

Meaning of Marriage

Study Guide #3 Roles: Loving through Mutual Submission

Does the word “mutual” in the title of this session throw you off a bit? Many churched people are familiar with the wife’s calling to submit to her husband in marriage, but “mutual”...? Hmm. It could be that you’re confused about the word “submission”. Submitting is not seen in a positive light in our world today by 99% of people out there. We do not like the idea of having our freedoms limited or having to follow someone else. Just think about this for example, how often do you hear people give seminars on being a good follower? Hardly ever, right? What about seminars and training on leadership? Those conferences sell out and it is likely your boss is already planning on sending you to one.

One of the reasons that we have a hard time with the idea of submission in a marriage is that virtually every culture in the world has distorted and abused gender roles in marriage for oppression. There are a lot of people who have had negative and controlling experiences in their past. The reason for this is that sin has distorted the very nature of our world and how we use our gender roles in relationships. The danger is that the tendency is to throw out the whole conversation.

What we see in the Bible is that God calls husbands and wives to live in such a way that they lift up each other. The Bible uses the word “submit” when discussing the wife’s role in marriage and it uses the word “love” referring to the husband’s role. As we look at how Paul discusses the husband’s role in Ephesians 5:22-33 you quickly see that he is not discussing authoritarian bossy leadership but instead a humble Christ-like self sacrifice for the good of his bride, just like Jesus in his relationship to the church. Tim and Kathy Keller discuss the roles of husbands and wives in marriage and they paint a picture of how both spouses play a “Jesus role” in their relationship while affirming male leadership of the home. When we look at it through that vantage point of a husband leading their wife it is not a domineering or chauvinistic way, instead it is life giving just like Jesus’ sacrifice of laying down his life for the good of his bride, the church. For a husband to love their wife they need to be a servant-leader just like Jesus. Would that kind of love be easy for a wife to submit to?

What about the wife’s role in marriage? Adam is given a “helper” from God in Eve. Some of us think of that idea of helper and we have images of having a kindergartner “help” you with a project in the kitchen or around the house doing something you can more easily do yourself. Helper can become a demeaning term, but that is not how the Bible uses it. Instead Helper (Hebrew: *’ezer*) is an uplifting term used mostly of God himself who is our ultimate helper. When we look at it from that view we see that the *’ezer* does not just help with something you can do on your own, but fills in where something is lacking. A wife’s role in marriage is not one of deferential silence as an anonymous “helper”, but instead a vital part of the relationship that causes the marriage to flourish. Without her presence the husband and the family would be lacking. When we see the life of Jesus we also see him playing the “submissive-helper” role.

Jesus more than anyone else in history shows us true humility by not pursuing selfish ambition and by not counting himself as more significant than others (Phil 2:3). That is a wild thought! The only one worthy of all our praise and worship did not lord it over others but instead was sacrificial and selfless in his life. As you examine Jesus' life you also see that he continually submitted himself to the will of God the Father. God the Son submitted to God the Father. Submission is not an assault on your dignity as a human being. Instead it is a natural outflow of the loving relationship God designed marriage to be.

It is important to also remember that when the bible discusses roles in marriage it focuses on principles instead of giving you a detailed, black and white, analysis of what it looks like in practice. God does not seem to just give you the "rule", instead he wants you to have the right heart when it comes to marriage.

This session of the Meaning of Marriage will challenge both husbands and wives to examine their thoughts on roles in marriage and it will leave you with some questions about how husbands can grow in either their servanthood or their leadership in marriage and for wives to be challenged in how they submit and complement their husbands in their service, without losing dignity.

Personal Study Questions:

When you look at your childhood, what role did your mom play? What role did your dad play? If you did not have a mom or dad in your childhood home, who played those roles?

Where have you received most of your opinions on roles within marriage? Some examples could be your family, married friends, mentors, books, the bible, movies, cultural norms of our time period, etc.

In Genesis 1:26 God create "man" (humanity) in his likeness and image. Genesis 1:27 expands on this to inform us that this meant male and female were created in the image and likeness of God. Men and women both reflect the image of God, yet are different. We want to be careful not to fall into absolute stereotypes, but men and women are not interchangeable unisex being and they can approach the same task in very different ways. There is always the danger of forgetting that each person is a unique creation with a personality and different human experiences, but most can agree that men and women can be very different.

How does this differ from our world's changing view of what it means to be a man or woman?

Do you think that gender differences are embraced in our culture or is there movement to ignore them?

Passages for personal study:

Read Titus 2:3-4. Paul tells us that older women are to train younger women to love their husbands and their children. This implies that a younger wife will not naturally love her husband and children the way she ought to. What does this idea teach us about marriage?

Read Philippians 2:5-11. How does Jesus model submission to God? What was God's response to Jesus' submission? This passage gives us a glimpse into what a relationship of leadership and submission ought to look like. If a wife is supposed to submit to her husband's leadership then what should be the goal of her husband's leadership?

Read Ephesians 5:22-33, specifically focus on the husband's role to model Jesus. What does this passage teach us about Jesus' motivation for sacrificial love of the church? What would it look like for a husband to love his wife this way?

Read 1 Peter 3:7. What would be the opposite of “living with your wife in an understanding way”? Paul calls the wife the “weaker vessel”, when you study that term it is the same idea that you’d apply to handling a valuable porcelain sculpture or dish. He is not commenting on strength or power, but instead pointing out something to be treasured and handled gently. The view of women in the time of Jesus was very different than today. Women used to be seen as property, as unequal and they did not have the same opportunities that women have today. How does this passage elevate the status of women?

Watch Video as a group

Group Study Questions:

Was anything in the video challenging to your thoughts on biblical roles in marriage?

The Bible gives principles about roles in marriage but does not give specific tasks, skills or personalities for husbands and wives. How does this challenge what you’ve observed about marriage or, if you’re married, the way you’ve approached your own marriage?

If you’re married, how might God be calling you to embrace your role in marriage in a way that may not be natural for you? If you are single, based on your personality, what do you think will be the biggest growth area for you when it comes to roles in marriage?