

Sermon follow up
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Rich Lusk

The seventh and final sermon in the marriage series focused almost entirely on some practical aspects of the marriage relationship. By the far the best author/preacher I have found on the practical dimensions of married life is Doug Wilson. His various books on marriage are tremendous resources.

Here are some additional thoughts on the three areas of marriage I talked about in the sermon – communication, confession, and decision making:

Communication:

Harvey Mansfield (*Manliness*, 29f) reports the following on different ways men and women communicate:

Lakoff pointed out certain distinctive features of women's speech. Women use a more specialized vocabulary for female tasks, such as cooking; they use milder expletives than men do; they use more empty adjectives like “cute” than men do; they attach tag questions at the end of assertions (don't you agree?); they use a wider range of pitch and intonation, as if avoiding flat statements; they employ “superpolite” forms, such as “I wonder if you would mind”; they sort of hedge their assertions; their grammar is more correct than men's and avoids vulgar or coarse words; and they do not tell jokes...

Men and women live for contrasting ways of life: men want independence, women intimacy. When men speak, they report what they know or believe, as if lecturing in public to an audience. When women speak, they seek rapport with their listeners so as to connect with them. As men are always speaking as if they were in public, so women treat every audience as if the discussion were private. Both men and women speak in context, there is always a “frame” in which conversation occurs, but women are more “contextual” than men. When men say something, it's take it or leave it. Men's speech is more *assertive* than women's...

The two sexes misunderstand, misinterpret, each other. The same action, say a polite request, that looks like subservience to a man looks like sensitivity to women. If a woman is silent, a man thinks she has nothing to say; if a man is silent, women think he does not need to speak. Silence means lack of power in the first instance; confident power in the second...[Women desire] intimacy rather than domination. Men with their seeming indifference to the context are actually very concerned with hierarchy; they want to rebel against it, show their independence of it, climb to the top of it, or establish an equality within it. Women are more democratic, or more effortlessly democratic, because they do not begin from a desire to contest.

C. S. Lewis somewhere points out that for women, love is *taking* trouble for others, whereas for men, it's *not giving* trouble to others. A woman loves by giving herself for others, going out of her way to serve them, acting in compassion, etc. A man thinks he's loved if he didn't get into a fist fight with the other guy.

If this is so, then women are innately closer to the biblical model in the way they love.

To communicate love to their wives, men need to pour a great deal of effort into it. The kind of sacrificial love men are called to give to their wives does not come naturally. Many men do not put much effort into figuring out how to make their wives feel secure and cherished. They think that so long as they don't cause their wives too much grief, they're doing ok. But that isn't the case at all.

In the sermon, I talked some about how to approach your spouse when you need to offer criticism. Marriage is a relationship where we need to be able to give and receive constructive criticism.

But don't take this to extremes. Do not try to fix your spouse's every flaw. Don't go on a "speck hunt" when you have a log in your own eye. Focus on inspecting yourself first, then pray about the things you would like to see changed in yourself and your spouse. When you have criticized yourself sufficiently and taken the matter before God, you're in a position to bring criticism to your partner in the right sort of way.

There are a lot of Bible passages on the tongue that I did not deal with in the sermon. I would strongly recommend that married people spend a lot of time looking at what the book of Proverbs says about the tongue, as well as studying James 3.

Confession:

In the sermon I focused mainly on what to do when you are in the wrong. You need to confess to God and to your spouse, and you need embrace offered forgiveness.

But what should you do when you are the one wronged? You need to stand ready to forgive (not harboring bitterness) and when the other person seeks your forgiveness, you need grant it fully and freely immediately. Husbands have a double responsibility here: They need to lead the way in showing their wives and showing the world what forgiveness looks like. Just as I said husbands need to be the first to confess their sin in the marital relationship when the couple hits an impasse, so the husband needs to be the first to offer and enact forgiveness.

Being willing to forgive, to be longsuffering, to be patient does not mean that you give up on any hope of ever improving your marriage or changing your spouse. You should have a long fuse, but you should also desire for your marriage to grow continually. The key is making sure you pursue that change in the right way.

Ephesians 5 shows husbands how to transform their wives. A husband who gives himself for the sake of his wife will be a means of sanctification to her, washing and cleansing by the word. He will love her with a transformative love.

1 Peter 3 shows wives how to go about changing their husbands. There is a kind of subtle, indirect, delicate, service-oriented approach that befits her role within the marriage. Wives who try to change their husbands directly usually find it backfires.

Decision making:

Obsessive husbands who want to control their wives and refuse to let their wives take any initiative or make any decisions on their own are totally abusing their headship. Headship does not mean control. A husband who feels the need to micro-manage his wife's every move is violating God's pattern for marriage. Note that the man married to the virtuous woman in Proverbs 31 "trusts her" (v. 11). She takes all kinds of initiative – but her freedom, authority, and accomplishments never threaten or subvert his overarching rule of the household. Thus, he is praised as a ruler in the community at the city gates (31:23).

A great discussion of decision making in marriage is found in Doug Wilson's *Reforming Marriage*, 65ff.

In the sermon, I tried to demonstrate that while a husband makes the decisions that control the overall shape of the family's life, he makes those decisions in consultation with his helper, his wife. Let me illustrate further the way this works.

The "Gimme the ball, and get out of the way" story models the way heads make decisions, relying on insight of those under their authority. The story is about Larry Bird, the basketball superstar who played for the Boston Celtics, and coach K. C. Jones. Coach Jones tells the story of how Bird pulled out a close game for the team:

"We are playing in Seattle. Five seconds left on the clock and the score is tied and it is our timeout. In the huddle, I am thinking Xavier McDaniel is guarding Larry.

"So I said, 'Now Kevin, you take the ball out and get it to Dennis and Dennis you can finish that.'

"Larry said, 'Why don't you just give me the ball and tell everybody else to

get the **** out of the way?'

"So I said, 'Larry you play, and I'll coach.'

"And he said, 'All right.'

"So I said, 'Dennis, you take it out and you get it to Kevin. Kevin you get it to Larry and everybody else get the **** out of the way.'

"That is communication...And that is what he [Bird] did. So when he stepped back behind the line and released the ball, as soon as he released it, his arm was still in the air going to the dressing room. Game over."

This is a great model of how to make a decision within a hierarchical relationship: Coach Jones asserted himself, and made the decision. Had it not worked, he would have taken responsibility for it in the post-game news conference. But Coach Jones also considered and relied upon the input of his key player. Bird told the coach what he thought they should do, showed he was willing to submit to the coach's plan, and the coach (after quickly thinking it over) decided Bird's idea was best. The result was a victory.

A husband has to do the same thing. He has to make the decision. But only after listening to what his "key player" – his wife – has to say. She has to submit – but that does not rule out offering her input.