

Attitudes In Marriage

By Casey Head

Introduction

The family unit in America is weakening more and more each year. Families just aren't what they used to be. It is less common nowadays to find families eating dinner together around the dining room table. We have become a "fast-food" society, rushing about crazily trying to earn more money so that our family can be "more secure." There was a time when security was about more than just money. So many things demand our attention, and before we know it, our children are going off to college and spouses are celebrating their 20th anniversary...or looking for a divorce because they have been neglected all these years. In this short article, I want to focus on the responsibilities that God has given to husbands and wives. If we can understand these roles, then marriages will be more successful. After all, the success of a nation is based on the strength of its families.

Leadership and Subjection

Let us first address the two distinct roles in marriage. In Ephesians 5:22-23, a controversial yet biblical point is made by Paul when he says, "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, even as Christ is head of the church." Wives are told to be in subjection and husbands are told to lead their wives. A lot of people don't like this passage, but it is the will of God expressed through the apostle Paul. Now, let us first explain what this isn't saying. It's not saying that husbands are to be cruel, power-hungry oppressors, making idle demands of their wives simply because they "wear the pants." Nor is this saying that men are more important than women. Both men and women are equal in status and importance (Gal. 3:28). However, it is also true, based on this passage, that men and women have been given different roles. Husbands are to be the leaders of the family while the wives are to be in the submissive role. Someone has to lead, right? And that necessitates that someone follows? God has determined that men will lead and women will follow, and both roles are extremely important.

The headship of the husband is compared to the headship and authority of Christ over the church. If we are going to understand *how* the husband is to serve as head, it is only logical that we examine how Christ serves as head. Now, would anyone say that Christ is a cruel, oppressive dictator? No. Would anyone say that He makes decisions based only on His desires? No. Would anyone say that He misuses His leadership and mocks those who are in subjection? Of course not. Jesus Christ, as head of the church, is a kind, sacrificial leader. He gave His life for the church (Ac. 20:28). And His decisions are based not on His own desires, but on what is best for us! When you look at the commands of the New Testament, it is almost always the case that those commands exist for the sole purpose of *helping* us to be faithful, and even happy. In the same way, the husband should lead his family. He should be a compassionate leader, not a selfish dictator! Ultimately, yes, the husband is the decision-maker, but that doesn't mean that he can't listen to his wife's counsel. In fact, if he is a wise leader, then he WILL be open to the advice of his wife. And his decisions should be based on what is best for the family, not what is best for him. If a husband is who he ought to be, then it will be easy for his wife to submit. This is the way in which a husband should govern his home!

The submissive nature of the wife should compare to the subjection of the church to Christ. It should involve willing obedience and a desire to serve. Women should not rebel against this role, because it is a beautiful and necessary role. Ideally, she will be submitting to a godly, competent man, but even when her husband is ungodly, the responsibility to submit is still there, as seen in 1 Peter 3:1-2. A submissive wife should not be contentious (Prov. 21:19). She needs to make her husband feel like a leader.

A Husband's Responsibilities

With some necessary groundwork established, let us now discuss the responsibilities that God has given to husbands. The fact is, more is said in the New Testament about the husband than the wife. As the leader in his home, everything comes back to him, which means that he needs more specific advice in *how to lead*. As you will see, there are three primary texts in the New Testament that pertain to spousal responsibilities- Ephesians 5:22-33; Colossians 3:18-25 and 1 Peter 3:1-7. Let us begin in Ephesians.

In Ephesians 5:25, husbands are told to love their wives “even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it.” Several very important lessons can be learned here. First, it is *necessary* for the husband to love his wife. It is not an option. It is not something that we do only when it's easy. We HAVE to love! Some men will object, “but what if my wife stops loving me,” or “I want to love my wife, but I can't,” or “We have fallen out of love.” The fact is, these objections do not excuse us from the command to love our wives. After all, Christ died for us “while we were yet sinners.” (Rom. 5:8) We may not have been too “loveable” at the time, but He still went to the cross and sacrificed His life for us. In the same way, husbands ought to love their wives even when we are tempted to say that they are “unlovable.” Despite the problems that have arisen in the past, the obligation to love is still there. Jesus even told the multitudes in the sermon on the mount, “Love your enemies.” (Mt. 5:44) Maybe our wife is our enemy, but we still need to love her!

This love ought to be expressed both in words and in actions. Men, we shouldn't be like the husband who told his wife, “I told you I loved you when I married you, and if that changes I'll let you know.” We need to get into the habit of telling our wives regularly that we love them (and this would apply to women as well). But not only should love be expressed in words, we also should *show* our love for our wives. This love can be expressed with a bouquet of roses or an intimate moment. Read 1 Corinthians 13:1-7 to learn more about biblical love.

In Colossians 3:19, husbands are again told, “Love your wives, *and be not bitter against them.*” We have already examined the command to love our wives, so let us now focus primarily on what it means to “not be bitter against them.” You know, when two people are living together, they see each other a lot, and they *hopefully* will talk to each other often. It is a fact of life that problems will occasionally arise. Men may be tempted to overlook a problem, which will inevitably lead to feelings of bitterness. Or perhaps his wife is not as submissive as she should be and he begins to resent her for it. These feelings need to be avoided. “How?” you might ask. A great principle to apply here is derived from Ephesians 4:26. Paul urges, “Let not the sun go down upon your wrath.” Men, if there is a problem or barrier standing between you and your wife, then solve it before you go to sleep. Do not allow bitter or angry feelings to linger. Again, this is a command, and it is a part of a husband's role as head.

Finally, we find an additional command for husbands in 1 Peter 3:7: “Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, given honor unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered.” There are five points to make from this one verse, so bear with me. First, husbands are to dwell with their wives “according to knowledge,” or with understanding, but men today are often heard saying, “women cannot be understood.” Who is right? Obviously, the Bible is right. If we are commanded to understand our wives, then it is possible! Along these same lines, we must also say that there are obvious differences between men and women. For example, when there is a problem, men look for solutions but women look for emotional gratification. Husbands, we need to understand this about our wives. Even when we just cannot understand why she is upset, we must still exert our time and energy in helping her. This involves “understanding.”

Second, husbands are told in 1 Peter 3:7 to give “honor unto the wife.” I believe this helps us to understand even further the attitude of a husband as head of the wife. He is not a cruel

oppressor who belittles his wife. Rather, he is a benevolent leader who treats his wife with the respect she deserves. This “honor” requires that we be considerate, respectful, caring and in a way, reverent. Later in the verse, husbands and wives are told to be “heirs *together* of the grace of life.” There should be a companionship and camaraderie. Yes, the husband is the head of the wife, but that does not mean that he is above her and superior to her. A good leader does not need to elevate himself. Leadership, after all, is not about power, but about attitude. Furthermore, a husband and wife should ideally be brothers and sisters in Christ who strive to help each other reach eternal life (1 Cor. 9:5). The word “together” is important. There needs to be a partnership in marriage.

Third, wives are referred to as “the weaker vessel” in 1 Peter 3:7. What does this mean? In answering that question, let us notice the structure of the verse. It says, “Giving honor unto the wife, *as unto* the weaker vessel.” In other words, Peter is not saying that she IS a weaker vessel, but that she is to be treated *as* a weaker vessel. That is, husbands are to be tender and compassionate towards their wives, honoring them and caring for them like we would care for a prized possession. This is a beautiful picture of gentleness.

Finally, husbands are told to treat their wives this way so that their “prayers be not hindered.” This could have two possible meanings. It could refer to the fact that these commands are a part of the law of Christ and that failure to comply results in disobedience to God (which would result in our prayers being hindered, or not heard). It could also refer to the fact that a poor relationship with ones wife can affect a husband’s overall attitude towards life and religion. Either way, we need to pursue the right relationship with our spouse so that we can have the right relationship with God.

The Wife’s Responsibilities

Not as much is said in the New Testament about the responsibilities of wives. As we discussed above, they are told to be in subjection to their husbands, but beyond that, very little is said. Nevertheless, let us devote some time to the commands that are given to wives.

Again, wives are told to submit to their husbands (Eph. 5:22; Col. 3:18; 1 Pet. 3:1). This requires obedience and subjection to the authority of their husband. The feminist movement of the 1960-70s has so altered the thinking of American women that the concept of submission seems ridiculous to most. Women today make the mistake of connecting submission to inferiority and shame. True submission, however, is a vital and honorable role in marriage. They serve not only as wives, but as mothers and managers of the home. Their responsibilities are of great importance and must be handled delicately.

To help us understand the nature of this submission, let us notice Ephesians 5:33. It says, “Nevertheless let every one of you in particular love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she *reverence her husband*.” The word “reverence” here implies respect and honor, and it should be given willingly. She needs to accept the role of her husband and support him in what he does. Many women have to give up this need to feel “dominant” and in control. Even when her husband is a poor leader, she must still be in subjection. In fact, the proper submission of a godly wife will undoubtedly help her husband become a great leader.

Conclusion

As I conclude this article, let me clarify a few points. First, marriage is not an “I’ll scratch your back if you scratch mine” relationship. Husbands need to obey the commands that they are given regardless of their wife’s actions, and the same applies to women. Both husbands and wives need to be willing to serve. Certainly, Philippians 2:4 would apply here: “Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.”

Not to be overly simplistic, but I truly believe that most marital problems could be resolved when both spouses understand and apply 1 Corinthians 13:1-7. Love is the key to a strong marriage. Let us love our spouses, and let us respect the roles that God has given.