



THE WHITBY FOUNDATION

HIS AND HER COVENANT NEEDS

God's Design for Love, Respect, Care, and Partnership in Marriage

A Biblical Teaching on Distinct Responsibilities and Shared Covenant Goods

EPHESIANS 5:21-33

CENTRAL THESIS

Scripture gives husbands and wives several distinct covenant responsibilities while also commanding both spouses to practice love, honor, faithfulness, gentleness, truth, service, companionship, and sexual faithfulness. These commands reveal important relational goods that each spouse ordinarily needs from the other. They must not be turned into rigid stereotypes, personal entitlements, or excuses for disobedience. Both husband and wife receive from Christ before they are called to give to one another.

Introduction: From Biblical Commands to Covenant Needs

The Bible does not provide a modern ranked list entitled “the ten needs of a husband” and “the ten needs of a wife.” It does, however, give direct commands to husbands and wives, describe the creation of marriage, and repeatedly identify the qualities that make covenant life faithful and fruitful.

From those commands, we may carefully identify ordinary relational goods that spouses should cultivate. For example, because wives are commanded to respect their husbands, respect is plainly important to marital faithfulness. Because husbands are commanded to love, nourish, cherish, understand, and honor their wives, those forms of care are plainly central to a wife’s good.

Interpretive Guardrail A biblical command tells a spouse what obedience requires. It may also reveal what ordinarily strengthens the other spouse, but it should not be turned into a demand: “You must meet my need before I obey God.” Christian obedience begins with Christ, not with guaranteed reciprocity.

I. Shared Covenant Goods for Both Spouses

Before discussing distinctive emphases, Scripture requires both spouses to practice many of the same virtues. Neither sex is designed to live without love, respect, safety, companionship, truth, affection, fidelity, encouragement, or peace.

Shared Covenant Good	Biblical Grounding
Love and self-giving service	John 13:34; Romans 12:10; Ephesians 5:21; Philippians 2:3–5
Honor and dignity	Romans 12:10; 1 Peter 3:7
Truthful speech	Ephesians 4:15, 25; Colossians 3:9
Gentleness and patience	Galatians 5:22–23; Ephesians 4:1–3
Faithfulness and exclusivity	Genesis 2:24; Malachi 2:14–15; Hebrews 13:4
Sexual generosity and mutuality	1 Corinthians 7:3–5
Companionship and shared life	Genesis 2:18; Ecclesiastes 4:9–12; Song of Songs 5:16
Peace and freedom from contempt	Proverbs 15:1; Colossians 3:19; Ephesians 4:29–32
Shared Principle Distinct roles do not erase shared humanity. A husband also needs love and understanding; a wife also needs respect and encouragement. Biblical distinctions are emphases within mutual covenant care, not permission to neglect common Christian duties.	

2. A Husband’s Distinctive Covenant Needs

Scripture places particular emphasis on a wife’s respect, submission, faithful help, and peaceful partnership. These do not make the husband superior. They correspond to the responsibility he bears to lead sacrificially under Christ.

I. Respect

Ephesians 5:33 directly commands the wife to reverence or respect her husband. Respect does not require pretending he is always right. It means treating him with dignity, refusing contempt, and addressing disagreement without belittling his person or office.

2. Honorable Speech

Proverbs repeatedly warns against destructive speech, while Proverbs 12:4 describes an excellent wife as her husband’s crown and shameful conduct as decay in his bones. A husband is strengthened when his wife speaks truthfully without ridicule, public humiliation, or contempt.

3. Peaceful Partnership

Proverbs 21:9, 21:19, and 25:24 warn about life marked by continual contention. These proverbs do not excuse a man's sin or silence a wife's concerns. They teach that chronic quarrelsomeness makes covenant life grievous. A husband needs a wife who can bring truth without making conflict the atmosphere of the home.

4. Loyal Help and Shared Ownership

Genesis 2:18 presents the woman as a helper corresponding to the man—not a servant beneath him or a rival against him. A husband ordinarily needs a wife who brings strength, wisdom, initiative, cooperation, and faithful ownership to the mission of the household.

5. Trustworthy Responsiveness to Leadership

Ephesians 5:22–24 and Colossians 3:18 call the wife to willing submission under Christ. This does not require sin, silence, or agreement with every judgment. It does mean that a husband should not have to lead against a settled posture of contempt, sabotage, or functional domination.

6. Sexual Fellowship

First Corinthians 7:3–5 presents marital intimacy as mutual obligation, mutual authority, and mutual care. A husband ordinarily needs willing sexual fellowship, but the passage equally governs him. Intimacy must never be coerced, demanded as proof of love, or separated from tenderness, consent, and the good of both spouses.

7. Companionship and Encouragement

Marriage is partnership and friendship, not only logistics or co-parenting. Song of Songs celebrates the beloved as friend, and Proverbs 16:24 describes gracious words as strengthening. A husband benefits from a wife who knows him, delights in him, prays for him, and speaks courage into faithful responsibility.

What This Does Not Mean A husband may not make respect, peace, submission, or sexual intimacy conditions for his own obedience. He must love faithfully under Christ even when his wife falls short, while addressing sin truthfully and seeking appropriate help.

3. A Wife's Distinctive Covenant Needs

Scripture places particular emphasis on the husband's sacrificial love, understanding, honor, gentleness, faithfulness, and responsible care. These commands correspond to the vulnerability and trust involved in a wife placing herself within his headship.

1. Sacrificial Love

Ephesians 5:25 commands the husband to love his wife as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her. A wife needs love that uses strength for her good rather than for self-interest, entitlement, or control.

2. Nourishing and Cherishing Care

Ephesians 5:28–29 calls the husband to love his wife as his own body, nourishing and cherishing her. This includes attentive care, protection from needless harm, and a settled posture that treats her welfare as bound to his own.

3. Understanding

First Peter 3:7 commands the husband to dwell with his wife according to knowledge. He must seek to understand her as a particular person—her concerns, limits, wisdom, burdens, and experience—rather than leading through assumption.

4. Honor and Dignity

First Peter 3:7 also commands husbands to give honor to their wives as fellow heirs of the grace of life. A wife needs to be treated as spiritually equal before God, worthy of dignity, truthful listening, and protection from contempt.

5. Covenant Faithfulness and Priority

Genesis 2:24 describes leaving and cleaving, and Malachi 2 condemns treachery against the wife of one's covenant. A wife ordinarily needs confidence that her husband is loyal, sexually faithful, emotionally trustworthy, and willing to protect the marriage from divided allegiance.

6. Responsible Provision and Stewardship

First Timothy 5:8 addresses responsibility for one's household rather than husbands alone, but husbands bear a particular duty of household leadership. A wife ordinarily needs a husband who takes provision, work, planning, and stewardship seriously—not necessarily one who earns every dollar or guarantees wealth.

7. Gentle, Non-Harsh Leadership

Colossians 3:19 commands husbands to love their wives and not be bitter or harsh toward them. A wife needs leadership governed by patience and self-control, not intimidation, contempt, pressure, or emotional punishment.

8. Companionship and Attentive Presence

Genesis 2:18 identifies aloneness as not good, while Song of Songs celebrates mutual delight, conversation, desire, and friendship. A wife ordinarily needs more than material provision; she needs shared life, presence, affection, and meaningful attention.

What This Does Not Mean A wife may not make perfect love, security, understanding, or provision conditions for her own obedience. She remains responsible before Christ, while retaining the right to speak truth, seek help, refuse sin, and pursue safety where serious harm is present.

4. The Ephesians 5 Pattern

Ephesians 5 gives the clearest sex-specific summary: the husband is commanded to love sacrificially, and the wife is commanded to respect and submit. These commands are not presented as bargaining terms. Paul does not say, "Husbands, love only when respected," or "Wives, respect only when perfectly loved." Each spouse answers to Christ.

Husband's Calling	Wife's Calling	Shared Goal
Love as Christ loved; give himself; nourish and cherish.	Respect; willingly respond to godly headship under Christ.	Holiness, unity, covenant faithfulness, and the good of the marriage.
Use authority as sacrificial responsibility.	Use strength as faithful help rather than rivalry or passivity.	A marriage that displays Christ and the church without confusing either spouse with Christ.

Husband's Calling	Wife's Calling	Shared Goal
Exegetical Clarification Ephesians 5:26–27 describes Christ cleansing and presenting the church. The husband imitates Christ's self-giving love, but he does not become his wife's savior or possess the power to sanctify her in the unique redemptive sense that belongs to Christ.		

5. Claims Scripture Does Not Establish

Some popular marriage formulas may describe common tendencies, but they should not be presented as direct biblical teaching unless Scripture actually establishes them.

Popular Claim	More Accurate Biblical Formulation
"Respect is a man's primary need, and love is a woman's primary need."	Ephesians 5 gives respect and sacrificial love distinctive emphasis, but both spouses need and owe both love and honor.
"Men bond through physical connection; women bond through emotional connection."	Scripture teaches mutual sexual fellowship and mutual companionship. It does not establish this formula as a universal male-female law.
"The husband sanctifies his wife through the Word."	Ephesians 5:26 describes Christ's sanctifying work. A husband should encourage holiness and lead under Scripture, but Christ alone is Savior and sanctifier.
"Provision means the husband must be the sole or higher earner."	Scripture requires responsible household care and condemns neglect. It does not prescribe one universal income arrangement for every marriage.
Accuracy Principle We should distinguish direct command, sound inference, and common observation. Scripture must govern the teaching rather than being used to baptize stereotypes.	

6. Needs Are Not Entitlements

A relational need may be real without becoming a license to demand, manipulate, withdraw obedience, or excuse sin. The language of need becomes dangerous when a spouse says, "Because you did not meet my need, I was justified in disobeying God."

- A husband's lack of respect does not authorize harshness, neglect, adultery, or withdrawal.
- A wife's lack of felt security does not authorize contempt, manipulation, domination, or deception.
- Sexual desire does not authorize coercion or entitlement.
- A desire for peace does not authorize silencing truth or avoiding necessary conflict.
- A desire for understanding does not make one spouse's interpretation infallible.
- A desire for leadership does not make personal preference equal to Scripture.

Covenant Principle Spouses should seek to understand and faithfully meet one another's legitimate needs, but each spouse's first responsibility is obedience to Christ.

7. The Gospel Before the Marriage

No spouse can bear the weight of being another person's savior, source of identity, or final security. A husband cannot give his wife everything only Christ can give, and a wife cannot supply the honor, strength, or peace that ultimately comes from God.

The gospel places marriage in its proper order. Christ loved His people before they could make themselves worthy. He bore sin, grants forgiveness, gives the Spirit, and forms a new people who learn to love because they have first been loved. Therefore, husbands and wives do not obey merely to obtain a response from one another. They give from what they have received in Christ.

Gospel Center The husband can love without making his wife's response his savior. The wife can respect without making her husband's perfection her security. Both receive identity, forgiveness, strength, and hope from Christ, and then bring those gifts into the covenant.

8. Practical Covenant Examination

1. Which biblical command to me have I been treating mainly as my spouse's obligation?
2. Have I turned a legitimate relational need into an entitlement, accusation, or excuse for disobedience?
3. Where does my spouse reasonably need more love, respect, understanding, faithfulness, peace, affection, or responsible care from me?
1. Am I asking my spouse to supply something that must first be rooted in my relationship with Christ?
2. What concrete act of covenant faithfulness should I practice this week?

Teaching Summary

A Husband Ordinarily Needs	A Wife Ordinarily Needs
Respectful and honorable speech	Sacrificial and self-giving love
A Husband Ordinarily Needs	A Wife Ordinarily Needs
Peaceful, loyal partnership	Nourishing and cherishing care
Faithful help and shared ownership	Understanding and attentive leadership
Willing responsiveness to godly headship	Honor and spiritual dignity
Mutual sexual fellowship	Covenant faithfulness and priority
Companionship and encouragement	Responsible provision and stewardship
Trust that grows through faithful leadership	Gentleness, presence, and freedom from harshness

These emphases must remain within the larger biblical command that both spouses love, honor, serve, forgive, speak truth, remain faithful, and pursue peace under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Selected Scripture References

- Genesis 2:15–25
- Proverbs 12:4; 15:1; 16:24; 21:9, 19; 25:24; 27:15–16
- Song of Songs 2:14; 5:16
- Malachi 2:13–16
- Matthew 19:4–6

- Romans 12:9–18
- 1 Corinthians 7:3–5; 13:4–7
- Ephesians 4:1–3, 15, 25–32; 5:21–33
- Colossians 3:18–19
- 1 Timothy 5:8
- 1 Peter 3:1–7
- Hebrews 13:4

This document presents a complementarian reading of marital headship and submission. Christians differ in their interpretation of these texts. The framework should be evaluated by Scripture and must never be used to excuse coercion, contempt, sexual

pressure, financial neglect, concealment of harm, or the silencing of conscience.