

How to Improve Your Husband

DESIDERIUS ERASMUS (1466–1536)

The Dutch humanist Desiderius Erasmus was known for his clever writing and scholastic aptitude. His most significant contribution to the church was his edition of the Greek New Testament (first edition, 1516), which he hoped would be translated into every language of the world. Erasmus was appreciated for both his wisdom and his wit. The following conversation is excerpted from a fictional dialogue between two troubled women discussing how to navigate a difficult marriage. According to Eulalia, a woman ought to weigh a man's faults before she marries him, but once married, it is "time for improving him, not blaming him."

Xanthippe: Do you get along well with your husband?

Eulalia: Everything's peaceful now.

Xanthippe: There was some turmoil at first, then?

Eulalia: Never a storm, but slight clouds appeared occasionally; the usual human experience. They could have caused a storm had they not been met with forbearance. Each of us has his own ways and opinions, and—to tell the truth—his own peculiar faults. If there's any place where one has a duty to recognize these, not resent them, surely it's in marriage.

Xanthippe: Good advice.

Eulalia: It frequently happens, however, that good will between husband and wife breaks down before they know each other well enough. This above all is to be avoided, for once contention arises love is not easily recovered, especially if the affair reaches the point of harsh abuse. Things glued together are easily separated if you shake them immediately, but once the glue has dried they stick together as firmly as anything. Hence at the very outset no pains should be spared to establish and cement good will between husband and wife. This is accomplished mainly by submissiveness and courtesy, for good will won merely by beauty of person is usually short-lived.

Xanthippe: But tell me, please, by what arts you draw your husband to your ways.

Eulalia: I'll tell you in order that you may imitate them ... My first concern was to be agreeable to my husband in every respect, so as not to cause him any annoyance. I noted his mood and feeling; I noted the circumstances too, and what soothed and irritated him ... When he's at leisure and not disturbed, worried, or tipsy ... admonish him politely, or rather entreat him—in private—to take better care of his property, reputation, or health in one respect or another. And this very admonition should be seasoned with wit and pleasantries ... After reproving him as I intended, I'd break off that talk and turn to other, more cheerful topics. For as a rule, my dear Xanthippe, our mistake is that once we've started to talk we can't stop.

Xanthippe: So they say.

Eulalia: Above all I was careful not to scold my husband in the presence of others or to carry any complaint farther than the front door. Trouble's sooner mended if it's limited to two.



Erasmus, "The Wife Blaming Her Marriage," in *The Colloquies* (1518).
Taken from *The Book of Marriage. The Wisest Answers to the Toughest Questions*,
ed. Dana Mack and David Blankenhorn (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans
Publishing, 2001), 102.

DEVOTION

"Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled" (Titus 2:3-5).

Many women might roll their eyes when they discover that the fictitious dialogue between Xanthippe and Eulalia above was written by a priest in the sixteenth century.

With divine wisdom, however, in Titus 2:3-5, Paul commands older women (not men!) to instruct younger women in the practical matters of married life. Older women can speak with both a scriptural and an experiential authority. They can say, "I know being a wife and mother is hard (because I am one), but God is calling you to submit to your husband and love your children. And, by God's grace, you can do this."

Are you a younger woman? Find an older woman who can speak into your life. When you arrive on her doorstep, come not only with questions, but with real friendship that gives as well as receives. (For example, bring fresh-baked bread, her favorite coffee, or offer to help her in some practical way.)

Perhaps you have successfully navigated life experiences that are leaving younger women exasperated (e.g., new marriage, in-laws, young children, teenagers). Is the Lord calling you to mentor a younger woman in the practical matters of life? Did a specific person come to your mind? Reach out to her today. The Lord has designed the church to pass down wisdom from one generation to the next in this way.

What the World says about Marriage

MARTIN LUTHER (1483–1546)

When Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the door of the church at Wittenberg in 1517, the German monk famously declared his theological disagreements with the Roman Catholic Church. Although his marriage to a runaway nun some eight years later is less talked about today, it was nearly as revolutionary at the time. When Luther married Katharina von Bora (1499–1552), he demonstrated the far-reaching social implications of the Protestant Reformation and gave the Christian world something it hadn't seen in centuries: a significant leader who was also a husband and father.

In order that we may not proceed as blindly, but rather conduct ourselves in a Christian manner, hold fast first of all to this, that man and woman are the work of God. Keep a tight rein on your heart and lips; do not criticize his work, or call that evil which he himself has called good. He knows better than you yourself what is good and to your benefit, as he says in Genesis [2:18], "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." There you see that he calls the woman good, a helper. If you deem it otherwise, it is certainly your own fault, you neither understand nor believe God's word and work. See, with this statement of God one stops the mouths of all those who criticize and censure marriage.

For this reason young men should be on their guard when they read pagan books and hear the common complaints about marriage, lest they inhale poison. For the estate of marriage does not set well with the devil, because it is God's good will and work. This is why the devil has contrived to have so much shouted and written in the world against the institution of marriage, to frighten men away from this godly life and entangle them in a web of fornication and secret sins. Indeed, it seems to me that even Solomon ... was speaking against just such blasphemers when he said in Proverbs 18:22, "He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor from the Lord." What is this good thing and this favor? Let us see.

The world says of marriage, "Brief is the joy, lasting the bitterness." Let them say what they please; what God wills and creates is bound to be a laughingstock to them ... The estate of marriage is something quite different from merely being married ... Now the ones who recognize the estate of marriage are those who firmly believe that God himself instituted it, brought husband and wife together, and ordained that they should beget children and care for them. For this they have God's word, and they can be certain that he does not lie. They can therefore also be certain that the estate of marriage and everything that goes with it in the way of conduct, works, and suffering is pleasing to God.



Martin Luther, "The Estate of Marriage, 1522," trans. and ed. Walther I. Brandt, *Luther's Works*, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), 45:37-38.

DEVOTION

“He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the LORD” (Prov. 18:22).

Throughout the day, what script runs through your head about your spouse? Do you think things like, “Not again!” Do you mutter insults under your breath after hanging up the phone with your husband or wife? Do you think or say, “I can’t believe my wife/husband is so [fill in the blank]?”

If you view your spouse as an annoyance, you will end up treating him/her as an irritation, and your marriage will be filled with strife, disappointment, and sadness.

Luther realistically described marriage as filled with sacrifice and suffering, yet marriage is God’s mysterious plan for providing the world with a daily mini-drama of the relationship between Christ and the church (Eph. 5:21-33).

This week, be conscious of the script that runs through your head about your spouse. If you are not thinking or saying true and godly things, ask God to forgive you. Look to Christ, who makes both you and your spouse acceptable on the basis of His perfect life and sacrificial death. Memorize one of the following Scriptures and say it to yourself when your mind begins to fall into the rut of criticism: Genesis 2:18 or Proverbs 18:22.