

RESPECTIVE MARITAL RESPONSIBILITIES

Since we've discussed the origin and functions of marriage, and since we've discussed the mutual responsibilities of spouses, then the next logical step is for us to consider the respective marital responsibilities of spouses.

Unlike the word "mutual" which refers to that which is "shared" by two or more, the word "respective" refers to that which is "not shared" by two or more; so in this study we're going to talk 'primarily' about responsibilities which husbands have to their wives but wives don't have to their husbands and responsibilities which wives have to their husbands that husbands don't have to their wives.

Consider the duties of the husband.

Definitions

Although I'm sure we're all aware that Webster defines the noun "husband" as "the male partner in a marriage," we're probably not all aware of three very significant terms in his definitions of the noun "husbandry" and the verb "husband": he used the words "care," "control," and "cultivation." Once we learn about some of the history behind the term "husband," we're then able to see why he chose to use those particular words when defining it.

According to Webster, our English word "husband" comes from the Old English words "hus" (which meant "house") and "bonda" (which meant "master"); so we have "the master of a house." (Interestingly, our derogatory term "hussy" originally referred to the "mistress of a household," which, incidentally, could've referred to a man's wife or one not his wife.) James Strong wrote that the Hebrew word for "husband" referred to "a master; hence a husband." So if a woman claims that she has a husband, yet she heads up the house over him, then she's contradicting herself; or if a man claims to be a husband, yet allows his wife to be the master of the house over him, he isn't living up to his title. Similarly, P. D. Wilmeth wrote that the word "husband" is a contraction of the words "house" and "band," implying that the husband is "the band of the home," the one who is expected to keep it together. Bearing all this information in mind, we move on to the husband's...

Duties (Ephesians chapter five sums up the biblical duties of a husband.) As both etymology and definition indicate...

God expects the husband to "care" for his wife.

1. He's expected to care for her physically.

In the very beginning God said to Adam (as opposed to Eve), "Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground..." (Genesis 3:17-19). Later in Ephesians 5:28-29 Paul said that "Husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes ... it, just as the Lord does the church."

The word "nourish" apparently has reference to such physical needs as providing food, clothing, shelter, and watching out for her health when she may be neglecting it. Someone wrote this humorous yet sad true-to-life account: "Is your husband much of a provider, Malindy?" "He ain't nothin' else, ma'am. He gwine to git some new furniture, providin' he gits de money; he gwine to git de money providin' he go to work; he go to work providin' the job suits him. I never see such a providin' man in all mah days!"

Paul warned, "If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of 'his own household,' he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (First Timothy 5:8). (Since,

as we already noticed, the English word "household" is directly connected to the word "husband," then Paul was definitely here speaking to husbands if no one else.)

2. He's expected to care for her emotionally.

Although we already touched in our last study on how that both spouses have the duty of caring for one another emotionally, yet we must touch on it again here in relation to the husband specifically: since a man's emotional constitution is more calm and steady than a woman's, emphasis is laid on his responsibility to help strengthen, uphold, and protect his wife by being there for her emotionally.

The word "cherish" in Ephesians 5:29 apparently has reference to such emotional needs as holding her dear and treating her with warmth, tenderness, affection, and appreciation. In First Peter 3:7 Peter demanded husbands to treat their wives "with understanding, giving honor to [them]" because women are more vulnerable, delicate, and fragile than men.

When he spoke of women or wives as being "weaker," I'm convinced he meant to include her emotional or mental constitution as well as her physical constitution; in other words, "understanding" this (as well as other things) about her as a person, men or husbands should treat their wives accordingly.

When he spoke of "giving [her] honor," he meant "to assign [her] a place of honor." A husband may genuinely appreciate his wife as a precious treasure, but instead of being sure she's reminded of it from time to time, he may feel like the fellow who told his wife, "Honey, I told you I loved you when we got married, and if I change my mind I'll let you know." Contrary to that attitude, though, a woman, as a wife, needs to know (by mouth and from experience) that she's loved more than anyone else in the world. One wife said that the dog is more important to her husband than she is because he comes home and plays with the dog. (In some cases we could replace the dog in this story with the computer, video games, TV, sleeping, and newspaper.)

Paul also cautioned husbands against becoming bitter toward their wives (Colossians 3:19); this means that a husband is not to become and remain frustrated with or unfeeling toward his wife.

Let's return to Paul's words about how a man who loves his wife loves himself (Ephesians 5:28-29). A man has an innate, automatic, and physical awareness of his own needs and hurts, but since he and his wife are one to the point that what affects her affects him, he should be sensitive to her needs just as he is to his own; in other words, a husband needs to be sensitive to and provide for his wife's needs as a woman, a wife, a person, and, if she has children, as a mother.

An important thing to remember here is that, unlike a man's reflex to fulfill his own needs, it doesn't become a reflex to treat his wife that way the day he marries her—this caring response must be developed. (Incidentally and obviously, this same general concept applies to wives as well; it's just that it's stressed more so on husbands.)

Secondly, as both etymology and definition indicate...

God expects the husband is to be in "control" for his wife.

God ordained it this way in the very beginning: speaking of the husband, God said to the wife, "he shall rule over you" (Genesis 3:16). Four thousand years later this fact was reiterated in Ephesians 5:23: "The husband is the head of the wife." So not only does the Bible teach that a wife shouldn't take over a husband's position of headship, but it also teaches that a wife shouldn't feel the need to take upon herself that responsibility because her husband refuses to. In either case, the husband will be held accountable by God.

Speaking of accountability..., when spouses fail to agree on some decision that needs to be made, someone must finally take the responsibility of making a decision, and that duty falls to the husband; so instead of allowing this duty to give him a feeling of superiority, it should give him a feeling of fear. When it's cheerfully submitted to, headship in the home, as in any institution, ensures stability, peace, and order.

Lastly, as both etymology and definition indicate...

God expects the husband is to "cultivate" his wife.

Christ gave Himself for the church [His bride] that "He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the Word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish" (Ephesians 5:26-27). Likewise, the husband is (to a great degree) responsible for the spiritual well-being (or the sanctification) of his wife for the following reasons from Ephesians 5:23 and First Peter 3:7.

1. "The husband is the head of the wife." In line with the true saying that with responsibility comes accountability, a husband must remember that since he has taken upon himself the responsibility of a wife, he must be prepared to be held accountable for her as well as for himself. Incidentally, I'm not implying by this that she won't also have to answer for herself. For example, when a sergeant gets reprimanded by a colonel for an infraction by one of the privates under his command, does the private get away without punishment? Of course not.
2. Christ "is the Savior of the body," His bride, the church. It seems to me that the contextual analogy here implies that the husband is, in a way, the savior of his body—his wife and home.
3. Peter reminded the husband that he and his wife are "heirs together of the grace of life." Many believe that Peter was speaking of the spiritual, that the phrase "the grace of life" refers to the grace (or the gift) of eternal life; in other words, he was assuming the expected: the marriage of two Christians. If this is true, we can see that the husband is not to look upon his wife (as was often done in Peter's time) as mere property, but also as a human being with a soul just as he himself; and since he's her head, he must take a leading role in saving her soul.

(There are others who believe that Peter was speaking of the physical, that the phrase "the grace of life" refers to marriage as being the grace [or the cherry topping] of life.)

Summary

The husband has the primary responsibility of loving his wife (especially with agape); more specifically (and regardless if he thinks she's a good wife), he has the responsibility to see to her physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. The following prayer is one that all husbands should pray.

*Lord, may there be no moment in my life
When she regrets that she became my wife.
Help me to do the utmost that I can
To prove myself her measure of a man.*

*Since years must bring to all their load of care,
Let us together every burden bear.
And when death beckons one its path along,
May not the two of us be parted long.*

~ M. Y. Caruthers

Consider the duties of the wife.

Definitions

As mentioned earlier, Old English used the words "husband" and "hussy" for spouses because one referred to "the master of the house" while the other referred to "the mistress of the house." But just as "hussy" has become a derogatory term for an indecent woman, so has the word "mistress," many times now referring to some man's lover on the side. However, "mistress" actually refers to the "woman at the head of a household," and some synonyms are "wife," "mother," "house-keeper," "care-taker," and even "manager."

Something else that's interesting is that just as the Old Norse language used their word "husband" to refer to "a householder" or one who "holds" or "owns" a "house" or "family," so the word "mistress" carries with it the idea of "ownership": in a sense, then, spouses (as opposed to their children) are joint-owners of the home. (Today sometimes we wonder about this because the children seem to own and run the house.) Bearing all this information in mind, we move on to the wife's...

Duties (Just as Ephesians chapter give sums up the biblical duties of husbands, so Titus chapter two sums up the biblical duties of wives.)

God expects the wife to love her husband.

When hearing of marital disputes, we often hear something like this. The husband says, "You're supposed to obey me." Then the wife says, "If you loved me like you're supposed to, perhaps I would obey you." One of the many problems with this scenario is that wives seem to tend to forget that they're also expected to love their husbands: Paul told Timothy to exhort "the older women" to "admonish the young women to love their husbands" (Titus 2:3-4).

The interesting thing about this is, instead of using the word "agape" as he did in reference to a husband's love for his wife, Paul used the word "philia," the love that cherishes and has tender affection for the beloved, a love of relationship—comradeship, sharing, communication, and friendship. In other words, as a husband may sometimes become embittered toward his wife, a wife may become embittered toward her husband; so, knowing how much he desires it, she may withhold affection (which includes marital intimacy) from him, perhaps in an attempt to manipulate him.

(We're not saying, of course, that she isn't expected to love her husband with agape, for she is; it just seems the Holy Spirit knew that husbands tend to lack in agape, while wives tend to lack in philia.) Secondly...

God expects the wife to obey her husband.

One of the marriage vows that has been deleted from many ceremonies is the vow that the bride would take concerning obeying her husband. In Titus 2 Paul went on to tell Titus to exhort "the older women" to "admonish the young women to be ... obedient to their own husbands" (verse 3-5). Note some other passages...

Ephesians 5:23: "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord"; in other words, wives are expected to obey their husbands just as they would obey the Lord Himself. (This reminds me of how Sarah called her husband, Abraham, "lord" [First Peter 3:6]).

Colossians 3:18: "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as is fitting in the Lord"; in other words, wives are expected to obey their husbands as long as he isn't asking something out of harmony with the Lord's rules.

First Peter 3:1: "Wives, be submissive to your own husbands"; and this is from Peter who was

obviously not a woman hater as people accuse Paul of being, for he was married (Matthew 8:14). (Also see First Peter 5:1, for in order to be an elder, he had to be married [First Timothy 3:2].)

The idea of wives obeying husbands is a very troublesome subject in our modern world (to say the least), but it has probably always been that way to some extent, for God said to Eve after she sinned, "Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (Genesis 3:16). The only other place where I could find this Hebrew word for "desire" used is in Genesis 4:7 where God told Cain that sin's "desire is for you, but you should rule over it." (Besides that, I understand that these two sentence constructions are identical.) The point is that although the construction of Genesis 3:16 may be obscure, yet that isn't the case in Genesis 4:7; the meaning is clear: sin wanted to have authority or dominion over Cain, but Cain was not to allow sin to gain that foothold. So if the same is true of Genesis 3:16, then God was in a sense prophesying that there would always be what we call "the battle of the sexes"; in other words, in general, women would always have a desire to be their own masters by attempting to usurp man's authority. (Wouldn't the same have been true if it had been ordained the other way around? Of course, and to some extent it is: men are trying to retain their God-ordained rank.)

Due to continually having this desire to be their own masters, women—especially wives—must constantly repress that urge, willing themselves to submit to men (First Corinthians 11:3 & 7-12). This idea is demonstrated in the use of the active term used by Peter when he described submission: "as Sarah obeyed Abraham" (First Peter 3:6). Likewise, Paul wrote to "let the wife see that she reverence her husband" (Ephesians 5:33, KJV); seeing that she reverences her husband involves practice, practice in her thoughts, her actions towards him, and what she says about him to others.

After admonishing wives to obey their husbands, Paul proceeded to compare the relationship of husbands and wives with that of Christ and the church, His bride: "For the husband is the head of the wife as also Christ is head of the church" (Ephesians 5:23); the point is, the relationship between wives and husbands ought to parallel that of Christ and His bride, the church. Lastly...

God expects the wife to be a homemaker for her husband.

In a world where women are now such a strong work-force, this is just as unpopular an issue as the issue of submission. In Titus 2 again, Paul went on to tell Titus to exhort "the older women" to "admonish the young women to" be "homemakers" (verses 3-5). Strong said the original word for "homemakers" refers to someone who is a "stayer at home, i.e. domestically inclined (a 'good housekeeper')"; the KJV reads, "keeper at home." C. L. W. Grimm said that this word refers to "caring for the house, working at home; the watch or keeper of the house; keeping at home and taking care of household affairs." Likewise, Paul told Timothy that wives were to "manage the house" (First Timothy 5:14). Strong said the original word for "manage" means "to be the head of (i.e. rule) a family," while Grimm said that this word means "to be master ... of a house; to rule a household, manage family affairs."

This is her New Testament position. The home is her "divine domain." In other words, she is responsible for keeping the house. Meaning what? Keeping it tidy, orderly, and functioning. This reminds me of the original meaning of the word "hussy" as discussed earlier: "the mistress of a household"; remember, the word "mistress" referred to "a house-keeper, care-taker, manager," and, as was also indicated, the word "mistress" (like the word "husband) carried with it the idea of "owner."

History is replete with information about how one of the major duties involved in keeping the home was raising the children: Paul alluded to this when to Timothy he wrote, "I call to remembrance the genuine faith that is in you, which dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice" (Second Timothy 1:3-5). He also wrote, "Let a widow under sixty years old be taken into the number ... if she has brought up children" (First Timothy 5:10).

Although the final responsibility of the home rests upon the shoulders of the husband and

father, the mother is the primary raiser of children under the auspices of the father: when Paul told “fathers” to “bring” their children “up in the training and admonition of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4), he used a word that can refer to “both parents” and is so translated in Hebrews 11:23 (cf. Grimm).

One more point: note the seriousness concerning this matter of a wife taking care of her domain—the home: she should do this in order to “give no opportunity to the adversary to speak reproachfully” (First Timothy 5:14).

Summary

The husband is to provide for the wife, but she is to take care of that which he provides. However, whether he’s a good provider or not or a good husband or not, she is to see that she lavish him with love (Titus 2:4) and reverence him by submitting herself to him in everything (Ephesians 5:33 & 24).

*What is there in the vale of life
Half so delightful as a wife,
When friendship, love, and peace combine
To stamp the marriage-bond divine?*

~ William Cowper

[Tony E. Denton, April 1998.]