

Caring Well for Your Family in the Ministry, A Talk for Pastors

The following talk I've been asked to give to our intern classes here at CHBC as well as to the men at the Senior Pastors' Sunday Weekender Lunch, three times a year. It flows out of years of being gently led by my husband, Mark. May it be encouraging to you as you lead your family, too.

--Connie Dever

AND SO, IT BEGINS

It was a rare, very cold and snowy night in Durham, North Carolina in January of 1982. This Colorado girl made her way through the slick, unplowed streets from Duke's East Campus to West Campus with an important delivery of warm chocolate chip cookies for Mark. He had been sick the night before and for some reason I thought chocolate chip cookies were what his ailing stomach needed. (Not sure the logic behind that!). I found a place to park, plunged through snowdrifts and up to his dorm room, only to find the door locked. "Wait outside. I'm on the phone," he told me. I was a bit miffed at this. Really! After all my efforts, THIS was his response?! What kind of phone call would be so important and so private that he would keep me waiting in the water puddles in the hallway! Well, as it turned out, he was on the phone with my mother, asking for permission to marry me. And that stomach "bug" he had had the night before was due to "cold feet" over whether I was the girl God wanted him to marry, rather than any virus.

Why all the turmoil over this decision? Was the idea of being married to me THAT scary? In all honesty, yes and no. No, I wasn't THAT scary. Actually, I was much of what he desired in a wife. On top of enjoying each other's company, I was striving to love the LORD and love Mark. I wanted to be lead by him and wanted to use my life to be his helpmate. I loved God's people and wanted to see them grow.

But on the other hand, yes, I was "scary." My father had died while I was a young girl and there was a real hunger for male affection that was no doubt more than usual. Mark wondered if he would be able to meet my needs. And yes, I did have some significant back issues that plagued me. Would these issues be more than he could care for? Mark was committed to living out the Ephesians 5 biblical mandate to love his wife for life in a way that echoed Christ's self-sacrificial love for the Church. If we were married, I would become Mark's highest care priority. That meant that his other dreams or desires --even the desire to go into the ministry-- would be shaped, and if need be, even set aside to care for me. Mark knew he loved me, but he was right to soberly think through the potential repercussions of my needs on his life. Would caring for me be a good fit for the life and ministry to which God was calling him?

Heartless or Heartful?

Perhaps this sounds heartless to think this way. Love is love, right? But, to me, it was wisely thinking through what it would mean to love me well and him deciding if he could do what was needed to do so. THAT is love! But that's also why Mark threw up the night before. It really was such a big decision. Marriage is for life. And there was no crystal ball to gaze into with a definitive answer for all his questions about the future.

Assurance At Last

But Mark looked to something surer, SOMEONE better that night for guidance: the sovereign Lord! Nothing is outside His knowledge. Every moment of our lives is in His plans. As David says in Psalm 139:16: "All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be." That night, the Lord gave Mark the assurance he needed to proceed towards marriage to me. Mark the reassurance he needed to go forward towards marriage. He had confidence that the love I had for Mark was a love the Lord had given me. He had sovereignly woven the shape of caring for my needs into the shape of whatever ministry to which He was calling Mark, and He would use it for our good and His glory.

The Lord has been faithful over these 40 plus years in marriage and ministry together. Like any marriage, it has not been all sunshine and roses. We have learned many a thing the slow and hard way. At times, we have felt the chafe of my needs/our family's needs tighten the cinch on Mark's ministry. At times, I have struggled with a dried-up love for the Church, feeling like a "wife on the side" compared to ministry to the Bride of Christ. But overwhelmingly, we have seen bountiful fruit both in our family life and in ministry together. We have experienced a growing love for the Church, and an absolute awe at God's perfect sovereignty. He has redeemed every difficulty and blessed every step over these past 40+ years.

I would love to share with you the "Big Three" that have been so important to loving the Church and caring well for me and our kids over the years. Then, I'll end with a lot of quick-fire practical tidbits. We hope this will encourage you as you look for a wife to share your life in ministry or consider how to care well for the wife (and family) you already have.

BIG NUMBER 1: YOUR WIFE IS YOUR TOP CARE PRIORITY FOR LIFE

Many times, I've heard Mark say, "A married pastor is called to be a husband, more than he's called to be a pastor, so choose your wife prayerfully, carefully, for her sake and for your ministry's sake. You can get another job. The church can get another pastor. But your wife is your wife for life."

A la Ephesians 5, loving your wife and caring for her needs will be a life-long top priority for you. And without a doubt, loving her (and any children) well will impact the shape of your ministry. Like Mark did in considering me as his possible wife, we would encourage you to think carefully about her needs and how you can meet them and how ministry will impact them. If something is going to go, as my husband says, it will be the ministry you are in, not the wife to whom you have committed yourself!

An example of someone who might not be a good fit is if you are considering a pastoral situation overseas in an area where there is little access to good medical care and the woman you are attracted to has significant, chronic health conditions that need regular, nearby care. Loving her well would probably mean leaving behind that type of ministry.

But on the other hand, don't go looking for a P.O.W. –a Princess of Wow, "perfect specimen" of a woman with no weaknesses, so that her needs never "cramp" your dream ministry style. First of all, such a woman does not exist. And second of all, because the Lord's sovereign plans are always better than our dreams. He never fails to weave great good into your life and your ministry as you love her well with her weaknesses. More on that later....

BIG NUMBER 2: ENCOURAGE HER WITH THE PROVERBS 31 BOOKENDS

I don't know who King Lemuel was or how God inspired his mother (see Proverbs 31:1) to give him this description of the Proverbs 31 woman, but talk about a "Princess of Wow", or I guess "Queen of Wow" in her case. I have had a dread relationship with this passage for years! She is overwhelmingly accomplished with seemingly unending energy. If I translate her giftings into what mine should be as a 21st century pastor's wife, I am an epic fail! If I were her, I surely I would be meeting not only my family's needs but so many of the expectations of others (especially in the church). What a mess!

But over the years, Mark comforted and catechized his tear-stained, feeling-like-a-failure pastor's wife with this encouragement: "You aren't called to be everything to everyone. You aren't called to meet all their expectations. You are called to love the Lord and to do me good, as my wife. Be a faithful member of our church. I need you! Be my helpmate with our family. No one else can support me like you can. And if you are wondering if you are doing what you are supposed to do, just come to me!" he has said to me many times. Such wonderful words for my soul!

Then came the day when I realized that King Lemuel's mother said the same thing as my husband, if I had only looked more carefully at the bookends of that Proverbs 31 passage rather than at the long job description in the middle. Take a look:

Bookend #1: Proverbs 31:10-12

"A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies. Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value. She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life."

Bookend #2: Proverbs 31:30-31

"Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Honor her for all that her hands have done, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate."

There you go. The Proverbs 31 bookends: a wife that longs to do her husband good and fears the Lord.

Care for Your Wife by Encouraging Her with the Bookends

These bookends have been such a great relief and encouragement to me over the years. And especially when my husband uses them to help silence (once more) false unrealistic expectations of well-meaning church members or that brew in my heart, of my own making. My guess is, they can be of great comfort to your wife, too.

Looking to God's Word for Guidance

A Proverbs 31 Bookends woman sets her sights on doing good to her husband and part of that doing good will be in response to what he does for a living. She seeks to understand what God has for him to do and sets out to bless him and his calling with her life. We see that in the original Proverbs 31 text as this wife is up to all sorts of good things that bless him and their family and that complement the work God has given him.

Studying what God calls pastors to do has been vitally important to Mark and me as we work out my pastor's wife's version of fearing the Lord and doing my pastor/husband good in many ways. These Bible passages have:

- Helped us soberly consider what kind of ministry, if any, is a good fit for us.
- Guided us in finding healthy guidelines for our family in ministry, and provided indications of whether we should at least discuss whether it's time to get out of the ministry.
- Helped us make decisions for our family from a place of biblical unity, especially important when sacrifices need to be made.
- Helped us work through expectations that others have for me, my husband, or our kids as pastor and family.
- Helped me know how to better encourage, pray for, and support my husband in what God is calling him to do. They have provided Mark with ways to better lead and care for me as his wife.
- Grown a heart of love and patience for God's people and appreciation of my husband as he perseveres in shepherding them, crucial for any pastor's wife.

One passage that has been especially helpful to us is Ephesians 4:11,12. Let's take a look at it.

Four Reflections from Ephesians 4

Ephesians 4:11,12 says:

"Christ himself gave ... the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."

Reflection #1: Pastors Are a Gift

Christ, Himself, gave the Church pastors. As a pastor, you are gift from God, called to equip God's people so they can build one another up. Because of this, part of your wife longing to do YOU good will undoubtedly also include her wanting to support you in equipping the church, as well as supporting you and any kids in the home.

Why This Has Been Important to Us

Christ does not give bad gifts. He gives perfect gifts. That is, gifts perfectly suited to do what He wants them to do. And Christ didn't just give, but He GAVE. These pastors were part of His sovereign, eternal plan, even before they knew they were to be. What God wants to do through him will take place. With God, there are no unfunded mandates! He who sends, gives the grace required. That includes men like my not-so-perfect husband, and their helper-wives, definitely not-so-perfect women like me. This is so helpful when we feel overwhelmed and under-equipped for the task to which God has called Mark as pastor, and me as his helpmate. God will give more grace. He will fulfill His good plans.

Reflection #2 The World's Most Beautiful Transformation

God's people are being transformed into the "whole measure of the fullness of Christ."

Why This Has Been Important to Us

Since God knew His people from before the beginning, planning to save them and change them into the likeness of His Son, this transformation is a sure thing. Could there be anything more exciting, anything better than the front row seat in which to see this change in so many people, as well as in ourselves!

But on top of that, God has chosen my pastor/husband to be an integral part of this transformation. And I, as his wife, get to support him in his role. Wow! There may be many sacrifices and discouragements involved in the ministry, but we know the outcome: God wins and His people are transformed, and these outcomes are for all eternity.

Knowing this helps us to persevere in the ministry, even in the toughest times. Everything we do for God's people is of eternal value.

Reflection #3 Transformation Often Means Trouble, Part 1

God gives the church pastors to equip them UNTIL they reach unity and full maturity in Christ: EXPECT IMMATURITY.

Why This Has Been Important to Us

Ah, that little word UNTIL. It reminds us that every single member of our church, including my husband and myself, is a work in progress. And while there will be many times when God's work in the hearts of the congregation show up in beautiful displays of God's love to God, to one another, and to my husband

as their pastor, I shouldn't be surprised when spiritual disunity arises or immaturity shows itself in how members treat each other or respond to my husband.

Off-handed Comments/Actions

This has helped me to be realistic in my expectations for how the congregation treats my husband. There WILL be times when he disappoints them, even when he's being faithful. As he frequently tells other men, pursuing the ministry, "Don't go into the ministry if you have to please everyone. You can't do it." So, while our husbands (and us) must carefully consider the merit of any criticism or dashed expectation, we don't have to be devastated by them. As a person who lives pretty high on the "love to make everyone happy" Richter Scale, this has been one of the hardest parts of ministry for me. It has been very important for me to have biblical truth through which to filter these comments. If your wife/potentially future wife is thin-skinned like me, this will be a very important aspect of ministry to soberly consider and to learn how to combat.

Two "Weapons" of Choice

Prayer

Praying and meditating on the 1 Corinthians 13 passage on love. Do you realize how all these attributes are undeserved responses to something frustrating or sinful that someone else has done. This is how God responds to us. This is how He wants us to respond to His other sinful people.

Bring Out the Buckets

I've found that many of the actions or comments of our congregation towards my husband or myself are sweet encouragement. And those that aren't, most of them don't come from malicious intent, but from immaturity, lack of understanding, or just plain stupidity. It has helped me immensely to make myself consider whether it's the malicious, immature, or stupid bucket someone's comment/action goes into. Yes, even stupid comments can hurt, but they are easier to get over. This helps me with comments directed towards my husband as well as towards me. It helps me not to build up resentment but see it as an opportunity to clarify a misunderstanding or forbear in love. Caring well for me includes Mark reminding me to think this way. It helps me keep on loving the church, even when people hurt me or him.

Reflection #3 Transformation Often Means Trouble, Part 2

God gives the church pastors to equip them UNTIL they reach unity and full maturity in Christ: EXPECT HILLS TO CRY ON and even MOUNTAINS TO "DIE" ON.

Pastors are often on the receiving end of many immature comments/actions on a wide variety of subjects that don't really matter at all in the eternal scheme of things, such as saying that our son dyeing his hair pink (temporarily for school spirit week) must mean he's in rebellion to my husband's authority. These are a perfect example of something that we put in the "stupid" bucket and forbear.

But there are other issues that matter deeply. Matters of divisive behavior and unsound doctrine that can cause great damage if left unaddressed. And if your church situation is anything like ours, Paul's words "UNTIL we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God" will very well include some of these, and they very well can be hills of difficulty and heartache that you and your family will cry on. And for some, turn into mountains on which your pastoral term at your church dies upon.

In 2 Timothy 4:2-5, Paul counsels Timothy in more depth about these difficulties and what to do: "Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine.

Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.”

Why This Has Been Important to Us

This passage’s emphasis specifically on divisive behavior and opposition to and biblical truth has been wonderful preparation for my heart. No one likes trials within the church, especially me. But to realize that my husband is acting more like a surgeon removing cancer and the patient is yelling at him about the pain he’s causing has helped me both be prepared for opposition, to endure the hardship, and to treat others with great patience as Paul encourages Timothy in this passage. It has helped me persevere through painful struggles in the congregation in the most important times. It’s been important me that these hills of biblical truth are worthy of crying on, and even “dying on” for the clarity of the gospel, the good of God’s people, and the glory of God.

The Nine Marks

It may sound a bit nerdy, but I’ve found understanding the biblical nine marks of a healthy church my husband has outlined very helpful in understanding where the crying hills and the dying mountains may arise. And, they have helped me to understand why these issues are worth suffering for. And they are great prayer points for our church and specifically for my husband to have wisdom when these or other issues of equal importance have caused difficulties in the church. Caring well for me is equipping me with knowledge to understand why a particular issue is worth crying and even “dying” for; and, so that I can be ready to keep on loving the Church and encouraging my husband to keep his head and endure the hardship well as we go through it. If you aren’t familiar with these, go to ninemarks.org for a description of them.

Too Much for the Family and Me?

Unfortunately, these kinds of church struggles can take a huge toll on your family. They certainly have on me, from time to time. Even though my husband is careful to shield me from information that I don’t need to know when these kinds of difficulties arise, there always seems to be enough to chew me up on the inside. It has also been hard on the kids, even when we are being carefully with what they hear. Keep close tabs on your family in these difficult times. Pray that God gives you wisdom not only to help the church through whatever difficulty but to give you wisdom to know when the toll is too high on your family.

This is an extremely important part of helping your family flourish in ministry life. These difficulties can be so hard on their faith. Encourage your wife to reach out to another respected pastor’s wife not in your church to share with and to pray with them. This gives your wife a safe, helpful person to speak with and can help combat the isolation that she may feel at your church over this matter. And if possible, you do the same. You aren’t the first to fight these kinds of battles! Talk to those who have navigated these in their congregations. You may find their advice helps resolve the matter more quickly and with less “collateral damage” within the church and within your family.

Reflection #4: Not Called to Do It All: Room for the Pastor and His Family

Pastors are called to EQUIP their congregations for works of service that build one another up (not do them all, themselves).

Why This Has Been Important to Us

My husband’s job is not to fulfill every need of every individual member, himself, but to equip THEM to encourage one another and build one another up. This is NOT a congregation of consumership. It’s a

congregation of every member discipleship. It is still a huge job. The ratio is still not in favor of pastors, with often hundreds of members to one or a few pastors. But it does mean that my husband is not called by God to be a Superman who can do everything, be friends with everyone, and meet every need. My husband, even when doing his job well, will spend more time with some people, and less time with others. It's simply a fact. Your church and your family are going to be in trouble quickly if the "success" of your local church is dependent upon your husband being everyone's best friend and personally tending to everyone's needs.

But, if your husband's equipping of the church leads to a plurality of elders who share the pastoral load, and deacons who oversee the physical needs of the members, and members who take on discipling and encouraging one another, as Paul is saying here, the benefits multiply exponentially. Not only is the church better served this way, but YOU get to pastor within reasonable limits. Furthermore, this is caring well for you, as his wife, **because it means that while God may have given your husband as a gift to a congregation of people, he is not called to be burnt out with nothing left over for his family or himself. He can be both faithful to God's calling and there still be room to care well for you, his family.**

And this leads us nicely into our Big Number Three...

BIG NUMBER THREE: MARRIAGE-SHAPED MINISTRY CARES FOR FAMILIES AND CULTIVATES LOVE FOR THE CHURCH

Ministry will impact many aspects of your life, most every day. I know it has been so for us. This is what we call Ministry-Shaped Marriage. It's what comes from loving and serving God's people, welcoming them into your lives, your heart, and your home. It's choosing for your marriage/family life to be shaped by their needs and makes you willing to be inconvenienced and even make sacrifices for the sake of God's people and to the glory of God.

And make no mistake, sacrifice and inconveniences will come knocking, often fast and furious. How will you decide which sacrifices to your marriage/family for the sake of God's people should be made? Who will win? The next urgent church need/wonderful gospel opportunity or regular family time? For me, this became an overwhelming struggle that turned into a groundswell of anger towards my husband and our local church, and it really wasn't either of their fault.

Gospel Blocker?

I guess you could say the problem stemmed from my own mangled version of the Proverbs 31 bookends. As Mark's schedule grew busier and wonderful gospel opportunities in DC and elsewhere multiplied, my version of fear of the Lord and longing to do my husband good came to mean doing everything I could to facilitate as much ministry as possible. "Surely, we can find a way to do without him for another night" if it's something at the church, or "We can manage for a few days," if it involves travel, I would tell myself. My default solution had become sacrifice needed family time for the church. To do anything less made me feel like I was being a "gospel blocker."

I'm a "getter-done kind of girl" and so I used that "super-power" to free him up for more ministry. Mark has always been great at discussing his schedule and asking my opinion, but the problem was I wasn't giving him the information he really needed to make the best balanced decisions for the good of me and our family because I was always trying to make it possible to squeeze in something else on the ministry side. My husband is a wonderful, wise leader, but an omniscient mind-reader he is not. He needed me to be his helpmate in understanding what would help his family flourish.

Perhaps there would be a conflict between regular sermon prep (that he spends quite a bit of time doing on Fridays and Saturdays) or another special gospel opportunity. I would be on hand, but Mark might not be. At least one parental representative was present at our daughter's horse show or our son's soccer game, I would tell myself. Mark would regularly ask my opinion on whether he should say yes to this or that opportunity, but my reluctance to have him turn down a great gospel opportunity meant I did not fully express how important certain activities were for him to attend. This tendency of mine led, at one point in our marriage, to the undercurrent of anger towards Mark and the church, I previously mentioned, which really wasn't his or their fault.. If I withhold information from him and in a sense, keeping in my hands decisions that he is to make, then I am NOT allowing him to lead, and that was not doing him or us good. I was inadvertently doing him harm. Ugh!

The dam of anger finally burst, and the conversation that resulted was one of the biggest turning points in the ministry life for me. Mark helped me realize that God calls pastors not to an out of control MINISTRY-SHAPED marriage in which the well-being of the pastors' family is always taking a backseat to the needs of the church. No! God calls pastors to Marriage-shaped Ministry. That is, God may have planned to give pastors to the church to equip her, but He also calls a pastor's care for his wife/family to remain his top priority. Seeing to their needs will shape the what, when and how of his ministry in the local church. Mark encouraged me that only in being completely honest with him about my/our family's needs could he lead us in finding the best balance between church needs and family needs, as he wanted to and as God intended.

Oh, how this helped me! No longer did I feel like a Gospel-blocker if our needs led Mark to cut back or turn down ministry opportunities. Best of all, it washed away the anger I felt towards Mark and the church. God had a sovereign plan that wove together our family's needs and the church's needs.

I don't know if your wife or family has these same struggles, but if so, I'd love to encourage you that the best way cultivate in your wife/marriage/family an enduring love for the church and being in the ministry is focusing on what seems to be the reverse: MARRIAGE Shaped Ministry. And where in Scripture did this idea come from? 1 Timothy 3. Let's take a look at that passage and tease this idea out some more:

1 Timothy 3: 1-7

"Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer (pastor, elder) desires a noble task. Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap."

The qualifications for a pastor in this passage can be summarized into 3 aspects:

1. Able to teach sound doctrine/refute unsound doctrine.
2. Live and lead in a godly manner.
3. Care/manage his family well.

Or, as I like to think of it:

1. **NOURISH** the church.
2. **FURNISH** a godly example/character in life and leadership.
3. And **FLOURISH** the family.

And right there is the idea of Marriage-shaped Ministry. 1 Timothy 3 implies that a man needs to flourish his family as a qualification to become and to stay a pastor/elder. No doubt this is partly because a married pastor's number one obligation before God (as my husband reminds me) is to love his wife as Christ loves the Church a la Ephesians 5. He needs to be able to continue to care well for her (and any kids in the home) while also loving God's people in the local church. Paul also infers that the skill to care well for the church is something that is seen in the smaller testing ground of his leadership in his family.

What Is Manage?

Paul uses the term "manage his household" here, and that can sound he's merely speaking of a husband's/father's authority being honored and obeyed by his family. That is most certainly a very important aspect. A husband/father needs to care well for his family with consistent, loving leadership. In a day when "gentle parenting" is becoming rampant, in which you persuade a child to change their mind to what is best and rarely address issues of the will, it is so important for fathers (and mothers) to truly discipline their children and help them obey even against their inclination. As Proverbs 19:18 warns: "Discipline your children, for in that there is hope; do not be a willing party to their death." Having had our own strong-willed children who grew up to thank us for our consistent discipline of them, I cannot be more convinced of the importance of this kind of leadership.

But, I think flourish is a fuller picture of what Paul means here, and it certainly has been that to which Mark has aspired our family. We take flourishing to mean a basic, consistent pattern of your family's wellbeing within the boundaries of your regular ministry life.

This does NOT mean there are never sacrifices made or suffering endured. And, this does NOT mean that you are always getting the balance right. There are plenty of lonely nights I have experienced as Mark is away or burdensome member situations that bear down hard on us, for example. Or times when the kids were sick of pastor's kid comments and being treated differently than other kids because of who their dad was.

But it DOES mean that sacrifices or struggles that make flourishing difficult, do not go unnoticed, unattended, or become the basic pattern of our lives. We communicate about these, work hard to keep these in balance, and make changes.

Some Reasons Balance and Flourishing in the Ministry Can Be So Hard

While divisions within the church may be the most hurtful difficulty we experienced in our time in ministry, balancing our family's needs with church needs has been the most consistent difficulty we have faced throughout our years in ministry. I've heard many other pastors' and their wives say the same thing.

Here are some reasons we have observed:

The Needs are So Great

Families and church members are such needy creatures, needier than there are hours in the day to fill. More can always be done. Add to this a turn-around church, small church, church plant or bi-vocational situation. and a regular pattern of balance can seem almost impossible.

Ministry Hours Colliding with Family Hours

Most churches post regular business hours, but for most pastors, those hours have far more to do with office staff and far less to do with them. Elders' meetings, counseling sessions, committee meetings, small groups, discipleship opportunities, and hospital visitations, on top of mid-week Bible studies and Sunday services that fall after hours. And with these, there is getting there early to prep and greet, then

staying there late for further conversations. These outside-of-office-hours meetings bear some of the richest fruit, but unfortunately, they collide with some of the richest times for families.

Not Much Left in the Tank

Even when pastor/husbands do get home, the burdens they bear can leave them distracted, emotionally depleted, and discouraged. This can leave them with very little to give to the very wife and children they hold as their top priority to care for.

The Only Thing Constant Is Change

Both at church and in the home, there is always something changing.

At church, new people are becoming Christians, new members are coming in, old members going out. Elders are rolling off their terms and new ones are coming on. Pastoral responsibilities shift around; budget constraints tighten. Member care crises, cases of discipline, and even whether a man is preaching or leading a Sunday School class shifts from week to week. And all those examples are just on the pastor's side, not even taking into consideration the many ways pastors' wives contribute to the regular workings of the church.

And at home, chores need doing, babies are born, school starts up, after school activities multiply, discipline must happen, sicknesses come and go, cars break down, vacations are planned, relatives come to visit, friends drop in at a moment's notice, middle schoolers who want more "just family" dinners drying up what were some of your "best" hospitality slots, teenagers who seem to open up only late at night, etc. etc. There are seasons of change on top of days of change. How can you balance moving targets?

Flourishing the Family Also Nourishes the Church

Why is flourishing the family not just important but a qualification to becoming and staying a pastor? Paul says that if a man can't manage his own household how can he be expected to manage a church of believers. But I would say that on top of the family circle pointing to a pastor's ability to care well for a local church, God actually uses a flourishing pastor's family to nourish the congregation in some very influential ways.

Here are 3 ways we have seen this to be the case:

#1 Because you teach your congregation, not only through your preaching from the pulpit, but through the megaphone of your life and your care for your family. Just think about it: your life and your family are two things that you are doing that is just like everyone else.

#2 Because your life and your care for your family reveal the truth of your testimony. I like to say that God is requiring of you what he is desiring of everyone else in terms of care for your family and your family's willing, even cheerful response to you and your leadership. Once more, these are two things that you are doing just like everyone else, and as they watch (which they will), this makes your testimony shine and gives them even more receptiveness to your preaching and to your leadership.

#3 Because your life and your care for your family are God's rich training ground for much of the wisdom you will have to give others and the orchard for the fruit of the Spirit that will help you forbear with others.

A.K.A. The Crockpot

The kids and I have been the “crockpot” of life that God has used to teach Mark many things that have tenderized him and made him a better preacher, counselor, elder, decision maker, example for the church. So, again, far from getting in the way with what God is doing, our family has actually been making him a better equipper of our local church, even if it means less actual hours with the church because he is meeting family needs.

I love to encourage other pastors’ wives saying, “Do you realize that everything we do God uses to love the church. Even if it’s just doing to send our husbands off to church clothed and fed. I don’t think there’s any other group of women who can say to this extent that God uses absolutely everything in our lives to bless the church because of the way it either supports our husbands or teaches our husbands in ways that help them pastor better.”

This is also something you, men, can use to encourage your wives. Even the fact that they go home ahead of you after church, wrestling tired kids and trying to get lunch on the table, while you stay and have an important conversation might seem like a big pain and of little consequence. But a life may have been changed through your conversation as she is trying to boil water for spaghetti and keep the kids under control at the same time.

Your Wife, Your Helper in Flourishing the Family

And the only way you’re going to flourish the family while you nourish the church is if you are mindful of your family and decisions about how the ministry impacts your family has them in mind. Your wife is your indispensable helpmate in helping you know how the family is doing and in helping you make good decisions so that you flourish.

A Little Practical Advice

1. Encourage your wife to be honest about her needs and the kids’ needs. Encourage her that even if her information causes you to spend less time doing church work that this is exactly what God has in mind and will actually be used to bless the church.

2. Expect change and be vigilant to communicate about it and adjust your family/ministry life accordingly to keep on flourishing. “The one constant in life you can expect is change.” What a true statement that is! And because change is such a constant, so will be your need to make new decisions with your wife to balance caring well for your family with caring well for the church.

Have regular times of communication. Nail them down on your calendar and guard that time jealously. a regular time/day to talk, pull out the calendar, make changes, and share transitions you see going on. Stick to these communication dates, if at all possible! Don’t let the tyranny of the urgent crowd them out.

Be on the lookout for things in your family, in your lives, in your ministry that change the shape of what you do and when you do it. (And every once in a while, things may change so much that you may need to step back from the ministry.)

3. Have friends to hold you accountable and ask you questions about your life. Have friends older than you as well as friends the same age as you. Both will help you care well for your family in your season of life. Find a designated accountability couple who you both respect and can listen to their advice, especially in times when you and your wife can’t come to unity on an important decision.

4. Help your wife understand how important she is in helping you know how to flourish the family. She may be especially insightful with special things the kids are doing/going through that you need to prioritize and even work around your regular schedule to be a part of. It makes sense: if she spends more

of her day around them, observing them, nurturing them, she very well will pick up on things you may miss.

5. Parents aren't fully exchangeable. There are some things the kids don't care if it's mom or dad there. And there's other things that they do care. Especially church plants and turn-around churches, this can be really hard. This is why some families choose to homeschool. It can provide more flexibility that keeps ministry and family time from clashing so much.

Seeing God's Sovereignty When Family Needs Lead to Less Ministry Time

New Boundaries Don't Mean a Downgrade in God's Economy

New balance usually means new boundaries upon what you do. Sometimes these boundaries may be wide and beautiful and easy to accommodate so much ministry, while still flourishing the family. Married couples before they have kids and empty nesters after the kids have gone often experience seasons like this. But many other times, growing family needs may put a squeeze on how, when, and what you do in ministry.

It's easy to feel like your family's needs are creating a downgrade in your ministry in such occasions. And, if it's something your wife is going through that has sparked the squeeze in boundary to better care for her, she can easily feel like she is hampering the gospel and your ministry. But this is where you can encourage yourself and her to lean into God's sovereignty. And that like David in Psalm 16 we can proclaim that the boundaries God has given have fallen in pleasant places.

We have been surprised, repeatedly, how God has used the lessons learned in times of "shrinking" ministry boundaries to actually teach Mark (actually both of us) things that wind up being a huge blessing to his ministry. Once more, the crockpot effect when God uses life to change us and those changes flow out into more fruitful ministry through example, wisdom, powerful preaching, and longing for God.

And once more, so good for the congregation...

Why Your Confidence in God's Sovereignty Matters So Much

Every wife has a tendency to either send their husband out to do too much or to want to hold on him too tight. But most of the ministry wives I found or of that first category: they feel either excited to send their husband out to gospel opportunities or guilty if they don't have them go out to another gospel opportunity. That's why your confidence in God's sovereignty and your encouraging of us to be honest with you with the real needs that we see to flourish the family are actually us helping you do what you're supposed to do not inhibiting you from doing something that God would have you do.

You help us so much when you encourage us that God is doing good things not withholding, good things when greater needs of the family create a "no" for ministry opportunity. This might be one of the greatest gifts of relief you can give.

God Never Wastes Anything

But not only that, we have found that God actually intends that these pull backs which seem to lessen one part of your ministry actually wind up, multiplying something else in your ministry, and often in a different way than you ever imagined. what we found is the Lord uses those changes to make Mark a better pastor, either because the difficulties we are going through as a family change his heart, or change his understanding and give him more wisdom that the Lord will turn and use tell him to Pastor others better, but also to do that third 1 Tim/Titus thing pastor elders are supposed to do: furnish an example.

Flourishing the family circles back round to enrich the other two qualifications of nourishing the church and furnishing a godly example in life and character in leadership. Back to the two ways you teach in your church: how you preach and how you live. Think of how many people are married in your church, and how many with kids. As they watch you limit ministry for the sake of your family, you are setting a good example for them as they balance work and family, too. Think of how many singles will get married in your church. Your example prepares them for decisions they will make in the future. Even singles who never get married still have to think through balancing things in their lives. No one may want you to say “no” to their ministry request because of caring for your family’s needs, but you never know what greater gift you are giving them by your example. God is the only infinite one here. All the rest of us are finite.

Leaning into God’s Sovereignty Like Never Before

In January 2025, I developed an extremely rare, very debilitating autoimmune condition that first attacked my kidneys and then the nerves in my arms and legs leading to complete paralysis. I spent 100 days in the hospital over seven stays as they searched for the cause and tried to get control or find a cure for it. A team of church ladies took turns coming to the hospital or to our house to help feed me and even scratch my nose, when I was at my worst. The elders of the church came round Mark and helped relieve him of some of his usual ministry obligations in order to have more time to be with me. My husband even cancelled going to the conference that he planned and was to lead celebrating 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea.... And he did this without ever telling me that HE was the one who planned it and was in charge of it! He made not even a peep of disappointment over not being able to go. He knew I would feel bad and he didn’t want to add to my sorrows. And, most of all, he 100% firmly believed that for whatever reason, it must be God’s sovereign will for him not to be at that conference. And perhaps not surprisingly, last year’s difficulties lead to him discussing with others as well as me as to whether it was time for him to completely step down from ministry at beloved Capitol Hill Baptist in order to care for me.

But by the grace of God, the support of our church, and some very smart doctors, we made it through the year, I responded to a drug, which gives me four months relief at a time, instead of two weeks. Yes, I’m still in a wheelchair and using a walker. My hospital bed is in our living room and just a few days ago was the first time in almost a year that I was able to climb stairs. I can only walk for five minutes at a time. But I can do dishes, make dinner, and other household basics. With the help of able-legged friends, I’ve continued to hold kids’ outreach events in our front yard and Children’s Ministry workshops during the Pastor Weekenders we hold three times a year. It’s not what life used to be, but together, we have found a new balance and a way to flourish our family while Mark continues to nourish the members of Capitol Hill Baptist as their pastor.

And, as the congregation came to our aid, prayed, and watched, the Lord once more did not waste these sorrows and these very severe boundaries. He used them in us and grew us even closer to many in the congregation. I felt like I did far more encouraging of others in the church from the hospital visits than ever before. The hospital staff were amazed at our church’s support, and I had multiple chances to share of the hope within me and within those from our church who came to help me.

The Capitol Hill community read about the Lord’s faithfulness to me in a letter I gave out in the goody bags when other members of CHBC carried out the Christmas kids’ outreach I had planned, while I was completely paralyzed in bed in my living room! My friends’ service to the community on my behalf simply made the gospel shine even brighter!

Many commented on the richness of Mark’s preaching and prayers throughout the year. Yes, the boundaries were cinched tight on the Dever’s, but they still fell in pleasant places (Psalm 16:6) And surely

God's goodness and mercy did follow us all the days of 2025 and continue to do so into 2026 and will until we dwell in the house of the Lord forever (Psalm 23:6).

I share this as encouragement to you, dear pastor/husbands that you can trust God's sovereignty even when the boundaries to flourish your family cinch tightly on your ability to nourish the church. Especially those of you with wives with chronic health conditions. The Lord knows what He's doing! He is completely trustworthy!

Marriage-Shaped Ministry Fuels a Heart of Ministry-Shaped Marriage

Mark's willingness to have a marriage-shaped ministry and to NOT make the needs of his family feel like a detour away from God's good plan to use him to equip the church is actually one of the things that makes my heart for the ministry and willingness to sacrifice for God's people grow. Because I'm not envious of the church or hate the church because I'm not a "wife on the side" and she's not the mistress. Because my husband esteems me and even makes decisions to flourish me, his bride, it helps the church be the bride who we both love and sacrifice for.