Today we’re going to dive headfirst into one of the most discussed, despised, debated, misunderstood, misinterpreted, misapplied, misused, abused passages of Scripture in the Bible. I’m talking about Paul’s command for wives to submit to their husbands in Ephesians 5:22-24. We’re continuing our series on the family, and today we’re focusing on the Bible’s teaching for wives. And before all the men and all the single ladies check out on me, let me explain to you why this sermon is for all of us. Men, most of you are dads or you’re going to be dads someday. And many of you will have daughters. And part of your role is to teach your daughter how to be a godly wife, so you need to know what the Bible says about that. For many of the single ladies, you’re going to be married someday, so obviously, you need to know what the Bible says about being a godly wife. But even if you think you may not get married, God may bring other women into your life for you to disciple, and you need to know what the Bible says about their role as wives. And then for you single guys, you need to know what a godly woman looks like, so you’ll know what you’re looking for. So this text applies to all of us, no matter which category we fall into. But then, there’s also an even bigger way that this text applies to all of us. If you’ll remember last week, we saw that marriage is patterned after Jesus’ relationship with the Church. And in that relationship, Jesus is the Groom, and we’re all the Bride. And that means, whether male or female, young or old, single or married, what the Bible says to wives, the Bible says to all of us about our relationship with Jesus. This texts tells us how we all should relate to Jesus as His Bride. So let’s read Ephesians 5:22-24 and see what the Bible says both to wives and to all of us as the Bride of Christ. Ephesians 5:22-24. Paul writes, *“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, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.”*

I told you a minute ago that this text is one of the most misunderstood texts in the Bible. Some people despise this text, because they think it devalues and degrades women. Other people embrace this text, because they think it gives men the right to rule over women. And then still other people don’t pay any attention to this text at all. They just dismiss it as being something that made sense in Paul’s day but doesn’t apply to us in our more modern, progressive culture.

And a good place to start today is to simply say, “They’re all wrong.” This text does not devalue and degrade women. This text does not teach that men have the right to rule over women. And this text is not just a product of Paul’s ancient culture that no longer applies in our day. None of those things are true of this text. And we need to get past those misunderstandings in order to see what this text really teaches.

So let’s start with the idea that this text devalues women. Maybe the easiest way to respond to that false belief is to back up one verse to verse 21. Verse 21 says, *“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”* That verse is directed to all believers… not just women or wives… and in that verse, Paul says submission is something that we’re all supposed to be doing. So when Paul tells wives to submit to their husbands, he’s not treating them as if they’re less valuable just because they’re women. In fact, he’s doing the exact opposite. He’s treating them the exact same way he treats all other believers, because all believers are called to submit in all sorts of ways. For example, James 4:7 says we’re to submit to God. Romans 13:1 says we’re to submit to government leaders. Ephesians 6:1 says we’re to submit to our parents. Hebrews 13:17 says we’re to submit to our church leaders. And Ephesians 5:24 says the church is to submit to Christ. So Paul’s command for wives to submit to their husbands in verse 22 doesn’t devalue women, because women aren’t the only ones who are called to submit. Men are also called to submit in all sorts of situations.

And if you think about some of those other situations, it’ll probably be clear to you that a person is not devalued when they submit. For example, do we devalue our children when we say they should submit to their parents? Do we devalue the church when we say we should submit to Christ? Do we devalue people when we say that we should submit to God? No, of course not. And we haven’t even mentioned the greatest example yet. The Bible teaches that Jesus the Son submits to God the Father. And you better believe that Jesus’ submission to the Father doesn’t devalue Jesus. In fact, the exact opposite is true. Jesus is glorified because He submitted. His value and worth are shown in His submission.

So this text does not devalue women (1) because men are also called to submit in all sorts of contexts, and (2) because submission itself is not devaluing.

Next, let’s deal with the false idea that this text means men should rule over women. There are two important responses. The first response is that you need to make sure you read what verse 22 actually says. It says, *“Wives, submit to your husbands.”* It does not say, “All women submit to all men.” So this verse says nothing about the relationship between men and women in general. It is specifically speaking to the relationship between one man and one woman who are married to each other. Second, we need to talk about the word that’s translated submit in this verse. It literally means “put yourself under.” And I hope you’ll notice that it’s addressed to wives, not to husbands. Paul doesn’t say, “Husbands, make your wives submit.” No. He says, “*Wives, submit to your husbands.”* In other words, this is a choice that the wife makes. She willingly and voluntarily submits to her husband and puts herself under him. So Paul is not giving husbands the authority to rule over their wives and force their will on their wives. In fact, next week, we’ll see in verse 25 that Paul says a husband should love his wife sacrificially and give himself up for her. In other words, he doesn’t lead by ruling over her. He leads by loving her and protecting her.

So this text does not teach that men should rule over women. It teaches that a woman should willingly and voluntarily put herself under the leadership of her husband, and her husband should not use his leadership for his own sake but should sacrificially love his wife and give himself up for her.

Finally, let’s respond to the idea that this text reflects Paul’s culture and no longer applies to us. One way to respond to that false belief is to remember the context. Two weeks ago we saw in verse 18 that Paul gives the command for all believers to *“be filled with the Spirit,”* and then in the next three verses, he describes what it looks like when you’re filled with the Spirit, including verse 21 where he says, *“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”* In other words, part of being filled with the Holy Spirit is living a life of submission to others. And then starting in verse 22, Paul explains what that submission looks like within the family. It looks like wives submitting to husbands, husbands sacrificially loving wives, children obeying parents, and fathers not exasperating their children but instead raising them in the teaching of the Lord. So in the context of what Paul has said, these instructions aren’t based on what culture you live in. These instructions are based on following Jesus and being filled with His Spirit.

And then even more than that, remember what we saw about marriage last week in verses 31-32. We saw that God created marriage to be a picture of Jesus’ relationship with His people. So the relationship between a husband and wife is not a cultural invention that changes from culture to culture. The relationship between a husband and wife is defined by the eternal truth of Jesus’ love for His people. And if you look at our text again, you’ll see just that: Paul doesn’t base wives’ submission on their culture at all. He bases it on Jesus and the church. Look at verses 22-24, *“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, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.”*

Wives should submit to their husbands as the church submits to Christ. Is there ever a culture where the church isn’t supposed to submit to Christ? No. And that means there’s never a culture where wives aren’t supposed to submit to their husbands.

So this text does not just reflect Paul’s culture. Paul makes it very clear that this text is based on unchanging, eternal truths about Jesus and the church. And that means when this text teaches about a wife’s role in marriage, that teaching doesn’t change from culture to culture, because the truths about Jesus and the church don’t change from culture to culture. So whatever this text says, it says to us today just as much as it said it to the Ephesians 2000 years ago. So let’s look at the text again and see what it teaches us about a wife’s role in marriage.

We start in verse 22 with the clear statement, *“Wives, submit to your husbands.”* As I told you a few minutes ago, that word submit literally means “to put yourself under.” It’s not something that someone else can force you to do. It’s something that you choose to do. You put yourself in that position. So *“Wives, submit to your husbands,”* means that a wife is supposed to make a willing, conscious, voluntary choice to put herself under her husband. She puts herself under his leadership and supports him. That’s the main thought for wives in this text. But then Paul also gives us three different phrases that explain exactly what this submission looks like. The first phrase that explains a wife’s submission is at the end of verse 22, *“Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord.”* The second phrase that explains a wife’s submission is at the end of verse 24, *“Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.”* And then the third phrase that explains a wife’s submission is at the end of verse 33, *“However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.”* So a wife’s submission to her husband is “as to the Lord,” “in everything,” and respectful. And I want to give you one sentence that captures what this type of submission looks like, and then we’ll walk through each of these phrases. When the Bible says wives should submit to their husbands, here’s what that means: Your attitude and desire is to follow your husband’s leadership and support him. Wives, that’s your God-given, biblical responsibility in marriage: Your attitude and desire should be to follow your husband’s leadership and support him.

Now… let’s talk about what that means and how it relates to the three phrases Paul gives us. First, he says wives are to submit to their husbands as to the Lord. Wives, the phrase *“as to the Lord”* means at least two things for you. First, it means that your submission to Jesus sets the pattern for your submission to your husband. You should submit to your husband in the same way that you submit to Jesus. And here’s what I want you to think about: Is submitting to Jesus a horrible thing? Is it drudgery? Is it demeaning? Should you do it with a scowl on your face and bitterness in your heart? No, no, no, and no. Submitting to Jesus is the greatest thing you can ever do. It’s life-giving. You find joy and hope and peace and comfort and security when Jesus is your Lord. When God’s grace changes your heart, you submit to Jesus not because you have to but because you want to. You desire to submit to Him because you love Him so much.

That’s why I say your *attitude* and *desire* should be to follow your husband’s leadership. The concern is that your love and your heart will be the same toward your husband as it is toward Jesus. You find joy in following your husband and submitting to him, because you love him. So the first aspect of *“as to the Lord”* means that you can’t just jump through the hoops or go through the motions. You have to have an attitude and desire… a heart… of submission. Which reminds us that back in verse 18, Paul said the only way this is happening is if you’re filled with the Spirit. You can fake the actions, but you can’t fake the heart. And you can’t change the heart. The only way your heart will change is when the Spirit of God fills you and changes you. Wives, you are dependent on the Spirit to give you a heart and an attitude and a desire to lovingly submit to your husband as to the Lord.

But then there’s also a second, very important thing that *“as to the Lord”* means about submission. It means that you only follow your husband’s leadership in so far as following His leadership is following Jesus. In other words, you don’t follow your husband into sin. Your first allegiance is always to Jesus and not your husband. And if there’s ever a moment where you have to choose between following Jesus and following your husband, you follow Jesus. Your husband is not an infallible, sin-free leader the way Jesus is, so you always follow Jesus first and foremost.

This is actually a general principle that applies across the board when we’re submitting to human authorities. We should always willingly submit to all human authorities that are over us, unless submitting to them would mean disobedience to God. We see that in Acts 5:29 when the apostles tell the governing authorities, *“We must obey God rather than men!”* We obey authorities as part of our obedience to God, but obedience to God always comes first.

So wives, this is the second part of the reason why I say that your *attitude* and *desire* should be to follow your husband’s leadership. There may be a situation where you aren’t able to follow his leadership, because he’s leading you into sin. But even in that case, it should still be your desire to follow him. You should have an attitude and a spirit of submission that clearly communicates, “I don’t want to resist your leadership, but I have to right now. And my desire is that you will turn from sin and turn back to Jesus, so that I can joyfully follow you.”

This attitude is the difference between arrogantly flaunting your resistance as you chastise or mock or fight with your husband and quietly, humbly, firmly saying, “I love you, and I will follow you in every way I can, but my loyalty to Jesus comes first.”

And wives, let me offer a word of caution right here. Be careful not to play the game where every time you disagree with your husband you try to turn it into an issue of sin, just so you can say, “Well, I don’t have to follow you here.” If you’re looking for a way to get out of submission, I can already tell you that your attitude and desire and heart aren’t where they need to be. If your heart’s right, you’ll be looking for any possible way that you can follow your husband’s leadership, and you only resist when there’s no other option but to say, “My love for Jesus will not allow me to follow you here.”

So *“as to the Lord”* helps us understand the attitude and desire behind submission. First, you should have a love for your husband and a desire to submit to him that mirrors your love for Jesus and your desire to submit to Him. And second, if you ever have to choose between following your husband or following Jesus, you follow Jesus. But even in that moment, your attitude and desire is still to follow your husband in every way possible.

The second way Paul explains submission is that wives are to submit to their husbands in everything. And I looked up that word “everything” in Greek. Do you know what it means? It means “everything.” And I’m sure there’s a lot that we could say about this, but I want us to focus on one very relevant application for us. A lot of people approach marriage as if it’s this big game where they’re always trying to maneuver to get the upper hand. A lot of people play the game of, “I’ll give in here, so I can get my way there.” Or, “I’ll ask for more than I want, so that I can still negotiate down to what I really want.” And marriage becomes a bunch of manipulation and mind games where people are always fighting for power and fighting to get their way. And Paul tells us that biblical marriage simplifies all that. *“Wives, submit to your husbands in everything.”* It’s not about giving in here so that you can get your way there. It’s not about finding a sneaky way to get what you want instead of giving him what he wants. It’s about willingly and voluntarily putting yourself under your husband and supporting him in everything. It’s not 50-50. It’s 100% of the time, you putting him before yourself.

And then husbands, we’re going to get to you next week, but let me go ahead and point out that the same is true for you. 100% of the time you’re to be sacrificially loving your wife and giving yourself up for her. In other words, when she submits to your leadership, you then use your leadership for her sake and not your own sake. So neither of you are working from this 50-50 “sometimes you get your way; sometimes I get my way.” And you’re certainly not trying to win a battle and get your way all the time. Both of you are putting the other before yourself 100% of the time. Make sure you hear that truth, because it is very counter cultural. One of the most common pieces of marriage advice that you’ll hear is that you have to learn how to compromise. That’s not biblical. Biblical marriage is not about compromise. Biblical marriage is about a wife submitting to her husband in everything, and it’s about a husband sacrificially loving his wife and giving himself up for her in everything. Husbands, you do what’s best for your wife all the time. And wives, you submit to your husband in everything. It’s not compromise. It’s putting the other person first 100% of the time.

The third way Paul explains submission is in verse 33. He says, *“The wife must respect her husband.”* Once again, this tells us that submission is about more than just your actions. It’s about your attitude and your heart. Wives, it’s possible for you to follow your husband’s leadership without respecting him and without truly submitting to him. You can resent his leadership and be bitter the whole time you’re following him. You can drag your feet and make every decision difficult and make every step he takes exhausting for him. Or you can recognize that God Himself has placed your husband in the role of leading your home. And you should respect him and support him as he fulfills the call to lead your family. You should desire to do everything in your power to make his life easier and his burden lighter. And wives, that is a huge calling. God has called you to follow and respect your husband the way the church follows and respects Jesus. You should speak to your husband and submit to your husband with the same respect you would show if you were speaking and submitting to Jesus.

So wives, you are called to submit to your husband “as to the Lord,” “in everything,” respectfully, which means that your attitude and desire is to follow your husband’s leadership and support him. That’s what biblical submission looks like.

And before we close, I want to answer two common questions you may have about submitting to your husband. The first one is, “What if my husband won’t lead?” Some of you are thinking, “I’d love to follow my husband’s leadership if he would lead.” The first answer is: Check your heart and make sure that you really would love to follow his leadership. Sometimes what we mean is, “I’d love to follow his leadership… as long as he leads the way I think he should.” That’s not what submission looks like. Submission looks like putting yourself under him and trusting him and supporting his leadership. So maybe he is trying to lead and you just won’t follow. But that’s not always the case. There are way too many husbands who aren’t leading. And you better believe we’re going to talk about that next week. But for now, wives, if your husband isn’t leading, here’s what you do. You continue to follow the leadership of Jesus. And anywhere you can, you give spiritual direction and leadership to your children, because you’re still an authority over them and you’re responsible for leading them. But even as you lead apart from your husband, your heart and your spirit should still convey your desire to submit to him. Be careful that you don’t begin to despise your husband or discredit him as a man or develop an arrogant spirit of rebellion. Watch for any opportunity you have to support even the smallest effort he makes toward leadership and always cultivate a heart that will submit in those moments.

And then as much as anything, realize that you can’t force him to lead. The very essence of your role is that you are to submit to him, which means that you can’t demand that he lead. You can’t nag him to lead, and you can’t demean him for not leading, because that’s contrary to your role of respectful submission. 1 Peter 3 says you are to win your husband over with your quiet and gentle spirit. So your role is not to preach at your husband or to guilt him or nag him about not leading. Just like Paul doesn’t say, “Husbands, make your wives submit,” he also doesn’t say, “Wives, make your husbands lead.” Your role is to humbly and quietly support your husband and pray for him and respect him, whether he leads or not. So make sure you don’t disobey Jesus and fail to submit even if your husband disobeys Jesus and fails to lead.

The second really common question I want to answer is, “Does this mean I should never disagree with my husband?” No, submission doesn’t mean that you never disagree. Submission doesn’t mean that you can’t speak your mind. What submission does is it tells you how to disagree and how to speak your mind. You do so respectfully, and you’re willing to accept that if you don’t see eye-to-eye, you will still put yourself under your husband’s leadership and trust him and support him. Imagine that it’s Christy and me, and I’m about to make a really dumb decision that Christy really disagrees with. What Christy doesn’t do is she doesn’t say, “That’s really dumb, and I’m not going to do it.” Instead, Christy can disagree and still express her submission by saying something like this, “I know you’ve thought a lot about this, but I’m still not comfortable with the decision. Maybe I just don’t see it as clearly as you do yet, but I’d really appreciate it if we could talk about it some more. Can we do that?” And then in the discussion Christy explains her concerns to me and helps me see how dumb I’m being.

And husbands, if you’ve got any sense about you, you’ll listen to your wife in those moments. Remember, your marriage is patterned after Jesus and the Church. And yes, Jesus is the authority over the church, but Jesus is also united to the church. Jesus is the head of the church, and the church is Jesus’ body. And I want you to think about that metaphor of head and body for just a second. That’s not a one-way street. The head sends signals to the body, and the body also sends signals to the head. And the head has to listen to the body if it’s going to care for the body. And if the head doesn’t listen to the body and care for the body, the head’s not caring for itself, because the head’s connected to the body. That’s the exact picture of marriage that we see in Ephesians 5. Yes, the husband is the head and the leader in the marriage. But he has to be connected to his wife and in constant communication with his wife. And when his wife sends signals that there’s something wrong in the body, the head better listen. It’s still the head’s job to make the decisions, but he listens to the body as he makes the decisions. So wives, there will be times when you disagree. Just make sure you do so respectfully and submissively. And husbands, make sure you humbly listen to your wife and lovingly do what’s best for her.

So wives, I pray that you will submit to your husband as to the Lord, in everything, respectfully. I pray that your attitude and desire will be to follow your husband’s leadership and support him. And I pray you will experience the joy of your marriage being what God designed it to be as you show the world a beautiful picture of Jesus and His church.