

Honoring Your Wife's Emotions

A Special Message from Man in the Mirror Co-CEO and President, David Delk

Unedited Transcript

1 Peter 3:7

Good morning, men! It is a joy to be with you again, it's always a privilege and honor to have a chance to do this. I want to give a little bit different version of a shout out today. I want to tell you about Lakeside Bible Church and Pastor Ken Ramey. A number of years ago, Ken and his wife were going through a few difficult times in their marriage and he came across a message that I gave at the Bible Study here over eleven years ago! He started listening to that. He went home and made his wife start listening to it with him. They started talking. He's gotten all kinds of guys at his church to do it, and so he called up and has actually been working for the last couple of years to get me out there to deliver that message to his men. So I went out a few weeks ago for their Man Up Breakfast on a Saturday morning. They had a great group of men there and it was just a lot of fun to be there with them and see what God is doing there north of Houston in their church. Now, there was one thing that they had as a little added benefit of being at the breakfast. Not to make you guys too jealous, but I thought I would show that to you here. Maybe this would serve for some ideas for Pat or some of the table leaders. I think this might work well back there by the donuts or something. Go ahead and start this video:

Plays video of guys measuring their strength on boxing machine.

So maybe one of you guys with a pickup truck could rent that and bring it in Friday? We'll see how that works! It was a great time and just such a joy to be with this church that's committed to reaching and discipling men, it's the foundation of everything that they do. You could tell that was true, not only from the way they had this breakfast on Saturday and the excitement the men showed about being there, but also from the leadership in the church and the way they are ministering to people in the community. So I want to give a shout out today to Lakeside Bible Church and we're grateful for their ministry.

Attendee asks what David's strength was on the boxing machine.

I actually did it at the end, and this was pretty funny because we all think we're twenty five. I've been having a little bit of shoulder issues, throwing baseballs with my son and stuff, and I finally got back to where I can throw the ball with my son. He's going off to college soon, and I'm like thank you Lord, I can throw a baseball! So anyway, I'm sitting there and say you know I want to do this. So I stepped up and I actually scored pretty well. I think it was probably like 770 or something like that, but when I was walking away from punching, my knuckles hurt, my wrist hurt, my shoulder hurt, and I thought you know forty eight is not twenty five! I was crazy! I was like man I don't even know if I could do it again! But anyway, it was fun!

Today we do want to talk about this idea of honoring our wife's emotions. Let's start by reading the scripture 1 Peter 3:7:

⁷ Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.

May God add understanding to the reading of his holy word.

I realize that there are a lot of people here who aren't married. A lot of people will be watching the video of this who aren't married, and the reality is we are going to be dealing with all kinds of situations where we encounter strong emotions. We're going to have people who are in our extended family, you may have children or grandchildren, you may have toddlers or teenagers, you may have customer service situations, you may have neighbors, or you may be involved in a committee at church. A lot of times we are going to encounter people who are experiencing strong emotions and we have to know how we are going to respond to that. So today we're going to focus primarily on the marriage relationship, but I believe these principles apply in many many other contexts.

We're going to start with just a bit of an illustration. You could imagine Scott and Jennifer. They have begun a relationship, they have begun dating, and they spend some time together. All of a sudden, Scott's work gets kind of busy and Jennifer has got a lot of things going on in her job and with her family in other states, and so they're not spending as much time together. Scott's got a big project and so he doesn't respond to a text until the next day. Then they're out on a date and Jennifer is feeling very distant from him and she's wondering why he didn't answer her text. They're driving to the restaurant in complete silence, and finally Scott says are you okay? Now what do you think Jennifer's reaction to that question is? Well, if it's like my wife, her reaction is what do you mean am I okay? You can't tell that I'm not okay? You're supposed to know that I'm not okay. I'm not talking to you, I'm looking out the window, and you didn't answer my text. Of course I'm not okay! So there's this sense in which we are supposed to be in touch with and experiencing the emotions of our spouse. We're supposed to know what's happening with them, we're supposed to pursue them, and of course we can't always do this perfectly. Sometimes we can't even get close! But we are supposed to be engaged with them.

I remember a few years ago now, Ruthie and I had a disagreement. I setup a meeting at church for Sunday morning. It turned out that it worked out pretty well for the guys that I was meeting with that we would gather at about 7:00 am on Sunday morning and we'd be done at about 8:15 am and we could head home, collect our families, finish getting the kids ready, get in the care and head back to church. It seemed like no harm no foul to me. I had been out of town doing a retreat or something. I got in Saturday night and I was telling her I needed to get up and go to this meeting in the morning. She's like why did you schedule a meeting for Sunday morning? That should have been a clue to me that it wasn't about the meeting. I told her why I scheduled it and pretty soon we were into this whole emotional discussion that really wasn't about the meeting. I felt like she just wanted to get her way and I'm sitting there thinking it doesn't matter to you, you're going to be asleep! What difference does it matter to you if I'm in a meeting or not? We couldn't seem to get on the same page, we couldn't seem to connect. She thought I didn't care how she felt, and I thought she was being irrational.

I know another couple, John and Barbara, and Barbara was talking about some struggles they were going through in their marriage. She said I learned early on that if I cry, that John would just leave. So I understand that if I want to have a discussion with him, if I want to have a relationship with him, if I want him to hear me, I cannot cry and I cannot show my emotions because if I do that he just runs away. That's not fair! How do you have a relationship with those kinds of parameters? So when you encounter someone who is experiencing strong emotions, the first thing that I want to mention to you is that it's not about you. It's not about you. All of us are a little bit confused about what to do with this when somebody is coming at us with these strong emotions, whether it's anger, sadness, shame or guilt. Whatever it is, it can be overwhelming and we sort of feel like John, what in the world do I do? The first thing we need to realize is that I am not the person in this situation that needs to be my primary focus. A

lot of us when we feel uncomfortable about this, what we do is we want it to go away. If our spouse is really angry, for example. I know when my wife gets mad at the kids, I get mad because I don't want my wife to be mad. I want that anger to go away, I don't like dealing with an angry wife! So I want it to go away and therefore I get mad at the kids, too! At get mad at the situation, too! In reality, it's selfish. I don't want to have to deal with an angry wife. When you think about it, we feel like a failure, we feel powerless, we try to make it go away and get better, whatever I need to say, whatever I need to do. I hear this from guys, I'll just say I'm sorry, I'll just say anything in order to make this go away. Whatever you need to hear, I'll do it! Because we hate the way that it makes us feel to deal with our wife when she's feeling these very very strong emotions.

Let me give you another example. Who in here can swing a tennis racket? Come on up here Scott. I want you take that, and pop the ball over to me real lightly, nothing extravagant.

Scott hits the ball to David. David slams the ball to the floor with his own racket.

Awe yeah! Woo! I won! Now how much fun was that for you? Was that a lot of fun? No it wasn't. Now here's what I want you to do, pop it up in the air again to me very lightly.

David and Scott hit the ball back and forth.

Now that's a little better now, isn't it? Look at that, that's more fun, it's more like what tennis is supposed to be. The reality is that when we just try to make our wife's emotions just go away, it's the equivalent of just slamming that tennis ball down and throwing our arms up in the air and saying I won. That's how our wife feels. She doesn't feel valued, she doesn't feel cherished, she feels like that what we're trying to do is to make her go away and change so that we can be okay. That it's really about us and not about her. James 1:19 says we should be quick to hear, and slow to speak. You see, one of the problems that we have to struggle through is our own feeling of inadequacy. After all, who is supposed to make sure my wife is happy? It's a myth that this is true, but in our minds who is supposed to make sure my wife is happy? Me right? That's my job, I'm her husband. If she is sad, whose fault is it? It must be my fault. If she's angry, it must be my fault. Neither one of those is true, but that's how we feel about it. Because we take the ownership for that, then we feel like a failure if she's angry or sad, so we want to undo that as quickly as we can. Ironically, that's the exact wrong approach because what we're really trying to do is we're trying to take care of ourselves instead of truly caring for her.

What is we need to do? We need to empathize and not fix. Empathize and not fix. When our wife is upset, when anybody is upset, your teenagers, your grandchildren, or a customer service person. If you're traveling and seeing what the customer service people deal with when traveling, a kind word means a lot. You say that to one of those folks when they've had twenty seven people in line and they're beating their fists on the counter and stuff. Boy, it must be a tough day today. It is amazing the change that comes over a person's face with just a phrase like that. Empathy. Empathy goes a long way. So what our wife wants is she wants us to empathize with her. A woman's greatest need is for intimacy and emotional connection, that oneness. When we try to fix her, she does not feel at one with us. Instead, we need to empathize, to be willing to put our self in the other's place and feel what they feel. That's empathy.

One of the issues we deal with as men is that I feel like if I empathize with somebody, then I'm agreeing with them. In other words, I'm saying that if I empathize with you, I'm saying that it's appropriate for you to feel this way. For example, say I'm meeting with a guy for coffee. He says man my boss is crazy! I

got to work twice this week and he is reaming me out, telling me I have to be there on time, and he's making me so mad! I cannot believe this guy! What are you going to do if you're having coffee with someone like that? You're not going to say I understand, that must be really hard for you, I can see why you're so angry. No! You're going to say idiot! That's your boss! He's telling you to get to work on time, so get to work on time! That's what we want to do as men, because if we say I understand how you feel, I am somehow agreeing with him that it's okay to be late to work, which of course it isn't. His boss told him to be on time! Well, women do not experience this in the same way, in general. My wife says that's the craziest thing I ever heard! Just because I empathize with somebody, just because I put myself in their shoes and experience what they're experiencing, that doesn't mean I agree with them! That doesn't mean that their world view or interpretation is right, it just means I care about them. I sit with women all the time that I listen to or cry with, and talk to. I let them share with me and tell them gosh it sounds like you're going through a really terrible time, and then the next week they'll come back and say I learned this, talked to my husband about that. He didn't mean this and so on. Boy you must think I'm an idiot! Ruthie will say well that wasn't exactly your best moment, but I'm glad we got through it.

Empathy does not necessarily mean that you understand or agree. And also to empathize doesn't mean that you don't ever come back and encourage or challenge or those kinds of things. It's not like you have to just let your wife have this perspective that you think hey this is not right. This is something based on an untruth, this is based on something that is not the correct view. This person did not mean this, I know they did not mean to have this kind of impact. Guess what? In the midst of the emotion is not the time to go through all that. There have been MRI studies that show that when we're experiencing strong emotions, it's lighting up all these other areas of our brain besides the areas of rational thought. Why does a baseball player come out of a game after striking out, walk over to a wall and punch it with his fist into a cement wall? He's not exactly processing rational thoughts at that point. Our fists were not made to hit cement walls, especially when you get paid millions of dollars for using your hands. Why would they do this? Because they're not thinking rationally. The midst of the emotions is not the time to go through well if you really think about this, and God's in control, everything's going to work out okay, all these wonderful truths that you think you want to apply to the situation, it's not the time. Doesn't mean you can't come back later, but what our wife wants is empathy.

Who does your wife turn to when she's dealing with strong emotions? I don't know about you, but my wife has a number of friends that it seems like she ends up on the phone with or she gets together with. I understand some of that is natural, but I think some of that is an indictment on me. If I was a better listener, if I was more willing to sit with her during those times, if I was better able to be there for her then she probably would need to call others less and relate to them.

One of the problems I have is that it's hard for me to say I'm sorry if I don't think I've done anything wrong. Does anybody else feel that way? You have this situation like this meeting on this Sunday morning. I didn't feel like I did anything wrong, I still think it's a good time to meet. So how do you say I'm sorry, and for years I didn't know what to do with that. She'd be like you can't even tell me you're sorry, and I'd be like I'm not! If I say I'm sorry I want it to be real, not just I'm sorry but not really and I'm lying to my wife, that doesn't make any sense! So what am I sorry for? What can I do differently? That's what I want to think through. So while I'm thinking about that, she's just getting madder and madder! Why doesn't he just say I'm sorry? So here's the magic words. I should have made you pay extra for this today. Eight words that could change your marriage. You ready? Here it is, after twenty five years: I'm sorry that what I did hurt you? Why did that take me twenty five years to figure out? I can say that! I'm not saying you're interpreting it right, I'm not saying it should have hurt you, I'm just saying that what I did hurt you. We live in a fallen world, people misunderstand things, I could have given off the wrong

tone of voice. All kinds of things could have happened here, and I'm sorry that I did something that hurt you. Twenty five years for that! It shouldn't have taken that long, or it doesn't seem like.

That's showing empathy, that's showing we care about what she's feeling. The problem is when she feels shamed because she's experiencing emotions, when she feels judged for what she's feeling, she feels like we're just trying to fix her, then that's going to shut her down, and that's going to keep us from ever really having that kind of connection. So we need to show her that we understand, we need to be able to talk about what we're thinking and feeling in these situations, even if it's confusing. You know what honey, I don't really know what to do with this. I've got to tell you I'm very uncomfortable right now because I wish I could do something but I can't, so I just want you to know I'm willing to listen. I'm willing to sit here, but it's hard. That would be something our wife would love to hear from us because it's authentic and it's real. The reality is that the reason we pursue this is because of the paradox of the Gospel, that when we give our lives away, we find them again. When you encounter an angry customer service person, when you have anger from a teenager, when your neighbor is irrationally upset about something, how are you going to handle that? Are you going to become defensive? Are you going to look out for yourself? Or are you going to remember that loving others is where we find real life through the example of Christ. In Ephesians 5:28, Paul gives us this paradox applied to marriage. He says: In the same way, husbands should love their wives as their own body. He who loves his wife, loves himself. So it may feel easier to kind of walk away or deflect strong emotions, or get out of the situation, try to fix your wife, or try to make it go away. That may feel easier, but if you really want to love yourself, then you'll love your wife because he who loves his wife, loves himself. We truly have become one flesh, and that's the paradox of the Gospel, that when we give our lives away to our spouse, we find our lives again. Not only that, but the beauty of it is (if you read this passage in Ephesian) that our love and our willingness to sacrificially love our wife has a purifying role in her life, because Christ loved the church that way. It says here that Christ loved the church (verse 25) and gave himself up for her that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word so that he might present the church to himself in splendor without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. So the ministry that Christ has, his sacrificial love for the church purifies the church, and obviously we don't have the same role with our spouse, but there is a sense in which that we have a ministry with our spouse like that, that our sacrificial love is part of what God uses to help our spouse become everything that God wants her to be. The reality is your wife's heart is a treasure and God has entrusted it to you. The same thing with anyone else who's experiencing these emotions. That customer service person, that neighbor, or that coworker, that person at church on that committee who has gotten so frustrated that they don't know what to do. That grandson or granddaughter, that teenager in your home, their heart has been entrusted to you in that moment. God has said you are somebody I can trust with a person who is going through something like this. Think about that! God has brought that encounter about, and in the midst of that person's pain, anger, sadness, or grief, God has placed that person in your life because he believes that you can sacrificially love them, that you can say it's not about me, it's about them, and I want to love them well. I want to sit with them, I want to empathize with them, I want to be with them, to show them what it's like to experience real love, even in the middle of this.

The reality is some of you may need to take a few minutes after this morning, and you may need to think through some ways you need to apologize to your wife. Maybe you haven't been there for her, maybe you've judged her, maybe you've shamed her, maybe you taught her you better not get emotional with me because I don't deal well with that and I want you to perform up to my standards so that I can love you. When you don't perform the way I want you to, then too bad! That's what we're saying, that's the message that's coming across loud and clear. Some of you may need to think about a

relationship with a child or grandchild today, and you may need to spend some time this weekend apologizing and connecting with them in a new way. Ultimately, the way that we respond to someone like this reveals what's going on in our hearts, and this is the key to it. Matthew 15:17, Jesus says it's out of the heart that comes anger, sexual immorality, lust, greed and all these things. It's out of the overflow of the heart that these behaviors come. When someone demonstrates strong emotions and confronts us and we feel that coming at us like a tidal wave, what comes next is a demonstration of what's inside of us.

I remember recently my wife and I were having an argument and we started down this path. We're not screamers or yellers or that kind of stuff. Sometimes I wish we were, but anyway we started down this path and she said some things. I thought I would never say that to her! I basically shut down in the midst of this discussion. Why? Because I'm better than her and I would never talk to her that way. So because I'm so much better than her, and think about this, I'm minimizing my own sin in this whole context, judging myself against her and saying I'm better than her, therefore I don't have to deal with this. What's going on there? I'm trying to justify myself. I'm trying to stand on my own two feet. I'm not as bad as she is. Instead of being willing to trust Jesus, and say it's not about whether I'm good or bad, it's not about whether she's good or bad, it's about Christ becoming a reality in our relationship, me showing the love and forgiveness of Christ to her, her showing the love and forgiveness and grace of Christ to me, and both of us trusting in Christ that this will work out. I don't have to defend myself, she doesn't have to defend herself, but we get off track when we start looking to something else to justify ourselves. I wanted to be okay on my own, I wasn't truly willing to trust Christ. So when we think about what is it that's going on in my heart, what am I worshipping? What am I looking to for hope, happiness, and significance? Am I willing to just sit and endure being uncomfortable with my spouse? Am I willing to just let her vent, to let her be angry or let her be sad? Because I'm going to be okay, Jesus has my back and I can trust him, even when I feel uncomfortable.

Romans 12:15 says rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. The only way we can do that is when we're focused on the other person and not ourselves. That only comes through the grace and power of Jesus Christ working in our lives. You see the problem is we use that opening illustration with the tennis ball, and it was kind of cute and whatever, but the problem is when we deal with our spouse in a dismissive way, when we try to fix them, when we try to make their emotions stop because we don't like it; to us it may just seem like a little discussion or interaction like slamming that tennis ball down. The truth is that really what we're doing is we're slamming down her heart. God has entrusted your spouse's heart to you. It's a precious gift, and all these interactions he's given this to you so that you can demonstrate the love and the grace of Jesus Christ.

So back to 1 Peter 3:8, talking about the relationship we have with everybody, it says: all of you have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart and a humble mind. That's my prayer for us as men as we deal with our spouses' emotions, as we deal with others that God has placed in our life, that we would be men that would have sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart and a humble mind. Let's pray!

Closing Prayer

Father, we thank you so much for your word today and we thank you for how practical it is that we deal with something as perplexing as emotions. I know that many of us as men have a hard time just dealing with people that are angry, sad or frustrated. We don't know what to do with that, we don't know how to respond, it feels paralyzing sometimes. It makes us feel angry, it makes us sad and we don't like that,

especially when it's our wife, this person that we want so desperately to be happy, to be joyful, to be peaceful, and then when we see them hurting we don't know what to do. So Lord, I pray that you would teach us to cast ourselves back on you and that we would be willing to sit with them, to empathize with them, to not try to fix them, but to demonstrate the love of Jesus Christ. Lord, I pray that you would help us to examine what's going on in our own hearts, that we would be men who worship you and you alone. That we would not try to defend ourselves, that we would not try to justify ourselves, that we would not try to win, to avoid the situation, but that we would have the strength that comes from the foundation of our hope in you. That you have forgiven us in Jesus Christ, that you have loved us in Jesus Christ, and that we are absolutely secure. I pray that out of that you would help us to give our lives away today to all kinds of people that you would place in our lives, but especially to our wives. For your glory we pray, in Jesus' name, amen!