

Ephesians 5:31–33 | “Marriage: More Than a Contract”
Preached on November 16, 2025 by Pastor Matt Brown

You can turn in your Bibles this morning to Ephesians 5, verses 31–33. *[pauseeee]*

We are in the portion of Ephesians, where Paul has been talking about our responsibilities as Christians in the home. *[pause]*

We saw the wife’s responsibility in marriage, and then the husband’s last week.

And now today, we are going to zoom out a little and look at marriage as a whole. *[pauseeee]*

It’s obvious that marriage in our culture is in dire straits, and a big reason for that is because marriage has been attacked. *[pause]*

First, our culture twists *who* should get married. *[pause]*

While the Bible shows us that marriage is meant for one man and one woman, our world has thrown a wrench into that design. *[pause]*

They claim that “love is love” so why bar two individuals, who simply love each other, from marrying?

And so, instead of being one man and one woman, they claim that two men can marry or two women. *[pause]*

By doing so, they are warping the very definition of marriage, for it touches on who can marry who. *[pauseeee]*

There has even been a rising trend of people who consider polygamy morally acceptable¹—talk about a move away from the 1 man, 1 woman design. *[pauseeee]*

Our culture also twists *why* people should get married. *[pause]*

Some people get married on emotion alone.

They feel the infatuation, the thrill of it all, and jump right into a marriage without thinking about how it’s really to be a commitment for life. *[pause]*

Others think that marriage is all about them and their happiness, and so they leave as soon as they don’t feel happy anymore. *[pause]*

To them, it’s like marriage is a contract.

If one of them isn’t upholding their side, then they see it as simply getting out of a contract that isn’t working for them. *[pauseeee]*

¹https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/313112/understanding-increase-moral-acceptability-polygamy.aspx?utm_source=chatgpt.com

There are others who say, “Why get married at all?”

They see no reason to do so that benefits them in some way, and so avoid tying the knot. *[pause]*

Some men even lead their girlfriend along, dating them for decades, and never make that commitment to marry. *[pauseeee]*

Our world also twists *how a marriage should function*. *[pause]*

They do so by attacking the marriage responsibilities, which we looked at in the past two weeks. *[pause]*

Instead of the husband being called the head of the marriage, he’s been knocked down. *[pause]*

Likewise, the wife being called to submit has been thrown out the window entirely.

And now, instead of having a clear structure in marriage, according to God’s design, there is no structure at all. *[pause]*

To the world, it’s just two individuals, who come together, and decide how they *want* it to function. *[pauseeee]*

Not only do they attack how a marriage should function, but also *how long* it should function. *[pause]*

There is no avoiding the reality that divorce is rampant in our culture.

They say that about 40–50% of marriages will end in divorce at some point, and the average length of a first marriage is only 8 years.² *[pausee]*

The question of how long a marriage should last is sadly one where the cultural thought about it today is: however long you want it to last.

It’s no longer “till death do us part,” but “till one of us decides we’re done.” *[pauseeee]*

Now I know that God’s Word does provide a few permitted reasons for divorce, but a large number of divorces today do not fit into those categories. *[pauseeee]*

Now the question is: Why does this happen?

Because when God is rejected, marriage becomes twisted. *[pause]*

If you reject God, then you will see marriage as yours to morph how you want, but if you see marriage as a God-given, God-designed institution, then you will seek to do it *His way*.

And as Christians, we *want* to do things God’s way, and that means also in how we view marriage. *[pauseeee]*

² https://www.fighterlaw.com/2025-divorce-statistics-in-america/?utm_source=chatgpt.com#common-reasons.

So what do we see that God says about marriage in our text? Listen as I READ it for you.

[READ 31–33]

Now, some of you may be single, widowed, or your past experiences with marriage have been messy. *[pause]*

While today's text focuses on the husband-wife relationship, these truths are still relevant.

[pause]

Whether single, divorced, or married, we can all grow from hearing about God's design and Christ's love. *[pauseeee]*

In the midst of talking about marital responsibilities, Paul gives some foundational truths about marriage, and the first one is...

I. Marriage creates a one-flesh union. (31)

In talking about marriage, Paul quotes from all the way back in Genesis to show that marriage creates a one-flesh union. *[pause]*

According to verse 31, when a man gets married, he “leaves” his father and mother to hold fast to his wife.

This means that when a person gets married, there is a fundamental change in their relationships and priorities. *[pause]*

They used to be under their father and mother, and their focus was there, but now there's something different when they get married...

Their relationship with their parents changes to some degree—they are in essence creating a new family unit. *[pauseeee]*

Now this doesn't mean that their father and mother no longer remain their father and mother, or that you are to neglect them—no way.

It means that their primary responsibility and focus ought to be their new spouse now. *[pauseeee]*

Practically, this means that in a marriage, the first person you should go to is not “mom” or “dad” when an issue arises, but should be your spouse. *[pause]*

You also shouldn't allow your parents to stick themselves into your marriage and cause issues, either.

Your priority and focus is now your wife, for you left father and mother to hold fast to her. *[pauseeee]*

That word ‘hold fast’ is a word that pictures being glued together.

It means that when you commit to marry someone, you are holding fast *to them* now. *[pause]*

So how could the person that you are ‘glued to’ *not* be your focus and priority? *[pause]*

This means that if you are not ready to make someone your priority and primary focus, then you are not yet ready to say, “I do.” *[pauseeee]*

As I mentioned last week, when a man and a woman come together to be married, they actually become one new entity. *[pause]*

They are no longer solely two individuals, but they are joined together as one in marriage. *[pause]*

This one-flesh reality means that it’s no longer about “me” but about “us,” and that means that you should be unified in every way. *[pauseeeee]*

In our culture, many people do not view marriage as a one-flesh union, but rather as two individuals simply living together.

And this is why you find married couples with two bank accounts because they view it as “my money,” and “your money.” *[pause]*

This is why you have couples who have conflicting schedules and neither one wants to budge for the other, for they view it as “my time,” and “your time.” *[pause]*

That’s not the way it ought to be!

You are now one with your spouse in marriage, so you need to act like it. *[pauseeeee]*

If you are married: in what ways does your marriage reflect this one-flesh union? *[pause]*

Are you unified with your spouse, or are you both trying to pull in opposite directions? *[pause]*

This ‘opposite pull’ creates such tension and fighting in marriage—for it’s like trying to pull apart something that’s glued together that’s *meant* to be glued together! *[pauseeee]*

Come together and make decisions in unity. *[pause]*

Set your schedules to work together and not work apart. *[pause]*

Be in agreement about your priorities and values.

Be open, honest, and close with your husband or wife. *[pauseeeee]*

Now I know that our marriages aren’t perfect. *[pause]*

You are probably aware of your failings, and there are times where we are disunified and hurt one another. *[pause]*

Marriage can be messy, rather than exemplary.

But though it's messy at times, it can be a beautiful picture of forgiveness, reconciliation, and growth, as God gives us grace day-by-day to repent, forgive, and come together once again.

[pauseee]

How much marital strife would lessen if we remembered that we were one with our spouse?

[pauseee]

The one-flesh union is not all that we see here about marriage, for Paul goes on to tell us something even more profound next...

II. Marriage reflects the Christ-church union. (32)

I want you to imagine that your loved one said to you, "I want to take you somewhere absolutely amazing." *[pausee]*

Now in order to surprise you, let's say that they put a blindfold on you and led you to this place.

[pause]

All of sudden, they said, "OK, take off the blindfold and look around." *[pause]*

You take the blindfold off, open your eyes, and you see a lake in front of you, but it's not so much the lake that's the best part.

For you look at the water, and reflected in the water is a beautiful mountain, lush forest, and a majestic waterfall. *[pausee]*

Now, would you be content with looking at that reflection, or would you want to turn around and see what was being reflected in the water? *[pause]*

Of course, you'd want to turn around and see the breathtaking scenery with your own eyes.

Well in this passage, it's like Paul turns us around from the reflection to the real thing. *[pause]*

The reflection is amazing, but what is being reflected is *even better*. *[pauseeeee]*

What we find is that human marriage is a reflection of something greater—Christ and the church. *[pauseee]*

After quoting from Genesis, Paul says, "This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church." *[pause]*

Paul has been talking about marriage and how it ought to function, and throughout the instructions, he has been pointing to Christ and the church...

So husbands are to love like Christ loves the church, and wives are to submit like the church submits to Christ. *[pause]*

But the question becomes, “Why does he keep making this connection?”

Well here we find our answer—it’s because human marriage was made to reflect Christ and the church. *[pauseeee]*

This is truly a mystery, meaning, it was something previously unknown before Christ, but is now made known to His people. *[pause]*

Before Christ’s work, no one would think, “Oh yeah, marriage reflects Christ and the church,” unless God revealed it to us. *[pauseeee]*

This mystery is also a *profound* mystery. *[pause]*

The word “profound” here is the Greek word “megas,” meaning: great, important, and deep. *[pause]*

This is no small thing or unimportant thing, but it’s a great and profound truth. *[pauseeee]*

For many people, they see marriage as simply a social construct, man-made institution, or legalized agreement.

But what Paul does is he lifts marriage up out of those incorrect notions and shows us that marriage is a grand sign that points to the Christ-church union. *[pauseeee]*

Oh, how little we think of marriage, when it is a symbol of something great! *[pause]*

We should never neglect marriage, nor devalue it in any way, shape, or form because it’s meant to show the world something about Christ and the church.

And this is one of the main reasons why we should uphold Biblical marriage for what it is. *[pauseeee]*

If you mess around with marriage, you do more damage than you think. *[pause]*

Homosexual marriage destroys the image. *[pause]*

Adultery ruins the image, and so does divorce.

And likewise, if you twist up the marriage responsibilities, they are not accurately showing the relationship of Christ and the church. *[pauseeee]*

You see, a husband’s sacrificial love for his wife is not some unnecessary responsibility, but a divinely-ordained responsibility that shows the love of Christ. *[pause]*

A wife’s submission is not some man-made tool of oppression, it’s a divinely-ordained tool of picturing the church’s submission to Jesus. *[pause]*

So fulfilling your marriage responsibility is not just a “buck up and do just because you have to” thing, but a good and glorious picture of Christ and the church! *[pause]*

How dare we neglect our responsibilities or change them around!

No wonder Satan loves to attack marriage, for he wants to mess up the reflection of Christ and the church that is displayed through it. *[pauseeee]*

This means that our marriages mirror a big, glorious reality—what an honor!

And that means that all across the globe in marriages the gospel is being pictured day-in and day-out. *[pauseeee]*

Do you understand that there’s more at stake in how you relate to your spouse than simply your own happiness?

This marriage is not just about us, but about God’s glory. *[pauseeee]*

Husbands, do you ever consider, “How I am treating my wife right now is showing something about Jesus”? *[pause]*

Wives, do you ever consider, “How I am responding to my husband is showing something about the church”? *[pauseeee]*

Let’s hold firm to Biblical marriage, for it profoundly symbolizes the Christ-church union.

Let’s not let that image be distorted in our culture, as best we can.

Let’s not let that image be distorted through our own marriages, but let’s reflect the relationship of Christ and the church by following what God has said about our marital responsibilities. *[pauseeee]*

Every time an unbeliever longs for intimacy, faithfulness, and sacrificial love in a marriage, they are showing that we all inherently long for that...

And it’s pointing to the church’s relationship to Christ. *[pause]*

But sadly, many do not turn to Christ and find it.

It’s like they are content with the reflection on the lake, and do not turn around to experience the real deal—the absolutely stunning thing that was being reflected. *[pauseeee]*

This means that only believers can truly grasp the full, spiritual significance of marriage. *[pause]*

They are able to experience marriage as it was meant to be because they understand and seek to live out the love and unity that marriage was designed to reflect...

The love of Christ for His Church. *[pauseeee]*

So how can a Christian husband and wife experience this significance more and more?

They can experience it more, as they themselves live out their calling. *[pause]*

As a husband lovingly sacrifices for his wife, he sees and feels in a small way, the love of Christ for the church.

He thinks, “Wow! Christ is so loving! Think of how much he loves the church, which I’m a part of!” *[pauseeee]*

As a wife reverentially submits to her husband, she sees and feels in a small way, what it’s like for the church to be reverentially submitted to Christ.

She thinks, “Yes! This is like the way the church submits to Jesus!” *[pauseeee]*

Likewise, spouses experience something as they see each other live out *their* calling. *[pause]*

As a wife sees her husband’s sacrificial love for her, she experiences a small glimpse of Christ’s love.

And as a husband sees his wife respond in respect, he experiences a small glimpse of how the church responds to Christ. *[pauseeee]*

What’s amazing is that a husband and wife get to participate in what the Christ-church relationship is like. *[pause]*

They get to live out (in a smaller way) the covenantal love of Christ and the church.

And here’s the thing, it’s not only the husband and wife who get to experience this, for anyone witnessing their relationship can be impacted, too. *[pause]*

A child can see his father’s sacrificial love for his mother, and see a glimmer of Christ’s love, or see his mother’s respect for his father and see a gleam of the church’s respect for Christ. *[pause]*

Your friends, neighbors, and people you meet can see this, too!

What a beautiful symbol that marriage is, which God has created to be a sign pointing towards something greater. *[pauseeee]*

So think of the greatest example of a godly marriage that you know. *[pause]*

It’s probably a beautiful representation of covenantal love and unity, through the ups and downs of life. *[pause]*

The husband loves sacrificially, the wife respects her husband greatly.

And they are unified and stay together, all the way “till death did them part.” *[pause]*

We marvel at such examples that we see...

And to think that that is only a small representation of the deep love and unity of Christ and the church is *astounding*. [pauseeee]

Christ loved us so much that He gave himself to die on the Cross for our sins and in our place, so that we could live and be united to Him.

And the church responds in great respect for its Savior, seeking to live in harmony with Him. [pauseee]

Though our culture has attacked marriage left-and-right—from attacking its foundation to its function—we uphold marriage to be what it was intended to be. [pause]

And though we ourselves have sometimes not lived in line with God’s ways in regards to marriage, we seek to align our marriages with God’s wonderful design, as it was intended to be. [pauseeee]

This is no trivial pursuit, but it’s of eternal significance, for marriage reflects a deep, spiritual reality. [pauseeee]

Marriage creates a one-flesh union, and reflects the Christ-church union, so that means that...

Your marriage ought to reflect that union! (33)

That’s how Paul wraps up this section in verse 33, as he says, “However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.” [pauseeee]

Paul has gone back and forth between the image of the husband and wife, and Christ and the church, and now he summarizes what each is called to do in light of that connection...

The husband is to love, and the wife is to respect. [pause]

This is no made up thing, or instruction that can be cast aside, due to being considered “outdated.”

No, these responsibilities reflect the one-flesh union *and* the Christ-church union. [pause]

So will *your* marriage reflect those things? [pauseeeee]

Husbands, will you sacrificially love your wife, knowing that she’s one with you, and that your love reflects Christ? [pause]

Wives, will you reverently respect your husband like the church does to Christ, knowing that you reflect the church to the watching world? [pauseeee]

Many of us feel like we’ve fallen short.

Our marriages haven’t been in line with what God has laid forth. [pause]

As husbands, we haven't been very loving at times. *[pause]*

As wives, maybe you haven't always been very respectful.

Or maybe as you think about your marriage, it hasn't reflected that "one-ness" that God has made you to be. *[pauseee]*

Others of you cringe when you think of the mess of a prior marriage. *[pauseeee]*

Know that God's grace can reach us all. *[pause]*

He gives us even now an opportunity to repent, He extends forgiveness, and He empowers us through His Spirit to pursue what He wants. *[pause]*

Lean into Him and rely upon Him, do not move away in shame or guilt, but move in and receive mercy and find grace to help in your need.³ *[pauseeee]*

Know that no matter if you are married or not...

No matter if your past is filled with broken marriages or not...

We can all look with *wonder* at the mind of God, seeing how He has ingrained into something as common as marriage, a sign that points to Christ. *[pauseee]*

That means that everyday, if we have eyes open to His sign, we could let our marriage or other marriages point us beyond, to our Savior and His love for us. *[pause]*

We could regularly stand in love-filled awe at the thing reflected that we see: the love of Christ for His church. *[pauseeee]*

Know that we can each be a part of *that* relationship, if we trust in Jesus Christ to save us from our sins. *[pause]*

We can experience His love, which led Him to die for us, and through which He cares for us even now.

And we can respond to Him in reverential love, submission, and respect as His church.

³ A reference to Hebrews 4:16.