

## **Sermon 36: Ephesians 5:28-32: The Realities and Responsibilities of Union**

### **OUTLINE**

The realities  
The responsibilities

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Bible often argues from what you are to what you should do. Because you are a new creature in Christ, act in a new way. Because you are in a one Spirit union with believers of other races, put away racism. Because your life is joined to the resurrected Christ consider your life in His and live appropriately. Because you are in a one flesh union with your spouse love them as yourself. What you are, or what realities are true about you imply how you ought to live. This is a basic truth which the bible assumes. But this has been rejected even this basic way of thinking has been challenged. For example, in the existentialist movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century we see thinkers like Jean Paul Sartre who rejected this. We believe that our essence determines our identity, and our identity determines our responsibility. This means that if you want to know what you should do you first have to ask what am I? If I am a human being made in God's image and not an animal this will determine how I should act. If I am a biological male, this will determine how I should act. Putting it in philosophical terms essence determines existence, ontology defines and drives ethics. But the Existentialists hated to be defined by anything but themselves so they rejected the traditional way of existence preceding essence, they reversed it and said that existence defines essence. So I will look inside myself see what I feel, what I desire, see what I am, and define myself on the basis of that not some predefined category like male or female, etc. We on the other hand recognise that we are creatures created by God, that He defines us. We have spoken many times about the new reality of union with Christ and what that means for our salvation and ethics. Paul is now going to draw on the realities of union relationships to speak about the responsibilities of union.

We are carrying on with our series on marriage in Ephesians 5:28-32. We are in that part that is dealing with the responsibilities of the husband, v25-33. The husbands are called to love their wives as Christ loves the church. If we were to summarize this in three points we could point to Christ's servant headship; His sacrificial love; and our sustaining union with Him as the ultimate model for the husband. We have described the servant leadership and the sacrificial love that we are to imitate. Today we turn our attention to the sustaining union that the believer has with Christ as the model for husbands to imitate in their one flesh unions with their wives. We will see how the underlying realities of union point us to the responsibilities of union. And those will be our two headings for this section, the realities of union in 28-30; and the responsibilities of union, and here we will look at the traditional categories of leaving and cleaving in v31-33.

### **The realities**

V28, 'In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.' Many have felt that these verses are anti-climactic. Paul describes the high and sacrificial love of Christ laying down His life for His bride, and then Paul tones it down by seemingly saying that we should merely love our wives as ourselves. The truth is that Paul has not moved away from Christ's highest self-giving love but in fact draws out further aspects of it for us to appreciate and imitate.

The notion of the husband and wife becoming one flesh is based on another profound unity, the unity of Christ with His bride, Paul tells us that the unity in marriage is based on the unity between Christ and His bride, v31-32, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." 32 This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.' Because of an ontological unity between Christ and His church there is a similar type of unity between man and wife. This unions transcends a mere legal union. We are one body with Christ by His Spirit, this transcends a mere legal relationship. Likewise there is a unity called one flesh that exists between husband and wife. What is this one flesh union?

Firstly, we must begin with Christ's interpretation of the verses Paul quotes in Genesis, in Matt. 19:6, 'So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.'" Jesus here tells us that God did a joining when the two become one flesh. Mal. 2:15 has some translation difficulties but seems to be saying the same thing, 'Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth.' The one flesh union of a husband and wife is not merely a sexual union, but the God joined union when two people join in a marriage, for this reason an adulterous affair does not make a new one flesh marriage. Adultery seriously undermines the union because sexual intimacy is a part of it but not the whole of it.

Secondly, one flesh is describing the reunion of man's rib back with the man so that Adam and Eve are not two individuals but one union. There is a fundamental change in their standing that they must now be treated as one and not two. This union means they are one home, one legal entity, one sexual unity, one financial entity; that they should be united in spiritual pursuits, of one mind and purpose.

Because of this reality of a one flesh union where the husband are no longer two but one, Paul compares the marriage union with our own union with our bodies, v28, 'In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.' Because of the union between husband and wife, to wound your spouse is to wound yourself. We cannot sin against our spouses without bringing about consequences for ourselves. We are no longer independent, we are one, just as we are one with our own bodies. And when our bodies give us pain, what do we do with them, do we amputate, do we punish that part of the body, no we nurture it, tend to it, we treat that part with deference, coddling it until it heals with balms and plasters. Self-harming is an unhealthy thing, we should not abuse our bodies or our wives. We can't live as if we have no body and spouse is to act like a single person. This behaviour that we display towards other things that we are united to like our bodies implies responsibilities in marriage, v29-30, 'For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, 30 because we are members of his body.'

Christ does not hate His body the church but loved her with an everlasting love, and because of His love Christ both nourishes and cherishes us. In other words He is not only concerned with our physical needs, but also concerns Himself with having an intimate relationship with us. In the same way, husbands are to love their wives, they are to both nourish and cherish them. Traditionally husbands have been called the breadwinner, it is because of this word in v29, 'nourishes.' It means to feed in order to bring to maturity. It speaks to all the responsibilities for physical preservation and safety. The LXX uses this word in Gen. 45:7, 11 to describe how Joseph provides for his family when they move to Egypt. The word 'cherish' means literally 'to keep warm with body heat,' and can also be

translated as 'brood.' The only other use of it in the NT is found in 1 Thess. 2:7, 'But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children.' It speaks of more than mere provision but concern and care. The husband is not merely to be concerned with 'bed and board' but with cherishing his wife. As we like to indulge not only our needs in the food we eat but cater to our favourite flavours, so we should love our wives and cater not only for needs but her pleasures and wants. As we protect our bodies from the cold or from injury we are to protect our wives. As we take measures with our health and fitness we are to guard our wives from infection and sickness. What appears to be the familiar commandment of loving your neighbour as yourself, when seen in light of the way in which Christ loves His body is transformed into something deeper and sacrificial.

This underlying unity implies much responsibility in marriage, we want to spend some time now looking at what has traditionally been called, leaving and cleaving.

## **Responsibilities**

Paul sums up all that he has said about the responsibilities in marriage from a single verse which has all these implications in it from Genesis 2:24 in v31, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." He teaches us to read this verse Christocentrically, that the pattern for marriage is based on Christ's intended redemption and not vice versa. Think about how this verse from Gen. 2 even before the promise of Gen. 3:15 foreshadows the gospel. This verse talks about a Son leaving His Father's house to take to Himself a wife. He teaches us to root our behaviour in the truths of our salvation, starting with doctrine and then leading to practice.

There are two verbs we need to pay attention to in this verse, 'leave' and 'hold fast'. Hence the couplet, 'leave and cleave'. We see the mention of the man leaving his parent's home to make a new one, not the woman because the man is the new head of a new home. His action of leaving and starting a new home indicate a real though not total break with his former family. Both husband and wife are to recognise that in leaving their parents and becoming a new family unit, they have to leave their parents and their authority behind.

It is often in dealing with this verse that we hear about the in-laws becoming outlaws. You have all heard the horror stories of the son whose mother has not cut the apron strings and who comes into the house of the new bride and tells her how to order her kitchen and how to cook food for her new husband. Or you have heard about the young wife who at the first sign of trouble runs back to daddy to fix things in her marriage or around the house and does not look to her husband. These are just a few examples of the many ways in which the new primary relationship between a husband and wife can be undermined.

The husband and wife are to recognise the new oneness that exists and protect it. You will have to protect one another from each other's families telling them to back off if they become interfering or invasive. Your best friends before you were married can no longer have the same amount of your time, everything has to change because you are a new unit. Husbands and wives who may have had a full single life filled with many social and other activities will have to stop living like a single person and do everything as a unit. A man whose whole weekend was taken up with hunting or tramping cannot get married and have nothing change. A woman who would blow her pay check on clothes cannot spend the way she used to. Getting married involves taking on adult responsibilities and putting away and those fun things that you used to occupy yourself with when you had no responsibilities. Paul is telling us that we are now living with another who is a part of us, and we need to act appropriately. If your spouse is spending long times alone at home while you are out enjoying yourself, there is something wrong, you are one and must act like it.

Our new oneness must deeply impact and shape our lives, think on Christ and how His being with one has changed our lives. Christ has united us to Himself by His Spirit and now we participate in His resurrection life so that we have eternal life and know power to resist sin. Being one with Him brings us into possession of His righteousness so that we are justified by His righteousness. Being His, like when a wife takes her husband's name we have Christ's name and have answers to prayer from the Father. Just as husbands and wives share in one another's possessions all that is Christ's has become ours, 1 Cor. 3:21-23, 'So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, 22 whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future---all are yours, 23 and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.' We share in His authority and will even judge angels sitting with Him on His throne; we share in His rewards and will enjoy all the gifts that the Father bestows on Him for eternity; we share in His purposes and are sent as He was sent sharing in His responsibilities; we share in His family and are adopted by His Father into a family of saved sinners; we share in His sufferings as the world hates us because we are Christ's; and we will share in His eternal Kingdom in the new creation. Christ does so much for us because we are one with Him, we are saved, sanctified, glorified, rewarded, adopted, Spirit filled, and all the other benefits you can think of because we are united with Him. Our marriages are to reflect this same radical oneness.

## **Cleaving**

The husband does not only leave his parents, but he also holds fast to his wife. He does not start a new family only to live with a stranger and be a stranger, no he holds fast to his wife and they become one flesh. One flesh we have already stressed is not only sexual union, but two people becoming united in every major way, mentally, spiritually, physically, financially, geographically, legally, etc. Let me touch on four important things that are needed to enhance and cultivate our oneness in marriage. The first is friendship. Adam was alone in the garden, God did not make him a drinking or hunting buddy but Eve. She was taken from him and reunited to Him and is a part of him. Loneliness is alleviated not merely by having someone cook your food and warm your bed but in a meeting of two whole people. As one writer puts it, 'Eros will have naked bodies; friendship naked personalities.' Husbands and wives will need friends of their own gender, no doubt, but they are made to be one another best friends. Best friends know one another's deepest secret and greatest fears, they are the most vulnerable with one another because of the strength and trust in their friendship.

All relationships need time and maintenance to be maintained and a married couple who are too busy will not know the oneness of their loneliness fulfilled. If their spouses do not fulfil this need they will always be vulnerable to the opposite sex.

One writer makes these differences between a love affair and a friendship, 'Lovers are always talking to one another about their love; friends hardly ever about their friendship. Lovers are normally face to face absorbed in each other; friends, side by side, absorbed in some common interest.' Friendship is often based and grown by mutual interest and activity. So as husband and wife find something that you can enjoy, explore and talk about together. It could be gardening; it could be camping, photography, music, going to movies, hospitality, renovations, etc. Be active as a pair in many different things and find those things that you both enjoy and do together, this will build up your friendship in marriage. It can be the kids they can be pretty absorbing but when the kids leave home will there be other things that you have in common or have you grown apart. There are many marriages

that end when the kids leave home because they lost their friendship along the way.  
Nurture your friendship.

The second thing I would like to emphasize to build up our oneness is communication. I feel like I cannot emphasize this issue enough. In many ways, if you have two Christians who want to try to make their marriage work, this is the one thing that you need if you have nothing else, communication. If your spouse is doing something that is annoying you, and they are someone who wants to be better, if you say nothing things will be bad and only get worse and worse. However, if you communicate, you can bring that thing to their attention, you can express how it affects you and they can make the necessary adjustments. Or if you have been hurt by some words or actions by your spouse and they are unaware that they have affected you in this way, and you are not brave enough to talk about how they have made you feel, you will only give room for temptation to anger and resentment and allow them to continue a pattern of behaviour that is hurting your relationship. In other words your silence not only hurts you, it hurts the relationship and therefore them as well. The longer you wait to reveal how you feel the angrier your spouse will be when they realise that you had not come forward sooner. Or if you really want to have a date, or spend some alone time with your spouse, but you do not communicate this with your words. News flash, your spouse cannot read minds, they may make other arrangements and you will take it personally when they do not even know that you want to spend time together.

Silence makes for poor words. The lack of communication is ambiguous at best and will not achieve what clear and honest talk can. We are all cowardly and fearful and find it hard to share our feelings and risking vulnerability but this is a risk we have to take to ensure a healthy oneness in our marriage. If you really struggle to share your emotions, or find that you go blank when it comes to talking, write them down first. If you think that you will not be able to speak without getting angry, they say touching one another, holding a hand or having legs across the lap makes it very hard to get aggressive. If you find that both of you are poor communicators then perhaps a regular time set apart for deliberate communication will help. If you find that one is fearful, you must give your spouse the right to say anything giving them permission to criticise you without taking offense. If your husband or wife is really annoying you, I suggest that you not lash out in anger but wait until the situation has blown over and then communicate. There are many strategies that we can use, but we must talk. Honest, transparent, vulnerable and regular communication is fertilizer for the oneness of our union and binds us more closely together.

The third thing that helps our unity is romance. Romance is that spark of attraction and enjoyment between husband and wife. Every marriage will ebb and flow when it comes to romance. Familiarity, busyness, emotional unfaithfulness, unforgiveness, jealousy, taking your spouse for granted and many other things cause romance to wane. Deliberate efforts must be taken to keep the heart enjoying one's spouse. If you do certain actions but your heart is not delighting in the gift of your spouse your actions will be in vain. I find that letters, poems, songs, journaling or any means by which I am able to reflect on my wife's qualities stirs the emotion in my heart again. For some spending more time with them on dates in situations where there is no interference or outside pressure is the key. Giving gifts, giving compliments, planning surprises, all of these are good things for a relationship. Let your spouse know you value them, that you regard them highly, that they take up your mind and hold your attention. And if they don't, then it is time to stop giving your mind to other things and nurture some appreciation.

Fourthly, v33, 'However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.' I believe that Paul aims his commands at the areas of our weakness. Women will feel tempted to criticise and not respect their husbands, and husbands will be tempted to be harsh and not loving with their wives. Tenderness from the husbands and respect from the wife will be a tremendous superglue that will bond the marriage together. I love the way Bryan Chapell puts it, 'a man will try to dominate a woman with strength, a woman will try and control a man with shame.' Ladies you may not be fully cognisant of this, but your husband needs you to be proud of him, and therefore public criticism and shaming and humiliation and embarrassment hits twice as hard for a man. Men are often mocked as having fragile egos, but God has made men to need the support of their wives. 'Women, by a look, a cutting remark, an accusation, or some embarrassing reminder may seek to diminish their husband so that he becomes less sure of himself and, thus, more controllable. Sadly these factors often turn cyclical, as insecure men react to their sense of being diminished by becoming more dominating, which then gives the wife more opportunity to needle and shame, which subsequently triggers more abuse.' One couple said, 'Early in our marriage my wife and I agreed not to belittle one another in public, even in jest, because we noticed how many of our friends used ridicule (often quite innocently disguised in teasing) to get an edge over one another. I had to be honest with my wife and say simply that I needed her respect.'<sup>1</sup> Men and women have different needs and husbands and wives should be sensitive to the way God made men and women and love accordingly. Wives take pride in your husbands, husbands cherish and delight in your wives.

Paul has reflected on the union that husbands and wives have, like a soul to a body, like Christ to His bride, so husband and wife are one flesh. This unity comes with responsibilities. Are we leaving and putting aside all those things that threaten our unity? Are we holding fast and nurturing our unity, keeping it healthy? Ask your spouse when you get home where you are weaker in leaving or cleaving?

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<sup>1</sup> Chapell, Reformed Expository Commentaries location 5585 of 7700.