

When You're Married to an Unbeliever: 3 Words of Wisdom

You may have married before you became a Christian and now feel the growing disconnect between your newer relationship with Jesus and your relationship with your spouse. You may have married someone who is not a Christian, thinking things would work out, and they most certainly have not. Or you may have married believing your spouse was a Christian, but they have moved farther away from Christ while you have moved closer. What do you do when your spouse is not a believer?

If you're reading this *before* you get married, take it from those who have walked that road before you: Marrying someone who does not share your faith is a setup for pain and disaster. You're not a special case! Your love for your intended spouse will not overcome the lack of spiritual alignment. Either you will be drawn away from Jesus or your marriage will be disappointing and superficial, or worse.

If you *are* married currently to someone who is not a Christian, don't despair. Regardless of how you got here, Jesus is interested in you moving forward. For any mistakes or poor decisions made in the past, lay them on Jesus. Then invite Him into your present circumstances and walk with Him into the future.

Christians have wrestled with this challenge ever since Jesus was here on earth. Paul's discussion of the question boils down to this: If your unbelieving spouse agrees to stay married, stay married. If they leave, God is releasing you (see 1 Cor. 7:12-16).

Nothing about this is easy, and many circumstances are much more complicated than the short statement above might indicate. Your heart hurts. But here are three important

things to focus on.

1. Discern who God needs you to be to your spouse.

This is likely to be the most important question of all. Seek God's perspective on your own heart, on your spouse's heart and on your marriage. Regardless of the spiritual state of your spouse, your most important purpose is to be the hands and feet of Jesus in your home. That does *not* necessarily mean being nice! It does mean you don't have the privilege of acting out of your feelings.

Imagine Jesus being in your home with you, next to you right now. (And by the way, He is right there with you.) You absolutely must not play Junior Holy Spirit to your spouse. But with Jesus right there, what role is He asking you to play? Does He need you to back off and give Him space to work? Does He need you to set some boundaries? Or does He need you to lovingly and unselfishly serve your spouse in some way? Perhaps some combination of all of these?

You can't know the role Jesus is asking you to play without spending a great deal of intentional time on your knees. Do whatever it takes to get into His presence and listen for His guidance. Ask Him specifically to show you who He needs you to be to your spouse.

2. Stay filled up.

Don't look to your spouse to fill you up. Interacting with a spouse who is not a believer will drain you in many ways. It will take more than the usual intentionality for you to stay filled up. See yourself as often going to the well of Jesus' presence, His Word and the company of other believers.

Learn what it means to get refreshing water in your soul from godly sources. That will look different for different people, and in different seasons of your life and marriage. Imagine yourself on a multi-day cross-country hike; you will need

excellent nourishment to keep your body strong. It's the same with the emotional/spiritual nourishment you will need to continue in any marriage, but especially when your spouse is not a believer.

When your own heart is filled up, you will have much more clarity and resilience with which to discern how to connect with your spouse. You will "look" healthier and more inviting to your spouse, and feel more resilient yourself.

3. Be an advertisement.

You are the most important advertisement your spouse is likely to see for the kingdom of God. Based on who you are, what is your spouse's impression of Jesus? That doesn't mean you can or will be perfect! It does mean you keep growing, and as you do, you become increasingly like Jesus. It means you present an uncompromising irresistible and *often nonverbal* invitation to join you in moving closer to Jesus.

Ask yourself, *What's it like to be married to me?* If I were the only thing my spouse knew about Jesus, would he or she want to know more? Remember, you're not responsible for your spouse's choices. But you *are* responsible for your own behavior and growth.

Look for ways in which you *can* join your spouse in their world. While maintaining your Christian integrity, where are you able to connect with them? Sports? Cars? Children/grandchildren? The arts? Travel? Nature? Intellectual interests? Nurture the friendship bond between you in every way possible; that is likely to be one of the most important ways you maintain an invitation to come closer to you as you move closer to Jesus.

Put yourself in your spouse's shoes. Seek to both understand and be who God needs you to be to your spouse in this season. Stay filled up.

And I pray with you that the Holy Spirit will work in your spouse's heart to draw him or her to Jesus.

Your Turn: *If you're married to an unbeliever, what's your biggest challenge? Which of these steps will you need to focus on next? Leave a comment below.*

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