

The Christian Woman As a Wife

Of all her roles, the one that is most important to many Christian women is being a wife. God does not require the Christian woman to marry, and, for a variety of reasons, some Christian women do not marry. (Sometimes, they may even be better off not to marry, according to 1 Corinthians 7.) However, the majority of Christian women do marry; and usually, from the time they marry, that marriage is more important to them than anything else in life. They may be successful in business, faithful in the church, and competent as mothers; but if they fail as wives, they are likely to believe that they are failures, period!

How can the Christian woman avoid such a failure? How can she succeed as a wife? The answer, to the extent that it depends on her, is to meet her responsibilities to her husband. Let us examine those responsibilities.

STAYING MARRIED

As a rule, the wife has a responsibility to stay married to, and to continue to live with, her husband. While this rule can have exceptions, the rule itself should be emphasized.

When Jesus was asked a question about divorce, He made His answer plain: From the beginning, God did not intend for a man and his wife to divorce. (See Matthew 19:3–9.) God's plan is one man, one wife, for life. If we believe this, then we should let our belief dominate our thinking; we should commit ourselves to it. Then, once married, we will not assume that the

problems which inevitably emerge in marriage should lead to divorce. Rather, we will assume that all problems which arise between a husband and a wife are "solvable"; and we will solve them! When a problem arises, a husband and a wife will "work it out" because they believe they have no other choice.

When do exceptions apply to this rule? First, according to Jesus, if a husband is unfaithful, the wife is free to divorce him and to remarry. We should emphasize that divorce in such a case is permitted, not required. Before the Christian woman takes this step, she should be sure that she is doing not only what is right (scriptural), but also what is best for her family. Second, under certain circumstances, the Christian woman is excused from living with her husband. (See 1 Corinthians 7.¹) I believe that this allows the Christian wife to leave an abusive husband to protect herself, although such circumstances would not necessarily permit her to divorce him or to remarry.

BEING FAITHFUL

The Christian wife also has a responsibility to remain faithful to her husband. Adultery is not a sin reserved for males. Many marriages have broken up because the wife sought sexual satisfaction outside the marriage bed.

¹This passage is controversial. Some believe that it allows a Christian woman to divorce her unbelieving spouse and remarry, but remarriage is not mentioned in the passage.

SUBMITTING

The Christian wife has a responsibility to submit to her husband. The New Testament teaching on this subject is direct: "Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, . . ." (Ephesians 5:22, 23a; see also Colossians 3:18 and 1 Peter 3:1, 2). What does this submission require?

Notice that the Bible does not require the Christian wife to submit to her husband if he asks her to do something wrong. If that happens, she must respond, as Peter did, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). At the same time, women may be inclined to make other exceptions which are not allowed by the New Testament.

(1) Christian wives may think that they are required to submit only if their husbands are Christians. This is not an exception to the general teaching, as is evident from 1 Peter 3. Peter told Christian women to submit to their unbelieving husbands.

(2) Christian women may believe that they are required to submit only if their husbands treat them correctly. Indeed, Christian husbands have a responsibility to love their wives as Christ loved the church,² but the context in which Peter told Christian wives to submit to their husbands suggests that they are to obey even husbands who do not treat them right. (See 1 Peter 2:18—3:2.) In every relationship, including marriage, the Christian's responsibility to others does not depend on how others treat the Christian.

(3) Wives may also have the idea that they are required to submit only if their husbands are competent. Many husbands have good intentions but make bad decisions; they may not be evil, just foolish. Is the Christian wife excused from submitting to an incompetent husband? God's Word does not make such an exception. A Christian wife can try to change her husband's mind when she sees that he is about to act unwisely; and a good husband will listen respectfully to his wife, believing that she is a person of intelligence and good judgment. (After all, she showed good judgment in marrying him!) Still,

²See the lesson "The Christian Husband" in the "Christian Man" issue of *Truth for Today* (November 1997).

his bad decisions do not excuse her from following his lead.

Women today may have trouble submitting to men. A little girl is likely to grow up thinking, "I'm as good as any man." She may spend her life proving every day that she can do almost anything that a man can do, and often do it better! When the time comes to marry, she may have difficulty giving up control of her life, as she perceives it, and being subordinate to a man.

What can the Christian woman do to overcome this problem? Here is one possible solution: Our older daughter was very independent; she thought she was as good as any of the boys she knew. She was a Christian and understood the Scriptures, and she was bothered that she would have to submit to a man when she got married. She was not sure she could do it. We told her, "Do not marry unless you find a man whom you can respect, one to whom you can willingly submit." She found such a man and married him; they have been married for eighteen years. The advice we gave to her, I would give to any woman: Find a Christian man whom you can look up to, whom you can respect, whose lead you can gladly follow, and marry that man. If you cannot find such a man, forget about getting married!

The Christian wife should remember that the command to respect her husband and follow his lead is in her best interest. A man often does not receive much respect in the world. Daily, he may put up with domineering bosses, irate customers, time-wasting bureaucrats, and a rude public. The world conspires to make him view himself as a nobody. He may come home beaten down like the comedian Rodney Dangerfield, whose famous line is "I don't get no respect." He should find in his home a haven of comfort and security, and a wife who obviously loves and respects him. If he does, he will almost inevitably reciprocate by loving and cherishing that wife who reassures him by her actions that he is important after all.

GIVING YOUR HUSBAND HIS "CONJUGAL RIGHTS"

The responsibilities of the Christian wife include giving her husband his "conjugal rights" (RSV). In 1 Corinthians 7:2-5, we read,

But because of immoralities, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband. Let the husband fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again lest Satan tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

The husband is not to deny his wife, and the wife is not to deny her husband, the opportunity for sexual intimacy. Marriage has as one of its purposes the legitimate fulfillment of sexual desire. The failure to grant your marriage partner the opportunity for such fulfillment is a violation of Paul's instructions. Such a violation may also drive your partner into another's arms!

One practice that this passage forbids is withholding sexual favors because of something your marriage partner has done or failed to do. Some women have refused to let their husbands sleep with them to punish them for some real or imagined misdeed. Not only is that kind of "punishment" unscriptural, but it is also unwise and likely to backfire.

KEEPING THE HOME

Another responsibility of the Christian woman is to keep the home. Two New Testament passages suggest this idea. Paul wrote, "Therefore, I want younger widows to get married, bear children, keep house, and give the enemy no occasion for reproach" (1 Timothy 5:14). In Titus 2 Paul told older women to "encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be sensible, pure, workers at home, kind, being subject to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be dishonored" (Titus 2:4, 5).

If a woman does not want to be a homemaker, she should remain single. Christian women are to "rule their households"³ and to be "workers at home." Concerning this require-

³The RSV wording comes closer to being the literal meaning of the word found in 1 Timothy 5:14 and translated in the NASB "keep house." The Greek word, transliterated, is *oikodespotein*, the infinitive of *oikodespoteo*, a word derived from the word for house—*oikos*—and the word *despotes*, meaning "master," from which we get the English word "despot." J. W. Roberts commented, "Some

ment, as with the wife's submission, more should be said. While the wife has a responsibility to keep the home, both the husband and the wife should consider the following:

(1) The Scriptures do not prevent the husband from helping with household chores. When a man expects his wife to help make the living, the man can reasonably be expected to help around the house. Furthermore, a man's helping his wife in the house is a loving action.

(2) Nothing in the Scriptures forbids the Christian woman to work outside the home. At the same time, the Christian woman who has a job outside the home must remember that she still has a responsibility to see that the house is kept.

(3) The Scriptures do not dictate a standard of excellence which the Christian homemaker must meet. Certainly, the Christian wife would like to be beautiful, sweet, intelligent, a wonderful conversationalist, a perfect mother, a great cook, an immaculate housekeeper, and a dedicated child of God—in other words, Super-Christian-Woman! Most Christian women will not likely reach that stage of perfection. Some tasks may have to be set aside temporarily in order for her to achieve more important goals: spending more time with her children, doing something special for her husband, or nurturing her own spiritual life.

LOVING YOUR HUSBAND

The Christian woman is to love her husband. This is among the requirements which older women are to teach younger women (Titus 2:4, 5).

Why do women have to be taught to love their husbands? Someone may answer, "Because husbands are not naturally lovable." That may be true—but more likely, Paul wanted to emphasize that a wife ought to act in a loving way toward her husband.

The Christian wife should always seek her husband's highest good; she should always do

people seem surprised to learn that Paul says that the wives are to 'rule the household.' But that is what Paul says. . . . The ancient household was ordinarily an establishment with slaves and various enterprises which had to do with clothing, food, education, etc. This is where the woman held sway." (J. W. Roberts, *Letters to Timothy* [Austin, Tex: Sweet Publishing Co., 1961], 59.)

what is best for him. What that means in practical terms will vary from person to person and from time to time. For one wife, this may mean getting up early to be with her husband at breakfast, fixing a good lunch for him to take to work, making sure that he has clean clothes to wear, or greeting him at night with a hug. For another, it may mean helping her husband to get over the disappointments of a difficult workday, laughing for the hundredth time at his favorite joke, letting him choose a family activity, or overlooking a dozen little faults. In some circumstances, it may mean lovingly trying to help the husband to overcome personality deficits that keep him from being successful, or carefully and kindly confronting him about his wrongdoing.

WINNING YOUR HUSBAND TO THE LORD

Closely related to doing what is best for her husband is the Christian wife's responsibility to do all that she can to win her unbelieving husband to the Lord. First Peter 3:1, 2 gives this challenge to Christian wives: ". . . be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior."

What does this passage teach? (1) For a Christian woman to be married to a non-Christian is not necessarily wrong; God recognizes such a union. (2) The Christian wife should be concerned about winning her non-Christian mate to the Lord. (3) She should try to win him "with a word"—that is, by teaching him the gospel and trying to bring him into contact with others who can teach him. (How else could it become obvious that he refuses to hear and cannot be won "with a word"?) (4) If the husband refuses to hear gospel teaching from his wife or others, the wife may still have hope that he will be converted by watching her live as a Christian should. These instructions are essential for the Christian wife to follow, whether or not her husband ever responds positively to the gospel's call.

Undoubtedly, hundreds and thousands of Christian wives have brought their husbands to the Lord—not only (or mainly) because of their attempts at teaching them the Word, but prima-

rily because they lived as dedicated children of God before their husbands every day. If you are trying to convince another to become a Christian, your own faithful Christian life is the unanswerable argument!

CONCLUSION

Ira North, the great preacher for the Madison, Tennessee, church of Christ, once preached a sermon called "If I Were a Woman." I doubt that I would have the nerve to preach such a lesson, but if I did, I would likely say, "If I were a woman, I would try to hang on to my husband. He might be ugly, old, weak, sickly, dumb, incompetent, or all of the above—but, with all of his faults, I think I would still be inclined to keep him."

I remember reading somewhere the following story: A woman visited her neighbor, a lady who lived on a farm. When she arrived, she found that her friend had just that morning washed and waxed the kitchen floor. While the two women talked in the kitchen of the farmhouse, enjoying the sight of the shining floor, the farmer came through the door of the kitchen. He pleasantly said "hello" to the two women and then, in his muddy work boots, walked to the sink to get a drink of water. After he excused himself, he went back out the door, leaving ugly black tracks on the newly washed floor. The visitor was incensed. "Did you see what he did?" she said. "He tracked up your clean floor! And you just sat there; you didn't say anything! I would have told him off! He wouldn't get away with that if he were my husband!"

The farmer's wife smiled, got up, took the mop, and began to clean the floor. She said, "I know it wasn't very thoughtful of John; but, you know, he's been making me a living for thirty years, working hard from morning to night. He's been faithful all those years and good to me and the children. He's spent every extra nickel he's ever made in all those years on me. It seems to me that cleaning up the floor after him now and then is a small price to pay for all he's done."

The husband you have may be lacking in some ways, but would you be better off without him? Maybe putting up with his little peculiarities and faults is a small price to pay for the good he brings into your life. ◆