



Christ and Relationships – Chapter I

Eros and Agape

Ephesians 5:21 – 33

UNDERSTANDING

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DISCUSSION

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UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Read Ephesians 5:21 – 33

Goal

The goal of this Bible study is to help students understand Christ's selfless sacrifice (agape) is the model for all erotic love. Eros and agape are not opposed to each other. Instead, they complement each other.

Context: God's Spousal Love

"God is love" (1 Jn 4:8). Have you ever stopped to think about these words? What does it mean to say that God is love? Well, God is difficult to describe, and sometimes the best we can do is describe God using analogies. For example, we know that God's love is *like* the love of a good father. We also know that God's love is *like* the love of a good friend. These analogies are helpful, but none of them completely describe God's love. When we say these things, what we mean is that God possesses all the good qualities of a good father or friend, but God possesses them even more than the best father or the best friend. After all, God is the fulfillment of all our desire, and even the best earthly fathers and friends cannot completely fulfill us. So it's true, God's love is like the love of father and friend — but has anyone

ever told you that God's love is like the love of a spouse?

The prophet Isaiah says, "Your creator is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name" (Is 54:4 – 6). And this doesn't only apply to women. Many biblical figures and Catholic saints spoke about God using spousal terms: St. John of the Cross and Pope St. John Paul II, along with Sts. Teresa of Avila, Elizabeth of the Trinity and Catherine of Siena, to name a few. Whether man or woman, God wants to marry us! Yes, God is a good Father, God is a good friend, God is also Lord and King. All these are true. But here in this study, we're going to talk about what it means to say that God is like a good spouse.

Spousal imagery pervades the Old and New Testaments. As we saw in the passage from Isaiah, Yahweh is not only the *Lord* of Israel, he is also the *bridegroom* (TOB: 104:3). When the Israelites turned away from Yahweh, their betrayal was often likened to adultery; when they remained true to Yahweh, their loyalty was equated to marital fidelity.

Spousal imagery is present throughout the Old Testament, but the imagery is even stronger in the New Testament. This is especially true of St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians, which is the main text for this study. According to St. Paul, Christ's love for the Church is like the love of a bridegroom for his bride. Christ loves us with a spousal love. So both the Old and New Testaments show that God, in all of His majesty and power, wants to marry us.

Main Thing: Christ's Love for the Church

Our complete union with God will ultimately come in heaven. But God's desire to marry humanity is so strong that He gave us the sacrament of marriage as a foretaste of the marriage we'll experience in heaven. Marriage is special because it shows us something about

God that nothing else shows: that God loves us with a spousal love. Marriage and the body communicate this dimension of God's love in a unique way. Pope St. John Paul II says, "The body, in fact, and only the body, is capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and the divine. It has been created to transfer into the visible reality of the world the mystery hidden from eternity in God" (TOB 19:4). So marriage is meant to take the invisible mystery of God and make it real to us in a concrete way. Thus, when we see or experience good marriages, this should remind us of God.

Jesus Himself leads us down the road of the spousal analogy by referring to Himself as the 'Bridegroom' in the Gospels (cf. Mark 2:19 – 20). Jesus is the perfect model for every spouse. So, men, if you're wondering how to be a good husband, look to Christ. Women, if you're wondering how to be a good wife, look to Christ! Male or female, Christ is our perfect model.

Now you may be wondering how Christ can serve as the model for marriage. After all, Christ himself was never married, so how can we model our marriages after Christ? St. Paul answers this question in his letter to the Ephesians. Paul urges husbands to "love their wives as Christ loved the Church" (Eph 5:25). How did Christ love the Church? Well, He loved the Church in many ways. He loved the Church by serving her in the poor, spending time with His disciples, preaching about the Kingdom and much more. But Christ loved the Church most completely when He died on the cross. That's right: Christ loved the Church, His spouse, so much that He literally died for her! Spouses are called to love each other in the same way. This doesn't mean spouses need to physically die for each other, but it does mean they are called to give of themselves selflessly!

Christ's love for His bride, the Church, is the model for all married

love. This has important implications. In Ephesians, St. Paul addresses all Christian wives, saying, “Wives, be subject to your husbands as to the Lord” (Eph 5:22). Upon first reading this verse, one might be tempted to think that St. Paul was a sexist, but nothing is further from the truth. In fact, exactly the opposite is the case. In this passage, St. Paul encourages women to “submit” or be “under the mission” of their husbands. Now what is the mission of the husband? As we saw earlier, the husband’s mission is to love his bride as Christ loved the Church. And how did Christ love the Church? He died for her on the cross. Thus, St. Paul is encouraging women to allow their husbands to sacrifice for them. Women should never become slaves to their husbands. Instead, both husbands and wives should love one another as servants.

This is a high standard for marriage! Christ is our model for marriage, and taking Christ as our model can be so challenging. It’s good to see Christ as a challenge. Challenge is good. Unfortunately, some see the Christian vision for marriage as not only challenging, but unattractive. Many people think Christian marriage is dry and uninteresting. They think Christian marriage is all about sacrifice and selflessness, but what about romance and sex? Isn’t this part of the picture too? The answer to these questions lies in a common confusion about sexuality and marriage.

Application: Eros and Agape

Have you ever heard the words “eros” and “agape”? Eros refers to a passionate love for union, and it’s important to note up front that eros (or erotic love) does not simply refer to sex. At the deepest level, it’s a love for truth, beauty and goodness which calls someone outside of themselves. Outside of sex, eros might, for example, refer to an attraction towards beautiful art or the desire to know the truth.

Agape refers to selfless love, as when someone gives up one's life for another. Many people think these two kinds of love are opposed to each other, and this is especially the case with sex, which is a kind of eros or erotic love. Doesn't selfless love contradict sexual love or erotic love? Sexual love seeks sexual satisfaction, and how can sexual satisfaction be selfless? These are important questions, and the answer to these questions highlights the beauty of the sacrament of marriage.

The world wants to separate eros and agape, but Christ wants to bring them together. Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa speaks to this point saying that the secular world wishes to separate different kinds of love. In the secular world, for example, we often find eros without agape, and unfortunately some misguided Christian marriages often possess agape without eros. This is a tragedy! One kind of love should not be isolated from another, and this is especially the case in romantic love! Whenever we isolate, we destroy. When people possess eros without agape, their lives fall apart: When erotic, sexual love is separated from self-gift, people become self-centered, and they cannot sustain relationships. Things like divorce and broken families follow. Thus, eros and agape cannot be an either/or. We must begin to see sexual love and selfless love as a both/and. But is this possible?

Recall from our first session that the husband and wife become "one flesh" in marriage (Gen 2:24). For this reason, St. Paul says, "Husbands should love their wives as they love their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself" (Eph 5:28). These two verses provide our answer to the seeming conflict between selfless love (agape) and sexual love (eros). When husbands and wives become united in marriage, they see each other as "another self" (TOB 481 – 482). It's similar to a friendship in which whatever affects one friend also affects the other, but even more deeply. One might say that, in marriage, a person's

desires expand so as to include the desires of another person. The desires of each spouse are tied together. A husband will naturally begin to treat his wife's desires as his own, and vice versa. Speaking about marriage, John Paul II says, "It is not enough only to desire the person as a good for oneself, but in addition — and above all — it is also necessary to desire his good." Good husbands and good wives desire good for each other. Sexual love makes no sense without agape, but in marriage the two find a common home in which the one strengthens the other. And herein lies the beauty of marriage: It naturally brings sexual and selfless love into harmony! So is it possible to bring together eros and agape? Yes, it is possible in many ways, but most especially in a good marriage.

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Ephesians 5:21 – 33

Context

1. *God as a Spouse*

A. Have you ever thought that God's love is like the love of a spouse?

B. Read Scripture passage Isaiah 54:4 – 6. What does this passage tell us about God?

Response: God loves us with a spousal love.

C. What is this passage saying?

Response: Allow the group to discuss. See how this sits with students.

D. Say: God's love is a mystery, but different analogies are helpful for understanding the mystery. It's so much better than we could ever imagine! God's love is like the love of a friend, spouse, sibling, shepherd, king, etc. All of these analogies help us understand God's love, but none of them encompass the mystery.

Note: Here the goal is to help students see God as someone who relates to them like a spouse. This is often easier to do for women than men. Men often relate more with the second part of the main portion of the study — the sacrificial love of Christ — than with the first portion.

Climax

1. "Out of Reverence for Christ"

A. Read Ephesians 5:21.

B. The verse encourages spouses to "be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ." To be subject means to sacrifice one's own desires for the other. But why should we be subject to one another?

Response: We should be subject to one another "out of reverence to Christ." There will be many times when you don't want to sacrifice for your spouse, and there will be many times when your spouse will not deserve your sacrifice. St. Paul says that we should sacrifice for our spouses even when it is difficult. Why? Because in the end, you're not sacrificing for your spouse; you are sacrificing for Christ.

2. "As Christ Loved the Church"

A. Read Ephesians 5:22 – 24

B. What does St. Paul tell wives to do?

Response: To be subject to their husbands.

Note: Many commentators have used this verse to justify a sinful male dominance. This is not the intention here. In fact, the point of these questions is exactly the opposite. We begin with the most difficult portion of Ephesians 5 for dramatic effect and to confront a possible incorrect interpretation. The intention of this series of questions is bring about a new understanding of submission in which men and women submit to each other out of reverence for Christ, laying their lives down so that they can uphold each other's dignity. Any view of submission which suppresses either gender in any way is undoubtedly incorrect. Make sure students know this.

C. What does it mean to be subject to your husband?

Response: To be subject to your husband means to submit or be under the mission of the husband. You might think of the word "submission" as being "under the mission" (sub=under, mission). The mutual mission of the spouses is to serve one another in a complementary way. In this way, the wife is to be under the mission of the husband, and the husband is to be under the mission of the wife.

D. You might ask: "Isn't this repressive?" Did St. Paul want to oppress women?

Response: First allow students brief discussion, then close the discussion by saying, "We can only answer this question if we know the mission of the husband. Does Paul tell us the husband's mission?"

E. Read Ephesians 5:25

F. What is the mission of the husband?

Response: To love his wife as Christ loved the Church.

G. How did Christ love the Church?

Response: Christ died for the Church.

H. Is this verse oppressive towards women?

Response: Allow the group to discuss. This verse is not oppressive at all! On the contrary, St. Paul is encouraging men to die for their wives. Now, that doesn't necessarily mean physical death, but it does mean death to self. Husbands are called to deny themselves daily by sacrificing for their wives and children. This is the mission of the husband. It is the role of the wife to allow her husband to sacrifice for her. And this is not only true for husbands; wives are called to sacrifice for their husbands as well. Both are called to be Christ for one another. The love of a husband or wife is a window into the love that Christ has for His Church! Once again, just as we saw in the Old Testament, Christ loves us with the love of a spouse! Marriage is supposed to be an experience of this love!

Application

1. Union of Eros and Agape

A. We have seen that Christ's love is like the love of a spouse, but sometimes it's difficult to think of Jesus in spousal terms. The reason for this is that we generally separate two kinds of love: 1) eros and 2) agape. *Does anyone know what these words mean?*

Response:

1. At the deepest level, eros is the longing for the true, good and beautiful, which draws us outside of ourselves and into union with another (TOB 47:5). Again, it's important that we understand that eros is not limited to sexual love. Sexual love is just one kind of eros.
2. Agape is selfless love, as when, for example, someone lays down his life for his friend.

B. Ask: Let's say you set out on a journey to find and/or experience these two kinds of love. Where would you go to look for them?

1. Where would you go to find eros?

Response: The students might need a little prompting, but the goal here is to illustrate that our society views eros as separate from agape. Student might say things like: bars, Las Vegas, Friday nights, etc.

2. Where would you go to find agape?

Response: Again, students might need a little prompting, but the goal is to illustrate that our society has separated agape from eros. Students might say things like: churches, soup kitchens, convents etc.

3. Have you ever thought to look in the same place?

C. *Response:* One of the biggest problems in our world today is that we separate eros from agape. We think that agape is for the Church, eros is for the world — agape is clean, eros is

dirty — and there is no bridge between the two. But nothing could be further from the truth! Even though it might seem uncomfortable to talk about eros in the same sentence as Christianity, God wants us to bring them together. Let's read what St. Paul has to say.

D. Read Ephesians 5:28 – 32.

E. What is St. Paul saying here? What does this have to do with eros and agape?

Response: Allow the group to discuss.

F. State: **Marriage is the meeting place of eros and agape.** Christ literally becomes one with His bride, the Church. The Church is the “body of Christ,” and so Christ loves the Church in the way that someone might love their own body! And the same is true for spouses. Just like Christ becomes one with the Church, so do spouses become one with each other. As St. Paul says, referencing Genesis, “a man leaves his father and mother...and the two become one flesh.” When you see your spouse as yourself, you'll sacrifice for your spouse in the same way you sacrifice for yourself. Spouses are literally part of each other. Whatever affects one affects the other, and as a result, just like St. Paul says, husbands and wives learn to love each other as they love themselves. In this way, romantic love (eros) is united with selfless love (agape).

Note: Two things to note here. First, just because someone isn't married does not mean they cannot experience eros. Sexual love is not the only kind of erotic love. Discussions about eros all the way back to the ancient Greeks included non-sexual erotic love.

Thus, non-married persons can possess eros; it's just directed differently. Second, you may get a question about celibacy here, in which case I would ask you to wait until chapter four where that topic is discussed.

- G. Eros and agape naturally belong together. We run into problems when we separate them. What happens when we focus only on eros and forget about agape? What does this look like?

Response: When people possess eros without agape, their lives fall apart. When erotic, sexual love is separated from self-gift, people become self-centered, and they cannot sustain relationships.

- H. What happens when there is agape without eros?

Response: Agape without eros becomes cold and disconnected from the human experience of the senses. Unfortunately, misguided Christians often fall prey to this sort of love, thinking; for example, that the body is bad and everything should be "spiritual." But this is false. In reality, eros and agape cannot be separated.

- I. Have you ever seen a good marriage in which spouses both sacrifice for each other but are also clearly attracted to each other? What was it like? Or more generally, who are some of the best married couples you know? How do you think these couples built strong marriages?

Response: Have an example ready, but allow the group to discuss. The point here is to make things concrete and to give students something to hope for in the future. Help them to believe that real love is possible!

J. Wrap Up: God wants to both 1) lay down His life for us and 2) be in union with us. And this great mystery of God's love is revealed in our bodies! Christ sees the true, the good and the beautiful in us, so He seeks an intimate union with us. Our marriages are meant to be a sacrament of Christ's love!

