

Last night we saw that our expectations have the capacity to turn marriage into nothing more than a contract. Rather than being free to give unconditional love, we find ourselves saying, “You owe me.” In this kind of relationship, neither of us ever measures up.

Like it or not, marriages eventually experience a collision of interests. Whether it’s an unspoken desire or a full-blown set of expectations, the bottom line is the same. You have your hopes and dreams, and your spouse has his or hers. It’s just a matter of time before they compete against one another. And when they do, conventional wisdom says that we should be willing to yield to the other person’s desires out of love for him or her.

But there’s a problem with that approach. What happens if you don’t feel a lot of love toward your spouse at the time? What if your spouse doesn’t deserve it? Or what if you’re so tired of giving in to him or her that you just can’t yield any longer?

The key to a successful marriage is having enough love to carry you both through the times of conflicting interests. And in this session we’ll examine a passage of Scripture that reveals a secret source of unending love for any marriage. **It’s really not a matter of putting your spouse first – or your spouse putting you first – but learning to put yet a third person first instead.**

The only way to get everything out of the expectation box and back into the desire box is to conclude that **your spouse doesn’t owe you anything and that you owe him or her everything**. This is the essence of a Christian marriage – mutual submission for Christ’s sake.

“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

**Ephesians 5:21 (NIV)**

What does it mean to submit? Submission is placing the needs, desires and dreams of someone else ahead of “I.” Our motivation for submitting is out of reverence for Christ – not one another. We are to express our gratitude to God through our treatment of the person we married. Think about this for a minute. It is like us going up to God and saying ...

*“God, how can I say thanks? You love me in spite of me.  
You forgave me. You’ve blessed me. Now what can I do for you?”*

And God responding,

*“Go do the same for your husband or wife, not for their sake, but for mine.”*

Hearing this we might want to ask, “Are there any other options? What if I give 11%? How about if I agree to go to Africa and help with AIDS relief?”

“Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord.”

**Ephesians 5:22 (NIV)**

What the scripture is saying is that wives should put their husbands first as you put the Lord first. Place your husband’s needs, wishes and dreams ahead of yours. And ladies, you may push back because he doesn’t deserve it. But that’s just the point! He doesn’t deserve it. Like you didn’t.

“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.”

**Ephesians 5:25 (NIV)**

Men, lay down your life for your wife just like Christ laid down His life for you. Our wives should feel as if we would lay down our lives in order to protect them emotionally, physically and financially. But she doesn’t deserve it. That’s the point!

You have been chosen as God’s number one method of expressing His love for your spouse. So how do you do this? You can’t unconditionally love your spouse until you get your expectations back in the proper box. And the only way to do that is to decide that your spouse doesn’t owe you anything. Only then are you free to love. And only then can you experience the unconditional love of your spouse.

Now you may have hesitations. You fear what would happen if you put everything back in this box and just gave and gave and gave. You’re afraid of being taken advantage of. And if that is the way you think then you probably also believe that the only reason your spouse is behaving now is because of your expectations, your reminders, your notes or your late-night conversations. Unfortunately, that’s not called marriage. That’s called parenting. If you take the pressure off, there’s no telling what will happen!

What you need more than anything else in the world is what your spouse cannot give you as long as you insist on prodding and nagging and reminding and tugging. You need to experience unconditional love – ungoaded love. That requires space. That requires the opportunity to give before being reminded. If you came out of a difficult family situation, you will always have a tendency to place on your spouse the expectations that were not met in your family of origin. And once you do that, he or she will live with the burden of pleasing someone that can’t be pleased. And you will never feel loved because you have removed the margin necessary to love. And what you fear will become a reality – you will become disappointed in your marriage.

### Reflection Questions

1. How does it impact your attitude toward marriage to recognize that your spouse is a child of God?
2. What keeps you from submitting to one another?
3. What would it look like if I submitted to my husband as to the Lord?
4. What would it look like if I loved my wife as Christ loved the Church?
5. How does it make you feel to know that God has designated you as an instrument to reflect His love for your spouse?
6. How loved do you feel? How loved do you think your spouse feels?
7. What could you do this week to help your spouse feel more loved? Be specific!
8. In what ways are you guilty of parenting your spouse by trying to manage his or her behavior?
9. What are the fears associated with freeing your spouse from his or her "obligation" to you and deciding that your spouse doesn't owe you anything?
10. What are the benefits of freeing your spouse from your expectations?