

5 Signs That Your Marriage Is in Trouble

It's true. Husbands and wives who pray together usually stay together.

After church one Sunday morning, a wife, with her husband at her side, said to me, "I've always heard that the husband is head of the home just as Jesus is head of the church. If this is true, my husband isn't doing his job! Will you set him straight?" Talk about being put on the spot!

Her statement and question were more about **relationship** than about **theology**. What she really was asking for (and needed) was a **husband** who would pray, be a **servant leader** and set an example of Christ in the home. How can a husband meet the needs of a wife in the areas of prayer and spiritual leadership without having to conform to a role that his wife—not God—expects him to fill?

The Private Prayers of a Husband

One frustrated wife accusingly berated her husband in a Sunday school class by saying, "My husband is always praying, but never with *me*! Every morning he goes off by himself and prays. I just don't understand why he must always be alone to pray."

The truth is, men prefer to pray in private. I have met so many wives who fail to understand this. Yet in counseling and sharing with scores of men, I have discovered this reality: Men have private prayer lives. They dislike expressing their true thoughts and feelings in a public setting, especially when their wives are present.

The men have a point. Private prayer *is* important. In fact, before public prayer becomes authentic, private prayer must be practiced.

Without private prayers of repentance and confession, the public prayers of a spouse often become arrogant, proud, preachy and religious. Wives discover that husbands who pray with them publicly without first praying privately may use that prayer time more to preach at them than to talk with God. How humiliating it is to have an arrogant husband, unbroken by God, use prayer to manipulate, correct, judge and berate his wife.

In a marital counseling session years ago, a wife confessed that she hated praying with her husband. "He preaches at me when we pray," she revealed. "I learn about all my faults, failures and his unfulfilled expectations. I dread our prayer times!"

When I asked the husband about his personal quiet time with the Lord, he confessed that he had difficulty with it. The only time each day he spent with God was the time he and his wife read the Bible and prayed together. Since he was never broken before the Lord privately, he had nothing to share or minister with his wife in their public prayer sessions together.

It is healthy for husbands and wives to confess their sins to each other in prayer "so that [they] may be healed" (James 5:16, NIV). But repentance in private prayer gives a man the strength and courage to share more transparently and become more vulnerable with his wife when they are praying together.

His Needs, Her Needs

As a couple learns to express their needs to God in prayer, trusting Him to be their source, they will learn to express their needs more openly to one another. People have different needs spiritually as well as emotionally and physically in a marriage.

The key to prayer at this point in our discussion is simply this: Ask for what you need. If your husband never or rarely

expresses a desire to pray with you, then you be the one to ask for what you need. Refuse to become frustrated or angry over his failure to initiate prayer. As a royal priest in Christ, you have as much right to initiate prayer as he does (1 Pet. 2:9).

Share your needs and concerns in a nonjudgmental tone. Refuse to put him down for not praying or initiating prayer the way you would like. Instead, ask for what you need; if he still refuses to pray with you, go ahead and pray aloud when he is around to hear you. Praying aloud can effectively communicate to him not only your need to pray with him but also your prayer concerns.

Is There a Spiritual Wall Between You and Your Husband?

Coming home from church, Mariann turned to Tom and confessed, "I hate going to church when we are such hypocrites." A river of tears began to stream down her cheeks. Stunned, Tom reached for the right words to respond.

What had seemed to be a wonderful and uplifting worship service had suddenly cascaded into an abyss of hurt and pain—and Tom didn't have a clue why!

At the root of their **spiritual crisis** was a wall that had risen higher and higher between them from years of prayerlessness and the lack of spiritual intimacy. Tom needed to admit that the wall existed. But the only person who could speak the truth in love about that wall was his wife, Mariann.

Now here's the shocker. Wives often hope that someone else will reach their husbands.

They pray for a preacher, teacher, evangelist, prophet or pastor to say just the right thing and jolt their husbands from spiritual ineptitude. Or they hope a friend will say something that will shake him from his **prayerlessness**. At

times, they will even buy books or leave the Bible open to a highlighted verse, hoping to reveal the **spiritual problems** facing their **marriage**.

Often a wife responds in shocking ways to her husband. She may confront, yell, nag, shame or criticize. She may encourage, plead, beg or push her husband toward prayer. And while he may change for a season, the sad reality is that lasting change doesn't occur, and after a few weeks or months the spiritual wall reappears stronger and more impregnable than ever.

The truth usually is that husbands don't notice the spiritual walls forming between them and their wives because their priorities are misplaced (Matt. 6:33). Too often husbands "seek first" to meet their career goals, financial goals and family goals—all of which are important, but not the highest priority—rather than seeking first the kingdom of God. They spend more time trying to please those who care about them least—bosses, clients or work colleagues—than caring about those who love them most—God, wife, family and the body of Christ.

As a husband works and plays harder, investing himself in everything and everyone else before attending to the Lord and his wife, a spiritual wall begins to form between the two spouses.

At first the bricks in the wall are small obstacles on which the husband stubs his toe and quickly recovers. But later the bricks are cemented together by the mortar of habitual neglect, and a formidable wall is built that requires much repentance to tear down.

Spiritual walls develop between husbands and wives who do not pray and share together spiritually. In counseling with scores of couples, I have discovered that many spouses are willing to allow a wall to remain. Why? There are at least 5 possible reasons:

1. **Denial.** They refuse to admit it's there.
2. **Ignorance.** They do not know they can have a more meaningful relationship through prayer and spiritual discipline.
3. **Pain.** They are unwilling to risk the pain and effort it will take to achieve spiritual gain in their marriage.
4. **Lack of faith.** They simply do not believe they can change.
5. **Fear.** The wife may fear becoming vulnerable again to hurt. She may fear rejection and failure. The husband, on the other hand, may fear exposing his own spiritual poverty or barrenness. He may fear that his wife is simply going to manipulate his feelings or attitudes to "get what she wants."

Repentance: Tearing Down the Walls

A husband and wife are two people who have become one in Christ (Mark 10:7–9). The walls we build that spiritually divide us *must* be destroyed. Who brings them down? How are they destroyed?

Our answer is found in Ephesians 2:14: "For He [Christ] Himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility."

Neither one of you can do it alone, but praying together in Christ will shatter any and all walls between you. You may protest, saying, "We don't want to pray this way," or, "We don't feel as if we are one in Christ." However, in marriage, the spiritual reality is oneness in Christ—so you can pray together in spite of your feelings.

God declares that in marriage you and your husband are one. That truth has not changed if you haven't prayed together for a week, a month or even years. Spiritual walls that have been in place for ages can be shattered in a twinkling of an eye by Christ—your peace, the destroyer of the dividing wall of hostility.

Praying With Power and Wonderful Results

With repentance and confession, the spiritual walls in marriage come tumbling down like the walls of Jericho. Healing is released for the marriage and for spiritual growth. As a couple prays, they encounter the power of God's Spirit working in and through them. Before prayer changes *things*, it changes *people* (2 Cor. 3:18).

I encourage you to pray together with your husband. But if he still refuses, don't quit. Find another wife who will agree with you in prayer for your husband and family. Be persistent. Never give up.

One husband I knew resisted the prayers of his wife for more than 20 years. She tried to pray with him but rarely would he pray with her.

She left books out and gave suggestions about prayer. She tried nagging, cajoling, shaming, affirming, exhorting and manipulating her husband to pray—all to no avail. She asked others to pray for him. She read books on prayer. She went to prayer groups.

One thing she did not do was give up. She persisted.

On Thanksgiving Day in 1989, God's presence powerfully touched her husband as he raked leaves in the backyard. Falling on his face before God with tears streaming down his face, he cried out to God and heard His voice for the first time in decades.

Over the years since that day, their marriage has been healed, their children have been restored, their ministry together has grown, and their prayer life together has matured. Not all is perfect, but they have seen many miracles performed by the hand of God because of praying together.

That husband was me. I thank God daily for my praying wife, who persisted until God broke through.

Precious wife, don't give up—that is, *unless* you are willing to face your husband on judgment day and answer his question: "Why did you give up on me? I needed your persistent prayers even though I was unaware of my need. Why didn't you persevere?"

Believe me, dear woman of God. Eternity may well hang in the balance for your husband. There is just one powerful thing you can do on your husband's behalf—pray! And that will be enough for a breakthrough.

Larry Keefauver, ., *is an internationally recognized pastoral leader, teacher and author. This article is adapted from Lord, I Wish My Husband Would Pray With Me.*