

Helping your partner grow in faith * Q's from the pews
September 13, 2020 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

This morning we have a really great question to look at and I'm glad that someone had the guts to ask it. It's a really important question and a very common situation and yet I'm not sure that I've ever heard anyone in church address. So we're going to dig in and think about it today. Here's the question—

My spouse doesn't like going to church. How can I help him to grow in faith?

That's a great question and as I said, a very common situation. I saw numbers this week like '1/5 of married women regularly worship without their husbands' (Murrow, 5) and I think that experience bears that out. It's quite common to see women coming to church without their husbands; that's not unusual. But it has to be said, that sometimes it goes the other way too. I can think of at least a few situations where the husband's on board but the wife is not. And I got to thinking this week- this question really applies to sons and daughters and neighbours and friends too.

So what do we do about it? How can we help our loved ones – men or women – to grow in faith, even if now, they are reluctant to go to church?

Well, first off, I think that we need to start with the first part of the question – my spouse doesn't like going to church. Ok. Why? Is the issue that they don't like church? Or is it that they don't like the message of the church? The Gospel. Because there's a difference.

If it's the first one, they don't like church – well, we can do something about that. David Murrow, in his book *Why men hate going to church*, points out that since there are often more women than men at church, it's possible for churches to subconsciously decorate for and cater to women. Murrow does a lot of work online too and in one article he tells this story:

The interior of the Grace UMC building had been decorated by grandmothers. The sanctuary was festooned with quilts, banners, and flowers – and a lace doily on the communion table. Walls were painted lavender and pastel shades. “This type of decor sends a very powerful message to men that that church is for women, particularly older women,” says Murrow.
(<https://www.crosswalk.com/church/pastors-or-leadership/how-your-church-can-attract-more-men-a-proven-blueprint.html>)

And men will resist anything that suggests that “Church is for women, children and wimps” (Dr. Woody Davis, quoted in Murrow, 28).

Now I don't think that we're there, but I think it's worth asking the question, are we doing anything as a church that would unintentionally make men uncomfortable? Are there songs that we're singing or activities we're prioritizing or stereotypes that we're perpetuating that could unintentionally make men feel awkward here? I don't think so, but we all have blind spots, don't we? I'd be interested in hearing from partners who don't come regularly if there's something about how we do church that they don't like, because maybe we could do that differently. I mean, there are some things that we will always do – we will always sing, we will always read the Bible, I will always share a message with you, but if we're doing secondary things that are an obstacle to people coming to faith, then we need to do something about that.

But if the issue is just that they have no interest in the Gospel, well, that's another thing entirely. And let's face it – the Gospel is the most demanding free gift that you will ever get. Salvation, purpose, walk with God is freely given to us, graciously given to us by a Father who delights in us AND YET, Jesus says, if we truly want to live that out, we need to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Him. And that's true for people whether they're married or not. Authentic faith means being selfless and depending on God and some people just don't want to do that. They don't like church because they don't want to give God control of their lives.

So if that's your partner, how do you help them to take steps towards faith and grow as a believer?

Well, believe it or not, this is not a modern situation. The NT anticipates these very circumstances, where one spouse is a believer and the other is not, or where one spouse is on fire for their faith and the other is not, and so I want to look at two passages this morning to get a sense of how to respond. Let's look at 1 Corinthians 7 and then 1 Peter 3 and then we'll see what the Bible says to do in this situation.

1 Corinthians 7 – Paul has this whole chapter on marriage and in verse 12 he launches into a discussion of let's say 'mixed marriages.' In the early church, it was very common for one spouse to come to faith out a pagan background and one to not and so you ended up with a Christian and a pagan married together. And so Paul says in verse 13 –

12 If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. 13 And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him.

See, he's anticipating here that these new believers will start to root out anything that smacks of their old life and some might start to wonder – 'Does that mean I should leave my spouse too, since we were married BEFORE I came to faith? They're a part of my pagan past; are they messing up my holiness?'

And Paul says – 'No! Stick with them!' Don't divorce them, BECAUSE -

14 For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

Now this doesn't mean that your partner is *saved* by your faith - you can't ride coattails into the kingdom of God - but it *does* mean that your partner has a front row seat to see what this life of faith is all about. They are just outside the border of the Kingdom and you have the capacity to welcome them in. That's what that language of one partner being 'sanctified' by the other is all about – they are in effect 'set apart' (that's tucked into that word 'sanctify') so that they can see the Gospel lived out in your life and be drawn to the life of faith. God's intention for believing spouses is that their lives would overflow with the Gospel, overflow with the love of God, so that their partners will inevitably see what God is all about.

That's verse 16 - 16 How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?

God may very well use your demonstration of the Gospel to bring your partner to faith or grow them deeper in it as you model it for them.

Now that's 1 Corinthians 7; 1 Peter 3 is also helpful. 1 Peter 3:1 - Peter says "Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, 2 when they see the purity and reverence of your lives" (1Pe 3:1-2 NIV).

Again, the idea here is that unbelieving partners would be won over to the Gospel by witnessing the Gospel in action; ie., by seeing the purity and reverence and confidence and peace that come from knowing that God is in control. I mean, think for a minute, what does your everyday behaviour tell your spouse about your faith? (Whether you both come to church or not). What does your everyday behaviour tell your partner about your faith? That it really does give you peace and confidence? That it really does inspire selflessness and sacrifice? Or that it's just a little faith, buried under a pile of pessimism and grumbling?

Newspring Church, a big church in the States, writes - The best way to show Jesus' love to a husband who isn't interested in God or the church is to love him the way Jesus loves him. You are the best example of Christ that your husband sees on a daily basis. (<https://newspring.cc/articles/what-to-do-when-your-husband-wont-come-to-church>).

And I think that really, that's the answer to this question – the best way to help your partner to grow in faith is to live out your own. The best way to help your partner to grow in faith is to live in light of your own! They have a front row seat, a VIP ticket to a more effective sermon than I could ever preach – ie., your life.

That's not easy – it means intentionally applying the Gospel to all parts of life – not the just Sunday morning stuff – but that's kind of what 'deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me' is all about, isn't it?

David Murrow writes: "Women, if you are going to church because of a sense of obligation..., because you've always done it, or because your friends are there, don't expect the men in your life to follow you into the pew. The men who are watching you don't care how saintly you are. They don't care about your traditions... They want to know two things: (1) Does Christianity really work? And (2) Is it really the power of God unleashed on earth, or is it just religious activity? As men see the power of the Spirit working through your life, they will be drawn" (200).

Help your partner to grow in faith by living out your own. 'Win them over without words' as Peter says. People I've used in marriage counselling before, Les and Leslie Parrot write – "Your spouse's faith will only develop if it's internal. It's not productive to try convincing or converting your spouse, and you're not likely to win them over through debate. So stay focused on your own spiritual journey and keep moving forward together" <https://www.symbis.com/blog/my-spouse-wont-come-to-church-help/> I think that's wise advice. Help your partner to grow in faith by living out your own.

Now, it struck me as I was getting this ready that it might sound as though this is all the believing spouse's responsibility, but it's not. Absolutely, you are uniquely situated to witness to your partner and Murrow quotes studies that say that the most likely person to lead a husband back to church is his wife (Murrow, 197), but really, this is a responsibility for all of us. Very few people come to faith on the basis

of one person; I know personally that I needed to hear the Gospel numerous times and see it lived out in other people's lives to realize – 'this is legit.' We all have a part to play here, living out the Gospel and making people feel welcome and open to the Gospel here.

And above it all, we need to pray. Jesus says in John 6:44 - No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day – so we need to pray that God would do what only He can do and to bring our spouses and neighbours and loved ones to new and deeper faith. So let's join together to pray.

BENEDICTION

2 Cor. 13:11 - Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.