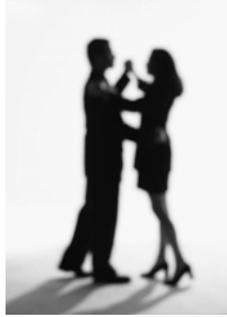


More on Roles—and *the* Role Model.



Ephesians 5:22-33

For the last couple of decades, sociologists have been questioning the relevance of marriage and predicting its imminent demise and ultimate disappearance. To buttress their claims, they will cite statistical trends. Just over a decade ago, the Bureau of the Census reported that the *fastest* growing marital status category was *divorced persons*. In that report, they noted that the number of currently divorced adults [had] quadrupled ***from 4.3 million in 1970 to 17.4 million*** in 1994. More recent statistics would indicate that the rate of divorce has peaked and is starting to decline. But that seeming bit of good news is actually misleading. When you take the time to get beneath those statistics, you find that there are fewer divorces because more and more couples, troubled by their prospects for divorce, are *simply opting not to get married!* Since 1960, co-habitation has increased by 1000%. From 1990 to 2000, households headed by unmarried partners grew by 72% and that trend is continuing.

But you don't need statistics to tell you what you encounter on a daily basis with friends, co-workers and classmates. I asked my daughter this week about her classmates at her public school and she said by all appearances at least half of her classmates come from homes that have experienced divorce. My wife, who is a substitute teacher sees the same thing—along with the disturbing effects on the children who come from such homes. With such dismal results, you might expect a good bit of cynicism from cultural barometers like the best-selling author and newspaper columnist, Lewis Grizzard. Before he died of complications from a congenital heart defect at the age of 47, Grizzard had been married four times. After his last marriage, he cynically concluded: “*Instead of getting married again, I'm just going to find a woman I don't like and give her a house.*”

Frankly, I am not all that surprised by that. It is the inevitable result of people trying to pursue a relationship that cannot be accomplished apart from a vital relationship with the One who designed marriage. What *I am* increasingly concerned about is the fact that the church of Jesus Christ has not escaped this dilemma. In 2000, pollster George Barna reported in a survey “that **33%** of self-described ‘Born-Again Christians’ have divorced their spouses, a rate statistically equal to non-believers.” In that same survey, Barna discovered that “90% of all divorces among Christians occurred *after* they came to Christ” (Barna Report, August 6, 2000).

But there is something that concerns me just as much as biblically groundless divorces in the church. It is Christian couples who are *missing what God intended a marriage to be!* It is couples who are *still together*, who have *not* succumbed to the world's way of dealing with an unhappy marriage by simply walking away from it and starting over—yet who are *miserable* and who are giving their children reasons *every day* why they ought to grow up and *never get married*. It is couples who fervently oppose same sex marriage and who would rally God's people to oppose any laws or cultural trends that would weaken marriage—yet *whose own marriages* contradict such a position by their marital *discontentment or apathy*.

*So what is going on? What is happening to God's people these days? Are we just ignoring that there is a problem? Are we in denial? I don't think so. Actually I think there is a lot of concern. One reason I know that is the fact that there have never been more Christian books on marriage than what you see in bookstores today. Literally shelves of them. With so many resources, Christian homes ought to be healthier than ever. Never before in my lifetime have I seen so many conferences and seminars on marriage. And yet, from all I can gather both statistically and personally—things are not well. Please do not misunderstand what I am about to say. Listen very carefully or you will misconstrue my words. I am **all** for good books on marriage. In fact, we encourage that. I am all for couples' retreats and conferences. We just had a wonderful conference for our married couples last weekend. But *far too much* of what is being written and discussed on marriage by Christian writers fails to grasp what a Christian marriage is *supposed to be*.*

Let me give you just one example of what I am talking about. One Christian writer offers the following explanation as to what is wrong with many marriages. Listen to his diagnosis and cure:

*“Could it be that deep inside hurting couples exists an invisible ‘emotional love tank’ with its gauge on empty? Could the misbehavior, withdrawal, harsh words, and critical spirit occur **because** of that empty tank? If we could find a way to fill it, could the marriage be reborn? Could that **tank** be the key that makes the marriage work?”*

On the surface, this has some plausibility. When your spouse does a poor job of living you—when they are unkind or insensitive, that really does hurt. No doubt about that. But if they would grow in understanding you, pleasing you and loving you—does that solve your basic problems? Do you *only respond in evil ways* when *evil is done to you*?

Let's try that premise from the other side? If you could only give your spouse enough of the right thing—would that *guarantee* that they would love you in return? Keep thinking with me. What does this sound like? It sounds like a truism that says: If you can find a way to scratch your spouses itch, may, just maybe they'll start scratching *your* itch. Is this 'love tank' concept really in the Bible? If so, *where*? The closest thing you will find is what Jesus talks about in Matthew 5:46:

“If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?”

Permit me to paraphrase that. “If you fill the love tank of those who maintain your tank (or those whom you *might wish* to fill your tank)—what’s your reward? ***Don’t even lost people do that?***”

I have to admit to you that I *really* like it when my wife figures out how to fill the tank of my desires and wishes. When she does things like make my favorite meal. When she says things like—Are you going to get to watch March Madness tonight? I know how much it means to you to watch Kentucky play on national TV. I just love it when she is sweet and kind to me after I have had a challenging day. And no doubt she likes it when I help her by jumping in and doing the dishes or surprising her with an unexpected gift. And all those things *really can be a blessing*. But we have gradually learned something else. Our tanks have some **major** leaks!! We have found that even when our itches have been itched, that there are needs much deeper that no amount of mutual back-scratching will satisfy. In short, we are discovering that ***God’s agenda for marriage is much bigger filling each other’s love tanks. It is much more satisfying than mutual back-scratching!*** And we are learning (I repeat—we are **learning**) that we can engage in God’s agenda, regardless of how the other happens to be doing on a given day. In fact, it is only when we are seeking ***God’s agenda*** that we enjoy the greatest satisfaction.

First Testimony: Allen and Rachel Litfin who have been married for nearly 68 years!

The agenda I have been talking about and that you have just heard illustrated is described in several places—but no less in Ephesians 5:22-32.

22 Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. 25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her 26 to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, 27 and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. 28 In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church— 30 for we are members of his body. 31 “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” 32 This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. 33 However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

PRAY

Whatever else this text may be saying—it first and foremost points to *this* truth: ***A truly Christian marriage is one that intentionally mirrors the relationship between Christ and the Church.***

We have been comparing marriage to a dance. When a couple is dancing, each partner has to keep in step with the music that is being played in order for the two to dance

together without stepping all over each other's feet or causing each other to stumble and fall. These verses provide the Holy Spirit's choreography for our dance. Let's begin with the wife's choreography:

I. The wife's role: Submission "as to the Lord" (22-24).

What are the steps a wife follows who is dancing in step with God's symphony?

Submission is first of all a matter of...

- A. **Order**—We have already talked about the word submission a couple of weeks ago. Though some have tried to equate this term with oppression and exploitation, that is *far* from its meaning. First of all, keep in mind that the term speaks of order or arrangement. Back in Genesis 2, when God created Adam and Eve, He did so with a clear order in view. He created Adam—then Eve. They were both equally human—but each had a different role. Paul reminds us in verse 23 that Adam was assigned the position of headship—just as Christ has been given the Headship of the Church. Wives are no more inferior to their husbands than Christ is inferior to His Father to whom He submitted when He came to earth. Genesis 2:18-23 goes into more depth in explaining how this order plays out. It talks about Eve being a "suitable helper." She is his divinely designed completer. As Dr. Wayne Mack points out, "*She is what a key is to a lock. She is absolutely indispensable.*" Or like one of my teachers said: Marriage is like complementary angles. The wife is acute and the husband is obtuse!

Illustration: How Kellie helps "Mr. DAY-TIMER" to be more *relational*. Her passion to demonstrate care and sensitivity balances my passion to get things done.

The point here is that there is *nothing* here of inferiority. A *beautiful* reflection of God's order and our Orderly God.

Submission is not just a matter of order that is outwardly seen in the way she complements her husband. It also involves the inner attitude of ...

- B. **Respect**—You see this word mentioned explicitly in verse 33. And at times a wife can really struggle with this part—especially when her husband is not doing a very Christ-like job of loving or leading. But to really get this, you have to go back to verse 22. To whom does a wife ultimately submit? That is where the phrase "as to the Lord" kicks in. (Paul doesn't discuss some of the "what-ifs" of failing authority, like if a husband is out from underneath God's authority and asks her to go against

God's Word (c.f. Acts 5:29). See also Matthew 18:15-20 and Galatians 6:1-2 (along with Matthew 7:1-5).

The bottom line: The basis of all this is your relationship to Christ. When you submit to your husband, you are not just submitting to a man. You are learning about and submitting to a deeper reality: Your submission to God and His agenda to make you more like Christ! Submission to another fallen human being challenges you to have to confront your own desires and to come face-to-face with whose will you are living for—God's or your own. Discipleship is learning to re-order your priorities under the agenda of the King of Kings—something that Adam and Eve and the whole human race lost at the Fall.

Does this seem a bit unfair? Wait until you see the other side of this before you ask that question....

II. The husband's role: Christ-like love.

For those of you who think this is easier or better—think again. Think of Christ's love. What did that involve? Appeasing the church with occasional flowers—or an obligatory date?

Just look at the description in verses 25-27.

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her 26 to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, 27 and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

A ton of truth packed into this. First of all, let me begin by saying that this is not talking primarily about Christ's present work of progressive sanctification to make her more and more like Himself. I used to take this passage and try to make it into a practical parallel of how husbands can promote spiritual purity in their wives. While that is not a bad idea and while Christ ultimately *will* sanctify His church, that is not what Paul has in mind here. All of the language here points back to **Ezekiel 16:1-14** where Ezekiel describes God's marriage to Israel and all that he did to make her His bride. Don't have time to read it now. I would encourage you to take a look at it. It is the most astounding picture of God's sovereign grace and love in all of the Scriptures. It starts out with a rather graphic description of God finding Israel abandoned by the pagan nations, thrown in a ditch and left to die. He comes to her. Cleans her up, wiping off the impurities that accompany a newborn child right after it has been born. The language is the language of a Jewish prenuptial bath which was the way a bride was exclusively set apart for her bridegroom. In Ephesians 5:25-27, Paul is tying in to that language and applying it to the Christ and the Church. Jesus found the church when she was dirty and rejected. And He gave her a prenuptial bath and made her His bride. How? By the washing with water through the Word. A general reference to having family devotions? No! This word is none other than the Gospel! It was the Gospel preached to the Ephesians and others that caused them to become Christ's bride. But how could this relationship even come about? He gave Himself up for her! He died!

Paul is not making a complete parallel here. He is talking about things that no man can do for another person—let alone His wife. All He is saying is this: Here is how to love your wife. Die! Die to your own agenda. Die to your will and desires. Die to self so you can live to serve your wife and reflect the love of your Savior before a watching world!!

So husbands—you don't have to have a perfect wife. In fact if you did, that would mess up the whole illustration. You just have to follow the lead of your Savior. You just need to look to the Conductor's baton and remember what He did for you!

Second Testimony: Bob (and Jessica) on how to lay down your life.

We tend to think of laying down your life as being willing to physically die if necessary for your wife or a child. And that is true. But it is also rare. Equally telling—and perhaps even more demanding is the *kind* of laying down of one's life that Paul has in mind in these verses. I want you to hear from another couple where that actually took place. This is a continuation of a story you heard last week. During the baptism, Jessica Bucholtz shared a powerful testimony of God's saving grace to her. Along with several other moving testimonies, she talked about the deception of sin and how it affected her life personally, but eventually even broke up her marriage.

What she didn't have a chance to tell you was how her husband—eventually her ex-husband—continued to minister to her in a way that reflects what Paul is talking about in this passage. I have asked both of them to come up and talk to us briefly tonight before we close.

Questions:

1. **Bob**—We are by no means making you out to be a perfect husband. You are a sinner saved by grace like any other sinner saved by grace. But the thing that has struck me is that you ultimately did not allow Jessica's struggle to cause you to take your eyes off of a Savior that you had only recently come to know shortly after you began attending Cornerstone. What did it mean to love her as Christ loved the church—even when you couldn't see it being returned back to you? What did you think about? What kept you loving her and serving her in a Christ-like way—even when you had to have been struggling?
2. **Jessica**—What did Bob do to model Christ's love you? How did it impact you?

So what does all this look like-for husbands *or wives*?? Read Ephesians 4:1-3; 4:22-24; 5:1-2; 5:18ff.

What is God's agenda? It is to take two fallen sinners, two people that were spiritually dead—give them new life and a new purpose—so they can learn to dance together in a world that is totally out of sync with God's symphony. Why? In order that through His gracious re-orchestration of our lives He might demonstrate the glorious grace of His Gospel!