

Marriage in Christ: Roles

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It does not take long in a marriage to see the need to divvy up and negotiate some roles and responsibilities. Even before Korby and I got married, this started happening. When we were moving Korby into the apartment we would soon share after our wedding, I learned pretty quickly that Korby was in charge of where stuff went in our new apartment. If it wasn't for my persistence and her sweet disposition, all my stuff was going in the closet. But to this day, we regularly negotiate the roles and responsibilities that are required to make our home and relationship work.

Many of the roles in a marriage are negotiable. Who does the bookkeeping; who maintains the cars; who manages the children's healthcare; who does the grocery shopping and a million other responsibilities can all be negotiated between a couple. I'd recommend you divide up the responsibilities based on what you're good at (or not so good at) and the kind of availability and time you each have. It's really not rocket science; just divide and conquer.

But the scriptures tell us God has some specific responsibilities and a specific structure for our marriages. God will hold husbands accountable for something specific; the same is true for a wife. Today, we're going to explore those together. As we begin, let me remind you that you will not fully appreciate or understand God's word today without the full treatment I gave last week on submission. I'm still going to do my best to provide the necessary context and qualifications so we all can understand the Word of God today, but if you find yourself scratching your head or possibly protesting the roles God has given a husband and a wife tell yourself, "Well, Brian said last week's message would really be helpful for what I'm hearing today; I should probably go listen to that."

I want to begin this morning by addressing the responsibilities that God has given husbands starting in Eph. 5:25 because I think it helps us understand why God gives the instruction he does to wives. So, let's read that starting in vs. 25 (READ vs. 25-32).

We can see pretty clearly that the primary command is that a husband love his wife. He clarifies what this love looks like that by telling us the manner in which a husband should love his wife; *as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her*. Now, in one respect that's not as specific as we need it. That's pretty ambiguous. Thankfully, he's about to get pretty specific. But in another respect, what is helpful from the Apostle Paul's initial instruction is that he clues us in that for a husband to obey God in his role in a marriage it's going to take everything. Christ laid it all on the line for the church as we talked about last week. He completely emptied himself. He let go of everything to serve the church. And, my dear brothers, the same is required of you. You have to be willing to die to yourself to honor God in your marriage; you can not count your life as precious to yourself to fulfill God's call on your life. You have to trust God to provide for you when you are going to be so tempted to provide for yourself by making ugly demands or

being selfish with your time and energy. But, it is worth it, men. When we hear God say, “Well done, my son,” we will be glad we made the sacrifice.

Now, let’s get into the details. How does God *specifically* say a husband should love his wife? I’m going to start reading in vs. 25 again, but the key verses are 26 & 27 (READ). In those two verses I see three things. I see a task, the means, and the intended results. Christ loved his church by doing something, by means of something, for an ultimate goal. Likewise, Husbands are called to love their wives by doing something, by means of something, for an ultimate goal. Let’s break this down.

The task is spelled out at the beginning of vs. 26 - that he might sanctify her. A husband is to love his wife, he’s to lay down his life for her, to see her sanctified. Now, what does that mean? Here’s the short of it: it means that a wife knows and grows in the Lord. The Bible uses the word *sanctification* to describe the process by which a person becomes more like Jesus. More and more, as we walk with Jesus we become like him and less like the world he saved us out of. And God has given a husband the role of making sure that comes to reality in the life of his wife. What an awesome responsibility! Brothers, do you feel up to the task?

You might wonder, “How in the world would I do that?” Paul is so kind; he tells us the answer in the next phrase (vs. 26b), “having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word.” Now, some of that is poetic or metaphorical language. One image connected to sanctification has to do with being cleansed. And so Paul is picking up on that image or theme of sanctification with this picture of cleansing. We see something a little more concrete when he says what does this cleansing (this sanctifying): *with the word*. A wife grows in the Lord by the Word (and so does everybody else). So, get what Paul is telling us about how a man submits himself to the good of his wife: he dedicates his life to his wife so she might grow in the Lord; and that happens when he takes God’s word and encourages her with it day by day. Now, there’s a lot that accompanies the ministry of the word. He needs to be a good example; he needs to be patient and kind; he needs to pray for her; consistency, too, is required to see growth (you can’t just do this for a week - it’s got to be for life). But the word of God is the key ingredient for growth to happen. Jesus states it so simply, but definitively in his prayer to his Father in John 17:17, “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.” That’s what you need to grow; it’s what I need to grow. And husbands, for your wives to grow in the Lord they need the word and God says you’re the one to bless them with it.

I know that sounds daunting; you won’t be able to do it without intentionality, without help, without knowledge of the word, which all require a dying-to-self love. But let me finish this off by telling you about the reward or the goal; that’s found in vs. 27, “so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.” Imagine your wife without spot or blemish; imagine her soul so sanctified, so matured in the Lord that she is a worthy representation of the holiness of God. I’m so thankful that so many of you men think well of your wives; you should. But I would bet your wives, my dear sisters out there, would love to be even more like Jesus. I would guess she

longs to be more patient with the children, kinder to the inlaws, have more self-control, to live more at peace with you, to be gentler with people in times of stress, more faithful to God. What a blessing it would be for her; what a blessing it would be for your family. And think how much you, too, would be blessed.

So, let me summarize a few things. Here's how I might sum up God's unique call on a husband: brothers, God has called you to be the primary instrument that brings God's word to bear on your wife's life so she grows in the Lord; if you have a family, I would argue it extends to the family as well. In leadership circles there is a term dubbed *first among equals*. I often think of me and my wife, Korby, hand in hand, side by side, in life. We do things together. We work together, decide together; we pray together and encounter challenges together. We're equal in this. But when someone needs to be the first to serve, the first to sacrifice, the first to step in and absorb the blows of a harsh world, that needs to be me. That's God's call on my life. And that's how I submit to my wife. I submit my desires, my wishes, my comforts, my prerogatives for my wife. And when I do that and encourage her with the word of God, she will grow.

As we shift now talking about the roles God has given a wife, big surprise, they fit what God is up to with a husband. Think about it with me for a minute: if God has given a husband the primary responsibility to disciple his wife (and family) with the word so she grows in the Lord, what kind of response do you think God wants her to have? Let's read Eph. 5:22-24 and find out (READ).

The answer to the question I posed prior to reading that passage would be: receive it. God is telling a wife to submit to her husband who has been given the responsibility to work and care for her soul and life. Let's walk this through. Paul likens a husband's discipling responsibility to Christ's discipling and care of the church. A church grows and matures through the faithful ministry of Jesus. Consequently, a church needs to submit to the Lord. That's the model wives are to have in relation to their husbands. Do you want to grow in the Lord, my dear sisters? Do you want the care, the protection, the encouragement the Lord is holding your husbands accountable for giving to you? Well, then submit to him; be responsive to him so you can receive the blessing of his work for you. Let me respond to some possible questions about these words to wives.

First of all, when Paul calls a husband the head of his wife, he's getting at this idea of responsibility we talked about earlier. God has entrusted a husband (and father) with the primary responsibilities of leading his wife and family in the Lord. Like I said, a man and his wife walk hand in hand, side by side. But when God looks to hold someone accountable, he's going to hold a husband accountable because he has given him this primary responsibility.

This is emblematic in the first marriage in the Bible - Adam and Eve. When you read this story carefully (like we always should) you'll notice a few subtle details. Here's the first one: do you remember the command God gave not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? While they were both to obey the command, God actually gave the command to Adam;

Eve wasn't in the picture at that moment. Gen. 2:16 says, "And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, 'You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.'"

Now, here's the second observation: after Adam and Eve both sinned, after they both disobeyed God's voice when they doubted his words rather than believing them, we read this (3:8-9), "And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden, but the Lord God called to the man and said to him, 'Where are you?'" Who did God require an account from? Who did he call? They both sinned; they both received punishment; they were both equal opportunity offenders of God's law. But God held Adam to account; his reckoning was with him. The reason for that, in my view, is that God gives a husband the primary responsibility for the spiritual care of his home. Because God is going to hold your husbands uniquely accountable for what's happening in your home, ladies, God wants you to submit to your husband. Paul puts it this way: a husband is head of his wife.

The second thing I want to comment on from the verses from Eph. 5 has to do with the phrase Paul makes of Christ and by analogy the husband: *and is himself its Savior (vs. 23c)*. There is a way that a husband is certainly NOT a wife's Savior. If you don't read this passage with a discerning mind, you can really get into the weeds. A husband might read this and have a far too flattering picture of himself. So, here's where the analogy works well. As Jesus provides the care, the nourishment, the help, the encouragement, the discipleship of the church (and thusly, saves her) so is a husband called to provide the same kind of spiritual care. So, wives, respect your husbands; God means to nourish your soul through his ministry to you. That's why it's in your interest to submit to him.

Finally, let's take a look at that last verse, vs. 24 (READ). Again, you have to read this with a discerning mind. I can just see that "I don't think so" look all over my wife's face if I tried to quote this to my wife. And, indeed, this is hardly a verse that would support the idea that a wife should just do whatever her husband demands. That's not this at all. We see multiple examples in the Bible where followers of God refuse to submit to earthly authority because their commitment to God's way and truth take precedent. Using this verse to justify a woman submitting herself in abusive situations is wrong. Like I've tried to make clear in last week's and this week's message, there are ways and times husbands should submit to their wives. For example (this just happened in our home last week): at lunch time I cooked some leftover beef on a frying pan. We have a variety of pans with different surfaces and sizes. Apparently, I used the wrong pan. Do you know how I figured that out? My wife told me. She said, "Hey, next time use this pan for that; it will work better and it won't be so hard to clean." Do you know what I said? I said, "You're the boss!" Do you know what I mean by that? This is Korby's domain; we've negotiated that this is her area of management. And she's obviously our resident-expert on these matters. Of course I should say, "You're the boss" about that. I don't know what I'm doing. Do you think this verse is saying I should be able to think or say, "Well, I'm your husband and I

get to use whatever pan I want; you need to submit to me in every way just like the Bible says!” What a silly and ungodly way of reading this verse.

Here’s the spirit of this verse: Men and women need all of Christ in all of life. Wives, your husband is charged to help you see all of Christ in all of your life. Therefore, submit to him in every way, meaning, there isn’t an area of life that you don’t need the Lord and God has ordained that your husband be an instrument for you to gain more of Christ. Is there an area of your life, ladies, that you don’t need more of Christ? Money? Patience? Relationships? So, submit to him in every way so you can have all of Christ.

So, can I summarize some things like I did early for the husbands? Wives, God has given you a husband in the Lord to help you grow in godliness. That’s his calling; God will hold him responsible. Therefore, God has called you to submit to his work and responsibility in your life. What benefit will it be for you if you refuse to yield to his efforts? None!

Now, I know that none of us are doing these things perfectly. Guys, I’m sure you feel inadequate in your ability to bless your wife with the word so she grows in the Lord; maybe you feel guilty for not even trying. Ladies, you might be disappointed in your husband’s efforts to lead you well. But you also know you’ve responded poorly by pretty much pushing him aside and effectively saying, “Get out of my way! I’ll do it!” Here’s something I’ve observed over the years: husbands are all too comfortable abdicating their responsibilities and just letting their wives take care of stuff that they really should be doing. And wives are too quick just to grab the reins, take the initiative, and set the course they *know* is best. And do you know what I’ve seen time and time again? Resentment. Wives resent their husbands for failing to step up and husbands resent their wives for assuming responsibility and not giving a sliver of space for a husband to think and step up. It’s a recipe for disaster.

Do you know what you should do? Stumble forward together towards these things believing God that his ways and roles for us are good. We certainly will make mistakes, we will fail, and we will sin against each other in these ways. But do you know what that means? It means we will have great opportunities to practice confession of sin and forgiveness. That’s what’s required, friends. It’s the hardest thing in the world (to humble oneself, to admit failures, to give grace over hurts), but it’s the only thing that will keep a marriage going. And don’t wait for your spouse to get his or her roles perfectly; you’ll be waiting forever. Instead, you obey God’s word and trust the Lord to make up where you spouse is struggling. He is faithful.