

2015

Proper 16 • Ephesians 5:22–33

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Recommended Citation

Wrede, William (2015) "Proper 16 • Ephesians 5:22–33," *Concordia Journal*: Vol. 41: No. 3, Article 9.

Available at: <http://scholar.csl.edu/cj/vol41/iss3/9>

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Proper 16 • Ephesians 5:22–33 • August 23, 2015

Marriage. A man and a woman united. The standard for this union has been established by God and is fully rooted in his love for us in Jesus Christ.

A quick review of the readings from Ephesians for the prior two Sundays will frame our reading for today; we are imitators of Christ and his love. Ephesians 5 continues to draw us away from partnering ourselves with “the sons of disobedience” and has us “walk as children of light” while discerning “what is pleasing to God.” Now, as we move into Ephesians 5:22–33, we are invited to look more closely, to drill down, and consider very specifically how to incorporate the previous verses into the model for loving one another as imitators of Christ.

For most of us, it’s important to acknowledge that we and so many others hit a

major barrier simply by reading the word “submit.” Is this really new with our generation? Given that this was written when marriages were arranged, it’s doubtful that this message was received any more easily by the people in Ephesus. It’s imperative that we not stop here but continue on to see the wonderful relationship established by God with each of us and how that has a direct impact on every other relationship.

The bulk of this passage has as its focus the role of husbands and how they are to love (v. 25ff). “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” Here’s where the weight on the shoulders of the husband grows heavier all the way to the point of it being impossible to carry. In verse 28, the obligation is for the husband to love his wife not only for a moment but as a binding and lasting obligation. This means that it is unacceptable for a husband to love to the best of his ability and call it good. Rather, he is to love as Christ loves the church (v. 29). This love Christ has for the church is both a profound mystery and an impossible standard for any husband to meet.

In taking this message to people, it would be wrong to soft pedal the clear message we have about the relationship between a woman and a man. Even the most wonderful husband is an imitator, not Christ himself. As an imitator, the husband is going to fall far short of the standard set by Christ. All husbands will not only fall short here but in every aspect of their lives and must receive forgiveness and be fortified by the means of grace. Our imitation is imperfect but we still reflect the love given to us. How blessed is the woman who sees the reflection of Christ in the man to whom she is married. How blessed are we, in all of our Christian relationships, to see the love of Christ in our brothers and sisters, the body of Christ.

In the Broadway musical *Les Miserables*, we watch the life of Jean Valjean as he is freed from prison and struggles to reinvent himself and spend the rest of his life keeping a promise to love an orphan girl as his own. As the end of the show arrives, we find Valjean dying and being greeted by the ghosts of the child’s mother, Fantine, and that of another character, Eponine. The epilogue carries with it a message of love, relationships, and forgiveness. Now, in death, Valjean, Fantine, and Eponine join in singing:

And remember
The truth that once was spoken
To love another person
Is to see the face of God.