

PRESERVING THE HONOR OF MARRIAGE

Biblical Guidance
from the Puritans



JAMES A. LA BELLE AND
JOEL R. BEEKE

PRESERVING THE HONOR OF MARRIAGE

Biblical Guidance from the Puritans

Contents

Introduction	3
1. The Duty of Mutual Submission	4
2. Christ and His Church	5
3. The Covenantal Principle	9
Study Questions	15

This booklet is a reprint of chapter 4, “Preserving the Honor of Marriage,” from *Living in a Godly Marriage* by Beeke and LaBelle, a 268 page quality paperback from Reformation Heritage Books, available at www.heritagebooks.org or by calling 616.977.0889. ISBN 9781601784636 (paperback) | 9781601784643 (Epub).

© Copyright 2016 by Joel R. Beeke and James A. La Belle.

All rights reserved. No part of this booklet may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. Direct your requests to the publisher at the following address:

REFORMATION HERITAGE BOOKS
2965 Leonard Street NE
Grand Rapids, Michigan 49525 USA

Phone: (616) 977-0889 • Fax: (616) 285-3246
orders@heritagebooks.org • www.heritagebooks.org

Printed in the USA by Chapel Library. Used by permission. All Scripture quotations are from the King James Version. Chapel Library does not necessarily agree with all the doctrinal positions of the authors it publishes.

Chapel Library sends Christ-centered materials from prior centuries worldwide without charge, relying entirely upon God’s faithfulness. We therefore do not solicit donations, but we gratefully receive support from those who freely desire to give.

Worldwide, please download material without charge from our website, or contact the international distributor as listed there for your country.

In **North America**, for additional copies of this booklet or other Christ-centered materials from prior centuries, please contact

CHAPEL LIBRARY
2603 West Wright Street
Pensacola, Florida 32505 USA

Phone: (850) 438-6666 • Fax: (850) 438-0227
chapel@mountzion.org • www.ChapelLibrary.org

Please see also *Preparing for Marriage* by Joel R. Beeke and James A. LaBelle; *The Duties of Husbands and Wives* by Richard Steele (1629-1692); and Free Grace Broadcaster 200, *Marriage*—all available from Chapel Library. The *FGB* is a quarterly digest of six to ten messages from prior centuries, all on one theme, with a different theme each issue. Request a subscription

– worldwide, free eBook sent via email:

www.ChapelLibrary.org/broadcaster/fgb-subscriptions/

– in North America, free printed copy sent via mail: write Chapel Library

– in a country with an international distributor, printed copy sent via mail; write to them directly:

www.ChapelLibrary.org/broadcaster/fgb-distributors/

PRESERVING THE HONOR OF MARRIAGE

Introduction

When we marry in the Lord we honor the Lord of marriage and can therefore look to Him for the many blessings which He delights to bestow upon marriage. Yet, as a man who has worked so hard to procure a fortune gives much thought to how to preserve it, so the task now is to address the means by which we might preserve and maintain the honor of marriage. Daniel Rogers (1573-1652) said, “Those who have found an honorable marriage must wait upon it and keep it so.”¹

If marriage’s honor is *from* the Lord and is to be procured by marrying *in* the Lord, then it necessarily follows that the only means of preserving its honor is to walk faithfully *before* the Lord in marriage. Otherwise, unfaithfulness will mar the honor of marriage before men, pierce the hearts of our spouses, and cause the Lord to withdraw His blessings from us. Accordingly, Scripture teaches us not only to marry in the Lord (1Co 7:39), but also how to live together in faithfulness before the Lord (Eph 5:22-33; Col 3:18-19; 1Pe 3:1-7).

To walk faithfully before the Lord in marriage is to heed the mutual and respective *duties* of marriage. Marriage is a stewardship from the Lord and is entered into with vows to one another before the Lord. Marriage should therefore be considered primarily from the standpoint of duty and obligation. Marriage entails uniting not so much with someone you passionately love at the moment as with someone you are committing to always love faithfully and dutifully.²

When God unites a man and a woman in marriage, He calls them to honor Him by faithfully performing the duties incumbent upon them in the relationship into which He has brought them (e.g., Eph 5:22-33; 1Pe 3:1-7). As these duties are assigned by God in His Word, faithfully performing them not only honors Him directly but also helps preserve and maintain the honor which He places upon the marriage. William Gouge (1575-1653) therefore spoke of both the need and benefit of being faithful in fulfilling marital duties when he said, “These [duties] are either *absolutely necessary* for the *being* and *abiding* of

¹ Daniel Rogers, *Matrimonial Honor* (Virginia: Edification Press, 2010), 115.

² P. den Ouden, *Liefde en Trouw bij de Puriteinen*, 3rd ed. (Houten, the Netherlands: Den Hertog, 2010), 40-41.

marriage; or needful and requisite for the *well-being* and *well abiding* of it, that is, for the good estate³ of marriage, and for a commendable, and comfortable living together.”⁴

However, God does more than assign us duties and call us to faithfully obey them. He wants those duties so impressed upon our minds and instilled in our hearts that we walk in them willingly and cheerfully out of the conviction that both His glory and our happiness are bound up with our faithfulness. He therefore impresses these duties upon us by grounding the ordinance of marriage on two scriptural principles: the Christ-Church principle and the covenantal principle...We will discuss these two principles which provide the ground and motivation for duty itself in a marriage. Once we do that, we can faithfully yield to all that duty to which the Lord calls us, which, by His grace, will in turn preserve the honor of our marriages.

1. The Duty of Mutual Submission

Gouge’s *Of Domestical Duties*⁵ is based on Ephesians 5:21-6:9, which describes the duties of husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and servants. Prior to explaining those duties, Gouge wrote an introduction explaining this passage phrase by phrase so that in each particular station one may know and understand his or her duty before the Lord, which is to *submit one to another* (Eph 5:21).

In Ephesians 5:21, Paul charges his readers to submit themselves “one to another in the fear of God.” Gouge explained that no matter what particular role or station the believer fills, he or she is called by God to *submission*. An inferior submits to those over him by honoring them and serving them in the fear of the Lord (1Pe 2:13-17), while a superior submits to those under him by ruling over them with love and humility in the fear of the Lord (1Pe 5:1-4), and equals submit to one another by putting the interests of others above their own in the fear of the Lord (Phi 2:3-4).

The logic behind such mutual submission is twofold. First, each of us has been assigned a place by God, not so much for our own good as for the good of others. Rather than being called to self-gratification or self-exaltation, we are called to service and duty. The apostle therefore describes the Church or body of Christ as being so composed by God that each one may care for one another (1Co 12:24-25) and thereby serve not his own interest, but the common good (1Co 12:7). God gives the members of Christ’s body different roles according to what is good for the whole body rather than for individual members. In our particular callings we are to regard the good of others more than our own (Phi 2:3-4). For those in authority, Gouge said, the callings of superiors “are in truth offices of service, indeed, burdens under which they must willingly put their shoulders, being called of God,

³ **estate** – condition.

⁴ William Gouge (1575-1653), *Of Domestical Duties* (Puritan Reprints, 2006), 155.

⁵ See *Building a Godly Home* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2013-14), a reprint of Gouge’s work in three volumes, edited and modernized by Scott Brown and Joel R. Beeke, and available at www.heritagebooks.org and through bookstores. See also *The Christlike Husband*, available from CHAPEL LIBRARY, a reprint of one section from the second volume entitled *Building a Godly Home: A Holy Vision for a Happy Marriage*.

and of which they are to give an account concerning the good which they have done to others, for the effecting whereof, it is needful that they submit themselves.”⁶

Second, in being assigned our places by God, each of us is responsible to be faithful to Him. No matter what our station is, we must fulfill our duties in the fear of the Lord because, said Gouge, that is the “*efficient cause* that moves a true Christian willingly to perform all duty to man.”⁷ Mindful of how good God is to us, and how happiness consists of enjoying His favor, a proper and holy fear of the Lord makes us willing to do all that He requires of us and unwilling to do what displeases Him.

In the fear of the Lord we submit to one another in performing the duties of our stations. Wives submit to husbands, and husbands love their wives (Eph 5:22, 25); children obey parents, and parents nurture their children (Eph 6:1-4); and servants obey masters, and masters govern their servants with Christ-like care and kindness (1Pe 2:17; 2Ch 19:5-9). As Gouge wrote, “He that obeys not those who are over him *in the fear of God* shows no respect for God’s image; and he who governs not those who are under him *in the fear of God* shows no respect for God’s charge.”⁸

Some may argue that mutual submission denies the difference between those who are in authority and those who are under authority. But the reverse is seen to be true if we remember that the form submission takes will differ with the roles we occupy. He who is in authority submits by governing those under him with humility and love. Likewise, he who is under authority submits by lovingly and faithfully performing his duties, giving honor to whom honor is due. And the Lord receives the greatest honor of all for we are all servants of one another according to our respective stations, equally accountable to Him, and equally motivated by fear of Him as members of His body.

Gouge therefore charged believers, saying: “Wherefore let all of all sorts set the *fear of God* as a mark before them to aim at in all their actions...Let superiors (Num 11:29) neither do anything to [satisfy] their inferiors, nor suffer any thing (1Sa 24:8) to be done for their sakes by their inferiors, which cannot stand with the *fear of God*. And let inferiors (Gen 39:10; 1Sa 22:17) [neither] do nor forbear (Act 4:19) to do at the will of their superiors anything swerving from the fear of God; but *everyone submit themselves one to another in the fear of God*.”⁹

2. Christ and His Church

In the context of mutual submission, Gouge followed the apostle Paul who, in Ephesians 5, addresses the duties incumbent upon wives and husbands in the Lord. As a basis for their duties, Paul introduces the first major principle of marriage: the *Christ-Church principle*. According to this principle, the husband is to love his wife as Christ loves the Church, and the wife is to show reverence and submission to her husband as the Church submits to

⁶ Gouge, 4.

⁷ Gouge, 5.

⁸ Gouge, 9.

⁹ Gouge, 10.

Christ. Paul invokes this principle, said Gouge, so that both husband and wife might be “the better directed” and “the better provoked.”¹⁰

The husband’s headship over his wife parallels Christ’s headship over His Church (Eph 5:23). As Christ loves His Church, so the husband must love his wife. He is to love her absolutely (v. 25), purposefully (v. 26), realistically (v. 27), and sacrificially (vv. 28-29). He must exercise a “true, free, pure, exceeding, constant love” to his wife, nourishing and cherishing her as Christ does His gathered people (v. 29).¹¹ Christ’s love for His Church is the pattern for a husband to follow.

To be sure, Christ’s love for His Church is as excellent, perfect, and infinite as His divine person. Thus a husband is unable to love his wife equal to the measure of Christ’s love. As a sinner, he will always fall short of the infinite reach of Christ’s love (v. 25). Yet, Christ’s love for His bride is to be every husband’s goal and pattern.¹² He is to walk as closely as he can to it. Such Christ-like love, said Gouge, will serve “as sugar to sweeten the duties of authority which appertain to a husband,” and thereby enable his loving wife to more easily submit to him.¹³ His faithfulness will encourage her faithfulness, and his love will draw out her submission.

Likewise, the wife’s submission to her husband parallels the Church’s submission to Christ (Eph 5:22-24). “A wife must submit herself to a husband,” Gouge wrote, “because he is her *head*; and she must do it *as unto the Lord* because her husband is to her as Christ is to the Church.”¹⁴ Thus the Christ-Church principle provides both the *reason* for a wife’s submission as well as the *manner* in which she is to render it. She is not to submit to her husband in *anything* that contradicts her submission to Christ (v. 22), but in *everything* that is in keeping with her submission to Christ, because she submits to her husband as she submits to Christ (v. 24).

If a wife submits to her husband in things contrary to Christ then she is not submitting *as unto the Lord*. Conscientious wives must therefore remember, wrote Isaac Ambrose (1604-1664), “that they have a husband in heaven, as well as on earth, betwixt whom there is a greater difference than between heaven and earth; and therefore in case they bid contrary things, they must prefer God before men, Christ before all men.”¹⁵ A wife “ought, like a true [mirror], faithfully to represent and return to her husband’s heart, with a sweet and pleasing pliability, the exact lineaments and proportions of all his honest desires and demands, and that without discontent, thwarting, or sourness. For her subjection in this kind should be as to Christ, sincere, hearty, and free.”¹⁶

¹⁰ Gouge, 18 and 30.

¹¹ Gouge, 31.

¹² Gouge, 31.

¹³ Gouge, 94.

¹⁴ Gouge, 19.

¹⁵ Isaac Ambrose, “Family Duties,” in *Media: the Middle Things, in reference to the First and Last Things*, in *The Works of Isaac Ambrose* (London: Rowland Reynolds, 1674), 235-36.

¹⁶ Robert Bolton (1572-1631), *General Directions for a Comfortable Walking with God* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1995), 279.

This Christ-Church principle holds true even if a husband is a worthless man who does not know the Lord (1Sa 2:12; cf. 1Co 7:12-13). Ambrose wrote, “A wife must be meek, mild, gentle, obedient, though she be matched with a crooked, perverse, profane, and wicked husband. She must in this case remove her eyes from the disposition of her husband’s person to the condition of his place, and by virtue thereof (seeing he bears Christ’s image) be subject unto him as unto Christ.”¹⁷ Her eye must ever be on Christ, who is above her husband and for whose sake she willingly submits to him, because this will enable her to fulfill her duty faithfully before the Lord who called her unto it.

Yet this principle also provides the *benefit* of submission. Christ as the head of His Church protects and provides for it, so the husband as the head of the wife must protect and provide for his wife (vv. 23, 29). The wife submits to her husband for her own benefit so that she might enjoy his protection and provision. As his headship is one of responsibility, so her submission is one of beneficence; and as his role reflects Christ’s goodness, so her role reflects the Church’s duty.¹⁸

So, how does this principle actually work in marriage? The husband should be mindful that his duty towards his wife is to represent and reflect the Savior’s love for His Church. Though a husband’s love for his wife will fall far short of Christ’s love for His Church, marriage is still meant to be an illustration of Christ’s love for His Church. A husband’s love should be as pure as Christ’s, not mixed with a wanton eye for other women, a lustful heart for other pleasures, or a selfish interest which quickly becomes dissatisfied. Rather, his love should be devoted entirely and only to her. His love should be as sincere as Christ’s, not looking to her for wealth or family or talents, but to her as a person. His love should be as constant as Christ’s, not like the passion of youth that quickly fades, but as an enduring and faithful love all her days. His love should be as sacrificial as Christ’s, promoting not only her temporal but her spiritual interests, even at a cost to himself. Moreover, his love for his wife should be rendered in such a way as to endear himself to her and thereby make her submission easy. She should delight to be the wife of such a loving and caring husband and do all that is required of her by God towards him.

The husband should cherish and nourish his wife as Christ loves the Church. He should not be harsh in his speech but speak words that comfort and build her up. He should not be careless in his manners but behave towards his wife with tenderness, softness, and the concern to please her and endear himself to her. He should speak highly and lovingly of her in her absence, making it clear to everyone that he cherishes her. He should be patient with her infirmities and seek to help her grow stronger in the Lord and be faithful in her duties to Him.

The husband’s relationship with his wife points to Christ’s place as the Head of His Church, which is His body. So a husband should zealously strive to accurately represent Christ. He should care for his wife as for his own body since the two, by marriage, have become as one flesh (Eph 5:28-31). This should be done with cheerfulness and willingness because of the honor placed upon him to show forth Christ in marriage.

¹⁷ Ambrose, 235.

¹⁸ Gouge, 20-21.

Likewise, the wife should reflect the Church's relationship to Christ by submitting to her husband. She should be enflamed with a desire, for Christ's sake, to honor her husband and submit to him in a manner that shows her own submission to Christ. Her husband is not *Christ* to her, yet he is *as Christ* to her within marriage. Christ regards her submission unto her husband as part of her submission unto Him since, as the apostle says, she is to submit "as unto the Lord" (v. 22). Her failure to submit to her husband in everything lawful is a sin because it is a failure to submit to Christ; it is rebellion against her Lord. Thus she should yield to her husband's leadership, depend upon his provision, and look to his protection of her, honoring the Lord who placed her husband over her.

It is important to understand that the submission to which the Lord calls her is not a matter of hierarchy but of *function*. God assigns the role of leadership to the husband not because he is better than his wife, but simply because He delegates this authority to him. John Robinson explained it this way: "God created man and woman spiritually equal, and when both fell into sin she did not become more degenerated than he from the primitive goodness. Yet in marriage one of the two must have final authority, since differences will arise, and so the one must give way and apply unto the other; this, God and nature lays upon the man."¹⁹ Her submission is therefore not a servile subjection, but a God-honoring submission.

Can every member of a nation be king? Can all in a family be fathers? Can all be wives? Can all be everything? Of course not. There must necessarily be not only order but degrees of authority, submission, and rule. The godly wife will therefore look contentedly unto the hand of God which made her the wife and not the husband, the weaker vessel and not the stronger, to obey and not to rule. For her to rebel against her place would wrong God more than her husband; and for her to assume the reins of the family and govern in her husband's place would usurp authority rather than rule with authority. Whatever government she may enjoy in the family, she should enjoy it under her husband's headship and not contrary to it; she enjoys it with her husband's consent and with reference to his will over her (in the same way that the moon must refer its light to the sun's illumination). She enjoys it to administer her husband's honor and desires as wisely and carefully as she would administer his money or anything else entrusted to her.

Truly, a marriage in which God's order is observed and enjoyed is a *good* marriage. "In such a case, how great an honor is the wife's godly government unto the husband, while he as king to command, yet with love as a husband, shall go in and out in the midst of his family, not fearing spoil, whether he be at home or abroad; nor needing unlawful spoils to maintain his estate? As also, how honorable a service is it in the wife, to depend upon his beck,²⁰ to advise with her head, to lean upon his breast, and yet to [enjoy] the authority to do what she will [as long as] her will is honest, lawful, and to her husband's good?"²¹

¹⁹ Quoted in Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as They Really Were* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 76.

²⁰ **beck** – gesture to command or inform.

²¹ Ste. B., *Counsel to the Husband; to the Wife Instruction* (London: by Felix Kyngston, for Richard Boyle, 1605), 49.

Because her submission honors the Lord, the wife should render it willingly and cheerfully; for her subjection is not to be in word or deed only, but also done with heartfelt joy. Her husband should rejoice in how joyfully and quickly she honors him, serves him, and looks to him to be the head which God has appointed and called him to be. She should live in such a way as to endear herself to him and draw his love towards her. She should do her duty towards him in such a way that he can do his duty towards her with equal ease and delight. This means she must submit to him voluntarily. Her submission is not to be compelled any more than his love is to be forced. Rather, she is to render her submission as part of her obedience to Christ just as much as he is to render his affection as part of his obedience to Christ. Their marriage and therefore their roles are grounded upon the Christ-Church principle. A wife's honor and freedom in Christ acknowledges her husband as her head and submits to him accordingly; and his honor and freedom in Christ acknowledges his wife as his own body and loves her accordingly.

But there is much more than mere motivation here. One might be motivated to do what is right but still be unable to do it. For believers, the Christ-Church principle provides the enabling we need to do what God has called us to do. It is true that Christ is to be leaned on in every situation and His own holiness drawn upon in every station and duty. The apostle Paul said he could do all things through Christ who strengthened him (Phi 4:13). If this is the case in all circumstances, then surely we can also expect Christ to enable us to be holy in marriage.

3. The Covenantal Principle

Flowing out of the Christ-Church principle, which is the very reason for *duty*, is the second principle, the covenantal principle. Upon this principle both parties in a marriage freely and voluntarily consent to live according to the rules of marriage which God set when He solemnized the marriage of our first parents.²² When a man and a woman enter into holy matrimony before the Lord, they promise to fulfill the duties of marriage without conditions and without reservations.

Two things are mentioned in Malachi 2:14 that underscore the solemnity of the vows made at the commencement of marriage. First is that this exchange of promises is a covenant. In verse 14 the Lord calls husbands to repentance for dealing treacherously with their wives by divorcing “thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant.” In Proverbs 2:16-17, the adulteress is described as she who not only forsakes her husband but forgets “the covenant of her God,” a reference to her marriage vows. Marriage is therefore a sacred bond. When a man and a woman exchange the vows of marriage, they are doing more than contracting to share a home and a bank account; they are entering into a covenant with each other with stipulations and responsibilities. As P. den Ouden observed, “For the Puritans it was not love but faithfulness which constituted the marriage. Even if the love would

²² Cf. Chapter 1 in *Living in a Godly Marriage*.

weaken...the partners remain under obligation to remain faithful to each other because of the marital oath.”²³

Marriage must be entered into as a covenant in which a husband and wife promise before God to perform the duties that God has assigned to each. The husband promises to faithfully love his wife as Christ loves His Church, to serve her, comfort her, honor and cherish her, and forsaking all others keep faith with her as long as they both shall live. The wife promises to love her husband, comfort him, respect and submit to him as the Church submits to Christ, and forsaking all others keep faith with him as long as they both shall live.

P. den Ouden therefore said, “Someone who does not wish to take on responsibilities does not understand the essence of marriage.”²⁴ To define marriage in any way that ignores or negates its covenantal commitment of faithfulness to certain God-prescribed duties is to abandon its institution and foundation and redefine it in a man-centered way. Such marriages bring shame rather than honor upon the relationship of Christ with His Church and therefore fail to experience the honor and blessings of marriage itself. Edward Reyner (1600- c. 1668) wrote, “The duties of marriage are matters of religion, of conscience and obedience to the gospel, being fully prescribed and enjoined therein. And Christ will one day come in flaming fire to take vengeance on them that obey not the gospel, in the precepts of it (2Th 1:8).”²⁵

The second thing mentioned in Malachi 2:14 expressing the solemnity of the marriage vows is that the Lord Himself is a witness to the marriage covenant. Verse 14 says, “The LORD hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously: yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant.” In other words, marriage is not only concerned with the man and the woman being married. Marriage was instituted by God, blessed by God for those who honor Him in it, and is also witnessed by God. He hears the promises you make to each other, the vows which you utter. He is witness to your surrender to your spouse and He will hold you accountable to your own words. Henry Scudder (c. 1585-1652) therefore advised married couples to “consider what you then did; you then entered into a near covenant with one another, indeed, into a *covenant with God* to be one another’s, and to be faithful to each other...So that if you break covenant with one another, you break covenant also with your God.”²⁶ Marriage is not only a covenant between husband and wife; it is a covenant with God which He witnesses and seals.

Some think a good marriage is one in which a man secures the most beautiful woman for his bride. Some think a good marriage is one in which a woman lands the richest man to be her husband. Others regard a marriage to be good if a husband and wife can enjoy a

²³ den Ouden, 45.

²⁴ den Ouden, 42.

²⁵ Edward Reyner, *Considerations Concerning Marriage: the Honor, Duties, Benefits, Troubles of It* (London: by J. T. for Thomas Newbery, 1657), 36.

²⁶ Henry Scudder, *The Godly Man’s Choice: or A Direction How Single Godly Persons, Who Intend Marriage, May Make Choice of a Fit and Meet Yoak-fellow* (London: by Mathew Simmons for Henry Overton, 1644), 71.

good measure of independence within the marriage and not feel tied down or restricted by it. Still others regard a good marriage as one in which the man finds a wife who will do whatever he tells her, or the woman finds a husband who will give her whatever she wants. All such marriages will prove disastrously disappointing because they fall far short of what God intends in marriage. Scudder advised unmarried persons to think about and prepare for the duties of marriage *before* they marry, for “God has in his Word told you what you must do when you are married.”²⁷ Likewise, Reyner said, “For any to marry before they know their duty, or how to carry [themselves] therein, is like setting up before one has learned the trade; or like answering a matter before one hears it, which is folly and shame unto him (Pro 18:13).”²⁸

To enjoy a marriage in which joy and peace reign, one Puritan gave the following counsel: “It stands not [upon] what man and wife shall [agree] upon, that there may be peace and quietness, but [upon] what order God has prescribed them, to be obeyed in their places; so that they must look unto God’s wisdom, order, and polity, for [household] government, and not what may seem right and good in their own eyes...Each must keep their place, their order, and heavenly polity,²⁹ whereto God has called them. The husband is made the head and the wife resembled to the body. May the head of a natural body be turned [upside down]? Can the whole person so continue and live well in that estate? How unseemly is it? No more can a body [of household government] be in peaceable or blessed condition if the order is inverted.”³⁰ William Secker (d. 1660) put it this way: “Our *ribs* were not ordained to be our *rulers*. They are not made of the head, to claim superiority; but out of the *side*, to be content with *equality*. They desert the *Author* of nature that invert the *order* of nature. The woman was made for the *man’s comfort*, but the man was not made for the *woman’s command*. Those shoulders aspire too high, that content not themselves with a room below their head...The body of that household can never make any good motion, whose bones are out of place.”³¹

Richard Baxter (1615-1691) gave similar counsel: “It is the subversion of all societies, and so of the world, that selfish, ungodly persons enter into all relations with a desire to serve themselves and fish out all that gratifies their flesh without any sense of the duty of their relation. They consider what honor, profit, or pleasure their relation will afford them, but not what God and man require or expect from them (Gen 2:18; Pro 18:22). All their thought is what they shall have, but not what they shall be and do. They are very sensible what others should be and do to them but not what they should be and do to others. Thus it is with magistrates and people, with too many pastors and their flocks, with husbands and wives, with parents and children, and all other relations. Our first care should be to know and perform the duties of our relations and please God in them and then to look for

²⁷ Scudder, 60.

²⁸ Reyner, 35.

²⁹ **polity** – form or system of government.

³⁰ Ste. B., 41-43.

³¹ William Secker, “The Wedding Ring,” in *The Nonsuch Professor* (Virginia: Sprinkle Publications, 1997), 256-57. See also *The Consistent Christian* by Secker, available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

his blessing by way of encouraging reward. Study and do your parts, and God will certainly do his.”³²

Scudder counseled unmarried persons by saying, “It shall be your wisdom to be provident and wary how you enter into this estate; and that you foreknow and do thoroughly fore-think and prepare for ability to do the duties and to bear the troubles which that estate will necessarily put upon you.”³³ Would that such counsel was weighed today by those desiring to marry! Divorce would not be so common, especially among the people of God who should honor the covenant that they made to each other in front of God and other witnesses, and who should model their relationship after the example of Christ and the Church.

Two caveats³⁴ should be added here. First, since both husband and wife have obligations to fulfill in the marriage, neither is to wait for the other; instead, each must seek to be faithful before the Lord irrespective of the other. The husband is accountable to God for himself and cannot excuse himself of those duties if his wife fails in hers. If she neglects her duties, not only does she wrong her husband, but she also dishonors God who called her to those duties and in whose name she entered the covenant of marriage. Likewise, a wife is not to withhold submitting to her husband saying that he is withholding his love from her. She is accountable to God to fulfill her duties as a wife regardless of her husband’s behavior. She must persevere in submission and thereby not only endear herself to him, but also remind him of his own obligations to her before the Lord as her husband; for what should her submission to him recall but his own obligation to submit to the Lord as a husband?

Therefore both the husband and the wife should seek to do their duty first! Reflecting on Paul’s words in Romans 12:10 (“in honour preferring one another”), one Puritan wrote, “I wish that it might never grow to question of law between man and wife whose is the duty...to begin the work of household government; but [I wish] for them rather to strive, who should be most careful of each other’s goods. The husband (in needful service) should not need to say, Good wife, help me herein...but the wife should [precede] him with, Good husband let me do it for you. Neither [should] the wife [need] to say (in like case), I pray husband do this for me; but he rather [should] take care to [precede] her desire...Thus they should not strive, unless it were to give honor...and to do service, and by love to [precede] each other...And surely where true love reigns indeed...or where...either of them are truly careful of each other’s good, they shall not need to sue each other at the law for their right, or complain they have [been] wronged.”³⁵

Second, neither the husband nor the wife is to define his or her rights by the other’s duties. The husband may be tempted to demand his wife’s total submission and thereby

³² Richard Baxter, *The Godly Home*, ed. Randall J. Pederson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 127. See also *Directions for Profitable Hearing and Reading* and “Self-Losing,” both by Baxter and available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

³³ Scudder, 65.

³⁴ **caveat** – caution or qualification.

³⁵ Ste. B., 53-54.

behave as a tyrant, while the wife may be tempted to demand her husband's sacrificial love. Not only are such demands sinful in themselves, but the one who positions himself to think of his spouse's duties as his right has already neglected his own duties. Neglecting one's own duties is the *root* of the demand that your spouse fulfill hers. The only way to avoid this temptation is to zealously fulfill your own duties and to prayerfully allow your spouse to zealously pursue hers. When you do this, you will find the grace of God to faithfully perform what you are called to do. Happiness in marriage is not bound up with what your spouse does but with fulfilling your own duties willingly and cheerfully because you do them as to the Lord.

Let it then be our chief concern to do *our own* duty. Though it is difficult to be married to a spouse who neglects his or her duty towards you, you can rejoice before the Lord when you fulfill your duty towards your spouse. As Gouge said, "To have others fail in duty to us may be a heavy cross, [but] for us to fail in our duty to others is a fearful curse."³⁶ Therefore if the husband will see that he rules with love, and if the wife will see that she obeys with cheerfulness, and if they both will see that they remain content before the Lord with their own lot and portion, then the yoke of marriage will be both worn and pulled with ease.³⁷

The following exhortation should encourage us as it encouraged the young married couple to whom it was written:

I exhort you [Miss] to wise subjection, to loving, and Christian reverence, to faithful and dutiful obedience, which shall not only be your crown of glory amongst the godly wise, as it was Sarah's [1Pe 3:6]...but if you desire to rule and to be trusted with all your husband has, this is the way, and there is no other. If you thus say, Give me the sword, you shall have both it and all assistance to use it; but if you will strive to wrest it out of your husband's hand, you will not only miss your desire, but take hurt by striving. Thus your godly subjection shall gain you more liberty, ease, honor, and lawful government, than all the contention in the world can bring to pass. And hate both the name and nature of a contentious wife; remember she is as an incurable dripping, and intolerable. Besides, to rule the family with the husband's assignment is a great honor to the wife; but to bear sway against his will and favor, [there is] no greater shame...

And you [Mister], as my dear friend, I counsel...know your wife to be a vessel, therefore necessary—I will not say, as one says, a necessary evil, for I trust she shall be that virtuous wife that shall do her husband good and not evil all the days of her life; but I doubt not to say, a necessary vessel for fruit unto God's glory; a vessel, when you are full of sorrows, to help bear them and ease you. A vessel to contain your counsels and instructions, and not to be plowed with, by any adversity, but as a faithful bulwark against adversaries. Yet being withal the weaker vessel, she must be treated accordingly. Our most precious vessels (whether glass or gold) are commonly the weakest...and those we most precisely³⁸ [treat], not roughly or carelessly. To a virtuous woman, there

³⁶ Gouge, 96.

³⁷ Ste. B., 92.

³⁸ **precisely** – carefully.

is no vessel, no jewel, comparable; count her therefore the chiefest vessel in your house that must contain yourself and all your treasures. Her price, says Solomon, is above the pearls (Pro 31:10); show not your rough and manlike courage (like Lamech) to your wife, but to your enemy (Gen 4:23, 24). You are both one, therefore be as one. Look not so much [to] what is required of her, as what is due to her from yourself. You are the covering of her eyes (Gen 20:16), which must defend her, not oppress her. She is of godly, wise, and worshipful stock and parentage; her years have been seasoned hitherto with the salt of godly education, and therefore the fitter for your wisdom to work upon. Make the work perfect and you shall have both the honor and the comfort of the work. To be brief, what is lacking in her...that may [take away] from the title of a virtuous wife?...You are both in the fittest time to begin an happy estate; lay therefore the foundation according to God's holy Word, and the building shall be glorious. Let that be the rule of both your duties, and know that God is most wise in directing both your states.

Thus while you both regard the duties of your several places, jointly towards the Lord first, then mutually towards one another, how easy will the burden of your family and callings be unto you? The equal [distribution] makes your burden light. What an example will [yours] be to servants, to children, to neighbors, to friends, yes to all men, to be followed and commended?...You shall be most happy first in this present life, and more happy above happiness in the life to come.”³⁹

May we be as moved to faithfulness in our marital duties as this young couple surely was by such a warm exhortation, and may we be brought to enjoy and preserve the honor of our marriages before God! Marriage is a tender flower planted by God. If we neglect our duties towards marriage, this flower will wither and die. If we treat marriage harshly, its beauty and life will be choked off and its blessing turned into a curse. But if we cultivate marriage according to God's instructions and are thankful *to* Him and faithful *before* Him, we may preserve marriage's enduring beauty, fruitfulness, satisfaction, pleasure, and honor.



³⁹ Ste. B., 92-97.

Study Questions

1. Explain the idea of mutual submission (Eph 5:21). What does it mean practically?
2. How does the wife's submission to her husband parallel the Church's submission to Christ (Eph 5:22-24)?
3. What did Isaac Ambrose say should limit the submission of a wife? Provide some contemporary examples that illustrate this limitation.
4. How should the husband's love for his wife parallel Christ's love for the Church (Eph 5:25-27)?
5. According to William Gouge, how is a husband's love like "sugar" to his authority?
6. Read Malachi 2:14 and Proverbs 2:16-17. How would covenant loyalty protect and enrich a marriage?
7. Richard Baxter warned of "selfish ungodly persons" who "consider what honor, profit, or pleasure their relation will afford them." What does selfishness do to a marriage? What steps can you take in your marriage to limit the influence of selfishness?
8. Baxter contrasted the selfish to those who aim to "perform the duties of our relation and please God in them." If so, how is duty the path of love?
9. What is the danger of demanding your rights based on your spouse's duties?
10. In the lengthy exhortation quoted at the end of this chapter, what did you find most helpful or thought-provoking? Why?