

# Marriage Pursuing Conformity to Christ in the Covenant

by John Piper

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*Marriage is a display of the relationship between Christ and the church, and is based on the power of grace to enable forgiveness, forbearance, and change.*

**Duration:** 48:17

**Scripture:** Ephesians 5:25

**Topics:** "Christian Marriage", "Sacrificial Love"

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## Description

This sermon emphasizes the importance of grace in marriage, highlighting the need for forgiveness, forbearance, and seeking change in a relationship. It explores the roles of husbands and wives in helping each other grow spiritually and morally, drawing parallels to Christ's sacrificial love for the church. The message encourages a foundation of grace, humility, and sacrificial love to foster transformation and unity in marriage.

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## Transcript

Grace, grace, God's grace, grace that is greater than all our sin, all our husbandly sins and wifely sins and parenting sins and single sins and young child sins and old people sins. Oh how we love grace. So now I pray that as I undertake to unfold another dimension of the display of grace in and through marriage, you would come and help me.

Make it plain, keep it biblical and faithful to your Word. And would you grant to those who are watching, listening at the downtown campus and the South Campus as well as here in this room this very moment a heart to listen, a heart to yield to truth, a heart to change where change is called for. And so would you sweeten as well as stabilize the marriages of our church, the ones that exist and the ones yet to be.

I pray this in Jesus' name. So you cannot say too often that marriage is a model of Christ and the church. Noel said that and I've been saying it as often as I could to see whether I could say it too often.

And you cannot say it too often. And one of the reasons I gave for why you cannot say it too often is that it assures us that marriage is based on grace. Because if we exist to display the relationship between Christ and the church, we know that relationship was established by grace, it's upheld by grace, it would be brought to consummation by grace.

And so grace is what marriage is about. Underneath it, in it, coming out of it. So you cannot say too often that marriage is a model of Christ in the church because Christ in the church exists by grace and marriage only can be sustained by grace.

And we've spent two weeks emphasizing the nature of grace as that which inclines you to forgive and forbear your spouse's annoying idiosyncrasies and sinful habits. So the emphasis for two weeks has been on forbearance and forgiveness. And that in fact is what grace does.

It gives you the ability to cover a multitude of sins, love covers a multitude of sins, and to throw them in the compost pile and to walk away from them and find those paths that are still green and to put your emphasis there and only go back to the compost pile where the sins are and where the idiosyncrasies are and keep the fence around it. It may smell from time to time, the wind may blow the odor over the pasture from time to time, but you're not going to pitch your tent there. Grace is willing to walk away from the compost pile and find those beautiful places in the pasture to live and affirm.

So that's what we've been talking about. And the reason is because that emphasis on forbearance and forgiveness is right at the center of the Christian ethic. Listen to the words of Jesus.

Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you and pray for those who abuse you.

To the one who strikes you on the cheek, turn the other also. From the one who takes away your cloak, do not withhold your tunic either. Love your enemies.

Do good. Lend, expecting nothing in return. And your reward will be great.

You will be sons of the Most High, for He is kind to the ungrateful and evil. Be merciful, as your Father in heaven is merciful. Those don't cease to be demands when we get married.

If we are to return good for evil in general, how much more in marriage? So the emphasis for two weeks has fallen on returning good for evil and covering sins, covering idiosyncrasies, throwing them in the compost pile, forbearing, forgiving, and finding a way in covenant keeping love forward together. So that's what we've emphasized so far and the emphasis shifts now in this message. The emphasis is not going to shift off of grace.

The emphasis is going to shift to another thing grace does. Not only does grace function in our lives as a power to enable us to forgive and forbear, it functions also as a power to enable us to change so that there aren't as many things to forgive and forbear. That's where the emphasis is going to fall now.

Say it again. Grace has this double function. It enables us to forgive and forbear when things are not what we would like in the other, and it functions in both to bring about changes so that there isn't as much to forgive and to forbear.

And that's where we're going to focus in this message. If all of our emphasis fell upon forgiveness and forbearance alone, you might get the impression there is no hope of any change and marriage is just one long endurance of things that may displease over the years. And that isn't the case.

We don't just forgive and forbear, we seek to change. And I'll focus mainly in this message on husbands and wives wanting and taking steps to help the other change. So that's where we are going.

Not just to return good for evil, but to do less evil, and to hate our own evil, and to help the partner do less evil, or even just do less things that bother you. How does that come about? Now you might think, now it's kind of a roundabout way, isn't it? Why didn't you start here? Why didn't you start with becoming new people so that you'd have less to forgive? And then when you get to the forgive part, you can just say what's left over you forgive and forbear. And there is a very gospel reason why I'm not doing it that way.

And the gospel reason is this. There has to be laid in a relationship like marriage, there has to be laid a foundation on which both of you are standing when you begin to get in each other's face with desires for change. Because if a foundation of absolute, rock-solid, gracious commitment to forgive and forbear isn't there first, the efforts to bring about change will start to sound like ultimatums, not service.

There's got to be a kind of gospel foundation down here that says, I'm committed to you no matter what, so that when I ask this to change, I'm not saying change or I'm out of here. That foundation is laid. Rock-solid forbearance, rock-solid forgiveness, rock-solid covenant commitment goes down first.

That's what the vows are about. Then, once that's laid, and we've been laying them for two weeks now, once that's laid, you've got a place to stand that feels safe. It feels secure.

It doesn't feel like she's reaching for the divorce papers as she talks to me. We're together. We're going to work on this.

We're going to make it. And all the back and forth that goes into the transformation of human beings is gospel transformation. Christ comes to us and He commits Himself to us through faith before we get changed.

The new covenant is a covenant of, I'd die for you. I'd take my wrath away from you. Just receive me as you are.

Receive me and your guilt is covered. And now, guess what? He's got some ideas how we should live. But He didn't start there, and that's the way it is with marriage also, I'm arguing.

So it's not static. I know that may have been the impression for the last two weeks. Marriage is not static, like here are two unchangeable sinners who've got to endure each other now the rest of life.

Nobody changes. You just endure. And now I'm qualified.

If you've got that impression, I'm going to try to fix it so that you don't think that's the biblical impression of marriage. So let's go to our text. I'm only going to focus on three verses here.

We'll be back to this text in other sermons, but the three verses in what was read are verses 25, 26, and 27 of Ephesians 5. We're starting with the husband and his desire that his wife be different in some ways. And then we're going to go to the wife and talk about her desire that her husband be different in some ways. Verse 25, husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the Word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

Now one thing is crystal clear from these verses. Jesus Christ, in covenanting with his people to make us his own, dies for us with a view to changing us. That's really clear, isn't it? Read again, love your wives as

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her.

That means make her holy. Having cleansed her, washing of the water with the Word, take away all the wrinkles and all the spots and present his bride to himself in splendor. We're not a splendid bride right now.

He's working on us. One day he will finish that work at the coming of the Lord and we will be presented to him at the marriage supper of the Lamb in the robes of splendor. And the marriage will be consummated in heaven.

Now here's some implications of that, it seems to me. Husbands who love like Christ bear a unique responsibility in a marriage for the moral and spiritual growth of their wives. They bear a unique responsibility for the moral and spiritual growth of their wives.

Now it is a great sadness that the roles are reversed in so many relationships. That is, that the wives are perceived to be and often are way ahead of their husbands in moral and spiritual maturity, which is why so many men are paralyzed to take this responsibility because they feel, what's the use? I mean she's so far ahead of me, there's no way I could ever be an effective leader. Now this is not a message on headship.

That's coming, maybe even next week. I haven't decided for sure. This is not a message about headship.

I'm simply taking the man is man here and the woman is woman and saying there is, in their relationship with each other, an appropriate way to see each other's change. And here it happens to be in the context of the man's headship. So say it again, if a man draws his conception of being a husband in a covenant relationship with a woman from Christ's relationship to the church, then he feels a special burden or a special responsibility for her growth and her maturing and her moral and spiritual transformation.

And said a word about how it happens here. You say he feels that and he ought to. Every man who's married and every man moving towards marriage should feel himself growing into a special responsibility for this woman.

And then it faces him with huge questions about how do you do that? What steps do you take? How do you behave? How do you talk or what does it mean? Now right here I know I'm treading on dangerous ground. And I'll tell you the ground in the hopes that nobody will go there. I could be playing at this moment right into the hands of a selfish, small-minded, controlling husband who has no sense, no sense of the difference between enriching differences between him and his wife that should stay and what I'm talking here about, moral and spiritual growth.

There's no sense. So that he takes what I say and turns it into a mandate to control every facet of her behavior and makes the criterion of what he controls his own selfish desires cloaked in spiritual language. That's the danger I'm treading near as I talk about husbands getting their cues from Christ as the one who died to sanctify the church and now he then takes a unique and special responsibility in this relationship that she moved towards Christ like this under his headship.

But an honest look at this text won't let us fall into that error that I just described. They're all controlling. I've dealt with guys like this.

That's why I'm thinking of this. Who are sick. They're mentally skewed guys.

They don't have any sensitivity to what it means to be a human being out there distinct from him which he must dance with. Instead, anything he doesn't like, he says, I've got a right to fix it. And I'm arguing that is not the implication here.

So here are the clues I see in the text that show that's not what this implies about how a husband brings about the changes which he and Christ would like to bring about. Number one, he is like Christ, he is not Christ. That's big.

He is like Christ, he is not Christ. Verse 23, for the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church. And that little word as does not mean in every way he's like him.

He's not. I'm not. For example, I, husband, am finite in my strength.

Christ is omnipotent. I am finite in my wisdom and therefore fallible. Christ is not fallible, ever.

He never makes any mistakes. I do. Third, I am, as a husband, sinful.

Christ is sinless. So woe to me if I begin to assume that when the Bible says I'm like him, I conclude I'm him. I'm him for you.

That's not what it says. It's drawing an analogy out in this relationship and the analogy is not one-to-one. All that Christ is, all that you are.

All that he can do, you can do. All that he can think, you can think. All that he can say, you can say.

All that he can demand, you can demand. That's not what's going on here in that little word as. Second observation, the aim of the godly husband's desire for change in his life is conformity to Christ, not conformity to himself or to his own private selfish wishes.

Look at the words in verses 26 and 27, the key words, that he may, this is verse 26, that he may sanctify her. Christ died to sanctify his bride. I love her that way.

So your longing is not to get her to do everything my personal preferences desire, but get her to be holy. Oh, and my wife, holy. Or a second word, in splendor.

That is verse 27, that he might present the church to himself in splendor. I want her to be morally beautiful. Third, verse 27 again, the word holy, that she might be holy and blameless.

These words imply that our desires as husbands for our wives should be measured by God's standard of holiness, not my personal preferences. That's second observation. Third observation, and this is the most important of the three.

What Paul draws attention to most amazingly, and let it land on you, men especially, wives will hear it and wish it were more true. Husbands should hear it and be staggered at the thought. Verse 25, husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

That means he died. That he might sanctify her. The most radical thing that has ever been said about marriage in the world is this.

Every culture in the world is blown to smithereens by this statement. African cultures, Asian cultures, American cultures are simply shattered by this statement. I've sat with pastors overseas and watched how

their wives are treated.

A nice multiculturalist, who didn't happen to be a feminist at the time, would say, leave this culture alone. It's culture. All cultures are equal.

Baloney. Baloney. You're not loving her like Christ loved the church.

Otherwise, you'd pick up the hoe instead of sitting on your duff all day. The most radical thing that has ever been said to any husband is love your wife. Now, just think now how this alters the way you approach getting her to do what you want her to do.

How do you approach it? The answer is, you die. The way Jesus brought about sanctification was dying. Not lording it over the church.

Not with a whip. He died to make her holy. This is so radically transforming and preservative from that dangerous ground that I described.

That man, who has no sense of what appropriate differences are, and no sense about the difference between holiness and his own personal desires, he's not thinking, the way I lead is by dying. So guys, got to work that one through. You've got to think that through.

Some guys are so fearful of being shamed by attempting leadership that it's pure pride cloaking as humility. Pure pride cloaked in the guise of humility. She's before me, I'm not this, and I'm not that.

Bologna, you are afraid that ego will be compromised. You're not being a man. So the third observation that prevents us from going onto that dangerous ground is men, in the pursuit of the conformity of their wives to Christ, pursue it not by lording it over her, but by dying for her.

When we lead her, or even if necessary confront her, are we self-exalting or self-denying? Are we contemptuous or compassionate? You can add to the list. So, if a husband is loving and wise, like Christ, in all these ways that I've just described, his desire for his wife's change will feel, to a humble wife, I've stuck in a lot of qualifiers there, wise, loving, wise husband, loving husband, like these ways, the wife is humble and not rebellious. If all of that is true, then the desire that she change will be felt by her as being served, not humiliated.

Christ clearly desires for his bride to grow in holiness. He died to bring it about. So brothers, govern your desires for your wife's change by self-denying death and service and sacrifice.

May God give us the humility and the courage to measure our methods of husbanding by the sufferings of Christ. It is amazing what power there is in loving like this. Let's turn to the women, the wife's desire for her husband's change.

This is not a message, again, about headship and submission yet, but in order to make the points I'm making, I have to make points about what headship and submission are not. I don't want to talk too much yet about what they are, but I do need to say another comment about what they're not, and I've just said that a husband is not Christ. His headship is not equal signs to Christ's headship.

And so the implication here for the women is that a wife's submission to the husband is not identical with her submission to Christ. That's what it's not. It's like it, the text says, it's like it, verse 22, wives, submit to your own husbands as, you get that word again, to the Lord.

Now that word as does not mean that Christ and the husband are the same. Christ is supreme, the husband is not. Her allegiance is first to Christ and then to her husband, not the other way around.

The analogy here only works if it goes that way. Only if wives have supreme allegiance to Jesus will their allegiance to their husbands not be treason against Jesus. You got that now? Let that be clear.

We do not equate a woman's submission to her King and Creator and Redeemer with her submission to her husband. Christ is not down here, he's up here. And he gets supreme, uncompromised, unquestioning allegiance from wives.

Right, wives? And then the attempt to submit here is not idolatry or treason. It's the same thing, I'm just going to put in a parenthesis here. You can carry this right through with child to parent and citizen to government and people to elders in the church.

All four of those operate on this principle. If, render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's. Now what's the relationship between rendering to Caesar and rendering to God? Well, when you render to God what is God's, what do you render to him? Tell me.

Everything! Because that's what's God's. Okay, there's nothing left now to render to Caesar. But you're supposed to render to Caesar your citizenship.

So, you've totally bound yourself to God as King and Lord of your life, and now he tells you, go in there and be a citizen. And for his sake you go, and now it's not treason anymore. You don't have a divided allegiance.

I submit to my government for his sake. And as soon as that government gets out of step with him and demands sin from me, I'm not obeying. You see that all through the Bible.

That's the way it is with wives and husbands, that's the way it is with children and parents, that's the way it is with elders and people in the church. All human authorities are relativized by the supreme authority of Jesus Christ. Now, close that, Princess.

That's not on my paper here. I just wanted to give you the bigger picture of what I'm saying when I say that a wife submits supremely to Christ and secondarily to this sinful husband. That's a very, very, very important distinction.

One of the things that it implies is this. A wife will see the need for change in her husband, since he's not Christ, he's a sinner, a fallible sinner. And she will see this.

And I'm arguing now, she may and should seek the transformation, even while respecting him as the head. And when we talk about submission in a few weeks, I'll open more on what that looks like and how that works. I'll give you several reasons why I believe that's the case.

I'm arguing now that not only may husbands seek the transformation of their wife on the analogy of Christ dying to sanctify his bride, I'm arguing the other way around, that wives, since he's not Christ, and she is in full allegiance as a subject to Christ, cares about this man's conformity to Christ, may take steps to bring that about. Really, really. A few arguments.

One, the analogy of prayer. Now, I don't want to push this too far, it's just a pointer, but take it for what it's worth. When the church is taken by Christ, who is sovereign and all-wise, does the church ever want to

change him? And the answer is no, you don't change him.

But what about things he does? Is it okay for the church to ever ask the Lord to do something different than he's doing? And my answer is yes, because that's what prayer is. And this only works if you believe in the sovereignty of God. I believe in the absolute, total sovereignty of God, that everything that comes to pass, comes to pass by his ordination, his design.

Which means, if I'm sick, he ordained that I get sick. But he also ordains that I pray to get well. So, if I get sick, call the elders, anoint me with oil, and say, oh God, please, alter this situation.

Now, that's me coming to my husband, so to speak, and saying, change this situation you have brought upon me. And I'm saying, that's good. That's a good thing to do.

We should pray. Ask the Lord. You have not, because you ask not.

I don't give you blessings, because you don't ask for blessings. I haven't done this for you, because you don't ask me. I'm leading down this path, I would take you down that path, if you asked me.

Ask me. And so here, you see where I'm going with this. A wife, on that analogy, would then be expected to, and have the right to, talk to her husband and say, you're getting home at 6 every night, and the plan is 5.30. Can we talk about this? I'd like this to be different, because I plan for 5.30, and the kids plan for 5.30, and you're getting here at 6 every night, and it doesn't seem to bother you at all.

And it's wrecking everything. That's prayer. You can see how the analogy breaks down.

This guy's misbehaving. He shouldn't be doing that. Jesus never misbehaves.

You don't ever go to Jesus and ask Him to improve. Improve, Jesus. Like, I know better for how you can be a better God.

You just ask that circumstances change, if He would be willing. And so there's an analogy there. Don't press it too far.

Here's another reason why I think it works this way. Namely, that since husbands aren't Christ, and therefore are fallible, and sinful, and are like Christ, but not Christ, it is fitting that the closest Christian in relationship to them help them. Help them grow.

Help them see their flaws. Help them change, men and women, back and forth. For example, a wife is not simply like the church.

She is also like a sister. I married my sister, spiritually speaking. Sisters relate to brothers not exactly the same as wives to husbands, or church to Christ.

But that's a reality. Then you read a text like this, Galatians 6.1, If anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Can that apply to a wife? I think it should.

I think it should apply to everybody, if they're spiritual. If this wife is spiritual, and she detects, Galatians 6.1, If anyone is caught in a trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness, lest you too be tempted. I'm arguing that the brother-sister Christian relationship has a place, not just submission headship.

And the submission, we'll see, shapes the way you do this, shapes the way a wife does this. Another example would be Matthew 18.15, If your brother sins against you, go, tell him his fault between you and him alone. Does that apply to marriage? I think it should.

It's a general statement. But if a wife who knows this man better than anybody else sees that, there's a sin. Nobody knows it but me.

Does she then say, I can't bring this to his attention, I can't plead with him, I can't talk to him about it. I'm saying, no, she can and she should bring it to his attention. And here again, I'm walking on dangerous ground.

Because there's some words in English that would describe if she got this all wrong. Nag is one word and badger is another word. And the Bible has verses that warn a wife not to do that.

One of them is 1 Peter 3.1. Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won, W-O-N. They may be won, without a word, by the pure and respectful behavior of their wives. I don't take that to mean absolutely no words are allowed to be spoken between a husband and a wife for all the reasons I've just given.

But it is a caution, isn't it? There is a kind of speech that could come out of a wife's mouth that would be totally counterproductive. And a wife must be as wise as a serpent and as innocent as a dove in discerning when and how I can talk to this man in a redemptive way that will not put him so on the defensive that he won't grow. So I'm arguing that it is right, good, and necessary that the person closest to you men should confront you with your sin.

She should do it in a way that is submissive. I'll give you just an example of what I mean by that. If you come to a husband and he's characteristically doing something that you perceive to be immoral or so out of step with what Christian character would call for or leadership would call for, you could precede the exhortation with, I love it when you are my dear.

In other words, find words that give expression to the affirmation of the husband's role as a spiritual leader. And then, having laid that ground of I affirm you in that, I want you to be that in this relationship, then you say the problem and ask him to deal with it with you and talk it through. Then he hasn't felt like you've come at him on the attack as though there were no appropriate relationships here of headship and submission.

Now back to the text, and we're almost done. This was very encouraging to me to see what I'm going to close with. Verse 25, back to husbands.

Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her that he might sanctify her. If you take 1 Peter 3, where it says, wives, win him over by your pure and respectful conduct. And you say to husbands, husbands, seek her moral and spiritual growth by dying for her.

You see the commonality there? Both of those are saying, behavior, loving, sacrificial service is the key to both. Not talk. Talk is right, talk is good, talk is necessary.

But both of these emphasize husbands, Christ died to make the church holy. Wives, win your husband by your pure and respectful behavior. If you can, without a word.

Both of those are saying, love expressed through sacrificial, humble, respectful, kind, loving behavior is the key to transformation in the other person. Which implies this, everything I've been saying for the past two weeks. You thought all of that talk about forbearance, all that talk about forgiveness, really was just going to leave marriages in their stuck position with nobody changing, because all you're emphasizing is forgiveness and forbearance.

When in fact, we've just seen that that kind of behavior is the key means of bringing about the change that you're enduring. Bringing about the change of the behavior that you're enduring. Which means the last two weeks have really been about change, even though they've sounded like they're about enduring non-change.

Because one of the most powerful instruments in being changed is for a husband and a wife to lay down their lives for each other. To be loved is a very powerful incentive to become lovable. To be loved in a sacrificial, patient, humble way is a very powerful incentive to become lovable.

That's the way we're related to by Jesus, is it not? He comes to these ugly, dirty, sinful people like us, and he says, I'll die for you. He dies for us and he rises. And by faith alone, he embraces us, still dirty, into his family.

And now, that being loved gives us the incentive to become more lovable. More like him. And that's our goal.

We don't want marriages that are merely endurance. We want to so endure, so forgive, so forbear, so seek in appropriate ways to confront and deal with each other's flaws, that there is, over time, a growing up into Christ for both of us, so that at 10 and 20 and 30 and 40 years of marriage, there's greater conformity to Jesus so that the dance of headship and submission flows with more smoothness and beauty than it ever has permeated by a lot of delight. So, Father in Heaven, pray for Noel and me as we live these things out and try to grow together in them, lest we be sheer hypocrites in saying things like this.

And I pray for those who are married in these services, that they would perceive this and grow in this, and that both husbands and wives would see the appropriate ways by which they can come to the other with longings for appropriate change. God, work a miracle, I pray, in our marriages so that we don't feel threatened. We don't feel ultimatums when the other approaches us.

We don't feel hopeless. You want me to do something I cannot do. Help us not to fall into that mindset.

Grant, I pray, that grace would abound both in patience and in the pursuit of godly change. I ask this, Lord, for Christ's namesake, for his glory in this world, for the joy of marriages, for the good of children, indeed, for the reaching of the nations through Christ. Amen.

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