

St. Matthew's Institute for Healing & Intentional Growth

Freedom in Marital Conjugal Love
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Christians enter into marriage with certain expectations. Regular sexual activity is one of those expectations.

"The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife. Do not deprive each other." (1 Cor. 7:3-5)

A reasonable expectation in a good marriage is frequent and mutually fulfilling sexual activity. Each partner can expect help from the other to experience personal sexual satisfaction. It is realistic to desire and work toward intimacy-enhancing sexual companionship that grows over the years. However, sexual communication is much more than just intercourse or orgasm.

The following Biblical quotes are often used by men to "convince" their wives of their sexual responsibilities:

"Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord." (Col. 3:8)

"Wives, 'be subject to your own husbands,' as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything." (Eph. 5:22-24)

"Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again lest Satan tempt you because of your lack of self-control." (1 Cor. 7:5)

Marriages, however, are often not as self-sacrificing as Christ is towards His church. Consequently, sexual differences often arise. Because of marital discord the wife will often reject the husband's sexual advances. How should the husband respond?

First, let us look at the requirements of conjugal love. Conjugal love involves a totality, in which all the elements of the person enter – appeal of the body and instinct, power of feeling and affectivity, aspiration of the spirit and of will. It aims at a deeply personal unity, a unity that, beyond union in one flesh, leads to forming one heart and soul; it demands *indissolubility* and *faithfulness* in definitive mutual giving. In a word it is a question of the normal characteristics of all natural conjugal love, but with a new significance, which not only purifies and strengthens them, but also raises them to the extent of making the expression of specifically Christian values.

Sexuality is ordered to the conjugal love of man and woman. In marriage the physical intimacy of the spouses becomes a sign and pledge of spiritual union.

Sexuality, by means of which man and woman give themselves to one another through the acts which are proper and exclusive to spouses, is not something simply biological, but concerns the innermost being of the human person.

The acts in marriage by which the intimate and chaste union of the spouses takes place are noble and honorable; the truly human performance of these acts fosters the self-giving they signify and enriches the spouses in joy and gratitude.

The Bible describes the beauty and complexity of the marital companionship that creates the context for lovemaking. The loving, intimate relationship of you and your spouse is modeled after the relationship of God and His chosen people. A mature companionship fashions itself after *redemption* in that you die to yourself and let go of any defensiveness. You create a bonded partnership in which you submit your will for the good of your mate. Your union is based on love and trust.

Your trust is well founded because each of you reaches out and lovingly nurtures the other as carefully as you would watch out for your own body. In this union, you look honestly at your own rough edges and shortcomings and humbly try to change them. You choose to give as precious gifts the things that your mate desires and needs. It is a marvelous atmosphere for fun sexual relating and intimate connecting when this kind of tenderness, trust, genuine empathy, and cooperation abound.

These are beautiful descriptions of two individuals willingly giving of themselves to another. A woman will want to give herself to her husband when she feels the love and dignity that should be in a Christian marriage. She will deny her husband when he has provoked her to anger and devalued her personhood.

When a husband pressures, even through the use of Scripture or calling his wife to perform her "duty," and she unwillingly or begrudgingly submits, marital rape or assault has taken place.

Marital rape, mate rape, is a common form of family violence, for one out of eight married women. There is little evidence to indicate that the wives provoked these assaults by refusing reasonable sexual requests.

Rape is an act of violence and humiliation in which the victim experiences overwhelming fear and powerlessness. Although it is defined as a sexual act, it is primarily an expression of violence, anger or power. Rape is legally defined as penile penetration of the vagina without mutual consent. Penile penetration of the mouth or anus, without mutual consent, are not rape but sexual assault.

Rape is the forcible violation of the sexual intimacy of another person. It does injury to justice and charity. Rape deeply wounds the respect, freedom, and physical and moral integrity to which every person has a right. It causes grave damage that can mark the victim for life. It is always an intrinsically evil act.

No emotionally healthy Christian husband would want (under any circumstance) to rape or assault his wife. Sex under these circumstances can only lead to more marital difficulties.

How should a Christian husband respond when his wife refuses his sexual advances?

"Husbands, love your wives, and do not be embittered against them." (Col. 3:19)

"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her... So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, because we are members of His body. For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church. Nevertheless

let each individual among you also love his own wife even as himself..." (Eph. 5:25-33a)

"You husbands...live with your wives in an understanding way...and grant her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered. To sum up, let all be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit;" (1 Pet. 3:7-8)

The love that the husband is commanded to have for the wife is not primarily sexual or emotional (though both of those concepts are involved); it is a love that loves in spite of the response (or lack of it) in the one loved. It is the kind of love that God has for the world. A husband can only love his wife properly if he is a Christian and under the control of the Holy Spirit.

The two responsibilities the husband has in the family are to dwell with his wife according to knowledge, and to render to his wife the honor which is due her because she is his wife. To "dwell together" with his wife means that the husband must take his wife into every aspect of his life. There are to be no areas of his life where there are signs that say, "Private, husband only – wife keep out."

The husband is to perform his two duties for a spiritual purpose: "That your prayers may not be hindered." The man who is not taking his wife into every aspect of his life and rendering to her the honor which is due her because she is his wife cannot communicate with her in the way that God intended; hence, he cannot communicate with God either. To make sure that the channel of communication with God is open, the husband must make sure that the channel of communication with his wife is open. Only in this way can he truly love his wife as God intended and manifest his headship properly.

From one man to another: Honor your wife and she will want to make love to you. It may take the help of a professional counselor and some hefty reconciliation, but it will be worth it. In the meantime, do not be angry toward her. Love and forgive her, as you would hope Christ would love and forgive you. Fortunately Christ loved us on his own accord, not because we deserved it.

Finally, remember that if you are estranged from your wife you are also estranged from your Creator. A frightening thought.