



The New Man Comes Home

[3:18, 19]

Chris Bullard

“Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and do not be embittered against them” (3:18, 19).

In August 1979 a woman who identified herself only as “Mrs. X” wrote to the *New York Times* about a dilemma in which she found herself. She had discovered that her husband had been carrying on an affair with another woman for two years. While it was not a unique problem, she conceded, she was confused about what to do. In an earlier time the solution to her conundrum would have been simple: She would have put up a brave front and carried on as though nothing had happened. But the spirit of the age has changed.

Society is telling her, she wrote, that her inner integrity and self-worth are more important than forgiving her husband and redeeming a corrupt marriage. “Only a short time ago society would, for the sake of its stability, have applied sanctions to keep my home together,” Mrs. X concluded. “Now it had dropped its sanctions and no longer seems to think that it has any stake in marriage at all.”

The passing of a decade has only heightened the problem posited by Mrs. X. America’s “Baby Boom” generation (those born between 1946-1964) has radically altered the way society looks at the marriage relationship. Baby boomers have married less often, married later, divorced more frequently, had fewer children, left more chil-

dren in single-parent homes, and done more to destroy family life than any generation before them.

Landon Jones, in his monumental work *Great Expectations: America and the Baby Boom Generation*, observed:

Previous generations were taught that life is hard, sacrifice is necessary, and unhappiness a cross that sometimes must be borne. But the baby boomers were not willing to make the risky and often painful compromises their parents did. Just as they had great expectations for themselves, they had great expectations for their marriages. Life was too short to live with an unhappy marriage. If they could switch to another TV channel, why not switch husbands and wives? In fact, their satisfaction and sense of self-obligation practically demanded it. As Norman Ryder has pithily phrased it, frequent divorce is the understandable consequence of making the satisfaction of the individual the test of a good marriage. The burden of proof, he added, has shifted from what the individual can do for the family to what the family can do for the individual.

With the American family in such desperate straits, a revival in our attitudes toward marriage is needed to save our homes. In the face of so many crumbling relationships, nothing could be more timely than Paul’s remarks on a resurrection style marriage. His counsel gives insights into how to find renewal in our relationships at home. When you think about all Paul could have written on this topic, it is remarkable that his entire commentary on how to work out our God-given new life in our

marriages is boiled down to just twenty-three words: "Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and do not be embittered against them" (3:18, 19).

Through the years there have been thousands of Christian weddings; there have been fewer Christian marriages. Here are the fundamentals for a resurrection marriage: one verse for wives and one verse for husbands. Short and sweet.

SUBMISSIVE WIVES (3:18)

Paul began with a word to women: "Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord" (3:18). Sex discrimination! Male chauvinist! That is the first thought to spring into the minds of many women when they read these words. But they have misunderstood Paul.

Paul did not speak of obedience, but submission. Many women, reading that statement, jump to the conclusion that Paul meant to grit your teeth and do whatever some overbearing husband says to do. That is not so. Remarks about obedience are reserved for children (3:20) and slaves (3:22). Submission is reserved for wives and has a cooperative ring to it.

Paul wrote, "Be subject to *your* husbands." My wife is not expected to be subject to anyone else's husband. All women are not to be in submission to all men. "Wives," the apostle was saying, "be submissive to the husbands you have chosen." This is a personal relationship that a woman is to practice toward the man she has wed.

What does this mean for her marriage? It certainly does not imply that she is inferior to her husband. The term "submission" has no connotation of worth or value. Jesus submitted to God the Father, but He was not inferior to Him.

Neither is submission expressed in absolute obedience. A wife must not yield to her husband under every possible circumstance. Sometimes a wife will have to choose whether she must obey God rather than her husband. A husband may require of his spouse something she cannot do in all good conscience before God. To go against her conscience would be sin (see Romans 14:23). Thus, the command to be subject does not signify absolute obedience.

To be subject means accepting one's role or responsibility in life. A Christian wife who sees her husband as God's gift to her will want to be at his side supporting him. By marrying him she

agreed to be his helper. Thus, she volunteers her support and loyalty. Such submission cannot be forced on her by a demanding husband; rather, it must flow out of a new heart filled with new life. When a wife shows deference to her husband as the leader in the home, she acknowledges that she expects her husband to fulfill his responsibility as the leader in the home.

This is to be done in a way that is "fitting in the Lord." The only justification for this response is that this is the way God intended it from the beginning. In the Garden of Eden before sin was in the world and the curse was placed on mankind, God looked at Adam and declared, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him" (Genesis 2:18). Ladies, when you lovingly volunteer your loyal support for your husband, you are fulfilling your God-given purpose in being a helper for him. You contribute to the success of your partnership.

LOVING HUSBANDS (3:19)

Paul followed this counsel with a word to the men: "Husbands, love your wives, and do not be embittered against them" (3:19). The Greek text is emphatic here: "Husbands, keep on loving your wives and stop being embittered [or cross] with them." Some men only know how to get their will done in the home by force, threats, or perhaps bartered rewards. Such harshness is the result of insecurity in any kind of leader. A Christian husband is not to aggravate or be cross with his wife. You cannot call her "honey" and then act like vinegar!

How are you as a husband to act toward your wife? You are to continue loving her. You loved her before you married her; you loved her when you married her; you loved her for a while after you married her—so keep on loving her. This love is not primarily an emotion. Rather, it consists of an attitude of self-sacrifice that springs from being as concerned about your wife as you are about yourself. C. F. D. Moule observed, "If a wife is asked to submit, it is to her husband's love, not his tyranny."

How can a man ensure he will treat his wife with love and not with harshness or bitterness?

First, you can practice awareness. Your wife wants to know she is thought of, noticed, and appreciated by you. How easy it is to take our wives for granted. Have you had any kind words

for her for all those meals she has prepared or for the clean laundry that “appears” in your dresser drawers? Do you know what your wife’s emotional and spiritual needs are so you can pray for her specifically?

Your wife wants to know she is important to you. The only way she can be convinced of that is for you to give visible and vocal evidence that you know who she is as a person and that you understand what her needs are.

A second way to love your wife is spelled “t-i-m-e.” A husband inevitably spends his time doing what he considers to be most important. Of course, much of his time directly relates to his work, and he has little time left over. But men, we do have blocks of time every week that we have control over, and how we use that time communicates to our wives unquestionably what is important in our lives.

When you were dating your wife-to-be, you spent valuable time in sharing and planning. Whatever time you were required to come in was always too early. How is it now? Have you sacrificed times of sharing and pleasure on the altar of expediency? Have you let commitments to business and hobbies crowd out critically needed time with your wife? If so, show your spouse how you love her by rescheduling your commitments around time with her.

A third way to practice loving your wife is by communicating with her. Often wives say, “My husband never talks with me.” Your wife wants to know what you think and how you feel.

The other side of that complaint is: “My husband never listens to me!” Listening is more than hearing the words your wife says. Listening is picking up on her tone of voice, key words, and other factors that tell you not just the words she is mouthing but the feeling she is experiencing as well.

A man also shows his wife that he loves her through affectionate touch.

I heard of a couple who, after a whirlwind courtship, married. She had noticed that at times he was not as affectionate as before, but it seemed not to matter. Gradually her vivacious personality began to fade. She became more quiet, even morose and depressed. She virtually lost her personality and assumed a zombie-like appearance. Only then did the young husband become convinced that he needed to communicate more

with his wife. But communication was no longer possible. She would stare into space, never responding. He took her to counselor after counselor, but with no apparent change.

Finally, he took her to a much recommended counselor. Several sessions later there was still no response. In what was scheduled to be the last session, the counselor laid down his pencil and pad, got up from behind his desk, and right in the presence of the husband reached out his hands to the wife, and stroked her cheeks and planted a kiss on her cheek. The effect was electrifying. She blinked several times; a broad smile broke out. She began to talk excitedly. Her old vivacious personality was on its way back!

Her husband was awestruck but grateful. He drew the counselor aside and asked what caused the change. The counselor confided that the man’s wife was starved for affection, and he recommended the same treatment at least every Monday through Friday. The young husband replied, “That would be fine except I don’t think I could get her here on Fridays. That happens to be my bowling day!”

While this is a funny story, it illustrates a serious point. Something in a touch, in the holding of hands, conveys volumes. How strange that we know that intuitively when we are dating and forget it after we marry. Some of the most tender moments in the Bible came when Jesus touched those who were lepers. Touch communicates, “You are important. I am aware of your presence.”

The Bible says, “Husbands, love your wives, and do not be embittered against them.” We can summarize it by saying this love is that deep devotion that sees your wife as a sister in the Lord, as the more delicate vessel to be cared for, as your best friend, as the most important human being in the world, as your most critical permanent investment, and as your lifelong partner.

CONCLUSION

We live in an age of crumbling marriages. Many are little more than a tension-filled compromise between two warring parties. Marriages are filled with dashed expectations for husbands and indentured servitude for wives. Companionship in an uncertain world is missing. In the midst of this malaise, Christians have an opportunity to show that marriage as an institution is alive and well where a couple is rightly related to God and then to each other in His Spirit.