



Does God Care More About Sex than Marriage?

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. 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 blog I won't be able to adequately tackle the topic. But I'm asked this question frequently, therefore, I want to try.

It goes without saying that it's important to understand more what she means by emotional and verbal abuse, but let's suspend that question for now and just assume it's true.

That said, many women suffering in these kinds of marriages tell me that their counselor quotes 1 Corinthians 7 and tells her that regardless of how her husband treats her, God's word is clear—she may not withhold herself sexually from her husband.

But what are we really telling a hurting woman by this counsel? Are we telling her 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 how she feels, or the damage he's done to her spirit or their relationship? Are we saying that God doesn't care how she feels, or how her husband treats her? Are we saying she has no 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 I think we need to think through a bigger picture of marriage and relationships and not take one passage about sex in marriage as a one-size-fits-all approach.

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."¹

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 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 biblical responsibility in these situations? Is she to prop up the broken marriage and try to pretend all is still well? Or, does that approach enable the husband to continue to be self-deceived—believing he can act selfishly and irresponsibly with no consequences for his sin?

What does God say to the wife, and what should her biblical response be to the way he's treating her?

God tells us not to retaliate when we are sinned against, but instead we are to overcome evil with good (Romans 12:21). As counselors, it would be good to help this wife to forgive her husband and deal with her anger and bitterness toward him.

But here is where we must be exceptionally wise. If we help her forgive and let go of her bitterness (which are good goals), and he continues to treat her as he always has, is it realistic or biblical to expect that she would, or even could, feel sexually attracted, or even any wifely affection toward him?

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

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 or warmth, but actions that are directed toward another person's good, or long-term best interests.

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 so, keep in mind this 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 is to do all she can to help him become the man God designed him to be. As a 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 and pride, 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) and become more thoughtful and considerate of his wife's feelings (Philippians 2:3).

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 true.

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. 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, 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.

Speaking God's truth would be good for him, good for her, and good for their marriage. These are some ways we can help her practice overcoming evil with good.