

What You Should Know About Courtship, Marriage, and the Family



by J. W. Jepson, D.Min.

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CHAPTER ONE

WHY MARRIAGE, AND WHERE DID IT COME FROM?

You are driving down a major freeway. Traffic is heavy. Weather conditions make the going difficult. Now and then you go by a vehicle that left the pavement and ended up off the shoulder or in the median strip. Most are damaged. Some appear to be a total loss.

"I wonder how many people have been hurt in these accidents," you say to yourself, half aloud.

A few miles later things really start getting wild. Wrecked cars are everywhere. You watch in disbelief as drivers leave their lanes, veer off the roadway, and crash. Some even jump the concrete dividers and land on the other side.

Wounded, hurting people--men, women, and children--stagger around, dazed and crying.

"This is bizarre!" you gasp. "Are these people crazy? ignorant? reckless? They can't break the laws of nature like this and get by! Why don't they use common sense and follow the rules?"

Of course, this scenario is obviously surrealistic. It is obvious because we assume that practically everyone knows the basic physical laws that are involved and are careful to obey them. When it comes to driving, they are embodied in what is called "the basic rule."

One wishes that more people would also know and obey the basic *moral* laws that govern human conduct. Many fail to understand that, just as there are physical laws govern physical action, there are also moral laws that govern moral action.

Just as physical laws come out of the nature of physical reality, so also moral laws come out of the nature of moral reality. Moral laws derive from the nature and relationships of moral beings--human beings.

These universal moral laws are embodied in the Bible. The Bible is in total, complete, and precise harmony with objective reality. It fits the nature of things perfectly. For this reason it is directly and vitally relevant to all of life. It is the completely reliable instruction manual of life.

Any and every deviation from the Bible is a deviation from objective reality. It is a deviation from nature and nature's God. For this reason every social problem that is the result of human behavior can be traced back eventually to a violation of Biblical principles and/or a deviation from Biblical norms.

Just as in our imaginary freeway scene we saw the tragic results of violating basic physical laws, so also in real life we witness the tragic results of violating basic moral laws. The wreckage of broken lives and broken relationships is strewn along the roadways of life. Everywhere wounded, hurting people stumble around in confusion, crying in pain. If only they would live God's way, the way they were created to live! Our hearts go out to them. We try to inform them, but most either do not hear or do not listen.

People who live by the Bible are living right, and are enjoying the blessings and benefits. People who live contrary to the Bible are not living right, and are suffering the unavoidable consequences.

Nowhere is this demonstrated more vividly than in the relationships between the sexes. God made us male and female (Genesis 1:27), a fact that certainly fits objective reality!

THE ORIGIN OF MARRIAGE

God looked at everything He created and saw that it was very good (Genesis 1:31). Then He saw Adam all by himself and said, "That is not good" (Genesis 2:18).

So, "The LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh instead in its place. Then the rib which the LORD God had taken from man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man" (Genesis 2:21, 22).

The word woman means man-kind (man-ness), taken out of man. That was the only time that a woman came from a man. Since then men have come from women.

Jesus Christ rose from the dead, proving that what He said is the truth. And He stated clearly that Adam and Eve were real, historical persons (Matthew 19:4).

We did not come from a blob of goo out of some primordial stew. God created us in His likeness and according to His likeness (Genesis 1:26, 27). We all descended from one man and one woman--one human pair.

When God created Eve, He created her out of Adam's side--not out of his head to dominate him, not out of his feet to be subjugated by him, but out of his side as his equal as a human being.

We see, then, that it was God Himself who created marriage. This deep relationship, this lifetime unity of one man and one woman, is not a human invention. It is not a product of human social development. Marriage is God's idea. God created it, and He owns it. Marriage is God's property.

God takes marriage very seriously. Many people play and trifle with it. God does not. He has placed some of the most solemn sanctions around this relationship to protect it.

We enter into this holy relationship. We live and function within it. We grow personally and as a couple in its disciplines. We enjoy its benefits. But we do not own it. It is God's.

Marriage is a temporal, earthly relationship. There will be no marriage in Heaven. But it is vital here on earth. God created it to function for us here in this world.

This is not to say that everybody has to be married. Many are single by choice, many not by choice. For certain reasons the apostle Paul was single. Although single ministries have their place, our purpose here is to affirm marriage.

God has revealed to us the nature of marriage and the way it operates. He set its rules and established its boundaries. We cannot do whatever we wish with our marriages, because our marriages do not belong to us. Your marriage belongs to God. If it is going to work, you must conduct it by God's rules. You must live it the way God has prescribed.

Because God created marriage for the entire human race, He has a stake in your marriage and we have a stake in each other's marriages. Our marriages are not entirely our own private affair. Whether or not your marriage succeeds is everybody's business.

Marriages are the building-blocks of society. Take a block here and there out of a wall, and the wall is weakened. Take out enough blocks, and the wall collapses.

We are not a collection of independent, isolated individuals. What one does affects others, sometimes many others. What happens in one marriage affects other marriages. It affects the whole fabric of marriage and thus the whole fabric of society. For this reason God has a vital interest in your marriage. He is *for* your marriage; He is committed *to* your marriage; and He has provided all the resources needed to make your marriage succeed.

We must be careful to avoid non-biblical notions and advice about marriage. "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly" (Psalm 1:1). Beware of such "quicksand counsel." It has wrecked many a marriage. We must go to God's word instead and learn there how to live our marriages.

The word of God declares that marriage is honorable in all (Hebrews 13:4).

"But I didn't want my daughter to marry that guy!"

Maybe not. But they are married. Honor that marriage. Do not try to undermine it

or break it up.

Some people say, "I think I married out of the will of God." Even if you did, it is now the will of God for you to stay married. It would be wrong to look somewhere else for the "right person."

THE PURPOSE OF MARRIAGE

God created marriage to establish the basic structure of society--the family--and in that basic structure to develop and perpetuate humanity physically, intellectually, emotionally, socially, and above all spiritually.

"Then God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply'" (Genesis 1:28). We certainly have accomplished that purpose!

Malachi 2:15 says that one important reason for marriage is to produce godly offspring.

God intends that children be raised within a family, as He has defined the term in His word. As we all know, many children are being raised by a single parent. These are also families, but they are incomplete families, "handicapped" families, as any struggling single parent knows all too well. We need to pray for and support these fragmented families. They are not God's norm. And they certainly are not the "complete" families idealized in the media. To picture a single parent as a liberated person in a "whole" situation mocks reality.

Some years ago a bright young fellow about 12 years of age was being interviewed on television.

"I don't belong to my parents; I belong to myself!" he asserted with an arrogant air.

That young lad probably did not come up with that profound idea by himself. It had been put into his head by a secular society and he bought it without mature, critical thinking.

Children do not belong to themselves. They do not belong to the state. They belong to God and He has placed them under parents for godly training.

"Therefore I desire that the younger widows marry, bear children, manage the house, give no opportunity to the adversary to speak reproachfully" (1 Timothy 5:14).

Although children are to be raised and nurtured within the family and surrounded by the strong bond of marriage, we must avoid the mistake of basing marriage on our children. Children are only temporary members of the home. Marriage is a lifetime bond. Some couples stay together only "for the sake of the children," and doing so is

commendable. But it is far from what God intended marriage to be. When children realize that they are the only "glue" holding the marriage and home together, they carry a burden no child should have to bear. It makes them feel insecure, pulled in two.

Children should see their parents' relationship solid and unshakable. Then they will feel secure. They realize that they live in a framework that is stronger than they are.

Also, God created marriage as a safeguard against immorality (1 Corinthians 7:2). To avoid fornication, every man is to have his own wife and every wife is to have her own husband. "To each his/her own."

We go again to Malachi 2:15. "Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth."

Often adultery does not start with the flesh. It starts in the human spirit. Marital problems develop deep down. Feelings go unexpressed. Problems go unresolved. The oneness of couplehood erodes. So the guy goes off to work miffed, harboring strange and pained feelings. On the job he works for eight hours beside some pretty little thing. He begins to tell her his problems and feelings.

With sympathetic eyes and a tender voice she responds, "I understand."

What is happening? He might not even care how pretty she is; however, something is happening in his spirit. An emotional attraction is developing. We all know the rest of the story.

We are not to throw our affections and passions around, but to give them exclusively to our spouse.

Another reason God created marriage is to provide completeness, total and intimate companionship, and mutual help. There are two words in the King James Version of Genesis 2:18 that have become part of our vocabulary as one word. "I will make him an help meet for him." We call this a "helpmeet." It means "corresponding, comparable, suitable." I will make him a helper who is of his exact kind and therefore suitable for him. It is like two halves that are designed to fit together. One half is not complete without the other.

Both spouses are not the same. If both were strong on the same points and weak on the same points, they would neither complement each other nor complete each other. God made you and your spouse to fit each other.

God looked at Adam and said in effect, "Man, you are incomplete. Something is missing." So God made this girl, Eve, to complete what was incomplete in Adam's life. God knew exactly how to make her, and she moved right in and filled the vacancies in Adam's life.

That is the way God intends it to be--not two individuals competing on similar strong points. Marriage is a duet, not a duel.

Another very important reason for marriage is to bring a man and a woman together in a permanent, total relationship that demands and also provides the greatest possible opportunity for the development, expression, and fulfillment of love in all of its qualities.

You know what happened when that girl married you. She got into everything! She rearranged your life. Now, God created the relationship, and the only way it is going to work properly is for you to surrender yourselves to each other and for both of you to surrender yourselves to God.

That is the last thing we are willing to do. "Me? Surrender myself? I'm the master of my fate. I'm the captain of my soul! No, I want to live to please ME, and I want YOU to live to please me."

Pity the poor person who marries someone like that. The only way they can coexist is to balance their selfish interests and involve themselves in pursuits that provide mutual self-gratification. But that is a poor substitute for real love.

And real love is what many are afraid of. Love is not get; love is give. Love is not "what can you do for me?" or, "how can you please me?" Love is a commitment to someone else's well-being and happiness.

I once saw a cartoon that showed a man and woman in a boat riding into a tunnel called, "Tunnel Of Love." The man had his arm around her and a big smile on his face. Next, the cartoon showed them about to enter another tunnel called, "Tunnel Of Commitment." The man looked terrified and was about to jump out of the boat.

Someone has said, "Sex says, 'anybody will do'. Love says, 'nobody else will do'." There is a world of difference between the two.

So God provided the beautiful relationship called marriage, the best opportunity for the development and expression of love, total surrender to God and to each other under God, where each lives for the other and both live for God, where we have to subordinate our own ways and our own desires, and put the other person's greater interests ahead of our own lesser interests.

Marriage is not kid stuff. It is a grown-up affair. It is for adults only. It is a relationship that forces us to discipline ourselves and grow up. It demands adulthood, maturity, and self-giving.

Swallow your pride. Take responsibility. Bring those feelings under control. Someone else's higher interests are at stake.

This is the only way we grow as a person. We grow in relationship, not in isolation.

Our spouse is a primary agent under God in our growth and development. We are not "married singles," pursuing our own personal self-gratification and so-called "self-fulfillment." We are couples, and God tells us to work on our coupleness, to move forward together in the oneness He created for us.

CHAPTER TWO

COURTSHIP: THE SELECTION PROCESS

According to the words of a song that was popular in an earlier generation, "it's an old, old story of a boy and a girl in love."

It certainly is. Somewhere in our biological and psychological development we move from childhood into adolescence. This process includes what is known as puberty.

The story is told of a boy who was giving a patriotic recitation that included Patrick Henry's famous line. Raising his voice at the dramatic moment he exclaimed, "Give me puberty, or give me death!"

The awakening does not usually come on with such urgency. Normally a boy begins to look differently at what were once those little freckle-faced nuisances in pigtails. They are growing up. He experiences strange new feelings and warm fuzzies.

Although it happens to young people at different ages, it does happen. You begin to make eyes. A casual touch triggers a sensation. Something is going on inside of you. You feel awkward. You don't know exactly what to do or what to say. Whenever you open your mouth, you think you put your foot into it. You want to make a good impression, but you blow it.

Welcome to the human race!

Our culture has created this period of development we call adolescence. Most young people become sexually awake and aware years before they are ready for marriage. This delay produces stress and tension.

This is not to advocate young marriages (and it is certainly not a justification for premarital sex). Our complex society places heavy demands on us. Adulthood is serious business. Marriage and all that goes with it requires maturity. It is for adults only.

In some societies marriages are arranged by others, usually parents. The couple might or might not have something to say in the matter. In those societies people are expected to love the person they marry. By contrast, in our western culture we marry the person we love, with the intent of continuing to love. This creates what we call courtship.

Through the teenage years boys and girls develop in the way they relate to each other. In the healthiest process the progress is from the general to the specific. It is a narrowing process, a selective process.

It is much healthier if adolescents avoid getting locked into exclusive, emotionally intense "boy-friend/girl-friend" relationships, where they go through painful "break-up/make-up" cycles. You know the story. Here is this fifteen year old girl, sobbing her heart out. She just broke up with her boyfriend. Her world is shattered. Her life is over.

This premature boy-friend/girl-friend idea is promoted by the secular media. You have to have a boy-friend. If you don't, you're not "in."

"How are you and your boyfriend doing?" Well, who cares? Have lots of friends. Develop many healthy acquaintances and friendships. Then, as time goes by you can narrow the field through a prayerful, intelligent process. As you mature, you will have a much better idea of who you are and who they are. The person you marry might not even be among the people you knew at fifteen or sixteen. You might meet him or her in another community, in college, or even after college.

Meaningful dating usually begins about middle to late teens. As the selection process narrows, dating eventually leads to courtship; courtship leads to engagement; engagement leads to marriage.

Yes, dating is a lot of fun. It is also part of a process that leads eventually to some very serious results. For that reason it should not be played with. The ultimate purpose of dating is to "zero in" on that one person you want to spend the rest of your life with. Remember, some day you will marry someone you are or will be dating. This makes courtship an exciting experience, filled with hope and anticipation, tempered with a healthy element of uncertainty.

The most important ingredient in courtship is spiritual. A person who loves and obeys God is committed to knowing and doing His will. Such a person will be very prayerful and thoughtful in dating and courtship.

God is interested in your dating and your courtship. He wants you to have His best. So don't miss it. In all of your dating let your ultimate purpose be to lock on to God's will for your life. If you want to marry in the will of God, marry according to the Bible.

God requires that Christians marry only Christians. How wonderful it would be if all Christians had enough sense to marry Christians. It would be better to remain single than to marry an unsaved person.

It is essential not to let one's heart run away with one's head. Courtship must be intellectual before it becomes emotional. Infatuation is fun, but it is not a form of recreation. Infatuation without deliberation can lead to devastation. "Puppy love" can put you into "the dog house" and lead to "a dog's life."

The Bible tells us about Samson and his impulsiveness. He saw this Philistine girl and immediately demanded of his parents, "Get her for me, for she pleases me well" (Judges 14:3). Such impulsiveness got him into a lot of trouble.

In dating intelligently, you narrow the scope of your interests and relationships as you apply the qualifications and standards that you have established. You get a clearer picture of what that special "somebody" is like. This involves a spiritual and intellectual evaluation in a prayerful attitude.

The most important element of courtship is spiritual. "He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor from the Lord" (Proverbs 18:22). "A prudent wife is from the Lord" (Proverbs 19:14).

The awareness of this fact guides us in the selection process. "Going steady," then, is not an emotional or social fad. It is an intelligent part of the process that leads eventually to engagement and marriage. Along the way we decide where we are going and who is going with us.

We learn that it is important not only to find the right person but also to *be* the right person, to prepare ourselves so we can bring to the one we will marry a person of the highest Christian standards and qualities.

Accordingly, in dating and courtship it is essential to establish and maintain the highest standards of purity and mutual respect. A young man once said to his pastor, "I don't know how to act around a girl on a date. How do I treat her?" The pastor replied, "Treat her the way you would want other young men to treat your sister."

Most girls want to be respected. Your date is not your property. She is not your toy. Let her know by your words and actions that you think more of her than that. A kiss means a lot more than just "thanks for the hamburger and fries." The Bible instructs men to treat younger women as sisters "with all purity" (1 Timothy 5:2).

Young lady, if that young man does not treat you with respect, eliminate him from your ever-narrowing list. If he does not respect you before marriage, he will likely not respect you during marriage. Avoid the person who wants to get too physical.

We infer the principles of pre-marriage (dating and courtship) from what the Bible says about marriage itself, about who we are as human beings, and about personal relationships in general (love one another; be kind to one another; pray for one another; bear one another's burdens; build up one another).

The sacredness of marriage sets the standards of pre-marriage. If there is to be mutual respect in marriage, it must be established here. The quality of the marriage you want should determine the quality of your courtship.

Physical desire must not be the driving force in courtship. The Bible says, "Each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God" (1 Thessalonians 4:4, 5).

"Possess" here means "acquire." "Vessel" is a word used in The Scriptures to mean a spouse. It denotes our useful purpose under God. So what this passage is saying is that each person is to acquire his/her spouse "in sanctification and honor," and not in the passion of lust.

Christians are not to court the way the unconverted world does. The world puts the flesh first; believers put the flesh last. We follow the highest standards and keep our natural desires under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Even when you begin to go steady with the one person who has captivated your heart, the one you want to spend the rest of your life with, remember to keep the highest Biblical standards in your relationship. If you do that, you will come to the altar as pure virgins before God. You will be thankful that you waited.

Sex is one of the most powerful drives that God created. He created it for a specific place--marriage. Sex is like fire--delightful in the right place, but destructive elsewhere. Because God created marriage, He set the rules. The only "safe sex" is "saved sex"--sex saved for marriage. Sex is safe only in monogamous, heterosexual marriage.

"Learn about sex between your *ears* before you learn about sex between your *legs*."

Sex outside of marriage is a lie. It says something to the other person that cannot be true because the absence of the marriage vows and marriage bond proves it to be untrue. It says, "I am going all the way with you." That is not true until each says to the other, "I take you to be my wedded wife (or husband), to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, 'til death do us part," and those moral and legal vows are established in Heaven and on earth. *That* and that alone is truly "going all the way." Then when they take each other and bond as one flesh, they are really telling each other the truth.

If they get into a car wreck two weeks later and one of them is in a wheelchair for life, the other says, "I'm not walking away from you. It's you and I all the way, baby."

Before then, the man and woman might claim they are going to get married. But they haven't, not yet. The moral and legal bond of marriage is not yet in place before God and man, and before it is, total self-giving has not been established, and sexual activity is an immoral violation of human sexuality. Also, the seeds of mistrust are sown. After marriage, the wife has reason to ask herself, "If he didn't control himself before we got married, I wonder if he is controlling himself now around other women?"

ENGAGEMENT

Engagement is a serious commitment. It is not a blind gamble or the result of the impulse of a moment. A foundation has been laid. You have matured personally. Over a period of time your relationship has matured spiritually, intellectually, and emotionally.

Engagement is a commitment, and you are ready to make that commitment.

Engagement is not marriage, of course, and it does not include the privileges and rewards of marriage. Instead, it is a promise made to each other and announced to everyone else. It sets the couple on a deliberate and direct course toward marriage.

The development of your coupleness should continue during the engagement period, as indeed it should throughout marriage itself. You know each other well enough to make a life-long commitment to each other. But no matter how well you know each other before marriage, you will have some surprises once you marry!

Courtship begins the blending of a man and a woman in vital relationship. Two people in love will change each other, unless one (or both) is an immature, spoiled brat.

"This is the way I am, and I'm not going to change! You will just have to accept me the way I am." That is immaturity. That is a kid talking. Courtship for people like that is not a time of discovery; it is a time of hiding. For them, love is blind but marriage is going to be a real eye-opener!

A mutual willingness to change--to blend--is a sign of maturity. You have not allowed your emotions to run away with you. You have learned to relate to each other on every level as human beings and as Christian adults. You can look back on your courtship with the knowledge that you built on the solid foundation of trust, integrity, and mutual respect. You honored God and obeyed His word. Christ is the Lord of your lives and your relationship. You expressed proper emotional and physical affection. You proved to yourselves and to each other that you are self-disciplined.

You are now ready for marriage.

CHAPTER THREE

THE WEDDING

"What's a piece of paper?"

The question is tossed around flippantly by couples who choose to cohabit outside of marriage.

Here is another question: *If that "piece of paper" doesn't mean anything, why are some people so afraid of it?*

God loves weddings. He personally conducted the first one, thereby establishing the divine precedent and pattern. When Adam saw Eve for the first time, he did not say, "Give me back my rib!" No, indeed. Instead, he exclaimed, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Genesis 2:23). That was his way of saying, "Where have you been all my life, baby?"

Adam had seen all the animals with their mates, and perhaps began to wonder where his own "other half" might be. Now there she was and he felt complete.

Jesus was fond of weddings. He was there in the beginning and participated with the Father in the establishing of marriage. He liked to talk about marriage. He likened His future return to a wedding. The Church is His Bride. There is going to be a marriage supper. Our Lord selected a wedding as the occasion for His first miracle. Yes, there is something special about a Christian wedding--Jesus is there.

In primitive cultures and cultures that are regressing to more primitive standards and structures, the wedding is not as significant as it is in more enlightened societies. In some cultures the wedding itself might be virtually non-existent. Nevertheless, marriage does exist in those cultures and is recognized by those cultures, whatever form it takes. The structure and essential obligations are there. It is marriage and is recognized such by God and man. "Marriage is honorable in all" (Hebrews 13:4).

More enlightened cultures attach higher significance to the wedding, in view of the importance of marriage itself.

One purpose of the wedding is to provide an occasion to declare before God and man that the couple are entering into the marriage relationship by mutual consent. There is no coercion, no "club-over-the-shoulder, dragging-them-in-by-the-hair." Rebekah was asked concerning Isaac: "Will you go with this man?" She replied, "I will go." (Genesis 24:57, 58).

Also, the wedding is the time and place where the couple actually take each other in marriage and declare before God and also before established human authority the

moral and legal commitment without which marriage does not exist.

A wedding demonstrates that the couple mean business. They prove their love by surrounding each other with the moral and legal protection of the marriage bond. Yes, there is a piece of paper; that piece of paper has God's endorsement and He backs it up with all the authority of Heaven. God put marriage into human society and holds society responsible to uphold it. It is a sacred covenant recorded on earth as well as in Heaven (Malachi 2:14). The vows they take have no expiration date except the one that will be placed some day on a death certificate.

They are for life.

Anything less than that is not worthy of us as human beings. Anything less is not worthy of the Creator. Only God could create something that holy, that sacred, that bonding and indissoluble.

And He did it for our good, not to put a ball and chain around our necks but to hold us to the very principles necessary for our happiness.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE NATURE OF MARRIAGE

The wedding is followed by an important period of patient adjustment. No matter how well a man and woman know each other before marriage, they will make some discoveries afterward. They come to realize that love is no longer the process of courting; it is the heart-beat of living. These adjustments must be made patiently and prayerfully.

God created marriage to establish the basic structure of society within which to perpetuate and develop humanity physically, intellectually, socially, and above all spiritually. He has provided that through the Christian home truth and holiness shall continue from generation to generation.

Children are not the property of the state to be raised by the government. God has made them the responsibility of parents, to be nurtured by parents as part of that fellowship of love called the family. Grandparents and other adult relatives should enrich this nurturing process. It takes more than a village to raise a child. Above all it takes a godly family.

In all of this we must keep in mind that marriage is not built on children. Under normal circumstances children are temporary members of the home. Marriage is a couple relationship built by God. Children who are raised under that strong couple bond are blessed indeed.

God created marriage also as a primary human relationship to provide companionship and completion. "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him" (Genesis 2:18 NIV).

We live in a world of secondary relationships. Secondary relationships are transient. They exist in a particular function. You know someone as a doctor, a dentist, a postal worker, a store clerk. Secondary relationships put little demand on us. We walk away from them after the immediate transaction is complete. They are easily terminated. Secondary relationships are incomplete.

God created marriage as the closest possible primary relationship between two human beings, closer even than parent and child. It is a total soul-bonding that provides the man and woman with the greatest opportunity for the on-going development, fulfillment, and expression of love in all of its beautiful qualities. This is so because love is give, not get.

Marriage is not kid stuff. It is for adults only. It demands maturity, discipline, and mutual giving. It is easy to be patient, kind, longsuffering, forbearing, and gentle if you are all by yourself. Marriage changes all that. Marriage does not lessen or destroy

one's *individuality*, but it does put an end to one's *autonomy*. Each has made a full commitment to the other. Each has taken responsibility for the other's well-being. They have merged into each other's lives. They are now a team. This requires them to get along. They must learn to be patient, kind, longsuffering, forbearing, and gentle.

This calls for daily decisions. Some days you do not feel the warm fuzzies. At times you feel very disturbing emotions. Some mornings you might wake up and look over at (and perhaps smell) your sleeping spouse and go, "*Ugh!*" You don't ask yourself, "Do I *feel* married?" You reaffirm the basic fact that you *are* married and that love is a decision and not just a feeling. This makes marriage an ideal workshop for building maturity and Christian character. It is an orchard for growing and developing the fruit of the Spirit.

Jesus said a lot about marriage in a few words. "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate" (Matthew 19:4-6 NIV).

First, the Lord affirmed the determinative authority of The Scriptures ("Haven't you read?). Second, He affirmed that marriage is heterosexual and thus ruled out homosexual unions ("At the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female' ...a man will ...be united to his wife"). Third, He affirmed monogamy ("The two will become one flesh"). *It is reckless to assume that Jesus Christ was wrong, on this or any other subject.*

For a long period of time humanity lost God's original order for marriage. During that time of ignorance many men practiced bigamy and polygamy, including some of the greatest and godliest of the patriarchs. These men of God were living up to the light they had and therefore served God with an honest and sincere faith. Nevertheless, as the Biblical record shows, whether in rebellion against God or in honest ignorance, the unnatural practice produced trouble and heartache.

Jesus brought us back to God's original order, back to basics, back to what is right and wholesome.

Now that we know about genetics, we recognize why God included in the Mosaic jurisprudence a prohibition against marriages with close relatives. This prohibition also extended to marriages with certain others who had been family members but not "blood relatives," to prevent dishonor to those members of the family to whom they had been married (Leviticus 18:6).

The Scriptures teach that marriage is honorable in all (Hebrews 13:4). Some people say that they married the wrong person. Even if they did, they are still married, and they are to honor their marriage. They are married to the right person now because it is God's will for them to stay married.

Perhaps your son or daughter did not marry the "right" person. However that might be, they are married and that marriage is to be honored. Sometimes parents who do not approve of their son or daughter's marriage try to break up that marriage. It is wrong in the sight of God to try to break up someone's marriage because we do not approve of it. The marriage might have taken place in rebellion and disobedience. It might be a dysfunctional marriage in some ways. It is still a marriage, and as such God stands behind it. We should help that couple take what they have and build upon it.

Marriage is a solemn and sacred covenant. God refers to your wife, sir, as "your companion, the wife of your covenant" (Malachi 2:14). It is a covenant commitment not only to each other but also to marriage itself. Marriage is a covenant so sacred that it has been chosen to represent the holy and eternal covenant-bond that exists between Christ and His Bride, the Church (Ephesians 5:32).

We should discard some widely accepted clichés about marriage. "Marriage is a partnership." No. Marriage is a merger. "Marriage is a 50-50 proposition." No. Marriage is 100 percent both ways. "Marriage is a union." No. Marriage is a unity.

What is the difference between a union and a unity? The difference has been illustrated this way: you can take two cats, tie their tails together and sling them over a clothesline; you will have union, but you will not have unity!

Marriage is like two rivers that flow together to become one. It is like jumping out of an airplane with a parachute. You cannot climb back up. There is only one way to go, and it is all the way.

Marriage is for keeps. It is not something we jump into and out of. God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16). If we regard marriage as God does, we will hate divorce as He does. We need to eliminate the word "divorce" from our personal vocabulary. Like an amputation, divorce is a last resort. In fact, if people thought of divorce as an amputation and took it as seriously as they do an amputation, it would eliminate over ninety percent of all divorces! No matter how much your leg hurts you, it is still your leg and you will do almost anything to keep it.

"Doc, every time I take a step, my leg hurts. But it is *my* leg, and I'm going to keep it if at all possible. Do what you have to with that scalpel, *but leave that saw alone!*"

In marriage we become flesh of one flesh and bone of one bone, and we are not to be cut in two vertically any more than horizontally. Therefore, it is vitally important to know what one is doing before saying "I do" to the person one might be looking at across the breakfast table for the next fifty years.

DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE.

Divorce and remarriage has always been a subject of great importance and

discussion. It needs to be addressed as clearly and definitely as possible. Like every other subject, God's word on the matter is absolutely decisive. Too often when people make up their minds to do what they want to do, they will do it no matter what the Bible says. Nevertheless, what the word of God says makes all the difference. The Bible settles the matter.

In Deuteronomy 24:1-4 the Mosaic law laid down certain provisions concerning divorce and remarriage. Jesus explained that this was done because of the hardness of people's hearts (Matthew 19:8). In other words, because many would throw away their spouses, something had to be done to protect the victims of this evil practice. But the practice of divorce itself was in violation of God's established order.

Jesus Himself made clear in the Sermon on the Mount that divorce and remarriage during the lifetime of the former spouse is adultery, except for the cause of immorality (Matthew 5:31, 32. Also Matthew 19:3-9; Mark 10:2-12; Luke 16:18; Romans 7:2, 3).

In 1 Corinthians chapter 7 we find an inspired apostolic expansion on this subject. This passage should be read carefully and prayerfully. Paul is writing this passage by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit within the context of an unusual time. He refers to it as "the present distress." Nevertheless, its commands regarding how married couples are to relate to each other and also regarding divorce are definite, universal and timeless, and its principles regarding singleness apply in all contexts.

In verses 1 - 7 Paul affirms that God created marriage as a safeguard against immorality. Because there is so much sexual immorality in the world, "let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband" (1 Corinthians 7:2). He gives instructions to married couples regarding their sexual relationship, and he advises "engaged" couples on what to do depending on the strength of their sexual desires and their ability to exercise self-control.

In verses 10 and 11 the apostle says, "Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband. But even if she depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And the husband is not to divorce his wife." Not only does Paul himself give a command by the Spirit of God but He also refers to the words of Christ Himself. "A wife is not to depart from her husband." "The husband is not to divorce his wife." That is clear and definite. Do not walk away from your husband. Do not discard your wife. Then he says, "But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife" (verse 11). That is also clear and definite.

Concerning virgins, Paul had no specific command from Jesus' teachings; so Paul gave judgment on the subject "as one whom the Lord in His mercy has made trustworthy" (Verse 25). He went on to give his "inspired opinion" that it was best for singles to remain unmarried during "the present distress" (Verse 26). This instruction is still pertinent in times of distress.

In these verses the apostle is speaking to believers on the basis of God's established universal principles concerning marriage. Then he goes on to deal with the question of the unbelieving spouse.

"But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her" (Verse 12). The apostle Paul is not denying divine inspiration but merely saying that he has no direct statement of Jesus to refer to. In essence he is saying, "I am telling you something that Jesus did not talk about; so this is further revelation."

In verses 13 and 14 Paul says that if your husband is not a Christian, stay with him. By the grace of God your godly influence prevails over his negative spiritual influence and thus should secure the salvation of your children in spite of him.

Of course, no one should allow himself/herself to suffer domestic violence. Protect yourself and your children from it; nevertheless, do everything reasonably possible to solve the problem. Divorce should be only the very last resort.

"But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace" (verse 15). This means abandonment, and abandonment *usually* implies immorality, which is the only exception that Jesus gave for divorce. In other words, if there is unrepented adultery, the Christian is not under bondage in such cases. Adultery destroys the very integrity of a marriage.

Now, there are cases where people want to get rid of a husband or a wife; so they put their spouse in a position where they become vulnerable to adultery. Then when it happens they say, "Now I have Scriptural grounds to divorce and remarry!" That is wrong.

Another principle also applies--forgiveness. Even if there has been an act of unfaithfulness, if there is genuine repentance, we are to forgive and to restore if possible. By the grace of God many marriages have survived an adulterous relationship and been rebuilt because people have been willing to forgive. They were committed to the marriage and were not looking for an excuse to divorce their spouse.

Now, if you are among the many who have gone through a divorce and remarriage for a reason other than the exception that Jesus made, face the fact that you committed a sin. If you justify or excuse it, it becomes a cloud in your life. Confess it to God and acknowledge that it was wrong. Ask God to forgive you and accept His forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Then go on and live for Jesus. We deal with it like any other sin. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Then stay married to your present spouse. A divorce and remarriage is not corrected by another divorce. "Let each one remain in the same calling in which was

called" (verse 20).

Although its principles apply also to ritualistic circumcision (verses 18, 19) and servitude (verses 20 - 22), the primary subject of this chapter is marriage. Paul says in effect, "Wherever God finds you in your social relationships, stay there. Stay married and honor that marriage because marriage is honorable in all. God honors your marriage. When God forgave you of the sin of divorce and remarriage, He forgave the sin in its entirety. *That cleared all the subsequent relationships in that remarriage.* You can go on in freedom to live for God in your present marriage. "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

THE THREE LEVELS OF MARRIAGE

Leaving the issue of divorce and remarriage, we go on to consider the three levels of the unity of marriage--physical, intellectual, and spiritual.

The physical relationship is an important part of marriage, especially when it is an expression of real self-giving. Human sexuality is far different from mere animal sexuality. The common attempt to understand and explain human sexuality in terms of animal sexuality misses the truth completely and demeans our humanity.

Human sexuality is far more than a biological function. It is a God-given vehicle for the mutual self-giving of a husband and wife in the closest, most intimate physical relationship possible. In this relationship everything within the one person reaches out and embraces everything within the other. Each embraces the other as a total person. In this embrace each is saying to the other, "I give myself totally to you, and I accept your total self-giving to me."

As was affirmed earlier, this exclusive, mutual self-giving exists only when each has surrounded the other with the full commitment of the marriage bond. For that reason sex outside of marriage is a lie. It is saying something to each other that cannot be true because the absence of the marriage bond proves it to be untrue.

"Oh, but we plan to get married." Good. But you are not married--not yet. Wise up, girl, before you hear yourself tearfully repeating the seven last words--"but he told me he loved me"--and you feel like an empty paper cup and a crumpled napkin thrown into a garbage can.

Sex outside of marriage is a cheap exploitation and desecration of something beautiful and wonderful. It is immoral to take the rewards of marriage before accepting the full obligations and responsibilities imposed by the marriage vows. In the wrong place, fire is destructive. In the right place, it warms and cheers. So it is with sex. Keep it where God put it--in marriage--and keep the home fires burning!

Sex is one of the most powerful forces God created. That is why He placed it exclusively within the bounds of marriage. Sex is for marriage, but marriage is not just

for sex. Sex is a part--and only a part--of marriage. Love gives the physical relationship of marriage its highest, truest meaning and quality. Love combines the soul and spirit together with the body, putting the whole person--one's total humanity--into the act.

We refer again to 1 Corinthians chapter 7, verses 2 through 5. "Do not deprive one another" (verse 5). Never use sex as a tool to get what you want or a weapon to punish. It will damage your relationship. Remember, you said "yes" in your wedding vows. Let your self-giving be free and without merit. Do not freeze up on each other. If a problem or barrier exists in your relationship, identify it and resolve it. Dialogue it out. Get in touch with each other's feelings and open up to each other so your affections will flow as they are supposed to do.

Not only do we have sexual rights in marriage but also sexual obligations. Don't be a clumsy lover. Be gentle, considerate. Cultivate mutual sensitivity. If your wife seems "frigid," perhaps her sensibilities are like a delicate musical instrument. If you will learn their gentle artistry, they will respond with the sweet music of love.

Marriage is a unity also on the intellectual level. It is a uniting of goals, values, interests, ideas, experiences, emotions. It is a blending of minds; a sharing of feelings with mutual understanding and consideration; a selfless accommodation of personalities, social and economic life, and plain everyday living. Experiences, problems, decisions, resources, pleasures, sacrifices and rewards are to be shared freely and fully.

Love is a decision to seek someone else's well-being and happiness; a decision to be open, to communicate, to share feelings, to risk being vulnerable; a decision to get into the other person's world and let him or her into one's own, to find common ground and cultivate it; a decision to change, to become what you ought to be and are meant to be, to bring a better and kinder "you" to the relationship.

This requires us to avoid the "married singles" trap. Many couples left each other mentally long ago. They still live in the same house but pulled away into different worlds. They forgot to LIVE together. They neglected to communicate. And, yes, sometimes it is more important to communicate than it is to agree.

The highest unity in marriage is spiritual, that is, Christ-centered. A marriage that is not in unity on this level is missing its most important quality, its core ingredient. Many couples attempt to build their relationship on each other and their shared interests. "All we need is each other. If we have each other, we have everything."

No so. That is not the foundation. Christ is. Many couples have tried to build their marriage on each other--by combining and balancing mutual self-interest--only to have it fall apart. By definition, selfishness and self-centeredness polarizes people around themselves. Mutuality eventually gives way to individuality. We must build on something outside of ourselves, something bigger than ourselves, something bigger than our marriage itself.

This is why it is essential that Christians marry Christians. "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers" (2 Corinthians 6:14). This is not an excuse for a believer to leave an unsaved spouse (1 Corinthians 7:12, 13); rather it is the basic rule for the believer in choosing a spouse.

Trying to get something done with a team that is yoked and pulling in opposite directions is continuous frustration. Wedlock becomes deadlock. The Christian couple, on the other hand, is teamed together for God. They are living for each other, and both are living for God. *Because they love God most, they love each other more.* They know that a couple teamed and pulling together for the kingdom of God have more important things to do than fight and quarrel.

Marriage is like two sides of a mountain, with Christ at the top. As two people move toward Jesus, they move toward each other. When they meet Him, they find each other. If they drift away from Jesus, they drift away from each other. That is why it is vital to stay close to Him, because two people close to Jesus cannot be far from each other. Two people walking with Christ are walking together.

So if you sense a strain, a distance, in your marriage, get close to the Lord. More marriages have been healed and enriched in His presence than in all the counseling offices combined. Although there is a place for counseling, more problems are solved when a couple simply get down on their knees, surrender to God, get rid of their selfishness, ask forgiveness of God and each other, and let the love of Christ bind them together. A marriage built on the Rock will not go on the rocks.

Marriage comes with some built-in obligations. The most essential of all is love. In fact, love encompasses them all. Love is the root of them all. Love is the dynamic behind them all. They are all expressions and applications of love. They are all love in action.

Love is like a garden. It must be cultivated. What happens if a garden is neglected? It grows weeds. Weeds do not have to be planted or tended; they just grow and flourish by themselves. Misunderstanding, contention, anger, bitterness, resentment, suspicion, jealousy, self-pity, dishonesty--selfishness of all kinds. It takes diligence and determination to root these weeds out and keep them out. And one cannot wait until they go to seed. As soon as we see that ugly little weed begin to sprout, right then it must be dealt with. Pull it out, root and all."

"Be angry, and do not sin' [Psalm 4:4]: do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil" (Ephesians 4:26, 27). Do not stay upset all day, and never go to bed mad or with miffed or hurt feelings. Resolve it. If you do not, it will have a corrosive effect upon your relationship, even if you have pushed it to the back of your mind. If enough of these tiffs go unresolved, an emotional callous begins to form, and affection is replaced by indifference.

Come together. Hold hands. Hold each other in your arms. Be open with each other. Clear it up. Keep the deadlock out of wedlock. Be big enough, grown up enough, Christian enough, to say, "I'm sorry. I was wrong." And be humble enough and gracious enough to forgive. Do not bring it up again. That's an important part of a successful marriage.

Close each day with a hug and a kiss, and begin the next the same way. Even if your wife wakes up in the morning looking as if she just came through a hurricane, tell her you love her. Be generous to each other with those three little words, "I love you."

Everything the Bible says about inter-personal relationships--how believers are to treat one another--applies most directly and fully to the primary relationships of marriage and the family.

Love one another; pray for one another; to be kind to one another. Marriage and the family is where all of these expressions and applications of love must be lived out day by day. If they do not happen in the home, they will not happen in the church.

"Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you" (Ephesians 4:31. Also Colossians 3:8, 9).

Many marriages become dysfunctional because couples run from each other instead of confronting things together, coming out in the open, and taking the risk of being vulnerable, of being open and honest with each other even if it hurts.

When it is necessary to confront a problem in your marriage, be sure it is not in a hostile attitude. Remember, you are not fighting each other; you are fighting *for* each other, for your coupleness.

Faithfulness is absolutely essential in marriage. Adultery devastates a marriage. It destroys its very integrity. "You shall not commit adultery" is God's absolute law (Exodus 20:14). Under the Mosaic law, it was a capital crime (Leviticus 20:10). "Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge" (Hebrews 13:4). We must keep our heads clear and our hearts pure. We remember that Jesus said that even to look on a woman with lustful intent is adultery in the heart (Matthew 5:27, 28). Proverbs chapters five, six and seven contain a graphic picture of this deadly sin.

Another essential of marriage is steadfastness. Marriage cannot be an on-again, off-again arrangement. God said that a man is to *cleave* (be joined) to his wife. They are one flesh (Genesis 2:24).

No other bond is that close, except our bond to Christ Himself. Though they are close, even one's own father and mother are no longer one's next of kin. Not even our own children are as close to us as our spouse. Our husband or wife is number one

under Christ.

We must avoid the common tendency to build our marriage and our home on our children. As precious as they are, they are only temporary members of the home. If children become the "glue" that holds a marriage together, they feel insecure. Glue points are stress points. Then if the marriage fails, the children judge it to be their fault. In their minds it becomes their failure, a burden children should never carry.

On the other hand, when children know that dad's and mom's relationship is solid and non-negotiable, they feel safe and secure. Yes, stay together "for the sake of the children," but while you are doing so, work on building a more solid foundation under your marriage.

Beware of marital fatigue. It can happen after several years of marriage. Often it is the result of neglected love--just taking each other for granted. Sometimes it comes when the children are grown and gone--the empty nest. This is the time that your relationship needs special attention. Sons-in-law, daughters-in-law, and grandchildren are now part of life. The goal of raising a family has been reached, and career goals are making heavy demands. If there is no other goal, no higher aim, stress cracks develop within the marriage and endanger its quality and even its survival.

If the great, overriding aim of your lives and your marriage and your home continues to be to glorify and please God; if Christ is Lord of your lives and marriage; if your hearts and hands are joined together in service to Him, your marriage will move ahead, right on through to a deeper and fuller dimension, a depth that has been termed "love in the third degree."

Recognize God as the creator and sustainer of your home and His will as the guiding purpose of your marriage. Solve your problems on your knees in prayer. Find in Christ the spiritual unity that might now be missing in your lives and relationship. Then your love and your marriage will be indestructible.

CHAPTER FIVE

HUSBANDS AND WIVES

Many years ago a lady evangelist who was about thirty years old and single stood up behind the pulpit and announced the text of her sermon. It was from 1 Samuel 17:10, the words of Goliath as he challenged the armies of Israel: "give me a man, that we may fight together." We teenagers lost it. I don't remember a thing she said in her sermon, but her text has stayed with me ever since.

Of course, that is not what marriage is about. Christians are to show the world what marriage and family life ought to be by demonstrating the Biblical model in our daily living.

Our society is confused about the distinct roles of husbands and wives. It need not be, because the word of God is clear on the subject. As Jesus said, people err because they do not know the Scriptures nor the power of God (Matthew 22:29).

Although masculinity finds expression through the man, and femininity finds expression through the woman, the basic definition of each is deeper than sex or gender.

The basic definition of masculinity is "that which acts upon; that which provides." The basic definition of femininity is "that which receives the action and provision, processes and refines it, and gives it back." That is why God is called "our Father," and why we speak of the earth as "mother earth." God is the One who "acts upon." All of creation receives the action, processes it and gives it back. In this sense God is totally masculine and all of creation is feminine.

So it is in marriage. The masculine gives, provides. The feminine receives, processes, refines, and gives back. That is God's natural order.

So far as our basic humanity is concerned, husbands and wives are equal in essence, personhood, rights, and dignity. Nevertheless, there are some very distinct differences between men and women (as we very well know). Men do not bear half of the babies just for the sake of equality!

Men are superior to women--*at being men*. Women are superior to men--*at being women*. Misunderstanding has arisen because some people fail or refuse to recognize that just as God has assigned different biological roles to men and women, He has also assigned different organizational roles to husbands and wives, and has equipped them for those roles.

In any successful organization there must be an allocation of positions and responsibilities. Not everyone can be the President or CEO or General Manager. No

smooth running organization can have two heads. The same is true in marriage and the home because marriage and the home are an organized structure with God-given and God-equipped levels of authority and responsibility. It is a domestic unit with domestic government.

Suppose that three people form an equal business partnership. All three invest the same amount of money in the business. As partners they are equal. But when it comes to organizing the business, only one can be the President. Someone else can be the Office Manager, and someone else the Sales Manager, or whatever. But there can be only one CEO. There is governing authority in all institutions of society, including marriage and the family.

MEN

In the divine plan for the home, God has given the CEO position to the husband, the father. In effect God is saying to the man, "This is your responsibility. I framed you physically and psychologically for it. Do not run from it. Accept it and act like a man."

The husband is the head, but not the bull-head. He is the head, but not just because his wife says so.

When all is said and done; when the family consultations have been held; when everyone's interests and point of view have been properly considered and prioritized, and the issue at hand has been thoroughly discussed--there is one person in the home who cannot "pass the buck." It is up to him to render and announce the decision. That is the husband--the father. This is "servant headship."

There is a *man* in "demand," and there will always be a demand for good men. Sir, when you got married, that was the end of all that kid stuff. You are no longer mama's little boy. You are a man with a home of your own for which you are responsible. As a husband you are the ultimate human strength of your home, the point of human stability in times of trouble and difficulty. That is why you need the on-going strength of God's continuous presence in your life.

The apostle Paul said, "When I became a man, I put away childish things" (1 Corinthians 13:11). He did not say that childish things automatically left him. He put them away. It was a deliberate and permanent choice.

I agree with the conclusion that the biggest single cause of problems in marriage is immaturity in the husband. Many young men have never learned how to be a man, a husband, and a father. Often this is because their own fathers did not know how. So they follow whatever role models and examples they have. These are often very inadequate. Some try to be men by being rough, tough, domineering, and rude. In many cases they are verbally, emotionally, and even physically abusive.

Young men and boys need good training in how to be real men. A young man needs to learn how to treat a woman. The best place to start is in the home, learning how to treat his mother and sisters. Young lady, a good way to find out how that young man is going to treat you if you marry him is to watch how he treats his mother and his sisters.

The Bible has some specific and direct instructions for husbands and fathers. First Corinthians 11:3-12 teaches that there is a basic chain of command that starts with God the Father, goes through Jesus Christ the Son, to the husband, then to the wife, and then of course to the children. It establishes the fact that the family derives its existence and authority ultimately from God. If a family is experiencing rebellion in the lower levels of this chain of command, perhaps it is due to rebellion a step or two higher up the chain. The captain who refuses to obey the general has lost his authority to command the first lieutenant and the privates. Likewise, the man who refuses to obey God has undercut his authority with his wife and children. And the woman who refuses to obey God has undercut her authority with the children. But when everyone is honoring the Biblical chain of command under the fatherhood of God and the lordship of Christ, there is stability, peace, and harmony.

This passage also teaches the principle of coupleness and mutual dependency. "Neither was the man created for the woman, but the woman for the man" (verse 9). Here the word "for" is *dia*, and means "because of." God sees you and your spouse as a couple in the coupleness that He has established.

Men, verse seven says that your wife is your glory. How you treat your wife reflects on you. If you demean her, put her down, embarrass her, call her "the old lady," you are tearing yourself down. If you appreciate her, lift her up, validate and affirm her, it will reflect on you. How you treat your wife says more about you than it does about her.

When you meet a married lady who has dignity, grace, and poise, you automatically tend to form a high opinion of her husband. You assume that when you meet him, you will meet a gentleman. If she is like this, what must he be like? She is his glory. And even if he turns out to be a jerk, her qualities somehow tend to compensate somewhat for him. Her glory gives a measure of luster to his dullness.

If we husbands will elevate our wives and place them on a high level of honor, usually they will live up to it. They will tend to live up to the image we have of them and communicate to them, whether it be a high or a low image. So, if you will honor your wife, she will likely honor you.

A husband's greatest obligation to his wife is to love her. "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave himself for it" (Ephesians 5:25). "So husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself" (verse 28).

One of the best things a father can do for his children is to love--and marry--their

mother.

"Husbands, love your wives and do not be bitter toward them" (Colossians 3:19). Men, watch out for self-pity. It is one of your worst enemies. Stop feeling sorry for yourself. Shake off the "my wife doesn't understand me" complex. Remember that love is like a garden. If you want it to grow, you must keep the weeds out. You will keep that girl's affection the same way you won it--by kindness, consideration, manly strength, dignity, self-discipline, and your affection toward her.

God requires husbands to be faithful to their wives. "A husband is not to divorce his wife" (1 Corinthians 7:11).

"Likewise, you husbands, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered" (1 Peter 3:7).

Learning to live with one's wife in an understanding way requires thought and patience. Women are "wired" differently from men. When two men get into an argument, they "put it all out on the table," talk it through, shake hands, and then go have coffee. It's done--over.

That is not the way women do it. It is not over until she *feels* right about it. That is why many men get frustrated. The husband says, "But I *told* you I was sorry. Why do you keep bringing it up?" That is because he is thinking like a man. The issue is resolved logically and factually, but she is not *feeling* like it's over. He needs to take her in his arms and hold her until he hears the "kitten purring" again. That is part of living with his wife in an understanding way.

Malachi 2:14 - 16 speaks to men.

"...The Lord has been witness between you and the wife of your youth, with whom you have dealt treacherously; yet she is your companion and your wife by covenant. But did He not make them one, having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly offspring. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth. 'For the Lord God of Israel says that He hates divorce, for it covers one's garment with violence,' says the Lord of hosts. Therefore take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously."

Guard your spirit. Watch where you put your emotions. Don't throw them around. If we keep our eyes and thoughts at home, our feelings will stay at home.

As was stated earlier, more "affairs" begin in the human spirit than in the flesh. A guy goes to work feeling that his wife does not understand or appreciate him. Negative emotions grow. At work there is this pretty little thing. He begins to express his feelings to her. She listens sympathetically and assures him repeatedly, "I understand." We all

know the rest of the story. It did not begin in his physical desires. It began in his spirit.

Remember, sir, you are no longer a ladies' man. You gave your heart to one woman and took her as your wife. Proverbs 10:10 says, "He who winks with the eye causes trouble."

In Proverbs 5:15-21 the Bible has some plain talk to husbands (these are not Sunday School "memory verses" for children). Verse 18 says, "Rejoice with the wife of your youth."

In Ecclesiastes 9:9 we find the same admonition to live joyfully with our wives all of our lives. One man goes to work because it is an irksome chore he has to do. Another man goes to work happy that he can provide for his wife and family. What makes the difference? Love.

On the subject of providing for one's family, 1 Timothy 5:8 reads, "But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever."

Yes, there are times when a man has met with sickness, injury, or some other misfortune. There are times when a man willing and able to work just can't find something at the moment, or a business venture has gone bad. Such times require a lot of patience and understanding.

On the other hand, there are situations where an able-bodied man just has not grown up. He expects his wife to mother him while he "plays with the toys and the boys." That is not what God expects a husband and father to be.

A wife's security is her husband and her home. The man's responsibility is to provide. If she has to go to work to make ends meet, it should be only temporarily in order to get through the immediate need. If at all possible, a husband and wife should arrange their finances so she does not *have* to work. If she chooses to work or pursue a career, it should be optional and for reasons beyond providing the necessities of life.

No matter how hard a man works and how well he provides, he is not fully the head of his home nor living up to his full manhood unless and until he becomes the spiritual leader he should be. He should never expect his wife to be what God requires him to be. Obeying God is not just for women and children, any more than obeying the laws of the land is just for women and children. The husband is to take the lead in establishing and maintaining a godly home. He should lead the family in daily devotions. His children need to hear *him* pray. He will be a bigger man in their eyes.

God is looking for men who will stand up, look the world in the eye, and say as Joshua did, "As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD" (Joshua 24:15).

WOMEN

Proverbs 31:10-31 describes the virtuous woman. In conclusion it says, "Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised."

God has built into women certain innate qualities that equip them to be wives and mothers. They are nurturers. In the organizational structure of marriage and the home, God has assigned to the woman a subordinate role--not that of a slave to a master, not "chief cook and bottle washer," but Executive Vice President In Charge Of Domestic Affairs.

We will examine some of the main passages of scripture that speak to the subject. All of these passages make up God's formula for a happy marriage and a happy home.

First we go to Ephesians 5:21-24. "... submitting to one another in the fear of God. Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything."

More women have been brow-beaten by the mis-use of this passage from the Bible than perhaps by any other. That is not its purpose or message. It was given for true fulfillment. Often people begin at verse 22, "Wives submit yourselves to your own husbands." That is not the place to begin. The passage is prefaced in verse 21 by the principle of mutual submission in love. When each loves the other, cares for the other, considers the other, and subordinates his/her own desires for the greater good of the other, then in that attitude of mutual submission proper submission can function.

It is important to keep in mind that the word of God is speaking concerning marriage and the family. It does not say, "Women, submit yourselves to men." It says, "Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands." A wife might be the CEO of a multi-national corporation and her husband an unskilled laborer, but in their marriage and home he is the head--that is, if they want a truly happy marriage and a wholesome home life the way God designed it to be.

As a wife, you might be more talented and creative in some areas than your husband. God did not give you those giftings and allow you to develop those abilities so you could dominate your husband. God wants you to bring them to your marriage to strengthen it and to complement your husband. He might have strengths where you do not. If both of you were strong and weak in the same areas, you would not complement each other nor contribute to the completeness of your coupleness.

A wife should have no problem submitting (as the Church is subject to Christ) to a husband who loves her as Christ loves the Church.

Along with Ephesians we also read Colossians, because they are "twin epistles" and

parallel each other in many ways. Colossians 3:18 speaks to our present subject: "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as it is fitting in the Lord." Notice the phrase, "in the Lord." If your husband is not a Christian, submit to him so long as it does not include disobedience to God. If your husband puts pressure on you to disobey the Lord, then your obligation is to the higher authority in the chain of command--that is, to Christ. Wives are not to submit to their husbands if it means committing sin. The Bible gives us an example of the consequences of wrong submission in the tragic case of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11).

Both history and present experience are replete with shameful examples of men who have mismanaged and abused their God-given authority. Biblical Christians denounce that. We reject all male chauvinism as entirely contrary to the Biblical principle of mutual submission in love. The husband who loves his wife even as himself will not dominate her, demean her, enslave her, or abuse her.

The Scriptures lay down some practical instructions in Titus 2:3-5. "The older women likewise, that they be reverent in behavior, not slanderers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things--that they admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be blasphemed."

In the church the pastor is often the one who is expected to counsel the younger women. That is not the Biblical norm. Older, mature women in the church are the natural ones to fulfill this ministry. They have "been there, done that." Also, they do not have to counsel only out of their own experience and wisdom. Biblical passages such as the one in Titus provide definite goals and clear instructions. Biblical counseling is authoritative, correct and corrective.

More apostolic instruction to wives is found in the first epistle of Peter, chapter three, verses one through six.

"Likewise you wives, be submissive to your own husbands, that even if some do not obey the word, they, without the word, may be won by the conduct of their wives, when they observe your chaste conduct accompanied by fear. Do not let your beauty be that outward adorning of arranging the hair, of wearing gold, or of putting on of fine apparel; but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible ornament of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God. For in this manner, in former times, the holy women who trusted in God also adorned themselves, being submissive to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, whose daughters you are if you do good and are not afraid with any terror."

A woman does not have to be gaudy or glamorous to be gorgeous. Glamor is only skin deep, and gaudy doesn't go even that far. The inner beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit does not fade. In fact, it improves with age. That kind of beauty does not depend on one's physical features. At the same time, the inner discipline that produces a gentle

and quiet spirit should show itself also in the discipline of the body. Such a person will not be careless in his or her appearance. Sloppiness is not godliness. A person can use cosmetics modestly without depending for "beauty" on the excessive hair styles, clothes and jewelry censured in the Scriptures. Because the "roots" of a woman's hair go down deep into her soul, a trip to the beauty salon is uplifting to women of all ages regardless of how much hair they have.

The Bible says that a wife is not to be contentious. "The contentions of a wife are a continual dropping" (Proverbs 19:13). It is the middle of the night and you are trying to sleep, but all you hear is the steady, rhythmic "ker-plup . . . ker-plup" of dripping water. "Better to live on a corner of the roof than share a house with a quarrelsome wife" (Proverbs 21:9 NIV). Verse 19 continues, "Better to live in a desert than with a quarrelsome and ill-tempered wife." This does not provide grounds for separation or divorce. It merely compares the two situations from a subjective perspective.

Wives are commanded to be faithful and virtuous. The words of 1 Corinthians 7:10 should be in neon lights: "A wife is not to depart from her husband."

Proverbs 12:4 reads: "An excellent wife is the crown of her husband, but she who causes shame is like rottenness in his bones." Remember, the wife is the glory of her husband. A good wife will not brow-beat, nag, hen-peck, humiliate, or discourage her husband. On the contrary, her presence, her help, her virtue, her modesty, her poise, her counsel, her strength, her influence, will help him to reach his full potential.

"The wise woman builds her house, but with her own hands the foolish one tears hers down" (Proverbs 14:1 NIV). Many wives have literally torn their own homes apart. Wives are to manage their homes, not destroy them.

"So I counsel younger widows to marry, to have children, to manage their homes and to give the enemy no opportunity for slander" (1 Timothy 5:14 NIV).

Being a wife is a God-given opportunity for a woman to achieve fulfillment and to realize her full potential as a woman. It is also a challenging responsibility, and for that reason she must maintain her spiritual priorities and balance.

That is the lesson we learn from the story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42). Mary might not have been an immaculate, fussy housekeeper who insisted that every last item had to be in its place (and woe to the member of the family who messed it up!). But Mary made a value decision. Even though she might have had to let some things go for the moment, she chose to seize the opportunity to sit at the feet of Jesus and hear His word.

That is what will give you strength and balance. When you feel the pressure rising, everything is on overload and you are about to "blow a fuse," drop everything, get your Bible, get alone and spend some time with Jesus. And if you will do that first thing in the morning, the rest of the day will go much more smoothly.

CHAPTER SIX

THE FAMILY

As we begin this chapter on the family, we first lay a foundation in the following passages of Scripture.

"Children's children are the crown of old men, and the glory of children is their father" (Proverbs 17:6).

"Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6).

"Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 'Honor your father and mother,' which is the first commandment with promise: 'that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.' And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:1-4).

"Wives, submit to your own husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be bitter toward them. Children, obey your parents in all things, for this is well pleasing to the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged" (Colossians 3:18-21).

The family is the basic building block of the human social structure. The strength and integrity of the family is the strength and integrity of human society. To maintain and perpetuate the family, God has established it as an organized governmental unit, with proper levels of authority. The governmental unit of the family is directly and ultimately accountable to God Himself, not to the state. The state has a vital interest in supporting the institution of the family and providing a positive political and civil environment for it, including the enforcement of general law. When families do not obey the moral law as revealed in the Bible, the state steps in and exercises its jurisdiction under God as His agent and an extension of His moral rule (Romans 13). Nevertheless, the family is not a creation of the state. Its authority comes from God. It functions under God and is accountable to Him.

As we have seen from 1 Corinthians 11, the husband is the human head of the family. He in turn is directly accountable to Christ. To have authority we must be under authority. We can exercise only the authority that is delegated to us, and to which we ourselves submit and give our obedience. With delegated authority comes accountability. When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, God did not say, "Eve, where are you?" He said, "Adam, where are you?" The husband is the first person God holds accountable.

Of course, not all fathers and mothers exercise their God-given authority properly. But even when that is the case, children are to respect the positions their parents hold

and to obey so long as obedience to their parents would not violate moral and/or civil law. In so doing they are making a distinction between their parents' personalities and their positions.

God intends that the earthly father be a picture of the Heavenly Father, and the earthly mother be a picture of the Church. If that model is lived out in the home, children will grow up with a proper and positive view of both God and the Church.

To succeed as it should, the family must live in love, live according to 1 Corinthians 13. This includes mutual respect. Respect is a two-way street. We teach our children not to interrupt our conversations by not interrupting theirs. We teach them to be ladies and gentlemen by being ladies and gentlemen ourselves. We teach them to be courteous by being courteous to them. They have a right to expect us to be examples of wisdom, self-discipline, and maturity. They have a right to grow up in an atmosphere of love and a stable environment, where family government is exercised fairly and consistently, where father and mother honor each other and enforce the rules together. A child might get his or her way by playing off one parent against the other, but in the long run that child will be the loser in such a game. If parents disagree, they should work it out between themselves privately and not in front of the children. The children should know that the family government is an indivisible unit, where father backs up mother's word and mother backs up father's word.

Biblical discipline includes a spanking whenever it is needed. People who do not recognize the authority of the Scriptures object to this with a self-righteous air of ethical superiority. And when children enter into the state system, foster parents are specifically forbidden to spank them, an unfortunate rule that makes parental care more difficult and ultimately works against the well-being of the children. God's wisdom is always superior to man's.

We go to the Scriptures to see what it says about the physical discipline of children by parents.

"He who spares his rod hates his son. But he who loves him disciplines him promptly" (Proverbs 13:24).

"Discipline your son, for in that there is hope; do not be a willing party to his death" (Proverbs 19:18 NIV).

"Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of correction will drive it far from him" (Proverbs 22:15).

"Do not withhold correction from a child, for if you beat him with a rod, he will not die. You shall beat him with a rod, and deliver his soul from hell" (Proverbs 23:13, 14).

"The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother" (Proverbs 29:15). "Correct your son, and he will give you rest; yes he will give

delight to your soul" (Verse 17).

Physical discipline is also referred to in Hebrews 12:9-11.

Words have different connotations to different people. This is true of the words "beat," or "strike." To some it conjures up scenes of physical abuse. To others it suggests only a mild swat on the bottom. The Hebrew word, *nakah*, means "to strike," either lightly or heavily. It is wrong to assume that the word calls for harsh and abusive action.

Shame on the parent who acts like a tyrant, beating or yelling at a child just to gratify the passions of personal anger and rage. Children grow up to resent parents like that. On the other hand, when a child disobeys wise rules, that child deserves to be disciplined and he or she knows it. If the situation calls for it, that discipline will be in the form of a sensible paddling. And the child knows that if the rules of the home are worth respecting, that child will get that paddling. Be sure that your child understands that you are spanking him or her not because you are upset but because you love your child enough to enforce the rules that are established for his or her good.

When spanking, do not use your hand as the instrument. Hands are for healing and comfort. The Bible indicates that something else should be held in the hand. This should be something that will cause momentary pain but not bring trauma or injury to the body tissues.

Of course, never "box" a child's ears, throw the child around, or shake a child's head. These can cause serious and sometimes permanent injury.

Many parents believe that it is better to punish a child by denying a previously promised activity than by spanking. This is mis-guided thinking. Most children would rather get the spanking. If you promise your son that you will take him fishing Saturday, keep your word. If he does something that calls for discipline, give him his promised spanking--and also his promised fishing trip. He will respect you for it.

Be sure that your child knows that you are not rejecting him or her as a person or as your child. That is why it is very important to follow up discipline with an expression of affection or personal interest. Your child will love and respect you and will learn to respect law and order in the home and also in society. Also, it is important that the person who does the chastening be the one who does the comforting.

When discipline is exercised according to the mood of the parents and not according to clearly established rules, children learn to "play" their parents' emotions like a musical instrument. Such children tend to grow up believing that all rules and all discipline are only the expressions of people's subjective whims. *Teach your children to obey your word, not just your threats.*

Spankings should end by the time a child nears adolescence. If discipline during

childhood has been successful, the adolescent should be prepared to progress toward intelligent adulthood. Sensible, consistent discipline will still be necessary, but it should take a different form. Teenage discipline should be intellectual rather than physical. This often involves the temporary withholding of privileges. However, children and teenagers should never be punished by not being allowed to go to church, for the same reason that they are not punished by not being allowed to breathe. Both are vital. Discipline that is harmful to a child spiritually is worse than discipline that is harmful to a child physically.

The purpose of teenage discipline is to help the young person understand that independence depends on self-discipline, and that freedom expands as personal responsibility grows. Its aim is to mature their sense of values and hone their ability to discipline themselves intelligently.

Discipline is a way of life. In order to discipline, we ourselves must be disciplined people. Basic to a stable home is the acceptance of responsibility. This means husbands and wives working things out as adults, as Christians, and not walking out in a childish huff or running home to mama. It means parents and in-laws giving junior and his wife a chance to face up to life and work things out together as adults without interference. It means teaching our children God's word and leading them to the Savior (that is their most important human and civil right). It means training up those children in the way they should go, working at it day by day. It means helping them learn how to discipline themselves by making sure that their emotions do not become unmanageable.

Remember Ephesians 6:4. "Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord" (NIV).

Fathers can exasperate their children by their own self-justification. Children and teenagers are not always wrong. Parents can exasperate them by brow-beating and nagging them. They should be allowed to express an opinion or say what is on their mind without being jumped on. Parents can exasperate their children also by negative comparisons ("Why can't you be like ____?").

Validate and affirm you children. Parents don't always have to "win" or "be one up" on their children. They need your approval; give it to them when you can do so honestly. Encourage them.

Keep open the lines of communication with your children. When they are little, take time to listen to their childish problems. As they grow older, they will feel free to bring their troubles to dad and mom. Then, if some day a really big problem arises, they will not be afraid to confide in you because they know you love them and are concerned about them. No matter what might have happened, let them see God's grace and compassion through you. Surround them with your love and loyalty. The most important thing at a time like that is not parental or family pride and reputation. It is rescuing a wounded, troubled soul who desperately needs the love and support that

only you can give.

It is important to keep your home a warm, happy place to be. Do not push your children out on their own too early. That does not mean you should tie them to your apron strings, but it means that they should not leave early because of an unpleasant home. It is normal for children to grow up and become self-reliant and independent. But the home itself is the place where they find room for the healthy development of responsible independence. On the one hand, mother them but do not smother them; on the other hand, do not push them into pre-mature independence by parental indifference, neglect, thoughtlessness, or rejection.

Genesis 2:24 says that the reason a young man should leave his father and mother is to be joined to his wife, not just because he has a job and wants to get an apartment. If he goes to college, he is still under his parents' jurisdiction. This is even more so for young ladies. A young lady is under her father's "covering" until she comes under her husband's "covering" at marriage. This has been established as the normal, natural, and safe order of things and is therefore a general principle; however, it is not necessarily a hard and fast rule for every situation.

For whatever might be said in its favor, making everyone legally an adult at their eighteenth birthday has caused much harm to teenagers, teenagers' families, and to society.

Within the governmental structure of the home, teenagers' independence should grow as their self-discipline grows. They should be given as much freedom as they are prepared to handle safely and responsibly. And be sure that they know the limits of their freedom. They will push on the walls to see where they are and how firm they are. If there are no walls, if they do not know where the walls are, if they can push on the walls and the walls "give," the child or teenager might feel a heady rush of freedom, but down deep inside that child or teenager will also feel very insecure. Teenagers push on the walls, but in reality they are glad the walls are there.

All of this requires patience and God-given wisdom. It involves setting a good example. It means taking time to discuss things together, answering questions, listening to and respecting their views, giving constructive criticism, offering suggestions, and yes, putting your foot down when necessary and occasionally giving your teenager a good lecturing.

But be careful not to nag and harangue. Remember Ephesians 6:4. Avoid a domineering attitude, and be careful not to "harp" on one thing so much that you discourage and alienate your teenager. When they are doing their best, don't criticize them for not doing better.

Now, parents, please excuse me while I take a moment for a special word with your teenagers...

If you are living at home with your family, be thankful, especially if you have both parents. A lot of young people do not have that blessing. You might be one of the lucky ones with Christian parents. Maybe not. Let's suppose your home life is a long way from what it ought to be, and you are having some real problems. First of all, face the fact that you are a part of that home and you are subject to its government, faulty and dysfunctional as it might be. Perhaps your parents are not Christians. They are still your parents, and if you will serve Jesus Christ in your home and obey your parents as a Christian young person, God will help you make it a better home. Remember, He is with you.

Also, keep in mind that your home life depends a lot on you. You can try to escape from it and try to shut it out of your world; or you can face it and do your best to make it better.

Your parents make mistakes, but perhaps they are doing the best they know how. Some day you will probably be a parent, and you will make mistakes, too. Determine that you will do your best to build a successful, happy home. *Start practicing right now in the home you are living in.* "Listen to your father who begot you, and do not despise your mother when she is old" (Proverbs 23:22 NASB).

Growing up is the process of preparing for independence. But it does not happen all at once. There is no magic in your 18th or 21st birthday that automatically "zaps" you into an adult. Real adulthood is the result of the development of two qualities: self-discipline and self-reliance. The process of developing them together in balance is called maturing. The more you are able to control yourself, the less you need to be controlled by others.

To react childishly to maturity in others--that is inexcusable.

To react childishly to immaturity in others--that is understandable, but still childish.

To respond graciously to immaturity in others (especially in adults)--that is real maturity.

The hassles you are having right now might be your golden opportunity to develop and express the qualities of real maturity--if you will let them be. It just depends on how serious you are about really growing up. It is not the situation that makes or breaks you; it is how you respond to it.

Now, back to parents.

Parents' first responsibility is to teach their children the ways of God. "These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road,

when you lie down and when you get up" (Deuteronomy 6:4, 5 NIV. Also Isaiah 38:19).

It is important to create in our children an appetite for the right things. Children develop physical appetites. An Eskimo girl attended college in the state of Washington. After a few months she said to another student, "Oh, I'm so hungry for a piece of whale blubber!" She had acquired an appetite for what she had been raised on.

The same is true spiritually. Let us be careful that we do not create in our children such an appetite for sports, week-end camping trips, or other legitimate activities that they hunger after these things more than after God, His word, and His church. Children know what is important to their parents and they will likely adopt the same values. They watch to see what is *your* commitment to Christ and His kingdom.

Children and young people today are under tremendous pressures. Many influences are threatening their well-being, especially their spiritual life. They urgently need the spiritual undergirding and strength of a godly home life, led by parents who are totally committed to Jesus Christ. Your children are looking to you for spiritual leadership--strong, definite spiritual leadership. We need to stand like a rock and be spiritual pillars in the home--and in the church.

The Bible gives us some examples of parental successes and also parental failures. God said of Abraham, "For I have chosen him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice; in order that the LORD may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him" (Genesis 18:19 NASB). Joshua said, "But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:15). That is the kind of parent God wants every child to have and that every child has a right to have.

Children who are raised to know, love, and obey the Lord will bring joy and blessing to their parents. "The father of the righteous will greatly rejoice, and he who begets a wise child will have delight in him" (Proverbs 23:24).

In contrast, the sons of the backslidden priest Eli made themselves vile and he did not restrain them (1 Samuel 13:3).

King David was so busy running the kingdom that he neglected his own home. When Absalom rebelled, it was too late for David to try to be a dad (2 Samuel 18:33). Another son, Adonijah, caused trouble because his father had never displeased him by saying, "Why do you do that?" (1 Kings 1:6).

This demonstrates the importance of establishing an awareness of responsibility in our children. If they do something wrong, parents should ask them specifically, "What did you do?" If they learn to take responsibility for their own actions, they will be less likely to make excuses and blame something or someone else.

Some parents make the mistake of showing partiality. Isaac loved Esau and

Rebekah loved Jacob (Genesis 25:28), and the result was big trouble. Jacob favored Joseph above all his children (Genesis 37:3), and the jealousy of Joseph's brothers led to deep pain and heartache. Successful family government must be impartial government. Parental partiality is only a form of parental selfishness.

Financial responsibility and stability are also essential to a successful home. Proverbs 12:27 says "The substance of a diligent man is precious" (KJV). Proverbs 21:20 reads, "There is desirable treasure and oil in the dwelling of the wise, but a foolish man squanders it."

The familiar saying is true: "If your outgo exceeds your income, your upkeep will become your downfall."

Wise people live well within their income and avoid debt as much as possible. Impulse buying plus easy credit equals a lot of trouble. God is interested in the financial stability of your home; so pray before you purchase, and "beware of covetousness" (Luke 12:15).

Again, it is well to emphasize that the most important element in any home is its spiritual life. Right here is where millions of parents fail miserably. Father, mother, your children are following you, and you are leading them either to heaven or to hell. There are enough people trying to drag your children down without you being one of them. "But when Jesus saw it, he was greatly displeased and said to them, 'Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God' (Mark 10:14b).

Instead of building road-blocks for our families in front of the "strait and narrow" way, we should be paving it for them. We are either stepping stones or stumbling blocks for our children. Oh, what parents who block the gates of Heaven to their children will have to answer for!

"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household" (Acts 16:31). Our greatest obligation as parents is to lead our children to Jesus Christ, and remember, leaders go first. If you are not saved, turn to Christ now with all your heart and commit yourself to Him in faith as your Savior and Lord. Set an example for your family. Eternity is at stake. God through Christ has done His part. Christ died for you and rose again. The Holy Spirit is urging you to come to Christ. Now it is up to you. God bless you as you choose Christ--and eternal life--for you and for your family.