The Law of Priority

*For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother.*

*Genesis 2:24, NIV*

When God designed the marriage covenant, He did so with the intent that this special commitment between a man and a woman would be more important than any other human relationship. That is the reason God commanded man to leave his father and mother when he became a husband.

Before a person marries, the most important relationship bond is with his or her parents. So God told man to “leave” his parents in order to properly “cleave” to his wife.

The “leaving” does not mean one should abandon or abuse one’s parents in order to honor God’s requirements for marriage. If that was what God meant in Genesis 2:24, then the Word contradicts itself! In the Old and the New Testaments, the admonition to *honor your father and mother* (see Exod. 20:12; Deut. 5:16; Matt. 15:4; 19:19) is one of the ten commandments.

In fact, in Ephesians 6:2, Paul wrote that this commandment is the first one with a promise: “that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth” (Eph. 6:3, NIV).

The word “leave” in Genesis 2:24 is the Hebrew word azab, which literally means “to loosen or relinquish.” So when God said that a man should *leave* his father and mother when he married, God meant that a man was to *relinquish* the highest position of commitment and devotion previously given to his parents in order to give that position to his wife.

God did not mean a man was to stop *honoring* his parents. That was an admonition to last throughout their lifetimes. However, at the time of his marriage, a man’s parents were to be released into a lower-priority...
position in his life. His wife hereafter was to come first. It is possible to do that and yet honor and respect one’s parents, or God would not have said to do it.

Of course, the same instructions apply to the wife.

To put it simply, God designed marriage to operate as the second most important priority in life, coming next to your personal relationship with Him. If we put marriage in any position of priority other than the one God has instituted, the marriage does not work.

If you examine closely the problems and failures of your own marriage or of those around you, it will not take long for you to see that many of those problems and failures are the result of misplaced priorities. In fact, untold millions of couples have ended up in a divorce court because they failed to properly uphold the priority of the marriage covenant. Millions of others live frustrated, strife-filled marriages for the same reason.

To help you understand the importance of rightly prioritizing marriage, let me acquaint you with a term you may not have heard before: legitimate jealousy.

Did you know there is a righteous and spiritually legitimate form of jealousy that all of us experience many times during our lives?

An example is this: Imagine walking down the street with your spouse, when suddenly, a stranger walks up and begins to try to seduce your mate and take him or her away from you. How would you feel?

You probably will answer, “Well, I would feel angry and violated and chase that person off!” Of course you would! And the core emotion fueling your response and anger would be jealousy. That same emotional response would occur if someone tried to kidnap your child or steal your furniture. Legitimate jealousy is the righteous emotion that causes us to protect what is rightfully ours.

Webster’s Dictionary defines “jealous” as “intolerant of rivalry or unfaithfulness.” There is something within us that makes us feel our spouses belong to us before anyone or anything else, except God. So when something threatens that correctly prioritized and pure element of our marriage, we feel legitimate jealousy.

You might ask, “But I thought it was a sin to be jealous. Are you telling me it is all right?” There are forms of jealousy that are sinful and
destructive, perversions of legitimate jealousy. These come into being when we try to get from someone else something that is not rightfully ours or try in an unrighteous manner to hold on to something that is not ours.

However, in marriage, both spouses have moral obligations to God and to each other to protect their relationship from being violated by people or things of lesser priorities. When time, energy and/or resources that rightfully belong to us are given by our spouse to someone or something else in any consistent or significant way, we will feel violated and experience legitimate jealousy.

God Himself is the best example of this fact of life. In Exodus 34:14, He commanded Israel through Moses, “Do not worship any other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God” (NIV).

The first thing we see in that verse is that one of God’s names is Jealous! The second thing we see is that all jealousy is not wrong, or God would have nothing to do with it, much less call Himself by that name. The third thing we see in that verse is something important about the design of God’s relationship with us.

Because God loves us and created us to love Him before anyone or anything else, He becomes jealous when that relationship is threatened. When we turn from Him to follow other gods, He is provoked with legitimate jealousy. Whenever we give time, energy or resources rightfully belonging to Him to a person, project or activity, He is violated.

That is why several times in the Old Testament, God compared Israel and Judah’s turning away from Him as their first priority relationship to adultery. That is why Jesus’ relationship with the Church is sometimes likened to a bride and bridegroom relationship.

One of the greatest certainties in life is that at some point in marriage, you will feel legitimate jealousy. The classic cycle of jealousy begins when a couple is only dating or “in love.” During their courtship days, they regularly communicate the importance of their relationship in several ways. They see each other regularly; they sacrifice to meet one another’s needs; they defend the relationship against competing demands that might interfere with their ability to relate properly to one another.
Problems Do Not End at the Wedding

All the way to the altar, a couple highly prioritizes their relationship. If there are any problems, they console themselves and each other with the idea that everything will be solved once they are married. During the wedding and honeymoon, they spend a lot of time together and focus attention on one another. For some time afterward, there is the excitement of the new relationship and living situation to keep things going.

Generally, within at least five years, the couple begins to have children. Many couples actually are remarrying, which means children already are involved. However, suppose this is a couple who have no children for about two years. At the point of the change from newlyweds to parents is where the satisfaction with the marriage usually begins to drop significantly—if there have been problems in it.

Often the initial problems are ignored, or masked, by the activity and excitement surrounding a new baby. Nevertheless, it is at this point that any existing problems begin to surface and even magnify.

As the new mother pours herself into caring for the child, the father often becomes more aggressive toward his career. Where once they were prioritizing each other, very subtly now, they begin to allow something else to compete with the time and energy they previously reserved for one another.

For the husband, the temptation is to replace the priorities of marriage with his job, career or interests outside the home. For the wife, the greatest danger to her marriage relationship becomes her children and interests inside the home. Although this classic cycle is changing somewhat as more women pursue careers and work outside the home, the point is the same: To avoid problems, one must not allow anyone or anything to replace the priority of one’s spouse.

I (Jimmy) cannot begin to count the number of couples I have counseled whose bottom-line complaints are these:

“He works all the time, and when he gets home, he is tired and just wants to rest. When he does get time off, he is doing something with his buddies.”
“She doesn’t even know when I’m home. She is so busy with the kids and the house that anytime I want to get romantic or have her do something with me, she is worn out.”

Both spouses are saying to each other, “I’m jealous of what has taken my place in your life, and I feel violated.” The wife complains that the energy her husband once gave her is being taken by his job. The husband complains that the attention and affection she once gave him are now being consumed by the children.

Your situation may be different, so in order to understand this concept, substitute whatever are the particular threats to the priority of your marriage: friends, school, parents, a project, a talent, a “busyness” at anything else. However, the point is the same.

If you allow anything or anyone, no matter how good or important, to take the time and energy that rightfully belong to your spouse, you are violating God’s design for marriage. Your partner is going to experience legitimate jealousy. If you do not correct the problem, it can seriously damage or even destroy your relationship.

Studies show that, as the average couple gets older and their children grow older, the satisfaction level of the marriage gets lower and lower. The only time this changes significantly is when the children leave home. At that point, the satisfaction of marriage will rise somewhat but still remain lower than when the marriage began.

Unfortunately, the average couple will never again be as happy as in the beginning. That is why such sayings as “The honeymoon is over” have become part of our language. That adage is a way of saying, “The good times of marriage are over, and it is time for you to live in ‘reality’ and suffer like the rest of us!”

The error in such thinking is the assumption that, because so many people experience this downward trend of lowered satisfaction in their marriages, this is a fact of life, inevitable, and to be expected. But it is not! In fact, God designed marriage to get better every year.

Although most people become less happy in their marriages year after year, it is certainly not because God “goofed” when He instituted marriage. It is because we “goof” by failing to follow His plan.
We are an example of a couple who have tried it both ways. For the first five years, as we wrote earlier, we carried out our marriage relationship the wrong way. We were the classic American couple who married because of love but who did not have a clue as to right or wrong attitudes in marriage. The only thing we knew was what came naturally and what we saw everyone else doing.

As usual, what came naturally was ignorance, and everyone else we saw had problems as bad or worse than ours. We made the classic mistakes and were on the brink of divorce after only five years. I (Jimmy) was the classic husband who spent his energies at work, and Karen was the classic wife who spent hers on the children. To make matters worse, when I was not working, I played golf every time I got a chance.

Eventually, every time I walked toward the garage to retrieve my golf clubs, Karen’s nostrils would flare. I offered to let her come along and caddy for me, but she refused. I couldn’t understand why she was so irrational!

In turn, I was frustrated with her for the little energy she directed toward me, especially when it came to sex.

When I voiced a complaint, she would say, “You don’t pay any attention to me all day—until you’re ready for bed. Then you start getting really nice because you want sex!”

My blood pressure would jump immediately, and I would respond, “Oh, really! What do you want me to do? Quit my job and never have any fun? Anyway, you are so busy with everything around here, I can’t get your attention for a minute.”

We were caught in the classic vicious cycle. Both of us were doing things that violated the other’s marital rights. However, many of those things were reactions and our responses to feeling violated.

For example, because I ignored Karen’s needs, she turned her attention more and more toward the children. Likewise, when I came home and got little or no attention, I would watch television or grab my clubs and go play golf. Our relationship became more self-defensive and destructive every year. What made matters worse was the frustrating reality that we couldn’t even talk about our problems without getting into a fight.
The night our answers began to come from God was the evening I described in the introduction when I got on my knees and asked Him for help with our marriage. He revealed to me that I had misplaced the priority of my precious wife in my life and that our marriage was in danger as a result.

One of the first things God told me to do for the healing of our marriage was to repent to Karen for the way I had treated her. I didn’t hear an audible voice, but I did hear God speak clearly to my heart. There was no mistake: I had put myself, my job and golf above Karen.

After I repented, I went into the bedroom where she was still crying. Because never before had I admitted that I was wrong about anything in our relationship, I am sure she thought I was coming to finish the fight or to make another point in the argument. So she immediately was on guard when I entered the room.

I walked over to the bed where she was lying and knelt down next to her.

“I need to talk to you,” I said.

She wiped her swollen eyes with a tissue and asked defensively, “What about?”

“About what I’ve been doing wrong in our marriage,” I replied.

That got her attention instantly!

I told her the Lord had shown me that I had been wrong for not putting her first in my life. I repented of laziness toward the relationship and of selfishness. Then I asked her forgiveness and told her I was hanging up my golf clubs (which I did for several years).

She cried as I repented, and she forgave me. Then she confessed her own shortcomings and sins toward me and repented of her actions and attitudes. Of course, I also forgave her.

Since that night, we have never forgotten the importance of keeping each other first.

I can state without a doubt that every year of our marriage since then has been better than the year before. We are much more in love today, and we know how to love one another better than we did on our honeymoon.

That is how God intended marriage to be.
Love Begins with Priorities

The newly married situation should not be the model. Instead, prospective brides and grooms should observe and learn from veterans who have been married for a long time. Isn’t that how it is in other areas of life? The veterans teach the rookies; the older teach the younger; the experienced teach the inexperienced. However, in marriage we have allowed our mistakes to dominate us. As a result, short-lived, ignorant bliss has become the worldwide standard for the newly married. This is tragic, unnecessary and unbiblical.

If we will obey God’s command to prioritize our lives to accommodate and keep our marriages higher than anything except our God, marriage will work wonderfully. The misery and hurt in today’s world caused by couples’ misguided and wrongly prioritized relationships would be removed—if only God’s law of priority in Genesis 2:24 were obeyed.

Perhaps you grew up in a value system where work was considered more important than marriage. Or, perhaps, you have always believed that the children in a home are to be valued above the parents’ relationship. Perhaps you have never seen marriage work the way we are saying it is supposed to, and you are wondering if it really can.

If you identify with any of the above situations, consider these questions:

1. What do you have when you bring a paycheck home in a marriage where people do not get along? You have a perverted situation where the home is considered a place that supports the job. Instead, it should be the job that supports the home. This confused priority has caused untold damage and divorce.

2. Do you want your children to grow up with the marriage model of unhappy and unfulfilled parents? The most important thing parents can do for their children is love one another and meet one another’s needs. Children who
live in the security of a loving home and see a model of marital harmony have a higher percentage of being able to enjoy success in their marriages later in life.

Obviously, our children are more important than almost everything in our lives. However, they are not as important as God or our marriages. In fact, the parents’ personal relationships with God and the intimate, fulfilling relationships between spouses are what make the correct foundation for loving and training children. Therefore, when we sacrifice God or marriage for the sake of the children, we do them no favors.

Remember, parents, your children will grow up and leave home one day. What kind of marriage will you be left with when they are gone? Cold and distant, or intimate and fulfilling? And what model for marriage will you have given them as they begin new lives?

Regardless of whether it is for God, for yourself or for your children, you must realize the important role correct priorities play in our lives. After realizing the importance of priorities, we must then commit ourselves to changing those things that keep us from living true to real values, no matter how difficult.

There are three things all of us need to do in establishing and adhering to correct priorities:

1. List the most important priorities in your life in order of importance;
2. Prove those priorities in real ways; and
3. Prepare to protect those priorities the rest of your life.

Most lists should look something like this:

1. God—seeking and serving Him personally
2. Spouse
3. Children (if you have any)
4. Church—seeking and serving God together with His Body
5. Extended family and special friends
6. Work and career  
7. Hobbies and other interests

How do you prove those priorities in real ways? Many people say they love God first, but then give very little time and attention to their relationship with Him. Do you really believe God is satisfied or fooled by lip service? Of course not! Jesus said in John 14:15, “If you love me, you will obey what I command” (NIV).

If we neglect His commandments and then tell Him how much we love Him, we only fool ourselves. God knows who loves Him as He observes in real terms how we operate in every area of our lives, not just with our tongues or good intentions.

The same principle is true in marriage. Many men ignore their wives’ needs, as well as take their wives for granted. At times, when they want sex or want to appease anger on the part of their wives, they might say, “I love you.”

Because most men believe what they are saying, they cannot understand why their wives’ responses are, “No, you don’t! If you really loved me, you would work less and spend more time with me!”

Every man needs to understand that women do not measure love by what they hear. Although it is very important for a man to speak loving and affirming words to his wife often, her ultimate standard of measure for love is, “What will you give up to meet my needs? How important am I to you compared to the other things in your life?”

If a man sacrifices his wants and desires to meet his wife’s needs, then she feels loved. If he will not sacrifice for her, all of the words in the world cannot convince her that he really loves her.

Women need to understand the same thing about their husbands. A man will know you love him when you give him the energies and attention he deserves. Your husband feels the same way about your being too tired to give him what he needs as you do about his coping out when your needs are unmet. The answer is putting action to your words.

Although verbalizing love and affirmation for God and for others is important, words will not be necessary to convince people of your love, if you do what is right in prioritizing your life and communicating
through actions. If you do not act upon your convictions, words will be of little use.

The third thing I mentioned above was that you must not only set priorities, but you must also prepare to protect them all of your life.

With life’s demands constantly bearing down on you, protecting your priorities becomes more of a real challenge and more necessary every day. Once you have decided what your priorities are and have committed to proving them in real ways, the next step is to prepare to protect them from unwanted intrusions.

One way to understand the necessity of protecting priorities is to look at your time and energy as if they were money. Because it is easy to see that money is a limited asset, you can easily understand that you must learn to budget if you want to get the best and most necessary use of your money. If some money is left after the necessities are taken care of, then you can afford some luxuries. Likewise, if you get in a pinch financially, the first thing to do is cut down on the luxuries and other nonessentials.

It is exactly the same with time and energy. It would be foolish to spend all your money on luxuries and nonessentials and leave nothing for the rent or food. When the landlord came to collect, how do you think he would respond to the news that you had spent the rent money on a trip?

Do you think he would accept it if you said, “You know, I don’t ever pay you much money, but I really am a good tenant”? Of course he would not!

Time and energy must be budgeted just as you do your money.

What is the first priority you set on the list you made earlier?

If it is God, then God should get the first and the best of your time and energy.

What is your second priority?

“My spouse is second,” you say. Then your spouse should always get the next best. Then your children, and right on down the list. If anyone does not get “paid,” it should be those at the bottom of the list, not those at the top.

My (Jimmy’s) priorities, as God reorganized them, caused me to hang up my golf clubs for three years. That decision is still paying big
dividends. After my time and energy spent with God, I “pay” Karen from the best of the time and energy left, which she rightfully deserves as the second most important priority in my life.

If someone or something is going to have to do without my time and energy, it will not be her. As a result, I have a happy wife, and she has a happy husband, because we have learned to love God’s way, in His priorities for our lives.

Have you or your spouse been complaining lately about feeling violated by other things or other people invading your marriage?

If either one of you has, then listen carefully to these warning signals. They are being witnessed to you by God to prevent the destruction of a marriage that He designed for enjoyment and blessing. If you will heed the warning signals and fix the problems that are causing your “buzzers” to go off, you will be fulfilled and very glad you took the time and expended the energy to reestablish God’s priorities in your lives.

As you commit to establish and protect the proper priorities of your marriage, you will find there are frequent challenges, and also some awesome rewards. You just cannot improve on God’s design. He made marriage something sacred and beautiful, and it will stay that way if we do not try to change it.

But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you (Matt. 6:33).

Notes