

From Section 6: Living within God's Good Limits: Making a Plan

Psalm 16:5-6 "Lord, you have assigned me my portion and my cup;
you have made my lot secure.

The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
surely I have a delightful inheritance."

Advice from the School of Hard Knocks

There's nothing like learning the hard way to knock some sense into your head... or life, in this case. Here are some things we've learned that may help you incur less bumps and bruises!

1. Take Frequent Beach Trips

Remember that "ocean of agreement" I mentioned in Mark 1? Keep going back to it to avoid fighting. Communication is the first step towards unity. Don't forget all the things you agree about. If you start to get upset, try not to accuse the person of not caring just because they don't see something as the same priority as you. You aren't clones of each other. You are different. Respect each other and try to come to an agreement. If something is more important to your husband than you, try to accommodate that priority; just like you want him to do that with something you value as more important than him. And usually, it's not that you disagree on something's importance, but how much time should be spent on it.

2. There's No One, Single Recipe that Fits Every Ministry Family

If only learning how to flourish your family while nourishing the church was as straightforward as a simple cake recipe, how wonderful that would be! Just open up your cookbook to the chocolate cake recipe, grab your ingredients from your cabinet, get out your mixing bowl, measure them all out, slap them in a pan, tuck them in your oven, and in 30 minutes you've got your cake.

But the truth is, every ministry situation is different. And every couple is different. That means the combination of what your husband does in ministry and what you all do as a family is going to look different. And not only that, but it's going to change as your church changes, as your family changes, as you and your husband change. So, whether you're reading a book like mine or somebody else's, or looking around at other ministry families you know of, or listening to a podcast about how to do this nourish and flourish thing, realize that the best anybody can do is tell you what they have learned, then encourage you to go make the best cake you can for your family and your church.

By all means, look around, read around, and listen around. There will be many of the same ingredients in your family-ministry cake as there are in others, and that means there's so much you can learn from others. But as one of my fellow pastors' wives says, "You're going to take some and you're going to leave some" in order to get to the best-balanced version of family-ministry life for your family.

3. See and Respect One Another

Both your husband and you bring special proficiencies to your marriage and to your life in the ministry. Do yourself a favor and acknowledge these special proficiencies. Try to be especially open to the opinion of the one who has more experience, while leaving room for the less experienced person's opinion to be heard, valued, and weighed.

And when you have to make a decision in which neither one of you has much experience or expertise,

seek counsel from others those who have experience/expertise that you both lack. You might need help with the budget. You might need help with the kids. You might need help thinking through hospitality. You might need help figuring out how to carve out regular time in the bedroom. Everybody needs help with something. Be kind and patient with one another! And put on humility over everything.

I mentioned back in Chapter 2 Mark's Humorous Way of talking about his overly confident decision-making ability: "always confident, sometimes right." Men who are strong leaders very often have a natural tendency to be strongly opinionated that they are right. Years of experience in life helps soften that a bit, at least it has in Mark's case. When we first got married Mark's quote might've been closer to: "always right." But it didn't take too long for him to begin to add in that: "always clock confident" and see that sometimes he was right, but sometimes I was right.

My husband's assuredness has been a great gift to our family as well as to our church. But the growth in humility and openness to carefully weigh my opinion has also been a great gift to our family as well as to our church.

My problem hasn't been being "always confident". I've been a classic empathetic, deep feeler, intuitive sort of gal. It's not that I don't care about the facts. I do. It's just that how someone feels modifies and colors my decisions, sometimes in good ways and sometimes in bad ways.

When we are able to recognize we our both wearing a different set of lens going into a decision it helps us to recognize not just each other's blind spots, but our own blind spots. Prayerfully, we ask God to give us one vision that combines both sets of lenses. And if we can't come to a decision, we often seek outside counsel. And if outside counsel isn't enough to come to a good decision, then we let Mark guide our family, trusting in the Lord giving him grace to lead us well.

An example in our lives was the decisions we made about how to school our children here in D.C. Education was not an easy, straightforward path through the neighborhood public schools for our kids. We used Christian schools, private, secular schools, homeschooling, and even online education. Each time we made a decision to change, there were many different factors to consider. Mark and I often saw different factors of greatest importance. On our own, we would have made different decisions.

But since I was the one who spent so much time getting to know the teachers, helping our kids with their lessons, and read so many books of education, Mark recognize the experience/ expertise I had and let my understanding of our kids' needs way more heavily into what we decided. But on the other hand, I was emotional about these decisions that Mark was not. We may have needed my expertise/experience but we needed his clear thinking to make the best decisions for our kids.

4. "L" Stands for "Lifetime Learner", Not for "Loser"

You will always be a learner at something. Always. Yes, you may have a common attitude and a common vision. But each of you will always have certain things that are hard for one or the other of you. Don't kill each other over this! Expect it. Be honest with each other about your weaknesses, appreciate each other's strengths, and strategize together. And laugh, laugh, laugh! Enjoy each other for a lifetime of learning.

5. Seek Out Advisors

"For by wise guidance you can wage your war, and in abundance of counselors there is victory."
--Proverbs 24:6, ESV

Be a Winsome Asker

You may be helped by bringing in some outside help if you are overwhelmed, confused, or just plain upset. You will be especially helped if you can find an older ministry couple or at least a couple who has more ministry experience. Everyone faces this balancing act. Might as well get some help from the wisdom of others. It can be especially hard for men to ask for help. The same, very admirable quality of confident decision can also carry with it a blindness to see a need for help. You may need to be very winsome in asking him who he respects who could look over your schedule and talk to you about it. Do not do this in a degrading way! If nothing else, after any conversation with that outside couple, don't forget to encourage him for being the kind of man who seeks advice to make the best decision for his family and his ministry.

One, Special, Designated Couple

Most every marriage has times when husband and wife just cannot come to agreement on important matter. Find a couple who you both respect and ask them if they would be your designated "guardian couple" who you can go to help you think through the matter and settle your disagreement and come to a decision. Having somebody like this set up well in advance of the difficulty makes it so much easier to come to a decision in the moment.

Other Ministry Couples

There is nothing like the advice of others who have felt the wonderful calling as well as burdensome weight of ministry to help you persevere as well as avoid some of the sorrows.

Meeting up with ministry couples in a similar church situation or family season can help you encourage each other right where you are. You can compare notes about how you are each coping with the struggles you face and pray for each other with great sympathy.

Meeting up with ministry couples with years more experience under their belt may be of even greater benefit. Not only can they share compassion for what you're going through, having faced it themselves in all likelihood, but you can profit from their hindsight being 20-20 and hopefully even avoid some of the mistakes they made.

This is why here at Capitol Hill Baptist Church we have encouraged both our pastors and other like-minded pastors from the area, as well as our pastor's wives and the wives of those other like-minded pastors from the area, to regularly get together for prayer, advice, and support. We've been having these groups for over 25+ years and seen the great help these have provided. It can be a safe place to share your struggles and honest place to receive life-giving help.

I would encourage you to try to find at least one other pastor couple to regularly get together with for encouragement, wisdom, and prayer. Use that time not just to talk together couple to couple, but also for the men to talk together as pastor to pastor, and the women to talk together pastor's wife to pastor's wife.

If you have a number of like-minded pastor couples either at your church or in the area, consider starting a regular gathering time with them. And if you don't have anyone in your area, but you have someone in your past even if they live on the other side of the world, use the blessing of modern technology to set

up a video meeting. There are some wonderful apps that even let you have a video chat with multiple people in multiple places at the same time.

6. Twirl with Your Swirls

There will be something in your schedules both on the ministry side and the family side that are fairly immovable. And then there will be a lot of things that have a lot of flexibility. It helps to identify those things that are like pillars and then learn to make the other things twirl around them.

For instance, say you are trying to figure out the best time to have quality alone time with your husband or as a family. There may be times in the week when your husband will be especially distracted, such as when he is in the middle of writing a sermon. These would be the kind of times not to expect quality together time. Much better to wait to a time when your husband is able to give you his full attention.

For my husband, Sunday nights and Monday's feel like his Friday nights and Saturdays. He's finished good but long day of preaching now it's time to relax and get ready day off on Monday. Those are two of our best times for quality togetherness alone or as a family.

Many men also need a little time to unwind before fully engaging with you and the family after a day at work. Planning for him to take an extra 15 minutes at the office, giving him time to put his feet up in his study, or take a run might cut your evening a little bit, but great improve the time you do have.

7. School and Saturdays

One of the biggest pillars in your family's life that you will need to navigate around in your children's education. From the ages of 5 to 18, this is what will consume most of their Monday to Fridays. With your husband's most important ministry day being Sunday and the most common kid activity day, Saturday, many families feel very constrained.

If your husband is distracted like mine is on Saturdays, this makes his active participation in their extra-curricular much more difficult. It's for these practical reasons (on top of other philosophical reasons), that some ministry families choose homeschooling or hybrid school options. These education models put more flexibility into the week and can dovetail more helpfully with the ministry schedule.

8. Learn What Works Well and Stick to It

You will find your husband and you each have things that are very important to you. Learn these and try to have these as part of your regular schedule. And don't just guess what these things are, ask each other. You might be surprised at the answers you get.

A few years ago, books on love languages were all the rage. That term may not be in use very much, but the idea is still very much in play. It's that we all have different things that say I love you in more significant ways and in less significant ways. Part of you loving your spouse and him loving you, is figuring out what says I love you most to each of you and figuring out how to keep those elements as a regular part of your life, even when life gets crazy.

And don't go thinking that what's important for the couple next door will be just as important for you. My husband and I love to give each other foot rubs and listen to some of his crazy music and talk. We do that many nights of the week. You might find that disgusting. And that's just fine. And furthermore, don't let some stereotype of sex be the scoresheet for what enjoyable intimacy is for you. You and your husband are only called to love each other well in this special way. It doesn't have to look like anybody else. It doesn't have to be as frequently or infrequently as anybody else. That is a decision that you to make together, Scripture tells us. And that's good enough for me!

If you have kids, also find out what is especially meaningful for them. It might be meals together. It might be watching their soccer games or horse shows. It might be reading stories at night or a regular Father-daughter date night for ice cream. Your husband's schedule may limit their participation in more activities than yours, but by finding out what is most important, you can make the most of the time he is available.

9. Spontaneity is Over-rated

Okay, let's be honest. Spontaneity scores a lot of points on the love-o-meter. Nothing says "My heart overflows and love for you," like a spontaneous show of affection or a big bouquet of roses you were expecting. But as life gets busy, our schedules get crowded, and then throw in a sick kid or two, the opportunity or energy to be creatively spontaneous seems to dry up. And unfortunately, lack of spontaneity is too often blamed on lack of love. Let me encourage you enjoy spontaneity when it happens, but grow in your esteem of deliberate, planned out love. And when you think about it, doesn't planning ahead and prioritizing your time as a couple say even more than the wonderful gush of warmth from a last-minute, random act of kindness? I think it does.

Treasure planning over spontaneity. Tailor your planning to whatever is needed, whether it be organizing a babysitter so you can have a regular date night, blocking out time in the evening on your schedule's for a regular walk around the neighborhood are just sitting on your back porch talking, to having sex.

Mark and I learned that when he has a particularly busy week or is been out of town to plan in extra time together immediately afterwards. We noticed a pattern of me being more likely to feel neglected right after times like that. Now we know to keep those days especially free to give us good catch-up time in whatever form needs to take.

The other big advantage that planning has over spontaneity is you can prepare for it. For example, if you know you are planning to have sex on Monday night and a day with your kids typically leaves you exhausted, you can choose to give your kids some quiet time in their bedrooms and you take a nap yourself. That leaves you with the energy you need to be with your husband the evening.

10. Don't Expect Your Spouse to Be a Mind Reader

How many times in your marriage have you had arguments over you or your husband thinking it should be obvious to the other what your/his needs were? Or perhaps they know the needs, but don't meet them at a time when it seems as obvious as the nose on your face that you need them? Mark and I have had plenty of arguments like this over the years, especially during the earlier years.

After a while, we began to realize that just because something is obvious to us that doesn't mean it's obvious to our spouse. And even if the need has shown itself many times in the same way and we think our spouse should have recognized the pattern by now, that it still may not be obvious to them.

Again, it's easy to decide this lack of observation is due to lack of care. But every time we get in the argument, it became obvious that there was no lack of love, just lack of "getting it." So in humility, we have come to give each other helpful prompts. Yes, sometimes that does take the sweetness of initiation out of it, that our spouse saw when we needed, observed it and followed through. But better to give a helpful prompt and give our spouse a chance to love us the way they want to than discouraging them by expecting them to see something there obviously not very good at seeing.

An example of a very needed helpful prompt in our case has been what we've come to know as the "wife on the side" nudge. A "wife on the side" is a reference to those throwback diner restaurants our family I

ove to go to where you ordered two eggs over easy and some sausage on the side. The eggs were the main event. The sausage was the side. When we've gone through a season of lots of guests and extra engagements, or too many guys wanting my husband's time in the evenings, sometimes I start to feel neglected. I could just get angry at him for not noticing that I haven't been getting much TLC lately (and I most certainly have done that); or, I could just tell them with a little smile on my face, "I'm starting to feel like a wife on the side." He gets the point without me getting upset that I need some together time to help me start feeling more like the eggs over easy than the sausage.

11. Encouragement Works Wonders

Two people with very different needs imperfectly met can naturally be recipe for disaster. But throw encouragement into the mix and you help each other want to do a better job at meeting each other's needs. And complaints can be replaced with gratitude. Make the most of even small attempts and improvements with your encouragement and you may be surprised how those small beginnings multiply into bigger attempts and bigger improvements.