

CONTENTS

1. The Role of Savior	5
2. The Role of Sanctifier	23
3. The Role of Satisfier	43
The Urban Alternative	61

THE ROLE OF SAVIOR

A preacher was performing a wedding when he came to the part of the ceremony in which it is traditional to ask if anyone present knows any reason why the wedding should not proceed. So the preacher asked if there was anyone who objected to this marriage, and a voice rang out through the church, "I do."

"Quiet," the preacher said. "You're the groom. You can't object!"

I've never conducted a wedding in which this has happened. But judging by the staggering divorce statistics in our culture, maybe there should be more wedding ceremonies that are brought to a halt because someone objects to the union. And that includes weddings between two Christians, because the body of Christ in

America isn't doing any better than the world when it comes to divorce.

It's obvious that a lot of people are getting married with little or no idea of what they're doing and/or with a faulty view of the person they are marrying. We all know that during the courting process a lot of selling goes on. Then when the two people get married, they discover they have been sold a bill of goods. The marriage isn't what they thought it would be—and one or both parties want out.

It is my contention that one reason so many people are having so much trouble in their marriages today is that they are marrying sociologically instead of theologically. That is, their marriages are based more on social conventions and family expectations than on solid biblical foundations. It's no wonder, then, that many husbands and wives have little idea what they should be doing to make their marriages work.

We are going to address the man's role in this marriage guide, but I also want to note briefly the woman's role because the two are side by side in a crucial passage that closes the Bible's most extensive discussion of the marital relationship. In Ephesians 5:33 we read, "Each individual among you also is to *love* his own wife even as himself, and the wife must see to it that she *respects* her husband" (*italics added*).

These two highlighted words are a concise summary of the responsibilities that husbands and wives have toward each other. Husbands are commanded to love their

wives, and wives are commanded to respect their husbands. Since this marriage guide is dedicated to the man's role in the home, we're going to talk about what it means for a husband to love his wife.

The book of Ephesians 5:25–31 spells out in detail how a husband is to treat his wife. I want to begin with the basic command that encompasses a husband's calling: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church" (v. 25a).

The word "love" has been tossed around flippantly and reduced to its lowest common denominator today, to the point that many people don't see any difference between the statements "I love yogurt" and "I love my wife."

That's why we need to begin by reminding ourselves that the Bible's definition of love is so much more than personal taste or preference, or even affection. The biblical concept of agape love involves giving of yourself for the benefit of another, even at your own expense. Biblical love is defined by passionately and righteously seeking the well-being of another. Biblical love is an act of the will and not just a fuzzy feeling in the stomach. That's why God can command us to love one another. Love really has nothing to do with whether you feel loving at a particular moment. It has to do with the need of the person being loved, not the feelings of the one doing the loving. We'll see later how this love applies to a marital relationship.

With this definition of love in hand, we are ready to consider three practical ways that a husband can fulfill

his role: by becoming his wife's savior, sanctifier, and satisfier.

BECOMING YOUR WIFE'S SAVIOR

The first way that a man is to love his wife is by becoming her savior. Don't get shook up by that term because we're using it strictly in a nonreligious sense to capture the force of Paul's command that husbands are to love their wives the way Christ loves the church.

That means we need to find out how Christ loves the church because that's the standard we husbands need to attain before we can legitimately be classified as lovers. Every man I know wants to be a lover, so let's find out what it takes to love our wives as Jesus Christ loves His church.

Now before we begin our study, I want to ask you to lay aside what you've heard about love and marriage on the street, on television, or in the movies, and maybe even from your family background, and simply let God's Word speak to you directly.

There are at least three principles or truths that every husband needs to know about loving his wife based on Jesus' love for the church. Even if you're not yet married, I would encourage you to take note of these because they are at the heart of being a successful husband. We can summarize these things in three words: sacrifice, suffering, and substitution.

SACRIFICING FOR YOUR WIFE

How did Christ love the church? First, “[He] gave Himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:25b). That’s referring to the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross so that sinners like you and me can be saved. So if a husband’s love for his wife is to be like Christ’s love for the church, we could say that his love should be cruciform—in the shape of a cross.

Now, most men don’t want to hear about crosses and sacrifice. We want to hear about how we’re supposed to be wearing a crown as the king of our castle.

Well, I have some news for all of us. Jesus wore a crown, but it was a crown of thorns on his way to the cross. And He’s wearing a crown today as King of heaven, but the cross came first. You don’t get the crown without the cross. To put it another way, you don’t get the glory of Easter without the pain of the cross.

So although most men want to talk about the glory of love, the first thing God wants to know about you as a husband is this: When your wife looks at you, does she see a cross? God wants you to be a look-alike of Jesus, a “little Jesus” in your home by the sacrificial way you love your wife.

We men are great at rapping our love. We can sound very impressive to a woman, talking about how we will be there for her and protect her and even die for her if necessary.

But we’re not crazy. We know that the chances of this happening are very remote. I personally can’t think of one man I know who has been shot or stabbed or mauled

defending his wife from a crazed intruder, and chances are you can't either. That's not going to happen to most of us, or to anyone we know. So we're pretty safe declaring how we would make the ultimate sacrifice for our wife.

But for most of us, it's another story when it comes to the everyday stuff of married life—the sacrificing of our desires, opinions, preferences, and plans for our wives. When God calls husbands to give themselves up for their wives, He is not simply talking about being willing to die. Sacrificing for our wives involves being willing to nail our desires and our agenda to the cross to love our wives and meet their needs.

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This brings us to the area where we fail as husbands so often, which is selfishness. Men are often reluctant to give up their wants and their agendas, when necessary, for their wives. Yet a husband should let his wife see that she is of such infinite value in his eyes that he would lay aside anything for her well-being.

The question of a husband's sacrifice is very simple: If I gave your wife a piece of paper and asked her to list what you have given up that's of value to you because of what she needs, desires, or cherishes, how long would her list be?

If I asked her in what ways you have adjusted your plans and schedule in the past month because you saw that she had a burden or a need you could help meet, would she be able to recall such times?

If not, my friend, you have stopped sacrificing. You have stopped representing Jesus in your home.

Now a husband may say his wife didn't remember something, or that there were other circumstances involved. But the point is that our sacrifice should be visible as well as verbal. We need to play as good a game as we talk. In other words, our wives shouldn't have to ransack their memories to try to recall the last time we did something for them that qualified as sacrificial because they benefited from it, even though it cost us.

Let me illustrate what I mean by using Christ's example. Is there anything fuzzy or hard to recall about the reality of His sacrifice for us and how we benefited from it? Of course not. The only reason we are saved is because Jesus went to the cross and laid down His life so we could pass from death to life and move from hell to heaven.

And just in case someone may miss the extent of Jesus Christ's sacrifice, Paul wrote these words:

Although [Jesus] existed in the form of God, [He] did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped,

but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:6–8)

Before we sinful human beings came along, Jesus never had to experience hunger or thirst or pain. He was never lonely or mistreated or misunderstood. He wasn't hounded to death before He entered this world and gave His life as a sacrifice for you and me. He left the splendor of heaven for the misery and suffering of earth, all because of His love for us.

Jesus could have adopted the attitude that some husbands have: "I am not about to sacrifice myself for someone who doesn't appreciate my effort and doesn't sacrifice anything for me." Praise God that Jesus didn't take this position, or we would be in big trouble. Jesus gave Himself up for the church.

One of the interesting places where you hear "give yourself up" terminology today is in the game of baseball, which has a play called the sacrifice bunt.

The basic play is simple. The batter gives up his chance to take his three swings at the ball so he can lay down a bunt and move the runner or runners along. The batter who sacrifices is almost always thrown out at first. In fact, that's the plan because he doesn't want the runner or runners ahead of him to be thrown out and lose the chance to score.

What's interesting is the mental process involved

when a batter looks up and sees the third-base coach give the bunt sign. The need for a sacrifice bunt often comes at a crucial point in the game, when one run could make the difference between winning and losing.

In other words, the batter who gets the sacrifice sign is being asked to give up his chance to be "the man," the hero, in a tight situation. He can't flex his muscles and show what he can do with his bat. His job is to tap out a meek bunt and get thrown out at first for the greater good of the team.

I think you know where I'm going with this. God has called every husband to lay down a sacrifice bunt for his wife, so to speak. On a day-to-day basis, this may simply mean not always having to have your way just because you're the leader in the home. Sacrifice involves what is best for the other person, not necessarily what is best for us. Jesus gave up heaven to save us, not because He had to, but because He chose to.

Jesus' sacrifice tells husbands what it means to love. We love by choice, not by feeling. As we said earlier, loving your wife today has little to do with whether you feel like being loving today. Biblical love is generated by the need of the person being loved, not necessarily the feelings or wishes of the one doing the loving.

When the desires of the one who is doing the loving and the needs of the one being loved come together, that's great. The Bible says that Jesus endured the cross "for the joy set before Him" (Hebrews 12:2). His joy was in the knowledge that His sacrifice would purchase our

redemption. He was joyful because of His great love for us (see Ephesians 2:4).

That's important because we're not saying that a husband's act of sacrificing for his wife should be a painful thing. He doesn't need to grit his teeth and grunt and do it because he knows it's best for her. When you love your wife the way Christ loves the church, sacrificing for her can bring great delight because you know you have brought joy to her.

But even when sacrifice does hurt and involves real cost to a husband, he is still called to lay aside his wishes for the good of his wife. Too many marriages are hurting because there is no sacrifice involved.

SUFFERING FOR YOUR WIFE

When a man decides to love his wife with Christlike love, then in addition to sacrifice there will be suffering. You can't give up something that is important or valuable to you and not suffer.

When Jesus Christ was in the garden, He prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me" (Matthew 26:39). The cross was traumatic for Jesus to face because He knew it meant such great suffering. His human spirit was engulfed in agony as He looked ahead to the crucifixion.

But Christ also knew there was no other way to accomplish our redemption, so He concluded His prayer by saying, "Yet not as I will, but as You will." Sacrifice brings suffering.

To love your wife with self-sacrificial love is going to hurt sometimes. Jesus called us as His people to take up our cross and follow Him (see Mark 8:34).

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You didn't think the cross was only for Christ, did you? My favorite verse in the Bible tells us otherwise. It is a verse that I say every morning to myself when I wake up and start my day. Galatians 2:20 says, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me."

We also must die to ourselves daily to follow Christ, and for husbands this includes dying to our plans and our preferences in order to love our wives as ourselves. Nailing these things to the cross can hurt. But again, you can't get to the glory of Easter and the resurrection without

enduring the cross and dying to yourself.

Besides surrendering your own desires and plans, let me mention another way that showing Christ's love to your wife may hurt. It may hurt because she may not respond immediately in the way you would like her to respond. She may doubt your sincerity or turn a cold shoulder to your attempts at sacrificial love.

I say that because what we're talking about here is not a magic wand a husband can wave over his marriage and instantly erase years of frustration or hurt. A husband may have to persevere through a period of mistrust, skepticism, or even hostility in order to break through the protective shell that his wife has built up around her heart.

That's why a husband needs to take his cue from Christ and hang in there. By that I mean a husband needs to keep on loving his wife regardless of whether she appreciates or even deserves his sacrifice.

This is the way Christ loved us. Paul said in Romans 5 that it's easy to love people when they're good and nice. "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). We weren't nice, and we weren't easy to love. But Jesus didn't say that if we would treat Him right, He would love us. He loved us even when we were ignoring Him and trampling His love in the dirt.

I hope you know that Jesus could have come down from the cross. As the old gospel song says, "He could have called ten thousand angels." Jesus didn't have to stay on the cross, but love nailed Him there.

Jesus was willing to suffer and die for us, and God is asking husbands to imitate His Son in their homes. But that's hard for men to do because by nature we are deal-makers. Many husbands make deals with their wives, even if they never actually verbalize it. "If you meet my sexual needs, I'll love you. If you cook my food and let me watch sports and don't spend too much money, everything will be fine."

But when we start putting conditions on our love, we have redefined love and taken it away from the biblical meaning. Again, I'm not saying it will always be easy, because you may not get the response you were looking for.

One man told me, "My wife is keeping me from loving her!" I know what he meant, because his marriage was in rough shape. But I still had to point out to him that he was starting in the wrong place. Christlike love doesn't make "if you will, I will" deals.

You may say, "Tony, this kind of love sounds pretty risky. You're saying I may have to risk misunderstanding, mistreatment, or even rejection in order to love and serve my wife. You're saying I have to risk crucifixion!"

That's right. The love I'm talking about is risky, and it involves a cross. That's why your faith has to be not in your ability to love, or even in the response of your wife, but in the God "who raises the dead" (2 Corinthians 1:9).

Jesus knew that if He went all the way to Calvary to bleed and die for our sins, His Father would raise Him from the dead. You say, "But God isn't raising me from the

grave. I'm not experiencing His resurrection power in my marriage."

Maybe it's because you haven't died to yourself yet. You can't resurrect folk who aren't dead. True love involves suffering, even to the point of going to the cross.

SUBSTITUTING FOR YOUR WIFE

The third way that a husband shows Christlike love to his wife is by substitution.

We read about Jesus' substitutionary death for us in Romans 5:8. He took our place and took the stroke for our sin. We were the ones who deserved to be on the cross. There was no question about who was right and who was wrong when it came to Jesus becoming our substitute. We had no argument to offer Him to justify ourselves.

**MEN, IF YOU WANT TO SEE YOUR
WIFE BLOSSOM INTO A LOVING,
RESPONSIVE MATE, THE MARITAL
BALL IS IN YOUR COURT.**

So if a husband is going to be a savior, a Christlike example in his home, he must be willing to bear the stroke

without fighting over who is right or fighting for his right to be right and have the last word.

Men are detectives at heart. Maybe it comes from watching too many old "whodunit" movies. But we like to get in there and figure out who said what first and who did what. We like to sift through all the evidence so we can track down the culprit and make sure justice is done and the guilty party is fingered.

Of course, our wives usually approach marital conflict or disagreement from a totally different perspective. They're more interested in the personal and emotional implications of the conflict than in arguing about who started it or who's right.

This means there will be occasions when a husband may feel justified in insisting that he is right. But the emotional fallout from taking that position far outweighs the momentary satisfaction of saying, "I'm right, and you know it." There's such a thing as winning the momentary battle and losing the marital war.

This thing of being right and justifying ourselves is a big one for men. We're wired in such a way that we like to be right, and we like for other people to know that we are right—even when we are wrong! We'll even lie sometimes rather than admit that we don't know what we're talking about.

One of the more common areas where this tendency shows up is in driving. There isn't a man alive who doesn't believe deep down that he could follow a trail through trackless woods like Daniel Boone. Now I can assure you

that Daniel Boone's wife never said to him, "Honey, are you sure you know where you're going?" But our wives often ask us that question. And we can be sweating bullets, looking desperately for a road sign or an exit. But we're not going to admit we're lost. "Oh yeah, I know exactly where we are."

Women don't understand that to ask us to pull off and ask for help stings our manhood. So we keep plowing ahead, praying under our breath, "Father, show me which way to go."

I have this same problem, compounded by the fact that I hate to stop for gas. I know how far our car can go once the gas gauge hits the "E," so I'm not afraid to pass up a few gas stations.

This drives my wife to distraction, and it almost cost me big time once when I kept passing stations on the freeway and she kept gently suggesting that I might want to stop at the next station. I kept going, and sure enough by the time I really needed gas and started sweating, I couldn't find a station.

I could see my whole marital life flashing before my eyes as I took an exit in desperation while the car started sputtering. To my great relief, I discovered that the exit was downhill and there was a gas station at the bottom! I coasted up to the pump like nothing was wrong at all.

Men want to be right, but substitution says being right isn't the issue. In fact, let me tell you how wrong you and I were before Jesus Christ. He took our place and bore the punishment for us even when we were at

our most vile in terms of being sinners.

After what Jesus has done for you and me, there is nothing that our wives could ever do or say to us that should cause us to refuse to be their substitute. God has commanded us to love our wives even when they don't deserve it—for if we love them only when they deserve it, where would grace be? In fact, we need to love our wives the most when they deserve it the least.

When I counsel a couple who are engaged to be married, we will discuss different areas of their histories that they are bringing into the marriage. One area I ask about is if the bride-to-be has any debt. If she does, then I ask her future husband if he is willing to assume the responsibility for that debt.

He needs to not only acknowledge her debt—and even the poor choices she might have made in accruing it—but he also must assume ownership for her debt if he is going to satisfy his role as husband.

In marriage, if a wife does something that is wrong that brings about negative consequences as a result, a husband should not only seek to forgive his wife, but also to cover her through taking ownership of the consequences. In doing this, he serves as her substitute.

Now before you toss this marriage guide aside because all of this sounds like too much work and too much sacrifice, let me remind you of something. Women are responders. They are wired to respond positively to love, attention, and caring.

I asked a question of the married women in our

church in Dallas: "If your husband lavished on you the kind of sacrificial, suffering, substitutionary love that Jesus Christ lavishes on the church, would you have any good news for him?" The response was overwhelmingly positive. I'm convinced this is what our wives are longing for—and starving for, in some cases—even if they don't state it in theological terms.

Men, if you want to see your wife blossom into a loving, responsive mate, the marital ball is in your court.