

## **Why is My Spouse So Complicated?**

Over the last few decades a very destructive teaching has overtaken many societies. It's that "men and women are basically exactly the same, except for some small physical features". Other than the fact that men are generally a bit taller and stronger and we have different sexual organs, we are exactly the same.

Many people hold this belief today, even in the church. At the same time many people have probably heard comments like the following before (or even said them to others):

- My spouse just doesn't know how I feel.
- All my husband wants is sex.
- Why do my friends of my own gender understand me better than my spouse?
- How can my spouse be so insensitive?
- If my spouse would only do <fill in the blank>, I could do <fill in the blank> for him/her as well. But my spouse has to take the first step, then I will respond. I will not give in again.

Many marriages fail because of a lack of understanding each other. One of the most common misconceptions is that "my spouse is just like me". We treat our spouse the way we want to be treated. Husbands treat their wives as if they were men, and wives treat their husbands as if they were women.

The underlying assumption here is of course the lie that men and women are the same. This belief is now engrained in many cultures. I so well remember listening to one of my favorite teachers in school who unfortunately taught exactly this. His logic was: "Men and women are exactly the same. Differences exist because parents believe there are differences and subconsciously pass on these differences to their children. But if we could simply 'reset' everything and parents were to treat their sons and daughters exactly the same, then there would be no more differences. It's all taught; we are not born that way."

Many people today believe such lies. But actually, nothing could be further from the truth.

### How different men and women actually are

There are some interesting writings out there that do describe the differences between the genders. "Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus" by John Gray is probably one of the most famous books that addresses our differences. But even without much research, we should pretty quickly be able to identify areas where men and women are totally different. For example:

- How many husbands enjoy receiving flowers and love notes from their spouse as much as their wives do?
- How many advertisements show women in revealing clothing? Do we see as many advertisements with half naked men?
- Do men like romantic movies as much as ladies?
- How often does the wife suggest: "Let's just sit down and talk a bit?" How often does her husband do the same?

No matter if you are married or not, you probably realize that there are some significant differences between men and women. The differences are obvious in any school class. Just look at performances in maths and physics versus performances

in language and arts. On average, maths and physics are boys' domain, language and arts are more the strength of girls. Now I'm not trying to discredit anyone. There are certainly a lot of very smart girls and women out there who do great in the area of science. And there are a lot of boys and men out there who are very gifted in the area of language and arts. That's all wonderful. But if we take a big enough group and measure the average grades in these subjects, we will realize there are differences. In some subjects, boys on average get better grades. In other subjects girls will score higher on average. When I went to university studying computer science (not being a Christian yet), I was shocked (and somewhat disappointed) that 90% of my classmates were young men. Universities in a city nearby focused more on languages. Most of those students were young ladies. No wonder people in both cities desperately wanted to live in the other city.

Now we certainly don't want to discriminate anyone. We love seeing women step up and do well in areas that are typically men-dominated and vice versa. Looking at different areas of life though, e.g. average performances in certain subjects, it becomes obvious that men and women are different.

So what on earth was God thinking? Why did He create us this way? Why did He make things so complicated for us? Why didn't He just create us all the same? And how do we actually use our differences?

### God's design: Complementing each other, not fighting each other

One of our problems in today's world is that we use our differences to "fight against each other". Men want to change their wives to be like their buddies and treat them like other men. And when women don't respond to that, men get frustrated. Sometimes (very unfortunately) they then use physical force to overpower their wives. That obviously leads to terrible outcomes.

Ladies sometimes do similar things. If women treat their husbands like other women, they get equally frustrated. While women generally don't become violent in their frustration, they harm their husbands by verbal abuse or emotional withdrawal

from their relationship. Outwardly the results might be less harmful, but they are equally devastating for the relationship.

God's plan is not that we fight against each other, but so that we complement each other. That's what the creation story was all about.

*And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him. (Genesis 2:18)*

Clearly, from the very beginning, God's intention was that men and women work together. They complement each other. The word "helper" indicates that God wants them to work and He wants them to fulfill their task together.

Men and women are very different. God's intention is that we use our differences, our strengths and our abilities, to complement each other. Unfortunately in today's world, many people see the differences as a reason to fight against each other. This was the result of the fall. Remember what happened after they ate the fruit God commanded them not to eat? First God confronts Adam:

*And he said, Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree, of which I commanded you that you should not eat? (Genesis 3:11)*

And what was Adam's reply?

*And the man said, The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat. (Genesis 3:12)*

As a result of the fall, we are now blaming one another, pointing fingers, shaming each other and exposing each other's weaknesses instead of taking responsibility for our own lives.

God's design from the very beginning has been that men and women complement each other in marriage. In every marriage the man has certain gifts and abilities the woman does not have. In the same way the woman can contribute things to the marriage that the man cannot. The woman can be that perfect helper that she was

designed to be, the best “team mate” for her husband. Together they can achieve things that neither of them could achieve alone, without the other.

Of course that is not easy. As a result of the fall, we want to be independent. Actually, that was the cause of the fall: The desire to “be like God”, to be independent of God, taking control of our destiny without acknowledging God’s ways. We don’t like humbling ourselves. We don’t like admitting “You’re better in this” or even “I can’t do this without you.” We want to be in control, we want to be independent and we want to be able to say “I did it, I achieved this all by myself. Nobody else should take any credit in this but me.” That’s human selfishness that God wants us to overcome by His Spirit.

There is a second challenge in God’s design for us that goes against human nature. It is when we have to take time to understand each other and respect each other when we don’t see any reason to do so. Ask my wife whether it’s easy to love and respect me when I have once again been insensitive, criticized and judged her for the mess in the house when I come home. Often I haven’t asked her how her day was, not realizing how much she actually did well throughout the day, while the kids gave her a really, really hard time. I just quickly judged her by the appearance of the house without even listening to her side of the story. Obviously, in such a situation everything inside her wants to scream: “You’re not fair, you don’t deserve to be loved, and I would be better off without you.” But that’s the time when God asks us to choose to say: “You know, I don’t feel that way right now. But I need you, and we complement each other to achieve things that neither of us could do alone.”

It’s challenging. But such an attitude is necessary to overcome difficulties and disappointments in marriage.

### Recognize your differences

Recognizing how different we are can be quite complex. Many books have been written about this topic, so I don’t want to repeat what others have already made

available. Instead, I will give a quick overview over some of the books we read that have helped us understand how different we are. If you want to know more on these topics, we want to encourage you to read these books yourself.

The first book is called: "His Needs, Her Needs" written by Willard F. Jr. Harley. His research recognizes that every married person has ten basic needs. However, the order of these needs is different for each person. On average, the top five needs for men are the bottom five needs for women, and vice versa. So here are the ten:

- Affection
- Domestic support
- Sexual fulfillment.
- Admiration and Appreciation
- Financial support
- Honesty and Openness
- Family Commitment
- Companionship
- Communication
- Physical appearance

How would you order these ten needs? Which one is most important to you? And which one is relatively unimportant to you? Each person probably has a few variations, but one thing is certain: Your order is significantly different from your (future) spouse's order.

Generally, most men have a similar order and they would pick similar top needs. The same is true for women. But the differences between the genders are stunning. Understanding our different needs and desires are key to a successful marriage. In

this book you can learn what the average order is for men and for women, how these needs can be fulfilled and how they are related to each other. The author claims that marriages are (nearly) affair-proof if we implement the principles he shares in his book. And we would agree with him.

### Love and Respect

Another great book that we read is called "Love and Respect" by Dr. Emerson Eggerichs. What he does in his book is a study on the simple verse of Ephesians 5:33.

*Nevertheless let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she respect her husband. (Ephesians 5:33)*

Let me just ask a quick question to men. Ladies, how do you think most men will answer? The question is as follows:

If you had the choice between these two scenarios, which one would you prefer?

- Being stranded alone on an island, potentially staying there by yourself for the rest of your life.
- Living among people, but not being respected by the people you are with.

Here's the little surprise for ladies: The great majority of men (some researchers say more than 80%) would pick the island. So would I. Being disrespected is absolutely unacceptable to men. They cannot live in such an environment. They would rather live all by themselves, for decades if needed. If men feel disrespected, they tend to withdraw. This is something most women don't know, and the Bible confirms this truth.

*It is better to dwell in a corner of the housetop, than with a contentious woman in a whole house. (Proverbs 21:9)*

*It is better to dwell in the wilderness, than with a contentious and angry woman. (Proverbs 21:19)*

Men would rather be completely alone than being in an environment where they are disrespected. That is in essence what Solomon is saying in his proverbs. Many men emotionally or physically withdraw from their marriage when they feel disrespected.

In his book, Dr. Eggerichs analyzes how a husband can love his wife and how a wife can respect her husband. The book explores the difference between love and respect and how they are related. He shares how many couples are on a downward spiral in this area. A lack of love leads to a lack of respect. That in turn leads to a lack of love. And the couple grows more and more distant from each other.

He then gives great tools on how we can stop the downward spiral and actually get on a cycle of "out-giving each other": how his love can spark her respect and how her respect in turn encourages him to love. In such an environment, the relationship gets deeper and better over time.

The book is very practical. It's not a Bible study. It just gives husbands great tools for how to love their wives in ways that are not natural to them. In the same way, the author describes the husband's need for respect and how the wife can meet that need even though she might not understand why he even has such a need.

These are two great reads that we would like to recommend to you if you would like to dig deeper in this whole area of "differences between men and women" and how these differences relate to marriage.

### Meet your spouse's needs first

There is an attitude that is very common but very unhealthy in marriage. It is the attitude of "If you meet my needs first, I will meet your needs as well." This is human nature, but actually destroys marriages, because God's design works exactly the other way around. The Bible's teaching can basically be summarized in this simple sentence:

**If you want your own needs to be met, you need to meet your spouse's needs first.**

When we realize that our spouse is not meeting our needs, we instinctively tend to criticize him or her. We tend to blame the other person, telling him or her that "you should meet my need". Too often we then take it even one step further: "I'm not going to meet your need until you meet mine." Such an attitude will obviously lead to frustration on both sides and a downward spiral that is hard to stop.

The only way to get out of such an unhealthy spiral is if one person starts the opposite approach. One person has to say: "I'm going to do my best to meet my spouse's needs even though I don't feel like it." And that usually causes a positive response by the receiving partner: he or she will be motivated to meet the need of the giving person as well. If both partners respond to the initiative of their spouse, they eventually try to out-give each other. Each person has a strong desire to meet the spouse's needs, since they realize that their spouse is doing their best to meet their own needs as well.

This is how a simple attitude change can turn sour marriages into healthy ones. An attitude of "you meet my need before I meet yours" causes both partners to be more and more passive and demanding, which in turn causes the relationship to turn cold. An attitude of "I'll do my best to meet my spouse's need, even if I don't feel like it" can turn around most unhealthy marriages and cause them to thrive again. It's hard, but that's how God designed it.

Let me just give you an example from our family: One of the challenges that we face in our marriage is "how we rest". I am an introvert. Resting for me means: "Do nothing, don't meet anyone, just stay home with the family." For Ryoko however, things are different. She is an extrovert and draws energy from meeting people. Most days she stays home with the kids though. So when it comes to my day off, she wants to plan the day, doing a lot of things and meeting people. That on the

other hand is exactly what I am doing throughout the whole week: planning and meeting people. It's also exactly the opposite of what I want to do on my day off.

For a long time we have been trying to "convert" each other. She has been trying to get me to "public outings" and I have been trying to convince her to stay home. This left both of us frustrated.

Eventually we changed our approach and started trying to understand each other. I am now trying to give her that "time off". Sometimes she goes out with me. Sometimes she goes out by herself when it is not what I feel like doing. She on the other hand understands my need for resting at home. She gives me that space to just do nothing every now and then. At times she doesn't feel like it, but she knows it's important to me.

As we both tried to understand each other and serve each other, our relationship got significantly better. It's not easy. It's not natural. We don't want to do certain things that the other person wants to do, but we choose to do it anyways. Throughout time we then realize that the benefits far outweigh our small sacrifices. And the relationship grows deeper and deeper as a result.

### **Questions for Reflection**

#### For Everyone

Do I fully appreciate the uniqueness and differences of both genders?

Do I fully embrace the way God made me, including my gender?

When I am with friends of the other gender (just friends, no romantic feelings): do I fully respect them and how different they are from me? Or do I treat them more as if they were of my own gender?

#### For Singles

Should I talk with a married person of my own gender or a married couple about the differences between men and women? Should I ask them and learn from them about the differences of husbands and wives?

For Married Couples

Do we treat each other with love and respect in our differences? Or do we treat each other the way we ourselves would like to be treated by the other person?

Do I appreciate the areas where my spouse is more gifted than I am? Do I tell my spouse? Or does my pride hinder my spouse from fully developing his/her gifts? Do I try to diminish my spouse's abilities because I do not want to feel inferior?

Do I know my spouse's needs? Does my spouse know my needs? Do we feel our needs are being met? Do we want to talk about it with each other?

If you would like to, you can personalize the following prayer to your own situation and speak to God about it.

*Dear Heavenly Father,*

*Thank you that you made us male and female. Thank you that you made us different. Thank you that you intend to use us to complement each other, not to fight against each other. Thank you that you want us to enjoy our differences, celebrate them and embrace them. Thank you that you want us to come together to use our different gifts and abilities to do things together that we couldn't do by ourselves.*

*Lord, I want to treat my (future) spouse the way you created him/her. I don't want to treat him/her the way I would like to be treated. I want to get to know my (future) spouse, learn from him/her, embrace our differences, use our different talents to complement each other and treat him/her with the greatest respect for who you created him/her to be.*

*But God, I confess I cannot do this by myself. I confess I am selfish, I confess I want things my way, I confess part of me wants to conform my (future) spouse into my image, not into your image. Help me to love sacrificially, to trust, to honor, to respect and to support even when I don't feel like it. Help me to overcome my pride, to celebrate my spouse's strength, esp. in the areas where I am not good. Help me to celebrate my spouse's weaknesses so I can show the kind of sacrificial love to him/her that you showed me on the cross.*

*Teach me and my (future) spouse to love each other like you love us. Thank you Lord.*

*In Jesus' name and for His sake we pray, Amen*