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## UNDERSTANDING AND HONORING

### YOUR WIFE

1 Peter 3:7

by

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1 Peter Lesson 15

## Understanding and Honoring Your Wife

1 Peter 3:7

I read a fictional story called “Johnny Lingo’s Eight-Cow Wife” (by Patricia McGerr, *Reader’s Digest* [2/88], pp. 138-141) that is a parable on our text. It took place on a primitive Pacific island, where a man paid the dowry for his wife in cows. Two or three cows could buy a decent wife, four or five a very nice one. But Johnny Lingo had offered an unheard of eight cows for Sarita, a girl whom everyone in her home village thought rather plain looking. The local folks all made fun of Johnny, who they thought was crazy to pay so much for a wife.

But when the teller of the story finally sees Johnny Lingo’s wife, she is stunned by her beauty. She asks him how this could be the same woman—how can she be so different? Johnny’s reply shows that he’s nobody’s fool:

“Do you ever think,” he asked, “what it must mean to a woman to know that her husband has settled on the lowest price for which she can be bought? And then later, when the women talk, they boast of what their husbands paid for them. One says four cows, another maybe six. How does she feel, the woman who was sold for one or two? This could not happen to my Sarita.”

“Then you did this just to make your wife happy?”

“I wanted Sarita to be happy, yes. But I wanted more than that. You say she is different. This is true. Many things can change a woman. Things that happen inside, things that happen outside. But the thing that matters most is what she thinks about herself. In Kaniwata, Sarita believed she was worth nothing. Now she knows she is worth more than any other woman in the islands.”

“Then you wanted—”

“I wanted to marry Sarita. I loved her and no other woman.”

“But--” I was close to understanding.

“But,” he finished softly, “I wanted an eight-cow wife.”

People tend to live up—or down—to how we treat them. If we offer repeated praise and affirmation, the person responds by living up to it. If we run the person down, they oblige us by meeting our negative expectations. Peter tells husbands that, like Johnny Lingo, they should treat their mates as eight-cow wives. Husbands should understand and honor their wives.

The reason Peter gives this command may startle you, if you aren't overly familiar with the verse. We are not to treat our wives well so that we will have happy marriages, although that will be one result. Rather, we are to treat our wives properly so that our prayers will not be hindered! Isn't that startling—that there is an undeniable connection between how you treat your wife and your prayer life! Since effective prayer is at the heart of a walk with God, this means that if a man mistreats his wife, I don't care what he claims, he cannot be enjoying close communion with God.

Husbands are to understand and honor their wives  
so that they will have an effective prayer life.

Although it is only a single verse, it is brimming with profound truth that will transform every marriage if we husbands will work at applying its principles. I would translate it freely like this: “Also, husbands should dwell together with their wives according to knowledge, assigning to them a place of honor as to a delicate instrument, namely, a feminine one, as a fellow-heir of the gracious gift of eternal life, so that a roadblock will not cut off your prayers.” There are two commands and one result: (1) Live with your wife according to knowledge; (2) Grant her honor as a fellow-heir of the grace of life (= salvation); (3) The result: So that your prayers will not be hindered.

1. Husbands are to understand their wives.

We all have a deep-seated longing to be understood by at least one other person who cares for us and accepts us for who we are. We all enter marriage with high hopes for a deepening understanding to be built between us and our mate. And yet, all too often, a couple grows increasingly callused toward one another.

In American culture, for some reason, men are often inept at understanding their wives on a deep level. So there are disappointments and hurt feelings that never get resolved. The husband shrugs his shoulders, ignores his wife whom he doesn't understand, and pours himself into his job, which seems to be something he can handle. She shares her feelings with women friends and gets caught up in the frenzy of raising children and running a household. And then the nest starts emptying and the wife starts thinking about going back to school and getting a fulfilling job at about the same time the husband realizes that he isn't fulfilled through his job and what he really wants is intimacy with his distant wife (or with a younger version who excites him more). It's no surprise that the divorce curve shoots up at this point in life.

This piece, called "The Wall" (author unknown) captures the drift that often sets in when understanding is lacking in a marriage:

Their wedding pictures mocked them from the table,  
these two, whose minds no longer touched each other.

They lived with such a heavy barricade between them  
that neither battering ram of words nor artilleries of touch  
could break it down.

Somewhere, between the oldest child's first tooth and the  
youngest daughter's graduation, they lost each other.

Throughout the years, each slowly unraveled that tangled  
ball of string called self, and as they tugged at stubborn knots  
each hid his searching from the other.

Sometimes she cried at night and begged the whispering darkness to tell her who she was.

He lay beside her, snoring like a hibernating bear, unaware of her winter....

She took a course in modern art, trying to find herself in colors splashed upon a canvas, and complaining to other women about men who were insensitive.

He climbed into a tomb called "the office," wrapped his mind in a shroud of paper figures and buried himself in customers.

Slowly, the wall between them rose, cemented by the mortar of indifference.

One day, reaching out to touch each other, they found a barrier they could not penetrate, and recoiling from the coldness of the stone, each retreated from the stranger on the other side.

For when love dies, it is not in a moment of angry battle, nor when fiery bodies lose their heat.

It lies panting, exhausted, expiring at the bottom of a wall it could not scale.

No one plans for that to happen, but we all know it does happen all too frequently. How can we prevent it? By working at three aspects of understanding our wives implied in this verse:

A. Understanding your wife involves developing and maintaining togetherness in your marriage.

Peter says that you should "live with" your wife. You say, "I've got that down! We both live at the same address and share the same bed and eat many meals together." But the Greek word means more than

just sharing living quarters. It is used only here in the New Testament, but in the Greek Old Testament it is used several times to refer to the sexual relationship in marriage. Peter uses it to refer to the aspect of togetherness. A husband is to promote a spirit of emotional, spiritual, and physical closeness that is only possible in the commitment of marriage.

It's significant that Peter puts the responsibility for togetherness on the husband, not on the wife. In our culture, women are often the relational ones. Men aren't real communicative; they just sort of grunt. But the Bible puts the burden for intimacy in marriage primarily on the husband, not on the wife. If there is a drift in your marriage, men, *you* are to take the initiative to bring things back together. This doesn't mean that a wife can't act first if she notices a distance in the relationship. But it does mean that as men we are to be active, not passive, in developing and maintaining a close relationship with our wives.

I read a true story about a man who made a private vow to try to be a loving, giving, unselfish husband for the two weeks of the family's vacation. He worked hard at noticing his wife, of attending to her needs, of doing what she wanted to do, even if he really rather would have done something else. It went great. Toward the end of the time, he made a new vow to keep on choosing to love his wife like this.

But on the last night of the vacation, his wife was obviously upset. Finally she blurted, "Tom, do you know something I don't?" "What do you mean?" he asked. "Well ... that checkup I had several weeks ago ... our doctor ... did he tell you something about me? Tom, you've been so good to me ... am I dying?" It took a moment for it all to sink in. Then Tom burst out laughing, took her in his arms, and said, "No, honey, you're not dying; I'm just starting to live." (Tom Anderson, "How Love Came Back," *Reader's Digest* [10/86], pp. 129-130.) Maybe husbands should treat their wives as if they were about to die!

It may sound perfectly obvious, but one way to develop and maintain togetherness in your marriage is to do things together. So many couples live in their own separate worlds. Men, help your wife with the dishes sometimes, not just because she needs the help, but to

be together. Take walks together, go shopping together when you can. If you can't tolerate shopping, at least drive her there sometimes and sit in the mall and watch the people or read a book. The idea is, to be together so that you intertwine your lives. As Simone Signoret observed, "Chains do not hold a marriage together. It is threads, hundreds of tiny threads, which sew people together through the years."

B. Understanding your wife involves knowing her well.

"Dwell together with your wives according to knowledge." This comes partly through spending time together. The Greek word means to grasp the full reality and nature of the object, based upon experience and evaluation. It is the apprehension of truth, especially (in the N. T.) of spiritual truth (see point C). But here it refers not just to spiritual knowledge, but also to a knowledge of your wife based on careful observation.

Shortly after Ray Perkins took over as head coach of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers football team, someone asked him if his wife objected to his 18-hour workdays. He replied, "I don't know. I don't see her that much." He should have read the fortune cookie message that said, "If a man spend too much time with his fortune, someone else might steal his cookie!" Knowing your wife is not automatic. It takes time and effort.

Every husband needs to become an avid student of his wife. You need to know her personality, her likes and dislikes, her needs, her strengths, her weaknesses, her fears, her hopes, her joys. Such knowledge is a personal trust to be guarded with great care. You should never bring up a vulnerable point as artillery in a disagreement.

Elaine and Dave arrived at the hotel exhausted. Elaine had made all the arrangements for the room and the concert they planned to attend, and she let Dave know about it all the way, telling him how hard she'd worked to coordinate everything.

Then—horrors—they walked up to the desk and the hotel manager told them they had no reservations. He pulled out the letter Elaine had written and proved he was right.

“I had put down the wrong dates,” she groans. “And having been so full of myself, I thought for sure Dave would give me my comeuppance.”

What Dave gave her instead was a hug. “Honey,” he said, “don’t worry. We’ll find something else.” It dawned on Elaine that she’d married the kind of person who never hits you when you’re down. (Judith Viorst, *Reader’s Digest*).

That man knew his wife and he didn’t use his knowledge to tear her down, but to build her up. That’s what Peter is talking about.

- C. Understanding your wife involves knowing God and His truth well.

To dwell with your wife “according to knowledge” means knowing her well. But also it has the nuance of knowing spiritual truth well. This is implicit in the phrase, “as fellow-heirs of the grace of life.” This points to the vast spiritual riches that are ours equally as men and women through faith in Christ (1 Pet. 1:4, 13). As a husband leads his wife spiritually into a fuller knowledge of all that God has prepared for those who love Him, they will grow together in a depth of intimacy the world can’t know. In knowing God and His Word, we will come to know ourselves and our wives and thus be able to relate to them more adequately.

This means, men, that if you’re spiritually passive, you’re not being obedient to what God wants you to be doing as a husband. A lot of men feel inadequate spiritually. Their wives spend time going to Bible studies so that they know more about spiritual things than their husbands do. Many men leave early for work and come home late, too exhausted to spend time alone with God. I know it’s tough. But you can do what you want to do, and if growing and leading your family spiritually is a priority, you can do it.

Thus our first responsibility is to understand our wives, which means developing togetherness, knowing her well, and knowing God and His truth well.

## 2. Husbands are to honor their wives.

The word “grant” means to assign or apportion that which is due. A wife deserves honor (the Greek word has the nuance of value or worth). Grammatically, the phrase “as a delicate instrument, namely, a feminine one” can go either with “dwell together according to knowledge” or with “assigning her a place of honor.” I take it with the latter, the sense being, rather than take advantage of your wife because she is physically weaker, you should treat her carefully as you would a valuable instrument. A doctor would never think of taking an expensive, delicate instrument and using it to pound a nail. He would “honor” that instrument by treating it well.

In my opinion, if Christian husbands had practiced this well, we wouldn't have the backlash of the so-called “evangelical feminist” movement. Notice the fine balance that Peter lays out: On the one hand, the wife is the “weaker vessel,” who should submit to her husband (3:1) for the protection and care she needs. On the other hand, she is a fellow-heir of the grace of life, which means that she is not inferior personally or spiritually. Her husband is not to dominate her, but rather to assign to her a place of honor. Thus the Bible maintains a distinctive role for the sexes, but it does not put down women as second-class citizens.

A major part of honoring your wife involves how you speak to her and about her. There is no room for jokes or sarcasm that put down your wife. Also, if you have children, it is your job as head of the household to make sure that they honor their mother. You model it by treating her with honor, but you enforce it by disciplining them for disrespect toward her. You should join the husband of the virtuous woman (Prov. 31:10-31) in singing her praises. One of the things I often say to Marla and about her behind her back is that she makes our home

a refuge for me. She serves you as a church by doing that, so that I get recharged for the ministry by being at home with her.

So the two commands are, Understand your wife; and, honor your wife. The result is:

3. The result of understanding and honoring your wife will be an effective prayer life.

As I said, this is a somewhat startling conclusion. I would think that Peter would have said, "so that you will have a happy marriage," or "so that God will be glorified." Both will be true, of course. But Peter is calling attention to something we often forget or deny: That there is always a correlation between your relationship with your wife and your relationship with God (Matt. 5:23-24; 6:14-15). If you don't want a roadblock thrown up in your prayer life, then you must understand and honor your wife. It's also interesting that if the Greek word translated "dwell together" has a sexual connotation, then both here and in 1 Corinthians 7:1-5, Scripture brings together that which we invariably separate, namely, sex and prayer. (I'll let you explore the theological implications of that!)

But please note: If your prayers are not effective, your life is not effective in the ultimate sense. Prayer is at the very center of life, since it is our link with the living God. Everything else in life hinges on having an effective prayer life. Yet, sadly, many Christian couples never pray together. If you don't pray with your wife, men, why not swallow your pride or fear and begin?

### Conclusion

Husbands, your work is cut out for you: To make your wife an "eight-cow" wife! You are to understand her and honor her so that your prayers will not be hindered. The late Bible teacher Harry Ironside once had a super-spiritual young man come to him and say, "Dr. Ironside, I have a spiritual problem. I love my wife too much!" He probably thought that Ironside would commend him for his great dedication to God. But instead, Ironside wisely asked him, "Do you love her as much

as Christ loved the church?" When the young man stammered, "Well, no, I don't love her *that much*," Ironside said, "Then go get on with it, because that's the command."

#### Discussion Questions

1. How can a man who has trouble expressing his feelings learn to communicate?
2. How can a man with a habit of putting down his wife learn to build her up instead?
3. How can a man who feels inadequate learn to lead spiritually?

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