

WHAT TO SAY  
WHEN

*She Thinks  
Her Husband  
Isn't a Good  
Spiritual Leader*

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Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

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*Your small group from church* decided to have a women's night, so all your friends are grabbing dinner at the local Mexican joint. By the time the chips and salsa arrive, everyone has caught up on life. Then one of the women in the group changes the subject. "Hey, can I ask you all something? I'm really frustrated with my husband. He doesn't lead our family. I mean, sure, he works hard, helps around the house, and spends time with the kids. But he's just not a good spiritual leader. What should I do?"

Another friend joins in. "Oh my goodness, I feel the same way! It's like my husband isn't interested in family devotions, praying together, or even talking to me about Jesus. I'm constantly the one bringing up anything spiritual. Isn't it his job to make sure the kids and I grow spiritually?" Women around the table are nodding in agreement, understanding on each of their faces. You want to help, but you don't want to make it sound like you think your husband is perfect, nor do you feel confident about how to engage with your friends. You want to encourage them, but this is a challenging topic. Suddenly your mind is

spinning: *What does the term spiritual leader even mean? What's a spiritual leader supposed to do? And who—or what—determines whether he's a good or bad one?*

## *The Heart of the Struggle*

Most Christian women want a husband who loves Jesus and desires to become more like him. They hope their husbands read the Bible, pray, take part in church, and care about Christian service. Most women also want a husband who doesn't just engage in these spiritual disciplines; they long for a husband who will guide them—and their children—toward Christlikeness. They want their husbands to initiate plans for spiritual growth and follow through with them in their homes. All of these are God-given and God-honoring desires, and God calls husbands to lead their families in these very ways.

Unfortunately, in every marriage, our God-honoring desires come face-to-face with sin—both the sin of our spouses and our own inability to live a perfectly righteous life. Husbands do not always fulfill their God-given callings, or they stumble in their attempts. Wives are not always delighted by the leadership they thought they wanted from their husbands. To complicate matters further, expectations of what spiritual leadership should look like in marriage can be misguided or skewed for both husband and wife.

## **Why She Says, “My Husband Isn’t a Good Spiritual Leader”**

We will look at a definition of spiritual leadership in the next section, but for now let’s consider some specific reasons a woman might express dissatisfaction with her husband’s spiritual leadership. Women may find themselves in one (or more) of the following categories.

*Her husband is truly not a good spiritual leader.* No Christian husband is perfect, but it is possible for a Christian husband to be spiritually lazy, irresponsible, or apathetic. Perhaps he does not cultivate a relationship with God through Scripture reading and prayer, maybe he’s disconnected from the local church, or maybe he never talks about the gospel with his wife, children, or friends. Not only are these signs of spiritual indifference, but his lack of engagement with God, the people of God, and the Word of God—regular means of growth in Christ—will hinder his ability to help his wife and children grow. This does not mean their growth is impossible, but it will inhibit his family from experiencing the type of love and direction a Christian husband is called to provide.\*

A wife may respond to her husband’s spiritual irresponsibility in a variety of ways: She may feel spiritually

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\* See pages 22–24 for further discussion of a husband’s role as described in Ephesians 5:22–23.

discouraged, she may feel alone in her attempts to raise their children with an understanding of the gospel, or she may even adopt her husband's spiritual apathy and become distant from the Lord. Some wives may respond with frustration, anger, or bitterness, even becoming jaded and cynical about the future. Their marriages may not be destructive, but they will be difficult.

*She has internalized extrabiblical teaching about spiritual leadership.* Many assumptions about spiritual leadership are an accumulation of teachings women have heard over the years. They cobble together ideas, principles, and practices from sermons, books, articles, and conversations with other married couples. Christian young women are often taught to make a list of qualities or traits they hope for in a future husband. If, like mine, that list was a combination of all the godly characteristics and behaviors ever seen in Christian men, then it was extensive and impossible for any one man to live up to! By idolizing an ideal Christian husband, wives often add to what Scripture clearly instructs husbands to be and do, creating extrabiblical standards. Women may have heard, or assumed, versions of the following:

- A good Christian husband consistently leads his family in Bible reading.
- A good spiritual leader initiates prayer with his wife every day.

- If you want a strong marriage, you need to marry a man who loves to study theology.
- The husband carries sole responsibility for the spiritual growth of his wife and children.
- Good spiritual leaders teach God's Word to others.
- Good spiritual leaders are always eager to be in church and readily volunteer for ministry opportunities.

Obviously, these are not bad qualities and behaviors! But sometimes women place too much emphasis on outward demonstrations in a way that can lead them to believe that a husband who is a “good spiritual leader” looks and sounds a certain way. It's not wrong to want a husband to demonstrate godliness, but when a wife creates specific, extrabiblical rules for her husband to follow, she's setting him up for failure. Even the godliest Christian men can become forgetful, grow discouraged, and wrestle with inconsistency in their spiritual disciplines.

If a wife is looking for her husband to follow a certain set of practices, she will likely be disappointed or confused when he does not follow them perfectly. Bitterness and resentment can set in, causing her to lose sight of God's grace for her *and* her husband. Rather than praying for her husband's continued growth, she may nag or belittle him for his failure to live up to her standards, pressure him to make commitments in the church, or invalidate the ways he may lead behind the scenes.

*She's comparing her husband to other Christian husbands.* Women are prone to making comparisons about the state of our homes, fashion choices, children's success, personality differences, and more. It's no surprise that a woman would also compare her husband to other Christian husbands she knows. Just as in the garden Eve wanted the forbidden fruit that she *saw* was pleasing to the eyes, we also *see* the things and people around us and desire them for ourselves, revealing our dissatisfaction with what God *has* provided for us. God determines our portion and gives what we need (Ps. 16:5–6). When we covet another person's husband, we are casting judgment against God himself, failing to believe he is good, holy, loving, and kind. No two husbands will lead their families exactly the same way, and it's good for us to recognize—and be grateful for—the varied ways God calls husbands to uniquely lead their families.

A wife may make observations about men in church as she sees them open their Bibles, sing, raise their hands, share in small group, or even get up front to teach. She may watch other men interact with their wives and children in a variety of settings, seeing their gentleness, hearing them correct a child with prayer and a Bible verse, or witnessing the tender looks they give their wives—all while she compares and contrasts their behaviors with her husband's. She may be quick to make assumptions about a man's spiritual life based on these observations.



When a friend talks about the way her husband leads family devotions, prays with and for her, or speaks with her about the Lord, a wife can be tempted to compare her own husband's spirituality to her friend's, and she might find her own husband's spiritual leadership lacking—perhaps because it truly is deficient in some way, or simply because it looks different from the leadership of this other woman's husband. In moments like these, a woman might think, *Why can't my husband be like him? What would it be like to have him as a husband? I want a husband like hers.* Rather than pursuing an encouraging conversation with her husband about areas where they need to grow in their marriage, she might inwardly berate her husband, gossip about him to her friends, or, even worse, fantasize about a marriage with another man. Left unattended, these sinful desires will damage her relationship with her husband.

*She equates spiritual leadership in the church with spiritual leadership in marriage.* Scripture instructs husbands to exemplify Christlike qualities in marriage, but it does not hold all husbands to the standards required for church officers. Confusion sets in when a woman conflates the qualities and qualifications for elder or deacon with that of a Christian husband. But the New Testament's instructions for male leadership in the church do not apply to every Christian man. The qualifications for overseer (elder) and deacon in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 are specific to men who