

Our second reading today gives us a longer or shorter option. The shorter option leaves out the difficult language about wives being subordinate to their husbands, language that might sound archaic, cringeworthy, and which may cause us to tune out the rest of the reading. So let me address those words. Contrary to what we might think, it's not a command that women should be suppressed, denied of human freedom or held under the control of husbands. And in whatever way any man has ever self-righteously used these words as a platform to exercise abuse against women, it's not only morally wrong, but also not what St. Paul was talking about.

Understand, in the Roman-Greco-Jewish culture St. Paul knew, women had almost no rights. A woman was her husband's possession, and it was common for a pious Jewish man to thank God in his daily prayers for not making him "*a Gentile, a slave, or a woman*". And it was even worse for women in the Greek-influenced culture. My point is not to condemn the Jewish or Greek culture of any time, but instead to show that St. Paul's teaching was counter-cultural, even if it initially sounds harsh to our modern ears.

And in whatever way we would be inclined to lift our noses, as though we are so culturally enlightened, let us acknowledge that we live in a culture that still harms women, exploits them, uses them, and undermines their dignity as daughters of God.

To be clear, regardless of whatever ways our society or any other, might exercise any inequality of gender, our Christian faith does not. In God's eyes, man and woman bear a shared dignity, even as they're different. As we say in the nuptial blessing, just after a man and woman have been united—in God—by the sacramental grace of marriage, we say, "*May the grace of love and peace abide in your daughter _____...May her husband entrust his heart to her, so that, acknowledging her as his equal, and his joint heir to the life of grace, he may show her due honor and cherish her always with the love that Christ has for his Church*".

And those last words are what we likely fail to hear in St. Paul's reading: "*Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her to sanctify her...*" So how did Jesus love the Church? To redeem her, to make things right between her and God—and by 'her', I mean all of us—he walked with us, lived and spoke in such a way as to direct her heart and her consciousness toward the goodness of God. He willingly suffered for her, gave his life for her, as a powerful act of love to make her holy.

I recall meeting with a couple, beginning their preparation for marriage. They were very excited and clearly loved each other, but they acknowledged some concerns as well. She took her faith very seriously. He on the other hand, much less so. When he would watch movies that had a lot of bad language, gratuitous sex, and immoral behavior, it bothered her. Not only because he was willing to expose her to what she regarded as pollution, but because that was what he chose to absorb. He didn't see it as a problem—it's just a movie. But the matter was bigger than just the movies or their content.

She struggled because she deeply wanted to be married, but his choices and behaviors were troubling. During their engagement, she attended a conference in which a presenter, a female, spoke to the women about their choices and their desires, as Christian women. *Do you want a man who isn't going to move you to holiness? Do you really want a man who doesn't desire to help you fall in love with Jesus?* It hit her—for all the ways that she desired marriage, she needed a man to move her ever-deeper into the love and life of Jesus. The man she was engaged to was never going to do that. That clarity of mind led her to call off the marriage.

It makes me wonder: do women want a husband who strives to move her and their children toward Jesus? That by virtue of the way he lives, speaks and acts, they could experience God's love more powerfully. Whether you're already married or hope someday to be, is that not what women want?

So, men, what do you do to foster your own holiness, to help you (and your wife) to lead your household? What's your own spiritual life like? Is the Lord calling you to rise into your role as a husband, a father, a man, rather than what our culture says about those roles? I have no doubt that many Christian men make sacrifices, but with what purpose in mind? Is it to move your wife and children holy?

Jesus showed us all that, first-hand. In the life and death of Jesus, our bridegroom, he showed how dying, sacrifice—for the good of the other—eventually gives way to life. I'm not so naive as to ignore all the pressures, the challenges, the dynamics in spousal relationships, and everything else that comes with marriage. But God had something specific in mind when he established it: a way in which a husband and wife could draw strength to fight together against whatever would otherwise divide them. God intended for marriage to be a living and efficacious sign to the world of his eternal and unwavering love, and an instrument for salvation.