

## OF FOOTBALL AND LOVE

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February, 1993

With football season behind us (that high church holy day, Superbowl Sunday, is now past) and Valentine's Day just ahead (as I write), maybe it's a good time to put in a word for marriage, especially to husbands coming out of "football hibernation" (that period of winter when husbands' bodily functions slow down as they sit for months in front of the tube watching game after game). Some of you wives may need to read this to your husband if he's forgotten how during the football season.

The combination of football and marriage reminds me of a true story I read in *Reader's Digest*. A woman married for 34 years to a coach said that she had learned that a ball game always has top priority. But one particularly frustrating day she burst out, "Frank, you'd miss my funeral to go to a ball game!"

Very calmly her husband the coach replied, "Roberta, what *ever* made you think I'd schedule your funeral on the day of a game?"

A marriage is a lot like a new diet or exercise program—easy and even fun to begin, but difficult to hang in over the long haul. As humorist Sam Levenson puts it, "Love at first sight is easy to understand. It's when two people have been looking at each other for years that it becomes a miracle."

But I think it's not so much a miracle as it is the result of taking marriage off autopilot and giving it our energy and attention. God's Word says as much when it commands us, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her" (Eph. 5:25).

Several things arrest my attention in this verse. First, it's *directed to me* (the husband), not to my wife. I think that as American men we tend to think of love and romance as women's stuff. But the Bible plops it squarely in our laps as men. We are to be the lovers.

Second, it's *commanded*, not just a helpful hint for whenever I get in the mood to try it. That means that to be obedient to Christ, I must concentrate on what it means to love my wife as He loves His church. As Tim Stafford has pointed out, "Nowhere does the Bible say that love is the basis for marriage; marriage is the basis for love. Paul's command is 'Husbands, love your wives' rather than 'Men, marry your lovers'" (*Christianity Today* [1/16/87], p. 22). If love in a marriage has grown cold, it is precisely *in that marriage* that it must be revived.

Third, I look in vain for any command that says, "Husbands, get your wives to submit to you." The command to me says *nothing about getting my wife to do anything!* It does confront me with the ongoing responsibility of loving my wife.

Fourth, it's an *impossible command* in that Christ's love for the church is a never-attainable standard. But that doesn't mean that I should give up. Rather, I must keep working at it. The suggestions that follow are directed at myself first, as well as at each husband in the church:

\* *Make time to be together.* Cut out some of the busyness of your life and carve out time to talk, take a walk, or do something fun together. Shortly after taking over as head coach of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers football team, someone asked Ray Perkins if his wife objected to his 18-hour workdays. His reply: "I don't know. I don't see her that much." But as someone else pointed out, "Not many men get to be 65 and say, 'I sure wish I'd spent more time on my business.'"

\* *Don't disparage the small talk.* As men, we tend to make light of the "unimportant" details of life and focus on the "big" stuff. But it's important just to ask, "How did your day go?" and then to give my

focused attention as she tells me (rather than saying, "Uh, huh" as I read the paper). Simone Signoret made a profound observation: "Chains do not hold a marriage together. It is threads, hundreds of tiny threads, which sew people together through the years." Make sure you don't discount the threads of daily small talk.

\* *I need to love my wife in ways that make her feel loved*, not in ways that I think *ought* to make her feel loved. I may think that working hard to earn a good living shows her that I love her; but she wants my time and attention more than anything else. To make her feel loved, I need to do what makes her feel loved, not what I think ought to make her feel loved.

\* *I need to check my tongue*. Are my words kind, encouraging, and accepting or sarcastic, critical, and angry? Do I tell her often that I love her? Do I respond to her anger toward me with a counter-attack or with a blessing (1 Pet. 3:8-9)?

\* *Am I giving spiritual leadership* to her and the family? The Bible consistently directs commands for spiritual leadership to the husband and father. A lot of men feel inadequate here, since their wives know more about the Bible than they do. But how can you lead unless you start? Your own times with the Lord must be the foundation. Pray for your wife and children. Then, lead the family in Bible reading and prayer as consistently as possible. Talk with your wife about the things of the Lord, being vulnerable to admit your own struggles. Read a book on the spiritual life with her and discuss it.

So how about giving your marriage a check up? Not many guys hit 65 and say, "I sure wish I'd spent more time watching football!" (or whatever your particular time-consumer may be). But quite a few wish they'd spent a bit more time working on their marriage.