

Leadership & Submission

– Sunday School Notes –

Review of previous week

In the last two weeks we have looked at some of the differences between men and women and talked about some of the typical problems that arise, if we do not understand these differences as God-given. We have seen that men and women differ in the ways they build self-esteem, communicate, handle competition, and find fulfillment in the sexual relation.

Of course, there were a lot of generalizations and in about 20% of the cases the description doesn't fit you as man or woman. But I am pretty sure that the other 80% come pretty close.

I hope this made us a little more aware how the needs of our spouse differ from our own and how we can fill these needs by trying to understand THEIR approach to life.

4 Natural causes for problems

Today we want to look at another “natural source” for problems in a marriage. This source has to do with the way we grew up, how our past experience has influenced the way we approach life today. We all have developed wrong thinking habits here and there. And we experience these habits as a wall that keeps us from being the wife or husband that God intended us to be.

So we want to talk about the building blocks of that wall, the pieces that we somehow managed to pile up on top of each other and possibly still add to that wall. Much of the insights that I will talk about today, have been discovered by psychologists or people who tried to unveil the “driving” of human behavior. These worldly sciences can help us to discover the origins for some of the problems we experience. But as Christians, we can do more: *once we have acknowledged that we do have a wrong thinking habit*, we can bring it before the Lord and ask him to change us. And God will do this, because he promised

I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people. (Heb 8:10b)

Wrong thinking patterns can be changed, because

The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, we have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. (2.Cor 10:4-5)

So we cannot say “that's the way I am, and I cannot change this”! We can change our thinking habits and take every thought captive – if we want to. We only have to admit that we need to change and some of our values need correction.

Understanding the origins of our current way of thinking shall help us to do so. Therefore we will talk today about the building blocks for wrong behavior that caused us to become passive husbands or unsubmitive wives.

I will look at three types of building blocks:

- Negative building blocks of the past and their consequences for today
- Trends in our current thinking pattern, and
- Current behavior that we use to keep the “wrong lifestyle” going.

4.1 Value Systems developed during Childhood

The roots of many of the ways we approach the world go way back to our own childhood. We have watched the marriage of our parents and decided how we want to experience marriage. We have noticed certain situations as painful for one of our parents and decided to avoid such situations in the future. We have admired many things that we saw our parents and expect our partner to be the same. We have noticed how our parents do things and decided that this is the only right way to do them. We have seen behavior that we did not like at all and decided to defend ourselves against such behavior, should we experience it in the future.

We can't blame our parents for this, but we have to admit – they weren't perfect. Even the best parents make mistakes when raising their children. And not all of us were so fortunate to grow up in a healthy home. We may have had dominating fathers or mothers who ran the family. We may have seen a lot of tension in our parent's marriage, or even a divorce – a traumatic experience for most children. All this shapes our understanding of love – how we express it, how we expect it to be expressed to us, and what we see as signs for a lack of love.

And so we develop a value system, that does not always have to do with godly values. Here is a small list of typical consequences of our childhood experiences:

- Father dominates:
Daughter gets hostile view of men, Son tries to imitate father
- Mother dominates:
Son overvalues independence from women: keeps emotionally distant, does not want to show weaknesses, certain defensiveness
Daughter
- Love was expressed mainly materially:
Need to stockpile symbols, possession, status. Difficulty with simple lifestyle.
Excessive generosity (?)

- Parents didn't set limits (the word "no" wasn't used):
Problems with self-discipline, responsibility. Cannot manage resources.
- Parents never apologized openly:
Cannot forgive, perfectionist, gifts may be viewed as admission of guilt
- Parents are viewed as ideal:
Weaknesses in spouse are not accepted, failure is criticized
- Family moves often:
Outsider role, Loneliness
- Parent's marriage visibly unsatisfying:
Problems with trust (doesn't believe in chance for good relationships), tries to remain independent, does not open up
Focus on own achievements as substitute for love and source for happiness (success, strength, status, education, be "better" ...),
– *that's what I discovered in myself before I became a Christian* –

All these are building blocks for wrong values that dominate our current way of life. Wrong values often lead to certain extremes in our life as adults. We dive into work because we believe it satisfies our needs. We accumulate possessions or just need to demonstrate to ourselves that we "can afford it", or that we are better than others (richer, more intelligent, more beautiful, more meticulous, have a better taste ... you name it). By falling into these extremes we miss the true values of life – *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness and self control* (Gal 5:22/23) – and are never really satisfied. We fall into the trap of the advertising industry and believe that our life is not fulfilled if we don't have MORE than we have right now – whatever that may be – so we are never content. In no way we can accept a step backwards, a "less than before". If we grew up with the wrong values, this is how we believe life should be. Of course, we would never admit that we believe in this MORE stronger than in the promises of the bible, but our actions show it nevertheless.

What can we learn from this? Wrong values have often long and bitter roots. We often only see certain behavior in us that we don't like. But unless we recognize the wrong thinking habit that leads to this behavior we won't be able to change it (I think our weigh-down workshop says the same about overeating). And unless we admit that we do cling to wrong values, unless we recognize them as sinful because they go against God's standards, they will not go away. Only God can make us free – once we we admit our need for help.

4.1.1 Inadequate or missing role models for men

Among the building blocks that lead to wrong values there is one particular problem that has become stronger over the past decades – the lack of a proper role model for men. In contrast to the time of about 100 years ago, most children today don't see much of what their fathers are doing. They watch them disappear in the morning and come home late in the afternoon – often too tired to communicate with them (*this now becomes also a problem for women*). Their father spends almost no time with them during the week, which means that they hardly know their father at all. Obviously they get a very incomplete picture of what a man does for the family. Their father is distant to them – it is the mother who really runs the family – that is the way boys and girls experience the family. It is even worse if both parents work hard. Children do not observe their fathers as leaders of the family and they have only a vague idea of them as provider with some responsibility. After all, they have no idea what it means that a job creates the necessary money to run the family. So boys grow up without the feeling that a man constantly works FOR the family and don't learn what their future responsibility will be. Girls grow up without learning to respect the tasks that a husband fulfills unseen – because they notice that mother does everything. (Well in some households this actually IS so).

The consequence: boys grow up without knowing the proper role models for their future life, because no one shows them what a good father and husband is supposed to be – even if both parents consider their marriage as very happy. So boys develop their own role model and this may be quite different from the ideal. Similarly girls do not learn how to submit to a husband in a constructive way.

If we grew up without role models, we need to learn this later if we want to have a successful marriage. We need to see that our own value system differs from God's standards and that we have to adopt this “new” responsibility as only way towards a fulfilled marriage. This is a difficult process, but it will succeed once we admit that our current role models for wives and husbands are not correct.

As parents, we can do something for our own children (we come to that later again): Fathers should spend real time with their children and let them participate in their everyday life. Show them, where you work. Tell them what you do and let them – if that is possible – participate in small pieces of it. Let them meet your fellow workers – if your children hear them praise your efforts, they will get a better feeling for what you do for the family and who you are.

4.2 Loneliness: we need friends besides our spouse

The next building block has much to do with the mobile lifestyle of the western society. If you move often, you will experience difficulties in developing and maintaining friendships. What I mean by that is not just a loose friendship with people that you meet in church or at work, but a deeper relationship with people outside your imme-

diate family that allows you to share even the “not so nice” aspects of your life and find understanding and comfort. It takes years to develop such a friendship and this is particularly difficult for men and women who spend most of their time trying to be successful. If you live in such a world and move every 3 to 5 years, it is very hard to have any true friends at all.

We have experienced this a couple of times and still notice this as one of the greatest difficulties of living here in Ithaca. It just takes so much time to cross cultural differences, to find people that you find really comfortable with, and to get to know them in depth until you get to the point where you have the impression that you can talk about everything – I mean really everything that goes on in your life – and still find understanding.

For men it is even more difficult to develop deep friendships. We were not made to put relationships to the top of our priority list. So often the only friendships we have go back to the times of our highschool or college. And these friends seldomly live close to where we live right now, which makes it difficult to maintain the friendship. So many men have no real friends at all – I mean human friends, of course.

Women have it a bit easier to disclose themselves to their women. It is part of their nature to develop closer relationships and they feel the need to do so much stronger. But even for them, it is not so easy to develop new friendships and they experience the lack of friendships much stronger than men. So they probably go through a harder time when they move to another place, particularly when they come from a different culture and speak a different language.

The situation is not much different for Christians. Yes, we meet at church and have fellowship with others. But this is not the same as a friendship where you share a major portion of yourselves, talk about your inner feelings, tensions, hopes, insecurities, or failures. Christian men face the same difficulties as other men to let go of their sense of competition and their need to appear successful, and to open up before other men. But a man *needs* a best friend in whom he can fully trust.

Why is this so? Why are male friendships so important for us, even when we're married? Isn't it enough to have our wives, whom we entrust almost everything, and to discuss the rest with the Lord?

Well – it simply doesn't work that way! What do we do when it was our wife who has hurt our feelings? Do we want to keep this all for ourselves? Yes – of course in the ideal situation we would all resolve the matter quickly with our wives and we don't need anybody else – right?

Let's face it! We can't always do this – our emotional barrier is just too strong. Now, where do we turn to just to talk about this, if we have no male friend? Let me tell you one thing – a man without a male friend is very vulnerable. If he doesn't have a male friend, he will probably end up talking to a woman about the problem.

Why?

Because women are more understanding – we men know that – and there is no feeling

of competition when we talk to them. So if a man doesn't have a close friend, he will find it easier to share his problems with a woman than with another man. And you can probably imagine the consequences: a man has trouble with his wife and talks to another woman who is *so much more* understanding. How many affairs have started just this way?

You can almost *guarantee* that trouble arises when married men talk to women about their marital problems or vice versa. You're emotionally mixed up already and the situation leads to even more emotional confusion. You will develop strong feelings toward the one who understands you – and this is not always good for your marriage. How many counselors, even pastors have experienced this problem.

In the Christian Group that I joined after my salvation we had a bit training in Christian counselling. And they have made it a rule that men should only counsel men and women only women. Although this rule sounds a bit too strict, it is very wise – too many people have fallen seriously into sin by ignoring the fact that human emotions are much more complex than they imagined. We shouldn't play with temptation!

Thus having a male friend is very important for men – actually, a male friend can much better understand how we feel, when we express our difficulties to him, because he experiences life from the the same – the male – perspective. Once we crossed the barrier of trust, we will find out that we are not alone with our fears, insecurities, and uncertainties that our wives seem not to understand at all. *A friend loves at all times*, says **Proverbs 17:17**. By sharing with another man, we get a clearer perspective of ourselves. The more a man finds his feelings respected, the easier it will be for him to share himself and his feelings with his wife.

So women – the time your husband spends with his friend is very well invested and you should encourage your husband to deepen friendships with other men.

I think, the men's prayer breakfast is a very good step in this direction. I know that some churches go even a step further and encourage their members to form microgroups of two or at most three men (or two or three women) who get together at least once a week and talk about all aspects of their life, spiritual insights, experiences, problems, and so on. This doesn't guarantee that you find a good friend but the chances are pretty good if you stick to that habit.

4.3 The need to control

Now let's come to the final brick – the need to control.

Once we have assembled all the other building blocks, once loneliness and wrong values dominate our life, we often come into the situation that we have to build more and more on top of them to maintain our life in an increasingly difficult world. We notice that it takes much effort to manage our life and we become quite desperate to maintain enough control over it.

How shall a man manage his family, if he has already so many problems with his own

life? How shall a woman freely submit, if she doesn't really know what trust is? In both cases, the man or the woman will feel a strong desire to control everything that happens in the family, because everything that is not under control poses a threat to their own feeling of security.

We already have talked about how useless the battle for control is – but if we don't see that the problem is in *ourselves*, we will constantly make our partner responsible for it. After all, it is our spouse who seems to make the control over our life so difficult. We surely notice a problem, but we ignore the fact that it has quite natural causes. So we try hard to get rid of the problem – the symptoms, to be precise, not the real disease. We search answers in the bible but find nothing specific enough. We try to discipline ourselves wherever we notice a wrong lifestyle. But we don't go for the real problem, the wall consisting of many building blocks that we have erected in the past and are still building higher. That is, what we need to approach – we need to remove the *wall*, not what's growing on it.

4.4 Do we need a crisis?

A man reaps what he sows, says Galatians 6:7. Not what we reap is the problem – it is the seed we're sowing in our soul. If we sow wrong thoughts, surely the harvest will be a growing number of conflicts. We shouldn't wait until this piles up so high that we are in a severe crisis! Yes – sometimes it needs a crisis to get our full attention, to make us understand how wrong and destructive our some of our beliefs and values are. But we don't have to wait that long until we start working on ourselves. If we keep our eyes open, we notice *where* we have built our personal version of the wall that keeps us from being the wife or husband that God intended us to be.

So let us get into the habit of checking ourselves in the light of the spirit: do we feel the need to control things? Do we neglect building friendships? To what extent differs our value system from giving priority to *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness and self control* over all other things? Let us work on the causes and take down the wall again. And keep in mind – this IS easy: once we admit that WE are the ones who build the wall, we can ask Jesus to change our heart.