

Discipline of Marriage

I regularly have the best view at Christian weddings, as I stand about three feet from the joyous couple. Their skin glows with amber luminescence from the flickering candles behind me. I see everything: the moist eyes, the trembling hands, the surreptitious wink, their mutual earnestness of soul. I hear the words their parents said before them: “. . . for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health . . .” They are submitting to the larger logics of life, to the solidarity of the Christian community, to “otherness,” to life itself.

Sometimes in my enjoyment I let it all blur for a moment and imagine the ultimate wedding where Christ will officially take us to himself, and then I blink back to the living parable before me. How will the couple fare over the years? Will she reverence her husband? Will he love his beautiful bride as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her? Will he love her with an elevating, sanctifying love? Will he love her as he loves himself? I pray it will be so.

It was so in the life of Dr. J. Robertson McQuilkin, the beloved former president of Columbia Bible College (now Columbia International University) in South Carolina, and his wife, Muriel, who suffered the ravages of Alzheimer’s disease. In March 1990 Dr. McQuilkin announced his resignation in a letter with these words:

My dear wife, Muriel, has been in failing mental health for about eight years. So far I have been able to carry both her ever-growing

needs and my leadership responsibilities at CBC. But recently it has become apparent that Muriel is contented most of the time she is with me and almost none of the time I am away from her. It is not just “discontent.” She is filled with fear—even terror—that she has lost me and always goes in search of me when I leave home. Then she may be full of anger when she cannot get to me. So it is clear to me that she needs me now, full-time.

Perhaps it would help you to understand if I shared with you what I shared at the time of the announcement of my resignation in chapel. The decision was made, in a way, 42 years ago when I promised to care for Muriel “in sickness and in health . . . till death do us part.” So, as I told the students and faculty, as a man of my word, integrity has something to do with it. But so does fairness. She has cared for me fully and sacrificially all these years; if I cared for her for the next 40 years I would not be out of debt. Duty, however, can be grim and stoic. But there is more; I love Muriel. She is a delight to me—her childlike dependence and confidence in me, her warm love, occasional flashes of that wit I used to relish so, her happy spirit and tough resilience in the face of her continual distressing frustration. I do not *have* to care for her, I *get* to! It is a high honor to care for so wonderful a person.

The following month Barbara and I had a brief visit with the McQuilkins and witnessed Dr. McQuilkin’s gentle, loving way with his dear wife, who understood little of what was going on. The memory of our visit is one of lingering beauty.

Such beautiful Christlike love did not just happen! It came from the inner resolve of a young husband who had determined forty-two years before to live under the authority of God’s directives regarding how a godly man must love his wife—as it is spelled out in Ephesians 5. These are directives every Christian man ought to be familiar with, understand, and, I think, even commit to memory—as I myself have. They are the foundational discipline of marriage—the bases for holy matrimonial sweat.

To examine the godly man’s responsibility, we must fix in our minds the grand truth at the end of Ephesians 5:31, where Paul quotes Genesis 2:24: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and

hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” He then adds in Ephesians 5:32, “This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.” There is an astounding unity in marriage! The assertion that men and women become “one flesh” indicates something of the psychospiritual depth of marriage—an exchange of soul.

Marriage *ideally* produces two people who are as much the same person as two people can be! Christians in marriage have the *same* Lord, the *same* family, the *same* children, the *same* future, and the *same* ultimate destiny—an astounding unity. An amazing bonding took place the moment I saw my newborn children and held them in my arms. They are from my flesh. I am close to my children, interwoven with them. Yet, I am not one flesh with them. I am one flesh only with my wife. This, in my opinion, is why old couples possessing extraordinarily different appearances yet often look so much alike—they are “one flesh.” There has been an exchange of soul—a mutual appropriation of each other’s lives.

This is, indeed, a mystery—which partially illustrates the even deeper marital union of Christ and the church. And this is why the biblical text often uses descriptive language when speaking of Christ and husbands and the church and wives at the same time. We must keep the mysterious nature of our union constantly before us if we are to understand the disciplines of marital love as they unfold—the disciplines of *sacrificial* love, of *sanctifying* love, and of *self-love*.

Sacrificial Love

The opening charge in Ephesians 5 is a clear call to radical, sacrificial love: “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (v. 25). This call to marital love was a bare-knuckled swing at the domestic commitment (or lack thereof) among the men of the day—just as it is today. Taken seriously, the naked form of these words, “love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,” is staggering! And honestly received, the punch it delivers flattens many Christian men because they fall so short!

Death

The reason the punch hurts is because it is a naked call to *love with a willingness to sacrifice, even unto death*. Recognizing this, Mike

Mason, author of the classic book *The Mystery of Marriage*, says pointedly that marital love is like death—it wants all of us. I agree. If you do not understand this, you do not know what marital love is. It claims everything. Mason goes on to liken marital love to a shark: “And who has not been frightened almost to death by love’s dark shadow gliding swift and huge as an interstellar shark, like a swimming mountain, through the deepest waters of our being, through depths we never knew we had?”¹

The realization of what this call means may at first be frightening, but it is also beautiful, because a man who embraces such a love will experience the grace of death to self. Marriage is a call to die, and a man who does not die for his wife does not come close to the love to which he is called. Christian marriage vows are the inception of a lifelong practice of death, of *giving over not only all you have, but all you are*.

Is this a grim gallows call? Not at all! It is no more grim than dying to self and following Christ. In fact, those who lovingly die for their wives are those who know the most joy, have the most fulfilling marriages, and experience the most love. Christ’s call to Christian husbands is not a call to be doormats, but a call to die. As we shall see, this can mean a death to our rights, our time, or our perceived pleasures—all liberating deaths. This is a truly male thing, a masculine thing, for it takes a strong man to die.

Suffering

When Christ “gave himself up” for us, he not only died, he suffered. And his suffering was not only the cross, but it was and is suffering that comes from identification with his bride, the church. This is why the apostle Paul, then known as Saul, who was fanatically persecuting the church, suddenly heard Jesus cry, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (Acts 9:4). Christ suffers with his bride, and husbands ought to suffer with and for theirs.

Men, when you properly hitch your life to another, you are in for a wild ride with huge ups and downs. Just as when you really love God you will undergo difficulties foreign to an unloving heart, so it is

1. Mike Mason, *The Mystery of Marriage* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1985), 52.

in marriage. You will share her experienced injustices, cruelties, and disappointments. You will experience her upsets, insecurities, and despairs. But, of course, you will also know an index of joys beyond the range of the unloving. You will ride through some dark valleys, but you will also soar among the stars!

Intercession

On the evening Christ gave himself up for us, John 17 tells us, he prayed in succession for himself, for his twelve disciples, and for all of us who would later believe. When he finished praying for his future bride, he went to the cross. Then came his *death*, his *resurrection*, his *ascension*, and his *enthronement* at the right hand of the Father, where he constantly makes *intercession* for us. Thus, we understand that giving ourselves for our brides involves prayerful intercession. Men, do you pray for your wives with something more than “Bless good old Margaret in all she does”? If not, you are sinning against them and against God. Most Christian men who claim to love their wives never offer more than a perfunctory nod to their wives’ needs before God. Men, you ought to have a list of your wives’ needs, spoken and unspoken, that you passionately hold up to God out of love for them. Praying is the marital work of a Christian husband!

The bare-knuckle command is “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” Men, we are divinely called to *die* for our brides, to take on their *sufferings* as our own, and to make *intercession* for them.

Sanctifying Love

Marriage under the lordship of Christ is a mutually sanctifying relationship—it moves us toward holiness. Most of us, by the time we get married, are like a well-furnished home, and a lot of furniture needs to be tossed out to make room for the other person. Marriage helps empty some rooms. Genuine marital love reveals rooms full of selfishness. As these rooms are cleared, one finds other rooms of self-centeredness. Beyond these are autonomy and self-will. We need an ongoing house cleaning. Marriage certainly did that for me. I had

no idea how self-centered I was until I married! George Gilder, in his much-discussed book *Men and Marriage*, even argues that marriage is the one institution that tames the inveterate barbarianism of man.² Over the years a good marriage can change us for the better—almost beyond recognition. There is indeed a mutual sanctification in marriage.

But the emphasis in the Scriptures is on the responsibility of a husband's love for his wife. Paul writes that Christ gave himself for the church “that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 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” (Eph. 5:26–27). This is what Christ will do through our divine marriage to him, for at his return the washed and regenerated church will be presented to him in absolute perfection. This is the sealing of the romance of the ages.

Meanwhile, these divine nuptials are a parable of what ought to be the loving husband's elevating effect on his wife. He is to be a man of the Word who lives a godly life, praying and sacrificing for his wife. His authentic spirituality is meant to buoy her onward and upward toward the image of Christ. The man who sanctifies his wife understands that this is his divinely ordained responsibility.

Men (ignoring for the moment our wives' spiritual responsibility to us), do you realize it is your responsibility to seek your wives' sanctification? Even more, do you honestly accept it? Marriage will reveal something about your wife that you already know about yourself—that she is a sinner. Marriage reveals everything: her weaknesses, her worst inconsistencies, the things others never see. *Loving your spouse is not to love her as a saint, but as a sinner.* “If we love her for her saintliness, we do not love her at all,”³ says Mason. You see your wife as you see yourself, and you love her as yourself. You realize your mutual need, and you delve into God's Word to listen to it with your heart and try, by his grace, to live it out so that she will be encouraged by your life—and thus become an even more beautiful bride for Christ.

2. George Gilder, “Taming the Barbarians,” in *Men and Marriage* (Gretna, LA: Pelican, 1986), 39–47.

3. Mason, *The Mystery of Marriage*, 163, 164.

This brings up some hard questions: Is my wife more like Christ because she is married to me? Or is she like Christ in spite of me? Has she shrunk from his likeness because of me? Do I sanctify her or hold her back? Is she a better woman because she is married to me? Is she a better friend? A better mother?

Men, our call is clear: sanctifying love.

Self-Love

Greek mythology tells of a beautiful youth who loved no one until the day he saw his own reflection in the water and fell in love with it. He was so lovesick, he finally wasted away and died, and was turned into a flower that bears his name—*Narcissus*.⁴ Actually, narcissistic self-love is not a pretty thing! We are repulsed by narcissism and carefully seek to avoid it.

But, incredibly, in Ephesians 5 we are called to a sublime self-love: “In the same way [as Christ loves the church] husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body” (vv. 28–30). This loving of ourselves by loving our wives is based on the “one flesh” unity we have already talked about—the deep exchange of our souls in marriage that can even make us look alike. It is the love that Shakespeare’s Lorenzo celebrates when he says that Jessica will be placed in “my constant soul.”⁵ Our marital love is our constant soul!

To love our wives as our own bodies is a grand and great thing. It means granting them the same importance, the same value, “the same existential gravity that we take for granted in ourselves.”⁶ They become as real as we are to ourselves. *She is me*.

How do we love our wives as our own bodies? How do we care for them as we do for ourselves? The answer involves three incarnations.

4. N. G. L. Hammond and H. H. Scullard, eds., *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (London: Oxford University Press, 1978), 722.

5. William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, II, vi, 57. Lorenzo says, “Lord. Beshrew me but I love her heartily; For she is wise, if I can judge of her, and fair she is, if that mine eyes be true, And true she is, as she hath proved herself, And therefore, like herself, wise, fair, and true, Shall she be placed in my constant soul.”

6. Mason, *The Mystery of Marriage*, 36.

The first is a *physical* incarnation. Dr. Richard Selzer, in his book *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery*, tells of performing surgery to remove a tumor and of necessity severing a facial nerve, leaving a young woman's mouth permanently twisted in palsy. In Dr. Selzer's own words:

Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed, and together they seem to do well in the evening lamplight, isolated from me, private. Who are they, I ask myself, he and this wry-mouth I have made, who gaze at and touch each other so generously, greedily? The young woman speaks. "Will my mouth always be like this?" she asks. "Yes," I say, "it will. It is because the nerve was cut." She nods and is silent. But the young man smiles. "I like it," he says. "It is kind of cute." . . . Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and I, so close, can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate to hers, to show her that their kiss still works.⁷

This is the way we must love. Her body is my body, her comfort my comfort, her adornment my adornment, her care my care.

A second way to love our wives as our own bodies is *emotional* incarnation. So many men make the emotional differences between men and women subject to degrading humor. They belittle the female disposition, as if male stoicism were superior. They realize the differences, but make no allowances for them and do not attempt to understand. No man can claim obedience to God and do this! It is a flat-sided masculinity that imagines that understanding another is a feminine trait. Actually, such understanding of the complementary natures God gave man and woman is the mark of a fully developed, mature man.

Then, of course, there must be *social* incarnation. Women have many social settings: the home, the office, the classroom. But I remember a profitable incarnation I experienced when my wife visited her sister in Connecticut for a week, leaving me in charge of our four small children. I fixed the meals, changed thousands and thousands of diapers, fixed hurts, settled quarrels, gave baths, cleaned up catastrophes, and cleaned them up again. I was at work *before* I got up and *after* I went to bed. The experience so marked me that in my mind I invented

7. Richard Selzer, *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), 45, 46.

a new kitchen, modeled after a car wash. The floors sloped to a large drain in the middle of the room. A hose hung on the wall, nozzle ready to spray things down after the meal. It was an incarnation I was not anxious to repeat again, but as my wife says, “It was good for you!”

Men, we are called to a divinely appointed self-love: to love our wives as our own bodies, to care for them as Christ does the church. Loving our wives’ bodies as our own demands a triple incarnation: physical, emotional, and social. We are to devote the same energy, time, and creativity to our wives as to ourselves. We are to cherish our constant souls. Envy the woman who is loved like this. Even more, envy the man who loves like this—for he is like Christ.

Men, what a challenge Ephesians 5 presents us—*sacrificial* love (love is like death), *sanctifying* love (love that elevates), and *self-love* (loving your wife as much as you love your own body). If this calls for anything, it calls for some holy sweat. As Walter Trobisch said, “Marriage is not an achievement which is finished. It is a dynamic process between two people, a relation which is constantly being changed, which grows or dies.”⁸

How to Answer the Call

Men, the all-encompassing call to love our wives as Christ loved the church demands specific disciplines.

Commitment

We must begin with the discipline of commitment. I have grown tougher through the years in my demands on couples who want me to perform their wedding ceremonies. I tell them that wedding vows are a volitional commitment to love despite how one feels. I explain that it is rubbish to think one can break one’s vows because one does not “feel” in love. I point out that the Scriptures call us to “put on love” (Col. 3:14)—and despite the canard about such love being hypocritical, it is never hypocrisy to put on a Christian grace. I tell them that if there is the tiniest thought in the backs of their minds that they can get out of the marriage if the other person is not all they expected, I will not perform the ceremony. The truth is, marriages that depend on being

8. Walter Trobisch, *The Complete Works of Walter Trobisch* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), quoted in *Marriage Partnership*, Winter 1989, 17.

“in love” fall apart. Couples who look back to the wild promises they vowed in the marriage ceremony are the ones who make it. There is no substitute for *covenant plus commitment*.

Fidelity

When a man commits himself to love his wife “as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,” he will ever be faithful to her. One thing the church can count on is the fidelity of the Bridegroom. And this is the one thing a wife whose husband loves like Christ can rest on. Jeremy Taylor, the great seventeenth-century preacher, in his sermon “The Marriage Ring or the Mysteriousness and Duties of Marriage,” gave this charge regarding fidelity:

Above all . . . let him [the groom] preserve towards her an inviolable faith, and an unspotted chastity, for this is the marriage ring, it ties two hearts by an eternal band; it is like the cherubim’s flaming sword set for the guard of paradise. . . . Chastity is the security of love, and preserves all the mysteriousness like the secrets of a temple. Under this lock is deposited security of families, the union of affections, the repairer of accidental breaches.⁹

Men, our wives must be able to rest in the fact of our fidelity. Everything about us—our eyes, our language, our schedules, our passion—must say to her, “I am, and will always be, faithful to you.”

Communication

Next is the discipline of communication. The readers of a popular women’s magazine were asked, “If you could change your husband, what would you change?”¹⁰ The overwhelming consensus was they would like them to communicate better. They indicated that even more, they would like their husbands to *listen*. Eugene Peterson remarks:

The stereotype is the husband buried in the morning newspaper at breakfast, preferring to read a news agency report of the latest scandal in a European government, the scores of yesterday’s ath-

9. William Alan Sadler Jr., ed., *Master Sermons through the Ages* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 116.

10. Conversation with Harold Smith, editor of *Marriage Partnership*, February 19, 1991.

letic contests, and the opinions of a couple of columnists whom he will never meet rather than listen to the voice of the person who has just shared his bed, poured his coffee, and fried his eggs, even though listening to that live voice promises love and hope, emotional depth and intellectual exploration far in excess of what he can gather informationally from *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Christian Science Monitor* put together.¹¹

Men, the discipline of communication demands that you set aside regular time to talk—and that you really do talk, and that you communicate more than facts, that you communicate feelings—that you learn to talk in metaphors and similes with phrases that begin, “I feel like . . .” And it means that you listen. The *Harvard Business Review* recommends that an executive should spend 65 percent of his time listening.¹² How much more so the wise husband.

Elevation

Next, I strongly recommend the discipline of elevation. Winston Churchill once attended a formal banquet in London, where the dignitaries were asked, “If you could not be who you are, who would you like to be?” Naturally, everyone was curious as to what Churchill, who was seated next to his beloved wife, Clementine, would say. After all, Churchill could not be expected to say Julius Caesar or Napoleon. When Churchill’s turn finally came, the old man, the last respondent to the question, rose and gave his answer: “If I could not be who I am, I would most like to be”—and here he paused to take his wife’s hand—“Lady Churchill’s second husband.”¹³ The old boy made some points that night. But he also said it for everyone who has a good marriage.

A commitment to building up your wife is of greatest importance. Men, if you think what your wife does is less important than what you do, you are wrong and you have big problems. Compliments on her kindness and her daily provisions should be commonplace, as should showing her respect by observing common courtesies.

11. Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 62.

12. Howard Hendricks made this statement in a lecture delivered at College Church in Wheaton, IL, in June 1984.

13. Quoted in James Humes, *Churchill, Speaker of the Century* (Briarcliff Manor, NY: Stein and Day, Scarborough House, 1980), 291.

Deference

Along with this, the discipline of deference must be carefully practiced. Many men never forgo a planned pleasure for the sake of their wives. For some men, golf is synonymous with Dante's *Paradiso*, but the entrance to a department store is like the gates of Dante's hell, bearing the inscription "Abandon all hope all ye who enter here."¹⁴ But if you love your wife, there must be times when you forsake the heavenly greens because you value her interests and simply love her.

Time/Romance

Lastly, I must mention the discipline of time and romance. Years ago, in the Midwest, a farmer and his wife were lying in bed during a storm when the funnel of a tornado suddenly lifted the roof right off the house and sucked their bed away with them still in it. The wife began to cry, and the farmer called to her that it was no time to cry. She called back that she couldn't help it because she was so happy—it was the first time they had been out together in twenty years!

Researchers have found that one of the major factors in marital stability, happiness, and satisfaction is time spent together.¹⁵ Make sure you maintain this priority. Your calendar reveals what is important to you, so write her calendar into yours. Schedule weekly times together that do not just "happen." Be creative. Date! Surprise her. Be extravagant.

Men, when was the last time you opened the door for her; said "I love you"; complimented her; wrote her a loving note; sent her flowers; "dated" her; or gave her extra special attention? In her poem "The Spring and the Fall," Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote,

14. Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*, trans. John Ciardi (New York: New American Library, 1954), 42, quoting Canto III, which reads,

I am the way into the city of woe.
 I am the way to a forsaken people.
 I am the way into eternal sorrow.
 Sacred justice moved my architect.
 I was raised here by divine omnipotence,
 Primordial love and ultimate intellect.
 Only those elements time cannot wear
 Were made before me, and beyond time I stand.
 Abandon all hope all ye who enter here.

15. Sarah M. Flood and Katie R. Genadek, "Time for Each Other: Work and Family Constraints among Couples," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 78, no. 1 (February 1, 2016): 142–64.

"Tis not love's going hurts my days,
But that it went in little ways.

Many other “disciplines” could be named, most of which are implicit in what we have said—for example, tenderness, sensitivity, and patience—but the bottom line is that we must work at it. In the fire of new love, marriage seems as easy as falling off a log. Actually, it is as easy as *staying* on a log. It requires careful attention, developed skill, and work.

Men, are you working on the second most important relationship of your life (God is first)? Sweat any lately? No perspiration, no progress. No pain, no gain.

Let us bow to God’s Word: “Act like men, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love” (1 Cor. 16:13–14). Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness.

Food for Thought

Do you agree with Mike Mason’s analogy between marital love and death? Why or why not? What does your love for your wife demand of you? Are you willing to pay the price?

Do you generally feel what your wife is feeling—her joys and sorrows, her mountain peaks and deep valleys? What can you do to let her know that you want to “connect” with her emotionally and spiritually?

The author writes, “Praying is the marital work of a Christian husband.” Do you agree? How often do you pray for your wife? With her? What can you do to make this more of a habit?

What are you doing currently to help your wife draw closer to Christ? List at least six specific things you will do within the next two weeks to help your wife grow spiritually.

What happens to a marriage if a husband doesn’t love himself? What does it really mean to love oneself biblically? How will such an attitude show itself practically?

How do Colossians 3:14 and 1 Corinthians 16:13–14 apply to your marriage? Be specific.

Application/Response

What did God speak to you about most specifically, most powerfully in this chapter? Talk to him about it right now!

Think About It!

Read Ephesians 5:22–33, then write a few paragraphs on the spiritual meaning of Christian marriage. What do the wife's submission and the husband's love have to do with one another? What does the relationship of Christ and his church teach you about your marriage?

Resources for Further Growth

Books

As For Me and My House (Walter Wangerin Jr.)

Gospel-Centered Marriage (Tim Chester)

Hedges (Jerry Jenkins)

Marriage Matters (Winston T. Smith)

Marriage and the Mystery of the Gospel (Ray Ortlund)

Married for God (Christopher Ash)

The Meaning of Marriage (Timothy Keller)

This Momentary Marriage (John Piper)

What Did You Expect? (Paul David Tripp)

When Sinners Say "I Do" (Dave Harvey)