

Servanthood: the Art of Ministering to each other

Two key passages on the Husband/ Wife relationship in the Bible are
Ephesians 5:21-6:9 and **1 Peter 3:1-12**.

The language used in those passages is "ministering" language. It presumes an attitude of setting aside self interests and serving and seeking after the highest good for the other. Not just temporal happiness, but that they will experience all that God desires them to have in their life. In Ephesians we find "*be subject, love as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her, sanctify, cleanse, present in all her glory without spot or wrinkle, holy and blameless, love as their own bodies, nourish, cherish, respect*" and regarding children and servants: "*obey, honor, discipline and instruct, with good will rendering service as to the Lord.*" In Peter: "*submit, chaste and respectful behavior, a gentle and quiet spirit, obey, do what is right without being frightened, living together in an understanding way, showing honor as fellow heirs, praying, harmony, sympathy, kind hearts and humble spirits, giving blessing.*" To these passages we can add many others like Romans 14:19, 15:2, 1 Thess 5:11, 1 Cor 8:1; Hebr 10:25 that speak of the ministry that all believers have with one another. There is no closer or more intimate relationship than that of marriage – and God certainly intends married couples to serve the other as ministers.

Bless (honoring and respecting)

Blessing comes in four ways in the Bible: Through good and loving words spoken to and about your partner, through practical behavior, which shows loving kindness toward your partner in actions large and small, through thankfulness and appreciation and through prayer in your partner's behalf.

Edify (building up and encouraging)

Edifying builds up, never tears down. It gives your partner the freedom to grow and develop as a person without fear of failure or criticism. It offers personal encouragement, inner strengthening, and establishes peace and harmony between individuals.

Encouragement has its power in the motivation behind the words said, rather than the words themselves. It comes out of love with a sensitive ear, motivated mind, and a loving heart and "speaks" to the other's fears. Which means that trust must be built up so our partners are willing to expose those vulnerabilities. Encouragement should be slow to speak, sensitive and gentle – accepting rather than judging. Rather than giving easy answers it ministers by helping our partners to reflect and clarify and explore their concerns and then share the burdens through intimate interaction together.

Share (nourishing and caring)

Sharing means giving of yourself your own interests and time, to focus on your partners interests and concerns, ideas, feelings and inner thoughts, spiritual walk, goals, etc. It requires openness and a listening ear, so that as you as you live life together you develop an awareness of your partners, and the many and various ways you can deep your love and minister to each other.

Touch (embracing and comforting)

Touching offers comfort – calms fears, soothes pain, gives emotional security. It is essential in building warmth and comfort into a relationship. Frequent (non-sexual) touching is essential for a married couple.

Service : To Support

(From Magnificent Marriage by Gordon MacDonald pp. 99-112, 123-129)

In romance, we feel things together; in companionship, we share things together. But in servanthood, we serve one another and bring about the kinds of changes *that God wants*.

If we believe that God has designed each of us to be a certain kind of person with special kinds of gifts, then the ultimate objective of relationships is to provide ministry which can bring people to the performance standards of that divine design. We make a choice therefore in our relationships: do we change one another to something that we want? Or do we effect change in accordance *with what God wants*?

We are not what God wants us to be, the Bible says, because we are sinners. From a practical perspective, that means that we are people whose original design has been warped and twisted. We are bundles of secrets, shames, and selfish habits. Until the secrets are revealed, the shames forgiven, and the habits changed, we will be far from God's plan for us.

A relationship can bring about such changes if it is cast in the servanthood mode. This is exactly what Jesus was trying to get across to his disciples near the end of their thirty-month experience together. We read in John 13, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper, laid aside his garments, and girded himself with a towel. Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded (verses 3-5). The verse cannot be segmented. It is important to note Jesus' sense of identity. He knew the extent of his authority, his origin, his future, and, therefore, his rights. Symbolically, he laid them all aside and in one act summed up everything he had been doing for the disciples for the past two and a half years: he assumed the role of a servant. In effect he said, "This is what I've been doing for you; I want you to repeat the act in your ministry every day as you come into the lives of human beings."

Servanthood was Jesus' method of bringing about change. As a plant grows to bloom in hothouse conditions, so a man can change when exposed to the love of a person committed not to *demanding* change but serving toward change. The disciples never understood this until they were filled with the Holy Spirit. And when they finally grasped it, they in turn changed the world. Servanthood in marriage requires three things.

The Principle of Surrender

Every Christian approach to marriage sooner or later arrives at Paul's great series of relational admonitions to the Ephesians in the fifth chapter of his epistle. The specific teaching on the subject of marriage begins many words

earlier when he first concerns himself with the unique lifestyle Christians are supposed to possess. He had warned them in Ephesians 4:17 that being members of the body of Christ meant that they had to step away from the accepted way of life which the Gentiles lived. He dealt with many relational problems such as anger, stealing, and exploitation. When he begins chapter five he becomes positive in his teaching: "Be imitators of God, and walk in love, *as Christ loved us*" Then Paul again launches into the dimensions of Christian life style which followed in the steps of Jesus. It is in this vein that he brings up the subject of mutual surrender in Ephesians 5:18. Christians do not *exploit* one another; they *submit* to one another. That is a universal principle among all Christian relationships: *it is the element of servanthood*. The best way to bring out the best from one another, Paul is saying, is to serve one another.

Then he sharpens the principle and brings it into the arena of marriage, "Wives, serve your husbands." He probably felt a need to say this because in their newfound faith, the Christian women were taking all kinds of liberties they did not have when they were non-Christians. Women in the pagan world had been playthings, sex-objects, house keepers, little else. In the fellowship of the Christian church they felt free and began to revel in a new kind of independence which they took to an immature extreme.

Paul goes on to illustrate the dynamics of this relationship. The husband is the head of the wife, he observes, in the same way that Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. I see the role of Christ in that statement in two dimensions: Christ is *initiator* of relationship as the church's Savior, and he is the *provider* of the relationship in the sense that the church is his body. Later in the paragraph, Paul reveals what he had in mind here when he says in verse 29: "A man *nourishes* and *cherishes* his body as Christ does the church."

In these two general ways a man is head of his wife. He is the initiator of the relationship; in the normal course of things it is the man who asks a woman to be partner with him in marriage. Second, he is normally responsible for nourishing and cherishing his wife, meaning that he provides for her protection, security, health, and welfare. He provides, in other words, for her betterment and growth.

A wife's desire to serve her husband is one of the greatest testimonies to her faith in Christ as Lord. This question of submission has been and will continue to be for some time a focus of controversy as we deal with the question of male and female relationships in the church. There are several facets of this which all of us ought to consider.

First, Paul appears to be recognizing certain offices in the family, just as he did in the previous chapter when he talked about offices in the church which were sovereign gifts of Christ. In the church, these offices provided structure to the

body, nurture, and protection. I think Paul's teaching is perfectly consistent here. He casts the husband in the role of head of the marriage relationship, as the one from whom the relationship emanates and the one who will provide the protective perimeter for the relationship in the home.

A second important observation flows from the first. Paul does not imply that headship is domination in the sense of power, and this seems to be where many people misunderstand him. Paul saw offices in the church as authoritative offices and asked people to submit to the men in those offices because it would be a sign of their love for Christ. But these were not *power* positions; rather they were *provision* positions. If the people in the church would submit to the pastor-teacher, he would—under God's direction—provide conditions in which all would grow.

When my wife and I enter our automobile, only one of us can drive. If I am the driver, I am the office holder in that particular relationship. Obviously she is in tacit agreement not to grab the wheel should she have a sudden whim to make a turn or pull over to stop at some store she sees. I, in turn, do not take my position as driver as one of power; rather, as one of providing the means by which we can both safely reach our destination.

One of the things which a person accepts if he submits to the God of the Bible is God's sovereign right to put certain people into certain positions which he chooses. Abraham did not take a civil service exam to compete for the patriarchal role he was given. Nor did Elijah ask to be a prophet any more than Paul submitted an application for apostleship. Throughout the Scriptures God chose men and women for certain functions and opportunities. He made no explanation for his choice except to say that he sovereignly made the choice.

God's choice in the family is for the husband to be the head of the wife. When Paul reaches for historical precedent on this matter, he takes the Corinthians back to the Garden and reminds them that the man was the first human being, and that out of him came a woman. There is a prominence only of order, not necessarily privilege. He goes on to say to the Corinthians, "In the Lord man is not independent of woman, nor she independent of him." To settle the score he also observes that while the first person was a man, man has been born of woman ever since. For Paul that evens things.

The Genesis account of God's judgment on the first couple is interesting. God turns to Eve, and he pronounces punishment. He does not specifically say what it was that she did; he merely tells her what the future is going to be like. She shall be caught in the paradox of bearing children in deep sorrow, yet at the same time she will be filled with a compelling desire to enter into affectionate relationships with her husband, which in turn will bring about the possibility of more pain. His final statement is, "He shall rule over you."

This is important, not because it is the first time the order of

relationships is stated, but because it is restated. In the pre-fall Garden experience, she had been a *helper*; now she is a *subject*. If one looks back to the reason for this, he may want to scan the method Eve used to make her decision about sin in the first place. Her evaluation of the serpent's temptation was threefold: she saw that the tree was good for food (appetite), a delight to the eyes (beauty), and it made one wise (intellect). She made a bad decision, and God relieved her of the decision-making responsibility from then on.

Adam's judgment, on the other hand, does begin with a specific indictment. "Because you did not listen to my voice. . . ." God says. Indeed, that is exactly what Adam did not do. He listened to the wrong voice: his wife's, who in turn had betrayed her role as *helper* and brought to Adam a decision founded on slippery ground. Adam had heard the voice of God in Genesis 2:17 before Eve was created. That was the voice to which *he* was to be subject. But he listened to his wife's voice speaking about something she knew nothing about. She had not heard the voice of God; she was ill-equipped to take leadership, but Adam caved in and listened to her anyway. Having listened to the wrong voice, Adam was now going to have to face a creation disturbed and convulsed by sin.

Paul's view of Christian marriage relationship is an attempt to reasonably recover the original Garden situation. It starts with the basics: we are safest when woman deliberately assumes the role of submission. I want to reemphasize that I am not suggesting anything that is not consistent with the order of relationships implicit in the doctrine of the church and, for that matter, in any divinely instituted community in both the Old and New Testament. God sovereignly chooses leaders, and a mark of our submission to God is our submission to those he has placed in leadership over us. The woman who begins her approach to marriage with the principle of submission as a helper firmly in her heart and mind can then begin to provide supportive leadership when it is sought by her husband.

This last thought is worth restating. What Paul is doing is stating the extreme realities of our relationships. This is the honest attitude of the Christian woman who recognizes that her weakness may consist in not always listening to the voice of God. By assuming the role of being subject to her husband, she is identifying with the specific sin of Eve and placing herself in a relational position so that she will not repeat that sin and betray her husband as Eve did hers.

There is a sense here of a theological reality which Western Christians may find it hard to swallow. It is the sense of mutual guilt: we pay for the sins of others, for we are mutually responsible for what each other has done. Woman is paying for the sin of Eve and lives under the headship of her husband: from helper to subject. Husbands are paying for the sin of Adam, having to work in a rebellious creation which is so resistant that it is difficult to enjoy it. The recreated woman in Christ begins by assuming the role of

servant and, by growing in the graces of Christ, becomes the helper once again to her husband. Now Paul does not stop at theologizing about woman's role. He moves on to the position of the Christian husband. Husbands *love* your wives... (how?)... as Christ loved the church... "At a first glance, many husbands have thought they have the upper hand in this relationship. Their first mistake is in their misunderstanding of the word *love*. They have equated Paul's view of love with Hollywood's, and thus they have made a fatal mistake.

Remember that when Paul wrote this, he knew nothing of the kind of dating game we play today; he was not thinking of wedding anniversaries, presents, dinners out, red roses, or anything that we think of under the word *love*. For him the word "love" was an action verb, not necessarily packed with romantic feeling. It was a word which spoke of total servanthood. If anyone was in doubt about the kind of servanthood he had in mind, he pointed them to the perfect model of love: Jesus Christ. How did Jesus Christ love the church? Paul responds with a three-point outline. He gave himself for it; he sanctified it; and he will present it in its perfected form, the result of his perfecting work.

This was not the first time Paul seized upon this model to bring people to an understanding of love. To the Philippians he had made the suggestion that Christian relationships were to have the characteristics of Christ's incarnation. Philippians 2:5ff. describes Jesus as surrendering his rights as part of the Godhead, submitting himself to the form and image of a servant, and, being discovered in *that form*, allowing himself to be crucified.

This is the drama of the role Paul has in mind for a man. Again let me point out the doctrine of extremes here that Paul is developing. Paul does not expect a husband literally to die for his wife any more than he expects a woman to be a total slave to her husband. But he has to say this to the Ephesians: you men have not treated your wives with the kind of value in mind that God wants you to have.

This is a practical point to meditate upon for a moment. If a man in his most humble heart-attitude says to himself, I am willing to die for my wife, he will treat her with a reverent tenderness and consideration. It is almost irrelevant to illustrate the point by suggesting the picture of an owner of an expensive automobile. If he has paid an exorbitant amount of money for his car, he is careful to polish it, maintain it, and drive it in conditions in which it will not be damaged or abused. In short, you will find no Rolls Royces on the jeep trails of the Rocky Mountains.

In the same way, when a man looks upon his wife and assumes the inner perspective that he has initiated this relationship at the cost of his own blood, she becomes a valuable associate to him. He will not exploit her, nor will he expose her to degrading conditions.

To give himself for her has some implications of the original meaning of the marriage vow. As Christ gave himself on the cross in total commitment to the church

which he loves, so a man gives himself totally to his wife. If what I've said is true, this man will never become a tyrant or a harsh dictator, but he will carefully cultivate his wife's welfare and draw from her the full value of what she has to offer him in the way of precious companionship.

The second thing Paul says that Christ did for the church was to sanctify it. To sanctify is to cleanse, to improve, to set apart for special ceremonial purposes. Theologically, we realize that that is exactly what Christ did for the church. He sanctified the church by washing it with his blood and by giving to it the new direction of the gospel. The church is being sanctified, perfected.

Paul says that a husband is to follow the loving model of Jesus. This means that to love one's wife means to provide opportunities for her to become sanctified, to grow in her experience as a human being toward her God-given potential. I see here the pastoral role of a husband, guaranteeing the spiritual experience of his family. The measurement of such a principle in our families is the answer to this question: is your wife a more mature child of God because she is married to you? Or has your lifestyle and spirit tended to draw her away from her relationship to Christ? The second answer is devastating!

The third principle of husband-love is that of presenting the church to the Father. One senses here the picture of Jesus Christ at the end of the age introducing the church formally to his Heavenly Father. Here is the church, Father, for which I have died, filled with my Spirit, and prayed for in my intercession ministry through the years. Our only conceivable image is a twofold one: the face of the proud groom at a wedding escorting his beautiful bride away from the marriage altar. But see the same man twenty-five years later, the marks of life etched upon his face and body. But his face is even more radiant as he stands for a 25th anniversary portrait surrounded by the family for which he has given so much.

So Christ stands before the Father and says in effect, the church is my most prized possession. I have given myself for it; I have cleansed it; and now it is worthy to be my bride; my highest achievement. I am blessed with the fact that the beauties of the universe are not enough to entice the eyes of the Savior. What he deems most attractive is the sanctified church.

What is Paul saying? That for a man, the greatest achievement and the most prized possession is a wife whom he has loved and served. Briefly, in case anyone has missed his communication, Paul launches into a second allegory to express a man's commitment to his wife. He asks men to reflect upon their care for their bodies. A man who is wise cares for his body. He feeds it, clothes it with protective coverings, and he exercises it. He doesn't exploit it or unnecessarily expose it to situations which will be dangerous for it. Need there be anything else said about what Paul is trying to tell the Ephesian men?

The apostle closes off his teaching on this subject by saying in verse 30, “We do this because we are members of his body.” Our submission to one another is a basic testimony to our submission to him. This is very important for young couples to ponder.

Now what Paul has done in this teaching to the Ephesians is to draw a circle of basic human equality. Wives, be subject—husbands, love. While we can see two different points of departure, sovereignly chosen, we see the same basic responsibility on both parts. Both have functions of servanthood: to bring out the best for the other. But it begins with submission, one to the other.

Perhaps a way to illustrate it would be to suggest that a man in the marriage relationship parallels the brain in a human mechanism. The brain is basically the initiator of all actions which the person carries on. But in the healthy situation, the brain does not unnecessarily exploit that initiating privilege. It has learned to work in concert with all other parts of the body—for example, the heart. If the heart begins to beat faster and faster, because the blood flow demands greater pumping power, it may send a message to the brain suggesting a slowdown of whatever function is causing the blood to need to run so swiftly. The brain has learned to trust the judgment of the heart. It processes the judgment of the heart and issues orders to other limbs to cease doing what they are doing. To apply our ridiculous illustration, the brain has submitted itself to the judgment of the heart.

The Ephesian husband, who is by God’s choice the head of his home, learns that leadership sometimes means submitting himself to his wife’s judgment. Thus a full circle of relationship has been completed, each able to complement the other in his or her weakness. The dynamic of it all is a mystery, and that it can even work is a miracle of God. It is also a paradox for which the world has no answer: the more we serve one another because we are submissive the faster we grow and experience personal freedom to be what God has designed us to be.

Servanthood demands Sensitivity.

The two great questions in a sensitivity-orientated relationship are these: what are my spouses needs and what are my spouses potentials? Needs tend to be deficiencies of personality and ability which one brings into a marriage and which a partner can correct. Potential describes qualities which can emerge in a person if he or she is encouraged and assisted. When Christ loved the church, Paul says, he accepted it as it was. He gave it the gifts of personalities and doctrines that would help it grow. This resulted in a spiritual strength that stopped it from being tossed “to and fro upon every wind and wave of doctrine and the whims of man” (Eph. 4:13ff.).

In marriage, human beings have very definite needs. We discover these needs only as we sensitize ourselves to the human spirit of our spouse. Strange as it may seem, we do

not always know our own needs. It often takes a loving relationship to reveal them and do something about them.

One area of potential need often results from the scars and aches of the past. A wife is extremely touchy about being criticized, and when any shortcoming is pointed up to her she dissolves in tears. Her husband is extremely frustrated: he knows that he cannot go through life withholding from her every opinion he has which seems to threaten her self-esteem and personal security. He can choose to punish her on this matter, making her more miserable than ever, or he can begin to ask himself about the past. What has made her so super-sensitive?

Searching conversation reveals a difficult relationship with a father who was never happy with her accomplishments. As a child she had walked on tiptoe for fear that she would feel the harshness of his disapproval. Husband and wife begin to face this fact of the past together. Little by little he is able to show her that his necessary expressions of criticism are not in the same pattern of her unappreciative father. Rather, his comments are designed to make their relationship fuller and more helpful to both. We seldom look back over the shoulder of our spouses and see some of the hurts they have brought with them.

Sensitivity also leads us to make a loving evaluation of the honest weaknesses each has. Some of these weaknesses can be improved upon; others may simply have to be accepted and built around. A certain man entering into marriage proves to be quite undependable when he commits himself to a schedule. He is invariably late to social engagements. It is not that he intends to be discourteous, but he has never fully grappled with the realities of time. More and more he becomes an irritation to his friends who are always delayed by his tardiness. His new wife is sensitive to the fact that this is not a deliberate but rather an unconscious weakness on his part. She will serve him as she sensitizes herself to this fact about him. Little by little she sets a higher standard for his schedule-making. She points up to him his commitments and highlights the need to get underway in advance of the meeting time. She cajoles, she plans, she affirms him when the pattern begins to change. She explains to him that she is proud of him, that she respects him, and that she wants others to love him as she does. This, in part, will happen if he will overcome this blind spot. He accepts her desire to make him into something better through this effort, and the habit pattern is dissolved and replaced by another more acceptable one.

We must also be sensitive to the needs caused by spiritual struggles. We cannot all grow to be mature Christians overnight, but, on the other hand, none of us will grow at all in our relationships with God if there is not someone by us who prods us and pushes us along. This is part of the pastoral role which was earlier mentioned in this chapter. As we grow in our marriages we learn to sense when our spouse is in or out of touch with the lordship of Jesus Christ. A gentle word, a loving rebuke in a trusting

relationship may be all that is needed to point out to the other that the heart is a bit cold today. It is the lack of sensitivity that is so tragic. The failure to see the signals of need that hurt so many relationships.

The second area that demands sensitivity is that of each other's gifts and potentials. For each of us is a human bundle of latent talents and gifts which God has created to be used in the fullness of life and service for others. Gifts and potentials are first brought out when a marriage partner sets out on a deliberate mission of discovery in the life of the other. There must also be encouragement. The two other rules for developing gifts and potentials are assist and release. To release one another means to provide opportunity in which the other can become more of what God wants him or her to be.

Servanthood requires Servability

And as it often short-circuited by a spouse who will not assist and release, it is also frequently killed by a partner who will not allow himself to be served. Peter is a good example. When Jesus began the rounds of the disciples, washing their feet, it was Peter who stepped back in horror. There is no way, Lord, that you are going to wash my feet, Peter said. For Peter it seemed the only thing to do. First, he didn't want Jesus to demean himself like that. Then too, Peter felt a bit embarrassed; why hadn't he thought of that? Add to that a touch of pride: the one whom Peter followed should not have to do such a thing. And in so thinking, Peter completely lost the message that Jesus had been trying to teach for three years.

The ministry of servanthood in the church demands not only servants, but people willing to be served. That's what Jesus meant when he said to him, "Peter, if you will not let me wash your feet, you'll have no part in me." It was Jesus' way of saying: there is only one way that you can experience the fullness of relationship with me, and that is as you let me enter your life as a servant.

Here is a significant factor that has to be reckoned with in Christian marriage. Are you and I *willing* to be served? Peter thought he was unserveable. But Jesus penetrates that thinking by suggesting that the only way people can be changed is through being vulnerable to service.

Vulnerability means that we have to let each other into our lives. How? Vulnerability begins when husbands and wives become free to share and open up their weaknesses to one another. It is one thing for my wife to find weaknesses within me; it is another when I sense the freedom to tell her what I think my inner struggles are. And I have not always found that easy to do, for to share a weakness is one way of putting yourself on the line as wanting change. And I don't always want to change.

A few years ago I began to admit to myself that it was difficult for me to rise early in the morning for a time of personal contact with God. It was hard at first to confess

that I would rather sleep than pray. It was even more difficult to admit it to my wife. I became "serveable," however, when I finally summoned the nerve to talk about my weakness. "I want to share this with you," I said, "so that you'll help me. I need you to make sure I've set the clock at night, and that I'll respond to it when it rings in the morning. I'd like you to kick me out of bed if I appear to be ignoring the clock." Gail promised she would, and she did. A weakness I could not handle myself was overcome by allowing Gail to enter into my life and serve me—even if she was rather ruthless about it at times.

Vulnerability comes not only when we share weaknesses, but when we open ourselves to trustworthy criticism from one another. I use the adjective trustworthy because one has to grow in his or her confidence that what a spouse says about our behavior at a party, about our physical appearance, or about the quality of a job we are doing is an accurate appraisal of how things are. But servanthood implies that criticism is given in love, and that it is designed only to build and improve—never to wound or destroy.

Gail and I learned quickly in our marriage that there are times to criticize and. times to remain silent. She discovered that the drive home from church was not the time to take my sermon apart. I was too emotionally involved with it to be objective. I learned that the days just before a menstrual period were not the proper time to comment about the taste of a certain vegetable. Better to wait for the moment when there was optimum hunger for improvement and growth.

I am "serveable" when I begin to share my dreams and visions about the future, and I bring my spouse into the stardust of my thinking. I do this now, because little by little my servanthood-oriented spouse has learned that there are conversations stamped "dream." While one might constructively criticize specific plans, one does not trample on dreams. Dreams are not open to editing or ridicule. They are the happy moments in marriage when our wildest thoughts are allowed to soar. We share them together, and from them a destiny is compiled. We are "serveable" when we release our dreams, and we serve when we do not puncture them. What an ecstatic moment when you discover one other person in the world with whom you can be transparent, who will not shoot holes in your beautiful balloon.

How do we build vulnerability in a marriage? This is a very important question. A wife complains that her husband shares very little with her, that he is a closed book and that she never knows what he is thinking. The husband responds with several episodes in which he had tried to talk about something he felt very deeply only to be met with a Niagara of criticism. "I *knew* all the answers," he says. "I didn't need answers from her; what I did need was someone to sense why I was struggling; she never seemed aware of that." Finally, he stopped trying to find understanding from her, and he turned inward. Here is a couple that needs to

build an atmosphere of vulnerability or serveability.

We lay the foundation for vulnerability when we establish in our marriage that acts in the past and facts in the present will not necessarily be held against us in the future. If a man frankly shares with his wife that on a recent business trip he had an inner battle with lust, will she remind him of this every time he goes away in the future? Will it become a theme of criticism to which she returns frequently? Does she allow the sharing to fester in her heart so that her trust in him crumbles?

We are talking about a brand of forgiveness. To establish serveability in marriage is to come to the point where we choose not to hold the past up to our spouse in the future. For a wife who has been betrayed by her husband in the past, this is an extremely difficult spiritual exercise. But she can never hope to regain the lost ground in their relationship until she disciplines herself to do it joyfully.

Serveability grows when we learn the exercise of being able to pray with each other and for each other. Over the years I have been plagued with an occasional series of headaches which come for a few weeks and then go away. On one occasion not long ago when the pain was seemingly unbearable, I asked my wife to lay her hands on me and pray. I remember it as one of the precious moments of our marriage. I had in that act admitted that I was at the bottom of my experience: I was without strength, and I needed her intercession. I would not trade the pain away for anything because through it I have learned the joy there is in asking each other for prayer and knowing that the promised intercession will be there.

Serveability grows a third time when a couple learns that their life together is a shared ministry and vision. As long as two people see their lives as two separate thrusts of existence where they rise or fall on their own merits, there is no marital ball game of consequence. Listen to a married woman who illustrates what I mean:

Dear Abby: My husband and I do not get along very well. In fact, if it weren't for the kids I wouldn't live within a thousand miles of this idiot. We are both artists and my husband specializes in Western art now, and he has been selling his paintings before the oil is dry on the canvas. I don't mean to put him down, but my work is much better even if it doesn't sell half as well. The public just happens to be going for gimmick art. I can hardly stand it when my husband sells a painting. For one thing he has a way of gloating that makes me want to put my fist right through his face. I wish I knew how to get over this envious attitude. Can you help me?

No one is serveable in that home because the lifestyle is not shared. It is competitive, not complementary. In contrast, I think of an elder in our church who enjoys an excellent job in the industrial world as an engineer. His wife has a superior singing voice and is gifted in choral conducting. I have watched him while he quietly sits in the congregation as his wife directs a fifty-voice choir. He delights in sitting

with their children while she stands in the spotlight. On choir practice night, he is at home making sure that the children have a continuity of parental fellowship while their mother is gone. I sense that every time she lifts her arms for the downbeat, his heart is in tune with hers. Her musical performance to the glory of God is not hers alone; it belongs to them both. It is *their* ministry. She is at that point serveable, and he is willing to serve.

There is a level of marital euphoria which comes when two people are welded together in a mutual dream. They are committed to ideals for which they would gladly die. For some it is the building of a discipling relationship with a group of high school young people; for others it is the conducting of a Bible study of neighbors. For a third couple, it is investment in the lives of children. But there is a joint ministry, and the two share it together.

Serveability grows if there is a level of "pleaseability." There is joy in serving one who is thankful for being served. In our book about birds at home there is a reference to a style of "unpleaseability":

The male housewren is a habitual nest starter. He stuffs any likely nesting cavity with twigs, grass, and other materials perhaps to mark his territory and perhaps as an inducement to the females when they arrive. As soon as they appear, the busy male sings to draw their attention. He courts one ardently, wings quivering, tail flickering straight up. If she proves receptive, he escorts her around his prospective nest sites. The female almost always disapproves of her mate's homebuilding efforts. After she selects one of his sites, she usually removes all the materials and starts the nest all over again. Sometimes she collects strange items. One nest contained 52 hairpins, 188 nails, 4 tacks, 13 staples, 10 pins, 11 safety pins, 6 paperclips, 2 hooks, 3 garter fasteners, and a buckle.' Talk about hard to please. One can see the forlorn shake of the male's head, after all his hard work, as he sees his new wife completely tear apart his creative efforts. I suspect that one could also imagine his irritation every time he steps on one of the tacks.

There have to be those times when we declare our thanksgiving for the servanthood efforts of our marital partner. We have to show how we are growing in the atmosphere of their love, and we have to say thank you.

Recently, I took a couple of days to retreat by myself for the purposes of study and prayer. One of the things I did on my retreat was to compose a letter to my wife. In it I outlined the great themes of our relationship and what Gail had done over the years to build up my personal life. It took several hours to write, but it was worth each minute because I was able to put my finger on the ways God has used her to shape me. "How do you say 'thank you' for many years of service?" I wrote. "The words seem far too small to describe the appreciation in my heart. Perhaps the fact that I have measurably grown in the sunshine of your love is the best way there is to say, 'I appreciate what you've done!'"

Nine Ways to Edify

1. Make the irrevocable decision to never again be critical of your partner in word, thought, or deed. This may sound like an impossibility, but it is not. It is simply a decision backed up by action until it becomes a habit you would not change if you could.
2. Study your partner. Become sensitive to the areas where your partner feels a lack and think of ways to build up your partner in those areas particularly.
3. Think every day of positive qualities and behavior patterns you admire and appreciate in your mate.
4. Consistently verbalize praise and appreciation for your partner. Be genuine, be specific, be generous. You edify with the *spoken* word.
5. Recognize your partner's talents, abilities, and accomplishments. Communicate your respect for the work he or she does.
6. Husband, show your wife publicly and privately how precious she is to you. And do not express admiration for another woman. This is never edifying to your wife. Keep your attention focused on her!
7. Wife, show your husband that he is the most important person in your life—always. Seek his opinions and value his judgment.
8. Respond to each other physically and facially. The face is the most distinctive and expressive part of a person. Your mate wants to see you smile, eyes sparkling in response to him or her.
9. Always exhibit the greatest courtesy to each other. You should be VIPs in your own home!



n marriage, it sometimes seems that we are asked to give up all hopes for personal happiness in order to provide happiness for our mates. If we are not experiencing the satisfaction that comes from resting in God's goodness, we look to our partners to meet our needs. When they fail to do so, as inevitably they do, we retreat behind protective distance to minimize our discomfort. As a Christian, the riches of heaven are mine. I am called to believe this. And God has given me a taste of what lies ahead to excite my faith. The problem, sadly, is that very few Christians have really tasted and seen the Lord is good.

ut those who have cast their entire lot with Christ know something of the joy and peace He provides. If I have experienced the answer to my deepest longings in Christ, then I will be able to see past my longings and discern my wife's needs; and when I see her needs then my experience of satisfaction in Christ will create in me a deep desire to promote similar satisfaction in my wife. A proper understanding of marriage as a calling to high ministry will cause us to look at the deepest needs of our mates and to appreciate our unique opportunity to touch those needs in significant ways.

Honor one another

Honor is to any growing and loving relationship as diamonds are to jewelry. For the ancient Greeks, something of “honor” called to mind something “heavy or weighty.” Gold for example, was something of honor because it was heavy and valuable. And the word dishonor actually meant lightweight “mist” . . . unimportant things. If we honor someone, that person carries weight with us, like the “heavyweight champion of the world.” That person is valuable to us. Honor is so weighty and significant in relationships that I’ve dealt with it at least briefly in every book I’ve written. When we honor someone we give that person a highly respected position in our lives. Honor goes hand in glove with love, a verb whose very definition is doing worthwhile things for someone who is valuable to us. What’s the relationship between honor and love? We first honor — increase the value of — someone, and then we feel the desire to love — do worthwhile things for — the person. Love is honor put into action regardless of the cost. Honor provides us with the energy to stay in love. Consider the ancient truth: Whatever you treasure, that’s where your heart is. When we highly value something, such as a job, car, friend, toy, rifle, or a coat, we enjoy taking care so as not to lose it or harm it. We enjoy “being with it.” I’ve found that as I increase the value of my mate and family, it’s easier to love them. I want to be with them, and I feel as though I’m “in love.” The feeling of love is simply a reflection of my level of honor for them. So how do you retrieve lost feelings of love? By choosing to increase the value that person has in your mind.

(From *Making Love Last Forever* by Gary Smalley)

How to Bless

Bless and do not curse the one who is giving you a hard time.

Be empathic and understanding with your partner.

Live in harmony with your mate.

Do not think you are better than your partner.

Do not act proud; do not act conceited.

Do not repay evil with evil (even in the most petty detail).

Be careful to do what your partner considers to be right.

As far as it depends on you, live at peace in your marriage.

Never take revenge.

Consistently do kind things for your partner, no matter what treatment you receive.

Do not let yourself be overcome by evil. Instead, overcome evil with good.

On Blessing and being Blessed

God has called every Christian into a lifestyle of consistent blessing of others through (1) *words* and (2) *behavior* in 1 Peter 3:9-12 (cf Psa 34:13-17). This means consistently blessing those in our own household—our marriage partner first of all. Blessing in word and action is most especially required of us in response to any manner of evil behavior or insulting speech. As you apply this to your own marriage, understand that you never have any justification for speaking to your partner scornfully, angrily, or deceitfully. Your partner’s bad behavior can never excuse your own in God’s eyes. If you fail to bless, God says that your mouth will bring more trouble on you; you will miss out on the blessing that He had planned for you; and, instead, His face will be against you (i.e., nothing you try to do in your marriage will prosper). The rewards of blessing are also plainly spelled out: God will see to it that we are blessed by Him (no matter what our partner does); that we will “love life” and experience good days; that He will watch over us with special protective care; and that He will hear and answer our prayers. Few choices of life have been given to us more clearly. Often we hesitate between this path and that, wondering what the outcome will be. In this case, we know. If we choose the disciplined path of blessing in our marriage (the road surely less traveled by!), it will make all the difference in our life. We know it because God has said it. The way is simple, if challenging, and can be followed by anyone who uses the spiritual resources the Lord Jesus Christ provides.

(from *Love Life for Every Married Couple* by Ed Wheat)

Worksheet #6 Servanthood: The Art of Ministering to One Another
Steps to Sharing

Look over the chart of the five **Types of Marriages**.

Which seems to most characterize your marriage? Why?

Creatively evaluate where you can develop sharing in your own marriage.

Look at your life together in these four areas:

Common Ground. Think of all the things you actually share right now. How can you enjoy it more?

Separate Ground. Parts of your life, particularly in the area of work and responsibility, may be separate. You may also have special interests that your partner will never become directly involved in. How can you bridge these gaps in order to share your separate worlds? Through communication? Through mutual understanding and encouragement?

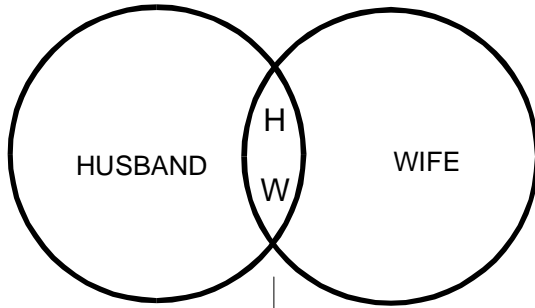
New Ground for One. What interests can you begin to enjoy because your partner enjoys them? If you each develop new enthusiasms to match your partner's, life will become more interesting than ever.

New Ground for Both. What new, absorbing interests can you develop together?

Every couple's plan for sharing will be different. Just make sure you have a plan. The natural tendency is to go your separate ways. Sharing helps to create an *enduring* love.

TYPES OF MARRIAGES

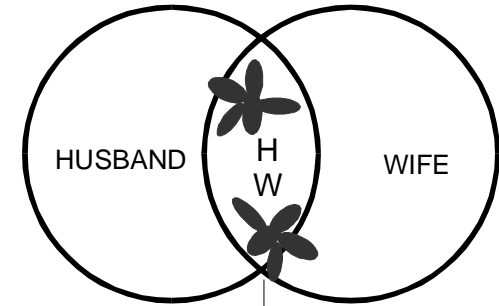
DEVITALIZED



LEVEL OF INVOLVEMENT

A placid half alive relationship, devoid of emotional involvement, with little conflict or passion. Surface level communication, no sharing of thoughts or feelings

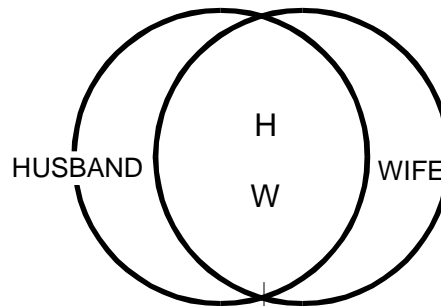
CONFLICT HABITUATED



LEVEL OF INVOLVEMENT

Frequent conflict, aggression and blaming; destructive, but can't seem to change. Seems to enjoy conflict, almost can't live without it. Involvement is high, but painful; relationships quite volatile.

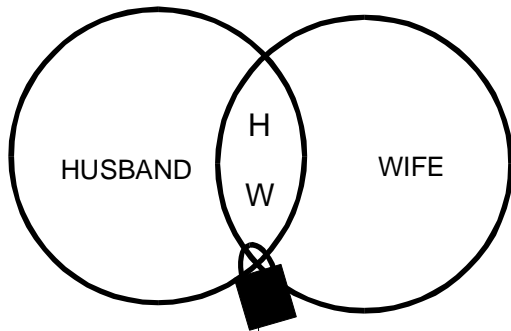
VITAL



LEVEL OF INVOLVEMENT

Very involved in each other's interests, but the relationship not locked. Togetherness as much as possible, good communication; open and honest, sharing feelings and roles with each other, but maintaining individuality and uniqueness.

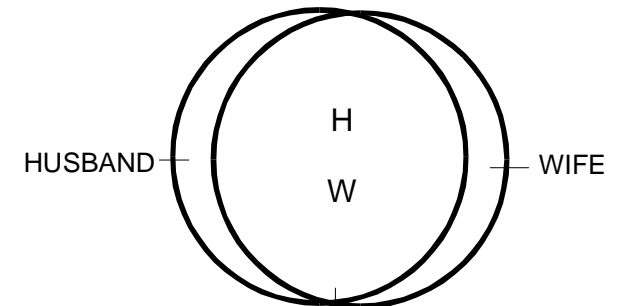
PASSIVE-CONGENIAL



LEVEL OF INVOLVEMENT

A comfortable relationship with few ups and downs, with some involvement, but little excitement and a mostly humdrum routine.

TOTAL



LEVEL OF INVOLVEMENT

An intense relationship of constant togetherness. Everything is shared and little conducted separately. Individual growth limited with a degree of stifling and smothering. Any small change or alteration "rocks the boat".