

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
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**A PROFOUND MYSTERY**

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Long, long ago, in what seems like a galaxy far, far away, when I was a student at Princeton Seminary, studying to become a pastor, I sat in a seminar with other students and a group of seasoned pastors who had been invited to talk with us about some of the realities of pastoral ministry. I'm not sure I remember anything from that seminar, except for this nugget from one of the pastors, who said that, as a pastor, "there are times when you have something to say, and there are times when you have to say something." I have never forgotten that.

This is one of those times when I have to say something. And I pray that I have something to say. Something from God. Something from God's Word, which is timeless in its relevance, truth, and wisdom for life. Something true to His Word, which is uniquely and fully inspired by the Holy Spirit, totally trustworthy, and the final and only infallible rule of faith and life. In humble reliance upon the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, I pray that this is an occasion in which I not only have to say something, but I have something to say as well, something God has given me to say in His name.

So, here goes. Unless you have been living in a cave for the past few weeks, you most likely know that eleven days ago (May 9, 2012), President Obama announced publicly his support for same-sex marriage. His announcement came on the heels of Vice-President Joe Biden's declaration on NBC's *Meet the Press* three days earlier (May 6, 2012) that he is "comfortable with men marrying men, and women marrying women." After the vice-president forced the issue with his comments, the president said in an interview that, while his views have been "evolving" over a period of several years, he now believes a man should have the right to marry another man, and a woman should have the right to marry another woman. (As you probably know, same-sex marriage is already legal in eight of the fifty United States, along with the District of Columbia, while thirty-two states have passed amendments to their state constitutions defining marriage and restricting it to the union of one man and one woman.)

In yesterday's *Washington Post*, Maryland Attorney General Douglas Gansler was quoted as saying that the campaign for same-sex marriage "is one of the fastest, if not *the* fastest social movement in American history. Ten years ago," he said, "people would not have been talking about recognizing same-sex marriages. And ten years from now," he predicted, "we'll look back and say, wasn't that a quaint debate we had." I don't know if Gansler is right about ten years ago. And I truly hope he is wrong about ten years from now. But it does seem that the cultural change with regard to the acceptance of homosexuality in general and same-sex marriage in particular has taken place at an astonishing pace. Apart from an abiding faith in the sovereignty of God, the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, it is truly frightening. And not something to celebrate.

In the worlds of politics, entertainment, education, and news media, we are constantly barraged with messages promoting, even demanding equal right – or even special rights – for

our fellow citizens who identify themselves as homosexuals. We are told that anyone who does not support the acceptance of homosexuality as a good, morally-acceptable way to live is a bigot. To voice a moral or religious objection to the full acceptance of homosexuality in our society is to risk being called intolerant in a day when intolerance is considered the cardinal sin.

For several decades, there has been almost unrelenting pressure on the institutions of society, including the church, to accept homosexuality and same-sex relations as good and normal, going against thousands of years of societal norms and religious teaching, including the clear teaching of the Bible. Despite the fact that the Bible nowhere affirms or supports homosexual practices, but in several places – wherever it is referred to in the Bible – specifically prohibits it and expresses God’s unqualified displeasure with it, some churches now openly support same-sex relations, and, where legal, conduct same-sex marriages. They also affirm the right of persons in same-sex relationships to serve in leadership capacities in the church.

The president says he believes that support for same-sex marriage is consistent with his faith as a Christian. He cited the golden rule as taught by Jesus to “treat others the way you want to be treated” (Matthew 7:12; Luke 6:31) in support of his position. I want to say that I believe President Obama is sincere in his belief that there is no contradiction between his faith and his views on same-sex marriage. I believe he is sincere in seeing the redefinition of marriage to include same-sex couples as a natural consequence of the golden rule. I don’t doubt the president’s sincerity. But I believe the president is sincerely wrong. Though his intentions may be honorable, I believe the president has badly misapplied the golden rule, as well as the teachings of Jesus and of the Bible as a whole regarding the kind of life that pleases God.

As a Christian, a husband and father, a pastor and citizen of this richly blessed nation, I am grieved by the public declarations of support for same-sex marriage by the president and vice-president, both of whom profess to be Christians. I believe God is grieved by it. It never pleases God when individuals or leaders or churches or nations declare “good” what He has declared sinful, or evil, or contrary to His good, pleasing, and perfect will for our lives in this world.

The God who made this world and everything in it, the God who knew each one of us before we were conceived in our mothers’ wombs, the God who loves each of us with a love that will never fail, the God who demonstrated His love for us in the incarnation, sinless life, vicarious suffering and atoning death of His Son Jesus Christ on the cross for us, the God who does not treat us as our sins deserve (Psalm 103:10), but lavishes us with grace that comes free of charge to people who do not, cannot and will not ever deserve it (i.e., people like me ... and you), the God whose plans for our lives are good and loving and wise, plans that are full of hope and a future blessed by Him (Jeremiah 19:11) – this God has made it clear in the Bible that homosexual relations and same-sex marriage are contrary to His will for humankind and will not receive His blessing. And, as I think is intuitively obvious to the most casual observer, our physical anatomy shows that man and woman are made for each other.

Please understand this: The fact that God disapproves of homosexuality does not mean that God hates people who identify themselves as homosexual and engage in same-sex relations.

God loves homosexual sinners and bisexual sinners in the same way that He loves heterosexual sinners. Jesus died for homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual, and whatever other “-sexual” kind of sinners there may be. Jesus died to save sinners, period. Regardless of our sexual desires. Regardless of our particular besetting sins. Those who champion same-sex relations and same-sex marriage, whatever their motives and whatever their own lifestyles may be, are our fellow-sinners. There is only one way for them or any of us to be saved, which is by grace alone through faith alone in the saving work of Jesus Christ alone. It is all by grace.

I believe that what the world needs is more grace. Not more arguments (though there is a place for honest discussion and persuasion). Not more angry pronouncements of judgment and condemnation. Not more hate. But more grace. More grace and truth: God’s grace and God’s truth, woven together into beautiful tapestry, bearing witness to the glorious freedom, joy, and fullness of life found not in the endless pursuit of pleasure and personal happiness, but in embracing the life God created us to live in the awareness of His loving presence and providential care, under His sovereign and gracious rule, and for His glory. It is when we submit willingly to God’s wise and loving rule, not when we insist on doing what is right in our own eyes, that we discover true freedom and joy. The psalm writer expresses this truth in Psalm 119:32: “I run in the path of Your commands, for You have set my heart free.”

Dear friends, do not believe the lie that Christian love and compassion require us to affirm homosexuality and same-sex marriage as morally acceptable and consistent with the historic Christian faith. It just isn’t so. What is so loving and compassionate about telling people that God approves of the way they are living, when God does not approve? In Proverbs 14:12, Solomon said: “There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.” Evidently the Holy Spirit thought this so important that He had Solomon say it again in Proverbs 16:25. So I’m going to say it again: “There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.” There is a way that may seem right to a society, or a culture, or a nation, or even a church that forgets or sets aside or distorts the truth of the gospel, but in the end it brings not liberation but bondage and death.

Do not believe the accusation that you are a bigot if you are opposed to homosexual relations and same-sex marriage. Some people who are opposed to homosexuality *are* bigots. There are some who spew hatred and condemnation in the name of Christ. Some people who profess to be followers of Christ *are* bigoted. They may claim to represent Christ, but you can be sure they do not. Do not be like them. In fact, have nothing to do with them. Bigotry is not a Christian value.

Do not be afraid to stand up and speak the truth, but do it always in love. And respect. As Paul says in Colossians 4:5, “Let your conversation be always full of grace.”

Remember that Jesus said: “This is how people will know that you are my disciples – by the love you have for each other” (John 13:35). Unfortunately, too many people today know us not for our love but for what we’re against. They think of Christians primarily as anti-gay or anti-abortion, anti-this or anti-that. It is not enough for us to say we believe that President Obama is wrong, or that same-sex relations and same-sex marriages are contrary to the will of

God. We need to go beyond saying what we're against to explaining the gospel we are for, and to expressing in both words and actions our love – God's love – for those with whom we disagree, and whose lifestyles grieve the heart of God.

I say to you in the name of Jesus, and with humble reliance on the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, that our president and vice-president are wrong in their support of same-sex marriages. Sincerely wrong. But we are wrong, too, when we fail to model the love of Jesus for sinners of all kinds, or think that homosexual sins are worse than the secret or not-so-secret sins that trip us up.

This has taken longer than I anticipated, but this is what I believe the Lord wanted me to say to you on this subject today.

What I had hoped to talk about at more length is the charge Paul gives to husbands and wives in the passage we read from Ephesians 5. I probably don't need to tell you that this is one of the most unpopular passages in the New Testament, or even the whole Bible. It is the directive Paul gives to wives in verses 22-24 to submit to their husbands that we find so offensive today, because it goes against the grain of our culture.

A friend told me once about a young woman he knew. They were youth leaders in the same church. In her Bible, she had used a red pen to cross out these verses and others like them in the New Testament, and in the margin had written the word "NO!" in capital letters. A wife should "submit" to her husband? Forget about it!

And yet, that is what the Bible says. It says: "Wives, submit. Husbands, love." Notice that Paul does not say: "Wives, submit. Husbands, boss." He does not say: "Wives, submit. Husbands, rule with an iron fist." He does not say: "Wives, be weak. Husbands, control." He does not say: "Wives, be a doormat. Husbands, walk all over your wives. Manipulate your wives. Exploit your wives. Abuse your wives. Treat them like slaves, not like equals. Make sure they know who is the boss." That is not what the Bible says.

Not everyone understands this. A husband read a book called *Man of the House* during his commute to and from work on the Metro. After finishing the book, he stormed into the house to confront his wife. Poking his finger in her face, he said: "From now on, I want you to know that I am the man of this house, and my word is law. Tonight you are going to prepare me a gourmet meal and a sumptuous dessert. Then, when I'm done eating, you're going to draw me a bath so I can have a relaxing soak. And when I'm finished with my bath, guess who's going to dress me and comb my hair?"

His wife responded: "My guess is the funeral director."

He just didn't get it.

We don't get it either, and we miss the point if we fail to see that submission is a two-way street. In verse 21, Paul says: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." Paul is talking to all of us here. He is talking to husbands and wives, children and parents, employers

and employees, pastors, elders, deacons, church members – everybody. Submission is not for wives only. In Christ we are called to mutual submission. It is meant to be reciprocal. And voluntary.

If you are driving on a country road, you may come to an old bridge or an underpass that is too narrow for two-way traffic. And you may notice that YIELD signs have been placed at the approach from both directions. That is how it is sometimes in a marriage, and in other relationships, too. As you and your spouse approach the narrow bridges of conflicting needs and desires, you will discover that God has placed YIELD signs at the approach from each direction. Mutual submission involves each of you setting your own desires aside at different times in order to meet the needs of your mate.

Paul says it this way in Philippians 2:3-4: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.” This counsel is not just for husbands and wives, but there is no doubt that it applies to husbands and wives.

I think many Christian wives long for their husband to exercise loving leadership in their marriage and home life. They long to submit to their husband’s loving leadership. But many of us husbands drop the ball and abdicate our leadership role.

Wives are to submit; husbands are to love. Paul repeats these directives in verse 33, where he reminds us that husbands are to love their wives, and wives are to respect their husbands. We have already seen that submission – voluntary submission, a submission that demonstrates respect for the other – is a mutual calling. So is love, though Paul emphasizes the husband’s calling to love his wife. And it is not some generic kind of love, not a shallow, syrupy kind of love, not a purely romantic kind of love marked by desire and passion that Paul has in mind. It is a very specific kind of love. Husbands are to love their wives the same way and with the same kind of love that Jesus loved (and loves) His church. What kind of love is that? A love that leads to sacrifice and self-giving. Jesus showed His love for the church – for us – by giving Himself up for the church, by going to the cross and paying the penalty for *our* sin. He showed His love for us by taking our place. He did it, Paul says, in order to make the church (His bride) holy – set apart for God, sanctified, purified, made clean by His grace through the cleansing power of the gospel – so that He (the Lord Jesus) might present the church (His redeemed people) to Himself as a beautiful, radiant bride.

This is what it is all about. This is how husbands are to love their wives. In *The Message* it says: “Husbands, go all out in your love for your wives, exactly as Christ did for the church – a love marked by giving, not getting” (Ephesians 5:25).

In another place, Paul describes God’s love this way: “Watch what God does,” he says, “and then you do it, like children who learn proper behavior from their parents. Mostly what God does is love you. Keep company with Him and learn a life of love. Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn’t love in order to get something from us but to give everything of Himself to us. Love like that” (Ephesians 5:1-2, *The Message*).

The command to “love like that” is meant for all of us. But it applies to husbands in a particularly important way. The well-being of your wife and marriage depends on it. The blessedness of your wife and marriage depends on it.

After taking us in verse 31 back to the institution of marriage by God in the beginning, when Adam and Eve were still in the garden, Paul says in verse 32: “This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church.” “A profound mystery.” In the Greek it says a *mega musterion*. A mega mystery. There is no doubt that marriage is often a mystery. A huge mystery. A mega mystery. Especially to husbands, I think. But Paul says this mystery is really about the relationship between Christ and the church. It is about the love Jesus has for His people, for the bride He died to save. Marriage is meant to be a picture of this love.

I don’t think I – or anyone, for that matter – can fully grasp and explain this mystery. But maybe I can give you just a partial glimpse. Once or twice a year, when we have communion by intinction – meaning, when we invite you to come forward to receive the elements down front at the communion table – I have the privilege of speaking personally to each person who comes forward. I have the privilege of speaking to each of you by name as you take bread from the loaf and dip it into the chalice. I have the holy privilege of saying to you: “Don, Jesus gave His life *for you*. Barbara, Jesus died *for you*. Sam, Jesus did this *for you*. Ria, Jesus gave His life *for you*. Charlie, Jesus went to the cross *for you*. Janet, Jesus did this *for you*. John and Claire, Jesus gave His life *for you*. This is how much Jesus loves *you*. *Each one of you*.”

Do you have any idea how much Jesus loves you? That He loves us the way He does is a mystery. A profound mystery. That He would take our place and give His life to save us from our sins is a mystery we cannot fully fathom. It is a mega mystery. But I know it is true. I pray that you do, too. And if you have never accepted the gift of His saving love for you, I invite you, I urge you, to do so today.

May you know the fullness of His amazing love in your life today. Lord, let it be so. Amen.