

---

# Husbands, Love Your Wives By Being the “Bad Guy”

**Rob Lister**

*Associate Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies  
Talbot School of Theology, Biola University  
La Mirada, CA*

---

The title of this article has its genesis in Ephesians 5:25: “Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” This command to husbands is, of course, part of a broader passage depicting the arrangement of the husband-wife relationship and other household relationships (Eph 5:22–6:10). The fact that the husband-wife relationship is predicated in this context upon the pattern of the Christ-church relationship is one key indicator that Paul’s instruction for husbands and wives is transcultural, as opposed to being restricted to first century marriages in and around Ephesus.

Having said that, twenty-first century husbands may still wonder *how* they ought love their wives as Christ loved the church. What does that mean in practice? That is an excellent question to ask, and the good news is we need not look any further than Ephesians 5 for an answer.

According to Paul’s argument in this passage, the pattern that Jesus laid down was one of “giving himself up” for his bride, the church, in pursuit of her sanctification (vv. 25–27). Then he states to husbands, “In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body” (vv. 28–30).

The directive is clear. After the pattern of Christ, husbands are to *love, nourish, and cherish* their wives as they do their own bodies. It does not get much more practical than that! So, let us consider a fairly common scenario in which Christian

husbands might love and lead our wives in accordance with this instruction. Though the possible applications are vast, the particular exhortation I have in mind at the moment focuses on those husbands who are also (or perhaps soon to be) fathers.<sup>1</sup>

From the vantage point of my own marriage, I have noticed (and have heard similar assessments from others) that one of the most routinely stressful seams in the day is the transition that occurs when I come home from work. This hour often generates a host of conflicting expectations about “what comes next” when dad comes home. Younger children are often bursting with energy and ready to play. Dad is frequently seeking a couch on which to collapse. Mom is looking for adult conversation and relief from having to be “on” all day with the kids, and so on.

Under such circumstances, the husband may find it very tempting to dismiss the concerns of everyone else—and especially his wife—in favor of “checking out” of life for some or most of the evening. In some cases, husbands may even come home feeling entitled to that kind of reprieve. “After all,” they reason, “I’ve worked hard all day to put food on the table and clothes on our backs. I deserve it, right?”

Sinking down into the couch, we may continue down our path of least resistance with the kids as well, either by immediately consenting to any and all of their requests, or by waving them back in the direction of mom to address their behavioral issues and other concerns. In either case, we effectively disengage from the family and potentially undermine much of the work of mom’s hands with the

kids throughout the rest of the day. And while we indulge in the comforts to which we feel so entitled, we may remain (or at least try to remain) ignorant that the wife of our youth is almost certainly more fatigued than we are. We can all too easily disregard the taxing nature of her daily labors, and perhaps even fail to wonder if she also might enjoy a reprieve. Sound familiar? Before you say “no” too quickly, ask your wife what she thinks.

In applying Ephesians 5:28–30 to our “end of the day” routine, might we not better love, nourish, and cherish our wives if we adopted a different approach? Instead of walking in the door preoccupied with our own fatigue, what if we came home prayerfully considering the needs of our wives as more important than our own (*à la* Christ, Phil 2:1–11), and sought to bear the “end of the day” burden in their place?<sup>2</sup> Indeed, as it pertains to lifting the parental burden, what if we determined that as soon as we enter the home, we would bear that frontline responsibility to discipline our children? While mom certainly has the authority to train and discipline the children (Eph 6:1–3), fathers would do well to take the lead when they are home.

In other words, what if we committed to leading and loving our wives by being the “bad guy” with the kids’ behavioral and disciplinary concerns when we are home, including when we get home at the end of the day and are tired?<sup>3</sup> Moreover, since we have no desire to restrict our interaction with our children only to those moments of correction (Eph 6:4), what if we made it our purpose not only to remove mom’s burden of being the “bad guy,” but walked in the door with a disposition to pursue warm and affectionate engagement with the children, not simply to bark orders at them. In this intentional approach mom would receive an enjoyable respite, and the children would come to await daddy’s homecoming with joy. To broaden the scope of the picture still more, what if we viewed taking that initiative not only as a responsibility but also as a ministry and privilege—a way to bless our wives, and also to be on the front lines tilling the soil of our children’s hearts and proactively training them as often as we are able?

As a purely practical mechanism, husbands

and wives might ease the conflicting expectations of this transitional hour by discussing in advance what the difficulties of this point in the day are. Then in response to each spouse’s expectations, a prayerful, loose-ended strategy could be employed for how they might make this “handoff” more effective.<sup>4</sup> In that case, the husband would be wise to clearly communicate his desire that his wife feel the freedom to voice her concerns without fear of nagging if the plans fail to work. After all, we should not be surprised to learn that “planning it out” in moments of strength is easier than “living it out” in moments of bodily fatigue. For in those moments of weariness, when we are battling the appetite for supreme self-regard, we are not merely resisting a tired body, we are also resisting the desires of the “flesh” (Gal 5:16–26). In those moments only the gospel has the power to meet that need.

Accordingly, in the kindness of God it seems that he has given husbands a daily opportunity to rely on the gospel as they resist a sense of entitlement to ease. By pouring themselves out daily for the well-being of their wives, husbands are pressed into the mold of Christ (Eph 5:25–30).<sup>5</sup> And as we love, nourish, and cherish in the strength that God supplies (1 Pet 4:11), we will find the capacity to bless both our wives and our children, all while exercising our own faith and bearing witness to the ultimate meaning of marriage, namely that Christ led and sacrificially loved his bride to the uttermost (Eph 5:31–32). Now that is a calling with *gravitas* that anchors us in grace, calls us to live daily with a view to the primary meaning of marriage, and reminds us that as we seek to love and lead our wives after the pattern of Christ there are no little moments.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>I realize that personal circumstances will vary from reader to reader. Some readers, for example, are no longer parents of children in the home, and others are not yet parents. My purpose here is not to account for all the possible circumstances that husbands face, but simply to present one fairly common scenario. Let the reader personalize and adapt the narrative example to their own unique situations. For another outstanding depiction of a husband loving his wife as his own body, see Wayne Grudem’s explanation of his vocational decision to relocate from Illinois to Arizona

out of regard for his wife's health ("Men and Women: Similarities and Differences, with Wayne Grudem," *Revive Our Hearts*, May 18, 2005, accessed December 17, 2013, <http://www.reviveourhearts.com/radio/revive-our-hearts/a-balanced-look-at-roles>).

<sup>2</sup>For a helpful resource in thinking more strategically about bearing some of the burdens of our wives, see Justin Buzard, *Date Your Wife* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012).

<sup>3</sup>Lest anyone misunderstand my intended meaning for "bad guy" here, allow me to emphasize that I, of course, am not condoning parental behaviors or attitudes that are harsh, mean-spirited, or unkind. I am simply referring to fathers stepping forward into the role that the children will (at least temporarily) view as the "bad guy," because we are holding them accountable and enforcing appropriate disciplinary consequences.

<sup>4</sup>As part of a strategy to love my wife as my own body, I have tried to learn to identify opportunities throughout the day where I can store up and recapture some reserves to spend on my family when I do get home. Here we might think of anything from adjusting dietary and exercise habits to increase energy, to trimming overcommitted schedules, to taking a short 10 minute walk around the office complex before making the drive home with the radio off so as to capture a few refreshing moments. I believe that expressions of "energy stewardship" such as these can all be helpful expressions of faithfulness. And yet, as the remainder of this article indicates, energy maintenance strategies are not sufficient in and of themselves—and that, too, is good news!

<sup>5</sup>For some husbands it is common practice to identify a landmark on the way home that they will use as a visible reminder to pray for a renewed appropriation of the transformative power of the gospel, as they transition out of the workplace and back into the home. See Timothy Lane and Paul Tripp's penetrating and gospel-centered analysis of this same sort of end of the day scenario in *How People Change* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2008), 157–58 and 167–69.