

How do I do this well?

That's a question I really wrestled with this last week: how do I do this well? More so than any other sermon I've written in recent memory this last week I've obsessed about my need to speak and communicate well this morning.

I always want my sermons to communicate well, but this last week I felt a pressure to make sure I didn't come up short on this one, and I'm betting you can guess why.

Ephesians 5...

It's easily one of the most potentially disagreeable and offensive sections of the entire Bible. In my own personal experience I have had more people struggle with this teaching than anything else the Bible says. And those people aren't just outsiders looking in, this is something that many life-long Christians, many life-long members of the WELS wrestle with.

So, in that vein of needing to communicate well, before we dig into what Ephesians 5 actually says, I need to make some disclaimers and say some ground work.

First: It is hard to talk about a topic as sensitive as this with an audience as diverse we are.

Some of you are single (because of your age, where you are in life, by your own choice, or in spite of your best efforts, some of you here today are not sitting next to a special someone) and so when Ephesians 5 talks about husbands and wives it could be easy to think that his doesn't apply to you, to check out.

Please don't. Even if you are not a husband or wife I need you to hear what God says to husbands and wives so that should that day come and you get married, you know what God wants from you. But even if you aren't planning on getting married, or that day doesn't come for you, I need you to hear what God says to husbands and wives so that you can be better prepared to talk about Ephesians 5 – because it's not just pastors who run into people who have questions about or problems with the topic of God and gender. At the very least, I need you to listen well so that you can help me – as my brother or sister in Christ I need you to pray for me, to encourage me, to equip me to be a better husband to my wife.

Some of you here today are relatively new to Christianity – some of you are newly minted members of St. Paul's, or you are just visiting. If you haven't caught on already, I need you to know that the Bible is out of step with society on the topic of gender. No matter how well I communicate today, some of what I say in this sermon will sound backwards, outdated, misogynistic, and just plain wrong to 21st century American ears.

I need you to know I don't say it lightly. I don't say it from the position of a man putting women in their place. I don't say it to offend, even though it may sound very offensive. It has nothing to do with a lack of respect or love for the women God has placed in my life. I say it because God in his Bible says it. God has made clear that it is not my right to avoid or change any of his word just because it may seem offensive or hard to swallow.

I also want to challenge you today: if this sermon and Ephesians 5 are offensive to you in any way, I want to challenge you to not turn your back on God because of this one teaching. I want to challenge you, if something that Jesus says today seems unloving, please know nothing could be further from the truth. I'm not here to win an argument. I don't need you to be convinced that Ephesians 5 is the only right way to treat gender after just one sermon on the topic, but I desperately want you to know that even if what I say about God and gender sounds unloving, he loves you more and better than anyone in this world. If you have a problem with Ephesians 5 please don't let that stop you from learning more about Jesus.

Some of you here today may not be new to Christianity, but still wrestle with God and gender for a different reason. Maybe some of you here today have been abused by men, or abused by a pastor who used these passages to beat you over the head and "put you in your place".

And so another disclaimer I have to make today is to simply say, "I'm sorry." In the history of this world, still today, men have given women many painful reasons to buck at the teaching of Ephesians 5. Throughout the history of the world and still today woman have been harassed, ignored, dismissed, underpaid, and abused by the men in their lives – some of those men dressed up in churchy clothes touting out passages like Ephesians 5 as proof that women should just shut up and accept the unfair, unloving treatment.

So, I'm sorry. I'm sorry that you've had to suffer for the sins of men. I'm sorry if anyone in the church has made you feel less than loved and respected. I'm sorry if anything I say today fails to communicate the love and respect I have for women.

I also want to challenge you today. If you wrestle with Ephesians 5 because of the sinful actions of men in the past or present, my challenge is this: don't throw the baby out with the bathwater.

In society and even in the church we have this horrible, nasty, dirty bathwater – all the times men have failed to love and respect the women in their lives (made even dirtier when men try and defend that abuse with the Bible). We need to get rid of that dirty bath water, but my concern is that we not throw the baby out with the bath water. God's design for marriage, God's thoughts on gender may be all mixed up with the dirt of our sinfulness, but the problem is not with God's word. The bathwater needs to go, but God's Word and his design for marriage is not worth discarding.

My challenge is that you listen closely today to what God actually says about gender, how he actually treats women, what he actually intends for husband-wife relations and realize that while it still may not be an easy pill to swallow, it is most definitely not intended by God to be one more weapon in a war against women.

One final disclaimer: it is important that we not read Ephesians 5 in a vacuum. We need the background of the rest of the Bible to inform our understanding of Ephesians 5.

Some people think that the Bible, as a whole, is oppressive to women, but if you actually read the Bible, if you look at how women were written about and treated in the Bible and how women were treated by the rest of the world when the Bible was written, you will find a shocking number of examples when God is proud of his daughters.

You'll read about Eve, the first woman, who is called the "helper" and that title "helper" is not like "the help." It is a title almost exclusively used to describe God in the rest of the Bible. God says to his daughters, "I want your role to be to the world what I am to you – an indispensable and valued part of my creation."

You'll read about Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, helping them, and leading the Israelites in a song of praise after God saved them from Egypt.

You'll read about Huldah the prophetess in 2 Kings who was guiding and teaching Josiah, one of the greatest kings in Israel's history.

You'll read about Mary, who unlike Zechariah, simply trusts the angel who came to announce a miraculous birth.

You'll read about the Woman of Noble Character in Proverbs 31 who is wise and industrious and productive and strong and capable.

You'll read sections like Romans 16 where Paul runs through a whole list of people who made his ministry possible – a list which includes a bunch of women whom Paul considered indispensable in his work.

Best of all, you'll read about Jesus who wasn't just served by men, but by capable women whose faith was often stronger than the men around them. It was women who were at the foot of his cross. It was women who boldly set out for the tomb to give Jesus a proper burial. It was women to whom Jesus first appeared when he rose from the dead. It was women who believed in his resurrection when the men thought they were being dramatic.

You may struggle with what Paul writes in Ephesians 5. You may struggle to understand why Jesus chose 12 *men* to be his disciples. You may struggle to square what you've learned in 21st century America about feminism and the Bible's out of step insistence that men be leaders in the church and home. You may be hurting because of the way some men have treated you in the past, but the God of the Bible unmistakably loves his daughters just as much as his sons. You are the queens of his creation. His Bible proves that he would do anything for you – even die for you.

Key to understanding Ephesians 5 is knowing that the rest of the Bible makes clear that when it comes to gender and God's plan for the different genders, it has absolutely nothing to do with status, worth, or aptitude. When it comes to value, love, and abilities, from God's perspective men and women are all equal. God treasures each and every one of you, his sons and his daughters.

So, how am I doing so far? Am I communicating well?

Men, women, do you know that your God loves you? Do you trust that your God wants what is best for you?

With those disclaimers in mind let's look at Ephesians 5.

The Biblical reality is that while in status men and women are the same, when it comes to vocation, or roles, or how men and women interact together, God has a specific game-plan.

How that game plan plays out in the husband/wife relationship is Paul's topic in Ephesians 5.

Wives (equally loved and cherished by God), this is how God wants you to interact with your husbands: **Submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife... wives should submit to their husbands in everything.**

Let's talk about that big, potentially ugly sounding word – submit.

I think there are a couple things that make that word sound so ugly.

First, is that history of men using this very passage to mistreat God's daughters. Clearly, as we will see when we look at God's instructions for husbands, there is no room for mistreatment of women (this is a bathwater not baby problem with submitting).

Second, there is a strong voice in all of our hearts that doesn't like being told to submit to anyone. Kids don't like submitting to their parents or teachers. We grown ups don't always like submitting to our bosses when we disagree with them or the police officer who wants us to step out of the car when we are in a hurry to get somewhere. This again is not a problem with God's word – this is a problem with our hearts, this is the product of that natural selfishness we all are born with. God promised Eve right after sin entered the world that her desire would be for her husband and he would rule over her – God clearly promised that because of sin there would be strain in the husband/wife relationship. Because of sin it would be an ongoing struggle for women to willingly submit.

So, the word sounds harsh to our 21st century American ears, and ugly to our naturally selfish hearts, but that doesn't make it wrong, nor does that make it bad.

The reality is that we submit all the time and we even consider those submissions virtues: the child who submits to his parents is helping the home flourish; the teen who submits to her teacher is helping the classroom learn; the young man who submits to a police officer's instructions is promoting peace and stability in society; the private who submits to his lieutenant in a combat zone helps save lives; the employee who submits to her boss keeps the workplace functioning.

God calls all of us to submit to someone – men and women alike – and though our hearts chaff at it occasionally, that doesn't make it a bad thing. In fact in just about every arena of life we recognize that having a chain of command, having one person submit to another promotes peace, stability, and efficiency.

God says he is a God of order, not of disorder, and in his creation, when there is order rather than anarchy, things work better.

Our God of order wants order in society, in the workplace, and in the family. So, he sets the order: wives submit to your husbands – not because he loves women any less, not because women aren't capable of leading, not because men always do it better, but because he wants the family, like the rest of his creation to function in an orderly way. He doesn't want the family to devolve into this anarchist warzone where husbands and wives maneuver and fight for control.

God gives the general structure, but he doesn't spell out what exactly this submission looks like. Like, in a practical, day to day basis, what does it look like for a wife to submit to her husband? As frustrating as that may be for those of you who love rules, God doesn't give us 1001 examples of submission in marriage. But let me help you understand what God does say.

The Greek word for *submit* is a combination of two Greek words – to set under.

When God says, wives submit to your husbands he is asking you to put your rights, your needs, your wants, your desires under his. In other words, have a *you first* attitude with your husbands. Let the motivation for every day of marriage not be what do I want, but how can I be a helper (like God called Eve) to the husband God has given me? How can I love him? Help him? Support him? Put him first?

That's God's desire for a wife in an orderly marriage. It's counter-cultural. It is against every natural instinct of our sinful hearts that wants all of us (regardless of gender) to look after myself first and others second. But wives, I can tell you that if you wake up every day and strive to submit to your husband by putting him first, you will be so irresistibly beautiful to him – and you'll be putting a smile on your God's face in the process.

Wives submit to your husbands. Put them first.

Now what about you men...

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her... husbands ought to love their wives as their own body.

In God's order for marriage wives are to submit and husbands are to love. Guys, let's talk about love.

This word for love in the Bible is not some gushy feeling you have for your wife – it's not an emotion-driven thing (which is good because, stereotypically, us guys aren't always plugged into emotions). This love is an act of the will. It is a decision that I make in my mind that regardless of how I feel at any given moment, regardless of what else is going on in my life, I am going to love this person. It is a decision that prompts action.

It requires a willingness to sacrifice – like Jesus sacrificed himself for us. And this willingness to sacrifice doesn't just mean sacrificing your life. Every husband says he would die for his wife – but here's the little bee in that bonnet, it is very unlikely that you will ever be in the scenario where you actually have to die for your wife.

What is inevitable and a daily occurrence is the call to live for your wife – to sacrifice your personal comfort, desires, and wants so that you can love her by living for her.

In short, it is also a *you first* attitude. Like caring for your own body, Paul says. No one has to twist your arm to get you to eat and take care of your body (although some men do go through a phase where they need some encouragement to wash regularly and eat the right food ☺). So, no one should have to twist your arm to love your wives by changing diapers, washing dishes, folding laundry, taking her on dates, holding her hand, snuggling on the couch.

Love may not be as harsh-on-the-ears of a word as *submit*, but make no mistake about it, there is nothing easy about loving the way God has called you to love. Your standard, your bar to jump over is Jesus – anything short of loving like Jesus isn't good enough. And men, your naturally selfish hearts are going to buck at this command just as much as any woman being told to submit.

That's God's desire for a husband in an orderly marriage. It's counter-cultural. It is against every natural instinct of our sinful hearts that wants all of us (regardless of gender) to look after myself first and others second. But I can tell you that if you wake up every day and strive to love your wife by putting her first, you will be so irresistibly beautiful to her – and you'll be putting a smile on your God's face in the process.

Husbands love your wives. Put them first.

You first does not come easily or naturally to any heart – whether it is *you first* submission or *you first* love.

Both of them require trust – trust that if you give up the instinct to look out for yourself first, you have a God who will look out for you. Trust that when God gives this order for marriage, which is very out of step with our world, he knows what he's talking

about. Trust that such a counter-cultural way of ordering the family could not only be a rule that is begrudgingly followed, but could actually result in blessing for husbands and wives and society in general.

But can you begin to see the beauty in God's design for marriage (regardless of scary words like *submit*)? Even though it requires a constant battle against the selfishness of our hearts, God's plan is this beautiful relationship where two people make this amazingly beautiful promise to each other: as long as I'm alive I am going to live for you – to make you happy, to make you prosper, to make you smile.

What is so backwards, out of date, and oppressive about that?

Yes, this relationship has one person as the head and the other as the helper, one is being told to submit to the other, but what is so ugly about a relationship where two people strive daily to put the other person first?

And at the end of the day, it is vitally important that we notice something else about Ephesians 5. Paul is giving direct instructions to husbands and wives, but did you notice what he can't stop gushing about?

Jesus.

The Jesus who willingly submitted to his Father's will and came to earth to save men and women who wrestle with submitting.

The Jesus who loved husbands and wives, men and women, so much that he lived for you – every minute of every day, every choice he made, every word he spoke, every breath he took was done in sacrificial service for you right up to his very last words, his very last breaths, on the cross where he suffered and died so that wives who don't submit like they should and husbands who don't love like they should could be forgiven, washed clean, saved.

There is one thing that can not only teach our hearts what it looks like to submit and love, but to make our hearts *want* to submit and love, and that is Jesus – the Jesus who submitted and loved so that we could be forgiven.

So, how did I do? I pray that God used me to communicate well this very timely and touchy subject.

If you have questions, if you want to learn more about God and gender, please let me know – don't just stew in silence by yourself, or even worse walk out those doors and never come back again. If you still don't quite get it, if it is still hard to swallow, that's ok, search the Bible yourself to see if what I just said is true. Above all, men, women, husbands, wives, remember that your God loves you and gave himself up for you to make you holy. You are his pride and joy. You are his bride, the love of his life.

Amen.