

CHRISTIAN HOME AND FAMILY LIVING

by

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CHAPTER THREE

HARMONY IN THE HUSBAND AND WIFE RELATIONSHIP

Proverbs 31:10-31; I Corinthians 7:1-16; Ephesians 5:22-23

And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness (Colossians 3:14)

In all of life there is no relationship that is as close and intimate as that between a husband and a wife. The highest and purest platonic friendship between men cannot compare with it. It is closer than the relationship of parents to children, for one must separate from parents and leave the parental home to establish this kind of relationship.

“Woman . . . was taken out of Man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and cleave unto [that is, *adhere to, be attached or faithful to*] his wife: and they shall be one flesh” (Genesis 2:23, 24; Matthew 19:4-6; Ephesians 5:31).

Though there is sexual difference in much of the natural world, there is only one such divinely arranged closeness. In this union one man and one woman surrender their rights to a completely private life of their own. This means the tearing down of pretenses, the unveiling of self, body, emotions and desires to each other, and accepting each other for what they are. It is an almost terrifying closeness and requires courage and trust and every other Christian virtue. Not all people can face these intimacies and attain the oneness of which Paul speaks in Ephesians five and elsewhere. It is possible to live in the same house together and yet live apart.

In marriage the ability of one to bring happiness or frustration to the other is multiplied. Because of its intimate nature it can bring the most exquisite joy and satisfaction known to man, or it can bring the greatest disillusionment and misery possible in human life. This is intensified by the fact that a husband and wife are united for life (Mark 10:6-9) whether they achieve happiness or not.

Failure is inevitably blamed to others, or to certain circumstances or conditions which are considered beyond control. Whether a marriage will be heavenly bliss or the torment of maladjustment actually depends almost entirely upon attitudes, and the effort which the husband and wife put into it.

That it is not easy to achieve harmony in such close daily living is evident. It is a life that must be shared exclusively by two people of differing sex, temperament and abilities who have been molded for years to different likes, attitudes and values. No two people are alike (often we see that opposites attract) and no two homes set the same values and worth on everything. There is constant need for adjustment, and of serious attempts to understand each other. Every little thread must be carefully woven into the pattern of life.

Yet there is the tendency to drift along until a sudden squall all but upsets the marital boat, and things never seem quite the same again. Some say that there is nothing like a good quarrel and the thrill of making up, for good marital sailing, but Paul says there is a more excellent way for good human relations; that “**charity never faileth**” to bring and keep harmony (Romans 15:1-3; I Corinthians 13:4-7; Ephesians 5:28,29).

There is much confusion and ignorance about the basic and ideal relationship of a husband and wife. It would be hard to find a subject of more general interest and about which so many are pondering and expressing opinions.

It is being viewed from every side, from the problem of authority and equality to the function of sex and all possible reasons for incompatibility, with many a side issue thrown in for good measure. Great quantities of writings have been tossed on the public round table on such topics as: “Sex Fulfillment”; “When Is a Wife an Asset in Marriage?” “Men Only Think They are Superior”; “Can Wives Have Careers?” “Wife, Yes—Housewife, No”; “What Keeps a Husband Faithful?” “The Background of Conflict in Marriage”; “How to Be a Perfect Husband or Wife”—the angles are prolific.

It is made both an alluring and alarming subject. The public faithfully reads, checks quizzes and takes notes. Women worry, and hurry to the best stylists in beauty salons; they diet, and shop for new clothes and alluring perfumes to recapture their appeal, instead of frankly facing the real reason for disenchantment. The sex-conscious public has husband-wife relationships on a merry-go-round, with the solution always just around the next turn.

The people of the world, and their sociologists and columnists seem to be much more concerned about how husbands and wives get along than Christians are. At least, they do most of the talking about it.

The churches have generally been sadly negative about the purpose of sex in the divine plan; sex has often been puritanically presented as a “remedy against sin,” with the words of Paul (I Corinthians 7:1, 2, 7-9) used as proof. Even in this day when men speak freely, few of our leaders feel competent, or think that they have the necessary tact, to speak on such a delicate and personal problem.

Many Christian husbands and wives, often in ignorance, think that it is an improper and unscriptural subject. They are in error for, though it is in a real sense sacred and not to be spoken of in jest, it is Scriptural. Moreover, God’s Word has much to say about it, and presents the only right and workable standards for this important phase of life.

That the husband and wife relationship is a physical one is based on the creative act of God. His hand did not falter in the creation of the sexes. God called His creation of man and woman good; because of it, heaven rang with His praises.

We must believe that the sex drive which draws man and woman together is a normal, healthy, God-given impulse (Genesis 2:18-25; 5:1-3; 9:17; Psalms 127; 128). It had to be a strong and consistent urge otherwise the function of reproduction might have been neglected. Self-control must be exercised over such strong impulses, and the Word tells us that it must be channeled into one continuous association of one man and one woman, forming the husband-wife relationship (Mark 10: 6-9; I Corinthians 6:16; 7:2; I Timothy 3:2). Self-control is also necessary within its appointed bounds (I Corinthians 7:5, 33; 12:25; I Peter 3:7), that in and through it all God may be glorified in the body (I Corinthians 6:19, 20).

Those who promote or excuse sexual liberties do not respect the Word of God.

The misuse of sex was a shame, a horror and a folly in Israel. It was an insult to God the Creator, and to His people who were called by His Name (II Samuel 13:12; Jeremiah 29:21-23). Many and varied examples of its misuse are recorded, showing to the ages to come the resultant misery, the laws and the punishment for violating God's will and work (Leviticus 18; Numbers 25:1-5; Deuteronomy 5:18; 22:13ff.; Judges 16:1ff.; 19; 20; II Samuel 11; I Corinthians 10:5- 12).

There are warning stories of fornication, adultery, harlotry and prostitution, all of which the holy God furiously hates (Ezekiel 16:35ff); of the sin of Sodom which is proverbial for the most abandoned kind of wickedness. For such is reserved the **“suffering . . . of eternal fire”** (Genesis 19:4-8; II Peter 2: 6-8; Jude 7).

Infidelity among men and women is the most apt and often-used illustration of apostasy and disloyalty to God (Jeremiah 13:27; Ezekiel 16). Today excuses may be found for pre-marital relations and infidelity, and it may be almost accepted as a modern practice, but God still pours his wrath upon it, now in broken homes and hearts and lives, and later with exclusion from the eternal Kingdom of Christ and of God (Ephesians 5:3-5; Revelation 21:8).

The many examples of uncontrolled passion in the past, and the examples of the present day when men seem to go free while women pay the penalty, have tended toward resentment and tensions in women, and to the misconception that sexual fulfillment is a one-sided affair.

However, A. B. White, in his book, *Worry in Women*, writes that “to be indifferent to the physical expression of love, still more to dislike it, or to feel that it is in some way shameful is neither superior nor virtuous nor refined.” He suggests that it is a symptom of mental illness or maladjustment. Perhaps it is mostly a woman's lack of appreciation of the force within herself, that force which makes her radiant and appealing, gentle with children, loving, understanding and compassionate. Scripture admits of woman's longing for children, and of her need for sexual fulfillment, whether she recognizes it or not. In Genesis 3:16 we read that **“her desire (which means “craving”) shall be to her husband”** (see Genesis 19: 32; 29:32ff; 30:15ff; 39:7- 18; Exodus 21:10 and I Corinthians 7:5 where mutual duty is given respect).

We are told that marriage is pure and honorable (I Corinthians 7:38; Hebrews 13:4) and that **“Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing.”** We can find reason to praise God and rejoice in that part of our nature which can be a source of deep fulfillment and rich fruitfulness; which gives power to create new life, and is the means of the most tender and spiritual love between a husband and wife, renewing and enriching their entire relationship.

Harmonious living depends also on how we interpret, **“wives submit yourselves unto your own husbands,” “the husband is the head of the wife,”** and the **“to honor and obey”** of the marriage ceremony. There has been much ado about this for many years now, much rebelling and insistence on the equality of the sexes. Women are on the front lines of the competition for superiority. It is not generally known that this battle will never be at a truce unless we look to the Lord for mediation. It is up to Christian women to take the initiative.

More and more women want to combine marriage and a career in this effort to assert themselves. They forget that marriage is in itself a career that is exacting in its demands upon a woman as a wife and mother, friend and gracious hostess. Her price is far above rubies (Proverbs 31:10), and real happiness comes only to the wife who appreciates and fulfills her calling.

The status of the early Hebrew woman was completely tied in with her husband and her children. She was always under the authority of some man, either her father or her husband, who had the rule over her (Genesis 3:16). Later her worth as a woman came to the fore (Proverbs 12:4; 14:1; 19:14; 31:10-31), and her virtues of industry, artistry, business acumen and intellectual excellence were extolled.

Yet, the virtuous wife is not depicted as a career woman in her own rights but rather as a perfect helpmeet for her husband (see vs. 11,12,23,28, 29 of Proverbs 31). It is possible that a woman is as important to a husband's career as are his own abilities.

According to Jewish and contemporary thinking in Paul's day, women were inferior to men. Though Paul asserted that woman is not spiritually inferior for in Christ **“there is neither male nor female”** (Galatians 3:28), he expressed a conservative view in keeping with Old Testament teachings.

He tells us that women must be subject to their husbands, obey them and even fear them (Ephesians 5:22,23; Colossians 3:18; see also I Peter 3:1-6), wear a veil as a sign of subjection (I Corinthians 11:5-10), keep silence in the churches, and if they want any information they should ask their husbands (I Corinthians 14:34, 35).

Woman is not inferior as a person (I Corinthians 6:15; 11:11, 12; 16:19; I Peter 3:7) but only as to her status. This is based on the order of creation (I Corinthians 11:8, 9). The inspired apostle sees a definite ascending scale or order in the status of being, which he says is: woman, man, Christ, God (I Corinthians 11:3). Woman reflects and brings honor to man just as man reflects and honors God (I Corinthians 11:7); and woman's subjection to man is paralleled by the subjection of the Church to Christ (Ephesians 5:24).

Perhaps the idea of subjection and authority is rejected today because it is not fully understood.

The authority “**to rule over the woman**” does not mean that man completely possesses his wife, to do as he pleases with her. The idea that a woman is a man’s property can be drawn only from the sinful practice of the bought woman (Genesis 21:10). A man could not sell his wife (Deuteronomy 21:14), for though he owned her marital rights (Genesis 20:3; Deuteronomy 22:22; I Corinthians 7:4, 5) he did not own her person; she had her rights and privileges, her maids and tent and property. We hear this in the complaint of Leah and Rachel in Genesis 31:14-16. However, after taking her husband’s name the wife is bound to respect his authority and to defer to him as the head of the house (Genesis 18: 9, 12; Esther 1:20; Isaiah 63:19; Ephesians 5:22).

What does the authority of the husband consist in? It is not a dictating, selfish tyranny. The husband who in arrogance or self-esteem “bosses” his wife, or insults her person or intelligence, is hardly worthy of respect.

Though the husband is to be the head (I Corinthians 11:3; Ephesians 5:23) he is not commanded to govern his wife; she is commanded to obey him but he to love her and provide for her (Ephesians 5:25; I Timothy 5:8). How? As Christ loved the Church, nourishing it and cherishing it, even to the extent of giving Himself for it.

As the head of the wife the man becomes “**the saviour of the body**,” the ever vigilant, self-denying, protector and guardian of her name and person.

- In all things he must seek her good, doing nothing to hurt her but everything to advance her well-being.
- His love must be exclusive and undivided, constant and lasting (Proverbs 5:15-21), in spite of her weaknesses and failings.
- He no longer seeks for someone who pleases him, but seeks to please the one he has chosen (I Corinthians 7:33; Colossians 3:19).

Because spiritual interests are basic (therefore, Paul advised against marrying an unbeliever) he will, above all, seek her spiritual welfare (Ephesians 5:25-27; I Corinthians 7:12-16; I Peter 3:7).

What is the perfect husband? The Bible has given us the answer.

When a husband loves his wife even as himself; with self-giving, forgiving, saving and sanctifying, nourishing and cherishing love (as Christ loved the Church) he will have no difficulty in establishing his authority. How can the wife help but reverence, try to please (I Corinthians 7:34), ‘love and obey” one who cares that much?

If harmony in the husband-wife relationship depends on this agape kind of love it appears superfluous to argue about the superiority of men or women, either physically, intellectually or socially.

If the wife does excel in any way, her husband will only rejoice in it. Paul would say that their worth cannot be compared for they are not two separate entities but “**one flesh**” inasmuch that “**He that loveth his wife loveth his own body.**”

As the hands and the feet are both indispensable, so husband and wife do not compete against, but complement each other.

However, life is not all ecstasy—it consists of daily existence with its common tasks, its tiring round of work, its irritations, imperfections and times of testing. A husband is the first to bear the brunt of a chronically nervous, nagging, and complaining wife (Proverbs 21:9, 19; 27:15,16), while the wife may be especially sensitive to any inconsiderateness. There are many things, all the time, on which a husband and wife must agree to be agreeable.

It takes creative effort to maintain harmony, and love should be expressed in many ways. There must be mutual loyalty to the common task and genuine interest in each separate endeavor; no sense of “mine and thine” in property and possessions, no concealment of anything, only openness and trust.

A simple preservative of happiness is the expression of love to one another. Although love may be “too deep for words” it needs to be spoken often to reassure or just for the joy it gives.

A husband shows his love by earning the living for both, and for the family; the wife by making for her husband a home that is clean and attractive and well managed.

The virtuous woman of Proverbs thirty-one showed her love in a practical way by her willingness to do housework, to sew, cook, and to garden; by her industry and resourcefulness; by her generosity, wisdom and kindness; by her loyalty and subjection to her husband, her care of the children, her attention to the beautiful, and to the fear of the Lord. She inspired her husband’s confidence, his pride and his praise.

From the same faraway past the ever-living Word, Himself the Heavenly Bridegroom, earnestly speaks: “**Be ye like minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind . . . For it is God which worketh in you, both to will and to do of his good pleasure.**”

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Would you say that it is wise and generous of parents to let the young married son and daughter live with them until they get on their feet financially? Why or why not? Is there a clue in Ephesians 5:31?
2. How important to husband and wife relations is beauty in the home; personal appearance; a sense of humor; respect for individuality; children?
3. How are children affected by expressions and actions of love which they see every day between their parents? What values or ideals are built up in their minds by contentions and inconsiderateness?
4. Is it really necessary that someone should be the head of the house? Why, or why not?
5. Define authority or the rule of the husband according to the Scriptures.

6. Is it necessary for a husband and wife to be perfectly mated as to temperament and background to be happy? If not, what does happiness depend on?
7. Suggest faults peculiar to women that take the joy out of a husband's life.
8. Why are spiritual interests so important?
9. Should a husband have his own personal recreation? A wife her own social interests? Or is it ideal that they have only recreation that they can enjoy together?
10. Describe what we could call a perfect husband according to the Scriptures; and a perfect wife.
11. How does the headship of the husband affect a wife's spiritual status, civic status, legal status, social status, marital status?

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