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HOW TO HANDLE A WOMAN

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LIVING RESURRECTION IN RELATIONSHIPS #4

How to handle a woman? This is the question that King Arthur ponders in the musical *Camelot* and a question that men mutter to themselves daily. Like all men, King Arthur is befuddled and puzzled about his wife, in his case Queen Guinevere. He complains to Merlin about his lack of education and wishes that at some point he would have changed into a girl to learn the way the creatures think. As he breaks out in song he asks, how to handle a woman? He wonders whether he should flatter, threaten, cajole, plead, brood or play the gay romancer. The wise old man tells him that none of these methods will suffice. There is a way to handle a woman that is known to every woman, and that is to love her, simply love her, merely love her. If you catch me at some opportune time in a soulful mood, I just might sing the song for you in my best Richard Harris accent.

Lerner and Loewe, the lyricists of the song, were onto something, for they hinted at the apostle Paul's advice for husbands to love their wives. We continue our summer series looking at the house rules in Colossians 3 and for the second week in a row the focus is on marriage. Last week Bernard carefully navigated us through the stormy waters of headship and submission and Sharon talked about being a wife, relating to a husband as is fitting in the Lord. Today our focus is on husbands. While last week's topic is controversial and confusing we have no such problem this week.

The Decline of Men

Before I talk about husbands loving their wives I want to talk a little about the challenges that men, married and single, face today in our society. These challenges center on the decline of men and naturally this affects husbands greatly. Many sociologists agree that in the last four or five decades men in our society have fallen into a sleepy malaise. Men are confused and uncertain about what being a man should look like. In general, men have been on a steady decline into passivity, lacking vision and leadership. Several things have contributed to this decline. Let me mention four things briefly.

The first contributing factor is the rise of the women's movement. In itself this is not a bad thing, in fact it is a very good thing. But as women have grown more assertive and confident men have grown more complacent. In our world today women don't need a man in order to be successful. When the roles of women were well defined by patriarchal models, men may have still struggled knowing who they were but at

least they knew who women were. Strong, capable women make many men uneasy, uncomfortable, and tentative.

Second, the way Hollywood presents the American male has had a negative effect on men. Over the past several years, television sitcoms have portrayed men as ignorant, clumsy, and rather stupid. We laugh at the portrayals we see on television but we subtly extend these perceptions into reality and fulfill these false prophecies. The comedian, George Carlin, known for being sarcastic, says "Women are crazy, men are stupid. And the main reason women are crazy is that men are stupid." Men struggle to give leadership because they no longer think they are capable or will be successful.

The third factor is the breakdown of the family and the lack of male role models. Men often grow up with fathers who are absent physically and emotionally due to divorce or preoccupation with career. Teachers, coaches and spiritual leaders who misuse their positions and lack vision for shaping young men cause deep wounds through discouraging comments, using young men for their own personal goals, or, as we are all aware, by physical abuse. Young people crave encouraging, positive role models and this was so evident at last week's Sports Camp. On the final night of camp it was clear how much the kids loved the leaders from *Uncharted Waters*. John Wayne, pick-up trucks, or playing football do not necessarily define maleness. But men do not know what it might look like. The confusion leads to non-action and an inability to make commitments.

A fourth factor in the decline of men is the rise of pornography and video games. This is especially true for the younger generation. Men can make a world of their own making where they are the superstar or hero. They no longer need community but can retreat into isolation and virtual reality for pleasure and stimulation. "Boys' brains are being digitally rewired for change, novelty, excitement and constant arousal. That means they're totally out of sync in traditional classes, which are analog, static, interactively passive."¹ As a result, men are a bit clueless and weak in knowing how to relate to other people, especially to women.

Men face other challenges, but all this to say that it isn't easy to be a man and consequently it isn't easy to be a husband. Marriage does not solve the issues men face. On the contrary marriage makes these issues more visible. Therefore it is essential that we remember the context of Colossians. Men, we have been raised with Christ. Our life is hidden with Christ

in God. We have already laid aside the old self and have put on the new self that is being transformed into the image of Christ. Our identity in Christ is the key to living out resurrection life in relationships. Therefore, as a husband, we cannot try to implement Paul's advice without this foundation. But with this foundation we can live with hope because we can break the constraints and limitations of the issues we face and relate to our wives as a new creation in Christ.

A Word for Husbands

Now we come to Paul's brief word to husbands in Colossians 3:19:

Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.

Notice that Paul does not say that we are to figure out our wives or understand them totally. I am not sure that it is possible. My wife will tell you that at times she does not understand herself. And of course from my experience the rules change from day to day. Notice also that Paul does not give men a list of jobs that define the male role. Every marriage is going to be different based on the gifts and talents of each partner. Paul simply gives two simple, powerful words. But these words would have been a major change for the first century husband who claimed absolute authority over the house and could treat his wife any way he wanted, where wives were for bearing children and mistresses were commonplace.

There is both a positive and a negative command. Let's talk about the negative command first. Husbands are not to be harsh. The NASB translation reads: "do not be embittered." The Message reads: "don't take advantage of them." The word means to become bitter, angry, or ill disposed. Harshness is the opposite of loving.

From my experience, most men have an issue with anger and they show this either overtly through aggressive actions and hurtful words or indirectly through manipulation or playing the role of the victim. Men are often wounded and they carry these wounds deep within their hearts, safely hidden behind steel walls that nothing can penetrate. And because these wounds are not dealt with, they surface as anger in relationships due to frustration, disappointment, selfishness, or unmet expectations. The marriage relationship has a way of bringing out this anger in various forms more than any other relationship, where old hurts find a new target. When men grow bitter and frustrated, the wife experiences the effects of her husband's wounds more than any other person, even if the anger does not directly relate to her.

You might recall that when Paul talked about putting to death the old self he provided two lists of five character traits. The first list consisted of inappropriate sexual practices. The second list deals with anger and harsh words: "now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips." Paul now applies this general instruction directly to husbands.

Men, it is imperative that we face our anger and the source of our anger if we are to be the kind of husbands that God wants us to be. Football is a violent contact sport but it has no place in the home as to how we relate. Maleness is not defined by how tough we are or how loud we can be. Every woman, even the strongest and most aggressive, has a fragile heart and a man can crush that fragile heart with a single harsh word, forcing her to retreat into herself. I know because I speak from my own experience.

Growing up I was a shy, mild-mannered introvert, keeping to myself most of the time. I would have never known or recognized that I had a problem with anger unless I got married. Marriage brought out the worst in me. Like my father before me, I saw that I could blow my top. I saw how angry or frustrated I could get when things didn't go my way or I didn't get what I wanted. I saw how my sinful and selfish desires collided with my wife's sinful and selfish desires. Since my wife could out argue me any day of the week my response was to just talk louder than her and say things to manipulate her. For many years I was unaware that my wife was mush inside and that harsh words could hurt deeply. Over time I came to realize that my anger came from deeper wounds, and opening up to these deeper wounds was essential to my putting away the old self and putting on the new self in Christ.

Men, how do you deal with your frustrations and disappointments? Even if you don't display anger, is there anger bubbling, simmering underneath the surface? Husbands, do you have a bitter taste in your mouth concerning your wife? Are you holding onto resentments or unmet expectations? If so, I encourage you to not bury these feelings but bring them before the Lord and have a conversation with him about them. Let go of them and let the Lord cleanse your heart.

Well, enough with the negative and on to the positive – I am getting depressed.

The positive command is to love your wife, simply love her, merely love her. In the context of Colossians we might read this in light of what Paul has just said: as God's beloved and holy people we are to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. And then Paul added that over all these virtues we are to put on love (Col. 3:12, 14).

What does it mean to love your wife? Most of us know the corresponding passage from Ephesians 5 that defines what Paul intends. In this passage Paul gives two analogies for how to love. The first is to love your wife as Christ loved the church:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. (Ephesians 5:25-27)

Christ-like love is defined as sacrificial. Christ laid down his life. Although he was God, Jesus emptied himself and humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death,

even death on a cross. This means that a husband lays down his life for his wife.

Sacrificial love means dying to self, being other-centered, seeking the other's highest good, not keeping score, accepting what is instead of what isn't, forgiving again and again the way God has forgiven you. Sacrificial love is patient and kind and compassionate. Sacrificial love means suffering because to die is to suffer. This is how the husband submits his life in marriage. As Bernard said last week, the wife is called to self-surrender and the husband is called to self-sacrifice.

Sacrificial love is also very purposeful. Christ died so that he could present the church to himself in all her glory, holy and blameless, without stain or wrinkle. Sacrificial love is sanctifying love, love that brings to completion, the end for which we were created.

In the same way, a husband loves his wife so that she might grow spiritually, emotionally, and physically to be the woman God created her to be, not the woman that the man wants her to be. Under the husband's headship or leadership a wife is intended to flourish. The wife's gifts and talents are given wings to fly through the husband's encouragement. A husband does not clip his wife's wings to keep her grounded.

In the second analogy a husband loves his wife as his own body.

In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church... (Ephesians 5:25-29)

The reason for loving a wife as your body is that husband and wife are one flesh and no one hates his flesh. This means that a husband's love is defined as caring and nurturing. A husband cares for his wife's needs in the same way he cares for his own needs – needs for rest, exercise, food, medical attention, emotional counseling, and friendship.

If a husband loves his wife less than himself he sees himself as superior. If a husband loves his wife more than himself he sees himself as inferior. Therefore, a husband loves his wife as himself. He loves both himself and his wife well. He learns to grace himself so that he will lavish his wife with the same grace.

What we see is that love is not defined by affectionate or romantic feelings but by an unceasing selfless and gracious giving. To love like Christ is to initiate grace again and again and again. Christ loved us while we were yet sinners. Therefore, as husbands we continue to move toward our wives independent of her mood or response. We are always to lay aside our pride and make the first move. Grace is more important than who is right and who is wrong.

This doesn't mean that we always pander to our wife's desires or try to please her or buy her every piece of jewelry she wants. Husbands are not to be "yes" men, always giving

way or walking on eggshells. This is not what a woman truly wants. She wants a servant leader who will fight for her and provide a place of safety and trust, a safe harbor where she can let down and not be in control. Her concern is whether or not her husband has her best interests in mind and will love her in the way she needs to be loved. She wants a man who is both strong and caring. A suffering Christ-like husband she cannot deny.

Essentials for Men

Now, I know that this word is not easy, in fact it sounds really impossible. Thankfully, we can rely on God's strength and power through the Holy Spirit. But let me encourage you with a few things that I consider very important and applicable to both married and single men.

Have a Malleable and Teachable Heart

None of us men start out in marriage as a finished product. Wives you do not marry a finished product. Most of us have no idea of what we are signing up for. I know that I didn't. I have to confess that it took many years just to begin dying to self. I kept trying to get my wife to die to herself.

Dying to self is a life-long process of letting go of pride and selfishness. We will fail many, many times. We will have to ask our wives for forgiveness frequently. But the most important quality that we can have is being teachable. Instead of growing discouraged we need to be willing to grow and change. Instead of being rigid, stuck in categories from our theological or family backgrounds we need to cultivate a soft, gracious spirit. We turn the soil of our heart over regularly in the same way we would a garden so that Christ-like love for our wife can grow within us through the work of the Holy Spirit.

We ask ourselves constantly: What would it look like today for me to love my wife like Christ? What would it mean today for me to love my wife as my own body? One of the reasons we always go to weddings is to be reminded over and over of what God has called us to do as men. Perhaps what I have said you have heard many times before. But you still need to be reminded.

Understand the Greater Goal

Marriage is not the end, but rather a means to a greater end for both husband and wife. Since marriage is a one-flesh covenant relationship, it is an opportunity to learn how to live in a one-flesh covenant relationship with God. Intimacy, union, freedom and acceptance are the goals of our relationship with God. In the Old Testament, God often refers to himself as a husband to his people Israel (Hosea 2:19-20). In the New Testament, the church is referred to as the bride of Christ. Marriage gives us the opportunity to experience this kind of relationship with someone who is visible.

On another level marriage provides the workshop or laboratory for a man to become like Jesus for both his wife

and for the world. As a husband dies to self and loves his wife he gives her and the world a visible picture of Christ. This is a very high calling.

I worked with young singles for some thirty years. As a result I saw many people begin to date and get married. Many times some young man would approach me and talk about his indecision to marry the girl he was dating. He would rattle off his list of what he wanted and wonder if it was okay to commit himself even though he couldn't check off every item on this list. My response was to tell the young man that he was asking the wrong question. The question wasn't whether the woman satisfied his wish list but whether God was calling him to become Jesus to this woman.

Let me suggest something. To become like Jesus is the essence of manhood, for both married and single men. If you want to know what it looks like to be a man, just watch Jesus.

Jesus was strong but compassionate, sacrificial but not passive, truthful but loving, firm but gracious, quiet but not tentative. Jesus emptied himself but was wealthy beyond measure, lived in community but spent time alone in prayer, was comfortable with both men and women, and lived a very purposeful life aimed at the kingdom of God not on the world.

Men, to live sacrificially in marriage and in the world will result in being the kind of men that God intended us to be.

Cultivate Male Friendships

I agree with what John Eldredge said in his book *Wild at Heart*. Men do not learn to be men in the company of women (I might also say in the company of computers) but rather men learn to be men in the company of men. We need men as spiritual companions and friends with whom we can share the good, bad, and ugly of our lives and find encouragement. Instead of venting on our wives or holding things inside we need male community where we can be open and honest about our anger, lust, disappointments, problems at work, struggles in marriage, or difficulties with children.

I know that this isn't easy. Women tend to be much stronger relationally than men. And fathers of young children often have little time or energy after they fulfill their obligations at work and serve the family. I have noticed in recent years a decline in younger men at our men's retreats. In the past men bonded over playing sports but in our world men are not as sports-minded. But we shouldn't give it up because something good happens when men are together and share their lives. So wives, encourage your husbands and help them make this a priority.

Know Deeply and Personally the Love of God

Finally and most importantly, as men we need to know very personally the love of our heavenly Father. How will we love our wives if we do not know the love of Jesus for ourselves? How will we be Jesus to the world if we have never had the inner experience of being with Jesus?

Men, when you sit in silence and solitude, when you lie on your bed at night, do you know in your heart, not just in your mind, that you are deeply loved by your heavenly Father?

Again, this isn't easy for men. But the value is beyond measure. Men tend to seek God's love in the arms of a woman. But a woman's love will never be enough. Knowing the love of God is what frees us up to love our wives. When our primary source for being loved comes from God, when we do not need our wife's love and affection, then we can love sacrificially and initiate grace for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health. This is the vow we made when we got married.

"How to handle a woman?

Mark me well, I will tell you, sir:

The way to handle a woman

Is to love her...simply love her...

Merely love her...love her...love her."

1. Philip Zimbardo and Nikita Duncan, *The Demise of Guys: Why Boys Are Struggling and What We Can Do About It*, TED Conferences, LLC, 2012.

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