

The Christian Home (8): Wifely Duties (part 1)

Having considered mutual duties binding upon husbands and wives, we now begin to consider specific duties for wives. These can largely be reduced into three: reverence (respecting), submission (obeying), and assistance (helping).

I. Wifely Duties

1. *The nature of reverence.* "Let the wife see that she respects her husband" (Eph.5:33). The Greek word rendered "respects" ('reverence' KJV) literally means "to fear or revere." "The word may express the emotion of fear in all its modifications and in all its degrees, from simple respect, through reverence, up to adoration, according to its object. It is, however, in all its degrees, an acknowledgment of superiority" (Hodge).¹ "Wives be submissive to your own husbands, that even if some do not obey the word, they, without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives, when they observe your chaste conduct accompanied by fear ('chaste and respectful behavior' NASB)" (1Pet.3:1-2). Wives are to respect their husbands even if they "do not obey the word." Wives must respect or revere their husbands regardless if they deserve it. "It is the duty of wives to acknowledge their own husbands, even those to whom they are joined in marriage by God's providence, to be worthy of a husband's honor, and to be their authority" (Gouge).²

William Gouge asked the question: "What if a man of low status be married to a woman of high status, or a servant be married to his mistress, or an old woman to a youth, must such a wife acknowledge such a husband to be her authority?" He responded: "Yes, truly, for in giving herself to be his wife, and taking him to be her husband, she advances him above herself, and submits herself to him. It means nothing what either of them were before marriage. By virtue of that matrimonial bond the husband is made the head of his wife, though the husband were before marriage a beggar, and from a family with little status in society, and the wife very wealthy and of a noble family."³

William Gouge asked a second question: "But what if a man of wicked and beastly character, as a drunkard, a glutton, a profane boaster, an ungodly swearer and blasphemer, be married to a wife, a sober, religious mother; must she count him her authority, and worthy of a husband's honor?"⁴ He responded: "Surely she must. For the evil quality and disposition of his heart and life, does not deprive a man of that position of honor which God has given to him."⁵ Joel Beeke said, "if a wife finds herself no longer able to honor his *person*, then she is to honor his *place* over her since his place does not fluctuate though his character may."⁶

A wife ought to cherish a high esteem of her husband; if not for his gifts and graces, yet at least for that relation which he stands to her, as her lord and her head, superior to her by God's appointment and ordinance. Yea, she must look upon him as that person whom God, out of all the numerous millions of mankind has particularly chosen and selected for her; and one, whom He saw fittest and best to be her head and guide.⁷

The wife ought to honor and esteem her husband: '*All wives shall honor their husbands, both great and small*' (Esther 1:20). To this end, she ought to contemplate all

¹ Charles Hodge, *Ephesians*, 260

² William Gouge, *Building a Godly Home*, 2:124

³ William Gouge, *Building a Godly Home*, 2:104

⁴ William Gouge, *Building a Godly Home*, 2:104

⁵ William Gouge, *Building a Godly Home*, 2:105

⁶ Joel Beeke, *Living in a Godly Marriage*, 154-155

⁷ Ezekiel Hopkins, *Works*, 1:423

the excellencies of his person, whether of body or mind; to set a due value upon them and not to think poorly of anything in her husband. And if the husband be but meanly accomplished (poorly skilled), yet she ought highly to value the excellency of his place, seeing the Holy Ghost has in this very respect styled him *'The image and glory of God'* (1Cor.11:7). Whatever he is in himself or to others, yet to the wife he is a person who has no equal. Such you esteemed him when you chose him, and so you ought still to esteem him. The wife ought to consider that her honor and respect among her family and neighbors does very much rise and fall according to that which she bears to her husband, so that in honoring him she honors herself.⁸

Thus, many older writers suggested that a wife's reverence for her husband has three ingredients: esteem, love, and fear. "Reverence consists of love and esteem, which produce a care to please, and of fear, which awakens a caution lest just offence be given. That the wife must thus reverence her husband is the will of God and the law of the relation" (Henry).⁹ "A wife must love him as a member, and fear him as a head. Her fear must be like that of the church to Christ, an acknowledgement of his superiority over her, and an unwillingness to displease him in anything, and a dread lest she should offend him" (Swinnock).¹⁰ "By *reverence* (Eph.5:33), the apostle means nothing of slavish homage, but that respect and deference which are due to one whom we are commanded to obey" (James).¹¹

A wife's reverence of her husband also includes love. She is to love him so completely and entirely that she will leave her father and her mother and her father's house and cleave to him as her head. She is to love him with that sincerity of heart and deep affection that will work in her heart the proper reverence she should have for him. Mere fondness will not do; neither will a doting upon his looks or strength. If she is to reverence her husband, she must really, deeply, and truly love him. Only a genuine love for him will sweeten her duties, making it more acceptable and delightful to reverence him as her husband.¹²

2. *The expressions of reverence.* "The reverence which a wife owes her husband is both inward and outward" (Gouge).¹³ (1) Inward reverence. "Inward reverence is respect filled with awe which a wife has in her heart for her husband, esteeming him worthy of all honor for his place and office's sake, because he is her husband" (Gouge).¹⁴ Gouge suggested this inward reverence shows itself in two ways: first, "in joy, when she gives contentment to her husband, and observes him to be pleased with what she does"; second, "in grief, when he is justly offended and grieved, especially with anything that she herself has done."¹⁵ "She who is married cares about the things of the world—how she may please her husband" (1Cor.7:34). "It is no slavish fear of her husband which ought to possess the heart of a wife, dreading blows, frowns, bitter words, or similar mistreatment' but such respect and awe of him that makes her care how she may please him (1Cor.7:34)" (Gouge).¹⁶

After the judgment of a wife is rightly informed of a husband's higher rank, and her will persuaded to account her own husband her *head* and *guide*, it is necessary that her heart and affection be accordingly seasoned with the salt of good respect, and high es-

⁸ Richard Steele, *A Theology of the Family*, 247-248

⁹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on Ephesians 5:33*

¹⁰ George Swinnock, *Works*, 1:505

¹¹ John Angell James, *A Help to Domestic Happiness*, 59-60

¹² Joel Beeke, *Living in a Godly Marriage*, 155

¹³ William Gouge, *Building a Godly Home*, 2:124

¹⁴ William Gouge, *Building a Godly Home*, 2:124

¹⁵ William Gouge, *Building a Godly Home*, 2:107

¹⁶ William Gouge, *Building a Godly Home*, 2:106-107

teem, which breeds reverence. In order that her heart may be seasoned, she should often and seriously meditate of his position and office, and of that honor which the Lord by virtue of it has planted in him. And if he has gifts worthy of his position, such as knowledge, wisdom, piety, self-control, love, and similar graces, she ought to take notice of it, and to think him worthy of double honor.¹⁷

When a wife fears her husband she does her utmost to please him, even if it means displeasing the whole world (1Cor.7:34). Out of her heart's desire to please him she endeavors in her speech, dress, behavior, and entire demeanor to endear herself to him as a most amiable and lovely wife. Therefore, a wife who pleases herself and does not care whether or not her husband is pleased or who purposely chooses those courses which cross her husband's will is both displeasing to the Lord and provokes the Lord, who commands that reverence and respect be paid to the husband as part of that reverence and respect which are due unto Himself.¹⁸

(2) Outward reverence. "A wife's outward reverence towards her husband is a manifestation of her inward due respect of him" (Gouge).¹⁹ This outward respect consists of a wife's conduct and speech. "Do not let your adornment be merely outward—arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel—rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God (actions). For in this manner, in former times, the holy women who trusted in God also adorned themselves, being submissive to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord (speech)." (1Pet.3:3-6).

(a) Actions. Wives are to adorn themselves "with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit." This is in opposition to a contentious and/or quarrelsome spirit. "Better to swell in the wilderness, than with a contentious and angry woman" (Prov.21:19; 25:24; 27:15). "Nothing is more ornamental to a Christian wife than a meek and quiet spirit. No deformity is more unsightly than its reverse—a discontented, fretful, peevish (irritable), domineering spirit" (Brown).²⁰ Thus, by "quiet" is meant a peaceable and calm spirit and not a silent one. "Gentleness in a wife refers to the ordering of her facial expression, gesture, and whole conduct before her husband, by which she shows cheerfulness to him, and a contentedness and willingness to be under him and ruled by him" (Gouge).²¹

The strength of woman lies not in resisting, but in yielding; her power is in her gentleness; there is more of real defense, and more ability to disarm a foe, in one mild look, or one soft accent, than in hours of flashing glances, and of angry tones. When amidst domestic strife she has been enabled to keep her temper, the storm has been often scattered as it rose; or her meekness has served as a conductor to carry off its dreadful flashes, which otherwise would have destroyed the dwelling.²²

(b) Speech. "A wife's respect is shown by her speech, both in her husband's presence, and also in his absence" (Gouge).²³ John Angel James said, "Your reverence will be manifest in your words." He then specified three occasions this is true: first, "in your manner of speaking *of* him, you will avoid all that will tend to lessen him in the esteem of others; all exposure of his faults or minor weaknesses"; second, "in your manner of speaking *to* him; every thing of contemptuous consciousness of superior-

¹⁷ William Gouge, *Building a Godly Home*, 2:107

¹⁸ Joel Beeke, *Living in a Godly Marriage*, 156

¹⁹ William Gouge, *Building a Godly Home*, 2:109

²⁰ John Brown, *Expository Discourses on 1 Peter*, 2:205

²¹ William Gouge, *Building a Godly Home*, 2:111

²² John Angell James, *A Help to Domestic Happiness*, 63-64

²³ William Gouge, *Building a Godly Home*, 2:113

ity, of dictation and command, of unnecessary contradiction, of stubborn and obtrusive disputation, of scolding accusation, of angry, reproachful complaint, should be avoided"; third, "in your manner of speaking *before* him, in the company of her family, or of strangers: she must not talk him into silence; nor talk at him; nor say any things that is calculated to wound or degrade him, for a sting inflicted in public is doubly charged with venom."²⁴

The woman is called the glory of the man (1Cor.11:7), because it is a high honor to him that so excellent a creature as a woman should be his inferior (in rank). Surely, then, wives which refuse this reverence are their husbands' shame and disgrace. When once a woman harbors contemptible thoughts of her husband, this one evil weed will so overrun and spread in her words and actions, that no good thing will grow by it. Oh it is a most doleful living, where the wife, instead of reverencing, is always railing at, and wrangling with, her husband. There are wives that are worse than their dogs; their dogs, though they bark at strangers, will not bark at their master; but they spare not the husband, the master of the house, in their curse crankiness and passions. A serpent is as good a companion as such a wife; for a serpent, if it kill, does it suddenly; but such a wife makes her husband die lingeringly, for his whole life is a civil death.²⁵

3. *The cultivation of reverence.* (1) Hindrances. William Gouge suggested three hindrances of wifely respect: first, "self-conceit by which wives esteem their own gifts too highly, thinking them so excellent as they need no guide or head, but are rather fit to guide and rule both their husbands and all the household"; second, "some weakness of mind, body, or life, which they see in their husbands, from which it comes to pass that many husbands who are highly honored and greatly accounted of by others, are much despised by their wives, because their wives always conversing with them know the secret weaknesses that are concealed from others"; third, "worst of all, from unjust assumptions and suspicions, suspecting many evil things of their husbands of which they are no way guilty, and misinterpreting and perverting things well done."²⁶

(2) Helps. (a) Remember your created order and purpose. "Wives should revere their husbands because the woman was made after the man (1Tim.2:13), of the man (1Cor.11:8), and for the man (1Cor.11:9). This duty of reverence is natural as well as necessary" (Swinnock).²⁷ (b) Mortify your pride and magnify your faults. "Wives ought to purge out their heart's pride and self-conceit, thinking humbly and lowly of themselves, and if the Lord has endowed them with any gift above the ordinary sort of women, to note well their own infirmities, and to lay them by their eminent gifts. When they behold any weaknesses in their husbands, they ought also to reflect their eyes on their own weaknesses, which may be as many and as grievous" (Gouge).²⁸ (c) View your husband in the best possible light, giving him the benefit of doubt. "Wives ought in regard to their husbands to assume no evil if they have not sure proof and evidence, but rather interpret everything in the best light, and follow the rule of love, 'which bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things' (1Cor.13:7)" (Gouge).²⁹

²⁴ John Angell James, *A Help to Domestic Happiness*, 60

²⁵ George Swinnock, *Works*, 1:506-507

²⁶ William Gouge, *Building a Godly Home*, 2:108

²⁷ George Swinnock, *Works*, 1:507

²⁸ William Gouge, *Building a Godly Home*, 2:108-109

²⁹ William Gouge, *Building a Godly Home*, 2:109