

8/7/2011 TOP TEN TEACHINGS OF PAUL: 8 - "Teachings on Marriage"

Key Scripture: Ephesians 5:15-33

by Rev. Dr. Bruce A. Jones

I knew when I selected this topic, that this would be one of the most difficult passages to preach on and explain. No passage in the New Testament causes us to cringe when we hear it as much as this passage and ones similar to it, like Colossians 3. For the most part, we modern Christians have tried to ignore this instruction, or we reinterpret it in a way that would make a 21st century wife or husband understand this role differently than it appears on face value. I remember at time, when I was reading Ephesians for the third or fourth time, that I simply skipped over this section as if it no longer applied. And I have attended weddings where this was read, and I get embarrassed. But we cannot exactly just cut it out of the Bible as irrelevant, in the manner that Thomas Jefferson, cut out all the sections of the gospels that he did not like.

So, if we are serious about Bible study, and even more importantly, if we are serious about loving our spouse the way God wants us to, then we have to grapple with and understand this passage with all of its faults and short-comings.

The first thing we must do is understand its context. Where does it fit in the larger scheme of this book, or in the larger context of Paul's writing? Secondly, how did this passage 'play in Peiraieús'; in other words, how did first century readers immersed in Greek and Roman culture read and understand this passage? Thirdly, what were family dynamics and structures like in those days?

Remember that Christianity was a radical moral system at its beginnings. The love and caring of Christ impacted how Christians acted and treated each other in a radical way. Remember that men did not speak to women publicly, not even their wives – they waited till they got home behind closed doors before a man addressed or corrected his wife. Yet, Jesus broke two taboos in one fell swoop, when he spoke openly to the Samaritan Woman at the well. A) He was a Jew and she was a Samaritan, and B) he was a man, not married to her, speaking to a woman in a public place. So you can see that the codes of conduct that evolved from this new theology of Christianity was quite a departure from the societal norms of that day.

Once we understand how very radical these instructions are, we might not be quite so harsh on Paul for being such a "chauvinist pig," to quote some of the early feminist writers. But this is now the 21st Century, and we want to know both how do we honor God's Word, the Bible; and honor our spouses. Well let's begin to look at the contexts.

I chose to read the seven verses before the address to husbands and wives this morning, so you can see that this whole section is on how we as Christians should behave differently from our peers. He then lists some specific behaviors in pairs so we should avoid one and follow its antithesis: **Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity. Do not be foolish, but understand the Lord's will. Do not get drunk** (i.e. filled with spirits), **but be filled with The Spirit** (meaning the Spirit of God). Then he encourages us to practice our faith in three distinct ways: **speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, and always give thanks to God the Father for everything.** Then he concludes this section by instructing us on how we should interact with others: **submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.**

Okay, so you can see that Paul uses the word “submit” here as a positive that we should all do toward each other all the time. Then, when he turns to the subject of wives and husbands, he is not hesitant to show the parallels between social interaction and intimate interaction.

Another thing that the casual reader of the Bible might not know is that it was not unusual for philosophers and teachers to write a similar set of instructions for household members. There were lots of published rules for masters and slaves, parents and children, husbands and wives, wives and servants, children and servants, officers and soldiers, civilians and soldiers, elders in the community and younger adults, etc. That society was highly stratified. So for Paul to elevate the quality of the relationship between a wife and a husband, was a significant step toward humanizing the relationship.

When this was first read in the congregation of Ephesus, there was probably a palpable sense of relief or even joy that Paul was calling for a greater equalizing of the roles between husbands and wives. He still gave men the title or role of head of household, but he instructed husbands to view their wives not as property or slave, but as an extension of himself. Just as a man takes care to protect his body and do what’s good for it, so should he take care to protect his wife, who is a part of his own flesh. Here Paul quotes the Genesis 2 verse about the man and the woman being united and becoming one flesh.

Paul goes a step beyond instructing husbands to take care of their wives. He instructs them to sacrifice for their wives, just as Christ sacrificed for “his bride,” the church. If we men are to treat our wives as extensions of our flesh and body, and we are to love our wives so much that we sacrifice for them, then there is no room for abuse, or denigration, or mistreatment of our wives in any way.

Remember it was also Paul who said, **You are all sons and daughters of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. Therefore, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.**

So before we go off and criticize Paul for his prejudiced view or his chauvinistic instructions, we should understand the whole of what he has said.

Here’s the bottom line for me. God created men and women to be equals, to be partners, and to be helpmates. You’ve heard that old quote: “God did not create woman out of man’s skull to rule over him, or out of his heel, to be ruled by him, but God fashioned her from man’s rib, so that she might stand beside him.” Every couple is different, and the dynamics between a husband and a wife are always different. The roles that each partner undertakes depends largely on skills, interests, personality, and physical ability. There is no biblically mandated role for marriage partners to assume. Both should take equal responsibility for the success and nurturing of the marriage. But the words of Paul are valuable and instructive on this level: each partner should bow or submit to the other in the areas of their strength or ability. When it comes to the home, the woman is in charge. Her tastes, her preferences, her design style, her colors and fabrics; her choices should be paramount, except for perhaps, “the Man Cave.” When it comes to maintenance, repairs, painting, fixing, mowing, cleaning the gutters, disposing of bugs, rodents, and other uninvited creatures; guys should probably take the lead, but there’s always exceptions, and I know as soon as I start generalizing, there will be a couple that doesn’t operate that way. That’s fine. But love each other as extensions of yourselves. You can’t cheat on yourself. You can’t lie to yourself. You can’t sneak around behind yourself. View your relationship as a partnership, and marriage puts you on the same team, as one entity. Therefore don’t do anything that will disrespect or

harm the one God has given you to love. Both the man and the woman need to take the lead in the spiritual life of the family. The man is not the head of the woman, if the woman is the more spiritual. The woman is not the head of the man, if the man is responsible, caring and wise. It's not about fixed roles, it's about partnership, it's about sharing the tasks that need to be done, by two people who love each other, and are contributing to the health and well-being of the household.

Love each other. Treasure each other. Be grateful for what the other brings to the marriage. Be glad you have someone to share your life with, and if your partner has died, be grateful for the years of blessing, and of joy.

Gary Smalley, the well-known marriage advisor says that partners should 'honor' each other, and I think that's what Paul means by respect. Have reverence for one another, he wrote. Your partner is a gift from God. Treasure her. Treasure him. Honor her. Honor him. But do it as equals, and not as one over the other.

And if you are not married, and finding a partner is on your agenda, don't look for someone to complete you. You are a whole person already. Look for someone who will honor you and respect you, and value you for who you are; not who they can make you into. If you don't feel respected, if you don't feel treasured by the person you are dating, then find someone else. Life is too short to go through it with someone who does not find you amazing and wonderful. Amen.