

Is Marriage and Family our First Calling?  
Ephesians 5

We will get to Ephesians 5, but not for a while.

Up until the 1960s, Christians in my circles assumed that if a person had a strong calling from God on their lives, then it was okay to regularly neglect spouse and children in order to obey God's will for their lives. It was unfortunate to neglect family, but inevitable and right.

Many things changed in the 1960s, and this was one of them. By the 70s, I was taught that this was a big mistake, a serious failure to live in God's ways. Marriage and family was always the higher calling of God, and service to the church and the world came after marriage and family.

We still usually assume that marriage and family is our first calling. When I first heard this in the 70s, everyone knew this was radical and new, but it sounded right, and we all accepted it, just as the earlier teaching about ministry more important than family sounded right 20 years earlier.

Which is right? Our service to the church? Or our family? Neither one. Let's be suspicious of both. Both are a problem. We fell off the horse, climbed back on, and immediately fell off the other side of the horse.

The basic call of Christ to his followers is to love each other as he loved us, to forgive each other and care for each other as he forgives us and cares for us. In the NT, our spouse and children and parents are simply one of the places to live this out. This all together is our first calling.

Right from the beginning of Eph 4, God teaches us how to treat one another. Eph 4:2 – *be completely humble and gentle, be patient, bearing with one another in love.*

This “one-another” kind of teaching continues into Eph 6. Two and a half chapters of Ephesians. The marriage and family section at the end of Eph 5 is just one part of this. It is one of the places where we are: *completely humble and gentle, patient, bearing with one another in love.* Marriage and family are neither above nor below the rest of our life with one another.

We have a Christ family, and an earth family. (Not ideal labels, I've not gotten anything better.) If the earth family makes us choose between family and Christ, then we must choose Christ and his family. That is always clear in Scripture. But outside of that, both are our priorities.

The first four disciples Jesus called were two sets of brothers, Peter and Andrew, and James and John. Jesus likes to keep earth families together. And those four were friends before Jesus came along. Jesus also likes to keep friends together.

But not much later, Jesus said, “who are my mother and brothers? You here, listening to me and doing my Father’s will, you are my mother and brothers and sisters.” And his earth family was at the door, quite possibly listening to this.

The most common biblical term for those in our Christ family is brothers and sisters. That is our longest family relationship. Brothers and sisters last a whole generation longer than our marriages, and a generation longer than our relationship to our parents, and our children. It lasts our whole lives. In the Christ family we are brothers and sisters.

There are several NT letters that speak directly about marriage, and some of these also to parents and children. But none of these give us reason to think loving the church, the Christ family, is more important than our earth family, and none say spouse and parents and children (our earth family) are more important than the Christ family.

There are times in family life, especially when children are small, when there is much energy left for the wider Christ family. That’s fine, no problem. But we also see parents pursuing their children’s activities all over the place, and taking themselves and their children out of church life to do this, and doing this often

Do that if you must, but do not bring God into it. The Scriptures direct us to serving both the Christ family and the earth family, and that this together is our first calling. Our church here has survived for 28 years because there were always families that did exactly that. They served in their homes and they served in their church. The Lord bless you, my brothers and sisters.

Some of us do not like groups of people, we find groups exhausting and need to get away to recuperate. That’s fine too, no problem. But let’s not assume our spouse will meet our relational needs. That’s not good for them or for us. We all need friends and brothers and sisters who are not our spouse.

#### *The Purpose of these Marriage sermons.*

I have one main agenda in all these sermons on marriage: to level out two relationships: our relationship with the Christ family, on the one hand, and on the other hand the union of man and woman in marriage. They should be on about the same level.

The problem is this: we assume we shall love and serve our Christ family, but in the middle of that, we have raised the union of husband and wife to tower above the Christ family. We wrongly assume marriage comes before the Christ family, both in how much we shall put into it, and also in the blessings we receive from it, satisfaction and fulfillment and meaning.

This high pedestal puts pressure on marriages that the Scripture does not support. I hope to take some of the pressure off marriages.

I want to lower the pedestal on which we have put marriage, and raise the pedestal of relationships in our Christ family. This needs you to be thinking about these things.

I have two reasons for re-evaluating marriage and the Christ family:

*Reason one: take pressure off marriages.*

I don't know how to say this more clearly. There is an idealism around about marriage, in the world and in the church, about what can be experienced and what should be experienced, that is dangerous. It is not happening in any couple's life.

The church, instead of pointing out that the views of our society on this are naïve and sentimental and false, has tried to find God ways to support this wrong view. We try to coach ourselves into achieving it. This is unnecessary pressure. Marriages that last have found ways to live with what actually happens, not what society and the movies promised.

But reducing expectations is not fun. And in some cases the disappointment is severe enough to end the marriage. Marriages end because "the marriage was not working." What, exactly, was not working? What we assumed would happen in marriage is not happening.

What we assumed is a problem. We don't like to lose our sentimental ideal. But for the good of marriage, we need to. Take the pressure off. Get it off the pedestal.

*Reason two for re-evaluation marriage in comparison to the Christ family.*

Where does that exalted view of marriage leave the single people, the unmarried? It leaves them without meaning in life, without intimacy and relational fulfillment. What a pile of nonsense!

John the Baptist was the announcer of the kingdom of God that we are inheriting, the predicted one that came ahead of Jesus. He was a celibate, and did not feel sorry for himself.

Jesus, our hero, our Champion and King and Leader, was a celibate. He did not feel sorry for himself. Paul the apostle was the ultimate carrier of the name of Christ to the world, and he was a celibate. And he felt sorry for married people!

"If you marry you will have many troubles in life," he says, "and I want to spare you. I don't say this to restrict you. I want you to be free from concern. I wish all of you were single and content, as I am." 1 Cor 7.

We know all this, and ignore it. We keep teaching about the blessing of marriage as if this was not true. Those three lives, John and Jesus and Paul, even if we had nothing else, are enough to teach us that deep love and commitment and affection are entirely available in the Christ family, outside of marriage. This is not the whole story, but it's part of the whole story.

Someone will say to me, “that’s easy for you to say, Ed, you’re married.” Well, I am married, but someone needs to say these things. If I was single and said these things, people would tell me, “you’re just saying that because you’re single.”

Marriage is not the answer to loneliness. The church, our brothers and sisters in Christ, are the answer to loneliness. If a believer, married or single, is lonely, the church has failed. There is loneliness in everyone’s life. Get used to it. But if it is severe, the church has failed.

One of the best things a wife or husband can do for each other is to have a few deep friendships outside of marriage and in the church. Take the pressure off.

These are just two reasons we should bring the marriage relationship and the Christ family relationships closer to the same level with each other: to take unreasonable pressure off marriages, and to gain a healthier view of living single.

Now to Eph 5:21 *Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.* I’ll come back to this.

In vv22-33, there is more about Christ and the church, than about wives and husbands.

<sup>22</sup> *Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord.* <sup>23</sup> *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.*

<sup>24</sup> *Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.*

<sup>25</sup> *Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her* <sup>26</sup> *to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word,* <sup>27</sup> *and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.* <sup>28</sup> *In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.* <sup>29</sup> *After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church—* <sup>30</sup> *for we are members of his body.* <sup>31</sup> *“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.”* <sup>32</sup> *This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.* (Christ left his Father to be united to his wife, and Christ took on flesh so he and his bride could have the same flesh.) <sup>33</sup> *However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.*

In the Christ family, wives and husbands are to model the church-Christ relationship. That’s emphasized here. God calls wives and husbands to live out particular Christ family behaviors toward each other.

*Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord.... Wives should submit to their husbands.* BUT: everyone in the Christ family has already been called to this.

In the previous verse, 5:21, we all: *Submit to one another out of reverence to Christ.*

Php 2:3: *In humility, honour others above yourselves.* In the Christ family, we all do this for each other. In John 13, Jesus washed his disciples' feet, and then he said, "*I have left you an example, that you should do as I have done. You wash one another's feet.*"

When Paul teaches that wives should submit to their husbands, he's not saying anything that should not already be happening in the Christ family everywhere. He is rather drawing attention to something already taught, because it is important in the marriage modeling Christ and the church. Wives live out with husbands a known Christ family behavior. Not unique to wives.

*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy.* Husbands, love this way: sacrifice yourself, so your wife can blossom and flourish.

But we are all called to do this for one another. Eph 5:2 *Walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.* We all are to love as Christ loved, and sacrifice ourselves for one another. Not unique to husbands.

In John 15, Jesus talked about friendship love: *My command is this: love each other as I have loved you.* (How did Jesus love his friends?) *Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command.* (15:12-14).

Wives are called to submit to their husbands, something all brothers and sisters in Christ are already called to do for one another. And husbands are called to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her; and that also is something all us brothers and sisters in Christ are already called to do for one another.

Marriage is neither above nor below our Christ family relationships. It is simply another part of life where we live out the basic Christ family kind of relationship.

The second way husbands love their wives: *husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they nourish and cherish their body.*

*Love your wives as your own bodies.* This is not more than "love your neighbour as yourself," the second great command of Christ. The call to husbands fills out the second great command, explains it more fully, but does not really add anything to it.

God speaks to husbands in Eph 5:25-33a. Two thirds of that section about Christ and the church. When Paul writes to husbands, he speaks mostly about Christ and the church. Paul's teaching to husbands was not at all what the society of that day said husbands should be like. Society called husbands to be stern capable leaders, God called husbands to love sacrificially and considerately.

Marriage in the Bible is not about what we will receive from marriage and our spouse, it is about what we will do for our spouses, what we offer. There are benefits to marriage, but that is not the concern of Scripture.

God created marriage to show how he treats his people, and how his people treat him. When God created male and female in the garden of Eden, he already had this in mind. He designed marriage around the relationship he would have with his people.

Back to the bigger question: is marriage and family our first calling before God? No. Is it a lesser calling than the Christ family? No.

What wives and husbands do for each other is no different than all the Christ family brothers and sisters are already doing for each other. It is no different than what friends in the Christ family are already doing for each other. Marriage and the Christ family are together our first priority.

Eph 4:2 – *be completely humble and gentle, be patient, bearing with one another in love.* That's our first calling. Amen.