

Dad loves Mom

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Family Priority Number 1: The Marriage



While parenting is hugely important and even sacred in significance, the human relationship that is most critical is the marriage relationship. The marriage relationship is second in importance only to one's walk with God through Jesus Christ, which is the relationship that trumps (and controls) all others. The marriage relationship is more important than the role of being a parent. It is more important than the role of being a (grown) child. It is more important than one's role as employee, business owner, or supervisor. It is more important than any friendship. My role as a husband is more important than my role as a pastor serving in the local church.

The Power Passages: Ephesians 5:22-33 (especially verses 22-25); 1 Peter 3:7

When Daddy loves Mommy, and the home radiates the feeling of a stable sanctuary from the craziness of our planet, the children in the family receive joy and confidence. It is as if they are able to breathe in good, clean air—emotionally speaking. Conversely, we need to realize what goes on in a child's heart and mind when parents' fight and fuss, or worse. Our little ones are looking to us and to our/their homes for their foundational peace, even after they grow up. You may be thinking: "Uh oh! We've really messed that up for them!" My children have already been exposed to toxic emotional air in our home!

If you feel that way (and we probably all do to some degree), know that everyone and every family struggles as the result of our innate, sinful selfishness. Take courage in the reality of the redemptive power of God's grace and in the fact that we can—through the power of Jesus Christ flowing through us—respond to this truth now and begin to impact our families with the peace and love of heaven.

Here are the three takeaways.

1. Marriage is a picture of an important spiritual truth



I love asking married couples the “how-did-you-meet” question. I cherish my wife’s and my story. If you don’t believe in the possibility of love at first sight, I’m pretty sure I could put up a good debate with you on that. I was 15 years old, and summertime life for kids in my town pretty much revolved around the youth baseball park, which was a five-minute walk from my boyhood home. I was a lefty who played first base, savored the post-game free snow cones, and enjoyed my buddies. Life was pretty simple. Then one day, that summer when I was 15, I saw her, standing in front of the bleachers. What a smile! What a gorgeous girl! Incoming...Cupid’s arrow...direct hit!

I was smitten, but very shy. So, I spent the next several months watching her from a safe distance. I knew when her brothers would be playing baseball (meaning she would likely be there). I knew her parents’ vehicles. So, I would know when to show up and watch her from a safe distance. (I think the modern term for my strategy would be “stalking.”) My friends faded in importance. My mind was in another place entirely. After a few months of observing my paralysis and pining, my cousin/best friend walked up to Jennifer at a ninth-grade dance and very much broke the ice. “My cousin wants to dance with you,” he told her, “but he is too shy to ask you. Will you dance with him?” In retrospect, I realize that this crossroads had two potential outcomes: freeze up or step up. I stepped up...thanks cuz!

Jennifer and I dated all through the rest of junior high school and high school, except for a couple of months when she transitioned from junior high to high school and announced to me those dreaded words: “Let’s take a break.” (I’m almost over that painful period). We stayed together as we went to college at Ole Miss. When I was a junior, and she was a sophomore, we knew it was time, and we were married during spring break, 1991.

Full disclosure: right before we married, I did my best to talk her out of marrying me. Why? I loved her so much that I wanted her to be sure that she wanted to throw in for life with a guy who wasn’t gearing his life around the American dream of big house/lucrative career/nice toys/travels, etc. Instead, she would be getting permanently mixed up with a guy who believes that this world is just a place where we learn to die to self and learn to live out by faith a life in which we focus on the things that have eternal significance. I loved her so much that, unless she also saw the big picture in this way, I did not want her to be with me and be frustrated that our goals were not in sync.

Thankfully, she didn’t blink! At this writing, our marriage has been a glorious 27 years and has been blessed with three children. My relationship with Jennifer brings incalculable joy and

meaning to my life journey. The way I can count on her and can count on us brings strength and peace to me that is my foundation for service and ministry, second in significance only to my eternal security in Christ.

You may be wondering...what does your love story have to do with God (or Ephesians, Chapter 5)? Here's the spiritual connection: my feelings of love and devotion to my wife provide me with insight into how Jesus Christ feels about me. He loves me much like I love my wife—only His love transcends even my strong love for Jennifer, because, well, He is God! He is love!

Thus, as a metaphor, marriage helps us to understand some important truths about God. It also gives us insight into His priorities and plan for creation. We know that God is beyond brilliant...He is majestically and gloriously wise. His depths of wisdom and majesty are unfathomable and beyond what our finite minds can grasp. To help us to at least get a glimpse of the important, fundamental truths about Him, God has put into motion things that we *can* understand that He then connects to those important spiritual truths. In addition to the marriage metaphor, some additional examples of this from Scripture include:

- The way we are told to look to God and trust Him as our “*Father*”
- The fact that a fellow believer is our “*brother*” or “*sister*” in Christ (that takes care of the lust problem!)
- How children are told to obey and honor their earthly parents as the “training wheels” version of learning to obey their Creator.
- The use of many other metaphors that help us to understand invisible, spiritual truths: “*light*” of the world, “*bread*” of life, “*Shepherd/sheep*,” “*branch/vine/fruit*” and many others.

Marriage was put into motion by God in part to help us understand many truths about Him, especially about His great “agape” love for us. Since the Word of God connects the marriage of a man and a woman to the relationship between Jesus Christ and His church, we know that marriage is a big, big deal to God.

Our “power passage” that teaches about this connection is Ephesians 5:22-33. In this passage, we read these amazing words: “*Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself for it*” (Eph. 5:25). This is a standard for loving another that is more premium and more pure and more powerful than any love we can imagine. The husband is to love his bride even as Jesus Christ loves the church! Motivated by His love for us and by His obedience to His Father, Jesus Christ suffered immeasurably and loved the church all the way to the cross and charged into the gates of hell, emerging victorious from the grave! And husbands are to love our wives with this kind of love as our model!? Husbands, what should be hitting our

minds is that this love for our wives is a sacrificial love, an intense and focused love, a protective love, a selfless love—a love that exceeds all other earthly relationships!

In this Ephesians 5 passage, we learn in verses 30-33 that God set the original marriage union into motion back in the Garden of Eden in part to help us to understand the way that He feels about us. When I think about the way I love my wife, these deep emotions and feelings can help me to get at least a glimpse of my Savior's love for me. This helps my feeble finite mind get a little traction in understanding the way the infinite Lord Jesus Christ feels about me.

In Ephesians 5, the apostle Paul reveals that this connection is by design. The relationship between man and wife united in marriage, united in such a special "*one flesh*" relationship, gives insight into the "*great mystery...concerning Christ and the church*" (v. 32).

Now, ladies, if your husband were to take this powerful message from Eph. 5:25 and run with it, what would be your response? (Don't say, "I would faint!") According to the amazing God who created you as a woman, according to His Scriptures, you have been built by Him to *respond* to that love. We will study this beautiful aspect of God's design for the woman in more detail later, but for now note that it is by the stunning design of our great Creator that:

1. A man who loves His wife as Christ loves His church;
2. Teamed with a woman who is responding to that strong love being poured into her;
3. Puts into motion a force that is a great testimony to the love of God and the genius of God.

Somehow, mysteriously, in the marriage union, 1+1 equals something bigger, greater and stronger than 2. The "one flesh" relationship of marriage is one of God's most precious and supreme gifts to His creation.

2. Success in the marriage role depends on our walk with our Savior



Now the hard part.

While the truths presented above are fascinating, glorious and hopeful, there is bad news to confront. The husband is sailing into some pretty strong headwinds. In fact, considering the realities of life on this fallen planet, he is sailing into a monster storm! There are enormous challenges from *without* the marriage, *within* the marriage, and *within* our very hearts and souls.

The external attacks on marriage are obvious. Our culture has abandoned the truths of Scripture, which place loving boundaries on sex and marriage. We are barraged with images and messages telling us to gratify our needs and impulses, regardless of purity or consequences. Our culture tells us that our (fleeting) happiness should be our main passion and goal. Our culture tells us that the Bible's definition of marriage is lame and outdated (and evangelicals haven't done a very good job of refuting this attack by living out biblical marriage). This is spiritual war. The enemy quickly attacked Adam and Eve's "one-flesh" relationship through his temptations, as we see playing out in Genesis 3:

Eve, did God really try to limit your happiness?

Eve, take the forbidden fruit...doesn't it look good?

Eve, be free from the shackles God has placed on you and Adam...

Adam, Eve, be free...be like a god yourself...be the captain of our own destiny...

The enemy is still using the same strategy, with the same devastating consequences.

The very definition of marriage, from a biblical perspective, has been replaced by both a warped definition of marriage (same-sex "marriage") and by a "who-needs-marriage anyway" attitude. Believing parents can even fall into this trap of downplaying the significance of marriage, for example, when we emphasize our children's education and careers over their sexual purity and God's plan for marriage in their lives.

The external attacks are relentless. Then, within the home, there are other forces feeding into this storm:

- Financial stress and the long-term toll on families caused by the setup of mom and dad both working outside the home.
- Extended family members who haven't figured out or heeded the "leave-and-leave" instructions of Genesis 2:24.
- Unbiblical priorities, as measured by how we invest our time.

These forces chip, chip, chip into the marriage, like termites. A marriage can get into trouble and be sinking before the couple even realizes the gravity of what's going on!

But the biggest, toughest, and most pervasive threat to our marriage is what we see when we look into a mirror. It is our sin nature. Ephesians 5:25 instructs me to love my wife selflessly. My sin nature oozes selfishness and ego. Ephesians 5:25 instructs me to sacrifice for her. My sin nature says, "Wait a minute! She oughtta be focused on me!" Ephesians 5:29 tells me to nourish and cherish my wife. My sin nature tells me to make my needs be the primary focus. Wives fight

the same internal, sin-fueled battle. Ephesians 5:22 says “submit,” which means “respond,” to your husband. Her sin nature says, “I’ve got a better plan than he does.” Her sin nature says, “I will call the shots because he’s incapable.” Her sin nature issues forth and radiates the desires to control, to lead, and to “fix” her man. However, the part of her made in God’s image is engineered to respond to the leadership of her husband, and a civil war erupts in her heart that drains the peace from her life (and her marriage).

What is the answer? How does the husband navigate this storm? How does the wife? Is there any hope, with divorce rates showing no signs of slowing down even with our nation (and the Christian community as well) moving into the 50 percent meltdown rate?

The standards that God puts forth for the husband, and for the wife, are impossible to measure up to in our own strength. For me in my own strength and through my own resources to love Jennifer “*as Christ also loved the church*” (v. 25) just has not happened, is not happening, and will not be happening. For Jennifer in her own strength and resources to respond to me “*as unto the Lord*” is not going to happen, either. Though we may usually hide it, our sin nature recoils at these principles of selflessness. The hope, our only hope, is to by faith access the grace and power of our position in the Lord Jesus Christ. Then, and only then, will His power and resources flow through our lives by means of the Holy Spirit. Looking at Ephesians 5 as a whole, and the letter to the Ephesians as a whole, the Bible student will learn that Paul is teaching that the life of spiritual fruitfulness is attainable for the believer *only* as he or she by faith will daily:

- “*be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man*” (Eph. 3:16)
- “*put off...the old man* [sin nature inherited from Adam, with its pride and selfishness], *which is corrupt according to its sinful lusts* (Eph. 4:22)
- “*put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness*” (Eph. 4:24)
- “*be filled with the Spirit*” (Eph. 5:18).

The Christian learns (from a study of the New Testament’s teachings on the Christian life) that victorious living—in which we experience freedom from the bondage of self (the worst of all our enemies) and thus freedom from the bondage of sin—is made possible by God’s grace as we place our trust in God’s promises pertaining to who we are in Christ. Though this (sadly) seldom-taught, game-changing truth is not the specific focus of the “Kids These Days” study, before you and I can become a godly spouse or godly parent, we must first know the source of our true power for godly living.

Take a hard, hard look at Galatians 2:20, and study the ramifications of this verse, and you will be on your way to unlocking some amazing information about how by faith to tap into the supernatural power of God Almighty Himself as you move through this sinful, fraying world. Additionally, Romans, Chapters 6-8, is perhaps the most comprehensive teaching in the entire Bible on the reality and implications of these truths. Men, we must go to the Scriptures, which bring us to the person and work of Jesus Christ—and by faith connect us to His power—before we can love our wives even as Christ loved His church. Women, you must go in faith to these

truths and connect by faith to His power, before you can respond to your husbands as if you are being led by the Lord Himself.

Go at it another way...and roll the dice on the 50/50 plan. Half of the marriages make it (though outside of Christ are still missing the true blessings of marriage)...and half of the marriages don't.

3. Marriage (in the Lord) is AWESOME!

Here is a prayer that every husband should pray: "God, thank you for marriage...thank you for my wife!" Men, when you think about it even just a little bit, you gotta admit that God put forward some of His "amazing grace" when he made woman. In fact, that is how Eve got her name. Adam saw her. His mouth dropped open, and the next words he said were, "Whoa! Man!" Hence the birth of the noun, "wo-man." This occurred after Adam discovered he was lonely because there was not yet, before Eve, in all of God's creation, a help or soulmate who was suitable for Adam (Gen. 20:19). Turns out, God was just adding some dramatic timing by making Adam wait for the best part of creation. God did something about Adam's loneliness, and, as always, He did it right! He then put them together, and God Himself officiated the first wedding ceremony as Genesis, Chapter 2, comes to a close.



A pattern that emerges in the Bible is that God puts up fences and limitations for our own good, and then the arrangements and avenues that He blesses us with inside the fence are very, very good. For example, extra-marital sexual activity is outside of the fence; thus, it is accompanied by feelings of guilt, fear, and the knowledge that the strong chastening of our heavenly Father is guaranteed to follow. On the other hand, the intimacy of marriage is inimitable, unsurpassed, spectacular and a special "*grace of life*" (1 Peter 3:7). And God put it all into motion as a very special part of His perfect plan for mankind.

Can I get an "amen"?!

Your Turn

1. Why are husbands told to love their wives in Eph. 5:25, but the wives are not given similar instructions to love their husbands?
2. Peter warns the husband's failure to honor his wife will "hinder" his prayers. That sounds serious...what is going on in that verse? (1 Peter 3:7).

3. “There is a simmering problem that I have got to address with my husband/wife (or I will absolutely explode!), and the kids are in the next room...what’s the next move?”
4. “So I’m feeling affectionate, and it is so good to see my wife that I want to let him/her know with a real kiss. ‘Ooooh gross!’ says our daughter. Is it a bad idea to be affectionate to my spouse in front of our children?”
5. “Hold on now, so I’m supposed to make sure my kids know they fall just below my spouse in the ‘pecking order’? Won’t that hurt their self-esteem?”