

Husbands, Love Your Wives

by Valsan Thampu

Husbands are called to love their wives as Jesus loves the Church, prioritizing their development and fulfillment, serving them in love, and being steadfast in their love for them.

Scripture: Genesis 2:24, Mark 10:45, 1 Corinthians 13:4, Ephesians 5:25, 1 John 4:8

Topics: "Marriage Counseling", "Christian Love"

Description

Valsan Thampu preaches on the importance of husbands loving their wives as instructed by the Apostle Paul. He emphasizes the struggle for husbands to shift from control to companionship, highlighting the need for men to cherish and value their wives to prevent taking them for granted. Thampu explores the deep psychological impact of love and low self-esteem on women, stressing that love is the ultimate antidote for enhancing self-worth and fostering companionship in marriage. He delves into the complementary roles of submission and love in husband-wife relationships, urging husbands to prioritize building up their wives spiritually and serving them with love, following the example of Jesus' sacrificial love for the Church.

Transcript

Having exhorted wives to shift from resistance to submission, Paul goes on to urge husbands to give up control and gain companionship. They must love their wives. The very fact that it seemed necessary to the Apostle to give this instruction at all proves that it is neither easy nor natural for husbands to do so. Men tend to take love within marriage for granted! They are too busy, too manly, or too strong to love. Husbands could be too vain and inhibited to confess their need to love and to be loved. A husband, who would fight another man for making advances towards his wife, may not love her with half the intensity with which he fights his adversary. From courtship to marriage, the radical change a man undergoes is the shift from love to ownership.

Yet nothing matters as much to a woman as being loved. Why is that so? Why does the Bible define the psychology of women in terms of "desire"? Desire of this kind is driven by the need to complete the self. The male need to dominate is also a form of 'desire'; but it is a different kind of desire. It is the desire not so much for completion, as the desire to be reassured. This too, admittedly, implies incompleteness. As God sees it, it is good neither for man nor for woman to be alone. "Being with" is, hence, a supremely important aspect of being human. The desire to own the partner is a distortion of this deep need. But the paradox of life is that, contrary to widespread assumptions, you cannot 'have' what you 'own'. You have to

choose between owning something and having it. To 'have' is to value its worth. But as soon as we come to own something we begin to lose a sense of its worth. Not many men continue to love their wives with the same reverential and exaggerated love with which they adored them in courtship. We 'take for granted' what we own. This is almost inevitable, and it helps to be aware of it and remain alert against it. The Biblical exhortation to 'cherish' each other is meant to be a safeguard against this universal human failing. 'Cherishing' enables us to remember and respect the value of what we have and protects what we have against the aberrations of the 'ownership mentality'.

The 'desire' of woman aims not at having, but at being. Her desire towards her man involves her identity and personhood. It engages her personal worth. While psychic insecurity torments men as husbands, women as wives are burdened by a sense of low self-esteem. Though the degree of this problem varies from culture to culture, it is universally prevalent. The most classic symptom of this psychological malady is the secret resentment that women harbour that "it is a curse to be born a woman". Love is the only antidote for this malady; and, fortunately, it is a sufficient one. Love is the ultimate alchemy of personal worth. Love effects a miraculous leap in the worth of the object of love. Paul, in exhorting husbands to love their wives, is instructing them to minister to their partners in terms of their basic need to regain and celebrate their self-worth. But the issue of the low self-worth of the wife has consequences that involve the well-being of the husband also in a substantial way. A sense of low self-worth disables the wife from believing that she is her husband's equal. Love presupposes equality. So the deep-seated anxiety of the woman in this relationship inhibits love in the relationship. Love is necessarily an egalitarian force. The vague sense of inequality that inwardly riles the wife inhibits her capacity for companionship. She then tries, and tries desperately, to improvise compensations for this disability in the form of 'slaving and slogging' in the house, the denial of basic comforts to oneself, though readily available and affordable, and exaggerating the burden and weariness she endures sacrificially. Or, to adapt the words of Paul to this occasion, she gives her body to be burned only to make up for her inability to enter into a relationship of love and companionship. She tries to prove her 'worth,' her usefulness to the household as a self-sacrificing person, though often a disgruntled one. Predictably, this brings poor dividends. Husbands who look for companions in their wives feel disappointed at gaining a superior servant, instead. The ownership-oriented husband gets disappointed even more, because the self-deprecation, and the personal elusiveness that goes with it, make the catch a counterfeit trophy! This disappointment inhibits love further and aggravates the cycle of bitterness and resentment.

It is necessary and helpful to recognize some of the practical implications and complications of this epidemic of low self-esteem.

It stifles companionship. No woman can be a companion and a slave at the same time. This does not mean that service is incompatible with companionship. True companionship expresses itself through mutual and joyful service in love. For one thing, low self-esteem corrupts the idea of service into an unfair extortion. For another, it becomes a disappointing substitute for true companionship. The capacity for companionship is corrupted in the male, as we have seen, by control-orientation. In the female, it is crippled by her low self-esteem.

Low self-esteem blinds its victim to the value of what she has. This expresses itself not much in terms of direct expression of disapproval or disappointment. Hardly any wife says explicitly that her husband is useless. She indicates as much by being indifferent to him and by being excessively appreciative of others. These are covert weapons wielded deftly in domestic warfare. Given the hypersensitivity of insecure male ego, it is not necessary to tell a man to his face that he is worthless. All a wife has to do is to

praise someone else on his trivial achievements. Exaggerated admiration is a calculated barb that rarely misses its target. Women who do not take themselves seriously, as it happens in low self-esteem, find it difficult to believe that anyone else, especially their husbands, can cherish them either. She, then, projects her grievance of ascribed worthlessness on to her whole household. She assumes herself to be worthless, resentfully. If she is worthless, her husband too must be. Also, her home and her belongings. This makes it a matter of 'inspired self-interest' for the husband to minister to his wife and enhance her self-worth, making a clear distinction between self-worth and self-importance.

In respect of her relationship to her husband, the wife has the following options:

Submit to him in love.

Submit under coercion.

Fight off her husband and evade the duty to submit.

All these options result in creating their own distinctive domestic cultures the fruits of which will be harvested over the generations to come. As we sow, so we reap. Strategies and choices in this respect need to be made, therefore, with a sense of responsibility and in the 'fear of the Lord' that makes people wise. Most people realize only too late that the choices they made were suicidal: that their solutions compounded their problems. That is because, in an individualistic sense, human beings learn only from their own experience. The advantage in participating in a spiritual tradition is that one can benefit from the wisdom of its accumulated experiences. And if that happens to be a spiritual tradition, there is also the guarantee that this experiential wisdom is shaped, directed and refined by revelation and the guidance of the Spirit.

The preceding analysis has been undertaken to explore the rationale for the instruction that the Apostle gives to husbands: "love your wives". The only antidote to the pathology of low self-esteem is the alchemy of love. Love transforms the object of love. It enhances the worth of the one loved. In the context of marriage, it makes the wife feel truly cherished and cared for. That makes it not only easier for her to submit to her husband, but transforms submission into a sacrament of love. Love inspires love. And love has no difficulty in obeying or submitting; for love does not seek its own.

Coercion is the alternative to love. Husbands, who disdain to love, resort to violence in the hope that they will break down the spirit of their wives and reign as victors in family life. Whether they win or lose, this ensures the defeat of their family life. For, if they win, their wives will degenerate into slaves and servants, turning victorious husbands into de facto widowers! If they don't win, they land themselves in a humiliating predicament that erodes their dignity, which ensures that the wife too ends up a loser. It is suicidal folly to strategize relationships in terms of win or loss. It is either win-win or loss-loss. Both lose, if they do not win together. That is the logic of togetherness. The right hand cannot win at the expense of the left; though it may survive at that price.

In the light of what we have seen so far, we can appreciate the complementarity of the instructions that Paul gives to wives and husbands. Wives must submit in order to enable their husbands to love and value them. Paul implies, hence, not only a mandate, but also a manner. Wives must submit themselves to their husbands in a way that would make their husbands cherish them. Wifely submission must be an investment in value-addition. She must submit only as a gift from God, and in order to enable her husband to love. This submission excludes personal degradation or devaluation. Rebelliousness, in contrast, ruins

the beautiful masterpiece that she is. Husbands, on their part, must love their wives in order to enable them to submit in love. Submission in love liberates, empowers and enriches; whereas submission under coercion disables, degrades, devalues and humiliates. These complementary responses -submission and love- cement husband-wife relationship and stabilize it over a lifetime.

It could well be debated as to who has the more difficult mandate: the wife who has to submit to her husband, or the husband who has to love his wife, as Jesus loves the Church? The answer to this depends on a further question: What does it mean for the husband to love in this fashion?

First of all we need to dispel the romantic notion that loving comes naturally to human beings. It simply does not. Especially, love as it is understood in the Bible. Spiritual love is unlike romantic love! Romantic love is an indulgence. Spiritual love implies self-denial. Romantic love, loves because of the object of love. Spiritual love loves in spite of the object of love, as is evident from the instruction to love one's enemies. In this instance the reason for loving does not rest in the object of love, but in our relationship with God and the spiritual discipline that it imparts. What does it mean, let us ask, for a husband to love his wife as Jesus loves the Church?

Love, says Paul, builds up (1 Cor. 8:1). The duty to love, obliges every husband to prioritize the development and fulfillment of his wife, which includes, among other things, the duty to build her up spiritually. The end-goal of this process is the transformation of the partners. Jesus endeavours to present the Church without blemish before the throne of Grace. So also the husband must cherish and protect his wife as a God-given treasure for whom he should be willing, if need be, to lay down his life, as Jesus was. What distinguishes Jesus' love for the Church is its absoluteness. But a husband's love for his wife is not required to be absolute, but total; for God alone deserves our absolute love. In practical terms total love implies 'leaving all else and cleaving' to one's wife. This does wonders to her and imbues her with a stable sense of self-worth, provided she is able to respond to it and appropriate its scope.

Second, love expresses itself through service. This purifies the authority of the husband of the desire to dominate or exploit his wife. Jesus experiences the zenith of his authority in the context of the fellowship meal. Significantly, it is then that he washes the feet of his disciples. What makes all the difference in the world is not authority per se, but whether or not love is present in the exercise of it. Authority devoid of love degenerates into authoritarianism. Authority driven by love blossoms into service. The husband is mandated thus to serve his wife in love. His role-model in this is Jesus, who came "not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for the sins of many" (Mk. 10: 45).

Third, love is eager to care and to share. Love is the ultimate cementing force. It is this that brings about the miracle of the two becoming "one flesh". This also implies the logic of a caring approach that must nourish husband-wife relationship. It is a pity that, due to cultural conditioning, caring has been traditionally associated with women rather than men. This has had the effect of leaving the personality formation of men under-developed in terms of their capacity to care and serve. The life and ministry of Jesus is an uncompromising rejection of this cultural bias. As the incarnation of God's love, Jesus remains our role-model for caring and sharing. Jesus' ministry illustrates this. It is marked by his eagerness to do and give his best to all in need. The final sacrament he instituted -The Last Supper- is a sacrament of absolute sharing. No giving can surpass that of giving one's body and blood for the sake of others. Caring is also a statement of worth; we care for what we value. By caring for his wife, a husband affirms her worth.

Finally, the duty to love obliges the husband to be steadfast; for love never fails. Biblically, the husband has no excuse for withholding his love from his wife. His love is not rooted primarily in his wife or in himself. Rather, it is rooted in God who is steadfast. It is because God is love and because we are created in His Image that we can love at all. If it were otherwise, the Commandment to love would not have made any spiritual sense.

Given all these, and much else besides, it is obvious that Paul was not being partial to or soft on husbands!

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