

## BECOMING A PEOPLE OF GRACE

### STUDY TWENTY

## The Most Challenging of All Relationships (Part One)

*Ephesians 5:21–24*

*In God’s order, He has arranged certain roles to be in authority over other roles without, for a moment, taking away the dignity or worth of the individual. Those roles must be sustained or there is anarchy, confusion, unhappiness, and a breakdown of the spiritual order.*

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

**O**UR most challenging relationships are those closest to home. Thankfully, Paul enters our households bearing gifts of divine wisdom, first for husbands and wives, then for parents and children, and finally for employees and bosses (Ephesians 5:21–6:9).

In all three settings—marriage, family, and work—Paul anchors his instructions to the foundation he’s already laid: “be filled with the Holy Spirit” and “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (5:18, 21). The first command leads to the second. Spirit-filled believers naturally infuse their relationships with a sweet spirit of mutual submission.

In this study and the next, we’ll see how husbands and wives can apply Paul’s submission principle in their marriage. Admittedly, Paul’s teaching on submission in marriage pushes buttons, particularly for women who have been mistreated by men who twisted Paul’s meaning. In God’s plan, submission does not mean subservience. As bearers of God’s image, husbands and wives have value and dignity, and men must treat their wives as equals before God. Ranking of roles does not imply ranking of worth.

Paul’s teaching provides no grounds for abuse—instead, he offers us a model of loving, mutual submission that works for the other’s highest good. As he has written, “Be kind to each other” (4:32) and “Live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ” (5:2). Especially in marriage.



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Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

## The Most Challenging of All Relationships (Part One)

*Ephesians 5:21–24*



### PREPARE YOUR HEART

Perhaps you have suffered at the hands of someone in authority. When others' sins wound us, we must run to the Savior, who makes a safe place for victims. Take a moment for quiet communion with the Savior. Ask the Lord to reveal His care for you, and pray that He will redeem your past, heal your wounds, then help you see His perfect plan. If you're married, open your heart to God's truth about your responsibilities and to feel God's assurance that He is with you as you follow Him.



### TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

We're dividing Paul's teaching on marriage into part one, instructions to wives, and part two, instructions to husbands. Although we'll cover just part one in this study, read the entirety of *Ephesians 5:21–33* to gain the overall flow of Paul's thoughts. What strikes you about the spiritual metaphor of husbands and wives and Christ and the church? How does Paul sum up his instructions on mutual submission in marriage in *5:33*?

Keep in mind Paul's commands to *love* and *respect* as we consider husbands' and wives' core duties. With the big picture in view, let's focus on Paul's specific teaching for wives.



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*Ephesians 5:21–24*

 **Observation: A Word to Wives**

In *Searching the Scriptures*, when we observe a passage, we examine closely each phrase.<sup>1</sup> Are there any repeated words? Did Paul use any connecting words that offer clues into what he was emphasizing? Use the chart below to record your observations and discoveries. Look for commands, contrasts and comparisons, cause and effect statements, emphatic statements, images, or figures of speech. Highlight references to Christ in every verse, for He is central to Paul’s instructions.

Verses	Observations
<p><i>And further, submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. (Ephesians 5:21)</i></p>	
<p><i>For wives, this means submit to your husbands as to the Lord. (5:22)</i></p>	
<p><i>For a husband is the head of his wife as Christ is the head of the church. He is the Savior of his body, the church. (5:23)</i></p>	
<p><i>As the church submits to Christ, so you wives should submit to your husbands in everything. (5:24)</i></p>	



## The Most Challenging of All Relationships (Part One)

*Ephesians 5:21–24*

Imagine hearing the apostle Paul read these verses in a marriage enrichment class, in which it's okay to raise your hand and ask questions. What questions would you ask Paul?



### Interpretation: Questions and Answers about Submission

In the interpretation phase, we'll consider a few common questions people ask about these verses. Gather your Bible study resources, such as a commentary on Ephesians or a Bible dictionary.<sup>2</sup> Free online resources are available at [biblestudytools.com](http://biblestudytools.com). William Barclay's *commentary on Ephesians* is available online as well. This free study aid contains interesting background information about first-century views on marriage that give us insight into Paul's teaching.

#### What Does *Submit* Mean?

The Greek word for *submit* is *hupotassō*, which means “to arrange under, to subordinate.”<sup>3</sup> It implies respect for a person in leadership and a willingness to follow. Paul's statement, “wives . . . submit to your husbands” (Ephesians 5:22) has nothing to do with inferiority. Men and women are equals in Christ, but they do have different and complementary responsibilities. The Lord has designed husbands to provide godly leadership in the home and wives to support and respect their husbands as leaders (5:33).

Paul added to his instructions “as to the Lord” (5:22), which does *not* mean that a wife must submit to her husband as if he were her lord. Certainly not! We have only one Lord, Jesus Christ. What did Paul intend this phrase to mean? Consult your Bible study resources or, for an online resource, [Constable's Notes](http://Constable's Notes) at [netbible.org](http://netbible.org).



## The Most Challenging of All Relationships (Part One)

*Ephesians 5:21–24*

### How Is the Husband “Head” of His Wife?

In Paul’s day, husbands treated their wives according to Greek, Roman, or Jewish cultural norms. What deplorable practices once considered acceptable does William Barclay describe in his *commentary on Ephesians*?

Paul shattered the culture’s mold in order to recast Christian men into a new form—to transform their behavior into the loving way of Christ. How is a husband “the head of his wife,” according to what Paul intended his first-century readers to understand (Ephesians 5:23)?

*To be appointed as head in no way gives husbands the prerogative of taking unfair advantage of those under their leadership. Headship is not dictatorship. Leading like Christ starts from the vantage point of love. A wife is to love her husband enough to submit to him. But a husband must love her enough to die for her. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll*



## **The Most Challenging of All Relationships (Part One)**

*Ephesians 5:21–24*



### **Correlation: The Limits of Submission**

Christian husbands strive to be like Christ in their headship. On the other hand, Christian wives look to the bride of Christ, the church, as their role model:

*As the church submits to Christ, so you wives should submit to your husbands in everything.*  
(Ephesians 5:24)

Paul's comment, "in everything," does not mean wives must follow their husbands blindly. The broader Scriptural teaching on authority helps us set appropriate limits. As John Stott wisely writes:

We have to be very careful not to overstate this biblical teaching on authority. It does not mean that the authority of husbands . . . is unlimited, or that wives . . . are required to give unconditional obedience. No, the submission required is to God's authority delegated to human beings. If, therefore, they misuse their God-given authority (e.g. by commanding what God forbids or forbidding what God commands), then our duty is no longer conscientiously to submit, but conscientiously to refuse to do so. For to submit in such circumstances would be to disobey God.<sup>4</sup>

How did Peter draw the line when obeying a human authority means disobeying God (*Acts 5:26–32*)?

*If your husband is pushing you to the point of disobedience to God, your answer is no. Take him to the Scriptures and show him what is right. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll*



### **Application: Final Points**

As Christians yielded to the Spirit's control and determined to submit to one another in reverence to Christ, let's follow these guidelines as we apply Paul's teaching to husbands and wives.



## **The Most Challenging of All Relationships (Part One)**

*Ephesians 5:21–24*

*First, we can maintain equality in worth, while maintaining our identity of roles. One person is not worth more than another person in God’s eyes. As equals, we can fulfill our roles within a loving and respectful relationship.*

If you are married, have you been a loving and respectful husband or wife? If not, what can you do differently? What words do you need to say to the other person? And if you need help in your marriage, where can you turn for godly counsel?

*Second, authority is not a synonym for tyranny. If you are living under someone’s control, begin by sharing your story with a pastor or counselor who can guide you in God’s path of healing and healthy relationships.<sup>5</sup> Paul’s principles for marriage are a lifeline for couples in conflict. They can break the power-and-control cycle and free husbands and wives to honor and serve one another as they learn a new way of relating as followers of Christ.*

What clarity do you find in Paul’s teaching regarding your role in marriage? Can you describe God’s design for marriage as you understand it so far? Use this summary as a launching point for the next study, in which we will focus on the responsibilities of husbands.

A wife doesn’t play her part alone in Christ’s order. As we’ll see in the next study, she takes her cues from how her husband leads as they walk together in the footsteps of Christ.



**The Most Challenging of All Relationships (Part One)**

*Ephesians 5:21–24*



**A FINAL PRAYER**

*Father, I submit myself to You and to Your leadership. I need the filling of Your Spirit to humbly obey and love my spouse according to Your design for marriage. Hold my spouse and me together and help us through whatever conflicts we may face. In Your grace and through Your power, we can experience a relationship of love and respect as we, side-by-side, follow You. Amen.*

**ENDNOTES**

1. To learn more about Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study, go to the Web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#)."
2. Recommended commentaries include Charles R. Swindoll, *Insights on Galatians, Ephesians*, Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary, vol. 8 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2015); R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990); John R. W. Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979); Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002); James Montgomery Boice, *Ephesians: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).
3. Kenneth S. Wuest, *Ephesians and Colossians in the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 129.
4. John R. W. Stott, *God's New Society*, 218–19.
5. A wife does not disobey her husband when she confronts him and resists his sin. She is opposing evil and opening a way for him to face the truth about himself and get the help he needs. If you are being abused and feel unsafe or afraid, reach out for help. Talk with your doctor, pastor, counselor, or a professional who helps victims find safety.

