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Pastor Mark & Cyndi Toone
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

Puzzling Marriage: Putting the Pieces Together
The Fit
Ephesians 5:21-33

This morning we conclude a four-week series on marriage. Why? Because marriages are in trouble... even marriages inside the church! Since marriage is the single most important institution in human society, and since everyone in this room has a stake in marriage—whether you are married or not—and since our culture and particularly our state are so confused about what marriage actually is—what God created marriage to be—we feel it is a topic worth investing in.

We are talking about the four corner pieces to the puzzle of marriage. Over the last three weeks we have talked about *The Vow*, *The Other* and *The Friend*. If we could get our heads and hearts around those three pieces of marriage... if we could ask the Holy Spirit to help us to keep our vows, to give our lives in service to one another and to help us become best friends... it would take every marriage in this room to a new place.

But we aren't quite done. There is one more "corner piece" to the puzzle of marriage, and this is the one that can get folks fired up. Who knows, it might fire you up, too. It is very counter-cultural. The final topic in our series is, *The Fit*. Husbands and wives are called to different roles in marriage... roles that "fit" together. When we understand that and live into those roles, our marriages will flourish.

[READ Gen 2:18, Mark Toone translation] *The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a strong helper, a perfect fit for him."* [Read Ephesians 5: 21-33]

Marriage God's way is a lifelong covenant between two different types of human being: a man and a woman. Ten years ago, this might not have seemed like a comment worth making. My how things have changed! Our culture, led by our very own state, is hell-bent on removing gender from the marriage equation. As a matter of fact, the whole idea of gender—that boys and girls, men and women—are different, is increasingly heretical in western culture. One Canadian family has decided to raise their new baby, named "Storm," without regard to gender. Only the parents, the midwives and two siblings know whether Storm is a boy or girl.

This is extreme, of course, but it illustrates the growing commitment to a genderless society. So, as obvious as it might seem, we start this morning by

stating that God's plan for marriage is gendered! God made man and woman for each other. They were made as a complement to each other in every way including, obviously, physically. That is what the book of Genesis means when it declares that "a man should leave his father and mother and cleave unto his wife and the two shall become one flesh." This is a profound and wonderful gift of God that links two human hearts in the deepest of relationships. And something magical happens in that joining. To make my point, I'd like to invite Ellis and Rachel White to join us. Ellis, you are a man, isn't that right? And Rachel, you are a woman, correct? And God has brought you together in the relationship of marriage, isn't that right? Do you have something you would like to share with us? [They are pregnant!]

To all but the radicals, it is clear that God created man and woman differently... created us for each other. There is an obvious complementary physical "fit" that defines, illustrates and celebrates the covenant of marriage. But the Bible also teaches that God created man and woman for a complementary fit in our "roles" within marriage.

This passage in Ephesians is one of those places... and honestly, it is a hard pill to swallow for many in today's society. "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church..." Many in our culture of equality find this statement offensive... and for good reason. This passage has been hijacked to dominate and oppress women for centuries... often in the name of religion. That should be offensive to us. It is to God.

But before we get offended this morning, could we take a look at what the text actually says? In the end, you might still be offended by it. Scripture is often offensive to us. But if you will make the effort to understand what it really teaches, you might be surprised to discover the grace and power of this insight into God's plan for marriage.

I'd like to start with Paul's instructions to the husband. He has three times as much to say to the husband as to the wife; obviously he counted on the men being denser than the women. So let's begin there. When you hear the phrase "head of the wife," what comes to mind? Power? Dictatorship? Domination? Maybe, until you actually read the very first line that Paul directs to the men: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her..." Could we just pause there? If Paul said nothing more, if he stopped with just that verse, and if we really reflected upon what he has said, it would completely redefine this conversation.

Men, how are you called to lead your wife? By loving her. Seven times he uses that word. It's like a drumbeat. Love, love, love, love, love, love, love your wife! How? Like Christ loved the church. How did he do that? He gave himself up for her. How did he do that? He served her. He died for her. The disciples never quite figured this out, by the way. They always viewed their relationship with Jesus as

the inside track to power and authority. They even fought among themselves as to who would have the place of highest honor, the seat next to Jesus' throne of power. Was Jesus their leader? Yes. But He never gave up redefining what leadership looks like in His kingdom. Listen to this in Mark 10:

"...whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Later, in the upper room following the Last Supper, do you remember what Jesus did? He washed his disciples' feet. Unthinkable! The filthiest of jobs reserved for the lowliest servant in the house, yet there Jesus is washing manure off his followers' feet. The eternal Son of God who emptied himself and came to earth to save his own creation, defined leadership in terms of what? Service! Sacrifice! Love! And the ultimate act of sacrificial serving love took place on the cross when Jesus laid down his life, literally, to save ours. He died for us.

Is Jesus the head of the Church? How did Jesus define his headship? Sacrificial, loving service. So, when Paul speaks of the man being the head in the marriage relationship, he is not speaking about power or control or decision-making. He is speaking of a spiritual authority that is defined by service and sacrifice and love. The husband is called to the role of spiritual leadership, initiative, and protection.

We don't know why God appointed the husband to the role of spiritual leader and protector in the marriage, but he has. And we men have largely failed in that calling. The ongoing struggle of the human male is passivity. It started in the Garden of Eden when Adam just stood there, watched as the Serpent tempted his wife to eat the forbidden fruit and did nothing about it. The scripture says that he was there with her. God had given him a responsibility to lead and protect his wife. He could have ordered Satan to leave her alone. He could have pulled out a hoe and chopped off the Serpent's head, but he did nothing. He went passive, he pulled back, he watched as the Serpent assaulted his wife and did nothing about it.

The greatest challenge facing most men in marriage is the temptation to be passive... to refuse to accept God's call to the role of spiritual leader and protector, to step back and abandon the wife to do her job and do his job, too. I have lost track of the number of women who have come to me and said, "My husband refuses to lead." They long to have a man who provides loving, sacrificial spiritual leadership. But just like Adam, our tendency—our instinct—is to step back, to pull away, to abandon our post. Men, it is time to step back up to our God-given responsibility to be the loving, sacrificial servant-leader in our marriage. If we don't—if we won't—we will never experience the depth of relationship that God intends.

[Cyndi]

So wives, if that is true—if your husbands are called by God to a role of leadership in your relationship and your family—where does that leave you and me? What does that make us? Maids? Slaves? Stepford wives with no opinions or ideas of our own? Unfortunately, this is the stereotype that our culture puts forward. And it hasn't been helped by centuries of so-called Christian men who have used this passage as an excuse to bully their wives. They view the idea of spiritual headship as being the "boss" of the family. If you are the husband, you get to call the shots... make all the decisions. But that isn't submission; that's slavery.

So I'd like to talk about this idea of submission first of all by saying what it is not. First, submission is not about power and control. The old wedding vows used to ask the wife if she would "love, honor and obey." But as a matter of fact, nowhere in the Bible is the wife told to obey the husband. I cannot remember a time when Mark made an important decision without me. We talk about everything; we decide life together. Part of the gift of marriage is bringing our different perspectives to every important decision.

Second, submission is not about my relationship with all men. It is about my relationship with my husband. Pastor Megan recently put it this way: "I am called to submit to Larry; I am not called to submit to every man." Nor does marital submission have anything to do with the workplace. Nor the church! We have women elders and a woman pastor because, even in a time when women were treated as possessions, the New Testament church had women apostles, women prophets, women teachers, women evangelists and women church planters.

Most importantly, submission cannot be taken; it can only be given. Involuntary submission is slavery. My husband cannot demand my submission. But I can offer it to him as my gift of support and encouragement. The best example of this is Jesus. In Philippians 2 Paul writes about Christ who "did not consider equality with God something to be hung on to, but emptied himself, taking on the form of a servant... he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross." When we wives offer to submit to our husband's spiritual leadership, we are following the example of Jesus who lovingly submitted to his Heavenly Father.

And let's remember once more how Paul defined the husband's role. He is to love his wife; he is to serve his wife; he is to sacrifice for his wife even to the point of laying down his life for her. This is the kind of leader that God calls our husbands to be. And in my experience, most women long for this. They long to have a husband who takes initiative, who provides loving spiritual leadership. They long to feel that they are not carrying the entire responsibility of the spiritual and moral nurture of their family upon their own shoulders.

When the husband is leading as God intends, he isn't putting his wife down. He is lifting her up! He is honoring her and encouraging her and helping her to look even more beautiful. My favorite illustration of this is the dance. One year Mark

and I took ballroom dance classes. And here's the first thing we learned: someone has to lead the dance. And someone has to follow. You cannot have two leaders on the dance floor. It doesn't work.

But here's another thing you discover: when the dancers are good, you cannot tell when the man is leading. It isn't obvious. It's a gentle pressure with the hand. It is a slight move in one direction or the other. At first, it can be clumsy and awkward. And the temptation is for the woman to take over; to show him how to do it. But again and again our dance instructor said, "Ladies, let your men lead!" After a while, if we let them lead and we follow their lead, they get better at it. And if the man is a good leader what is the result? The woman looks good! It is the leader's role to dip and whirl and display and honor his partner so that she shines. And of course, in the end, they both shine, because they played their roles.

Isn't this what Paul describes in our text? Husbands are to lead their wives in order to present them "in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle... holy and without blemish." The man is called to lead the dance, but he does so lovingly and gently, and he does so for the purpose of honoring and protecting and exalting her. And the wife is called to respond—to follow that lead—to resist the temptation to take the lead when she doesn't like how he's doing it. I can't tell you how many times I have heard friends lament to me, "My husband won't provide any leadership"... but then when he does begin to lead, she doesn't like the way he is leading. And so, rather than continuing in the dance—patiently allowing him to grow and gain confidence—she takes control. The man feels like he has failed, pulls back, and becomes even more passive.

When Paul uses the word "submit" what he is saying is, "Wives, let your husbands lead. Give them the chance. Encourage them to do what God created them to do—to provide spiritual leadership and protection for you and for your family—and see what a beautiful thing will come of it."

[Mark]

When Cyndi and I were talking about this sermon, we decided to call our Whitworth senior Rachel to get her opinion. We asked her, "Rachel, do you think Daddy is the head of our family? And can you give some examples of what that looked like in our house?" Remember, she's in college. She quickly replied, "Oh, nobody talks like that around here. Nobody uses words like 'head' and 'submission.' I have to think about that." So we called her later in the week, and this is what she said. "I don't know if I've ever really thought about it this way, but I guess I would say that, yes, Daddy usually leads the charge... but he could never do it without mom." That's Ephesians 5!

And boy is that the truth! I could never do it without Cyndi. [Cyndi] And I could never do it without Mark. [Mark] That is what marriage is supposed to look like. Two very different kinds of human beings called together into a relationship that

fits them perfectly. Just like those puzzle pieces you've been playing with out in the foyer. The husband called by God to a role of loving servant leadership. The wife called by God to a role of strong, encouraging helper.

So how are you doing? Again, this is pretty counter-cultural, isn't it? But our culture has produced a divorce rate of 50% for first-time marriages. If you aren't experiencing the kind of life-giving and intimate relationship you have always longed for from your marriage, maybe you ought to consider taking your marriage advice, not from our culture, but from the God who invented marriage and placed us in roles that are a perfect fit for each other.

Sermon Questions

- REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER: Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- PRAY TOGETHER: Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- DIG DEEPER
 1. This morning's text is a controversial one in today's culture. Why?
 2. When Paul speaks of a husband's leadership role in the marriage, what example does he use? How is this view of leadership countercultural?
 3. Cyndi spoke about marriage in terms of a dance. How does that illustrate relationship between husband and wife?
 4. How do you see your own marriage, or that of your parents, in view of this teaching?