers share in the responsibilities with the fathers to guide and train their children. In our day, there are undoubtedly numbers of Christian families in which one of the parents is absent and the remaining parent must carry on.

Paul began his instructions by exhorting parents not to **stir up anger** (“do not provoke,” ESV; “do not exasperate,” NIV) in their children. If discipline is used unfairly or in a heavy-handed manner, it will not accomplish the desired result. It will only build up resentment and anger in children.

Then Paul expressed a positive alternative: **bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.** The term rendered *bring ... up* originally referred to providing nurture and nourishment. Paul used the term here, however, in a broader sense—that of caring for the children physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

Children need both **training** (hands-on practice) and **instruction** (teaching and guidance). Paul specified that Christian parents are to give their children training and instruction on what it means to love, trust, and obey the **Lord.** This includes helping one’s children come to know Christ as Savior and Lord.

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

Read the following Old Testament verses that relate to parenting: