

# The Household Ethic

## Ephesians 5:22-33

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



Danielle and I began dating near the start of our junior year of high school. In December, we will have been married for 17 years, and with dating, we have been together for almost 23 years. Over this time, we have learned and continue to learn much about each other. We have grown and are growing in love, unity, and maturity. One of the things that I share with every young couple preparing for marriage is something that I heard Tim Keller say and have found to be absolutely true. He said, “God did not create marriage for your happiness but for your holiness.”<sup>1</sup> Ironically, this is what I find so deeply satisfying about marriage. It is more than just a physical reality or some partnership of mutual benefit. It is something that God has used to form both Danielle and me into the image of Jesus. Today’s passage speaks directly about marriage. And, to be honest, it is one of the more difficult passages in the Bible. Not because it is actually all that difficult, but because what it calls us to is so radically opposite of our natural logic and lived experiences. Yet, it is what we precisely need, and I think it is what our hearts long for. And while it speaks to marriage, it isn’t only for married people. It is for all of us. How? Because Paul applies the overarching principle of honoring others to the context of marriage for the Ephesians. This helps all of us, married or not, get a glimpse of what it means to apply this principle to our lives and relationships. Once again, we will be reminded by Paul that to follow Christ is to live in a way that bears good fruit. That is, we bear fruit that looks like Jesus. What is the specific fruit that Paul is exhorting us towards here? Honoring others. So he won’t let us forget this central truth that we see in Jesus, **people who have been honored make it a priority to honor others.**

## 1. Controversial – For Them & Us

- a. **A clarifying word** – This is one of those passages in the Bible that teaches something profoundly beautiful and noble. However, too often, it has been used to justify inappropriate, wrong, or downright evil stuff in the name of “righteousness” and “faithfulness to the Bible.” In reality, it has been the process of poor or nonexistent scholarship that has drawn these conclusions and does not reflect what God is actually trying to teach us.
  - i. Kathy Keller shares her experiences in this area in her booklet – “Jesus, Justice, and Gender Roles.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tim and Kathy Keller. *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God*. New York: Penguin Books, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Kathy Keller, *Jesus, Justice, and Gender Roles: A Case for Gender Roles in Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 31ff.

- ii. If you have had anyone in the church ever justify inappropriate, wrong, or evil things for this passage, I am sorry and hope that today we can see that God and his Word are indeed good and for our flourishing.
- iii. God never condones or dismisses the wrongs or injustices that we experience. Instead, he calls his people to act with both truth and compassion, and he will hold every injustice accountable in the end.
- iv. In order to mine the gold from this tough passage, we must be willing to step out of our context and into the context of the Ephesians. After all, this letter was written to them, and we must understand it from their perspective if we are to apply it correctly to our context.

**b. The Controversy – Them & Us.**

- i. **One of the temptations in reading this passage is to just assume that it wasn't controversial or difficult for the original audience to understand and apply. That is simply not the case.**
  - 1. **For us** – We are offended or dismissive of v.22 and the idea of submission. Or in other words, we are put off by the idea that the headship principle still applies to us today.
  - 2. **For them** – They were offended that the headship principle required service and sacrifice on the part of the “head.”
- ii. **A caution** - Authority & Equality – Be careful!
  - 1. There are two pitfalls we must be cautious to avoid when reading this passage faithfully.
    - a. **The question of authority** – If we only read this passage looking to answer the question of authority, we are going to miss both the essential principle that Paul is outlining and the character of Jesus.
    - b. **The desire for equality** – We have to understand and acknowledge that as modern people, particularly those in the American West, we have a very different understanding of the notion of equality than the Ephesians would have had. That means while the Bible speaks to the equality of men and women, this passage is not speaking to that directly and equality (in the way we understand it) is not to be a primary application.
  - 2. One theologian puts it this way, **“In conclusion, if either “equality” or “authority” is present in this passage in some way, it must be understood in the context of these larger and more dominant concerns of unity, holiness, and obedience.”**<sup>3</sup>

**c. Review – Headship in their context. - Greek Household codes.**

- i. This is key in understanding what Paul is about to unpack in this passage. And it helps us to understand why Paul's exhortation to them was so controversial.
- ii. Aristotle's concept of household codes, or *oikonomia*, was articulated primarily in his work *Politics*. In this text, Aristotle views the household (*oikos*) as the basic unit of society and explores its internal structure and relationships. His understanding of the household revolves around three key relationships: master-slave, husband-wife, and parent-child.
- iii. Aristotle's household codes reflect a hierarchical structure where the relationships are based on a concept of natural authority and subordination, with the purpose of

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<sup>3</sup> Lee-Barnewall, Michelle. Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian: A Kingdom Corrective to the Evangelical Gender Debate (p. 208). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

maintaining order and achieving the good life both within the household and in the larger political community.

- iv. **Aristotle on God** - Aristotle also states the expectations in terms of love for the superior by the one over whom he stands when he states: **“For it would be ludicrous if one were to accuse God because he does not return love in the same way as he is loved, or for a subject to make this accusation against a ruler; for it is the part of a ruler to be loved, not to love or else to love in another way”** (Eth. eud. 7.3.4). The difference was a reflection of the asymmetrical relationship between the head and the body for the good of the whole, an understanding that resulted in a set of expectations conforming to the nature of each part’s position.<sup>4</sup>

**d. The headship of Jesus – Self-sacrificing love.**

- i. Paul points to Jesus over and over in this passage and really, throughout all of Ephesians as our plumb line. His life and example are the very model that we are to us in order to understand the tough principles and truths of the Scriptures.
- ii. Sometimes we can downplay what Paul is encouraging by dismissing the controversial nature of his exhortation by saying that Paul was couching his advice in socially accepted terms.
  - 1. Lee-Barnewall helps us to understand that is not the case - **“When Paul asks husbands as heads to sacrifice themselves for their wives, he asks them to do something that goes against this fundamental order of society, which would be considered disruptive and even dangerous.”**<sup>5</sup>
- iii. Paul doesn’t let them or us off of the hook in this passage.
  - 1. He doesn’t water it down to a culturally acceptable idea that they might be more willing to apply and integrate into their lives.
  - 2. Nor are we given the privilege of dismissing the idea of headship because we feel that we’ve outgrown it or that it is too “old fashioned”. → I.e., Saying something to the lines of, “Its 2024, don’t we know better by now?”
- iv. Paul directly connects this application to the reality of Adam and Eve. (v.31)
  - 1. When we examine the Genesis narrative, what we will see is the unique roles and responsibility that God gives to Adam and Eve. And when it comes to the fall, the burden of responsibility for the fall is placed on Adam. Even though in the narrative Eve sins first.
    - a. Thus there is a striking and important pattern here: God gives the command directly to Adam, asks only Adam whether he broke the command, and specifically relates Adam’s punishment to the command. It is not that Eve is exempt from obeying and suffering the consequences of her sin since she is punished as well. Rather, we can note that from a literary perspective, the narrative is crafted in such a way as to draw special attention to Adam’s special relationship to and responsibility for keeping the command.<sup>6</sup>
    - b. The importance of Adam’s disobedience should not be underestimated, especially since Paul affirms this understanding in Rom. 5. Paul does not

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<sup>4</sup> Lee-Barnewall, Michelle. Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian: A Kingdom Corrective to the Evangelical Gender Debate (p. 226). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

<sup>5</sup> Lee-Barnewall, Michelle. Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian: A Kingdom Corrective to the Evangelical Gender Debate (p. 226). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

<sup>6</sup> Lee-Barnewall, Michelle. Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian: A Kingdom Corrective to the Evangelical Gender Debate (p. 192). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

describe Adam as someone who abandoned his headship but rather as someone whose disobedience led to death.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. The Honor Principle

### a. The overarching principle – Honor others as you have been honored.

- i. Karl Barth expresses the focus on the larger principle this way: What matters to Paul is not the establishment, maintenance, and welfare of the family as such but that every aspect of a person's life be seen in the light of the great antithesis, including this most significant and concrete reality of life. Even in their natural state, these relationships of ordered interdependence reflect our fundamental dependence on God in Christ; they are honored as Christian relationships to the extent that they reflect the divine-human relation. The obedience enjoined here is appropriate for that purpose and that purpose alone. The fear of Christ (5:21) both justifies these relationships and guarantees that they are not absolute relationships. Marriage is a mystery (5:32): it is by nature finite, yet it points to the promise of a future eternal transformation. Likewise, the relationships of parents to children exist for the purpose of training and admonition unto the Lord (6:4). The social orders witness to *one* Lord who orders all things, namely, God. This passage is not as conservative or implausible as it sounds when read out of context. It is more revolutionary than it may first appear, but the revolution to which it witnesses is from above.<sup>8</sup>

1. Lee-Barnewall agrees in saying – **“We will see that while kephalē can have connotations of “authority,” the main significance of its use is the way in which Paul reverses the cultural expectations of the “head” according to the radical new values of the Christian community.”**<sup>9</sup>

- ii. **It is significant that throughout this section husbands and wives are reminded of their duties and not their rights.** It is important also to read all that is said in this section realizing both that it follows what has been said in verse 21 about mutual submission and that it presupposes what is stated in Galatians 3:28 of the equality in Christ of male and female.<sup>10</sup>

- b. **The general exhortation to mutual submissiveness.** (5:21) → Christians should not be self-assertive, each insisting on getting his or her own way. **As the Philippian believers are told, they should be humble enough to count others better than themselves and put the interests of others before their own, following the example of Christ, who “emptied himself,” “humbled himself,” and “became obedient,” even when the path of obedience led to death on the cross (Phil. 2:3–8).** Out of reverence for their Lord, who set such a precedent, his followers should place themselves at one another's disposal, living so that their forbearance is a matter of public knowledge (Phil. 4:7), even when others are encouraged on this account to take advantage of them (1 Cor. 6:7). Even those who fill positions of responsibility and honor in the Christian community, to whom their fellow-believers are urged to render submission and

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<sup>7</sup> Lee-Barnewall, Michelle. *Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian: A Kingdom Corrective to the Evangelical Gender Debate* (p. 195). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, ed. R. David Nelson, trans. Ross M. Wright (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2017), 145–146.

<sup>9</sup> Lee-Barnewall, Michelle. *Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian: A Kingdom Corrective to the Evangelical Gender Debate* (p. 218). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

<sup>10</sup> Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 10, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 159.

loving respect (1 Cor. 16:16; 1 Thess. 5:12–13), earn such recognition by being servants, not lords (cf. 1 Pet. 5:3). For all his exercise of apostolic authority when the situation called for it, Paul invites his converts to regard him and his colleagues as “your slaves for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor. 4:5).<sup>11</sup>

- i. While we can acknowledge that not everyone is married and that makes 5:22-33 difficult to apply to all of our lives if we only focus on marriage. That is why we must understand the larger principle that Paul is applying in this section and consider it in the scope of our relationships.
- c. We honor others when we are...
- d. Humble – Thinking of myself less often.
  - i. A rightsized perspective of yourself.
    - 1. If you operate with an achieved identity, you have to compare yourself to others. This means your worth and value is only in relationship to others around you. This posture of comparison routinely leads us away from joy and contentment.
    - 2. If you operate with a received identity, your value and worth come from someone who esteems you greatly. In Christianity, that is God. This means your identity is both stable and rightsized through God’s Word.
  - ii. It is really hard to think of yourself less often if you only ever think of yourself.
    - 1. When we have a rightsized perspective we operate in confidence, security, and sensitivity for others.
  - iii. Concern & sensitivity for others.
    - 1. Have you ever been in the grocery store, at a game, or in class, and you were so focused on what it was that you were doing that you missed someone or something right in front of you? This is what happens when we focus on ourselves, we can’t see others around us.
    - 2. When we operate in humility, we grow in our concern and sensitivity for others.
  - iv. Purposeful responsiveness.
    - 1. The natural outflow of seeing the needs of others is to purposely respond to them.
    - 2. We can’t forget, purposeful responsiveness is not about responding to every possible need, but it is about responding intentionally with our time, talents, and treasure for the good of others and the glory of God.
- e. Patient – Seeing the big picture even when something bothers you.
  - i. A commitment to the big picture and the long view of things.
    - 1. Patient people tend to be those who can see the bigger picture or how something plays out over the long run. This allows them to choose their reaction to the immediate situation that will help get to the preferred vision in the future.
    - 2. When we operate with short-sighted vision we can overreact and lose control quickly.
  - ii. Operating out of a healthy sense of identity.
    - 1. Being able to see the big picture requires a healthy self-awareness and awareness of the greatest good of others in the situation.
    - 2. There is a leadership maxim that states, “You cannot lead someone to a place that you have not been before.” This is a helpful reminder even for our own self-identity. When we bump up against difficult situations and people, we are going

<sup>11</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), 382.

to have a difficult time seeing the big picture for the situation if we haven't seen the big picture in our own lives. This doesn't mean that we have to be experts, but we have to be aware. And there is no greater threat to awareness than insecurity.

a. Insecurity causes us to be tunnel-visioned.

**iii. Working to establish understanding and shared purpose.**

1. One of the things patient people do when they see the big picture is that they work to establish mutual purpose with those they are in conflict with. Often, everyone in the situation wants a very similar outcome. Patient people are self-controlled people and they are able to articulate the mutual purpose.
2. One of the crucial steps in establishing understanding and mutual purpose is not writing a negative backstory for another person. This comes back to the virtue of gentleness where we gave the benefit of the doubt.
  - a. We all write stories in situations that we face. And too often, even when we're in the wrong, the story we tell is that we are in the right.
  - b. If we are going to be patient people who work for the good of others, we have to get in the habit of telling accurate stories where we represent each person in the situation (including ourselves) honestly.
    - i. We'll only be able to do this through maturity and having a secure identity.

**f. Gentle – Self-control to remain composed in a difficult or stressful situation.**

**i. A commitment to self-control.**

1. Gentle people do not lose control. This is not some magical gift or supernatural power.
2. Self-control can be cultivated and developed.
  - a. One of the best steps in developing self-control is to rehearse your response ahead of time with the intention of staying in control.
3. **The truth is that all of these virtues can be developed and cultivated. Especially, since we are indwelt with the Holy Spirit who helps and empowers us to live in a God honoring way.**

**ii. Giving the benefit of the doubt.**

1. Too often we ramp ourselves up when going into difficult situations by creating a backstory where we assume the worst intent of the other person.
2. People who remain self-controlled begin by not ramping themselves up through assuming the best of those they are in conflict with.
3. Giving the benefit of the doubt does not mean that we excuse poor behavior or wrongdoings. It does mean that we work to understand the other person.

**iii. Understanding the significance of your response.**

1. Not every situation demands the same response. Gentle and self-controlled people think through the level and type of response that is warranted in every situation. They do this because they understand that their response is significant, not just in proportion to the situation that they are responding to, but ultimately to the outcome they are hoping to achieve.