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Answering the Key Questions About the Family

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

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Ours is a dark and decaying society. Sins that only twenty years ago were gasped at and spoken of in hushed and troubled tones are now publicly flaunted and even encouraged. Not so long ago, extramarital affairs were scandalous. Today, they're viewed as the norm. Even the president of the United States can engage in promiscuous behavior with a young intern, lie about it, and enjoy overwhelming support in public opinion polls. Why? Because so many Americans' own private lives are filled with similar sins. Our society has become inured to the sinfulness of sin. Homosexuality, incest, abortion, and even sex with children no longer shock and infuriate society the way they once did. In fact, all those sins now have their own advocacy groups, people who argue that such things are healthy, even desirable, activities.

The moral collapse has caused untold damage to the family. In fact, *any* attack on the moral fiber of society is ultimately an attack on the family. The proof can be seen in statistics that now show broken families are the rule rather than the exception. Turn on almost any one of the daytime television talk shows, and you're likely to see families literally disintegrating before your eyes.

Organized efforts to undermine the family and family life are now being sponsored by the women's rights movement, the children's rights movement, and the gay liberation movement. Hardly an election day comes anymore, without including "gay marriage" initiatives and other voters' propositions whose sole purpose is to redefine the whole concept of family. These are perilous times for the family. Add into the sinister brew the changing concept of marriage, the increasing acceptance of divorce, and the obliteration of gender differences and elimination of any distinction between male-female roles—and it becomes easy to see why the concept of family today is nothing like it was just two decades ago.

The result is that families are disintegrating. Is there anyone left in our society who has not been touched in some way by divorce, broken families, child abuse, juvenile delinquency, and a host of other ills directly related to the breakdown of the family?

In every generation, the dissolution of marriages, torn families, and broken homes take a greater and greater toll. This generation's kids will reap what their parents have sown, and they'll plant seeds that will bear thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold. The rising numbers of ruptured families is now accelerating exponentially. What can we expect from future generations?

The only hope is for Christians to proclaim and reassert the divine standard from God's Word—and especially to live it out in their own family lives. Christians must hold firmly to the distinctive biblical pattern for the family. And the church must begin again to articulate without fear or shame what the Word of God says about the family.

In the early 1980s I made a film series and wrote a book about the family. The demand for that material exceeded everything I had ever written before that. And over the intervening years, wherever I have gone, people have asked me questions about the family. Despite the volumes that have been written and all that has been said about the family, Christians are still hungry for more instruction.

I must admit, however, that I don't particularly care to be cast as a "family expert." I don't believe any particular psychological or professional expertise is needed to help what ails modern families. The biblical principles governing the order of the family are amazingly simple and straightforward. Scripture sets forth the divine pattern for family life in such clear terms that whoever tries to follow the biblical pathway, though he be a fool, should not go astray (cf. Isaiah 35:8). The confusion comes when people try to fit the Bible's teaching into the framework of contemporary "wisdom." We must take God's Word at face value, and obey it without compromise or reservation.

This little booklet cannot begin to answer all the biblical questions people will ask about the family, but these are the key questions. And my hope is that these answers will provide a starting point for dealing with the troubling questions you may be asking.

Answering Some Key Questions About the Family

The family was God's first earthly institution. Before there was a government, and long before God instituted the church, He ordained marriage and the family as the basic building block of society. The destruction of the family we are witnessing today is, I believe, a harbinger of the ultimate collapse of our entire society. The more the family is threatened, the more society itself is in danger of extinction. We're living in the last days, and nothing shows that more graphically than the deterioration of the family.

Ephesians 5:22—6:4 contains a distillation of the biblical pattern for family life. There we read instructions for husbands, wives, children, and parents. In a few beautifully simple verses, God lays out everything we need to know and obey for a successful, harmonious family life:

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church. Nevertheless let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother," which is the first commandment with promise: "that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth."

And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord.

These, then, are the elements of a successful family: A wife characterized by submission; a husband who loves his wife sacrificially; children who obey and honor their parents; and parents who instruct and discipline their children by being a consistent, godly example. Virtually every question that can be asked about the family must first go back to this passage of Scripture and the pattern it sets forth.

Even if your family is without children, or without a father or mother, the basic formula for family success is the same: each family member must pursue his God-ordained role.

If the woman is to submit, isn't she playing a lesser role?

Every member of the family—not just the wife—comes under the command to submit. In fact, it is significant to note that in the most reliable Greek manuscripts, no verb is used in verse 22 ("Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord"). The verb there is understood—and in order to make sense of the expression, the reader must refer back to verse 21 and borrow its verb (the Greek word for "submit," *hupotasso*). So a literal translation of verses 21-22 would be, ". . . submitting to one another in the fear of God. Wives, to your own husbands, as to the Lord."

Note that the command of verse 21 (submit to one another) actually applies to every member of the body of Christ. Paul is saying there is a mutual submission in the body of Christ that carries over into the family relationships. The husband shows his submission to the wife by his sacrificial love for her. His role is like that of Christ in John 13, where He girded Himself and washed the disciples' feet, accepting the lowest task it was possible for Him to perform on their behalf. The wife shows her submission to her husband by following his leadership, "For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church" (v. 23).

The husband's role is that of leader, "head of the wife." But that does not mean the wife is his slave, standing at his beck and call, awaiting commands like, "Do this! Get that! Go over here! Fix that for me!" and so on. The relationship between a husband and wife is one of "being heirs together of the grace of life" (1 Peter 3:7). The wife is the weaker vessel, and the husband is to honor her, protect her, and be an understanding leader.

The marital relationship is more intimate, personal, and inward than that of a master and slave. That is indicated in Ephesians 5:22 by the phrase "your own husbands." The husband-wife relationship is built on an intimate possessiveness. The verse seems to imply that it is assumed the wife would willingly respond in submission to one whom she possesses.

The wife's role is by no means second-class. It involves no kind of inferior status; only a God-ordained difference in function. This fact is wonderfully illustrated by 1 Corinthians 11:3: "The head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God." God and Christ have

roles of authority and submission, yet they are one in essence as God. So it is with husband and wife. Their roles differ, but in essential quality and value, they are equal. As Paul points out, men lead, but women are delivered from any thought of inferior influence by bearing and raising children. Men have the lead, but women have the stronger influence on the next generation (cf. 1 Timothy 2:11-15).

What should a Christian wife do if her husband fails to be the authority for her to submit to?

What if the husband isn't seeking to fulfill his role? What if he abdicates his position of leadership and leaves it to the wife to be the head of the home? It happens frequently, and especially in the realm of *spiritual* authority.

I once received a letter from a wife who wrote, "I've made a terrible mistake. I tried to be submissive to my husband, but he wouldn't take the leadership. Little by little I took it over, and now I'm dominating and he will never take the leadership. How do I get myself out of this mess?"

The answer is, go back to being submissive. Force the issue. If he doesn't give you leadership to submit to, submit to the things you think he would like. Put yourself in the proper biblical role, and stay out of his. Then encourage him, pray for him, and support him as head of your home in every way you can. Above all, refuse to take dominant leadership of the family. Be obedient to the biblical pattern. Make suggestions and steer him quietly when absolutely necessary, but leave gaps for him to step into.

First Peter 3:1-2 says, "Wives, likewise, be submissive to your own husbands, that even if some do not obey the word, they, without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives, when they observe your chaste conduct accompanied by fear." Again, the word translated "submissive" there is the Greek word *hupotasso*. It describes the function, not the essence, of the wife's role. In other words, while it is not saying that the wife's role is any less important than that of her husband, it is affirming that in the plan of God, she is the one to submit, and he is the one to take the headship.

Notice, too, that Peter says even if the husband is disobedient to the Word—whether he is a hostile Christ rejector or a believer who simply fails to take the leadership—the wife's response should still be submission.

So the best way a wife can encourage a non-leading husband to take his role as head of the family is simply to submit to him, pursue her role with greater determination and respect for him, and pray that the effect of that will be to push him closer to fulfilling his role.

How should a wife respond to a physically abusive husband?

Once I was taking questions from the audience in a meeting in Boston, and a young woman stood and asked how a Christian wife should deal with a husband who beats her. Immediately, a little eighty-nine-year-old, white-haired woman in the second row stood and shouted to her, "Hit him back, honey!"

Remembering the scene still makes me smile (I noticed after the meeting that the little old lady was

wearing black boots). As funny as it was, however, I don't think she had the proper remedy.

Divorce is not always an option, either—Scripture does not automatically permit divorce in the case of a physically abusive husband.

Still, while Scripture does not specifically instruct the battered wife, it gives principles that certainly apply to her. Proverbs 14:16 says, "A wise man is cautious and turns away from evil" (NASB). God gives us wisdom to be defensive and cautious. We duck when something flies through the air at our heads. Common sense tells us to avoid situations where we're placed in physical danger. And I believe that is what God expects of us.

A woman whose husband brutalizes her is not only justified if she protects herself—she would be wrong not to. There is no virtue in a wife's willingly submitting to beatings and physical abuse from a cruel or drunken husband. And certainly there is no biblical warrant for a woman knowingly to allow herself to be beaten and even injured in the name of submission to her husband, especially if there are legitimate steps she can take to avoid it.

By way of comparison, the apostle Paul says in Romans 13 that we are to submit to civil government as a God-ordained authority. Yet that "submission" does not necessarily include voluntarily suffering at the hands of an abusive government. Our Lord said, "Whenever they persecute you in this city, flee to the next" (Matthew 10:23)—certainly giving the persecuted warrant to flee the persecution of wicked governments if a way of escape is open. So the "submission" God calls us to does not include automatic acquiescence to sheer physical brutality.

My advice to women who are in danger of physical injury from their husbands is first of all to try to defuse the situation. Be careful not to provoke any circumstances that will make your husband become violent. Proverbs 15:1 says, "A soft answer turns away wrath."

This is certainly not to suggest women are to blame when their husbands become violent. There is no excuse whatsoever for a man to use physical violence against his wife; in fact, that is the most blatant kind of disobedience to the command given husbands in Ephesians 5:25. Men who physically abuse their wives cannot legitimately claim that any action on the wife's part justifies their use of brute force. To physically attack one's wife is an inexcusable and unconscionable sin against her and against Christ. And to try to defend such violence—as some men do—by claiming on biblical grounds that the husband is the "head" of the wife is to corrupt the very idea of "headship." Remember that God is the "head" of Christ and Christ is also the "head" of the church (1 Corinthians 11:3). So the expression involves not only leadership and authority, but also loving nurture and protection. "The husband is head of the wife, *as also Christ is head of the church*; and He is the Savior of the body" (Ephesians 5:23). The husband who thinks his "headship" justifies a domineering, tyrannical, or brutal leadership has no grasp of the biblical concept of headship.

If a violence-prone husband becomes agitated and abusive, the wife should remove herself from danger, by leaving the home if necessary. God has promised that He will not test us beyond our ability to endure, but will always make a way of escape (1 Corinthians 10:13). Sometimes escape is the only way. If you have children and they are in danger, take them someplace where you will be secure until you feel you may safely come back.

If you are not truly in any physical danger, but are merely a weary wife who is fed up with a cantankerous or disagreeable husband—even if he is an unbeliever who is hostile to the things of God—God's desire is that you stay and pray and sanctify that husband by your presence as a beloved child of God (1 Corinthians 7:10-16). The Lord will protect you and teach you in the midst of the difficult time.

Of course, pray for your husband, submit to him in every way you can, encourage him to seek advice and counsel from other biblically-knowledgeable men—and do everything you can to heal the problems that cause him to be angry or abusive.

Should a wife be employed outside the home?

The question of working wives is not one that can be answered with a simple yes or no. The real issue is how we understand the biblical priorities for a woman. Titus 2:4-5 says that the aged women in the church should teach the younger women "to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be blasphemed."

Clearly, the priority for any woman is caring for the needs of her family, and she does that first of all by being a "homemaker." First Timothy 5:14 emphasizes the same point, although a different Greek word is used. There, Paul writes, "I desire that the younger [women] marry, bear children, manage the house, give no opportunity to the adversary to speak reproachfully." The word translated "manage the house" in that verse is the Greek word *oikodespote*, which literally means "rule the home." The woman's domain is the home, and that is where a mother's priorities should always lie.

When the psalmist under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit wanted to show the glorious character of God, he could find no greater commendation than to say,

Who is like unto the Lord our God,

who dwelleth on high,

Who humbleth himself to behold the things that are in heaven, and in the earth!

He raiseth up the poor out of the dust,

and lifteth the needy out of the dunghill;

That he may set him with princes,

even with the princes of his people.

He maketh the barren woman to keep house,

and to be a joyful mother of children.

Praise ye the Lord (Psalm 113:5-9, KJV—emphasis added).

That is the ultimate thing God can do for a woman!

Caring for the home involves bearing children, training them, and managing the affairs of the home. All of that is a gift of God's grace to the woman. It is inextricably linked to the principle of the woman's being submissive to *her own husband*. If she works outside the home, she has a different set of circumstances to deal with. She becomes accountable and submissive not only to her husband, but also to her boss at work. Other priorities often threaten the biblical priority of home and family, and a woman usually finds herself torn between fulfilling her biblical role and fulfilling a quite different role required by her job.

There is nothing in Scripture, however, that specifically forbids women from working, as long as they are fulfilling the priority in the home (Proverbs 31).

Whether a woman works outside the home or not, however, God's *primary* calling for her is to manage the home. It is the most exalted place for a wife. The world, not the Lord, is what calls so many modern women out of the home. His Word portrays the woman's role as one preoccupied with domestic duties. It is a high calling—far more crucial to the future of a woman's children than anything she might do in an outside job.

The ultimate decision is a personal one that each woman must make in submission to her husband's authority. Obviously, a single woman would be free to work and pursue outside employment. A married woman with no children is perhaps a little more restricted in the amount of time and energy she can devote to an outside job. A woman who is a mother obviously has primary responsibility in the home and would therefore not be free to pursue outside employment to the detriment of the home. In fact, from my perspective as a parent, it is difficult to see how a mother could possibly do all that needs to be done in the home with the upbringing of children, hospitality, care of the needy, and work for the Lord (cf. 1 Timothy 5:3-14)—and still work in an outside job.

What about a woman who wants to work at home, but whose husband insists that she work in an outside job?

There are many women who face the dilemma of having husbands who demand that they work outside the home, although they themselves feel compelled by God to make the home the greater priority. In such a case, there is a tension between two biblical principles—submission (Ephesians 5:22), and God's plan for wives (1 Timothy 5:14; Titus 2:4-5).

The first approach for such a woman is to pray, and then to share her conviction with her husband. In a loving way, she should let him know how deeply her obedience to God matters. It may be, if money is the issue, that she can find some creative way to earn money by work that can be done in the home, or by limiting her outside working time to hours when the kids are in school. (The godly woman mentioned in Proverbs 31 earned money through the work she did at home.) She may do a little study for her husband on the actual financial benefits of her working. Many studies reveal that a working wife often does not increase real spendable income at all, once child-care costs and other expenses are figured into the equation.

If the husband still insists that she work outside the home, she should obey him in a spirit of gentleness, and keep praying. She should lovingly keep him aware of the negative impact on their relationship, the quality of the home, and the children's development. First Peter 3:1-6 gives added insight into a delicate situation like this. There, the wife is instructed to demonstrate her submission to God by submitting to the leadership of her husband, even if he is disobedient to the Word. Many women do manage to submit to their husbands and work outside the home, yet simultaneously obey God's Word by being a good keeper of the home between work hours. It's not easy, by any means, but a resourceful woman can manage to do it. By her submission to the husband, that wife is also submitting to the will of God. The Lord knows the circumstances, and He is able to work in the heart of the husband to change it.

What are some practical ways husbands can love their wives?

It's interesting that Ephesians 5:25 *commands* husbands to love their wives. First, it demonstrates that real love is not just a feeling that comes upon a person—it is an act of the human will. If it were not an act of the will, God would not command us to do it. Also, Paul doesn't say, "*Rule* your wives." There is a headship and one who follows, but the husband's perspective of his role should be focused not on the aspect of his authority, but on the aspect of sacrificial love for his wife.

Even more interesting than the command itself, though, is the standard of love that is set before husbands. The verse says, "Love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her." It is the most selfless, giving, caring kind of love conceivable to the human mind. There is no room in this kind of love for lording it over the wife, or selfishly dominating the family.

Peter describes the husband's love for his wife: "Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered" (1 Peter 3:7). I see three key concepts in that verse.

The first is **consideration**. We are to live with our wives "in an understanding way." We must be sensitive, understanding, and considerate. The counseling staff in our ministry is familiar with all these complaints from unhappy wives: "He never understands me." "He doesn't know where I'm at." "He's insensitive to my needs." "We never talk." "He doesn't comprehend my hurts." "He speaks unkindly to me." "He doesn't treat me with love," and so on. Those women are saying that their husbands are inconsiderate—concerned more with what they get out of marriage than with what they give to it.

A second way of showing love to your wife is through **chivalry**. Remember, husband, your wife is a weaker vessel. A major part of your headship is your responsibility to protect her, care for her, and give yourself for her. This kind of caring, giving attitude can be expressed in many ways, often through seemingly insignificant gestures that nevertheless speak volumes to your wife about your love for her. You can open the car door for her, instead of backing down the driveway while she's still got one foot hanging out the door. Or simply bring her flowers. Small, frequent expressions of care mean more to a wife than a once-a-year special treatment on your anniversary.

Finally, husbands can show love to their wives by **communion** together. Notice, again, how Peter calls husbands and wives "heirs together of the grace of life." Marriage, more than any other kind of human institution, is designed to be a close partnership—a uniting of two into one. The fellowship of a married couple, then, needs to be as deeply intimate as it can be. And that is something that needs to be pursued with diligence; it requires a special effort. Husbands, commune with your wives. Talk to them. Share your spiritual lives together.

Why must children be made to obey?

Scripture is clear that children are to obey their parents. The Fifth Commandment commands children to honor their parents. At least a dozen verses in the book of Proverbs alone tell children to obey their parents. Ephesians 6:1-3 says, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 'Honor your father and mother,' which is the first commandment with promise: 'that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.'"

Why must children obey? Because they lack maturity in four major areas of life that are essential for independence. Those are delineated for us in Luke 2:52. There we are told of how Jesus grew as a child in all four ways: "Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men." Even though He was perfect and sinless, our Lord grew as a child mentally, physically, socially, and spiritually. Those are the four ways all children need to grow.

Children need growth in **mental maturity**. Children lack wisdom. They lack discretion, instruction, and knowledge. When a baby is born into the world, his brain is almost completely without information. Whatever he's going to know must be taught to him. He doesn't know what is right and wrong; he doesn't know the right foods to eat; he doesn't know what not to put into his mouth; and he doesn't even have enough sense to stay out of the street. All those things must be taught, and childhood is a time for learning them.

Children also lack in the area of **physical maturity**. They are born weak and unable to support themselves. It is a long process as they gain strength and coordination. At first they must be fed, changed, and burped. They can't fend for themselves or make it in the world alone. It is their parents' responsibility to protect them.

Children lack **social maturity**. The most dominant thing you notice about a child when he comes into the world is that he is totally selfish. He wants what he wants immediately, and he thinks everything in reach belongs to him. It is difficult to teach a child how to share, what to say at appropriate times, and how to be humble. None of those things come naturally to any child.

Finally, children need spiritual maturity. A child doesn't naturally grow to love God. Scripture suggests that even little children do have some innate knowledge of God (Romans 1:19), but without proper instruction, they will drift away. Their own depravity will draw them away. It is the parents' responsibility to steer them the right direction. Proverbs 22:6 says, "Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it." Obedience on the part of the child is the tool that brings him to maturity in all the proper ways.

Should children obey even ungodly parents?

Not all parents desire to raise their children in the way of truth. But when Paul writes "Children, obey your parents in the Lord," he is saying that obedience is in the sphere of serving, pleasing, honoring, and worshiping the Lord. He is not saying that the responsibility to obey extends only to those children whose parents are "in the Lord."

The command for children to obey their parents is absolute—except where the parents' commands are counter to the clear commands of God's Word. If a parent asks a child to violate a clear commandment of the Scriptures, the truth of Acts 5:29 comes into play: "We must obey God rather than men." In such circumstances, the child must refuse to obey the parent's wishes, but not in a defiant or insolent way. And he should accept the consequences of his disobedience patiently and without a display of defiance or anger.

How can parents know the right way to bring up their children?

Ephesians 6:4 says, "And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord." The mistake too many parents make is that they think godly training will happen by itself in a Christian family. It won't. Parents are to lead by example, carefully and in a planned way. Their responsibilities include training, instructing, nurturing, and disciplining their children according to the way of the Lord, while at the same time not goading their children to anger.

Parents are the key to each child's spiritual growth. Every person is born with a bent to sin, and depravity will take over, unless its grip on a child is broken by regeneration. The child must be "born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever" (1 Peter 1:23). Scripture's instructions to parents suggest that the best environment in which to nurture the seed of God's Word for our children is in a loving environment of discipline.

In a study conducted several years ago, sociologists Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck of Harvard University identified several crucial factors in the development of juvenile delinquency. They created a test that can, with about 90 percent accuracy, predict future delinquency of children 5-6 years old. They listed four necessary factors in preventing juvenile delinquency. First, the father's discipline must be firm, fair, and consistent. Second, the mother must know where her children are and what they are doing at all times, and be with them as much as possible. Third, the children need to see affection demonstrated between their parents, and from their parents to them. And fourth, the family must spend time together as a unit.

Similar studies suggest that right parent-child relationships normally occur in contexts where the parents genuinely love one another, where discipline is consistent, where the child senses that he or she is loved, where the parents set a positive moral and spiritual example, and where there is a father who leads the family.

The bottom line is this: the example you live out before your children is what most affects them. Many parents make the mistake of being overly concerned about how they are perceived in the church and in the community, while completely disregarding the way they live before their children.

Nothing makes the truth more distasteful to a child than to have a hypocritical or spiritually shallow parent who affirms the truth publicly but denies it in the home.

Parents, ours is a solemn and awesome responsibility, but it's also a wonderful privilege. One of the most fulfilling experiences in all the world is to have children committed to following the Lord no matter what the cost, because they have seen the same commitment in us.

What makes a marriage strong?

Marriage for two Christians is first of all a commitment to Jesus Christ and then to each other. Satan loves to destroy marriages, and the best insulation against his attacks is a deep, profound, mutually shared relationship with Jesus Christ and a commitment to obedience of God's Word. In the presence of that kind of commitment, I don't believe a marriage can fail.

But to expand on that, here are two principles that strengthen a marriage. First, concentrate on being who you should be on the inside, not just on what you say, what you have, or even how you look externally. Peter gives this principle to wives in 1 Peter 3:3-4, but it surely applies to husbands as well: "Do not let your adornment be merely outward; arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel; rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God."

Everything you own will decay. Even the way you look continues to deteriorate with age. But "the hidden person of the heart" matures, develops, and grows more beautiful as we become more and more like Christ. If that's where the focus of your marriage is, your love for one another will grow stronger, too.

A second principle is this: concentrate on learning who your spouse is. I have counseled many people whose marriages were faltering simply because they had never taken time to get to know each other. It's important to realize that no person, and no marriage, is perfect. If you're clinging in frustration to an ideal of what you want your spouse to be like, you are hurting your marriage. Abandon your idea of the perfect mate, and begin learning to understand and love the one you have. Live with your partner "with understanding" (1 Peter 3:7).

It is significant that Paul commands husbands to love their wives (Ephesians 5:25), and wives to love their husbands (Titus 2:4). The point is that no matter whom you are married to, you can learn to love your spouse. The prevailing wind of contemporary thinking seems to be that love is simply something that just happens—it comes and goes. And when it's gone, people get divorced. How foreign that is to the idea of Scripture, which does not recognize even the possibility of incompatibility between two marriage partners! God simply commands husbands and wives to love each other. The feelings of initial attraction—the high-intensity impulses—will diminish in all marriages. But when commitment is cultivated, the reward of lifelong, loving friendship and fulfillment is far more satisfying.

Remember, the essence of marriage is that two people become one flesh. And one is the indivisible number. In Matthew 19:5 Jesus quoted Genesis 2:24: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." The Hebrew word translated "be joined" refers to an unbreakable bond. At the same time it is an active verb that carries the idea of

pursuing hard after something. It indicates that marriage is meant to be two people diligently and utterly committed to pursuing one another in love, bonded in an insoluble union of mind, will, spirit, and emotion.

In verse 6 Jesus went on to say, "What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." Every marriage—whether it is a Christian union or a pagan one, whether it was entered into according to the will of God or not—is a miraculous work of God, and if you tamper with that union, you are undermining the work of God.

Every family rests on that basic truth, and the success of the family as a whole rises or falls on the couple's commitment to each other and to the permanence of the union.

The family is so important in the plan of God! He wants to make our families all they can be—and the success of the family should be a priority for every Christian. We cannot allow the world to press us into its mold of divorce, division, delinquency, and all that goes with the failure of the family. If Christians don't have families that stay together, children who are raised in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, parents who love each other, and homes that are centered on Christ, we can never reach the world with the gospel. On the other hand, if we cultivate those things, and pursue them wholeheartedly, the world will sit up and take notice of us—and of our Christ.

Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1950), 257-71.

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