

Brave dad

John MacArthur



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BRAVE DAD

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*To my children: Matt, Marcy, Mark, and Melinda.
All of them are walking with Christ,
raising their own children in the discipline
and instruction of the Lord.
That is far and away the greatest joy a father can experience.*

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Introduction

No duty in my life is more important or more sacred than my role as a husband and father. That is where my true character is most accurately seen, and it is the best single gauge of my overall success or failure as a leader and role model. Everything else I do as a pastor, educator, author, or ministry leader would be severely compromised if I failed to lead my own family properly. In fact, this is one of the key tests of whether any man is fit to lead the church, because “if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?” (1 Timothy 3:5). Conversely, if a man cultivates grace, godliness, and the mind of Christ in his home life, the fruit of the Spirit will naturally be seen in abundance throughout every facet of his life—his performance in the workplace, all his relationships, and his conduct in the world.

Furthermore, because home is where a person’s true temperament is most clearly on display, no one knows the real character of a man better than his own children. They see with a keener clarity than most dads realize. If a man’s public persona is merely a hypocritical veneer that disappears in

the privacy of the home, the kids will be the first to see that. Indeed, it's hard to imagine anything more destructive to a child's moral and spiritual development. An ungodly, hypocritical, or indifferent dad is not only a constant, full-time negative role model; his influence also breeds cynicism, unbelief, discouragement, resentment, and a whole new generation of hypocrisy in his own children. Thus "the iniquity of the fathers [is visited] on the children to the third and the fourth generations" (Numbers 14:18; cf. Exodus 20:5; 34:7).

On the positive side, however, no one can have a more potent or longer-lasting influence for good in a child's life than a spiritually strong father. Bringing our children up "in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4) is not only a duty; it is also a great privilege, for "a wise son makes a father glad" (Proverbs 10:1; 15:20). There is no greater joy in life than to see one's own children walking in the truth (cf. 3 John 4). In other words, nothing is a more worthy investment of any father's time and energy than this: *Be a godly leader in your own home*. The returns you will reap include eternal riches of inestimable value, and the earthly rewards alone are sweeter and more valuable than any amount of material wealth.

This book, I trust, will be a help and encouragement to you as you pursue that goal. I have purposely kept it brief, simple, and focused. That is, after all, in keeping with the biblical instructions for fathers. Fatherhood is, of course, a prominent theme from Genesis to Revelation, and principles of parenting are scattered throughout. But glean and organize all of them together and what you will discover is that the Bible's

guidelines for fathers are few and simple. Unlike many of today's parenting manuals, Scripture doesn't treat parenting as an arcane or bewildering conundrum. The father's duties are straightforward and fairly basic. What makes fatherhood *seem* difficult are our own inconsistencies and weaknesses. That's because parenting is first and foremost a spiritual task—one in which personal righteousness, self-control, and the mortification of our own flesh are all necessary prerequisites to proper discipline and instruction of our children. In short, the only way to be a dad who leads well is to be a dad who *lives* well.

May God bless you and empower you in your pursuit of that goal.

The responsibility given to the husband [to love his wife] should not be undertaken lightly. It is a call to shepherd, provide, protect, and lead. It requires love, self-sacrifice, humility, and diligence. Ultimately, it looks to heaven and purposes to live each day in light of that future inheritance. In the meantime, it rests in the grace of God—knowing that the best of human relationships can be fully enjoyed only in light of our fellowship with Him.¹

RICH GREGORY

CHAPTER 1

The Starting Point of a Brave Dad

By God's design and God's will, the husband is the head of the household; he is the leader of the family. Scripture makes it clear he is the one responsible for the success of the marriage and family, and the well-being of everyone involved. This headship is affirmed from the beginning of time at creation, a fact explained by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 11, where he states, "The man is the head of a woman...For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake" (verses 3,8-9). In that passage, Paul upholds the concept of a man's headship in the family by appealing to the order of creation—man was created first, then woman—and the fact woman was created to help the man (Genesis 2:18,21-24).

Later, in the most significant passage on marriage and family relationships in the entire New Testament, Paul once again addresses the married man's role as head of his own home. In the course of writing about the relationships between

husbands, wives, and children in Ephesians 5:22–6:4, Paul establishes that God’s design is that “the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church” (verse 23). He then goes on to provide specific instruction on how husbands are to fulfill their leadership role, beginning with this important command: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church” (verse 25).

This, then, is the husband’s supreme responsibility—loving his wife. Using Christ’s love for the church as his example, Paul explains in the subsequent verses how the husband’s love is to be manifest. Every man is to love his wife with a sacrificial, purifying, caring, unbreakable, Christlike love—all of which we will explore as we continue through this chapter.

A Lack of Male Leadership in the Home

Yet the questions being asked by many today are these: Where are the strong husbands? Where are the loyal, loving, leading husbands and fathers? Where are the men who are willing to stand as the backbone, the solid framework or structure on which you can build a marriage and a family—and, in turn, a society?

Too many men today live in worlds completely isolated from their families. Outside the home, they are aggressive doers and problem solvers who come up with all sorts of innovative ways to make money and obtain promotions, prestige, and respect from the people in their outside world. Yet in the home, for the most part, they are passive, indifferent, and irresponsible. Though they may be present in the home, they are not actively engaged in the everyday dynamics of family life.

Looking at the problem from a historical-sociological perspective, one writer gave this observation:

A series of historical events, beginning at the Industrial Revolution, traversing the search for American independence and the Second Great Awakening, and culminating in Victorianism, has had the net result of disestablishing American men from a true role of fatherhood and moral leadership in our land. The American male, at one time the ever-present guide of the close-knit colonial family, left his family for the factory and the materialistic lure that the Industrial Revolution brought. The most numerous and most active members of the church, the men—who commonly debated theology in the colonial marketplace—were, in time, to be found arguing business practices in the tavern. The fathers who labored hard to instill the value of cooperation in their offspring, in time gave their children the example of unlimited individual competition. Men who once taught their children respect and obedience toward godly authority came to act as though independence were a national virtue. Men who once had an active hand in the education of their sons relegated this responsibility to a public school system...

Over the course of 150 years, from the mid-eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century, American men walked out on their God-given responsibility for moral and spiritual leadership in the homes, schools, and Sunday schools of the nation. As sociologist Lawrence Fuchs notes, “The

groundwork for the 20th-century fatherless home was set. By the end of the 19th century for the first time it was socially and morally acceptable for men not to be involved with their families.”²

What you have here is the disappearance of the American husband and father—all for what was initially a noble purpose—to provide a better life for his family. But soon the father was operating in a realm completely independent of his own family, a world his family knew little about, if anything. This has brought about both subtle and not-so-subtle changes that have had a devastating impact on the family.

For a variety of reasons, many men today are not actively involved in their family life. They’ve got work to do; they’re too tired when they get home; they need to work on the car, play golf with the guys, work out at the gym. Thus they don’t have time to interact and play with the kids, go to their games, and attend their school programs.

Now, we can look at this historical-sociological explanation for what has happened to fathers and say these changes had their roots in the Industrial Revolution, which basically created a world outside of the home. And there are those who would say there’s not much that can be done about it—we’ll just have to do the best we can with this reality.

But that is only part of the picture. It is merely one of many factors that have diminished the amount of time fathers are available in the home. There are other reasons as well, and many of them simply come down to the fact the father is making choices in his life that pull him away from his family. Yes, there are instances when circumstances may make it difficult

for a father to be available in the home. But if we're honest with ourselves, it's frequently a matter of how a man decides to prioritize his time.

The end result is that many men are not fulfilling their biblical calling in the home. They haven't made home life enough of a priority that they commit themselves to their most basic obligations as a husband and father. The Bible says a man is responsible to lead in his home, care for his wife, and provide instruction for his children. Those responsibilities are clearly spelled out in Scripture. When they're neglected, the family will fall apart. In effect, men who abandon their God-given role in the home have forfeited true manhood. Marital discord and a chaotic home life are among the inevitable results.

Thankfully, there are still men who care about fulfilling their God-given role in the home, and the fact you are reading this book tells me you are one of them. My heart always rejoices when a father expresses a genuine desire to live as a godly leader and example to his wife and children—a desire like that expressed in the letter below:

Greetings John:

My lovely wife and I have been married for seven years. We have two amazing young boys. They are sweet boys with loving hearts, so discipline thus far hasn't been too terribly hard. Here's my greatest concern, though—I want them to truly know the Lord. Am I properly shepherding their young hearts as their father, and is there more I can do?

Every day I see how much they need me to be a strong man of God, especially in these times. I want

them to look at me and have no question in their minds who their daddy lines up after—that Jesus Christ is my Lord and Master.

I know I will make mistakes along the way, as I am but a man. But I want to give them my best, laying a solid foundation and sowing as many seeds as possible. I would appreciate your advice as a Bible teacher and a dad of boys. I know I will be able to teach my sons high and lofty truths of Scripture when they are older, and I am so looking forward to those days. But these young days are priceless and I don't want to miss out on good teaching moments about our great God. Thank you, brother, for any help and encouragement you have for me.

The Priority of a Husband and Father

If we're ever going to restore family life to God's design, it starts with the husband's leadership in the home. This means moral and spiritual leadership, as well as emotional and physical security. That's where it all begins; that's what male headship is all about. It doesn't involve some sort of mystical search for one's "inner manhood," nor is it something that has to be figured out through psychological or sociological analysis. Rather, it's based on being diligent to apply straightforward and practical principles found in the Bible.

If you're a Christian man, surely you recognize that success in your home life is far more important than success in your career. That's especially true when you consider what kind of testimony your home life is to the people in your workplace.

Neglect the care of your family, and you'll lose credibility in the outside world when it comes to anything that has to do with the Christian faith.

Biblically speaking, your responsibilities as a husband and father come before everything else. That's how it was designed by God, who created the marriage union and the family unit as the earliest and most foundational elements of all human society. When the family breaks down, society breaks down as well. A strong family—and a healthy society—starts with the husband's leadership in the home.

So what does this leadership look like? How does a Christian man fulfill God's calling for him to lead in the home? More specifically, how can he lead his wife and children in a way that strengthens family unity, blesses those outside the home, and brings glory to God?

In Ephesians 5:25-31, God lays out the husband's responsibilities to his wife, and a little later in Ephesians 6:4, we find His divine instruction for how fathers are to lead their children. This is where we will focus our attention in the first part of this book.

Leading by Loving Your Wife

When Paul described the Christian husband's responsibilities to his wife, here's what the apostle wrote:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or

wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, because we are members of His body. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and shall be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh (Ephesians 5:25-31).

Note where it all begins—with the command, “Husbands, love your wives” (verse 25). Three verses later it’s repeated again: “Husbands ought also to love their own wives.” In fact, love

**A married man’s
supreme responsibility
is love for his wife.**

is the theme of this entire passage—a man’s love for his wife, and Christ’s love for the church. This makes it pretty clear that a married man’s supreme responsibility is love for his wife. That

comes first. Everything else in life flows out from that.

If Paul hadn’t illustrated how this love is to be shown, we would probably run off in a thousand different directions trying to figure out what it means for a man to show love to his wife. Our world today has such mixed-up ideas about love—ideas that are far removed from the biblical definition of love. Musicians have written endlessly about love and the struggles people experience in relationships. Love is usually defined as an emotion that comes and goes, rises and falls, ebbs and flows. It’s described as a feeling that causes people to do things they ordinarily wouldn’t do. Love as portrayed in popular music

and secular lore is not a sacrifice, a commitment, or a choice you make, but something that *happens to you*—you fall into it, or it sweeps you off your feet. People talk about waiting for love to come to them. They nurture romantic expectations about love that are untenable and unrealistic. They think of love in terms of what it will give them instead of what authentic love requires. Virtually all the popular notions about love fostered by our entertainment-saturated, self-centered culture fall far short of the real thing.

Thankfully, Paul doesn't leave husbands in the dark about how they are to love their wives. He cuts to the central issue in as few words as possible. He is very clear and specific, saying that a husband should love his wife "just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her" (verse 25).

Christ's love for the church is the model husbands are to follow in their relationship with their wives. In other words, a husband's love for his wife is supposed to be a living illustration of the redemptive love of Christ. Christ's love is the eternal standard and archetype. The love of a husband for his wife is meant to be a close facsimile. This explains the sacredness of the marriage union—especially the unique significance of the husband's calling. The role and duties of earthly husbands are designed by God specifically to illustrate the heavenly Bridegroom's timeless love for His church. That love is described for us in Ephesians 5:25-30, and we find that it manifests itself in four key ways.

Loving Your Wife with a Sacrificial Love

We begin with Ephesians 5:25, which says, "Husbands,

love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her.” What did Christ do for the church? He sacrificed Himself for her. He died on the cross for unworthy sinners who collectively constitute His chosen bride. His love for them was completely undeserved, and it was given freely, by *His* initiative—not because of any merit in those whom he loves; not owing to any inherent charm or appeal they might possess; and not because of any advantage or benefit they give Him in return. His love for them is not a reward they earn; it is purely a sacrifice He makes on their behalf. That is the standard husbands are to follow.

In Acts 20:28, we read that Christ purchased the church “with His own blood.” Romans 5:8 pictures Jesus pouring out His love in His death for us. In Romans 8:38-39, we are told it is an undying, unchanging love—He loves us with a love from which we can never be separated.

In response to the command made to husbands in Ephesians 5:25 the great Victorian preacher C.H. Spurgeon said this:

A husband loves his wife with a constant love, and so does Christ his church. He will not cast her away tomorrow having loved her today. He does not vary in his affection. He may change in his display of affection, but the affection itself is still the same. A husband loves his wife with an enduring love; it never will die out. He says, “Till death us do part will I cherish thee”; but Christ will not even let death part his love to his people. “Nothing shall separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our

Lord.” A husband loves his wife with a hearty love, with a love that is true and intense. It is not mere lip service. He does not merely speak, but he acts; he is ready to provide for her wants; he will defend her character; he will vindicate her honor; because his heart is set upon her. It is not merely with the eye that he delights now and then to glance upon her, but his soul has her continually in his remembrance—she has a mansion in his heart from which she can never be cast away. She has become a portion of himself; she is a member of his body, she is part of his flesh and of his bones; and so is the church to Christ forever, an eternal spouse.³

That’s a pretty remarkable love, isn’t it? The great challenge of a husband loving his wife in the same way that Christ loved the church is that there is always room to grow. Christ’s love is a perfect and eternal love, and husbands are called to emulate it. Christ loved us even when we were rebellious sinners who had utterly rejected Him. He died on the cross for us, showing a self-sacrificial love that expected nothing in return, a love that cost His life. That’s the kind of love He poured out for the church, and that’s the kind of love husbands are called to have for their wives.

Every now and then you’ll hear a husband say, “I love my wife too much.” But does he love her as much as Christ loved the church? If not, then he doesn’t love her enough. Christ’s love for the church is the standard by which husbands should measure their love for their wives, and let’s face it squarely: We all fall short. Given the clarity and force of this command, no

husband has any right to feel smug. Notice: Scripture doesn't adjust the standard to compensate for our weakness. It may sound like hyperbole, but it's not. Husbands are commanded to *give themselves up* for their wives, and the singular example we are given to follow is the infinite self-sacrifice Christ made to redeem sinners. In other words, there's no possibility of loving and sacrificing "too much."

The apostle Peter speaks of sacrificial love as well when he says, "Husbands...live with your wives in an understanding way, as with someone weaker, since she is a woman; and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered" (1 Peter 3:7). We see here in very practical terms how a husband is to love his wife, and we can break this down into three parts:

1. Consideration

"Live with your wives in an understanding way." That is, show sensitivity to her. Take the time to meet her needs and understand what she is thinking. Ask her about her concerns, goals, dreams, affections, and desires. Very simply, take time to listen to her. Before you can express a sacrificial love for her—the kind that meets her needs—you need to know what those needs are.

2. Chivalry

Peter graciously reminds us that our wife is "someone weaker, since she is a woman." People today might think this is a demeaning statement, but it's not. Peter was simply pointing out that a woman doesn't have the same kind of physical strength as a man, and therefore she needs his protection.

Though your wife is fully your equal from a spiritual standpoint (Galatians 3:28), she is physically weaker and in need of your provision and strength. To provide that for her is to love her.

3. Communion

Your wife is “a fellow heir of the grace of life.” She is your spiritual equal. As such, you are to cultivate companionship and fellowship with her, not lord it over her. This was a foreign concept to the Greco-Roman culture of Peter’s day. Husbands were generally uninterested in friendship with their wives, expecting them to merely take care of the house and bear children. In contrast, the Christian husband is to cultivate a loving and intimate companionship with his wife, which is one of the richest blessings he can know in this life.

In these ways, 1 Peter 3:7 defines for us all the more what a sacrificial love looks like. Ultimately, the Christian husband loves his wife *not* for what she can do for him, but because of what he desires to do for her. That’s how Christ’s love works. He loves us not because there’s something in us that attracts Him to us; He loves us because He determined to love us in spite of our unattractiveness. He loves us with a sympathetic love that seeks to understand us, assist us, comfort and equip us, and meet our needs. It’s a love we don’t deserve, a love that will never end. It’s a love that perseveres even when we fail Him. That’s the kind of love you as a husband are to have for your wife.

Loving Your Wife with a Purifying Love

Second, Christ’s love for the church is a purifying love.

Ephesians 5:25-28 says that Christ “gave Himself up” for the church “so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless.”

Paul is speaking here about a spiritually uplifting love, a spiritually beneficial love. You are to love your wife in such a way that you encourage her toward greater godliness. Such love leads a woman to become more holy and allows her full beauty to shine. We see here that the truest, finest, and most enduring beauty of a woman is not external; rather, it is internal. It is holiness that makes her genuinely beautiful, putting on display the work of God in her heart. First Samuel 16:7 contrasts outer and inner beauty when it says, “Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.” Women are therefore exhorted not to be so concerned with decorations that enhance their physical charms but to beautify the inner person. In 1 Peter 3:3-4 they are told: “Your adornment must not be merely external...but let it be the hidden person of the heart.”

For that reason, one of the best ways you as a husband can show love to your wife is by leading her to ever-increasing virtue. Encourage her toward holiness in the same way Christ seeks to sanctify the church so that “He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing” (Ephesians 5:27). Christ’s supreme desire for the church is to present her in all her glorious splendor without spot or stain.

Ephesians 5:26 tells us this cleansing takes place “by the washing of water with the Word.” In other words, God’s Word

has a purifying effect on our lives. Psalm 119:9 tells us that if we want to keep our way pure, we are to live according to His Word. So you as a husband are to ensure your wife is continually exposed to God's Word so that she might remain holy and blameless. That can include hearing the preaching of Scripture during Sunday worship, getting involved in a Bible study, and encouraging her to read books or listen to messages that provide solid biblical instruction.

This also means you don't lead your wife into sin or expose her to iniquity. Don't speak or act in ways that might embitter her or cause her to become angry or hostile. Don't intentionally prod her in ways that would cause her to respond in a sinful manner. If you really love your wife, you're going to hate anything that defiles her. You're going to do all you can to protect and preserve her purity. The loving husband, like Christ, seeks only to present his bride glorious and exalted. He seeks to honor her. This is a fundamental element of your role as the spiritual leader of the home.

Loving Your Wife with a Caring Love

Third, Paul says that a husband's love for his wife is to be a caring love: "Husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself" (Ephesians 5:28).

What exactly does it mean to love your wife as your own body? Paul is presenting a simple concept here: We are usually pretty good about taking care of our own bodies. When we're sick, we rest and do what's necessary to get better. When we're hungry, we eat. When we're thirsty, we satisfy our thirst. When we're sweaty or dirty, we wash ourselves off. When it comes to

feeding ourselves, clothing ourselves, or making ourselves comfortable, we're usually quite self-motivated. We're quick to take care of our own needs. And Paul is saying we're to treat our wives with the same level of attention we devote to ourselves.

The next few verses then bring us to a crucial point: "For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, because we are members of His body" (verses 29-30). When you married your wife, the two of you became one flesh. That's why Paul then writes, "For this reason a man shall leave his

If you want your marriage to be blessed, you need to take care of your wife.

father and mother and shall be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh" (verse 31). In the marriage relationship, you and your wife are one. And in salvation, your wife is one with Christ. So in a very real sense, the way you treat your wife is the way you are treating Christ. If you don't love your wife in a caring way, then you aren't caring for yourself and you don't love Christ as you should.

If you want your marriage to be blessed, you need to take care of your wife. When you know she has a need, you should seek to meet it. When you know she has a longing in her heart and it's a reasonable one that will add to her virtue and well-being, you ought to do what you can to fulfill it. Your wife is a God-given treasure to be cared for, nourished, and protected. That's exactly how Christ takes care of His church.

Looking again at Ephesians 5:29, note the two terms "nourishes" and "cherishes." In the original Greek text, the word "nourishes" is a term used primarily to speak of bringing up

children. It's the same word Paul uses a little later in Ephesians 6:4: "Fathers...bring [your children] up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." Typically we think in terms of nourishing our children, but in Ephesians 5:29, Paul says we are to nourish or care for our wives. As a husband, you are responsible to nurture your wife so that she, in turn, can effectively nurture the children in her God-given role as their mother.

Next, the Greek word translated "cherishes" means "to warm with body heat." It's sometimes translated "to melt." It is used of a mother bird who coaxes her children to draw closer to her so she can keep them warm and secure. In the context of husbands, Ephesians 5:29 is saying we're to support and care for our wives in a way that makes them feel loved and secure. It's a challenge to do this in a world that teaches women to be tough and independent. And it takes a tremendous amount of spiritual leadership from a man to provide his wife with warmth, strength, and security. As a husband, that's your responsibility.

The Husband as a Provider

Going back to the analogy that you as a husband are to love your wife just as Christ loved the church—have you ever noticed that it's Christ who does all the providing? It is He who nourishes, protects, and preserves. Nothing is said about the church giving back to Christ. In the same way, your love for your wife is to be a providing love. Christ didn't love the church with the expectation of getting something back in return, and that's the kind of love you're to have as a husband. Just as Christ is the provider for His church, you are to be the provider for your wife.

At this point you might be saying, “Well, I’d have to sacrifice my career to do that.” Then sacrifice your career. Or let go of whatever else it is that’s keeping you from loving your wife as you should. Maybe you won’t get promoted as high or often as you would like. Or maybe you won’t have opportunity to pursue some of your own personal goals or pleasures as much. But in the end, you’re going to be so richly rewarded by the bliss of living according to God’s design for marriage that you’ll find it well worth anything you’ve had to give up.

The Difficulty of Being a Provider

Scripture makes it clear that from the beginning, God’s design has been for the husband to be the provider. Yet this role was made more difficult when Adam and Eve fell into sin. Remember the curse God pronounced as a result of their disobedience? God told Eve she would know pain in childbirth. Then He told Adam, “Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. . . . By the sweat of your face you will eat bread” (Genesis 3:17,19). In other words, from here onward, the task of being a provider would require hard labor. The curse was a direct hit on the man’s responsibility to provide, as well as a direct hit on the woman’s responsibility to bear children.

This tells us that the husband’s work of being a provider won’t be easy. In fact, it’s so difficult that it can only be fulfilled in the power of the Spirit and a transformed life. As Ephesians 5:30 says, if you are a Christian, you are a member of Christ’s body. You are one with Christ, and the Spirit dwells in you. And as you walk in the power of the Spirit and yield to His

Word and His control, you will be able to care for your wife in the same way Christ cares for His church.

Loving Your Wife with an Unbreakable Love

The fourth characteristic of a husband's love for his wife is that it is to be an unbreakable love. In Ephesians 5:31, Paul quoted from Genesis 2:24 and wrote, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and shall be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." Marriage is the coming together of a man and a woman who leave their parents and create a new union with a unique identity all its own. It is two lives becoming one.

What is meant by the phrase "one flesh"? The primary reference is to the sexual union between the husband and wife, which is the most obvious evidence that the two have become one. This enables them to give birth to children who carry genetic traits from both of them, which makes the children an emblem of the oneness between a husband and wife.

Yet there's far more to the concept of a one-flesh relationship than that. In 1 Corinthians 6:15, Paul wrote, "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?" The believer's union with Christ is of course *spiritual*, not physical. Yet the apostle expressly says that in such a union even the physical bodies of Christians essentially become "members of Christ"—one body. As a matter of fact, he goes on to say that any sexual sin by a believer is a desecration of Christ: "Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? May it never be! Or do you not know that the one who joins himself to a prostitute is one body with her? For He says, 'The two shall become one flesh'" (verses

15-16). Obviously, then, the ideas of spiritual union and physical intimacy are inextricably linked. This suggests that the phrase “one flesh” has to do with much more than just sexual intimacy.

Indeed, marriage is a merger between two souls, not merely the joining of two bodies. The physical union illustrates and exemplifies the fuller reality of what marriage means, but by no means does it exhaust the significance of two becoming one. Marriage as God designed it not only brings two people together in physical intimacy; it also binds the couple’s hearts and minds together. Its full reality entails a spiritual union that engulfs every aspect of life.

When a man and woman become one in marriage, they enter into a unique, intimate, and comprehensive personal relationship. Their whole identity is redefined. They give up their personal autonomy (and every independent or self-focused aspect of their individual identity), because they are now one with another person. Nothing of value is actually lost in the union; both individuals gain immeasurably from being joined with each other. And “what therefore God has joined together, let no man separate” (Matthew 19:6). That’s why God hates divorce—because it severs what is designed to be an indissoluble, indivisible, one-flesh relationship (Malachi 2:16).

A Permanent Union

Ephesians 5:31 quotes directly from Genesis 2:24. The King James Version’s rendering of that verse is familiar, because it is commonly quoted in traditional wedding ceremonies: “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.” Jesus

quotes that same verse from Genesis in Matthew 19:5. The old English word “cleave” speaks of the permanence of the marriage union. It’s the Greek word *proskollao*, which means “to be glued or cemented together; to hold fast.” A husband and wife are to stick together in a union that is not only physical but also includes oneness of mind, oneness of heart, and oneness of purpose. In the marriage union, they are brought together in a magnificent, personal intimacy that is unlike any other kind of earthly relationship.

A Forgiving Union

All through my years in ministry, I’ve heard women who have said, “I want to keep my marriage together, but it’s difficult to live with this guy.” And I’ve heard men say, “I want to stay married, but I don’t know if I can live any longer with this woman.”

If a marriage has gotten to that point, it’s frequently because the husband, wife, or both have ceased to practice forgiveness in their relationship. When one or both spouses are continually unforgiving, the frustration toward each other accumulates, and that, in turn, will increasingly strain the relationship.

But consider this: How often has the Lord forgiven you? How about every day? His love for you will never change. Even when you succumb to temptation and fall into sin, you are still His chosen bride. And when you confess your sins, “He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). Nothing will ever separate you from Christ’s love (Romans 8:38-39).

It is that kind of loving, gracious forgiveness that we are

to practice in the marriage relationship. Ephesians 4:32 commands us to “be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.” We who have been forgiven so much by God ought to be more than willing to forgive the relatively lesser offenses of others—especially our wives.

With that in mind, how often are we to forgive one another? Jesus said “seventy times seven” (Matthew 18:22)—His point being that we should *always* be willing to forgive, without limit. You are called to love your wife with an unbreakable love that keeps forgiving no matter what. In marriage, you are one flesh for life. Can a man cast off his wife? Let me answer that with another question: Can Christ cast off His church?

The Key to Real Marital Bliss

In Ephesians 5:25-31, we see that a husband is to love his wife with a sacrificial love, a purifying love, a caring love, and an unbreakable love. And the role model for that love is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. That brings us to this important point: The marriage union between a Christian man and a Christian woman is a picture of the union between Christ and His church. That is why we’re to treat the marriage relationship with great reverence—it is a sacred symbol of Christ’s relationship to His church. God meant for marriage to be a permanent and unbreakable union that speaks volumes to the world about the love Christ has for His church.

Yet no husband can show such Christlike love for his wife apart from the power of the Spirit. As we walk in the Spirit (Galatians 5:16)—meaning we humbly yield to the Spirit,

trusting Him to empower us to live in obedience to the commands of Scripture—we manifest the fruit of the Spirit, which includes love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (verses 22-23). As you live under the Spirit's control and commit yourself to humbly living out God's Word, you will be empowered to love your wife in the way God has called you to. You will experience the lasting romance and joy in your marriage that so many other people have found elusive.

As you lead in love and cherish your wife in the same way that Christ loved the church, your marriage relationship will come to know the fullness of all that God intended for it to be. It is as you fulfill your role as a loving leader in your home that your marriage will blossom and your wife will delight in fulfilling her role in the relationship. And when your children see that their father and mother are committed to living out God's design for marriage, they'll experience the stability and security that come from a healthy home environment. They'll be richly blessed, and God will receive honor and glory as people around you see His perfect plan for husbands and wives lived out.