

How Far Can You Carry Your Wife?

Ephesians 5:25-33

June 17, 2007

As I begin the message this morning, I need to come clean with you. I need to be up front and honest. I read in a preaching journal this week about Brian Gray, a pastor in Denver Colorado, who suggested that the Father's Day sermon ought to be co-written with the pastor's wife. I did not take that advice.

Number 1 – if she co-wrote it, it would be a whole lot longer than it is going to be because she always has more to say than I do. But more importantly,

Number 2 – my wife's perspective on this might shatter the well-developed illusions that I have constructed among you about my intelligence, sensitivity, charm, and status as an all-around great guy.

So it is Father's Day. No Father's Day would be complete without also talking about women. I was introduced this week to a Lyle Lovett song, "She's No Lady, She's My Wife." Toni really likes Lyle Lovett and has several of his CD's, but I've never been a fan, although I remember coming to believe that there is hope for all of the not-so-talented, not-great-looking men out there when he married Julia Roberts. It's true that it didn't last, but for a little while, fate smiled on every average Joe Six-Pack out there, bringing them a glimmer of hope.

Have you heard about the big event that is scheduled to take place in Finland just two weeks from next Saturday? A city in Finland whose name I can't pronounce will host the 15th Annual World Wife Carrying Championships. It is a two week long festival and includes such activities as wife-carrying karaoke and a best costume contest. The highlight of the festival however – the big draw – the event everyone comes to see – is the wife-carrying race.

A wife must weigh at least 108 pounds and a husband must carry her around a three hundred yard obstacle course consisting of sand, grass, asphalt, two dry obstacles, and two water obstacles.

Now I am unable to verify this, but I read this week that the roots of this competition date back to the late 1800's. Apparently there was a local bandit who needed some partners to help him carry out his crimes. But he was smart enough to know that you can't accept just any old criminal into the gang. You have to make sure that your desperado really deserves to be included. Now at the time, it was a fairly common practice to steal farm animals and women from neighboring towns and villages, so hoisting a large bundle over one's shoulder was an important part of the job description. The head bandit held tryouts to make sure that the men he chose were physically able to do the heavy lifting that would be required. From these simple beginnings came the modern day wife carrying championships.

In the modern day contest, there is a 15 second penalty for each time a husband drops his wife. The wives may be carried any way the competitors choose with the exception that no harness or other artificial device may be used. The three most common methods are piggy-back, over-the-shoulder like a sack of potatoes, or the fireman's carry. The winning couple receives a trophy and the wife's weight in beer.

Amazingly, one of the leaders of Finland's feminist movement considers the event not to be demeaning at all, but rather uplifting and authentic because it celebrates companionship. Go figure.

Perhaps by this time, you are wondering what all of this has to do with Father's Day, or for that matter, the fifth chapter of Ephesians.

When I am doing pre-marital counseling with young couples, we often talk about particular Scripture passages. I always give the couples a choice of which passage we use during the wedding ceremony. There are all sorts of possibilities, among them Ephesians 5:22, "Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord." Seldom have I had a bride choose this set of verses. Grooms generally don't mind, but they are overruled. I just tell them to get used to it.

But I believe that if we truly and honestly look at this passage, we will discover that the main burden is placed on the husband and not the wife. This whole section of Scripture from 5:21 – 6:9 sets out rules that define the social and cultural relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, and slaves and masters. In that cultural context, there were well-defined boundaries for those who held subordinate and dominant positions of power and prestige. Everybody knew their "place."

But Ephesians 5, even though it doesn't sound like it on the surface, sets a standard which is in direct opposition to conventional attitudes. It begins with a command that everyone should subordinate him or herself to others. The hierarchy of power is flattened to only two levels: God and Christ are in the dominant position and everyone else is subordinate. Since we are all on the same level in relationship to Christ, then it is easy to see that among ourselves we are to mutually subordinate to one another. There is no chain of command beginning with God and Christ flowing down to husbands, to wives, to children, to slaves. There are only two levels: the divine level and the human level.

Now you may say that there are at least three levels of hierarchy because verse 23 says, "the husband is head of the wife just as Christ is head of the church." But it has already been established that both husband and wives are to be subject to one another. If we are making the case that husbands and Christ enjoy the same role of higher authority AND if we are saying that husbands and wives ought to be subject to one another, then it follows that Christ should be subject to the church. But Christ can't be head of the church and subject to it at the same time.

And if husbands are to emulate Christ, we have to be honest and admit that there are some things that Christ did that husbands will never be able to do.

Husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church. How did Christ love the church? He gave himself up for the church. He sacrificed everything for the church. Though he sat on a throne in heaven, he left there in order to be born a human being to die for the church.

Nevertheless, husbands are to love their wives. Husbands can never assume the role of Savior for their wives. There is only one Savior and that is Jesus. Yet, we are to view Christ's actions of love for the church as the definition of what it means for the husband to love the wife.

On this Father's Day, I believe that the church has an obligation and a responsibility to encourage fathers to love their families well. As a place to begin, I would put forth the proposition that the best way to be a loving father, is to first be a loving husband.

Without question, one of the most important issues facing the United States is the stress under which the nuclear family exists. Divorce and family dissolution, single-parent homes, kids who go back and forth between divorced parents like a ping-pong ball, verbal and physical abuse, and so many other problems strike at the heart of the ability to raise emotionally and spiritually healthy children.

As the parent of two sons and a daughter, I have some sort of credibility, I think, to talk about both sexes. And I have had these conversations with all three of my kids. I hope that sons, and all sons everywhere, can learn what it means to honor and respect a woman by watching the way faithful fathers treat their mothers. I hope sons can learn how to develop healthy relationships in a home environment where you won't find physical or emotional or verbal abuse. I hope sons can learn about love by watching fathers keep their promises to love their wives through the tough times as well as the easy days. Even on those days when loving each other has been a little challenging, I hope sons take a lesson from fathers who have remembered their promises. I hope sons have learned a thing or two about how to treat women by watching faithful fathers treat all women with honor and respect.

I hope that our daughter and all daughters everywhere, learn what sort of man they want to spend the rest of their lives with by watching their fathers treat their mothers. I hope that our daughters everywhere will catch just a glimpse of Prince Charming in their fathers and so refuse to settle for anything less in their own relationships.

Go back for a minute to verse 28. Paul says that he who loves his wife loves himself. I think that it can also be said that he who loves his wife loves his children. If we are to create a loving family by loving our wives, then just how do we do that?

Verse 25 counsels us that we are to love our wives as Christ loves the church. So how does Christ love the church? It is a love that is sacrificial in everything. Jesus gave his very life for the church. Isn't that the model for husbands in their relationships with their wives? For Jesus, nothing was more important than his love for those in the church. This is not a man-on-top and woman-in-submission role. This is a role in which nothing is

more important than the health, happiness, and well-being of wives – nothing. Love of our wives is always costly. It always costs something. It costs us our freedom to do as we please, our own desires, and our own needs. If men don't lay awake at night thinking about ways that they can serve their wives, then they are missing the message here.

The husband loves his wife as his own body by nourishing it and caring for it. Men, ask yourselves right now how you nourish and care for your wife. Can she feel that care? Is it evident?

I will admit that I can talk to my wife about Jay Cutler, the new quarterback for the Broncos, or LeBron James of the Cleveland Cavaliers, or the thugs that play for the Indiana Pacers, or Jarrod Parker, the terrific pitcher for the Norwell High School baseball team, or Danica Patrick of the Indy Racing League. But sometimes I have trouble talking about the stuff that really matters in our relationship. Sometimes I fall short on words of love and encouragement. Sometimes I forget how much she enjoys the simple act of touch, like cuddling on the couch in front of a chick-flick. Sometimes I forget small acts of service to her. Sometimes I forget simple acts of love like bringing her home a rose or picking up a Hallmark card for her.

Sometimes I forget to pick up and carry my wife. I'm not talking about a condescending attitude of protecting "the little woman." Believing that is still maintaining an attitude of arrogance in which the husband believes that he is the more important part of the relationship. I'm talking about loving her as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

Benjamin Franklin once said that one good husband is worth two good wives, because the scarcer things are the more they're valued. The impact of Ephesians 5, as I understand it, is to increase the number of good husbands so that they are not so scarce. One of the best ways I know of to increase the number of good husbands is for all of us to strive with all our energy to be loving fathers and husbands.

We may not be able to carry our wives around an obstacle course. That is probably something that we should leave for the professionals. Still, all of us men have the ability to learn to carry our wives' interests first and foremost in our hearts. That not only increases the chance for successful marriages, but also serves as a positive role model for our children. That is the kind of carrying all of us husbands and fathers can do.