

Each For the Other Navigating Differences in Relationships

We're studying Ephesians, it mentions marriage so we're pausing for three weeks to talk about marriage.

-Whether you are married or hope to be married or just want the most important relationships in your life to be more of a source of joy and less of a source of stress, there are biblical principles that we're talking about during these three weeks that, I'm telling you, they're counterintuitive, they don't make sense on the surface, but if you can take them and apply them the payoff is absolutely massive. These principles are helpful in marriage, but also in other relationships.

And I have to be honest, I've done a ton of teaching on dating and relationships over the years. I've spent years working with young adults and single adults and obviously dating and relationships are of great interest to those two crowds. But, I haven't done all that much teaching on marriage but I'll tell you what: I've been on my best behavior all week, because I'm not going to get up and talk about marriage with all of you when I'm in trouble at home.

-My wife and I we just celebrated 13 years of marriage in September, so our marriage is now a teenager. We dated for four years before that, and in the 17 years we've been together we've navigated college and graduate school for both of us, more addresses than I care to remember, the fits and starts that come with establishing our careers her as a pediatric occupational therapist and me as a pastor. We've navigated becoming parents, we've had seasons where we were both students, we've had seasons where we were both working part-time, I was a stay-at-home parent when our oldest was young, we've navigated both working full-time and now since March Christie's been home with our boys while I've continued to work. All of that to say, I know we haven't seen a little bit of everything, but we've seen a little bit of a lot of things.

And we've always had a pretty egalitarian approach to our relationship, meaning there has been a strong emphasis on equality. Because there has been so much fluctuation over the years in who is working and how much, we've always just sort of shared household tasks.

That sort of sharing of household tasks has always been normal for us. In fact, I remember one time years ago we were sitting in a small group for married couples, and another couple in the group was sharing a story and the husband said something like, "I told my wife that I was running low on undershirts, so, you know," as if that's a very normal thing for husbands to say. And listen, absolutely no judgment from me, I know that is a normal thing in a lot of households, and if that's the arrangement you have and everyone is happy, fantastic. But we left that night and as soon as we got in the car we were like, can you believe that? I don't know what my wife would say if I said to her, "I'm running low on undershirts, so you know..."

The thought that somehow my laundry was my wife's responsibility had never crossed my mind before. And it hasn't since. It's my laundry. And listen, if you've set up your household so that one person does all the laundry that's all good. I share the story just to highlight that we operate on a pretty egalitarian concept in my marriage.

And if there are any exceptions to that, they are these: I believe that I, as the head of the household, bear ultimate responsibility before God for the wellbeing of our household and that it's my job to go first to sacrifice my wellbeing for the good of others in my family.

What comes with that is that my wife often does defer to my leadership and my decision making, but that is a willing deferral and it's absolutely never forced. But I share all of that to give you a little insight into where I'm coming from as I approach the subject of marriage and just a give you a sense of what my wife and I have navigated through our life together.

Of course, the most recent challenge we've navigated, like the rest of you, we're navigating this little thing you might have heard about called a global pandemic.

-And I want to acknowledge that everything we've been through in the last six months has been particularly challenging for marriages. Forced close proximity plus the financial and emotional stress of unprecedented circumstances are a perfect storm for marital conflict, aren't they? There has never been a time when it's easier to notice your spouse's flaws (don't say amen to that).

You've seen the headlines...increase in divorce filings. WSJ article in August, and in the article the author states, *"Even in the best of times, marriages and relationships are hard work."*

This has been a constant refrain in my teaching over the years to young adults and singles: Marriage is work, it's the best kind of work there is, but make no mistake about it, it is work and it requires effort. More on that later, back to the article:

But the pandemic has produced a pressure cooker inside homes, straining even strong partnerships, and experts say, likely breaking others. Families are cooped up, with spouses trying to work while also taking care of their kids. Job losses, caring for at-risk elderly parents, arguments over what's safe, and disagreements over school reopening are all taking a toll."

I imagine if you're here today and you're married you can relate to that at least a little bit. Even if your marriage is healthy and strong, chances are there has been a bit more tension than usual in the last six months.

And as I've thought about everything we've experienced as a society in these last six months, a word keeps coming to mind. It's a word that we often associated with destruction or the end times, but it actually means "revealing". And that is the word apocalypse.

-Brewer 'apocaluped'

-In many ways for marriages, this has been an apocalyptic time, it's revealed what's there. For some of us, it's revealed the depth of our strength and unity. For others, It's revealed little cracks and problems and gaps that are much easier to hide during ordinary circumstances, and for that reason I don't think there is any better time for us to pause as a church and consider God's design for how marriage is meant to work.

And the text we're using as a jumping off point for the series is Ephesians 5:21-33, and I'm not going to read the whole passage today, but I do want to read starting in Ephesians 5:18, so if you have a Bible or a Bible-equipped mobile device I'd like to invite you do go there.

It's in Ephesians 5:18 that Paul says, **"Do not get drunk with wine, but be filled with the Spirit."** And then he goes on to list behaviors that occur when we are filled with the Spirit, and we've examined those behaviors over the last couple of weeks. And then in verse 21, the last behavior Paul lists is this: **"submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ."** And it's in the verses that follow that Paul applies this concept to marriage, but the big idea that we can't miss is this:

When we are filled with the Spirit it leads to mutual submission. If we're not filled with the Spirit, that's going to sound crazy. It's countercultural, it's counterintuitive, and it sounds like something that is going to make us miserable. And yet, God, who cares even more about our joy and wellbeing than we do, calls us in His inspired Word to submit to one another. And then in the verses that follow the apostle Paul applies this idea of mutual submission to the marriage relationship and last week

Pastor Paul showed us that **the pathway to a better and more fulfilling marriage is through the practice of mutual submission.**

Christian marriage, in other words, is a race to the bottom. In Romans 12 in a different context Paul says, **“Outdo one another in showing honor.”** And that’s the same idea Paul is getting at here.

And I want to tell you, if the idea of mutual submission seems scary, if you’re not sure how it works, or if maybe you were raised in an environment where all you ever heard was that wives were supposed to submit to their husbands not that submission was meant to be mutual, let me tell you something that I absolutely guarantee is true.

If you think about people you know with a thriving marriage, people who aren’t just tolerating each other or sticking it out for the kids or finding a way to make it work, but I’m talking about the people who have been married for a decade or two or three or four and still seems to genuinely like each other, I’m talking about those couples who irritate you because when you’re around them they’re always nice to each other and it seem likes it’s actually sincere, those couples where things might not be perfect but things just seem to work, I guarantee you, part of their secret sauce is the practice mutual submission.

I guarantee you they understand that the pathway to a better and more fulfilling marriage is through the practice of mutual submission.

Marriage as God intended it, marriage that is a delight to both partners, marriage that is joyful and fulfilling and fun is not built around:

- You owe me...
- Why don’t you ever...

- If only you would...
- Why should I do that for you, you never do it for me
- It's not built around a divide and conquer mentality, it's built around an each for the other mentality. That doesn't mean you don't divide up responsibilities, that's all well and good, but that division enhances your partnership it doesn't inhibit it.
- It's not built around a 'stick up for my rights' mentality,' it's built around a 'how can I willingly and lovingly surrender my rights for you?' mentality
- It's not built around the question, 'what can I justify?' And we'll talk about that more later, rather it's, 'How can I go first in showing kindness?'"
- It's not a game of tug-of-war it's a race to see who can put down their rope first.

In short, the happiest married people you know will tell you that one key to their happiness in marriage is the practice of mutual submission.

I read a marriage book recently by a pastor named Bryan Chappell and he says this, ***"We discover the happiness God intends for our lives only when we use the resources and privileges God has given us for the good of another."***

In other words, we don't demand our way to happiness, we don't bargain our way to happiness, we serve and we give our way to happiness.

And it's interesting to note something that non-Christian, secular researchers who study marriage are finding. They are finding that a big reason for marital strife and a big reason ultimately for marital breakdowns is actually very simple: ***We expect far too much from our partners and we don't expect nearly enough from ourselves.*** I mention that in wedding sermons sometimes.

We dream about a romantic partner who sweeps us off of our feet and fulfills our every wish, we don't dream of looking our partner in the eye, holding them close and saying, "I know you've had a tough day, I'd like to do the dishes tonight so that you can rest. And oh by the way, you don't owe me anything in return."

Marriages breakdown because we want a partner who will serve us, we're not looking to serve.

And so God, who invented marriage, in His wisdom says in His Word, as Pastor Paul showed us last week, the pathway to a better and more fulfilling marriage is through the practice of mutual submission.

So I want to do two things in our remaining time together:

- 1) I want to talk briefly about one truth that is the absolute lynchpin of mutual submission. And we're going to look at a few places in Scripture that reinforce this idea.
- 2) We're going to look at one powerful but underrated way you can practice mutual submission in your marriage.

So first, the lynchpin of mutual submission. We've already talked about how the desire to submit to another person is the result of being filled with the Spirit. And Pastor Paul showed us last week that when we are filled with the Spirit what it does is it fills us with the desire to seek the best interests of another. But I want to show you something else in the text.

See, if you look it says, "submitting to one another," but then it goes on to give us the 'why' behind the act of submission.

"Submitting to one another out of reverence for, who? Christ."

And this, incidentally would have been an absolutely radical idea in the ancient world. In Ephesus where this letter was originally sent there were all sorts of different gods and goddesses who were worshiped and celebrated, and something that nearly all of these gods and goddesses had in common was that part of the way you showed these gods honor and respect was by sacrificing for them. Gods in the ancient world demanded that people sacrifice for them, and these sacrifices, it was believed, were necessary in order to curry the favor of the gods.

Into that culture, Paul says, the God of Jesus Christ is different. This God, He says the way that you show that you really love me is not that you offer sacrifices to me, but rather that you sacrifice and submit yourselves to one another. The way you serve me is by humbly serving one another.

So when the Bible calls us to submit to one another, we're not called to do that because other people deserve it. Ladies, when the Bible calls you to submit to your husbands it's not because they're awesome and they deserve it all the time. Thank goodness. Men, when the Bible calls you to submit to your wife it's not because they're awesome and they deserve it all the time.

We are called to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. That's it, that's the lynchpin.

That means we seek the good of our spouse. That means we consider the needs of our spouse. That means we value our spouse's happiness and fulfillment above our own not because they're always awesome, but because Jesus is always often.

And He says through His Word, you want to show me reverence? Love your husband. Love your wife. Submit to them, not out of reverence for them, but out of reverence for me.

This is an absolute game-changer -we are willing to submit to someone who has our best interests at heart. Sometimes that's our spouse, sometimes we don't believe that. Jesus always has our best interests at heart. The power of the Spirit gives us the strength to seek the good of our spouse because we do it out of reverence for Christ.

I know you'll find this very hard to believe, but there are times when I can be pretty hard to live with. I absolutely never lose my temper or explode in anger, but when I'm hurt or angry I have a tendency to be quiet and to withdraw and be cold and distant. It's immature, I'm not defending it, and with God's help I'm working on it. In those moments, there is nothing in my behavior that makes me worthy of Christie's kindness. And yet she can still choose to do those things out of reverence for Christ.

There are times when Christie can be difficult to live with, and in those moments, and I'll admit I don't get this right all of the time, I can choose to be loving and kind to her out of reverence for Christ.

See, sometimes loving your spouse and submitting to them will be easy. But too often it's difficult. So we don't do it because our spouse deserves it. We do it because our Heavenly Father who loves us says if you want to show reverence for me, submit to one another.

This doesn't mean we're doormats, it doesn't mean we tolerate abuse, it certainly doesn't mean we ever demand submission, but it means we submit to our spouses not because they are worthy, but because God is worthy, and loving our spouse can be an act of worship to Him.

Alternative- Wait for our spouse to deserve it (doesn't work)

And I want to take you briefly to one of the most familiar passages about love in the entire Bible, and that's 1 Corinthians 13, and we're not going to take a deep dive into the passage, but I want to show you briefly from Paul's words there the connection between love and submission to others

Love is patient- Patience necessarily means we aren't giving in to our own impulses. It means we're accommodating, it means we are seeking understanding. It means we're seeing the best.

Keller: Here's what it means to fall in love. It is to look at another person and get a glimpse of the person God is creating, and to say, "I see who God is making you, and it excites me! I want to be part of that. I want to partner with you and God in the journey you are taking to his throne.

Love is kind- Kindness is like humility, we love it in other people, but we're not so sure we like it for ourselves. We all agree that our spouse needs to grow in kindness, but we're not so sure about ourselves. We have this expectation based on some Hollywood fantasy that our partner is going to supply all of the kindness we could ever need, and we don't need to cultivate kindness ourselves. That's a myth. Another word for kind is considerate, meaning we are intentionally considering the feelings of another. This is something you can practice in every relationship all of the time. Couples in crisis forget how to be kind.

Love does not envy or boast- This one is an absolute killer. Your spouse is not your competitor, they are your teammate. I got to test this early on in our relationship and early on in our marriage. NCAA athlete and more successful career.

It is not arrogant or rude- Arrogance and rudeness dishonor others. We might have a reason for it, but it's still toxic.

We don't have time to look at the whole passage but I want to draw your attention to the very next phrase, **It does not insist on its own way.** And how can we learn to do this, we look at our savior who did not insist on His own way. This doesn't mean we tolerate harshness or rudeness, but it means we say to one another, "Yes, I have a way that I want to do things, but my desire to serve you is greater than my desire to have my way, so let's have a conversation and work this out."

This is the countercultural key to a thriving marriage. To quote another of Paul's writings, "Let each of you look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others."

And listen, I live in the real world just like you do, I know what you're thinking as you hear those words: Man, that's good, I sure wish my spouse were better at that."

You cannot control your spouse. You can only control you. And so, while we are never to tolerate abuse or harmful behavior, we can submit to our spouses out of reverence for Christ. We can drop the rope in the tug-of-war first, and here's the deal, a person playing a one-person game of tug-of-war looks ridiculous. And ultimately, and it might take a long time, they'll want to drop the rope, too.

And here's the thing, we don't drop the rope because we're convinced our partner will, too. We drop the rope because Jesus, who is infinitely worthy of our trust, says that you show reverence for me when you drop the rope.

If you commit to practicing mutual submission only when your partner deserves it, you won't get very far. Because often times it is in the moments where your spouse deserves it least that it can have the greatest impact. If, instead, if your submission to your spouse is fueled by your reverence for Christ, He will give you the strength you need and your marriage and family will be healthier as a result.

And listen, if you're here today and you're not married and you hope to be married someday, any married person will tell you that few things expose your own selfishness like marriage. I used to think I wasn't a very selfish person, then I got married. And while the marriage relationship is obviously unique, you can practice mutual submission outside of a marriage. Living with a mindset to serve others out of reverence for Christ isn't a switch you flip when you get married. It's a skill you develop with God's help over time. And if you can learn to practice it as a single person, then when you get married you'll be miles ahead of most newlyweds. And if you never get married, all that will happen is the rest of your relationships will be healthier.

Now, I said there were two things I wanted to talk about, and the first was the lynchpin of a lifestyle of mutual submission. And the second thing is one underrated but immensely powerful way to practice mutual submission. This is not a magic bullet. Marriage is complicated and messy, I am a married person so I understand that. But if you do this you will save yourself a lot of heartache, and if you don't do it you will find that you return to the same misunderstandings again and again and again. And I'm telling you, for Christie and I, when we really put some time and energy into what I'm about to talk to you about it was a game-changer for us.

Because here's something you have to know about our relationship: We, like a lot of people, were initially drawn to each other because we have a lot in common. First conversation took place online because of a class we had together....friends on the church retreat- you need to marry her.

We met when we were freshmen in college. We were both Christians, we were both from Sacramento, we both liked sports, she was a division one athlete, I was a wannabe athlete, we were in the same friend circle, we were both pretty low-drama call-it-like-I-see 'em type personalities, and on and on I could go.

And, of course, over the course of our relationship disagreements, misunderstandings, and even arguments would pop up from time to time, but we didn't really do the work to figure out if there was

anything behind those incidents, because after all, we were so similar and we had so much in common.

And it took years of marriage before we really did the work to specifically understand this simple truth: we were different people. In fact, I know I've broken protocol by holding on this long before giving you the will in the blank: If you're married the first blank is **did** and if you're single the first blank is **will**. And the statement reads, ***You did not or will not marry yourself.***

And thank God for that.

But here is the underrated but powerful way to submit to your spouse: You must do the work to understand, specifically, how your spouse is different from you.

Because here's the thing: The way I think and the way I behave and the way I make decisions makes perfect sense...to me! I don't know why everyone doesn't do things the way I do. And listen, if that sounds arrogant to you, remember that you think the same thing. If you didn't, you'd do things differently.

The way I think makes perfect sense to me. But my wife is not me. So, so often what would happen in our marriage is we would end up talking past each other or misunderstanding each other people we would talk to each other like we're talking to ourselves. I think we still sometimes do that on accident, and it's never worked.

And there are a million tools, ranging in intensity from simple online personality tests to intensive counseling that can help give you language to understand how you and your spouse are different.

For Christie and I, one of the most helpful tools we've used has been the enneagram. And, it's well beyond the bounds of this sermon to really get into the details of the enneagram and if you have no idea what the enneagram is, don't worry about it. It's become very popular in the Christian world in the last four or five years. And I'll be the first to admit, there is not a lot of science behind the enneagram, and it's not the be all and end all of human psychology, far from it, but what it did was it gave us language to help us better understand our own inner-workings and motivations, but it helped us understand each other's inner-workings and motivations.

It's helped both of us become more aware of our unhealthy tendencies. My enneagram type doesn't tend to do well in uncomfortable or awkward conversations, but life is full of those, so now instead of just impulsively pulling the release valve I'm aware of my tendency to do that and I'm getting better at staying in the moment.

Christie's personality type is more of a perfectionist and the challenge of being a perfectionist is that it can lead you to be very critical of others, so that's something she's able to be more mindful of now that she's aware of it. It's helped me to recognize that she also has a strong inner-critic, so if I have something 'constructive' or corrective I need to say, I've learned I need to be careful how I say it because her inner-critic has been beating her up all day.

And again, there are a million tools out there, find one that works for you. I'll tell you, learning about ourselves through the enneagram was a little bit awkward, because we'd read about these negative traits of our own personality types and then say to each other, "Do I really do that?" (Can I answer that)

And here's the important truth: Our personality types are not an excuse for bad behavior. Instead, what they do is, again, they give us language for understanding ourselves and understanding each other so that we can know, specifically, how we are different. And then part of being a mature human

being is learning to adjust to accommodate the difference in people we love and to submit ourselves to the refining work of the Holy Spirit who sands off our rough edges.

I mention the enneagram because it's what's been helpful for us, but the point isn't to recommend it specifically. It's not Scripture and it's not very scientific. We've just found the language helpful. Instead the point is to recognize that God made us differently, and there are many marital landmines that can be avoided if we do the work to understand how, specifically, our spouse is different from us. And not just 'different' in the sense that one of you prefers the beach and one of you prefers the mountains. I mean different in terms of your core motivations, fears and hopes.

As we've begun to understand these areas of difference in each other it's helped us to better understand why we react to situations so differently, why what scarcely bothers one of us might be devastating to the other, why (in my case) one of us is just so dang hyperactive.

If you do the work to understand each other in that way, it won't solve everything, but it will help you steer clear of a lot of avoidable tension and conflict.

And doing the work to understand each other is part of the way that we submit to one another. It's a way that we say, "Instead of trying to force you to be like me, I'm going to do the work to understand the way that God made you." You did not marry yourself. You know that intellectually, but it takes some intentionality to actually live like that is true.

And let me tell you why this is important. It's important because I don't have to know very much about you to know that it is important to you that you are understood.

Understanding —> trust (helps you fill in gaps, I believe you are for me) —> intimacy

And that is what God designed marriage to look like. Is it meant to be work? Yes. Is it going to be hard? Yes. But if we are willing to submit ourselves to one another out of reverence for Christ and if we do the work to learn, specifically, how our spouse is different from us, we will be well on our way to building a marriage where each is for the other, and a marriage that is Christ-exalting, joyful and fulfilling.