

Leadership & Submission

– Sunday School Notes –

1 The Role Model for a Family

In the following months we want to study the issue of leadership and submission in the family. I chose the book “*Husbands who won’t lead and wives who won’t follow*” by James Walker as the basis for this study, but much of what we will learn here depends also on us sharing our own insights and experiences as we try to put the Word of God into practice in our everyday life.

Our starting point is **Ephesians 5:22–23**, in which Paul writes

Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body.

Whether we like it or not, the Bible clearly tells us that there are certain roles in the family. The husband is supposed to be the leader and his wife should submit to him. Until a few decades ago, this concept represented the typical family. Unfortunately, however, it was probably also one of the most misunderstood concepts in the Word of God. Husbands viewed themselves as the boss who had total authority over everything in the family – everybody had to obey whatever they commanded.

This rather oppressive view of what leadership is about has led to a change in our society, which nowadays condemns almost any concept of leadership and authority in the family. Parents have little authority over their children and the roles of husband and wife are considered interchangeable. Every man who doesn’t see it that way, is accused to be a “male chauvinist” who probably abuses his wife. And women who freely submit to their husbands are accused of betraying the female world by diminishing themselves instead of standing up for their rights. A marriage is not considered anymore as the inseparable bonding of two people but as two individuals living together. No one, not even Christians, is unaffected by this viewpoint of our society. We encounter it every day when we talk to friends or co-workers, read books or newspapers, watch TV, etc.

This pressure from the outside world makes it very difficult for today’s men and women to take on their God-given roles instead of falling into extremes that God never intended. Men do not even know anymore how to define their leadership role properly and women do not know how to follow their husbands appropriately. The way we grow up does not prepare us for these roles anymore, unless we were fortunate enough to have parents who trained us to be leaders and followers in the biblical meaning of these words. So we are forced to find out ourselves and fail quite often – simply because we don’t know what leadership and submission is supposed to be.

This study – that is the Word of God, the book, and our shared experience – shall help us to understand the roles that God has given to us, how God designed us, and what our identity is according to God’s plan. And it shall help us to understand our own spouses better – how God has designed *them* and how they differ from us – so that we don’t try to conform them to *our* image how they should be.

1.1 The Husband – a Leader?

Before we can talk about how to lead, how to follow, and how to overcome difficulties, we first have to understand what leadership is about and what it is not. In many families we find either of the following extremes.

1. *Misunderstood Leadership:*

Some husbands tend to *dominate* their wives, a behavior which is in sharp contrast to **Galatians 3:26–28**.

For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.

We are all one in Christ! No person should dominate another.

Others consider themselves as the *final authority*, the one who always has to give the directions in every minute thing. Another husband views leadership as being *responsible for everything*, They must do everything in the family that is of importance.

Although the above characteristics have some similarity with true leadership, they miss the main point.

2. *Absence of leadership* is the other extreme. Many husbands withdraw into *passiveness* and let their wives take on all the responsibilities. Or they let the family be reigned by in-laws, which is even worse. In both cases, there can’t be much of a family unit, because the husbands do not add their share to the family.

What then is biblical leadership? In **1. Peter 5:3** we find a description of leaders of the church as being examples to the flock. Leadership means *setting examples* for others to follow. But leadership also means *servicing*. In **Matthew 20:25–28** Jesus says

Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.

If you want to lead others, you have to ministering to their needs. Then they are willing to follow you because they know that their needs are taken care of. Finally, leadership means that a husband should *give himself up* for his wife, as **Ephesians 5:25** – the often ignored continuation of our initial verse – points out.

All these qualities are not what people usually view as leadership, because they express humility, not domination, as key to leading others. Our role model is Jesus. He *had* authority, but never saw it necessary to claim it. If we want to be leaders, we have to follow in his footsteps, even though this may be difficult for us to realize.

1.2 The Wife – a Helper?

The obvious question at this point is why women can't take this role in the family. Why can't they be leaders? Or why can't leadership be a temporary role in the family? After all – aren't men and women equal?

For a short time (from the sixties to the mid nineties) society has believed that there are no essential differences between men and women, but that all the differences were merely the result of being raised in different ways. Even today, many people try to adhere to that opinion, although scientists have found more and more biological differences between men and women. Besides the obvious physical differences, which can hardly be denied, there are fundamental differences in the structure of our brains from the moment we are born. This doesn't mean that one is superior to the other, but that men and women have different functionalities, because God created men and women to complement each other.

The Word of God is very clear about this. In **Genesis 2:18–24** we read that God viewed man as incomplete without a *helper* and that he created woman exactly for this purpose – as the complement of the man. And

Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.

They fit together so well that they can form a new unity.

Now the word “helper” has often been misunderstood as well. People believe it means that the wife is supposed to be the *assistant* of her husband, the one who only can do the minor tasks. In a sense, they consider women as *second-class* citizens, inferior to men and unable to live for themselves. Or they believe that helpers have to *obey* their leaders no matter what. And finally, some women interpret it conveniently as *not being responsible* for anything in the family, and let their husbands make all the decisions without voicing their own opinion.

But that is not what the word “helper” truly means. You can only be a helper to someone who *needs* help. In **Psalms 70:5**, the psalmist refers to God as his helper – and he surely did not believe this to mean that God is his assistant. No, as a helper you *enable* someone who is incapable of doing things without you. Helpers are not inferior but equal in both value and function.

So there is nothing bad about being a helper. It is actually a role that is to be highly respected and will be appreciated very much by husbands who understand how much they depend on their wives. Men and women can both accept their own roles, respect the role of their spouses, and be perfectly happy in it.

1.3 God's Plan for a Good Marriage

But the word of God does not only talk about different roles in a family. It also tells us that God has a plan for a good marriage. In **Genesis 18:24** and again in **Matthew 19:4–6** we read that a man and a woman joined together become **one flesh**. Marriage couples two distinct individuals together in order to create a union, a new entity – something as inseparable as a physical body. Each partner is there to fill the other's needs so that both can become complete in what they are.

This does not mean that either of the two will have to give up his or her distinct identity. On the contrary, a marriage enables a man to become as fully masculine as possible and a woman to become as truly feminine as possible. Each one fills the other's weaknesses. In contrast to that you would have to fill these weakness yourself at the cost of giving up part of your identity if you live as a single person.

Many people believe that the opposite is true and that only as a single one would be able to live freely as a man or as a woman while in a marriage you would have to give up a part of yourself. But this is not so! Surely, in many marriages people give up a part of themselves without receiving anything in return and are quite frustrated about it. But this is because they have not understood what marriage really means and consequently chose the wrong paths in their marriage.

Fulfillment does not come from the freedom to do what you want. It comes from partnership and being able to depend on each other. In **1. Corinthians 11:11–12** we read

Nevertheless neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord. For as the woman is of the man, even so is the man also by the woman; but all things of God.

In many marriages I know wife and husband are afraid of being completely dependent on each other. They fear that the other might use them for selfish purposes or that they might not be able to manage life alone if something should happen to their spouse. These things may happen, if we depend on each other *and* give up our own identity – which is foolishness. But if we hold back and do not dare to depend on our spouse, if we do not fully trust our spouse, then we rob our marriage of what it could be.

Proverbs 18:22, 31:10–12 tells us how much we can find in a marriage.

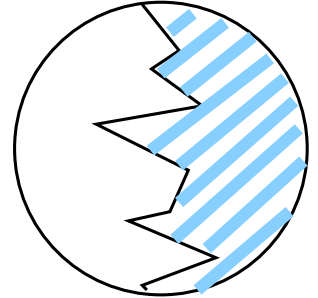
Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing, and obtaineth favour of the LORD.

Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies. The heart of her

husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil. She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life.

If we begin to fully trust in our spouse and believe that God will remain true to his promises, then we will receive what we long for: comfort, companionship, *and* fulfillment. We can freely develop as man and woman and will in turn have enough strength to give our partner what she or he needs or desires.

A simple picture may illustrate that. Men and women are designed with certain strengths and weaknesses, with edges in their character and in a way perfect complements to each other. If we want to fill the needs of our partner and live a fulfilled marriage, we must accept that men and women are different and cannot take on each other's roles.



1.4 Deviations from God's Plan

If we swap roles or misuse our own one, we deny our mate the right to be as God has designed her or him to be. It is no wonder that this will create problems. If we ignore the uniqueness of God's design for each individual, neither wife nor husband will find fulfillment in marriage. We are forced to perform tasks for which we were not made, and our own needs are not filled anymore.

It is better to accept the differences as God designed them. Men were made to provide, lead, and manage resources (**Genesis 1:26, 2:15**) – that is why they are stronger and focus more on “rational” thinking. Women, on the other hand are designed to nurture – physically, emotionally, and spiritually. That is why they have so much more intuition and a much better grasp for relationships.

We will look at these differences in detail later, but the central message for us is

Accept that your spouse is different from you and be happy that this is so.
Wives, don't try to change your husbands, and men don't block changes in your wife.

If we don't follow this advice, if we want to take away the individuality of our partner, then we will either create a hole between us or cause a collision. Most likely both will happen.

1.4.1 A hole between us

If we expect from our wife to be strong in the way we may expect it from other men, she will easily feel overburdened, emotionally exhausted, empty, depressed – or at least very unhappy.

If a man is not allowed to provide for whatever reason, he may quickly feel worthless, because a major part of his identity is taken away from him. At first he might even

enjoy the absence of responsibility, but then he usually becomes lazy and – out of an unfulfilled need for competition – will begin to criticize his wife in everything.

These two examples are generalizations of what individual couples will experience, but the above consequences will more or less become visible.

1.4.2 Collision

When we want to take away from our spouse what we desire to see changed, we are not attached to each other in a positive and strengthening way. Each partner will feel threatened and fear “the other tries to destroy my individual personality”. Both want to determine what is right for every little detail. “Things need to be done my way” is what they believe, whether they explicitly say so or not.

While almost every couple runs into a situation like that occasionally, we must not allow such a situation to persist. Otherwise it wears both of us down and leads to mutual frustration. We begin to feel worthless, because what we see as our own strength doesn’t seem to count much in the eyes of the other. The person who is supposed to build us up suddenly becomes a threat for our self-esteem.

There are two common, unfortunately very wrong, ways to react to such a threat.

1. *Rebellion*: We resist, attack, or pull away.
2. *Compliance*: We give in and give up.

Both methods do not lead us where we want to be. It is easy to see in the first case but giving in is equally wrong if we give up as well.

The only fruitful approach is to accept God’s plan for our own role and to live it – regardless of the circumstances. This may not be so easy, but *we* need to change before our circumstances will change. We need to mature both as men and women instead of only reacting to whatever our partner says and does. This is what we want to learn during this study.

1.5 Overview

We will begin by looking at typical problems in a “real” marriage, so that we will be able to detect *what* is going wrong and *why* it cannot work this way. We will look at the constant battle for control, the differences in God’s design for men and women that so often leads to conflicts, and then at other natural causes for problems in a marriage. All this shall help us to understand the nature of these problems, so that we can apply Godly means to overcome them.

We will then look a bit closer at the specific design for mature men and women. We will illustrate how God wants us to be by looking at typical types of failures, that is at husbands who don’t lead and at wives who don’t follow.

In general, men need to learn to overcome their passivity at home. There may be various reasons for that: withdrawal out of lack of confidence, overworking, or the

fact that some men fail to grow up and try to escape their responsibilities. Men who are trapped in these types of failures may be good and faithful as Christians, but still a total failure as husbands and father. As a typical example for that we will look at David, who despite all his weaknesses when it comes to family relationships, still was considered by God as a “man after my own heart”.

Women, on the other hand, need to overcome their desire and learn how to submit out of free choice. We will look at the subtle ways in which this desire expresses itself: hidden hostility in outward submission, busyness, open anger, and manipulation. All these arise from wrong convictions about how things should be run. And the only solution to that is to look at God’s truth and to trust that doing it His way will not lead the family into ruin.

Finally, we will look at the question of how to raise children that they may become true leaders and followers, so that their struggle in marriage may be easier than our own.