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DO YOU REALLY LOVE YOUR WIFE?

Ephesians 5:25-33

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Ephesians Lesson 49

Do You Really Love Your Wife?
(Part 1) Ephesians 5:25-33

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.)

Husband, do you *really* love your wife? How does your love for her compare to Christ's love for the church, which moved Him to give Himself for her on the cross? It's safe to say that no matter how long you've been married and no matter how happy your marriage may be, there is always a need to grow in Christlike love for your wife.

While I will be applying my comments specifically to husbands (because our text does), I should point out that Jesus commanded all of us to love one another just as He loved us (John 13:34). In Ephesians 5:2, Paul tells all believers to walk in love, just as Christ also loved us and gave Himself for us. So these comments apply to every Christian, single or married, male or female, in that general sense. We all must continually be growing in Christlike love for one another. But there is also a specific sense in which Paul applies the need for Christlike love to Christian husbands.

Christlike love should characterize each husband's relationship with his wife.

As we saw last time, Christian marriage is an earthly picture of the relationship between Christ and His bride, the church. The world should be able to look at a Christian marriage and see a distinctive difference in the way that husbands and wives relate to one another. Satan focuses his attacks on Christian marriages, in that the testimony of Christ and His sacrificial death on the cross is at stake. When Christian marriages break up, it sends a false message to the world, that Christ does not love His bride with an enduring love. So this text is not here just so that you can have a happy marriage, although it will help you do that. It's here for a much greater purpose, to help us all glorify our Savior through marriages that reflect the relationship between Christ and His church.

1. Love is the priority for husbands.

(1) Authority is not the priority.

Following Paul's instructions to the wives (5:22-24), which state that the husband is the head of the wife, you would have expected him to say next, "Husbands, exercise your headship over your wives diligently, just as Christ is the head of the church." If you were to ask Christian husbands, "What is your main responsibility toward your wife?" you would often hear, "To be the head of my home!" While that is a serious responsibility (as we saw last time), that is *not* what Paul says when he addresses husbands. Rather, he says (literally), "Husbands, be continually loving your wives...." The husband primarily (not the wife) is responsible to set an atmosphere of love in the home.

(2) Material provision is not the priority.

Many American Christian husbands think that their main responsibility is to provide an increasingly comfortable lifestyle for their wives and children. In fact, they would say that the long hours that they work are an expression of their love for their families. The truth is, many men find it easier to give their wives and children *things* than to spend time with them and share their hearts with them in deep, loving relationships.

The Bible bluntly states that if a man does not provide financially for his family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever (1 Tim. 5:8). Those are strong words, and we should not disregard them! But, Paul is saying that we must provide our fami-

lies with basic needs, not with all of the stuff that the world says we need to be happy. Rather, your main responsibility toward your wife is, "Love her!" It's not easy, but it is your priority.

2. Love is possible for all husbands.

There are two reasons that although difficult, love is possible:

(1) Love is possible because it is commanded.

God never commands us to do something unless He gives us the power to accomplish it. As we've seen, all of these verses reflect the results of being filled with the Holy Spirit (5:18). Without the Holy Spirit's replacing our self-centeredness with His fruit, which begins with love (Gal. 5:22-23), we could never make progress in loving our wives as Christ loved the church. While we will never do it perfectly in this life, with the Spirit's power, we can make significant progress in it.

The fact that God commands us to love our wives also means that the excuse, "I used to love her, but I don't love her anymore," won't cut it. If you say, "But I don't feel the same love for her that I used to feel," the Lord's reply is, "Get to work at obeying My commandment and the feelings will rekindle!" Falling in love is somewhat easy and effortless. But staying in love and growing in love require deliberate focus and effort. If your marriage has degenerated into bitterness, blaming, and anger, you'll have to work much harder at obeying this command. But the fact that God commands it means that it is possible and required.

(2) Love is possible because it is commanded to men from every conceivable background.

Just as the command for wives to be subject to their husbands is not culturally determined, but required of all wives in every culture, so the command to husbands to love their wives is given to all Christian husbands. Many of the husbands in the Ephesian church had been saved out of raw paganism. Many of them had frequented the Temple of Diana, goddess of the Ephesians, where both male and female prostitution were a part of the "worship" ritual. (This accounts for 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 Greece and 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 she 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.

But, to apply Paul's command, we must be clear about what he means by "love." Is it that overpowering feeling that swept you off your feet when you first saw her face?

3. Love is portrayed as a self-sacrificing, caring commitment that shows itself in seeking the highest good of the one loved.

If that definition sounds familiar, it's because I developed it when we studied Ephesians 5:1-2 (and also on many other occasions!). Each part of the definition comes right out of our text:

"Love is self-sacrificing," just as "Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her" (5:25).

"Love is caring," just as a man nourishes and cherishes his own flesh, as Christ does the church (5:29).

"Love is a commitment," as implied by the command to love, by Christ's covenant love for us, and by the analogy of the body.

"Love shows itself," that is, it is not just words, but also deeds, as seen by Christ's going to the cross for us.

“Love seeks the highest good of the one loved,” just as Christ died for us so that He might sanctify and cleanse us, to present us to Himself in all our glory, as holy and blameless (5:26-27).

So the definition fits this text and I think that every man should memorize it (or create a better one of your own) so that you can think about applying it daily towards your wife. It is very important to clear our minds of the Hollywood image, that love is primarily sexual attraction that hits you mysteriously out of nowhere and just as mysteriously evaporates apart from your power to hang onto it. Certainly, God designed it so that love involves a mutual sexual attraction. Without it, I would not advise a couple to marry. But, to sustain and deepen love over a lifetime, we must understand Paul’s teaching here.

So, I want to explore the text in more depth by presenting ten contrasts to help sharpen our understanding of what biblical love looks like practically. (We will only be able to cover two of them this time.)

(1) Love is sacrificial, not selfish.

“Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her” (5:25). He is our standard. He didn’t sit on His throne in heaven and bark commands to us on earth. 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)

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 tremendous, and I hope you would! But here’s the real question: “Are you crucifying self on a daily basis on behalf of your wife?” Is your focus on using her to meet your needs or on setting aside your selfish desires in order to meet her needs?

In his exposition of this text, Martyn Lloyd-Jones says (*Life in the Spirit* [Baker], p. 211), “... the real cause of failure, ultimately, in marriage is always self, and the various manifestations of self. Of course that is the cause of trouble everywhere and in every realm. Self and selfishness are the greatest disrupting forces in the world.”

Yes, the wife must also practice self-sacrificing love toward her husband, since all Christians must love one another. But, the apostle's explicit command to husbands is that we love our wives sacrificially, as Christ loved the church. The main responsibility for setting a loving climate in the home is on the husband. But many husbands know nothing in daily practice about laying aside their rights, their comfort, their pleasures, their pursuits, or their time, for the sake of their wives. If you're 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, wifel!" you don't love her as God calls you to do. Instead, as you drive home, you should be thanking God for the wonderful wife He has entrusted to you, and be praying for her and thinking about how God wants you to minister to her. 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.

(2) Love is purposeful, not aimless, effortless ecstasy.

Paul gives us Christ's purpose in giving Himself for the church (5:26-27): "so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that 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."

The world views love as an aimless, effortless state of ecstasy. You fall in love, kind of like falling off a surfboard. Once you're in the water, you just let the current carry you along. If you have to work at it or give it any effort, you must not have the real thing. True love is totally spontaneous and unplanned.

But biblical love involves effort to reach a purpose. Christ does not achieve His aims for His bride by effortless spontaneity! He has a definite purpose and He works with us to achieve it.

- Married love has an exclusive purpose.

“That He might sanctify her....” To sanctify means to set apart unto God for His purposes. There are three senses of sanctification in the Bible. There is positional sanctification, which happens at the moment of salvation. God sets us apart for Himself. In this sense, Paul writes (1 Cor. 1:2), “To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus....” There is also progressive sanctification, which is the process by which God makes us holy in practice (1 Thess. 4:3). And, there is final sanctification, in which we will be completely holy at the moment of Christ’s return (which is pictured in Eph. 5:27).

While some view the sanctification of verse 26 as the process of progressive sanctification, it may be more accurate to view it as the positional sanctification that takes place at the moment of salvation (Peter O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* [Eerdmans/ Apollos], pp. 421-422). In this sense, it has in view the exclusivity of our marriage to Jesus Christ. Just as couples often pledge at their wedding, “forsaking all others, I devote myself to you alone,” so when Christ saves us, we are set apart from the world unto Him alone.

In practical terms, men, this means that you must put a protective fence around your love for your wife. There is no place for flirting with other women. I think it is dangerous and inappropriate for a married man to continue or to form friendships with women other than his wife, unless his wife is fully included. To take another woman out to lunch is to flirt with temptation. Also, it should go without saying, but I’ll say it, you should not look at other women lustfully, whether in pornography or in person. While there is a sense in which Jesus loves all people, there is a special, exclusive sense in which He loves His bride. Even so, a Christian husband guards the exclusivity of his relationship with his wife.

- Married love has a purifying purpose.

Christ “cleansed [the church] by the washing of water with the word.” This probably refers to the cleansing that takes place at the moment of salvation, when Jesus’ blood cleanses us from all our sins (O’Brien, p. 422). While *sanctifying* refers to being set apart exclusively unto God, *cleansing* refers to the removal of our sins. Many commentators understand “the washing of water with the word” to refer to baptism and the word of consecration that accompanies the ritual. But, there is nothing in the context to indicate baptism.

Probably in Paul's mind was the ritual bath that Jewish brides took before their weddings.

Or, he may have been thinking of Ezekiel 16:8-14, where God describes how He entered into a marriage covenant with His bride Israel. He washed off her blood, anointed her with oil, and clothed her in beautiful garments and jewelry, so that she looked like a queen. Even so, Christ took us from our impurity and cleansed us from all our sins, making us the bride of the King.

"The word" (5:26) is from a Greek word meaning, the spoken or preached word, and probably refers to the gospel (as in Eph. 6:17; see also, John 15:3 & 17:17, which both use *logos*). It is through the word of the gospel that we are cleansed and set apart unto God. When Christ opens our ears to really hear the word of the gospel, that He shed His blood to cleanse us from our sins, and when He imparts to us faith to believe it, we become His purified bride, set apart unto Him.

The application for husbands is that we must be committed to the total well-being of our wives, but especially to their spiritual growth in holiness. You should read the Word with your wife and pray with her and for her, so that she will grow in godliness. Talk together often about the things of God, including both the struggles and the joys of the Christian life. Protect your wife from the world's moral filth as much as you are able. Don't take her to raunchy movies or suggest that you view pornography together to improve your sex life. Unless you have a medical problem, the Bible has all that you need to have a satisfying sex life (have you read the Song of Solomon or Proverbs 5 recently?).

- Married love has an edifying purpose.

The entire thrust of verses 26 and 27 is of the Lord building His church, so that we will be holy and blameless. That has been His purpose from eternity, in that in Ephesians 1:4 we read, "just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him." The Lord never does anything to tear down or put down His chosen bride! Even when He must discipline us, He does it in love that we may share His holiness (Heb. 12:6, 10).

The application for Christian husbands is obvious. Any thoughts, words, or deeds that put down your wife, ridicule her, attack her, or tear her down, are not in line with your God-given purpose. At times, you may need gently to correct her in love. But your aim is to help her grow into a truly beautiful woman in the sense of Proverbs 31:30, "Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised." Or, in the words of 1 Peter 3:4, you want to encourage her to develop "the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God."

Conclusion

We will have to look at the other eight contrasts next week. But for now, let me urge all husbands to focus on two things:

First, immerse yourself often in the wonder of the cross. Paul is not giving out shallow self-help tips, divorced from sound doctrine, on how to have a happy marriage. He roots his instruction to husbands in the theology and beauty of the cross, where the sinless Son of God offered Himself in order to secure His bride. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones points out (*ibid.*, pp. 137-138), "His argument is clearly this—it is only as we realize the truth about the relationship of Christ to the church that we can really function as Christian husbands ought to function." When you are overwhelmed daily with the fact that Jesus Christ died for your rotten sins, to make you His bride, the humility that that produces in you will spill over into self-sacrificing love for your bride. So take time each day to think about the glorious, amazing grace shown to you at the cross.

Second, take time often during the week (perhaps as you're driving home from work each day) to think about how you can show love to your wife. Be as practical and specific as you can. It may be as simple as asking about her day and giving her your focused attention as she tells you. It may be helping her with the household chores or giving her a break from the kids. But if you aren't giving it focused thought, you are not obeying Paul's command here. Your love for her should be sacrificial, not selfish. It should be purposeful, not aimless. You should do it not primarily to have a happy marriage, but primarily to glorify the Lord, who loved you and gave Himself for you on the cross.

Application Questions

1. Why does Paul emphasize submission for wives, but love for husbands? What implications does this have?
2. Discuss the implications of Dr. Lloyd-Jones' comment, "The real cause of failure, ultimately, in marriage is always self."
3. Does biblical marital love involve romantic feelings? If so, how can it be commanded? How can lost feelings be rekindled?
4. Many wives are further along spiritually than their husbands are. How can a husband in such a situation seek to help her become all that God wants her to be? Where does he begin?

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