

God's guidelines for dealing with offenses

When should I talk to someone who has offended me?

First, triage offenses to determine which *must* be addressed so as not to affect the life of the relationship.

1. Determine if the offense is self-induced.

- a. Am I simply annoyed? That is not an invitation to speak. Proverbs 12:16
- b. Are my unmet desires bothering me? Are they justified? James 4:1-2; Phil. 2:3-8
- c. Am I assuming bad motives? Interpreting other's words or actions through a grid? 1 Corinthians 4:5; 13:7
- d. Am I harboring unforgiveness and anger? Hebrews 12:15; Ephesians 4:31
 - i. Repent of anger and replace with God's kindness and forgiveness. Eph. 4:32
 - ii. Choose to forgive *because* God forgives you. Eph. 4:32; Matt. 18:21-35
 - iii. Choose to forgive *like* God forgives you. Jer. 31:34; Psalm 103:12; Heb.10:17
 1. Don't rehearse it to *yourself*. Phil. 4:8
 2. Don't rehearse it to the *person* you forgave. 2 Corinthians 2:6-11
 3. Don't rehearse it to *others*. James 4:11; 5:9
 - iv. Trust God to ultimately *right* the wrongs done against you. Romans 12:18-20
 - v. Forgiveness doesn't mean *ignoring* someone's recurring sin. It means dealing with them with a burdened heart to help, not an angry heart to hurt. Gal. 6:1
- e. Am I sinning or am I allowing the Lord to give me patience and grace to forbear? Philippians 2:3-8; Colossians 3:12-14; Galatians 5:16-24

2. **Let love cover or overlook it.** Colossians 3:12-14; 1 Pet 4:8; Luke 23:34. We don't have to bring up everything that bothers us. Let the Lord fill us with His patience, and love.

3. **Deal with other's offenses that are ongoing and are detrimental to your relationship with them.**

4. **Deal with other's offenses that affect their testimony for Christ.**

How should I talk to someone who has offended me?

"The three qualifications of a good surgeon are also necessary for a good reprover: An eagle's eye; A lions' heart, a lady's touch" - Matthew Henry - 17th century English pastor whose commentary on the Bible still used worldwide today.

1. An **Eagles Eye**: Confront Carefully

- a. Prayerfully. Do we pray before a loved one goes into surgery? Why? What? Confronting is spiritual heart surgery. We must talk to God before talking to others about their sin.
- b. Considerately. Ephesians 4:29
 - i. We must consider and understand their situation, health, stress, etc. Eph. 4:29
 - ii. We must consider the best time to talk to them. Not casually. Not haphazardly.
 - iii. We must consider the best approach (see below)
- c. Specifically. Galatians 6:1
 - i. Don't broad brush or generalize.
 - ii. Don't rehearse past events. Deal with the issue at hand. Don't open old scars.

2. **A Lion's heart: confront courageously**

- a. Focus on pleasing and obeying the Lord. Focus on glorifying God. If this issue is not confronted will God get glory from this person? Matthew 18:15; 5:23-24
- b. Be willing to be verbally attacked. A spirit of 'meekness' = humility under fire. Galatians 6:1
The sin of the person you are confronting will eventually be directed at you
- c. Focus on the spiritual well-being of the other person, not your need. Galatians 6:1
- d. Focus on their future fruitfulness in relationships and ministry. Ephesians 4:25
- e. Don't clam up. Eph. 4:15. You must speak. It is the loving thing to do.

3. **A lady's touch: Confront tenderly (Lovingly)**. Ephesians 4:15; Colossians 3:12-14

This seasons our speech with grace (Eph. 4:29) when dealing with offenses. It is God's Novocain to lessen the pain and promote healing and unity with the one we are confronting.

- a. Talk to restore not retaliate. Eph. 4:29 Your goal is to build up not put them in their place.
- b. Talk about their offense in the climate of love and affirmation for them. Eph. 4:15
- c. Acknowledge your own flaws and struggles. Gal. 6:1. Remember God's grace to you. Col. 3:12
- d. Draw out their heart towards you. Don't get defensive. Appreciate their willingness to help you by mentioning these issues. Ask forgiveness if necessary. Prov. 20:5
- e. Don't confront in front of others, especially children. Matthew 18:15
- f. Confront with a heart of compassion. Colossians 3:12-13; Eph. 4:29; 1 Thess. 5:14. What might they be going through that I need to sympathize with?
- g. Confront with a heart of kindness. Colossians 3:12-13, Do I have their best interests in mind when talking?
- h. Don't blow up. Eph. 4:31
- i. Don't attack or counterattack. 1 Peter 3:9.

Home Assignment:

- Read together "*50 questions to ask your husband/ wife.*" Ask your spouse to pick 5 of them that they would like you to ask them. Discuss with the goal of understanding and applying what you learn about the desire of your spouse. Give each other specific answers to the questions.
- Read the short article on the *power of marriage*. Discuss together what you learned and how you will apply what you learned in your marriage and life.
- Which of the three traits (Eagle's eye; Lion's Heart; Lady's touch) of a good confronter do you think you need to improve? Ask your spouse which one they think you are better at, and which one you improve and how? Write down the specific things you learn and ask God together to help you to do this. Pray for each other and thank the Lord for each other.
- Only the Lord, ultimately can give us a Eagle's eye, lions heart and lady's touch in dealing with each other. It is called the Fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-24. Without this we default into acting sinfully according to our "flesh" (sinful, selfish heart) (Galatians 5:19-21). Only when we fill our minds with His words and intentionally believe and apply them in love and dependence on Him will He change our heart. What changes do you think you need to make to get His word into your heart? His word changes our heart. Col. 3:12-15; John 17:17

50 QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR HUSBAND

1. What are your 5 favorite foods with the most favorite first?
2. What are your 5 favorite kinds of meals with the most favorite first?
3. What are your 5 favorite desserts with the most favorite first?
4. What are your 5 favorite restaurants with the most favorite first?
5. What is your favorite color?
6. What are your 5 favorite hobbies with the most favorite first?
7. What are your 5 favorite recreations with the most favorite first?
8. What are your 5 favorite sources of reading with the most favorite as first?
9. What gifts do you like?
10. What is your favorite book/s of the Bible? Why?
11. What is your favorite verse/s of the Bible? Why?
12. What is your favorite song?
13. What makes you the most fulfilled or happiest as a man?
14. What makes you the most fulfilled or happiest as a husband?
15. What makes you the most fulfilled or happiest as a father?
16. What makes you saddest as a man?
17. What makes you saddest as a husband?
18. What makes you saddest as a father?
19. What do you fear the most?
20. What other fears do you have?
21. What do you look forward to the most?
22. How much sleep do you need?
23. What are your skills?
24. What is your spiritual gift?
25. What are your weaknesses?
26. What things (personal, home, etc.) need mending?
27. With what chores and responsibilities do you like my help?
28. What caresses do you enjoy the most?
29. What caresses do you enjoy the least?

30. What action of mine provides you the greatest sexual pleasure?
31. What other things stimulate you sexually?
32. At what times do you need assurance of my love the most?
33. How can that love be shown?
34. What can I do that will make it easier to discuss and work on areas or problems that are uncomfortable to you?
35. What concerns do you have that I do not seem interested in?
36. What things do I do that irritate you?
37. What desires do you have that we haven't discussed?
38. What do you enjoy doing with me, with the most enjoyable as first?
39. What things can I do that show my appreciation of you?
40. What varying desires (spiritual, physical, intellectual, social, appreciation, recreational, protection, etc.) would you like me to provide?
41. In what ways would you like me to protect you (physically, spiritually, socially)?
42. In what ways would you like me to sacrifice for you?
43. What things are first in my life? As you look at me what do you see, not what I am.
44. What implied or unspoken desires and wishes of yours would you like for me to fulfill?
45. What concerns and interests of yours would you like me to support?
46. How much time would be good for us to spend together each day?
47. In helping family members to use their skills and develop their abilities, what motivating factors would be helpful for me to use?
48. What can I do that provides the greatest comfort and encouragement for you when you are hurt, fearful, anxious, or worried?
49. What personal habits do I have that you would like changed?
50. What ways demonstrated to you that you are a very important person who is as important or more important than I am?

50 QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR WIFE

1. What are your 5 favorite foods with the most favorite first?
2. What are your 5 favorite kinds of meals with the most favorite first?
3. What are your 5 favorite desserts with the most favorite first?
4. What are your 5 favorite restaurants with the most favorite first?
5. What is your favorite color?
6. What are your 5 favorite hobbies with the most favorite first?
7. What are your 5 favorite recreations with the most favorite first?
8. What are your 5 favorite sources of reading with the most favorite as first?
9. What gifts do you like?
10. What is your favorite book/s of the Bible? Why?
11. What is your favorite verse/s of the Bible? Why?
12. What is your favorite song?
13. What makes you the most fulfilled or happiest as a woman?
14. What makes you the most fulfilled or happiest as a wife?
15. What makes you the most fulfilled or happiest as a mother?
16. What makes you saddest as a woman?
17. What makes you saddest as a wife?
18. What makes you saddest as a mother?
19. What do you fear the most?
20. What other fears do you have?
21. What do you look forward to the most?
22. How much sleep do you need?
23. What are your skills?
24. What is your spiritual gift?
25. What are you weaknesses?
26. What things (personal, home, care, etc.) need repairing?
27. With what chores and responsibilities do you like my help?
28. What caresses do you enjoy the most?
29. What caresses do you enjoy the least?

30. What action of mine provides you the greatest sexual pleasure?
31. What other things stimulate you sexually?
32. At what times do you need assurance of my love the most?
33. How can that love be shown?
34. What can I do that will make it easier to discuss and work on areas or problems that are uncomfortable to you?
35. What concerns do you have that I do not seem interested in?
36. What things do I do that irritate you?
37. What desires do you have that we haven't discussed?
38. What do you enjoy doing with me, with the most enjoyable as first?
39. What things can I do that show my appreciation of you?
40. What varying desires (spiritual, physical, intellectual, social, appreciation, recreational, protection, etc.) would you like me to provide?
41. In what ways would you like me to protect you (physically, spiritually, socially)?
42. In what ways would you like me to sacrifice for you?
43. What things are first in my life? As you look at me what do you see, not what I am.
44. What implied or unspoken desires and wishes of yours would you like for me to fulfill?
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46. How much time would be good for us to spend together each day?
47. In helping family members to use their skills and develop their abilities, what motivating factors would be helpful for me to use?
48. What can I do that provides the greatest comfort and encouragement for you when you are hurt, fearful, anxious, or worried?
49. What personal habits do I have that you would like changed?
50. What ways demonstrated to you that you are a very important person who is as important or more important than I am?

lost and flawed, so sinful, that Jesus had to die for you, but you are also so loved and valued that Jesus was glad to die for you. Now you are fully accepted and delighted in by the Father, not because you deserve it but only by free grace. My reluctance to let Kathy serve me was, in the end, a refusal to live my life on the basis of grace. I wanted to earn everything. I wanted no one to give me any favors. I wanted to give undeserved gifts to others—so I could have satisfaction of thinking of myself as a magnanimous person—but I did not want to receive someone else's service myself. My heart still operated like this even though my head had accepted the basic gospel thesis that through faith in Christ we live by God's grace alone.

That gospel message *should* both humble and lift the believer up at the same time. It teaches us that we are indeed self-centered sinners. It perforates our illusions about our goodness and superiority. But the gospel also fills us with more love and affirmation than we could ever imagine. It means we don't need to earn our self-worth through incessant service and work. It means also that we don't mind so much when we are deprived of some comfort, compliment, or reward. We don't have to keep records and accounts any more. We can freely give and freely receive.

So why did I fail to allow my relationship with Kathy to be shaped by this gospel? It was because I believed the gospel with my head but it wasn't operational in my heart. The ability to serve another person requires the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, to drive this very gospel into our hearts until it changes us.

The Problem of Self-Centeredness

The main barrier to the development of a servant heart in marriage is what we touched on in the first chapter—the radical self-centeredness of the sinful human heart. Self-centeredness is a havoc-wreaking problem in many marriages, and it is the ever-present enemy of every marriage. It is the cancer in the center of a marriage when it begins, and it has to be dealt with. In Paul's classic description of love, in 1 Corinthians 13, he says,

Love is patient and kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

(verses 4-5)

Repeatedly Paul shows that love is the very opposite of “self-seeking,” which is literally pursuing one's own welfare before those of others. Self-centeredness is easily seen in the signs Paul lists: impatience, irritability, a lack of graciousness and kindness in speech, envious brooding on the better situations of others, and holding past injuries and hurts against others. In Dana Adam Shapiro's interviews of divorced couples, it is clear that this was the heart of what led to marital disintegration. Each spouse's self-centeredness asserted itself (as it always will), but in response, the other spouse got more impatient, resentful, harsh, and cold. In other words, they responded to the self-centeredness of their partner with their

own self-centeredness. Why? Self-centeredness by its very character makes you blind to your own while being hypersensitive, offended, and angered by that of others.⁴ The result is always a downward spiral into self-pity, anger, and despair, as the relationship gets eaten away to nothing.

But the gospel, brought home to your heart by the Spirit, can make you happy enough to be humble, giving you an internal fullness that frees you to be generous with the other even when you are not getting the satisfaction you want out of the relationship. Without the help of the Spirit, without a continual refilling of your soul's tank with the glory and love of the Lord, such submission to the interests of the other is virtually impossible to accomplish for any length of time without becoming resentful. I call this "love economics." You can only afford to be generous if you actually have some money in the bank to give. In the same way, if your only source of love and meaning is your spouse, then anytime he or she fails you, it will not just cause grief but a psychological cataclysm. If, however, you know something of the work of the Spirit in your life, you have enough love "in the bank" to be generous to your spouse even when you are not getting much affection or kindness at the moment.

To have a marriage that sings requires a Spirit-created ability to serve, to take yourself out of the center, to put the needs of others ahead of your own. The Spirit's work of making the gospel real to the heart weakens the self-centeredness in the soul. It is impossible for us to make major headway against self-centeredness and move into a stance of service without some kind of supernatural help.⁵

The deep happiness that marriage can bring, then, lies on the far side of sacrificial service in the power of the Spirit. That is, you only discover your own happiness after each of you has put the happiness of your spouse ahead of your own, in a sustained way, in response to what Jesus has done for you. Some will ask, "If I put the happiness of my spouse ahead of my own needs—then what do I get out of it?" The answer is—happiness. That is what you get, but a happiness through serving others instead of using them, a happiness that won't be bad for you. It is the joy that comes from giving joy, from loving another person in a costly way. Today's culture of the "Me-Marriage" finds this very proposal—of putting the interests of your spouse ahead of your own—oppressive. But that is because it does not look deeply enough into this crucial part of Christian teaching about the nature of reality. What is that teaching?

Christianity asserts, to begin with, that God is triune—that is, three persons within one God. And from John 17 and other passages we learn that from all eternity, each person—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—has glorified, honored, and loved the other two. So there is an "other-orientation" within the very being of God. When Jesus Christ went to the cross, he was simply acting in character. As C. S. Lewis wrote, when Jesus sacrificed himself for us, he did "in the wild weather of his outlying provinces" that which from all eternity "he had done at home in glory and gladness."⁶

Then the Bible says that human beings were made in God's image. That means, among other things, that we were created to worship and live for God's glory, not our own. We

were made to serve God and others. That means paradoxically that if we try to put our own happiness ahead of obedience to God, we violate our own nature and become, ultimately, miserable. Jesus restates the principle when he says, "Whoever wants to save his life shall lose it, but whoever loses his life *for my sake* will find it" (Matthew 16:25). He is saying, "If you seek happiness more than you seek me, you will have neither; if you seek to serve me more than serve happiness, you will have both."

Paul applies this principle to marriage. Seek to serve one another rather than to be happy, and you will find a new and deeper happiness. Many couples have discovered this wonderful, unlooked-for reality. Why would this be true? It is because marriage is "instituted of God." It was established by the God for whom self-giving love is an essential attribute, and therefore it reflects his nature, particularly as it is revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Therefore, when facing any problem in marriage, the first thing you look for at the base of it is, in some measure, self-centeredness and an unwillingness to serve or minister to the other. The word "submit" that Paul uses has its origin in the military, and in Greek it denoted a soldier submitting to an officer. Why? Because when you join the military you lose control over your schedule, over when you can take a holiday, over when you're going to eat, and even over what you eat. To be part of a whole, to become part of a greater unity, you have to surrender your independence. You must give up the right to make decisions unilaterally. Paul says that this ability to deny your own rights, to serve and put the good of the

whole over your own, is not instinctive; indeed, it's unnatural, but it is the very foundation of marriage.

This sounds oppressive, but that's just the way relationships work. Indeed, it has been argued that that is how everything works. You must be willing to give something up before it can be truly yours. Fulfillment is on the far side of sustained unselfish service, not the near side. It is one of the universal principles of life:

Even in social life, you will never make a good impression on other people until you stop thinking about what sort of impression you are making. Even in literature and art, no man who bothers about originality will ever be original: whereas if you simply try to tell the truth (without caring two pence how often it has been told before), you will, nine times out of ten, become original without having noticed it. The principle runs through life from top to bottom. Give up yourself, and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it. . . . Nothing that you have not given away will be really yours. . . .?

The Wounds We Carry

There are many reasons that we cannot see our own self-centeredness. One of the main factors that hides it from us is our own history of mistreatment. Many people come to marriage having been seriously hurt by parents, lovers, or former spouses. I am not talking about parents who physically or

sexually abuse their children. I'm talking of the more widespread experiences of cold and indifferent parents or of verbally abusive parents who know how to punish children emotionally. Then there are the dating relationships or former marriages in which the other party wronged and betrayed you. All of these experiences can make it extremely difficult to trust the other sex, while at the same time filling you with deep doubts about your own judgment and character. "Woundedness" is compounded self-doubt and guilt, resentment and disillusionment.

We come to one another in marriage with these things in our backgrounds. And when the inevitable conflicts occur, our memories can sabotage us. They can prevent us from doing the normal, day-to-day work of repentance and forgiveness and extending the grace that is so crucial to making progress in our marriages. The reason is that woundedness makes us self-absorbed.

This is not hard to see in others, of course. When you begin to talk to wounded people, it is not long before they begin talking about themselves. They're so engrossed in their own pain and problems that they don't realize what they look like to others. They are not sensitive to the needs of others. They don't pick up the cues of those who are hurting, or, if they do, they only do so in a self-involved way. That is, they do so with a view of helping to "rescue" them in order to feel better about themselves. They get involved with others in an obsessive and controlling way because they are actually meeting their own needs, though they deceive themselves about this. We are always, always the last to see our

self-absorption. Our hurts and wounds can make our self-centeredness even more intractable. When you point out selfish behavior to a wounded person, he or she will say, "Well, maybe so, but you don't understand what it is like." The wounds justify the behavior.

There are two ways to diagnose and treat this condition. In our culture, there is still a widespread assumption of basic human goodness. If people are self-absorbed and messed up, it is argued, it is only because they lack healthy self-esteem. So what we should do is tell them to be good to themselves, to live for themselves, not for others. In this view of things, we give wounded people almost nothing but support, encouraging them to stop letting others run their lives, urging them to find out what their dreams are and take steps to fulfill them. That, we think, is the way to healing. But this approach assumes that self-centeredness isn't natural, that it is only the product of some kind of mistreatment. That is a very popular understanding of human nature, but it is worth observing that it is an article of faith—a religious belief, as it were. No major religion in the world actually teaches that, yet this is the popular view of many people in the West.

But this view of things simply doesn't work. A marriage relationship unavoidably entails self-denial, even in the most mundane day-to-day living. It is impossible to have a smooth-running relationship with even one person, let alone two, always feeling that his or her desires should have preeminence because of all he or she has been through in life.

The Christian approach begins with a different analysis of the situation. We believe that, as badly wounded as persons

may be, the resulting self-absorption of the human heart was not caused by the mistreatment. It was only magnified and shaped by it. Their mistreatment poured gasoline on the fire, and the flame and smoke now choke them, but their self-centeredness already existed prior to their woundedness. Therefore, if you do nothing but urge people to "look out for number one," you will be setting them up for future failure in any relationship, especially marriage. This is not to say that wounded people don't need great gentleness, tender treatment, affirmation, and patience. It is just that this is not the whole story. Both people crippled by inferiority feelings *and* those who have superiority complexes are centered on themselves, obsessed with how they look and how they are being perceived and treated. It would be easy to help someone out of an inferiority complex into a superiority complex and leave them no better furnished to live life well.

Confronting Our Self-Centeredness

Paul's description of the effect of the gospel is striking:

And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

(2 Corinthians 5:15)

There is the essence of sin, according to the Bible—living for ourselves, rather than for God and the people

around us. This is why Jesus can sum up the entire law—the entire will of God for our lives—in two great commands: to love and live for God rather than ourselves and to love and put the needs of others ahead of our own (Matthew 22:37-40).

All people need to be treated gently and respectfully, especially those who have been wounded. They will be unusually sensitive to rough handling. Nevertheless, all people must be challenged to see that their self-centeredness hasn't been caused by the people who hurt them; it's only been aggravated by the abuse. And they must do something about it, or they're going to be miserable forever.

In Western culture today, you decide to get married because you feel an attraction to the other person. You think he or she is wonderful. But a year or two later—or, just as often, a month or two—three things usually happen. First, you begin to find out how selfish this wonderful person is. Second, you discover that the wonderful person has been going through a similar experience and he or she begins to tell you how selfish *you* are. And third, though you acknowledge it in part, you conclude that your spouse's selfishness is more problematic than your own. This is especially true if you feel that you've had a hard life and have experienced a lot of hurt. You say silently, "OK, I shouldn't do that—but *you don't understand me.*" The woundedness makes us minimize our own selfishness. And that's the point at which many married couples arrive after a relatively brief period of time.

So what do you do then? There are at least two paths to take. First, you could decide that your woundedness is more fundamental than your self-centeredness and determine that unless your spouse sees the problems you have and takes care of you, it's not going to work out. Of course, your spouse will probably not do this—especially if he or she is thinking almost the exact same thing about you! And so what follows is the development of emotional distance and, perhaps, a slowly negotiated kind of détente or ceasefire. There is an unspoken agreement not to talk about some things. There are some things your spouse does that you hate, but you stop talking about them as long as he or she stops bothering you about certain other things. No one changes for the other; there is only tit-for-tat bargaining. Couples who settle for this kind of relationship may look happily married after forty years, but when it's time for the anniversary photo op, the kiss will be forced.

The alternative to this truce-marriage is to determine to see your own selfishness as a fundamental problem and to treat it more seriously than you do your spouse's. Why? Only you have complete access to your own selfishness, and only you have complete responsibility for it. So each spouse should take the Bible seriously, should make a commitment to "give yourself up." You should stop making excuses for selfishness, you should begin to root it out as it's revealed to you, and you should do so regardless of what your spouse is doing. If two spouses *each* say, "I'm going to treat my self-centeredness as the main problem in the marriage," you have the prospect of a truly great marriage.

It Only Takes One to Begin Healing

Neither of you may take this course of action, or both of you may do it together. But there is a third possibility: It may be that one of you decides to operate on the basis of verse 21 and one of you does not. In this case, let's say, you are the only one who decides, "My selfishness is the thing I am going to work on." What will happen? Usually there is not much immediate response from the other side. But often, over time, your attitude and behavior will begin to soften your partner. He or she can see the pains you are taking. And it will be easier for your spouse to admit his or her faults because you are no longer always talking about them yourself. So if both of you decide to work on your selfishness and minister to the other, the prospects for your marriage are great. But even if only one of you does it, your prospects are still good.

This reminds me of the place in Genesis 4 where God looks at Cain, who is full of self-pity, and says to him, "Cain, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must master it." What's important to understand is that the principle of self in your life is crouching at your door! It wants to have you, it wants to pounce on you, it wants to devour you. And it's up to you to do something about it. God asks that you deny yourself, that you lose yourself to find yourself. If you try to do this without the work of the Spirit, and without belief in all Christ has done for you, then simply giving up your rights and desires will be galling and hardening. But in Christ and with the Spirit, it will be liberating.

The principle we have been describing serves as a corrective

to a couple of the popular models for “having a satisfying marriage.”

There is a conservative approach to marriage that puts a great deal of stress on traditional gender roles. It says that the basic problem in marriage is that both husband and wife need to submit to their God-given functions, which are that husbands need to be the head of the family, and wives need to submit to their husbands. There is a lot of emphasis on the differences between men and women. The problem is that an overemphasis could encourage selfishness, especially on the part of the husband.

There is a more secular approach to marriage that says that the real problem in marriage is that you have to get your spouse to recognize your potential and help you to develop it. You must not let your spouse trample all over you. Self-realization is the goal. You’ve got to develop yourself in your marriage, and if your spouse won’t help you do it, you’ve got to negotiate. And if your spouse won’t negotiate, you’ve got to get out to save yourself. That, of course, also can just pour gas on the fire of selfishness instead of putting it out.⁸

The Christian principle that needs to be at work is Spirit-generated selflessness—not thinking less of yourself or more of yourself but thinking of yourself less. It means taking your mind off yourself and realizing that in Christ your needs are going to be met and are, in fact, being met so that you don’t look at your spouse as your savior. People with a deep grasp of the gospel can turn around and admit that their selfishness is the problem and that they’re going to work on it. And when they do that, they will often discover

an immediate sense of liberation, of waking up from a troubling dream. They see how small-minded they were being, how small the issue is in light of the grand scheme of things. Those who stop concentrating on how unhappy they are find that their happiness is growing. You must lose yourself to find yourself.

The Fear of Christ

There’s one more phrase in this crucial introductory verse 21 that we haven’t looked at. Paul says that we should submit to one another “out of reverence for Christ.” That’s what many modern translations say, but literally Paul says we should do it out of the *fear of Christ*. The word “reverence” is too weak to convey what Paul is talking about here, but the word “fear” is also misleading, because to English readers it conveys the idea of fright and dread. What does it mean?

When we go to the Old Testament, where the term “the fear of the Lord” is very common, we come upon some very puzzling usages. Often the fear of the Lord is linked with great joy. Proverbs 28:14 tells us that “Happy is the one who feareth always.” How can someone who is constantly in fear be filled with happiness? Perhaps most surprising is Psalm 130:4, where the Psalmist says, “Forgiveness comes from you—therefore you are feared.” Forgiveness and grace increase the fear of the Lord. Other passages tell us that we can be instructed and grow in the fear of the Lord (2 Chronicles 26:5; Psalm 34:11), that it is characterized by praise, wonder, and delight (Psalm 40:3; Isaiah 11:3). How can that

be? One commentator on Psalm 130 puts it like this: "Servile fear [being scared] would have been diminished, not increased, by forgiveness. . . . The true sense of the 'fear of the Lord' in the Old Testament [then] . . . implies relationship."⁹

Obviously, to be in the fear of the Lord is not to be scared of the Lord, even though the Hebrew word has overtones of respect and awe. "Fear" in the Bible means to be overwhelmed, to be controlled by something. To fear the Lord is to be overwhelmed with wonder before the greatness of God and his love. It means that, because of his bright holiness and magnificent love, you find him "fearfully beautiful." That is why the more we experience God's grace and forgiveness, the more we experience a trembling awe and wonder before the greatness of all that he is and has done for us. Fearing him means bowing before him out of amazement at his glory and beauty. Paul speaks of the love of Christ "constraining" us (2 Corinthians 5:14). What is it that most motivates and moves you? Is it the desire for success? The pursuit of some achievement? The need to prove yourself to your parents? The need for respect from your peers? Are you largely driven by anger against someone or some people who have wronged you? Paul says that if any of these things is a greater controlling influence on you than the reality of God's love for you, you will not be in a position to serve others unselfishly. Only out of the fear of the Lord Jesus will we be liberated to serve one another.

This all seems very theological, but verse 21 shows that it is crucial for how we conduct our relationships.

I once knew a woman in her late thirties who had never

married. Her family and her part of the country believed that there was something radically wrong with any woman of that age who was still single. She wrestled greatly with shame and a feeling that she had somehow failed as a woman. Because of this, she also had tremendous unresolved anger against a man she had dated for many years but who had not been willing to marry her.

Finally, she went to a counselor. The therapist told her that she had taken to heart her family's approach to personal value—namely, that a woman had to have a husband and children if she was to have any worth. She was bitter against this man because he had come between her and the thing she felt she *had* to have for her life to have any significance. The counselor then proposed that she throw off such an unlightened view and devote herself to a career. "If you come to see yourself as a good, accomplished person, then you will see you don't need a man or anyone else to give you a sense of worth." And so she began to shed her family and culture's view of women and to pursue a career. She began to feel better, but she discovered that it didn't enable her to get over her resentment toward her longtime ex-boyfriend.

At about this time, she was going to a church where she was hearing the gospel clearly for the first time. She heard that the gospel was *not* what she had thought—that we amass a good record, give it to God, and then he saves us. Instead, the gospel is that Jesus Christ has amassed a perfect record and when we believe in him, he gives it to us. He lived the life we should have lived and died the death we should have died in our place, so that when we believe, our sins are pardoned

and we are "counted righteous in his sight." Then we are completely accepted and loved by the only One in the universe whose opinions really count.

She began to realize that the well-meaning counselor was only half right. Indeed, it was wrong of her to seek self-worth through male affection. That had been a trap. It made her self-regard contingent on what men thought of her. But now she was being asked to look to her career and accomplishments as a way to feel good about herself. That meant that her self-image would be dependent on her success at achieving economic independence. So she said, "Why should I leave the ranks of the many women who make 'family' their whole life to join the ranks of the many men who make 'career' the same thing? Would I not be as devastated then by career setbacks as I have been by romantic ones? No. I will rest in the righteousness of Christ and learn to rejoice in it. Then I can look at males *or* career and say, 'What makes me beautiful to God is Jesus, not these things.'"

And so she did. Not only did she quickly find that she was much less anxious about her job, but she began to sense more and more the magnitude of God's love through Christ. She began to experience what can be called "emotional wealth"—a sense of being loved so deeply that when someone wrongs us we can afford to be generous, able to forgive. Her anger against her former boyfriend and against men in general subsided. A few years later, to her surprise, she met a man, fell in love, and married. Looking back, there was no doubt in her mind that, if she had married her old boyfriend, it would have been a disaster. She would have looked to him to give

her what only Christ can, and therefore she wouldn't have been in a position to serve and care for him.

One of the more dramatic examples of this principle can be found in Laura Hillenbrand's bestselling biography of World War II hero Louis Zamperini. On a mission over the Pacific in 1943, Zamperini's plane crashed into the ocean, killing most on board. After forty-seven days afloat in shark-infested waters, Louie and one other survivor were captured and endured two and a half years of imprisonment, which consisted of almost constant beatings, humiliation, and torture.

Returning after the war, he suffered from severe post-traumatic stress disorder and became an alcoholic. His wife, Cynthia, lost hope for their marriage. Louie spent most of his time dreaming and planning about returning to Japan to murder "the Bird," a Japanese sergeant who had repeatedly assaulted and tormented him in the camps. One night he dreamt that the Bird was looming over him. He reached out to defend himself. A scream woke him up and there he was, straddling Cynthia's chest, his hands locked around the throat of his pregnant wife. Not long afterward, Cynthia announced to him that she was filing for divorce. He was distressed, but even the threat of losing his wife and child could not stop his drinking or his self-destructive behavior. He was too tormented by his past and his bitterness to change, even to save his family.

Then one day in the fall of 1949, Cynthia Zamperini was told by an acquaintance that there was a young evangelist, Billy Graham, preaching downtown at a special series of tent meetings. She attended and "came home alight." She went

immediately to Louie and told him she didn't want a divorce, that she had experienced a spiritual awakening, and that she wanted him to accompany her to hear the preaching. After days of resisting, he finally gave in. That night, the young preacher's sermon homed in on the concept of human sin. Louie was indignant. *I am a good man*, he said to himself. But almost as soon as he had the thought, "he felt the lie in it." Several nights later he returned and "walked the aisle," repented, and received Christ as Savior.

Zamperini was immediately delivered of his alcoholism. But more crucially, he felt God's love flood his life and realized that he was able to forgive all those who had imprisoned and tortured him. The shame and sense of powerlessness that had stoked his hate and misery had vanished. His relationship with Cynthia "was renewed and deepened. They were blissful together." In October 1950, Louie was able to return to Japan and speak through an interpreter at the prison where many of his former camp guards were now imprisoned. He spoke about the power of Christ's grace to bring forgiveness, and to the prisoners' shock, he embraced each of them with a loving smile.¹⁰

I offer this example with hesitation, because dramatic testimonies of instantaneous change can be misleading. Louis Zamperini's emotional wounds were unusually deep and so the work of the Spirit—making God's love in Jesus Christ real to the heart—was also very powerful and dramatic. God's Spirit doesn't always work in such a sudden and obvious way, but he always does this same work. He gave Cynthia hope and Louie release from bitterness, thereby renewing

their marriage. He will always have the same influence, whether suddenly or gradually.

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . And our hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

(Romans 5:1-2, 5)

Louie Zamperini had been literally tortured, and his inner shame, anger, and fear had eaten up his ability to love and serve others. But each of us comes to marriage with a disordered inner being. Many of us have sought to overcome self-doubts by giving ourselves to our careers. That will mean we will choose our work over our spouse and family to the detriment of our marriage. Others of us hope that unending affection and affirmation from a beautiful, brilliant romantic partner will finally make us feel good about ourselves. That turns the relationship into a form of salvation, and no relationship can live up to that.

Do you see why Paul introduces the subject of marriage with a summons to love one another "out of the fear of Christ"? We come into our marriages driven by all kinds of fears, desires, and needs. If I look to my marriage to fill the God-sized spiritual vacuum in my heart, I will not be in position to serve my spouse. Only God can fill a God-sized hole. Until God has the proper place in my life, I will always be complaining that my spouse is not loving me well enough, not respecting me enough, not supporting me enough.