

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 17

Responding to grace in our relationships

How do we respond to God's grace? One way that we respond is by extending grace to others, in our families, neighborhoods, and workplaces. As an illustration of that, let's discuss marriage relationships.

If Jesus were married ...

Jesus was not married. But let's suppose for a minute what some people seem to *think* he would have done.

- **Jesus would inspire total confidence.**

Oops. One disciple betrayed him, and the others ran off. Only the women were faithful.

- **Jesus would do all the talking.** Wrong again—Jesus wants his wife (the church) to talk. She makes a few mistakes, of course, but that's the way we all learn. Both men and women are inspired to speak.

- **Jesus would watch television while his wife served him snacks.** Silly, isn't it? The truth is, Jesus would serve his wife when *she* was watching television. He knew he was going to die the next day, and yet he washed the disciples' feet while they argued with each other.

- **Jesus would be so dominant that his wife would rarely be seen.** False. Jesus wants his church to be seen. He leads by encouraging his wife to go into the world to work.

- **Jesus would manage his children well.** Jesus is not the problem—we (the children) are. Yet often we expect marriages within the church to be even better than what Jesus has! How ironic! Do we think we deserve more than he does?

We have various myths about marriage that are a little laughable, but when we try to live a myth, we cause a lot of pain. Husbands cause pain, and wives cause pain. We are all shot through with sin, and sin hurts people.

Singles

Some people are better off single, and some people are better off married. God created men and women for marriage, but he gave some people the gift of being single (1 Corinthians 7:7).

We need to value our singles and appreciate them the way they are. When we talk about marriage, we do not want to slight the unmarried. It is a perfectly honorable state. Some do not use it honorably—just as some married people do not handle marriage responsibly, either. No matter what state we are in, we are called to serve.

A single person, Paul said, can be totally dedicated to God. A married person has divided interests (verses 32-34). Single men and women can be enormous agents for the kingdom of God. Jesus was single, and Paul was single. Lydia and Phoebe probably were, too.

Your body is not your own

Paul discusses the responsibilities married people have for each other: "The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife" (v. 4).

Neither husbands nor wives can make selfish decisions. The husband cannot just decide to go off on his own some evening without letting his wife know where he is, because his body does not belong

to him alone, but also to his wife. She has a right to know. This verse prohibits unilateral decisions even for spiritually worthy causes; it is true for carnal pursuits as well, and the principle is as true for wives as it is for husbands.

The focus is on self-control, not other control. We can't demand our rights from our spouse. We can't demand to control their bodies. Even if that is our right, we cannot live the way of demand. What we can do is to control our own body in the way that honors the spouse. We work on ourselves rather than ordering others around. We try to please, not to demand.

Let this mind be in you, Paul wrote (Philippians 2:5-10). Think like Jesus did. Though he had great power, he did not use it for his own advantage. He took on the nature of a servant, he humbled himself to serve his wife. God does not measure greatness the way we do. He does not look at leadership the way we often do. Jesus did not demand his rights. He just did the job that he was given to do.

Paul later gave some instructions to husbands and wives. He told wives to submit (Ephesians 5:22). He told husbands to give themselves to their wives in service (verse 25). Some husbands claim to be willing to die for their wives, but are actually unwilling to change a diaper. I have a simple instruction for such husbands: Die daily. Because if you aren't willing to serve, you stink worse than a diaper.

Paul told husbands to love and care for their wives; he did not tell the husbands to demand submission. He told wives to submit, not to demand more love or more sacrifices. Each of us must attend to our own responsibilities whether or not the other person does.¹ We have to concentrate on what we can do, not on what the other person isn't doing.

Do you deserve a break today?

If we got what we deserve, we'd be dead. All of us, through God's grace, have more than we deserve. In Jesus, we have been given eternal life, something we did not earn and something we could

never earn. If our sins were counted against us, we'd deserve punishment every day, but we get blessings instead. We don't deserve a break today, but God gives us one anyway.

Every day, we need to be thankful for the blessings we have—always better than we deserve. When we see our spouse, always remember, this is better than I deserve. Always be thankful.

Remember the million-dollar debt God has forgiven you. Be forgiving when your spouse slips up (Matthew 18:23-35). Forgive each other from the heart, and do it fast. This is where the gospel of salvation by grace has an incredibly practical application in our day-to-day lives. It calls us to be gracious toward our spouses. It calls us to make sacrifices.

Husbands, love your wives even if you have to get down on your knees and wash their feet. Or stand up and wash the dishes. Honor them, respect them. Do not belittle them, for they are heirs with you of eternal life.

Service

Peter calls us to humility and self-sacrifice: "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men" (1 Peter 2:12). If you don't keep the laws of the land with integrity, don't be surprised if your family has trouble obeying you. "Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect" (verse 18). If you bad-mouth your employer at home, don't be surprised if your family has trouble respecting you.

"To this you were called," Peter writes, "because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow his steps" (verse 21). Yes, we follow him into suffering, into sacrificing our pride. If we have trouble obeying him, and we all do, then it should be no surprise that people have trouble doing what we want.

Peter has similar instructions for wives: "Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands" (1 Peter 3:1). And he has similar instructions husbands: "Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives ... so that nothing will hinder your prayers" (verse 7). If you don't treat your wife right, how can you expect God

¹ A spouse is not required to stay in cooperation with an abusive or life-threatening situation. She does not have to be an accessory to sin, staying in a situation that leads her husband into repeated sins.

to listen to you? Be considerate — that means to consider her needs before your own. That is what love means.

Ephesians 5:21 says that we are to submit to one another. We do not do this in exactly the same way (parents submit to their children in a different way than children submit to their parents), but we must all submit to one another's needs. We need to consider our spouses better than ourselves, better than we deserve (Philippians 2:3). Husbands, lead *by example*, not by demanding submission.

Husbands are called to love their wives. This means that they should be patient with them, kind with them. They do not envy or brag. They are not proud, rude or self-seeking. They do not get angry easily, nor do they dredge up mistakes of the past. Husbands should always protect, always trust,

always be optimistic and never give up (1 Corinthians 13:6-8).

Christ calls us to self-sacrifice, to be living sacrifices. We give our lives to him, and we live for him, and we let him live in us in our day-to-day relationships.

Good marriages don't just happen. They take work and conscious effort. When we live with someone every day for years and years, our patience will be tested. Our selfishness will be seen. Our spirituality (or lack of it) will be evident. We will make mistakes, and we will need forgiveness, and we will need to be forgiving.

Let grace abound! Forgive one another, just as Christ forgave you (Colossians 3:13). Be Jesus to your spouse.

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