

POWER TRIP

How Can We Build Stronger Marriages?

Text: Ephesians 5:21-33

Suggestions for Becoming One Flesh

The question I want to explore with you today is how can we build stronger marriages? How can a struggling marriage become healthier? What can make a good marriage even better? What does the Bible say to us about this important subject and how can these principles benefit even those of us who are not married?

One thought occurs to me as I think of the Golden Wedding Anniversary party at which a particular husband was moved to tell his wife just how he felt about her. "My dear," he said raising his glass, "after fifty years I've found you tried and true!" His wife, who had grown a bit hard of hearing, said: "Eh?" The husband repeated himself, louder this time: "AFTER FIFTY YEARS, I'VE FOUND YOU TRIED AND TRUE!" His wife shot back: "Well, let me tell you something -- after fifty years I'm tired of you too!"

I dare say that *clear and consistent communication* is one very important key to better relationships between men and women; wouldn't you agree? At the root of the word "communication" is the biblical concept of "communion." The Book of Genesis, Jesus himself, and the Apostle Paul all teach that marriage is about a man and woman so communing with one another in heart, mind, soul, and strength that they become "**one flesh.**"¹ This is always the vision of a couple as they begin the journey of marriage. Some of you remember well how at the start of your marriage you could not wait to learn more about the other's hopes and hurts and were equally eager to share your own. The very sound of your partner's voice was a comfort to you. But then life began to weigh in. Perhaps the kids came along and the job became tough and the finances were stretched and over time you simply stopped talking and listening as once you did. As difficult as it may be to restore that communion, it's never too late to work at communicating again. Take time to ask what your partner is feeling or thinking and then be quick to really *listen* to their response. Work to express your thoughts and emotions, even when they are confused or painful to discuss. These simple steps can go a long way to refreshing a marriage bond.

Sometimes what is needed is a commitment to *set aside some more time to play or roll in the hay*. Remember how you used to recreate together at the start of your relationship? God has ordained Sabbath rest for his children in part so that they would remember to play and enjoy one another. Maybe it's time to structure some time for the two of you to do that together. Laughter and pleasure can be terrific medicines for a marriage.

Many other couples speak of the strengthening of their marriage that came when they got serious about *praying together*. I think of the young men who once approached me and asked, very seriously, whether or not I believed in “pre-marital prayer.” It seemed like a very bizarre question at first, until they went on to explain that they’d been dating some young women and had gotten into a pattern of praying with them. They found that the process of praying together so increased their sense of intimacy and connection with these girls that they worried that it might lead to other kinds of intimacy that they wanted to save till they were married. Do you and your helpmate pray together? You might start by simply saying the Lord’s Prayer out loud together. You might use the words of a prayer book. You might then move on to praying from you heart about the concerns of your day and of your family and see how God uses this to make you, even more than you are now, one with him and one another.

Other couples I know of swear by the value of laying aside separate interests for awhile and *taking up a common project or hobby*. You know, Genesis 2 tells us that, in the beginning, man and woman worked side-by-side, tending the garden, exercising a shared dominion over the creation. It was only later, and a result of the Fall, that they split apart and went off on their separate vocational tracks. One of the greatest ways of strengthening a marriage bond is to find once again a common passion. Find something that neither of you is good at and try building some capability in it together. Take up a hobby that excites both of you and see how God uses that to make you one flesh in an even deeper way.

I imagine that you’ve probably got your own tips to share with others about all of this and I hope you will during the coffee hour today. But what I’d like to focus our thinking on during the time we have remaining this morning, is what I believe to be a basic biblical principle for the development of great relationships in general, and of the marriage relationship in particular. Then I want to suggest TWO specific ways that you and I might put that principle into practice.

A Basic Biblical Principle: God’s Power Comes Under

Of all the Scripture texts I suggest to couples planning their weddings, I’ve noticed that Ephesians 5 is about as popular these days as skin disease. Can you even remember hearing that text read at any of the weddings you’ve attended in the last 10 years? That’s ironic, if you think about it, because there is no text in the New Testament that provides more explicit teaching on the topic of marriage than Ephesians 5. Many of today’s women, however, can’t seem to get past verse 22. They read that part where Paul says **“Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord,”** and their very body language says, “not that text!” Paul’s words seem to open up a Pandora’s box of potential oppression and loss of voice. Many men, I’ve found, are equally unsettled by that text too, though for different reasons. It appears to thrust them into a place of supreme authority which they’re not really sure how to handle, or at least not without incurring the wrath of their spouse!

If you remember nothing else I say this morning, however, please remember this. Ephesians 5 is not about meting out power as we usually think of it. On the contrary, it is about completely turning on its head the world's conception of the way real and lasting power works in human relationships. We often think of power as something that one person wields -- even if benevolently -- *over* another person. When we talk about power-plays and rising to power, we are describing the process by which one person or party gains the upper hand, the ability to control, coerce, or compel response from another. But when Jesus and the New Testament writers talk about power they are thinking of something completely different. They are talking NOT about the power that comes from winning a position OVER someone but the kind of power that comes from choosing a position UNDER someone.

In Mark 9:35, Jesus said: **"If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all."** In Mark 10:45, Christ declared, **"For even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."** When the crowds wanted to make him a worldly king... when Satan wanted to give him political dominion over all the worldly kingdoms... Jesus refused the position, though it would have been his to take by right. Instead he said in John 12:32, it will be by sacrificing myself on a cross that **"I will draw all [humanity] to myself."** In other words, I will let go of my control, let go of my comfort, stoop all the way down, and submit myself even to death and this will unleash a power that changes the world. Commenting on how right Jesus was about this, Napoleon Bonaparte wrote toward the end of his life: "Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne and I myself have founded empires; but upon what do these creations of our genius depend? Upon force, Jesus alone founded His empire upon love; and to this very day millions would die for Him."

As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. so often observed, the greatest and most enduring power is not the kind that grants a benefit to one and not the other, but a power that eventually lifts everyone up who lives in its light. That's why the passage from Ephesians 5 begins as it does -- with an encouragement to both husbands and wives. It reads: **"Submit to one another, out of reverence for Christ."** Then, just in case we missed his point, Paul gets very specific and personal.

"Wives," he says, **"submit to your husbands,"** just as if it was Christ you were serving, **"for the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is head of the Church."** Let me add, parenthetically, that the Greek word translated here as "head" has been the source of some confusion. When we hear the word "head," we naturally think it means "higher authority" as in "head of the department" or "head honcho." Yet when the ancient Greeks and the New Testament writers wanted to speak of headship in that sense they virtually always used the word "archon" -- as in "monarch." The word Paul uses here is not "archon"; it is "kephale." It too means "head," but as in the sense of the "Head of the Nile or the Amazon." Kephale suggests a "source."² In Ephesians 5:23, Paul is invoking the creation narrative from Genesis 2 that tells us that

woman's original source was man; she was created from his rib. In like fashion, says Paul, the Church's original source was Christ. Women, the point here is that you, like the whole Christian Church, depend for your existence upon a Source beyond yourself, and men are to be one of the major ways God mediates his grace to you.

Men, this places a significant responsibility upon us as well. Paul says: **"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her."** How does Christ love the church? Does he not listen patiently and perseveringly to the hopes and hurts of his Bride? Does he not sacrifice his comfort and privileges in order to meet the needs of his Bride? How does Christ's treatment of his Bride inform our treatment of our bride? How are we giving ourselves up for her? What does this all mean in practice? How are husbands and wives meant to submit to and serve one another? Let me close by suggesting just two practical ways.

Practice #1: Entrust Decision-Making to the Other

First, we serve by voluntarily entrusting the power of decision-making to the other.

That is always the way genuine Love works. **"Behold, I stand at the door and knock,"** says Jesus in Revelation 3:20, "but it is your decision to open the door." God's way is often to trust his beloved with power to decide even critical matters. And if God does that with you and me, it can't be that much of a stretch for us to do that with our spouses. Let me dare to venture an illustration from my own marriage. Our marriage is a pretty traditional one. I make all the *really* important decisions in our house -- like determining what America ought to do in Iraq and who should be appointed to the Supreme Court. I leave to Amy the *less* important stuff -- like where we're going to live and how many children we should have. As, I said, it's very clear who's in charge!

Kidding aside, one of the common denominators I see in successful Christian marriages is the willingness of each partner to voluntarily give up to the other particular arenas of authority. Such couples seem to have identified specific areas where the other person perhaps has a giftedness the other lacks in the same measure. I'd like to say that the division of gifts was always predictable -- that women are always the more nurturing, and men always the better breadwinners. It sure would be a whole lot simpler that way. More often than not, however, the division is arrived at by experience and negotiation, sometimes changing by agreement as the years go by.

This doesn't mean that a couple doesn't still talk many issues through together. What it means is that there are certain arenas -- say finances or household rules -- in which the husband or the wife are given the tie-breaking vote. What is so impressive to me is what happens when one partner offers the other person that sort of trust. As Paul says in the great 13th chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians: **"Love does not insist upon its own way."**³ But when one partner loves the other in such a trusting manner, it is remarkable how readily the other partner seeks to listen to and

incorporate the other's concerns into his or her decision-making. Is that something you and I could be practicing in our relationships more fully?

Practice #2: Give the Other What They Need Most

There is also a second practical way we can serve -- one suggested explicitly in our text for today. We reverence Christ and serve our partner best when we affirm the other at his or her deepest point of need. And what is that point? I am always a bit wary of making generalizations, but because the Apostle Paul dares to, let me simply try and expand on his words. We find his counsel at the close of the passage. "Husbands," Paul says first, "**each of you must love his wife as he loves himself.**"

It may seem to go without saying, but in order to be freed up to be all that God wants them to be, women need to be loved by their husbands. What I mean is that they need to have their essential worth affirmed. Men, I know it seems like they can read our minds half the time, but as counter-intuitive as it may sound, we can't just expect our wives to know that we love them. I'm reminded of the elderly couple who sought the help of a marriage counselor. "Sven," the counselor says, "I'm hearing that Inge is longing to have you tell her that you love her." "But I told her that I loved her on the day we got married and that stands until I revoke it!? That may be, but is it enough? Again and again I have been told by women how much they wish their husbands would express their love for them more a bit more explicitly, even if they feel it inside.

In his wonderful book, *The Five Love Languages*, Gary Chapman says that people tend to recognize love in five different ways. Some of us feel loved through spoken words of affirmation. Some of us through the spending of quality time. Others of us by receiving tangible gifts. Still others through acts of service. And others of through physical touch. Fellow husbands, do we know what our wife's love language is? Are we speaking it?

And women, what is it that your men need? The Apostle Paul puts it this way in Ephesians 5:33: "**A wife must respect her husband.**" Speaking now from the inside track, all I can say is that more than we usually know how to tell you, we need your affirmation of our essential capability and competence. The reason a lot of us are so driven at work or in athletics is because we are still working to establish that reality. We put on a confident "game face" as best we can. We pretend we have it all together. But deep inside many of us is this voice that says: "You're not good enough. Prove yourself again today." I can't find the words to describe how it steadies me when my wife names the talents she sees in me and tells me how much she admires them. I don't let on most of the time, but her opinion of me and my efforts counts more than all the other affirmations I receive combined. Wives, you can mediate the assurance of God to your husband in a way that sets him free to stop striving so obsessively for position and worth. Use this power.

Men and women, **“submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”** In practical terms, husbands, love your wives. Wives, respect your husbands. For in so serving, you will *release the power of God* in your marriage -- a power for healing and wholeness, for renewal and resurrection, the likes of which you may be only beginning to discover.

Let us pray...

Gracious God, you have given to many of us an imperfect helpmate perfectly designed to be our companion in life. On this journey we share together, keep us from being blind to the gift that shares our home, or to the specific ways that we can express our love and respect for her or him. We know that you have a compassion and plan for those of us who are single, divorced, or widowed as well. Rally around us the sort of supportive men and women who can mediate your powerful grace in fresh and in-filling ways. Then grant, O God, that through our daily service to one another, we might also bring joy and glory to you who through the mystery maleness and femaleness continue to reveal your power. For this we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.

¹ Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:5-6; Ephesians 5:31

² Henry George Liddell, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996)

³ 1 Corinthians 13:5 (NRSV)