



Does God Care More About Sex than Love?

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As a biblical counselor, how would you respond to a client who asks?

I've been married for 25 years to an emotionally and verbally abusive man. He regularly curses at me, calls me degrading sexual names, refuses to have a normal conversation with me and mocks me in front of our children. He will not see a counselor or talk with our pastor.

I don't want a divorce but I'm tired of trying to make this better. I feel angry and bitter toward him for the way he treats me, yet he still expects me to be loving and affectionate with him, especially in bed. I can't do it. What does God expect me to do?

This is one of those difficult questions to answer thoughtfully and biblically and I fear in this short article I won't be able to adequately tackle this issue. But I'm asked this type of question so frequently; I want us to talk about it.

One of the most standard answers women hear from biblical counselors on this topic is that God's word is clear. She may not withhold herself sexually from her husband, no matter how he treats you, citing 1 Corinthians 7, citing 1 Corinthians 7.

But what are we saying to a hurting woman by this counsel? Are we saying that her husband's sexual needs (or desires) are more important to God than her emotional well-being? Are we telling her that God calls her to meet her husband's sexual needs regardless of the damage he's done to her spirit or their relationship? Are we telling her that God says she never has a choice? She is to be available sexually no matter what?

That is a horrible picture of God and it is not who He is. When we paint that picture of God, we are telling a woman that God values a man's sexual needs and desires more than a woman's needs for love and safety and this is not the truth. God cares equally for both individuals in a marriage and for the relationship itself.

In answering this woman's question we must look at the whole counsel of God with respect to marriage and not take one passage about sex in marriage as the sole biblical answer to her dilemma.

What does God say about marriage and the way a husband should treat his wife?

Marriage was not designed by God as a legitimate way for a man to get sex, but rather a loving partnership between a man and a woman. Tim Keller in his recent book on marriage writes, “The Christian teaching [on marriage] does not offer a choice between fulfillment and sacrifice but rather *mutual* fulfillment through *mutual* sacrifice.”ⁱ

The important word here is mutual. When one person in a marriage is not sacrificing or loving or caring, a biblical marriage is not happening. The scriptures teach, “Husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church” (Ephesians 5:25) and are instructed not to be harsh with them (Colossians 3:19).

Granted, no husband is perfect, but when there is repeated emotional and verbal harshness and cruelty with no evidence of repentance, remorse, personal responsibility or change, the marriage relationship as God designed, is clearly broken.

The question we must ask ourselves as biblical counselors is what is the wife’s responsibility in these situations? Is she to prop up the broken marriage and try to act as if all is still well? Or, does that approach enable her husband to continue to be self-deceived believing he can act selfishly and sinfully towards her with no consequences?

What does God say to the wife and what should her biblical response be to the way her husband is treating her?

God’s word clearly tells us not to retaliate when we are sinned against. Instead we are to overcome evil with good (Romans 12:21). As counselors, one part of helping this wife overcome her husband’s evil with good is to help her forgive her husband and deal with her anger and bitterness toward him.

But here is where we must be exceptionally wise. When we help her forgive and let go of her bitterness (which are good goals), if he continues to treat her as he always has, it would be good for her to continue to be wary of him and unable to feel wifely affection or sexual attraction toward him.

Next, the bible commands believers to love, including our enemies. But what does biblical love look like toward an abusive husband? Biblical love isn’t necessarily feelings of affection, warmth, or sexual attraction, but actions that are directed toward another person’s good, or long term best interests. We can help this woman overcome evil with good when we help her biblically love her husband.

Therefore, is it in her husband’s good and long term best interests to be available to him so that his sexual needs are met? If the answer is yes, then keep in mind this still does not address their marital problem, it is only a solution to his sexual frustration.

Often when counseling a woman in this kind of dilemma, I find she has lost sight of her God designated role as her husband’s help mate. As his partner, she can love him by helping him become the man God designed him to be. As his wife she is not a second class citizen with no power or say. That kind of wife was biblically called a concubine and clearly not God’s intent for marriage.

In cases where repeated abuse is present, it is always in her husband's best interest for him to repent of his selfishness, pride, and submit to God (James 4:7). It would also be in his best interests and in the best interests of their marriage for him to learn to control his tongue (James 1:19; James 3:10-12) and become more thoughtful and considerate of his wife's feelings (Philippians 2:3-4).

When we tell a woman that no matter how her husband treats her God says she must have sex with him, what we're saying is that God cares more about the fact that her husband is sexually hungry than the fact that her husband is hurting her and their marriage relationship. And, that's not biblical.

We need a new paradigm. Let's help this wife learn to speak up to her husband lovingly but firmly and say,

"No, I can't have sex with you in a godly way because of the way you treat me. I can't feel affectionate toward you when I feel afraid. When you curse at me, scream at me, and call me horrible names it breaks my heart. I am God's image bearer, not an object be used for sex and then discarded when you're finished. With God's help I choose to forgive you but I can't reconcile with you in a loving relationship until you begin to see the damage you're doing to me and to our marriage and change."

Words of truth spoken in love and humility are the potent medicine her husband needs to wake up to the fact that he can't expect the perks of a good marriage without changing his ways and putting in some work. The scriptures are full of examples of God's law of consequences. What you sow, you reap (Galatians 6:7). If her husband wants a good marriage and not just a concubine, he will need to stop sowing thorns and thistles into his wife's heart.

Overcoming evil with good empowers this woman take constructive action that may lead to the restoration of their marital relationship. That would be good for him, good for her and good for their family.

¹ The Secret of Marriage Tim and Kathy Keller, page 47 New York: Dutton, 2011

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