

Biblical Solutions for Life Issues

Topic 28 – The Husband’s Role in Marriage

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Introduction

Marriages have problems, and the problems that exist in marriages today are a result of the fall of mankind at the beginning of time. Put plainly, sin is the problem in bad marriages. One of the ways sin can be dealt with in a marriage is by the husband fulfilling his role as it is laid out in Scripture. Admittedly, it can be very difficult to focus on these biblical roles when our culture regularly bombards us with the worst examples imaginable. A brief examination of popular media today shows just how absent the upstanding and responsible husband is in the mind of society. In fact, the bad husband has become a common comedic character. The sad part of this is that many men find these “TV husbands” funny because they see glimpses of themselves in them. Chances are if you are reading this, you do not want to mimic these media characters, and that is commendable. You probably want to glorify God in your marriage or at least “be a better husband.” How does God view the husband’s role in marriage then? The Bible amply addresses this question. There are three basic areas in which a husband can glorify God in his marriage:

1. Love as Christ loved the Church
2. Live with your wife in an understanding way
3. Lead as a servant (like Christ)

He Loves His Wife as Christ Loved the Church¹

A husband seeking to glorify God in his marriage must love his wife as Christ loved the church. The world defines, explains, depicts, and expresses love in many different ways. On the whole, none of which have anything to do with how God has explained the love a husband ought to have for his wife in a God-glorifying marriage. God’s Word explains clearly the love a husband ought to have for his wife. Ephesians 5:22-33 serves as a starting point for this aspect of the marriage. From there, other passages and principles can be incorporated to get a full, accurate, and biblical view of the husband’s role to love in marriage.

²⁵**Husbands, love your wives just as Christ also loved the church** and gave himself up for her, ²⁶so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. ²⁸So **husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies**. He who loves his own wife loves himself; ²⁹for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, ³⁰because we are members of His body. ³¹**FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND SHALL BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH.** ³²This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church. ³³Nevertheless, **each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself**, and the wife must see to it that she respects her husband. (Ephesians 5:25-33)

Notably, the only direct imperatives aimed at the husband all have to do with loving his wife. In the Biblical Counseling movement there tends to be an undue amount of responsibility placed on

¹ Outline taken from © The Master’s College Biblical Counseling Dept., Marriage and Family Counseling Notes, 2007.

husbands to sanctify their wives. However, when examined closely there is no command for the husband to sanctify his wife. Paul simply expounds on why Christ gave Himself up for the church in verses 26-27. A woman's sanctification in a marriage is not completely on the husband. Each person's sanctification regardless of their age or marital status is purely the work of the Holy Spirit. There is no extra, spiritual ability for a husband to bring about sanctification in his wife.

Nevertheless, the husband does have the greatest opportunity to encourage and inspire spiritual growth in his wife's life. Due to the closeness and social intimacy of the marriage relationship, the husband has, with this greater opportunity, the greatest responsibility to use the marriage relationship to glorify God by exemplifying and encouraging spiritual growth in his wife.

The command is clear that husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church. This begs the question, "How did Christ love the church?" Christ's love for His church appears in many passages throughout the New Testament.

1. *Initiatory* – ¹⁹**We love because He first loved us.** (1 Jn. 4:19) – A husband ought to love his wife without waiting for any reason to love her. He must not wait until he deems her "lovable." He must choose to initiate love just as Christ loved us when we did not deserve to be loved.
2. *Sacrificial* – ²⁵**Husbands, love your wives just as Christ also loved the church and gave himself up for her...** (Eph. 5:25) – Christ showed His ultimate act of love when he went to the cross and paid the sacrifice for our sins. A husband seeking to glorify God in his marriage should be willing to sacrifice daily for his wife. This sacrifice should be in the big and small things of life. In Matthew 9:36 we see Christ had compassion on people when he was tired and had been doing much to serve people already.
3. *Humble* – ³**Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves;** ⁴**do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interest of others.** ⁵**Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus...** (Phil. 2:3-5) – Christ was humble as He loved His disciples and others who followed Him during His earthly ministry. He did not seek to make Himself equal with God, even though He had every right to do so. Instead He took on the form of a slave, and obeyed His Father's will to the point of being murdered. This is the ultimate example of humility. The Christ-like husband constantly bears in mind that he is God's slave and loves with humility.
4. *Volitional* – ¹⁶**You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you.** (Jn. 15:16) – Some of the last words Jesus spoke to His disciples before being arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane show that He made the conscious decision to choose His disciples. His love for them was a willful love not based on their ability to love Him or to do what He commanded them. He chose to love and lead them during His earthly ministry even though He knew they were broken, unreliable, weak sinners.
5. *Unconditional* – ⁶**For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.** ⁷**For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die.** ⁸**But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.** (Rom. 5:6-8) – Christ's ultimate act of love at the cross was done for ungodly sinners. The Christ-like husband cannot wait until

his wife is “godly enough” to love. If he did this, hypothetically speaking, he would never love his wife. Even when a wife is sinning against her husband in the worst way, he needs to choose to love her since Christ loved His bride, the church, unconditionally.

6. *Eternal and Committed* – ³⁷**But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”** (Rom. 8:37-39) – Nothing will separate Christ’s love from His bride. The Christ-like husband has this mentality of eternal commitment to love his bride.
7. *Forgiving* – ¹³**...bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.** (Col. 3:13) – Being quick to forgive and thorough in that forgiveness is a key for the Christ-like husband. Christ forgave before we came to Him for asking for it and he forgave us unconditionally.²
8. *Practical* – ¹⁶**We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. ¹⁷But whoever has the world’s goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? ¹⁸Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.** (1 Jn. 3:16-18) – Christ not only showed his love in his sacrifice at the cross, He also loved in practical ways, beyond just words. Consider the feeding of the 5,000 and the many physical healings of Jesus. Wives have real, practical needs, and the Christ-like husband is aware of them and meets them when he can (cf. Eph. 5:29).

Some examples of practical ways for a husband to love his wife are as follows.³

- Telling her (verbal v. non-verbal)
- Appreciating her (praising qualities and what you receive from her)
- Making time for her
- Communicating (listening and not assuming you can read her mind)
- Sharing (of your life, your complete partner)
- Providing, nourishing, cherishing (cf. 1 Tim. 5:8)
- Promoting her growth and development
- Treating her as priority (after God, primary ministry)

He Lives with His Wife in an Understanding Way

Second, a husband seeking to glorify God in his marriage must live with his wife in an understanding way. Our culture rather flippantly states, “You’ll never understand your woman, so why try?” God’s Word says the opposite.

⁷You **husbands** in the same way, **live with your wives in an understanding way**, as with someone weaker, since she is a woman; and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered. (1 Peter 3:7)

² For a more thorough explanation and treatment of forgiveness, see Topic 12 on Forgiveness, www.valleybible.net.

³ This list is neither exhaustive nor clearly commanded in Scripture. It is simply a list of possible ways a husband can practically love his wife.

The reason so many husbands in the world, and often in the church who have been affected and influenced by the world's thinking, have given up on understanding their wives is because they are too lazy to take the time and effort it requires. Just as with every other aspect of the Christian life and walk, this needs to be done in the power of the Spirit and as a by-product of a husband walking in the Spirit.

When a husband lives with his wife in an understanding way, often her problems become his problems and her passions become his passions. We are called to bear one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2), to rejoice with those who rejoice, and mourn with those who mourn (Rom. 12:15). Husbands who seek to understand their wives will also fulfill these commands from Scripture by default as well.

Additionally, a husband must spend time praying for his wife, and no husband can adequately pray for his wife if he is not consciously seeking to understand her. Finally, people change as they age. The husband who thinks he has "figured out" his wife should not get comfortable. Besides, the command here is to live with one's wife in an understanding way which conveys that this is an ongoing process rather than a one-time occasion.

He Leads as a Servant

Finally, a husband seeking to glorify God in his marriage ought to be a servant-leader. This point of emphasis is strategically situated last because it is the most misunderstood aspect of what a godly husband's role is.

The world's ideas of a husband's leadership rarely have anything to do with God's. Few husbands really seek to lead at all, and those who do typically have a very skewed view of what that should look like.

First, let us examine what godly leadership is *not*:

1. *It is NOT a dictatorship.* In Mark 10:35-45 James and John asked Jesus if they could sit on either side of Him when the kingdom had been established. After Jesus told them it was not His job to grant that right, He drew a contrast between His concept of authority and the world's.

⁴²Calling them to Himself, Jesus said to them, "You know that those who are recognized as **rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them**; and their great men exercise authority over them. ⁴³But it is **not this way among you**, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your **servant**; ⁴⁴and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be **slave** of all. ⁴⁵For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to **serve**, and to give His life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:42-45)

Therefore, a godly husband should not expect his wife to serve him, and he should not lord his authority over his wife. The husband who has ever said, "You need to do this because I am your husband and you need to submit to me," is thinking completely contrary about what it means to be a godly leader. Some husbands are even guilty of taking to the next level and demanding that their wife accept their opinions and preferences. "It is not this way among you."

2. *It is NOT making ALL the decisions.* This point is related to the previous point, but a husband has neither the time nor the biblical responsibility to make *all* the decisions in a marriage. He needs his wife's insights and counsel with discernment many times. The unintended consequence of a husband to take it upon himself to make all of the decisions is that he never allows his wife to think and help him in that way. Usually, husbands who think they need to make all the decisions in a marriage struggle with control and do not trust God as they should.

As a side note, a wife cannot fulfill the description of the godly woman in Proverbs 31:10-31 if her husband makes all the decisions. A controlling husband is not one whose heart trusts his wife (Prov. 31:11). In reality, as with so many other issues, pride is at the root of a husband's heart who thinks he needs to make all the decisions in his marriage.

3. *It is NOT following.* This almost goes without mention, but it must be clearly stated. A godly husband cannot lead in a Christ-like way if he is following the leadership of his wife. God has established the husband as the head of the marriage, and as such he needs to fulfill that role.

³But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and **the man is the head of a woman**, and God is the head of Christ. (1Cor. 11:3)

²³For **the husband is the head of the wife**, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. (Eph. 5:23)

A man cannot fulfill his role as a godly husband if he is following his wife's leadership. That is an abdication of leadership that God has established.

On the other hand, what *is* godly leadership?

1. *It is Christ-like.* Christ was and is the ultimate example of a Servant-leader.
 - First, Christ led as a *shepherd*, not a cowboy – ²⁷**My sheep** hear my voice, and I know them, and **they follow me**; (Jn. 10:27) – Cattle are driven, sheep are led. The husband who treats his wife like a cow will have big problems in his marriage. The husband who treats his wife as a sheep understands Christ's example of leadership.
 - Second, Christ led *humbly* - ⁵Have this attitude [i.e., humility] in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but **emptied Himself**, taking the form of a **bond-servant**, and being made in the likeness of men. ⁸Being found in appearance as a man, **He humbled Himself** by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:5-8) – Christ had every right to lead in pride since He was and is God. Yet, He was humble and even died for sinners who hated Him. Husbands have absolutely no right to lead in pride, and even if they did they should not since Christ did not. It is easy to become arrogant in positions of leadership, so husbands need to fight it and put on humility.
 - Third, Christ led by *doing the will of His Father* – ³⁴Jesus said to them, “My food is to **do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work.**” (Jn. 4:34)

- Fourth, Christ *led by example* – ⁵Then He poured water into the basin, and began to **wash the disciples’ feet** and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded. (Jn. 13:5) – So many husbands just tell their wives how they ought to think, speak, and act. However, Christ showed His disciples and was free of hypocrisy.
 - Fifth, Christ led as *a servant* – ²⁵And He said to them, “The kings o the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called ‘Benefactors.’ ²⁶But it is not this way with you, but the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and **the leader like the servant.**” (Lk. 22:25-26) – This is one of the beautiful paradoxes of the Christian life. It takes practice and attention to Christ’s example for husbands to properly lead as a servant.
2. *It is biblical and practical.* The above principles can be applied in many different ways, but here are some ways in which they may be applied.
- *Is others-oriented.* Taking into consideration the needs, input, and desires of those under you.
 - *Is God-oriented.* The husband leading like Christ will lead his wife towards God ultimately.
 - *Sets an example of self-control.* In Proverbs 23:26-28, the author begs his reader to avoid the harlot in self-control, and the means by which the reader is to live out this self-control is by following the author’s example. “Give me your heart my son, and let your eyes delight in my ways.” (Prov. 23:26)
 - *Solves problems Biblically.* The world’s solutions to life’s problems are ignored in wisdom and holiness by the godly husband. God’s Word needs to be sought often and joyfully.
 - *Instructs not as a father, but a team leader.* A husband is not a father to his wife. It can be helpful to view his role in terms of being a team leader or team captain since they should have the same goal of glorifying God.
 - *Motivates.* A practical way the godly husband can lead is by motivating his wife. This can be done by example or by word. Considering 1 Peter 3:7 is vital in carrying this out appropriately.
 - *Manages.* 1 Timothy 3:4, 5, 12 lay out the qualifications for church leaders, and one of them is that they manage their household well. An effective manager provides direction and guidance to those under their authority. Many husbands throw their hands up in response to difficult children or a difficult wife as if to say, “That’s between them and God!” While that is true, the husband has the unique opportunity to purposefully guide and influence his wife in a Godward direction.
 - *Views marriage as pleasant.* ⁹**Enjoy life with the woman whom you love** all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun; for **this is your reward in life and in your toil** in which you have labored under the sun. (Eccl. 9:9)
 - It can helpful to view marriage and a man’s role as husband as a pleasant thing. It is

something God has established not simply to be endured, but to be enjoyed. This is not the goal, but the byproduct of a God-honoring marriage.

The Christ-Like Husband of a Non-Believing Wife

Some husbands became Christians after having been married as an unbeliever to an unbeliever. Generally speaking, the Christian husband of a non-Christian wife should still seek to obey the principles laid out for all husbands above. However, there are some specific instructions and some general biblical principles given to men in this situation.

1. *Remain married and therefore committed to the marriage* – **1 Corinthians 7:12-16, 20, 24** – Paul addressed this concept of spiritually-mixed marriages in 1 Corinthians. His main motivation for urging believers to remain married to non-believers is to bring a sanctifying influence to the home. In short, he views the situation as an opportunity for the furtherance of the gospel.
2. *Radiate the gospel and Christ* – **Matthew 28:19-20** – This concept is directly tied to and flows out from the previous, but is so important it needs to be mentioned specifically. In the spiritually mixed marriage, there is tremendous opportunity for the gospel to be spread in the clearest and most intimate manner. Believers are to make disciples “as they go” in their life, and a marriage is an excellent setting for disciple-making even though it has its unique challenges.
3. *Respect God’s work in their life and be patient* – **1 Corinthians 3:6-9** – As the gospel is ministered to the unbelieving wife, the believing husband must remember that it is God who causes the growth in people’s lives, and he must therefore exercise patience.
4. *Remain in fellowship with other believers* – **Hebrews 10:24-25** – Though the unbelieving wife may not want the believing husband to be involved in fellowship at a local church body, this is a clear command for believers to obey. This is how the parts of the body of Christ are designed to work together. A word of caution ought to be issued on this topic though because some Christian husbands may take this too far and spend every waking hour “serving the Lord.” He must not neglect his responsibility to display Christ to his unbelieving wife.

Real Life Scenarios

Yourself: You used to try to be a godly leader in your marriage, but after year one of a rocky marriage you gave up trying because it seemed easier to just let your wife take the lead. This approach has seemed to work since there is much less quarreling between you and your wife.

- A. What steps need to be taken to turn your leadership around in the marriage?

Someone Else: A young friend of yours at Bible Study has told you he is worried about his marriage because he does not feel in love with his wife anymore after a few years of marriage.

- A. What follow-up questions would you ask to understand the situation better?
- B. What would you tell him initially if you had only a few minutes to address his situation before seeing him again the following week?

Conclusion

Worldly notions of male leadership in the marriage are either non-existent or very crooked. The way in which the Bible addresses this topic is twofold. There are direct commands regarding the husband’s role in marriage, and there are comparisons made to Christ. Through these we see that a godly husband needs to love his wife as Christ loved the church, he needs to live with his wife in an understanding way, and he needs to lead as a servant-leader.

Most marriage problems are solved as men in marriages seek to do these three things, but “fixing a marriage” is not the ultimate goal. The ultimate goal has been, and always should be, to glorify God and worship Him as He desires to be worshipped. Following these three guidelines for husbands in marriage should not be the starting point. These manifest themselves as husbands bring themselves under the authority of God’s Word and as they walk in the Spirit. If a man’s relationship with the Lord does not thrive, his marriage will not thrive. It may be “fun” and “peaceful” at times, but these experiences will be superficial and fleeting.

