

THE CHRISTIAN HOME

by

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CHAPTER THREE

THE CHRISTIAN WIFE'S RESPONSIBILITY OF SUBJECTION

Ephesians 5:22-25, 33

IN EPHESIANS 5, we have the divine key to any woman's being a happy, faithful and successful wife. In the portion before us the apostle teaches the nature, ground, and extent of the obedience due from the wife to the husband.

As to the nature of it, it is spiritual; it is as to the Lord. The obedience of the wife to the husband is to be regarded as part of her obedience to the Lord. As Hodges says, "It terminates on Him, and therefore is religious, because determined by religious motives and directed towards the object of the religious affections."

Here explains and answers the chief difficulty in the thinking of most people, even believers, regarding this basic marital commandment. All too many consider the commandment as teaching obedience to the husband. When this is the understanding it naturally ministers to the pride of man and the inferiority of woman. The true teaching places the whole subject in an entirely different perspective. The obedience is to the Lord and through the husband. That is, the wife is commanded to obey Christ through her obedience to her husband. Thus the obedience is spiritual in motive and religious in objective. Christ is the motive and the objective of her obedience to her husband.

The ground of the obedience is not only in commandment but also in nature. Hodges says,

The Apostle says wives are to be obedient to their husbands, because the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the Head of the church. The ground of the obligation, therefore as it exists in nature, is the eminency of the husband, his superiority in those attributes which enable and entitle him to command. He is larger, stronger, bolder; has more of those mental and moral qualities which are required in a leader. This is just as plain from history as that iron is heavier than water. The man, therefore, in this aspect, is qualified and entitled to command, is said to be the image and glory of God (I Corinthians 11:7); for, as the Apostle adds in that connection, the man was not made out of the woman, but the woman out of the man; neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man. This superiority of the man (by divine decree—thus removing any basis for boasting in man) in the respects mentioned, thus taught in Scripture, founded in nature, and proved by all experience, cannot be denied or disregarded without destroying society and degrading both men and women; making the one effeminate and the other masculine."

Shakespeare saw the truth and importance of man's lordship and woman's subjection to his rule and authority:

Katharine, one of Shakespeare's great characters in *The Taming of the Shrew*, shows a deep understanding of man's and woman's natures, and their different roles in married life.

When two women scorned and defied their husbands, she beautifully explained to them the love and respect a woman owes her husband.

Fie, fie! unknit that threatening, unkind brow;
And dart not scornful glances from those eyes
To wound thy lord, thy king, thy governor.
It blots thy beauty, as frosts do bite the meads;
Confounds thy fame, as whirlwinds shade fair buds;
And in no sense is meet or amiable.
A woman moved is like a fountain troubled,
Muddy, ill-seeming, thick, bereft of beauty;
And, while it is so, none so dry or thirsty
Will deign to sip, or touch one drop of it.
Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,
Thy head, thy sovereign; one that cares for thee,
And for thy maintenance! Commits his body
To painful labor, both by sea and land;
To watch the night in storms, the day in cold,
While thou liest warm at home, secure and safe,
And craves no other tribute at thy hands,
But love, fair looks, and true obedience,—
Too little payment for so great a debt.
Such duty as the subject owes the prince
Even such a woman owes to her husband;
And when she's froward, peevish, sullen, sour,
And not obedient to his honest will,
What is she, but a foul, contending rebel
And graceless traitor to her loving lord?

We like the fine, clear statement of the great commentator Eadie on this point:

As Christ is Head of the Church, so the husband is head of the wife. Authority and government are lodged in him; the household has its unity and centre in him;. . . and there is only one head; dualism would be perpetual antagonism . . . Man was not created for the woman, but the woman for the man, and he is in position superior (I Corinthians 11:9). **“The man is not of the woman, but the woman of the man”** [v. 8]. A portion of himself—his other self; taken out from near his heart and therefore—though his equal in personality and fellowship—being of him and for him and after him, she is still second to him. That is, in authority and government. Nay, more, **“Adam was not deceived: but the woman, being deceived, was in the transgression”**; and to her the Lord God said,

“Thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee,” though the gospel lightens this position of the curse which has been so terribly felt in all non-Christian lands each sex is indeed imperfect by itself, and the truest unity is in conjugal duality (I Corinthians 11:11). Still, though the woman was originally of the man, yet now **“the man is by the woman,” “the mother of all living.”** Finally, the Apostle illustrates this headship by the beautiful sentiment, that the woman is the **“glory of the man,”** but **“the man is the image and glory of God”** (I Corinthians 11:7).

Eadie says, in part, on Ephesians 5:25:

The submission of the wife is in kind that of the Church to Christ. It is not forced, but it springs from loyal attachment, from her conscious need of support and protection, from a just view of the relationship in which she stands as a helpmate, and of the original and continued destiny of her sex. She may be in other things man’s superior—in delicacy of sentiment, warmth of devotion, strength of moral heroism, power and patience of self-denial, and general sympathy with suffering and distress. Still the obedience inculcated by the Apostle sits gracefully upon her, and is in harmony with all that is fair and feminine, in her position and temperament.

On Ephesians 5:33, Eadie says,

One peculiarity in this injunction has been usually overlooked. What is the instinctive on either side is not enforced, but what is necessary to direct and hallow such an instinct is inculcated. The woman loves in deep, undying sympathy; but to teach her how this fondness should know and fill its appropriate sphere, she is commanded to obey and honor. The man, on the other hand, feels that his position is to govern; but to show him what should be the essence and means of his government, he is enjoined to love. When this balance of power is unsettled, happiness is lost, and mutual recriminations ensue.

Jeremy Taylor in his “Sermon on the Marriage Ring” (*Works*, Vol. 15) says, “He rules her by authority, and she rules him by love; she ought by all means to please him, and he must by no means displease her.”

“A masterly wife,” Gattaker says, “is as much despised and derided for taking rule over her husband as he for yielding to it.”

Ephesians 5:22 teaches the extent of the wife’s subjection to her husband. She is to be subject to him in everything. This does not mean that the authority of the husband is unlimited, but rather it teaches its extent and not its degree. “It extends,” as Hodges wisely says, “over all departments but is limited in all; first by the nature of the relation; and secondly, by the higher authority of God. No superior, whether master, parent, husband or magistrate, can make it obligatory on us either to do what God forbids, or not to do what God commands. So long as our allegiance to God is preserved, and obedience to man is made part of our obedience to him, we retain our liberty and our integrity.”

Nowhere is the great power of such subjection more clearly brought to our attention than in 1 Peter 3:1-6. Note that verse 1 begins with subjection and ends with power. In verse four God puts His evaluation on woman’s lowly subjection as **“of great price.”**

Augustine in Book 9 of his Confessions provides what might be aptly termed a rich and fitting commentary on I Peter 3:1-6. He says of his mother,

Brought up thus modestly and soberly, and made subject by Thee to her parents, then by her parents to Thee, so soon as she was of marriageable age, being given to a husband, she served him as her lord; and did her diligence to win him unto Thee, preaching Thee unto him by her conversation; by which Thou didst ornament her, making her reverently lovable, and admirable to her husband, and she so endured the wronging of her bed as never to have any quarrel with her husband thereon. For she looked for Thy mercy upon him, that believing in Thee, he might be made chaste. But besides this, he was fervid, as in his affections, so in anger; but she had learnt not to resist an angry husband; not in deed only, nor even in word. Only when he was smoothed and tranquil and in a temper to receive it, she would give an account of her actions, if perchance he had overhastily taken offence. In a word, while many matrons, who had milder husbands, yet bore even in their faces marks of shame, would in a familiar talk blame their husbands' lives, she would blame their tongues, giving them, as in jest, earnest advice; "That from the time they heard the marriage writings read to them, they should account them as indentures whereby they were made servants; and so, remembering their condition, ought not to set themselves up against their lords." And when they, knowing what a choleric husband she endured, marvelled that it had never been heard, nor by any token perceived, that Patricius had beaten his wife, or that there had been any domestic difference between them, even for one day, and confidentially asking the reason, she taught them her practice above mentioned. Those wives who observed it found the good, and returned thanks; those who observed it not found no relief, and suffered.

After two paragraphs of praise for the sweet meekness of his mother, Augustine goes on to say,

Finally, her own husband, towards the very end of his earthly life, did she gain unto Thee; nor had she to complain of that in him as a believer, which before he was a believer she had borne from him. She was also the servant of Thy servants; whosoever of them knew her, did in her much praise and honour and love Thee; for that through the witness of the fruits of a holy conversation they perceived Thy presence in her heart. For she had been the wife of a man, had requited her parents, had governed her house piously, was well reported of for good works, had brought up children, so often travailing in birth of them as she saw them swerving from God.

~ end of chapter 3 ~

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