

Leadership & Submission

– Sunday School Notes –

2 The Battle for Control

In the previous two sessions we have looked at God's plan for a good marriage, the general principles of leadership and being a helper and that marriage unites a man and a woman in a way that each others needs are filled. This new union, which the bible calls "one flesh" is much stronger than the sum of both individuals and provides the environment for both partners to find fulfillment as man and women in a way that they wouldn't be able to achieve as singles.

Today we want to talk about "the reality" of marriage, that is about causes for deviations from this ideal plan. Since we have the advantage of being God's children, *detecting* the problems is the key to overcoming them. The greatest obstacle for us is not the problem itself, but the fact that we – that is at least one of the marriage partners – simply don't see the problem and fool ourselves into thinking that everything we do is just fine.

But this is not so. Even if we do our best to follow God's will, we often fail AND DON't EVEN NOTICE THAT. Let's look at 1.John 1:8 – who can quote that by heart?

"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us"

This verse doesn't just hold true in general. Nobody of us would claim to have no sin! We know our Bible too good to say this. But when it comes to the concrete situation, we fall into the trap and deceive ourselves. Let me rephrase the verse a little: *"If we claim not to cause problems in our marriage, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us"*

You see? This sounds quite different. WE are the ones who are the reason why our marriages are not as God had planned them for us. And I am not speaking about us as fallen human race in general but about each individual in this room, myself included. I cannot claim that our marriage does not have problems, and I cannot claim that I do not contribute to each of them – although often I feel totally innocent.

So the first step to a solution is discovering and admitting the problem. Then we can work on it, that is we become ready to let the Holy Spirit guide us to a solution. So the purpose of this lesson and the following two is to make us able to detect *what* is going and *why* it cannot work the way we do it right now.

Today I want to look at the **battle for control**. Who determines how things are done in our family? How do we make decisions in our families – the big ones and the little ones? What happens if both partners have different ideas *how* things have to be done? It would be interesting to take a small poll in this group – so if you want to tell us about it, feel free.

Many marriage conflicts essentially boil down to the question of control. Who has the right to determine how to run the family? Both husband and wife have their own ideas about it and they don't always agree. But how do we resolve such disagreements? Some Christians say: "As the leader of the family, the husband ultimately decides". Other families have made the agreement that the wife takes care of the smaller everyday issues and the husband makes the major decisions. Strangely enough, however, there are never any major decisions to be made.

In both cases, the conflict seems to be decided. One partner has won the conflict and essentially runs the family alone. But this settlement has disappointing consequences for both sides, even for the apparent winner. If a wife lets the husband dominate her, she has become his tool, not his companion. And without a true helper, the husband's real needs will not be fulfilled. On the other hand, a wife who has total influence over her husband, will find herself living with a partner whom she cannot respect. She doesn't know if he really loves her, when he gives in or if he just wants to avoid conflict. So the first truth we learn from this is

The battle for control has no winner

Instead of letting one of us be in charge, we must accept that *both husband and wife are* responsible for the decisions that are made and that all decisions must be made in mutual agreement. This doesn't mean that we don't let our husband or wife decide certain things all alone, but this must happen as an expression of trust – which means that we are willing to back up whatever the decision will be.

This is quite easy to say and very difficult to do. It takes a long time for a couple to find a way which is best for them. There is no standard recipe for this, as each couple is different. But it is quite helpful to take a closer look at the danger signals when one partner starts controlling the other, so that we can see when we are going the wrong way.

2.1 False Leadership – Dominating Husbands

Let us first look at marriages with dominating husbands. In these marriages the wife plays a very unimportant role. She assists her husband, which he may appreciate, but her needs, desires, and soul are almost ignored. He makes the decisions and she follows, because that is her and his understanding of spiritual leadership.

So what is wrong about this? What biblical principles are violated in such a marriage?
(we had most verses on the first day) (ACTIVE PHASE!!)

1. There is a notion of female inferiority, instead of equality in value (Gal 3:28)
2. Leadership is understood worldly – like the boss of a company, or worse, like in the military – instead of as servanthood (Mt 20:25-26)
3. There is no mutual submission (Eph 5:21)
4. Her needs and desires are ignored – this is not love (Eph 5:25)

5. His wife is not his helper but his slave. His real needs cannot be fulfilled anymore. The problem with dominating husbands – and I speak only of believers here – is that they have a completely wrong understanding of certain words in the bible. The view submission as obedience to every word they say and they quote Ephesians 5:22–24 by heart and totally forget that the bible doesn't end here. Sometimes they even consider this as biblical love, because – after all – as appointed leaders of the family they know better what is good for women. Often their wives share these misunderstandings and force themselves to obey even if they don't feel like it – because they believe that this is what the Lord wants of them.

Others, dominate out of a feeling of insecurity. This may seem strange, but by controlling their wives they reduce the risk of being challenged in their opinions and decisions. Often, this behavior comes from experiences they have watched in others and want to avoid in their own lives.

Others, simply assume that it is their role as man to be always the active part. They views their *performance* as the only way of asserting their manhood. “A man is what he does” is their motto (open or hidden) and letting somebody else participate in their decisions would mean diminishing their role. They must be responsible – they alone.

Well, if we men are honest – that is what we think about life. And it is not so easy to get a Godly understanding of this responsibility.

So what are the danger signals that indicate when a man is too much in control? It would be interesting to let the ladies begin, because they usually see these tiny little indicators much better than we do. – *ACTIVE* –

1. She feels helpless and dependent.

– She does not dare touch technical devices: he has the remote control, drives the car,

– He controls the money and every cent she spends

– She doesn't dare to do things by herself (because her criticized too often)

2. He knows everything better

3. All ideas must come from him.

Adopting an idea from his wife is a sign of her dominating him.

4. He is the center of the world – and has rational explanations for it

5. He is always strong, doesn't show weaknesses

6. Whenever a problem occurs – he must solve it. (I admit, I have the habit of doing this) Open problems are a threat to his ego.

Sometimes our wives just want our listening ear, our companionship – not our solutions (let a woman explain this)

So MEN, I hope you have noted this – keep these signals in mind and if you discover any of them in yourselves, then it is time to do something about it.

2.2 No leadership — When Wives Take Over

The situation can also be the other way around. A wife can dominate her husband but this is a different form of control than with dominating husbands. Usually it is the man who simply gives up his leadership role because his wife does not let him lead but always criticizes him. She may have her reasons for this. Often she is even right with her criticism and her husband knows that.

But whether she is right or not is besides the point. It is the criticism as such, that is discouraging. A man may ask himself why he should even try to lead if everything he does is wrong. Constant criticism is about the worst thing a wife can do to her husband. That's why we find quite a few proverbs about this: *Read Proverbs 27:15-16, 21:19*

Here you see a husband who is about to give up. He isn't perfect and he knows that. But hearing it from his wife every day is simply discouraging. So he begins to withdraw and lets his wife take over the responsibilities.

But – and this is what makes it so dangerous – his need for leadership, admiration, and success is completely unfulfilled. He will search for new ways to build self esteem. He may stay long at work and be in charge there. And when he comes home, he can be passive. Why should he do anything if it will be wrong anyway? That, of course, will create even more criticism and more withdrawal.

Many women have lost their husbands because they couldn't control their desire to criticize every wrong they see. Nonchristian men simply leave after a while – usually because they have found a woman who seems to be more understanding. *Christian men don't do such a thing – right??* But even when they stay, you cannot call this a loving relationship anymore because the husband is not emotionally present anymore. He has found other ways to control his own life but this life does not have much to do with his wife anymore.

On the other hand, his wife may notice that her husband does not disturb her order in the house anymore and be very happy about this. But she pays a very high price for it. In a working relationship both partners share the load equally and get maximal results.

$$\textcircled{5} + \textcircled{5} = \textcircled{12}$$

As the pastor mentioned last time, the result is even higher than the sum of both shares. But when the husband withdraws, he gives much less to marriage and brings less of his energy and creativity home. His wife will take the space that has become empty – most women automatically do that instead of trying her husband to fill that hole again. But this costs her more energy than it would have cost him and the result is still much less than before.

$$\textcircled{8} + \textcircled{3} = \textcircled{10}$$

So, yes, the family is still a functioning unit. Everything that has happened before will still be taken care of, but the quality is much less and – worse – the wife will quickly become quite exhausted – physically, emotionally, and spiritually. When she finally discovers what has happened it is almost too late to change anything.

Why? She has no more energy left and her husband won't take over any more responsibilities because his confidence is broken. He knows that he is a failure as a husband, but he doesn't dare to do anything anymore because he fears her accusing finger.

So ladies, be careful — there are other ways of getting your husbands attention than criticism (we will talk about this later). Criticism is a sign of lack of respect and violates Ephesians 5:33. If you want to win your husband, if you want to get him involved – show him that you respect him. This will build up his self esteem, and he will have a greater desire to do something for you. But he will always do things differently from you – that is the way God designed him – and you need to accept that first. Only then can you expect a loving relationship.

In the next session we will talk a bit more about the differences between men and women so that we can understand each other better.

2.3 How to find an agreement

Let me wrap up this lesson by stating a few sentences that we should constantly remind ourselves of. They could be summarized as “don't over- or underestimate your role in the family”.

1. I am not the center of the world – not even of my family. I could be terribly wrong and need the help of my mate.
2. Others have the right to see and do things differently than I. If they do so, this does not usually endanger the harmony in our family.
3. I am NOT the one who knows what is best for my partner. I do not have the right or responsibility to change him or her.
4. I have the right to my own opinion and the duty to express it. If I remain silent, I am responsible for any damage caused by my partner's decision.
5. We both are filled by the Holy Spirit, so we should be able to resolve differences in a godly manner.