

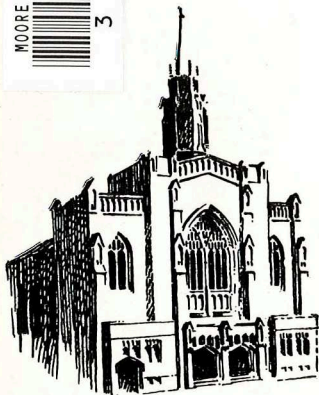
HOW TO HANDLE A DIFFICULT HUSBAND

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HOW TO HANDLE A DIFFICULT HUSBAND

A doctor who conducts a column in a certain newspaper printed a letter he had received from a desperate wife. She described how for twenty years they had often been referred to as 'an ideal family.' Then the letter went on:—

"My husband, 52, has completely changed in the past two years. He was honest, faithful, humble and a good churchman. He worshipped his daughters. Now is profane, ignores his customers, never smiles and half the time won't talk to me. He lies, cheats, and has even committed adultery.

"In the last two years he has aged ten years. He can't sit still one second. He doesn't listen to hifi which he used to enjoy. Doesn't read anything any more—except the comics.

"We talk—when we do—like two strangers; nothing deep, no affection, no warmth. When he leaves the house, if I kiss him on the lips he rubs his mouth. I have tried to be lovingly patient with all this. I feel he needs a doctor, but he won't go. What is your advice, please!"

The doctor suggested it might be the male climacteric in which case male hormones or electro-shock treatment could help. It might be some disease affecting circulation in the brain. It could be a brain tumour or the development of a psychosis. His advice concluded, "Whatever the cause, get him to a doctor or a doctor to him. Otherwise my hunch is that things will go from bad to worse."

That was three years ago and his hunch proved

correct. The husband refused medical treatment and finally left the family completely. In despair the deserted wife sent me the cutting and asked my help. It is a pity the man refused treatment which might have been necessary. However, the real problem seems to be moral and spiritual and final victory can only be achieved at that level. I'm glad to say I have seen such victories even after serious and prolonged lapses. It is not possible unless the wife knows how to handle the situation, has inexhaustible patience, great faith and the love which "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things." With such love a woman will remember she has made a vow to take her husband "for better, for worse" until parted by death.

A wife faced with such a situation needs enormous spiritual resources. Consequently, with the utmost sympathy, I commend to such women a study of the first Epistle of Peter, chapter three, and verses 1 to 9 as they are translated by J. B. Phillips. Here the Apostle Peter gives some very practical and indeed inspired advice to women who have difficult husbands and he also has a word or two of good advice for husbands. This epistle deals with a particular problem in the ancient world, a problem which strangely enough appears again and again in the hundreds of letters which pour into this Church. It is the problem faced by women who have become Christian believers, but whose husbands are still unbelievers, still pagan in their attitude to their wives and children, often quite brutal, treating them as possessions. In some cases the situation was being aggravated by Christian women harping on the truth that Christ had given a new dignity and status to women, putting them on an equal basis with men. This tended to make some women proud and haughty in their attitude towards their husbands which

did not make for harmony in the home at all, much less encourage the husbands to become Christians. Here in Australia today there are many thousands of women who are sincere Christian believers whose hearts ache because their husbands are not believers. What can be done about it? Well, there is mighty sound advice for all such women in this letter by the Apostle Peter, advice which goes equally well with husbands who may be facing a similar problem.

Before we consider the details of this advice let us pause to remember that the author is Peter, the Big Fisherman, the man with the notorious temper. He could curse and swear with the best of them—or the worst of them! Peter was a man of strong feeling who often flew off the handle, even after his conversion. His wife must have had a most difficult time with him. We have a little picture of their home in the description of one of our Lord's first miracles in the 30th verse of the 1st chapter of Mark. Peter's wife's mother lay sick of a fever. Jesus took her by the hand and immediately the fever left her. She got up and waited upon their guests. It makes me wonder what gave her that fever. Could it have been emotional tension with her son-in-law Peter? If so, I think it is a lovely thought that as soon as Jesus came into the home He was able to touch her and heal her of her fever. His presence restored peace, harmony and love. If that was not literally what happened in the fisherman's home beside the Sea of Galilee, it is no less than what happened in many other homes.

Be that as it may, the rough, quick-tempered fisherman, Simon Peter, did become a man of God and he has the right to give advice regarding marriage problems. Consider now in detail the advice we have here on how to deal with a difficult husband. It is hard to

follow in the Authorised Version, but if you have Phillips' translation I think you will find it really inspired. The Bible has four main pieces of advice:—

1. ADAPT YOURSELVES TO YOUR HUSBANDS. I like this word "adapt" better than the words used in other translations, "Be in subjection," "Be submissive," "Accept the authority of your husbands." Whatever the word used, there is no doubt that Peter meant management must remain with the husband. A husband who weakly hands over management to his wife is asking for trouble; for her and for himself. It destroys a woman's sense of security. There was a rather good cartoon in a daily paper recently. It depicted a marriage service and the minister was saying to the bride, "Do you promise to love and honour him and let him choose the TV programmes?" It might not be a bad idea to re-word the marriage service that way! If two people regard themselves as having equally the right to make decisions like this, either small or large, it will lead to endless arguments. But if both recognise that there can only be one captain of a ship, only one driver of a car, and in God's scheme of things that ought to be the husband, if the wife accepts the authority of the husband in such matters, such decisions do not create problems. If the husband really loves his wife he will decide for the programme she likes. So she wins anyway!

As I was saying, I do like this word "adapt" which Phillips uses here. To me it is much more positive than any of the other words. If a woman, even a Christian woman who is married to an unbeliever, accepts this principle, and realises that it is her Christian duty to adapt her self to her husband it can take so much of the tension out of married life. This thought was of great comfort once to a woman who wrote to me for

years about the tension in her home. According to her, she was a true Christian, her husband constantly hurt her by pouring scorn on the faith. To a large extent she had lost her respect for him and she felt she was demeaning herself by obeying him any further. But one day I urged her to read the 5th Chapter of Ephesians which stresses this same truth and it seemed to take a great load off her mind. She found it much easier then to "adapt" herself to her husband.

2. USE THE POWER OF SILENT CHRISTIAN WITNESS WITHOUT ANY WORD BEING SPOKEN.

This is most important. The Bible is not urging married people to indulge in the childish trick of "not speaking" if you have a quarrel. What it is saying is: a wife can't argue a husband into becoming a Christian believer, much less can she nag him into it. Deeds are much more powerful than words and the Bible urges all Christian wives to let their deeds speak for themselves. One of the great examples of this in ancient history was Monica, the mother of St. Augustine. In his famous book of "Confessions," Augustine spoke to God about his Mother's relation with her pagan husband and wrote these words: "Preaching Thee to him by her character, whereby Thou didst make her beautiful to her husband, reverently lovable and wonderful."

3. YOUR BEHAVIOUR MUST BE PURE AND REVERENT.

A woman who wants a difficult husband has little trouble in getting one. All she has to do is to be difficult herself. React to coldness with coldness. If he is mean to you, be mean to him. If he disappoints you by not being warm and loving, then, because your pride is hurt, refuse to be warm and loving to him. Be negative, be discouraging. If he is unfaithful to you in attitude or in act, be unfaithful to him. You will soon have a most difficult husband. But if you want a

warm, loving Christian husband, then "do unto him as you would that he should do to you." The world thinks it is not for the woman to take the initiative in these things. Christianity says it is. At this point in the 3rd chapter of 1st Peter, the Bible stresses the importance of "pure and reverent behaviour." After all this is only putting Christianity into practice in the home, in the vital relationship between husband and wives. Return good for evil.

In June, 1963 the "Reader's Digest" published an article entitled, WHAT MAKES A WOMAN UNFORGETTABLE? Some women are unforgettable and you can say of them "I did but see her passing by, and yet I love her till I die." The writer quizzed a great many men to find out what it was that gives a woman this magic, which makes men rejoice to be in a woman's company, to love her till they die. There were some surprising answers. For one thing, the writer found physical beauty was not very important. Many women who had this magic quality were noticeably deficient in beauty. Nor was it sex appeal. Indeed I would say that to most decent men (and I like to think that includes the majority) crude physical sex appeal can be actually repulsive. Men may give a wolf whistle and pretend to admire but actually they lose respect for a girl who flaunts sex appeal.

As I read the Reader's Digest article I felt that one word more than any other summed up what it is that makes a woman unforgettable. It is "responsiveness." In the poll three out of four men said the thing in a woman which endeared her to them more than anything was warmth. Such a woman cares for you as a person. She is responsive to your ideas, her heart reacts to your joys and sorrows. You think of her gratefully because when you ran out of petrol and had to walk

home in the rain, she regarded it as fun. So every time it rains you think of her with gratitude. She is responsive in the sense that, being feminine, she does not push her femininity, but in your company she makes you feel more of a man. She does not think of herself as involved in a hand to hand struggle to get what is coming to her, but she likes men and enjoys making them happy. She has a tenderness, a consideration for others and even a willingness to make personal sacrifices. She is responsive in the sense that she is intelligent and uses her intelligence not to score points off others, but to be more responsive so that when a man talks with her he finds himself talking more brilliantly. She has a gift for making people feel larger than they are.

There was one other surprising thing in this article; a woman is unforgettable when she is good. She can become unforgettable when she is wicked, but that is not the way we are using the word "unforgettable." To love her till we die, the woman must be good in the sense of being honourable, loving, courageous and generous. If these are the marks of her behaviour then I should think that would certainly meet the requirements suggested in this passage by the Apostle Peter—what a woman needs to win over an unbelieving husband. In reverse very much the same could be said about a man in his relationships with women, and not least about a Christian husband in dealing with a difficult, unbelieving wife.

4. CULTIVATE YOUR BEAUTY, ESPECIALLY THE TRUE BEAUTY. In the fourth place this big, burly ex-fisherman, a man's man if ever there was one, has some profound things to say about beauty. In the words of Phillips' translation:—

"Your beauty should not be dependent on an elaborate coiffure, or on the wearing of jewellery

or fine clothes, but on the inner personality — the unfading loveliness of a calm and gentle spirit, a thing very precious in the eyes of God. This was the secret of the beauty of the holy women of ancient times!"

Many good people have taken this to mean that Christian women should have nothing to do with artificial aids to beauty, cosmetics or that sort of thing. I think Phillips has caught the spirit of the original more accurately in which the thought seems to be, "Women will naturally use jewellery, go to the hairdressers, and wear pretty clothes while they are women, but a Christian woman will realise that much better beauty is to be found in a calm and gentle spirit." It is not wrong to make yourself look nice with a tasteful use of jewellery or good dressing or cosmetics. Indeed, the parable of the talents bids you make the most of the beauty God gave you. But it is making a serious mistake if you get the idea you can buy beauty while you neglect spiritual beauty.

How can you cultivate spiritual beauty? The Bible tells us that it is a matter of "the inner personality—the unfading loveliness of a calm and gentle spirit . . . this was the secret of the holy women of ancient time." What did they do to develop the "unfading loveliness of a calm and gentle spirit?" The verses which follow give us four important elements in this secret.

(i) **THEY TRUSTED IN GOD.** You can't have a calm and gentle spirit if you don't have something or someone in whom to trust. If you can't trust in your husband, trust in God. In any case trust in God. He will never fail you nor forsake you and underneath there are always His everlasting arms. That gives serenity—a practical faith in your heavenly Father.

(ii) **THEY WERE SUBMISSIVE TO THEIR**

HUSBANDS. Earlier Phillips has used the word "adapt," but here he reverts to the word in the older translations. As I have said, if two people are struggling for supremacy in the same home there will be constant tension and bickering. Perhaps submissiveness is the Bible's word for responsiveness!

(iii) **THEY LIVED GOOD LIVES.** As that "Reader's Digest" article makes clear, if people do not live good lives they can't long retain their beauty. I quote "Pettiness and hatred, meanness and greed take very little time to inscribe their unlovely handiwork on a woman's face." As a woman grows older, if she wants beauty of face she must cultivate beauty of soul.

One of the plainest women in modern times was Eleanor Roosevelt, the wife of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. With buck teeth and a receding chin she was a very unhappy teenager thinking there was no future for her. But she came to be loved and adored not only by one of the greatest men of all history, but by millions of other people as well. She had found to a very great degree the spiritual beauty, the responsiveness and the goodness which the Bible speaks about here. The day the President died with very little warning they left it to her to break the news to the Vice President, Harry S. Truman, that he was now President of the United States. Naturally, he was stunned and for a few moments he could not say anything. Then he stammered out, "Is there anything I can do for you?" This magnificent woman replied, still reeling under the tremendous blow, "Is there anything we can do for you, because you are the one in trouble now?" This is Christian beauty, isn't it? Consideration of others, responsiveness to, thought for others even when we ourselves are bearing a heavy cross.

(iv) **THEY DID NOT GIVE WAY TO HYSTER-**

ICAL FEARS. If sin ruins beauty even more does tension which so often is the result of sin, and certainly the result of lack of faith. Any kind of tension ruins beauty. Leslie Weatherhead records the case of a woman who strove desperately for years to remain young and beautiful. She resorted to every device conjured up by beauticians. She spent hundreds of pounds on the task. Weatherhead says the strain of trying to appear younger than she was seriously affected her beauty. Then one day she decided to give up the struggle and accept herself as she really was—to "be her age", as we say. Then the strain went out of her life. She found serenity, she became calm and gentle and for the first time in her life she really was beautiful!

To sum up Peter's advice to women who live with a difficult husband:—It is no use arguing. Be quiet, calm, gentle and by your behaviour and your beauty, your inner beauty, the unfading beauty of a calm and gentle spirit, lead him to want the great spiritual blessing you possess.

ADVICE TO HUSBANDS

At this point Peter inserts two sentences of advice to husbands. It is very brief but it marked a turning point in human history. He says "You husbands should try to understand the wives you live with." I like the way Phillips works in the word "Try" there. He doesn't say "Understand your wives." No man ever fully succeeded in understanding his wife! I suppose that is what makes our wives so adorable. You never can understand them. But a Christian husband should try, and the more he does understand the more he can be a true husband.

Husbands too should "honour their wives as physically weaker yet equally heirs of the grace of life." In

all primitive cultures men, being physically stronger, have tended to look down on women, but here Christianity makes the great break-through. Physical strength is not the standard. What matters is the spirit. If the wife has attained spiritual beauty, then she can be honoured. She will be gladly honoured by every true husband—and, deep down, even by an unbelieving husband. He may refuse to admit it, but one day he will face the fact that he does want the serenity, calm and spiritual strength which Christian faith has brought to his wife. When he accepts that faith, and they are united at the spiritual level, then their prayers are no longer “hindered.” Together they go forward into the spiritual life and praying together they enter into the joy of the Lord. That is the final reward of the “unfading loveliness of the calm and gentle spirit.”

This is a sermon delivered in St. Stephen's Presbyterian Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney, Australia, on Sunday, 6th September, 1964 and repeated at the Lunch-Hour Service on Wednesday, 9th September, 1964.

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