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I'M THE BOSS, AREN'T I?

Ephesians 5:25-33

By

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I'm The Boss, Aren't I?
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If you were to ask most Christian men, "What is your primary responsibility in the family?" they would reply, "To be the head of the home." If that's what you think, I say, "You're wrong!"

"But," you protest, "I'm the boss, aren't I?" No, Christ is the boss. Jesus alone is Lord of the family. I'm not minimizing the staggering responsibility given to the husband. Scripture is clear that he is in fact the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church. For reasons I don't completely understand, American men are especially passive when it comes to leading their families. The erroneous egalitarian view of the feminists has further eroded the responsibility God gives to the man, but not to the wife, to function as head of that relationship. So I do not in any way minimize or disparage the need for godly, Christ-like leadership on the part of Christian husbands.

What I'm getting at is, when the apostle Paul turns to the husband, he does not say, "Husbands, be the head of your wives, even as Christ is the head of the church." Rather, he says, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her." Thus, a husband's primary responsibility is not to be the head of his wife, but to love her.

A husband's primary responsibility toward his wife
is to love her as Christ loved the church.

I believe that the main reason the apostle states the fact of the husband's headship when giving instruction to wives, but when he turns to husbands he commands them with regard to love, is that the primary way a husband exercises his headship is through sacrificial love toward his wife. As I pointed out last week, verse 21 applies to all Christians, that we are to be subject to one another in the fear of Christ. This requires developing a humble, servant-attitude toward one another, where we lay aside our rights and selfish interests and seek the good of one another because we fear the Lord and are subject to Him. That principle governs all the

specific relationships which Paul goes on to discuss in Ephesians 5:22-6:4: wives and husbands; children and parents; slaves and masters.

But, as I also pointed out, the principle of mutual submission does not negate the principle of authority which Paul goes on to stipulate. Wives express mutual submission by submitting to and reverencing their husbands (5:22-24, 33). Children express mutual submission by obeying their parents (6:1-3). Slaves express mutual submission by obeying their earthly masters (6:5-8). Husbands express mutual submission to their wives in the fear of Christ by loving their wives even as Christ loved the church.

That's the governing principle. As with the principle of the wife's submission to her husband, this principle for husbands runs counter to the world's wisdom. So we must deliberately reject the world's portrayal of macho manhood and carefully consider what Paul means and then work at applying it as Christian husbands.

1. Love is commanded and thus is possible for all husbands.

You may protest that this is an impossible command, because no human husband can ever love his wife as Christ loved the church. I agree that it is an ideal that will never be realized in this lifetime. But it is God's commandment to us as Christian husbands. As with all of God's commands, it will take a lifetime of effort and there will always be room for growth. But as we are filled with the Spirit (5:18) and diligently work at understanding and obeying the command, we can do it!

The fact that God commands us to love our wives means that this sort of love is not primarily a feeling. The feelings of romantic love are wonderful and should not be lacking from any marriage, even with couples who have been married for 50 years. But the basis of biblical love and of Christian marriage is not feelings of romantic love, but rather a commitment of the will. If a man says, "I just don't love my wife anymore; I'm in love with another woman," God's Word to him is, "If you want My blessing, you will cut it off instantly with any other woman and learn to love your wife."

As with all Scripture, to understand and apply it properly, you must know something of the historical and cultural situation to which it was written. The Ephesians were not a bunch of Sunday School boys when the gospel came to them. The city was steeped in the occult and in pagan worship of the goddess Diana (or Artemis). Statues of this goddess show a woman with multiple breasts. "Worship" included sexual intercourse with temple prostitutes (see Paul's instructions in Eph. 5:3-12).

Furthermore, many of these men were married to women whom they did not choose, since marriages were often arranged by the parents. The Greek writer, Demosthenes, describes the common mentality of pagan men in those days: "We keep mistresses for pleasure, concubines for the day-to-day needs of the body, but we have wives in order to produce children legitimately and to have a trustworthy guardian of our homes" (quoted by William Barclay, *Flesh and Spirit* [Baker], p. 24; he documents the widespread immorality of pagan Rome on pp. 24-27).

Against that pagan backdrop, you can see how utterly radical the Christian perspective was regarding the sanctity of marriage and the responsibility of the husband to be singularly devoted to his wife in lifelong, sacrificial love! It is no less radical in our corrupt culture. But my point is, even in a marriage where the husband has fallen into the sinful ways of the world, where he has been unfaithful to his wife (or her to him), where romantic love has gone cold, it is possible through obedience to God's Word to turn that marriage relationship around so that it not only honors God, but also is fulfilling to the couple.

2. To love your wife as Christ loved the church, you must understand and practice biblical love.

Definitions of biblical words are important. We say, "I love pizza!" "I love baseball!" "I love my wife!" Great! But what does that mean? If you operate with a definition of love that you picked up from watching movies or listening to popular songs or reading romance novels, you will have the notion that love is some mysterious feeling that comes over you kind of like the flu, and when it goes away, there's not much you can do about it. But, you will not obey God by loving your wife as you should. I've hammered out the following definition of "*agape*":

LOVE IS A SELF-SACRIFICING, CARING COMMITMENT THAT SHOWS ITSELF IN SEEKING THE HIGHEST GOOD OF THE ONE LOVED.

This is what God requires of us in all our relationships, both toward Him and toward others (the two great commandments, Matt. 22:37-39). But it is particularly the primary job description for Christian husbands toward their wives. Let's explore it:

A. Love is self-sacrificing.

"Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her" (5:25). He is both our standard and model. He didn't sit on His throne in heaven and bark commands to us on earth. He didn't even come to this earth and sit on a kingly throne and give orders to us. At a personal cost that we can never fully fathom, He laid aside His rights as God, took on human flesh and became obedient to death on the cross, where He actually was made sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21)! "Amazing love, how can it be, that Thou my God shouldst die for me!" (Charles Wesley). Jesus' love is seen most graphically in His self-sacrifice for us on the cross.

A husband may say, "I'd die for my wife if it ever came down to it. I'd fight to the death in order to protect her." That's marvelous, and I hope you would! But the real question is, "Are you crucifying self on a daily basis on behalf of your wife?" Jesus said, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me" (Luke 9:23). At the heart of Christian living is not using other people to meet your needs, but setting aside your needs and selfish desires in order to meet others' needs for Jesus' sake.

I agree with Martyn Lloyd-Jones, in his excellent exposition of this text (he spends over 100 pages on these verses!), who says, "The real cause of failure, ultimately, in marriage is always self, and the various manifestations of self." He goes on to say that self is at the root of all problems in this world, not only individually, but on a national and international level: "--all these troubles ultimately come back to self, to 'my rights', to 'what I want', and to 'who is he?' or 'who is she'? Self, with its horrid manifestations, always leads to trouble, because if two 'selves' come into opposition there is bound to be a clash.... Therefore," he states, "any tendency to as-

sert self at once conflicts with the fundamental conception of marriage." (*Life in the Spirit* [Baker], pp. 211, 212.)

Yes, the wife must also practice self-sacrificing love toward her husband, since all Christians must love one another. But, the apostle's special command to husbands is that we love our wives sacrificially, as Christ loved the church. The marriage relationship is supposed to be an earthly portrait of the believer's relationship with his Lord (which is a major reason why egalitarianism is dead wrong). But many husbands know nothing in daily practice about laying aside their rights, their comfort, their pleasures, their pursuits, their time, for the sake of their wives. If you are using your wife simply to meet your needs, if you don't regard her needs above your own, if you are demanding your own way in the home, you aren't loving her sacrificially.

Let me put it in even more concrete terms: If when you come home from work, your attitude is, "I've worked hard all day; I deserve some time off. Don't bug me, family!" you don't love your wife and children as God calls you to do. Instead, as you drive home, you should be thanking God for the wonderful wife and children He has entrusted to you, and be praying for them and thinking about how God wants you to minister to them. If your wife brings you your slippers and the paper and says, "Enjoy yourself," that's fine. But if the kids are going berserk, the phone is ringing, the dishes are piled up in the sink, and the trash needs taking out, you may need to set aside your right to some relaxation and serve your wife out of love.

B. Love is caring.

Paul says that just as a man nourishes and cherishes his own body, so he should treat his wife (5:29), because that's how Christ treats the church and because the wife in fact is a part of the husband's body. Again, our relationship with Christ is the great model for Christian marriage. Just as Christ gave Himself to meet our need for salvation, and just as He constantly supplies our every need (Phil. 4:19), so the husband must seek to meet his wife's needs.

"Nourish" means to feed. Every man feeds his own body (some feed it too much!). Just as we all think about and take action

to feed ourselves when we're hungry, so every husband should think about and take action to feed his wife on every level--physically, through adequate (not excessive) material provision; emotionally, through being sensitive to her feelings; and, spiritually, through his own walk with God and by taking the lead spiritually in the home.

"Cherish" has the nuance of warmth. It is used of a mother tenderly holding her baby close to her body (1 Thess. 2:7). It connotes the utmost in tender loving care. The callous words, "I couldn't care less" should never cross a husband's lips. When part of your body gets hurt, you don't ignore it or cut it off. You tenderly nurse it back to health. Even so, when your wife, who is part of you, is hurt or needy, whether physically, emotionally, or spiritually, you should tenderly care for her. "Nourish" and "cherish" are the opposite of self-centered indifference.

C. Love is a commitment.

This is implied in the fact that it can be commanded--it is an act of the will, not just the emotions. It's also implied in the fact that it involves the definite action of leaving father and mother and permanently cleaving to his wife, so that the two become one flesh. We need to understand several things about this commitment:

(1) *It is a realistic commitment.* That is, a man should not enter marriage thinking that this perfect person is going to meet all his needs. Just as Christ knew us, including all our imperfections and sin, and yet gave Himself so that we might become His bride, so a husband should realize that his wife is not perfect, but he's committed to love her anyway. True love is not conditioned on your wife's always being sweet and kind, or always looking like a magazine model. In fact, the time love is most needed and tested is when your wife isn't altogether lovely!

(2) *It is a growing commitment.* That is, you must work at it and nurture it as the years go by. It doesn't run on auto-pilot. It requires thought and attention. It often must be done when you don't feel like doing it.

(3) *It is a total commitment.* You don't hold anything back. This commitment ends independence and creates a new single one-flesh entity. As Dr. Lloyd-Jones points out (p. 212), a husband will not

feel this one-flesh reality instinctively; he must be taught it, and then he must learn to practice it. It means that the husband is no longer to think only of himself. He must include his wife in all his thinking and plans. He doesn't just come home and announce that he and his buddies are going to do something, without talking it over with her. By being joined with a wife, a husband is committing himself to spend time with her, not because he *is obligated to*, but because *he wants to*. It means sharing yourself totally, your thoughts, your dreams, your fears, your struggles, your victories.

Of course, such a total, one-flesh commitment can't be practiced if a couple never spends time talking, not just about deep things, but also about the little things that make up each day. Someone observed, "Chains do not hold a marriage together. It is threads, hundreds of tiny threads, which sew people together through the years." Christian marriage is both the "chain" of permanent commitment, made at the wedding and constantly reaffirmed; and the little threads of much time together over the years. Husbands, if you just do your own thing, and don't spend time with your wife, you're not loving her as you should.

D. Love shows itself.

By this I mean, love isn't just an attitude or talk; love takes *action*. Jesus didn't just say, "I love you"; He took the basin and towel and showed love by washing the disciples' dirty feet. And then He went to the cross to demonstrate it. Jesus took the *initiative* in loving us. He didn't wait for our response nor did He limit His love because we don't respond as fully as we should. He proved His love in that while we were yet sinners, He died for us.

Even so, husbands are to be the initiators of love toward their wives. I'm not referring to the physical aspect of love only, but to the total kind of loving I've been describing. Even when your wife isn't acting in a lovely way, take the initiative to act in self-sacrificing love toward her. It will drive her crazy! Seriously, it will cause her to have fewer times like that.

E. Love seeks the highest good of the one loved.

This means that it is not effortless ecstasy. It is *deliberate, purposeful*, and requires *constant effort*. Just as Christ's goal for His bride is to sanctify her, to purify her, to present her without spot or

wrinkle, holy and blameless, even so a husband should be committed to helping his wife become all that God wants her to be. Occasionally this kind of love requires loving confrontation. But the overall flavor of it should be upbuilding, encouraging, positive, purifying words and actions.

Seeking your wife's highest good means that there is no place for verbal or physical abuse in marriage. No verbal abuse means no name-calling, no sarcasm, no jokes that put her down, no angry threats. She is a part of you, and any hurt you inflict on her you are really doing to yourself. Verse 29, by the way, isn't encouraging self-love, but rather using the fact that we all do love ourselves to say, "That's how we should love our wives."

Conclusion

The late, well-known pastor Harry Ironside once had a recently-married young man come to him and say, "I need your help. I'm in an awful state. I'm drifting into idolatry." "What's the trouble?" asked Dr. Ironside.

"Well, I'm afraid that I'm putting my wife on too high a plane. I fear that I love her too much, and I'm displeasing the Lord." "Are you, indeed?" asked Ironside. "Do you love her more than Christ loved the church?" "I don't think so," replied the young man.

"Well, that's the limit," replied Ironside, "for we read, 'Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself for her.'" (*In the Heavens* [Loizeaux Brothers], p. 281.)

Husbands, your job description, your main responsibility that you ought constantly to be measuring yourself against, is to love your wife just as Christ loved the church. Such love is *a self-sacrificing, caring commitment that shows itself by seeking your wife's highest good*. While you'll never fulfill that command completely, you must exert constant effort to do it, not just so that you and your wife will be happy, but because your marriage has much to do with Christ and the church (5:32). The world needs desperately to see Christ's sacrificial love for the church through your love for your wife. The head of the home should be the leader in love.

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss this proposition: Love is not the basis for marriage; marriage is the basis for love.
2. Discuss Dr. Lloyd-Jones' comment: "The real cause of failure, ultimately, in marriage is always self" (*Life in the Spirit*, p. 211).
3. How does a man rekindle lost feelings of love? If it requires effort and work, is it really love?
4. A wife says, "My husband doesn't love me"; a husband says, "My wife isn't submissive." Your response?

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