

Chapter 7

The Person Beside You

There is something remarkable about spending decades with another person. If you have been married for a long time, your wife has probably known several versions of you. She may remember the young man you were before you had much money, experience, or understanding of how life would unfold. She knew you before some of the accomplishments that later became important to you. She has watched you succeed, fail, worry, celebrate, change jobs, make decisions you were proud of, and make others you wish you could reconsider. She has probably seen you at your best and at your worst.

You may have raised children together, buried those you loved, worried about money, moved, changed careers, sat in hospitals, celebrated weddings, and laughed over things no one else would understand. Some seasons brought you closer together. Others may have tested your marriage in ways neither of you expected when you made your vows. Over time, you have built a shared history neither of you could have created alone.

That history is valuable. It can also become so familiar that we stop noticing the person who shares it. We would never intentionally describe our wife as someone we take for granted, yet familiarity can quietly produce exactly that result. The person who once received our most focused attention can gradually become someone we assume will always be there.

We know her routines. She knows ours. We divide responsibilities, manage schedules, discuss bills, and make decisions about the house. A marriage can become highly functional even as it grows less intimate. Sometimes nothing dramatic has happened. There has been no major betrayal or moment when either person decided to stop caring. Life became busy, and two people who still loved one another became less intentional about knowing each other.

The years remaining give us an opportunity to pay attention again. In Chapter 5, we asked what defining enough might make possible. For those of us who are married, part of the answer may be to pay greater attention to the woman whose life is joined to ours.

This chapter speaks directly to husbands, whether your marriage has spanned years or decades. If you are widowed, divorced, or have never married, you do not need to fabricate a marriage assignment for your plan. Some of these pages may stir gratitude or grief. Receive what is useful, and leave the marriage exercise incomplete if it does not apply. The call to love faithfully belongs to all of us, even though our responsibilities differ.

Provision Is One Expression of Love

Many men express love through responsibility. We work because others depend on us. We want the mortgage paid, the family protected, the future planned, and problems handled before they become crises. These actions reflect real love. In his instructions on caring for widows, Paul emphasizes the responsibility to provide for one's own household (1 Timothy 5:3–8). Meeting family needs is a serious expression of faith.

In many homes, both husband and wife have shared the work of providing, and in some, the wife has carried most of it. The point here is not who earns the income. It is that any of us can let providing stand in for the attention that love also requires.

But provision does not convey everything love needs to communicate. A man can provide extremely well and still leave his wife emotionally alone. That can be difficult for hardworking men to hear because we may sincerely believe that much of what we have done was for our families. Over time, financial pressure and long days became part of fulfilling the responsibilities we believed God had given us. Much of that may be true. The question is whether providing became the primary language through which we expected our wives to understand they were loved.

A wife may appreciate everything her husband has provided and still want something that cannot be deposited in a bank account. She may want his attention, affection, friendship, and a willingness to listen without immediately trying to solve the problem. Those things cost something, too. Sometimes they require us to give the part of ourselves that work has already exhausted.

This does not mean every demanding season of work is a failure at home. It means we need to ask whether the person we work for is receiving the love we intend to give. We cannot answer that question by pointing solely to our pay.

Christ Changes the Standard

When Paul addressed husbands in Ephesians 5, he set a standard that is simple to understand yet impossible to take lightly. He tells them, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:25, NASB 2020).

Paul could have used many comparisons, but he chose Jesus. Christian marriage, therefore, cannot be measured solely by whether I believe I am a better husband than most men I know. Remaining married, paying the bills, keeping my vows, and attending church matter, but none of them lets me stop asking whether I am giving myself for my wife's good.

Christ's saving work for His church is uniquely His. A husband is not his wife's savior. Yet Paul explicitly makes Christ's self-giving love the pattern for a husband's love and describes care that

nourishes and cherishes (Ephesians 5:28–29). This is a call to take another person’s good seriously enough to change how we live.

The same passage speaks of the husband as head of the wife and of the wife’s response to her husband (Ephesians 5:22–24, 33), and faithful Christians interpret those verses differently. Some see a distinct leadership responsibility given to the husband. Others emphasize the mutual submission Paul commends to all believers in the preceding verse (Ephesians 5:21). This chapter does not attempt to resolve that discussion, and your church’s teaching can help you think it through. Whichever conviction you hold, the instruction Paul addresses to husbands is the same: love as Christ loved, by giving yourself. No understanding of headship permits a husband to be harsh, self-serving, or indifferent to his wife’s voice, and none excuses him from taking the initiative to love her.

Here, the order we have established throughout REMAINING becomes highly practical:

Jesus > Others > Self

Marriage offers a man one of the clearest places to practice order. Sacrificial love sounds noble in principle but is far more difficult in everyday life. Giving your attention when you are tired, controlling your tone when you are irritated, listening when you believe you already know what she is going to say, and apologizing without defending yourself rarely feel heroic. Yet those ordinary moments reveal whether your preferences must always come first.

We need the grace of Christ here as much as anywhere. Recognizing our failures should lead us to confession and change, not to the belief that we must become flawless husbands before we can receive His love. We learn to give ourselves because He has loved us, and we keep returning to Him when our patience, humility, or willingness runs thin.

Knowing the Woman You Are Married To

One assumption long marriages can foster is that we already know everything important about our spouse. After thirty years, what could possibly be left to discover? A great deal, because life has happened to her, too.

The woman you married has accumulated experiences, disappointments, hopes, fears, losses, and questions, just as you have. The things that mattered most to her at thirty may not matter as much at sixty. Her understanding of herself may have changed. Her relationship with God may have deepened. Her dreams for the future may look different. Your wife continues to grow and change, and a strong marriage requires ongoing curiosity.

Do you know what she is thinking about this season of life? What concerns her about getting older? What does she hope the coming years will bring? Do you know whether she feels loved by you, not just whether you believe you love her?

We tend to judge ourselves by our intentions, while others experience us through our actions. A husband may sincerely say, “Of course she knows I love her.” He may be right, but it is still worth asking how she experiences that love now. The answer is not something we can provide on her behalf. We must make room for her to tell us.

Listening Without Defending

There are few things more difficult than asking someone we love how we could love her better, only to hear an answer we do not particularly like. We may begin sincerely, but the moment our wife mentions something we believe is unfair, incomplete, or exaggerated, our instinct to defend ourselves kicks in. We remind her how much pressure we are under, explain why we work so much, or start listing everything we do around the house.

Some of those responses may contain legitimate facts, but they may also miss the point of the conversation. If I ask my wife how she experiences my love, my first task is to understand what she is saying. I can listen for the concern beneath her words before preparing my reply.

James tells believers, “Now everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger” (James 1:19, NASB 2020). His instruction is part of a broader call to receive and obey God’s word, not merely a technique for getting along. Marriage offers us a daily opportunity to practice that obedience.

Listening does not require agreeing with every conclusion. It means caring enough about another person’s experience to understand it before responding. You might ask her to describe a recent example, then share what you heard and invite her to correct you. That can reveal things you would never discover while defending yourself.

There will be room to share your own experience as well. This conversation should make room for both of you. But if you have asked her to speak, give her time to finish. When you recognize that you have wronged her, name what you did and apologize without demanding that she reassure you immediately. An apology can begin the process of repair; it does not dictate how quickly trust must return.

The Marriage You Have

No marriage develops exactly as two people imagined. Careers change. Children bring both joy and stress. Parents age. Health changes. People carry wounds into marriage that neither spouse fully

understands at the outset. Some marriages have also endured betrayal, addiction, years of conflict, or other wounds that cannot be responsibly addressed with a few encouraging sentences.

If that describes your marriage, I do not want this chapter to trivialize your experience. Some problems require pastoral care, professional counseling, clear boundaries, patient rebuilding of trust, or protection from harmful behavior. “Love like Jesus” should never be twisted into an instruction to quietly enable abuse or to pretend that serious sin is unimportant. Christlike love is truthful. Grace and truth are not enemies.

The conversation later in this chapter is an invitation, not a test that every couple must pass. If speaking openly would expose either of you to threats, intimidation, or retaliation, seek appropriate individual support rather than using the exercise to force a joint conversation. If your behavior has caused harm, the next faithful step is to take responsibility for it and seek help to change it. A written commitment does not replace that work.

For many readers, however, the marriage has received less attention than it deserves. You do not have to wait for a crisis to care for it more deliberately. History can create depth that novelty cannot replicate. You know the stories behind the stories and remember seasons no one else witnessed. But a garden does not remain healthy because it was planted forty years ago. Neither does a marriage. What you have shared gives you something worth tending today.

A New Season Together

For couples who raised children, a significant transition often occurs when those children no longer need daily parenting. For decades, the household may have revolved around school, meals, transportation, and the constant logistics of raising a family. Then the house grows quieter, prompting a question: Do we still know how to enjoy one another now that the children are no longer the center of the household?

Retirement may bring another adjustment. A couple who have spent years seeing each other primarily in the mornings, evenings, and on weekends may suddenly find themselves with much more time together. Retirement does not automatically create intimacy. It may create availability. What we do with that time depends on the relationship we have built and the one we are willing to build.

Other couples enter a season of caregiving, continued employment, or responsibilities that leave less freedom than they anticipated. Loving well in that season may mean accepting help, adjusting routines, or finding small ways to be companions amid demanding work. The question is what faithful attention looks like in the life you actually share.

There may be something good ahead that neither of you has yet imagined. It will be easier to discover if you are willing to ask one another what this season means, rather than assuming you already know.

Planning the Years Together

Your wife is not a resource in the same sense as money, time, or professional ability. She is not a possession, a project, or a supporting character in your future. She belongs to God. Marriage entrusts you with a covenant responsibility to love her faithfully. That distinction carries over into how we approach people in the Entrusted Inventory.

Even a well-intentioned husband can decide when to retire, where to live, how to spend money, and which ministry to pursue before asking what his wife hopes for. By the time he invites her into the conversation, he may already be committed to a plan she had no role in creating.

The Remaining Years Plan should help you recognize your responsibilities. It should not become a way to settle shared decisions on your own. Your commitment to becoming a more attentive husband is yours. Decisions that shape both your lives need both your voices. A hope you have not discussed is still yours; it is not yet an agreement between you.

What does your wife want the coming years to look like? Perhaps she wants more time with grandchildren, opportunities to serve, or the chance to pursue something she set aside. She may want to travel, simplify your home, move closer to family, or stay where you are. Perhaps she does not know yet. The purpose is not to produce a ten-year plan over dinner. It is to become curious again.

There may be concerns she has carried quietly or dreams she believed there was no room to express. Asking communicates something before she even answers: her future matters to you, too. When your hopes differ, you have identified a conversation to continue, not a problem for one of you to settle immediately.

The Marriage Conversation

Ask your wife whether she would be willing to set aside uninterrupted time to talk about the years ahead. Explain what you are doing and why you want to understand how she sees this season. Choose a time that works for both of you, put away distractions, and let the conversation unfold without requiring every question to be answered right away.

Start with something you appreciate about her today. Be specific. Then choose a few of the questions below, leaving room for what she wants to discuss. These are invitations to know her better, not an interview or a scorecard for your marriage.

When do you feel most loved by me right now? Listen for what already strengthens your relationship and what needs attention.

Is there anything you need more of from me this season? Ask whether anything you do or fail to do makes her feel less important than you intend to make her feel.

What do you most enjoy doing together now? Your answer may have changed as your circumstances and interests have evolved.

What do you hope the coming years of our marriage will look like? Use a time horizon that fits your lives. Ask about something she would like to pursue or change that you have not seriously discussed.

How can I support your relationship with Jesus and the person He is calling you to become? Let her describe what would be helpful rather than assuming you already know what she needs.

If she does not want to have the conversation now, do not press for answers or complete her side yourself. Respect her response. You can still reflect on your own conduct and seek wisdom for the next step. If illness or another limitation makes this kind of conversation difficult, adjust your expectations to her capacity and focus on the care she can receive.

Your Side of the Conversation

After listening, share what you appreciate and what you are beginning to understand. Consider where you have taken her presence for granted, or where work, a hobby, technology, or your preferences have consistently drawn your attention away from your marriage. If you owe her an apology, address the specific action you took rather than offering a general confession that asks little of you.

Tell her what you hope will grow stronger between you. She should have space to hear your concerns and hopes as well. The goal is not to leave with a list of everything wrong with your marriage. It is to leave knowing one another better and with a clearer sense of what deserves your attention.

Do not assume that a single good conversation can repair years of distance. Give her time to see whether your actions match your words. Nor should you dismiss a small beginning because it does not resolve everything. A patient conversation, a sincere apology, or a kept commitment can be a meaningful act of faithfulness.

One Thing

Choose one thing you can do consistently to help your wife feel your love more clearly. It may be uninterrupted time, affection, practical help, shared enjoyment, or listening without immediately offering solutions. You might ask, “Of everything we talked about, what is one thing I could start doing that would mean the most to you?” Let her answer guide your decision.

Make the action small enough to practice and clear enough to recognize. “Be more present” is a desire. Setting aside a set time to talk without your phone gives that desire a place in your life. If the most needed action is seeking help or addressing harm, begin there rather than substituting an easier gesture.

Record one step in the plan that follows and begin within seven days. If a commitment from an earlier chapter already addresses this need, refine or continue it. You do not need another promise just to fill a page. This is not about earning points or securing a particular response from your wife. It is about practicing love faithfully.

Your Remaining Years Plan

Our Next Chapter

Begin with what you learned, not with what you intend to fix. Complete these fields based on a conversation you had. If something remains unknown or undecided, state that. Record shared hopes only when both of you have expressed them. If the exercise does not apply to your circumstances, mark this section as not applicable.

What my wife values most in this season is:

What she hopes for in the years ahead is:

Something I understand about her better is:

Something I appreciate about her and want to express is:

One area of my own conduct that needs attention is:

Something we both want to experience or pursue is:

A question or difference we still need to discuss is:

My Marriage Commitment

Write a brief statement describing the kind of husband you want to be in the years ahead. Focus on your faithfulness rather than on what you want your wife to become. Include one specific practice that reflects what you have learned. You might begin this way:

I want my wife to experience my love through the attention and care I show her. By the grace of Christ, I will listen before defending myself, take responsibility when I am wrong, and make room for her hopes in decisions about our future. I will begin with the practice we discussed and continue learning what faithful love requires in this season.

Use your own words and circumstances. If no conversation has taken place, do not imply you have reached an agreement. Write what you can responsibly commit to now, including seeking help when that is the next step.

My Marriage Commitment:

One action I will take:

I will begin by: _____

How I will make room for this practice:

My plan review date: _____

Use the review date already set for your plan. Consider whether you kept your commitment and what helped or interfered. If your wife is willing, ask whether the change has been helpful to her and listen to her response. Review your conduct without judging her response. Adjust the practice as you learn, and carry the commitment into your full Remaining Years Plan.

Love While You Can

There is a reason marriage appears this early in the Remaining Years Plan. We can plan retirement dates, travel, housing decisions, and future projects, assuming the person beside us will simply move through them with us. Marriage deserves more than an assumption.

If God has given you decades with your wife, those years are extraordinarily valuable. You share a history no one else has. There may also be wounds between you and issues that still need attention. The marriage may not look exactly as you once imagined. You cannot go back and become the husband you wish you had been twenty years ago, but you can take responsibility for how you love today.

The selfless love of Jesus calls us to receive His grace, confess our sins, and grow increasingly willing to give ourselves for another's good. Grace does not make past harm unimportant. It gives us a place to bring it honestly and a reason to begin living differently. For a married man, home is an immediate place to practice that faithfulness.

The next chapter expands the circle to our children. As they become adults, our responsibility to love remains, but the way we express it must mature. We will consider how to offer wisdom, care, and encouragement while respecting their lives and responsibilities.