

There seems to be increasing interest these days about the topic of the family. The emphasis certainly is needed. As you walk through Christian bookstores, you see shelves filled with books on family relationships. Public figures are talking about the family. During the 1992 Presidential campaign, former Vice President Dan Quale made national headlines by accusing the producers of a popular television show of promoting single motherhood in one of their programs, and his comments generated national debate on "family values" (MacArthur, Different By Design, 49). In a recent interview by "USA Weekend" (May 19-21, 1995, p. 22) with Janet Reno, the U.S. attorney general offered this advice to Americans, "The most important possession in your life is your family. Structure your day, your week, your year so you make sure you spend time with them."

Yet it's news to nobody that many families are crumbling. What's happened to the family in our country? One of the problems is rooted in ignorance--A lot of people don't know what a successful family is. They didn't grow up in one. And the culture certainly doesn't offer helpful answers.

At last week's MBI Pastors Conference, Gary Chapman (Pastor of Family ministries in Winston-Salem, NC for over 20 years, and noted family conference speaker) began his message with an ear-catching introduction, "I'd like to speak to you today about the 'Functional Family.' All we hear about these days is the 'Dysfunctional Family.' Everybody it seems is said to have a 'dysfunctional' family. A great problem is that many don't even know what a 'functional' family would look like." Dr. Chapman is right.

How does God intend for the family to operate? We can be grateful that He didn't leave us in the dark. In His Word, He gave us a blueprint for the family. We began a study three weeks ago to learn what a "functional family" is--a series entitled, "God's Design for the Family."

In week #1, we went back to the basics on marriage by looking at Genesis 2. We learned that marriage involves both design and duty. God designed marriage. The purpose of marriage is companionship. When a couple marries, they have a specific God-given duty--they must leave, cleave, and weave two lives together for the glory of God.

Last week, we investigated what God expects of the husband. The Bible presents men with three responsibilities. As a husband, I must be a Learner, a Lover, and a Leader. Peter says I must "dwell with my wife according to knowledge" (1 Pt 3:7), that is, I must devote my life to getting to know my wife. In Ephesians 5, we learned that in addition to being learners, we must be lovers. Not as the world defines "lovers." I must love my wife as Christ loved the Church. I must also love her as I love my own body. In addition, God calls the husband to be a leader--not a dictator, but a leader. Leadership is serving. A man who is a Christ-like leader is a man who serves his wife and children.

This week, our aim is to explore "God's Design for Wives." Frankly, this is a challenge for me in that, obviously, I'm not a wife. But thankfully, God doesn't call me to speak from experience, but rather to present His revealed truth. My task is not to tell you what I think, but what God says.

***Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

We need to spell out two matters at the outset. First, what God's Word will say to us today probably would not classify as being "politically correct" (not that it matters in biblically preaching). In fact, it may be downright unpopular. But secondly, what God has to say to us about His design for wives is GOOD. God is good, and His Word is good. If we implement it, we can anticipate God's joy. If we ignore it, we can expect heartache. If you doubt that, I merely would remind you of what's happened to the family since our society started chucking God's guidelines.

Which brings us to the question--What is God's design for the wife? To answer that question, we're going to survey three familiar texts in the Word of God, texts I've preached on before, texts which address this issue.

Proposition: God has given wives two distinctives, as revealed in the key texts of Genesis 2:20-23, Ephesians 5:22-24 and 1 Peter 3:1-6.

- I. God gives wives a distinct role (Genesis 2:20-23).
 - A. The husband is the head.
 - B. The wife is the helper.
 - 1. The woman was made for man.
 - 2. The woman was made from man.
 - 3. The woman was brought to the man.
 - 4. The woman was named by the man.
- II. God gives wives a distinct responsibility.
 - A. The wife is to submit to her husband (Eph 5:22-24).
 - 1. The issue is not worth.
 - 2. The issue is function.
 - B. The wife is to support her husband (1 Pet 3:1-6).
 - 1. A wife can influence by her behavior (1-2).
 - 2. A wife can influence by her beauty (3-4).

I. God gives wives a distinct role (Genesis 2:20-23).

God's design for marriage goes back to Creation. You know the account of Genesis 2 well, but I want to reiterate the fact that God established two fundamental roles from the very beginning.

A. The husband is the head.

God created the man first. Paul wrote in 1 Cor 11:3, "But I would have you to know that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God." After the Fall, God told the woman in Gen 3:16, "And thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee." In Eph 5:23, the apostle restated this truth, "For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church."

We'll talk about what "headship" means in a moment, but for now, don't miss this first role. According to God's design in marriage, the husband is the head.

B. The wife is the helper.

Gen 2:18 reads, "And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help fit for him." Don't miss this. God said Adam needed a helper. Adam needed something his job couldn't provide. Nor could the animals. Nor could another man. God fashioned for Adam exactly what he needed--a woman.

Notice the narrative in Gen 2:20-23. "And Adam gave names to all cattle...but for Adam there was not found an HELP fit for him. And the LORD God caused a deep sleep...And the rib which the LORD God had taken from man, made He a woman, and brought her unto the man. And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones..." Adam needed a helper. What God gave him was a woman.

Elisabeth Elliot has written a valuable chapter entitled, "Masculinity and Femininity Under God," (in the book, Our Savior God, ed. J.M. Boice, p. 42). Elisabeth Elliot was married to Jim Elliot, the missionary who was killed by the Auca Indians in South America. Based on Genesis 2, she makes four observations about the role of the woman:

1. *The woman was made for man.*

God created Eve for Adam, to be his God-given helper, his wife. But not only FOR man,

2. *The woman was made from man.*

She was bone of his bone. God made Adam from the dust. He made the woman from Adam's bone.

3. *The woman was brought to the man.*

Do you see this? Being brought to the man, the woman was God's special gift to Adam.

4. *The woman was named by the man.*

Adam called her "Woman" (23), a name indicating her origin--she came from the man.

Then Elisabeth Elliot draws this conclusion (42), "So there are four aspects which define my position as a woman. I was made for man; I was made from man; I was brought to man; I was named by man. Paul bases his arguments about the roles of women in the church on this created order, not on anything which can possibly be construed to be purely social or cultural."

God has given the wife a very distinct role. She is the helper. Again, I am indebted to an observation made by Elisabeth Elliot (42-43), "If you look at the human body, you cannot escape the fact that the male was made to protect, lead, and rule (the generally larger size, the heavier musculature, the broad shoulders would suggest this); to cherish ('to husband' means to care for, or cherish), to initiate, to act upon...The female body, by contrast, is made to respond, to be acted upon, to receive, to bear, to nurture, and to carry."

The point is this. God has given wives a very distinct and special role. He has equipped her to be to her husband what another man could not be--a helper.

This is basic, but ever so key. Many a struggling marriages can be attributed to a breakdown right here--two people who refuse to accept the roles God has given them. In his book, Christian Living in the Home, biblical counselor and author, Jay Adams, sums up what's at the heart of a Christ-honoring marriage with two questions (70): "Husbands, do you love your wives enough to die for them? Wives, do you love your husbands enough to live for them?"

Men, God calls us to be willing to give up our lives for our wives. And wives, God invites you to pour your life into being your husband's helper. Neither of these requirements is easy. Nor are they negotiable. They are the distinct roles God has given.

II. God gives wives a distinct responsibility.

This responsibility is spelled out in two key, New Testament texts--Ephesians 5 (and its parallel passage in Colossians 3) and 1 Peter 3. From Eph 5 we learn this...

A. The wife is to submit to her husband (Eph 5:22-24).

Actually, the context goes back to Eph 5:18, "Be filled with the Spirit." Notice that Spirit-filling affects your praise (19), your perspective (20), and your personal relationships (21). V 21 makes it clear that there is to be a mutual submission between Christians. With that thought, Paul launches an entire section dealing with Spirit-filled relationships, from 5:22-6:9. He describes what the Spirit-filled life will look like for wives, husbands, children, parents, employees, and employers.

To wives, he writes (22-24), "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife..." In Col 3:18, we read, "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit (NIV "fitting") in the Lord."

My purpose is not to do an in-depth exegetical of this text (which we've done before), or to develop a word study of "submit" (you can do that with any good, Bible-study help). I want to highlight the obvious, and make sure we don't miss two basic truths about submission for wives.

1. The issue is not worth.

The word "submit" has become an offensive, archaic, politically incorrect expression to many. This is partly because of gross misunderstanding, for some feel it denigrates the worth of women. Listen to Elisabeth Elliot again (45), "Lest anyone believe the notion so widely accepted that response and submission are admissions of inferior worth, may I point to the Trinity. Here we have, as theologians tell us, three persons who are at once coequal, coeternal, and consubstantial. Yet within the three persons of the Trinity working together, there is a filial obedience in the person of Jesus Christ eternally offered to the Father, and there is a functional subordination of the Holy Spirit to both the Son and Father...But no Christian can construe that as meaning that the Son is not worth as much as the Father or that the Spirit is of inferior worth to the Son."

What's she saying? Simply this. Having a different role and responsibility doesn't make God the Son inferior to God the Father. Nor does it make wives inferior to husbands.

2. The issue is function.

The word submit was primarily a military term in Greek usage, meaning "to rank under." Hence, the idea "be subject, submit." Paul used it in Rom 13:1, 5, "Let every soul be subject to the higher powers." Did Paul mean that government leaders are worth more than average citizens? No. Submission has to do with function, not worth.

God is a God of order, not chaos. There is even order in the Trinity. There is to be order in the home. He has given family members different roles and different responsibilities. The husband is the head (23), and he is responsible to be a loving leader (25). The wife is the helper, and her task is to submit to her husband.

Suppose a train decided, "I've followed these same tracks for years, and I'm tired of it. I want to blaze my own trail--I want to be free!" When is a train freer--when it veers OFF the track over the bumpy hillside, or when it runs along smoothly ON the track, confined and restricted by the track? When a train is restricted to the track, it's free. It's freer when it does what it was intended to do (Adams, 74).

When is a person playing the piano really free (ibid)? Is she free when she says, "Forget the rules of music. Forget practicing the scales. I just want to do my own thing on these keys!" Will that attitude result in freedom? No, it'll result in sheer noise and disharmony. The pianist who is truly "free" at the piano is the one who has spent years practicing the scales, learning the laws of harmony, and playing within those guidelines.

Listen. Freedom in God's world never comes apart from structure (Adams, 75). We are truly free when we choose to live the way God intended us to live. Husbands and wives are truly free when they accept the roles God has given them. If your home is a place where the husband is a loving leader and the wife a submissive helper, then you have a home that is running "on the track," a home that results in beautiful music.

Submission is not being a doormat. A wife says, "He's the head, but I'm the neck that turns the head," and under the guise of submission, runs the family. Neither is submission inequality. Nor is it a denial of influence (I remind you that in 1 Sam 1:3 God used a woman to turn a nation). When a wife submits to her husband, she is recognizing the divine plan for function and order in the home.

What's involved in submission? Peter addressed that question in 1 Peter 3.

B. The wife is to support her husband (1 Pet 3:1-6).

Like Paul, Peter includes his counsel to wives in a context where he says all Christians are to practice submission. When it comes to civil matters, all Christians are to submit to government authorities (2:13). On the job, Christians are to "be subject" to their bosses (2:18). What about in the home? The role of the husband and wife dovetail.

As we saw last time in 3:7, husbands are to be learners who tenderly know and honor their wives. What about wives? Notice 3:1, "In the same manner, ye wives be in subjection (NIV "be submissive"--same Greek word) to your own husbands, that if any obey not the word, they...may be won by the behavior of their wives."

Without going in to detail, allow me to "skim the cream off the top." Don't miss this. Peter is saying that a submissive wife is a powerful force! She's certainly no doormat. Specifically, he's addressing wives who have husbands who are "without the Word." That is, either their husband is unsaved, or he is a believer who is living in willful disobedience to the Word. How can a wife reach a husband like that? Preach at him? Turn his car radio to CDR? Drag him to church? No. Peter says, "Submit to him."

Support him. Ladies, are you concerned about spiritual apathy in your man? Did you realize you have two surgical tools at your disposal which God can use to cut away the spiritual cataracts from your husband's eyes? You do. God's Word says...

1. A wife can influence by her behavior (1-2).

V 2 says wives can reach their husbands, "While they behold your chaste conduct." Wives, can your husband see Christ in your behavior? Specifically, does he know that you support him? Is it apparent by your life that he is more important to you than your job, your hobbies, your other friends, and even your children? Does he know that you are his helper?

Footnote: Should a wife work outside the home? The woman in Proverbs 31 was an industrious worker. The real issue is this. The wife's number one, God-given responsibility is to her family, not to her job/career. If you are a wife that works outside the home, you need to answer objectively the following question: Is your job helping or hindering your family?

Last week at the Wheelersburg High School graduation, I was pleasantly amazed by a statement made by the superintendent, Dr. Sells. In commenting on what would be happening to the graduates, he mentioned that many would go to college, several would enter the workforce, a few the military, and one said she wanted to be a housewife. Dr. Sells' response caught my attention, "There is no higher calling in life."

There was something incredibly refreshing about that affirmation. We live in a day in which women (and men) are sacrificing their families on the altars of their careers. The Christian lady who chooses to be a homemaker and devote her life to her husband and children is quite often demeaned, even by fellow-Christians. She hears statements like, "When are you going to get a real job and make a real contribution to society?" It's long overdue for someone to spread the biblical truth that a wife can make no greater, "real contribution" in the light of eternity than to invest her life into her family.

Now the second surgical tool with which wives can influence their husbands.

2. A wife can influence by her beauty (3-4).

Not sex-appeal, but soul-appeal. Listen to vv 3-4, "Whose adorning...let it be the hidden man of the heart..." If we read this text and get hung up on the issue of whether women can wear cosmetics, we've missed the point. It's a matter of balance. We can distract people by being sloppy as well as vain.

The question a woman must ask herself is this. Am I a woman of grace? Am I as concerned with my spiritual beauty as my physical? And does my husband know it?

Conclusion: Early one morning last week, I was awakened by the sound of the telephone. I heard the voice of a friend, a man who had been in the ministry. It seemed like a nightmare when I heard these words, "I'm sorry to be calling you so early, but I want to ask you and Sherry to be praying. My wife left with the kids yesterday, without even saying a word. She packed their clothes and left me a note saying I'd hear from her attorney."

Listen. All marriages have struggles. Even Christian marriages can go through times of turmoil. I am burdened for married couples in this church. My challenge to you is this. Don't wait until the letter is on the kitchen table to decide you are going to put Christ first in your marriage. Are you willing to take steps today to have a Christ-honoring home?

"What steps?" you ask. First, make sure Jesus Christ is #1 in your life. He must have first place in your life, above your spouse, above your kids, above your job, above everything. He will not play second fiddle in your life, even to your family. For that matter, a truly successful family is impossible apart from a relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Apart from Christ, we don't have the power to live as God demands. So the first step to a Christ-honoring home is basic. Do you know Christ, and is He #1 in your life?

Second, choose today to submit to God's design for your family. Make a decision today to say, "I will accept the role God has given me in my home." As a husband, I will be a Learner, a Lover, and a Leader of my wife. As a wife, I will be a Helper to my husband, and will submit to him and support him. More than anything, from this day forward, I choose to build my life on the Word of God. I want Christ to be pleased with my family. I want the world to see Christ in my life and home.

Perhaps you're thinking, "It's too late. I've already blown it. My family is in shambles." True, you can't change the past, but thank God He is merciful. Resolve that from this day until you see Christ, you're going to live to please Him.