

## WHAT IF I MARRIED AN UNBELIEVER?

<https://fiercemarriage.com/what-if-i-married-an-unbeliever>

[00:00:00]

**Selena:** I think we have a tendency to want to always change our spouse. As much as we love them, there's always parts of them that we would like to change about them, right? But-

**Ryan:** No. Dead wrong. *[Selena laughs]*

**Selena:** Good answer. Good answer. Good answer. So, we get faced with this question a lot. What if my spouse is an unbeliever? How can I make them a believer? How can I change them? How can I save them? How can I...? Wish I would stop you, friend, right there because- *[chuckles]*

**Ryan:** Well, how can I cope? How can I cope with this reality that I have this worldview that is completely...

**Selena:** It's a better question.

**Ryan:** ...different from their worldview. And also I care about them. And how do I...Uh. It's so hard because you want to make it happen.

**Selena:** "God, tell me what I can do." *[chuckles]*

**Ryan:** So we're talking about that today. We'll see you on the other side.

[00:00:49] <music>

**Ryan:** I guess my heart really goes out to these wives, to these husbands who write in, they call in or they leave a comment somewhere, and they'll just say, "What am I supposed to do? I love Jesus. I love my spouse, they don't love Jesus. And it's ripping us apart because at the very soul depths of us, we disagree on maybe who God is, that God even exists, who Christ is, if Christ ever did what He said He did, what the Bible says He did." And it will rip them apart. It feels as if it's ripping them apart.

Now, I'm always also a little bit amazed at how these couples are still together, and in some cases, still thriving. And I think that says a lot about the grace of God and the effectiveness of a spouse who adheres to the Word of God and who loves the way Christ loved, the effectiveness of that heart orientation, and those efforts in bringing about godly fruit in a marriage. So we have some very tangible things to talk through to that end.

What is the spouse to do? If that's you, if you have a friend who's married to an unbeliever, we're gonna hopefully give you some helpful tips... I don't know. "Tips" is not the right word. Some helpful insights. That's a little bit better. *[both chuckles]*

First, if you're new to the channel, my name is Ryan. This is my lovely wife Selena. We are the Fredericks. We're the founders of Fierce Marriage, Fierce Parenting. We do this work to point you to the gospel and to commission you as an individual, but also as a married couple into the gospel, into the work that Jesus is doing around the world. We love being able to do this.

And the way that we're able to do this primarily is (a) we have books that we have published and we sell. Please, if you're interested in those, check those out. *[Selena chuckles]* And also our lovely patrons. So if you are a patron and you're watching this, listening to this, thank you. You bless us in ways that we can't articulate in many ways. I will say that God has used you to provide stability in what might not be a stable way to make a living.

So if you want to be part of that patron community, please, already, thank you. Pray about that and go to [fiercemarriage.com/partner](https://fiercemarriage.com/partner). You'll find all kinds of information there.

So yeah, let's dive into this conversation. I think this is one of those talks we need to revisit periodically just to kind of bring it back to the forefront of our hearts in terms of the ministry.

**Selena:** Right. And it's not really a part of our story. We both grew up in Christian homes. You probably found that in other episodes, our family of origin stories, we both love the Lord, we both believe that God brought us together for His purpose and for His glory. I can probably say that about most marriages that we know.

So talking about a topic that's a bit unfamiliar is not... we're not scared to talk about it because Scripture is very clear about it. And so we can definitely help present what Scripture says and also empathize with the struggle and pray for people and help equip them to still...

I mean, just because you have an unbelieving spouse and that is your circumstance, you know, for us, we have different struggles. The common thread, though, is that we all need God, we all need Christ, we all need the gospel.

**Ryan:** That's good.

**Selena:** So whatever the struggle is, Christ is enough. And so we're going to talk about that today. The Bible even has a specific passage about a husband married to an unbeliever or a spouse married to an unbeliever.

It's in 1 Corinthians 7:12-14. It says, "To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy." *[Ryan laughs]* My children are unclean all the time. *[both laughs]*

**Ryan:** I'm realizing how loaded this passage is [00:05:00] in other areas of theology and ecclesiology, and how different denominations view covenantal theology. *[chuckles]* We won't get into that because I've not really studied it at length. So that's going to be kind of our cornerstone scripture for this.

There are two premises that I want to make sure that we hit. There's a sad premise. In our humanity I think it's sad that there's no pixel, there's no guarantee that what you do will bring about the results you want. That is not a scope that God has given us agency over. We cannot change the hearts of our spouse. No matter how hard we try, we cannot change them ourselves. That's the sad premise.

Here's the amazing premise is that God is powerful, God is loving, and God happens to be in the heart-changing business. And that is what He does. He transforms hearts. He takes hearts of stone and turns them into hearts of flesh. I'm a testimony to that. Selena is a testimony to that. Our hearts were once hard and seared, our consciences were seared, and we had suppressed the truth and unrighteousness and God turned on the light in our hearts and in our minds. And that light is the Word Himself, Jesus Christ.

So those are our two premises. As we move forward, it's not up to you to change your spouse's heart. You do have things that are up to you. Making them believe in God is not the thing that's up to you. God is playing that role.

So what are we to do now? And that's what we're talking about here today. I think the first thing a spouse should do if they're married to a nonbeliever is honor God. That's a good sentence? *[laughs]*

**Selena:** I think so.

**Ryan:** Okay.

**Selena:** I think so.

**Ryan:** They honor God.

**Selena:** How do they do that?

**Ryan:** Obey the Lord. Obey the Lord and do the things that you see laid out in Scripture that you would do even if your spouse was a Christian. Do those things. Still pray to the Lord. Worship Him alone. Cherish the Word of God. Seek Christ in the pages of Scripture, participate in Christian community.

In Hebrews... I forget what passage it is. I don't have the passage here, but it's in Hebrews. It says, "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering." So that's honoring God. Hold fast to the confession of your hope without wavering.

It goes on. "For He who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another in love and good works." That has to do with Christian community. "Not neglecting to meet together," again, in Christian community, "as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day, capital D Day drawing near. And that day would be the day of Christ's return." So in other words, walk as a disciple of Christ is what it means to honor God.

**Selena:** Right. And I think the tendency, when you find yourself struggling, you're in those dark moments of "Man, I really wish we were, you know, yoked together equally, that he was a believer," the tendency might be to look for a way out. To say, "Well, this feels hard. I don't really like this. What does the Bible actually say about this?"

Actually, we do have another verse in 1 Corinthians 7. It's a great chapter, you should check it out. But verse 17 talks about "Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches."

So looking for a way out is not God's option for you. Honoring Him is closing off that door mentally, it's not entertaining those thoughts, it is saying, "Okay, we've made this covenant with one another. If they're not a believer, I am a believer, and I believe that God has put me here for a reason and to love my spouse, and to honor them and to walk as a disciple of Christ."

What's the mark of a believer, like the distinctives of believers, right? One of them is how you love one another. So if people see you loving the spouse who is not a believer, I mean, that's going to speak volumes to anyone, and it probably, hopefully, would speak volumes to your spouse as well.

**Ryan:** So that's the next point, then. So honor God is the first to do item, okay? It's a big one. We spent our whole lives doing that. And then within that framework, now deal biblically with an unbelieving spouse. Again, that has to do with honoring your husband or wife, right?

So your husband or wife may not look at scripture as authoritative, but you do. And so wife, read the passages that talk about how wives are to honor their husbands, husband read the passage about how husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church and live those out. Live those out biblically.

And here's another thing. Don't be surprised when your spouse who has an unregenerate heart sins against you. Don't be surprised. Now granted I'm not saying don't be hurt by that. That still hurts if someone sins against you. If they're, you know, communicating in a way that's unhealthy and hurtful [00:10:00] or if they've done things that are extramarital, that is obviously very hurtful. And there's consequences to that.

But I guess the response there should be, "I'm hurt, but also, Lord, please change their heart, bring them to you." Because until they have that new birth, that new life, that only the Holy Spirit can create in someone's heart, they will continually be walking in their flesh and not by the Spirit.

**Selena:** Right. It's also important for you as the believer to continue to find ways to be content in the Lord. And that sounds like a big task, right? But how can I, as the believing spouse, find contentment, delight, joy in the Lord and therefore bring Him glory even in the most challenging situations? I mean, this is a very challenging situation. But again, we all have circumstances and things that we're dealing with.

So how, as a believer in this specific situation, can I find ways to bring glory to the Lord? By loving my spouse who doesn't know the Lord or doesn't care or doesn't want to know the Lord.

**Ryan:** Yeah. So again, honor Lord, deal biblically with your spouse. That has to do with how, again, you're standing on the firm foundation of contentment you have because of Christ, the life you have because of Christ. And because of that you honor one another.

And then we're praying. Pray for your spouse to turn. That's how you love them well. I'm trying to think. Still treat them with respect. Because sometimes, you know, you can kind of Bible thump your own spouse.

We had a story of a friend of ours, Kenny and Linda. They were mentors of ours for many years and friends. Linda used to tell the story of how she was the believer. They lived in... I don't know what you'd call it. Like the boondocks.

**Selena:** Like country town.

**Ryan:** Country town.

**Selena:** A little country town.

**Ryan:** It's Yelm, Washington. Look it up. If you're from Washington you know where it is probably. But they were kind of a notorious family, Kenny and his brothers and his father for being just rough. Like being complete rednecks, if that's the right term. Yeah. Well, and just getting firefights and all sort of thing.

Anyway, Linda would be at church on a Sunday, you know, like all prim and proper. Like, I'm just so holy, I'm in church. And then she would typically just kind of nag Kenny about going to church until one day she just felt Lord to say, "You know what? Just love him right where he's at." And she tells the story much better. But just love him right where he's at.

And she was in church, she kind of got this epiphany. She goes home and Kenny is sitting on the couch, he's got a beer, and he's watching a football game. And he's used to her coming home just kind of hitting him over the head with the Bible. Like, "You shouldn't be in church. What are you doing?"

Instead, she goes in, she sets her Bible down, she goes over to the fridge, cracks open the beer, sits down and says, "What's the score?" And Kenny said, Kenny said, "That's the moment God started softening my heart."

**Selena:** And that was the last Sunday he didn't go to church. *[chuckles]*

**Ryan:** Yeah. And I'll tell you. They have raised two incredible, godly children who have now married. And now they're raising their children up in the Lord. They are pastors. Kenny's been following the Lord faithfully. He is one of the most faith-filled guys we know. And it started with a wife grabbing a beer, sitting on the couch, saying, "What's the score?" What was she doing? She was loving him right where he was.

**Selena:** Right. Right.

**Ryan:** Of course, he was responding to the prompting of the Lord. Which again, what's the Lord's job? To change hearts.

**Selena:** Right. We see this in 1 Peter 3:1. Not the grabbing of the beer. *[Ryan laughs]* "But likewise, wives be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be one without a word by the conduct of their wives."

Again, we have a caveat for this. If your spouse is asking you to disobey God, say, they forbid you to go to church, well, you got to gently communicate that to them: you are still going to go to church and you love the Lord and you're called in His word to continue gathering, to continue meeting. So we would promote, I think, obedience first to God, and then a gentle communication of that to your spouse as well.

**Ryan:** Absolutely. That's good. It does complicate things-

**Selena:** In practice it's complicated I think.

**Ryan:** Well, I mean, we're kind of taking the stance that you just have an unbelieving spouse, and they don't believe in anything. But what if you have a spouse who is-

**Selena:** Defiantly against.

**Ryan:** Or is a Muslim, right? Or if you have a spouse who, you know, is into New Age things, or is in the Eastern religion, or is a Mormon, or just doesn't believe the same things? That's going to be a different dynamic for sure. So if you have a husband who's a Muslim and a wife who's a Christian, there's some real danger there. Not to open that can of worms, but I mean, there could be some real conflicts of interest, I think, depending on the situation.

But it's going to be a challenge. And the call is still the same. That's the thing is you need to love the Lord, honor Him as God and obey His commands with wisdom. Part of that, I think is making sure that you're not doing this in isolation. That you're still plugged into Christian community like we talked about earlier. [00:15:00]

So a bit of a rabbit trail there. But the point is, is we don't mean to paint with too broad of a brush here, but rather just to say, hold fast to God.

**Selena:** To the truth of the scripture.

**Ryan:** Hold fast to truth. So we talked about honor. So let's back up then. So speaking well as part of honoring, how does a wife most honor her husband regardless of what he believes or his profession faith? You tell me as a wife. How can a wife in that situation honor her husband?

**Selena:** I mean, one of the first things we talked about is just speaking well of him or her. Well, as a wife, speaking well of him, my husband, when they are not around or when you're with others. Having unity and showing that you do care. Again, a distinctive for the Christian life is how we love one another.

I think it says in... where's it? Sorry, it's John 13:34-35. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

**Ryan:** Yeah. At one point... I forget which Scripture it is. It says, "Who will credit it to a man for loving his own friend, but to someone who would love his own enemy?" That's something really. That's not what Scripture said but that's the summary. That's the Ryan summary. That's saying something.

**Selena:** Right. Right.

**Ryan:** So all the more reason now to honor. I'm gonna honor you even harder. *[laughs]*

**Selena:** Even harder. *[chuckles]* Not even more.

**Ryan:** Honor you even more. That's good.

**Selena:** I think one way to encourage unity in the marriage, too, is a constant invitation and reminding your spouse they are always invited. And having those predictable rhythms. Like if you get up in the morning and you read your Bible, they're always invited. Like you are making that known to them—they're always invited to read the word with you, they're always invited to participate in prayer with you and your children. Hopefully, you're able to do that.

Again, trying to meet them where they are to pray for them. And to pray without ceasing, right? Continually bringing them to the Lord.

**Ryan:** Interesting. And even going to them. If God is doing something in your heart through scripture, like, "Hey, can I read this to you real fast? I know, you know, maybe you don't value the same way I do but I want to read it to you, because I love you and want to share this with you."

**Selena:** Yeah, maybe they're struggling with someone at work or something at work and Scripture speaking to this situation. And maybe you can say, "Hey, I know you're having trouble with so and so work. I was reading my Bible, and I just wanted to share this. Maybe it'll help you find some reconciliation there, whatever. But maybe it'll be helpful."

**Ryan:** I think from a genuine place that can be a really powerful thing. One note, because I hear this coming from many husbands. So husbands will write in... Typically, I'm the one that's responding to comments on YouTube and on Facebook, and whatnot. And I think people kind of understand or they at least know that.

So we will have a husband who will maybe like send me a message and they're like, "Hey, man..." Or some of our patrons even. And we've had long conversations with patrons about this. "I'm pursuing my wife, but she has completely shut me out." I don't always know the history. Sometimes he'll tell me the history, like maybe he was a bonehead and did some dumb things. Usually, it's around infidelity or some sort of sexual addiction. Tragically, that's very common.

And it's so hard. It's almost more rare... I'll say this. In my experience, it's more rare to see a wife change that trajectory than for a man to change that trajectory. And I don't know what that says about husbands and wives in the dynamic. Like, there's this need for a husband... I'll speak as a husband. There's this need for a husband to feel the love and appreciation of his wife. He needs to feel like she admires him and she wants to be on his side, right? He needs to feel that.

So if your husband is not a believer, a wife can still like give him a profound sense of "I'm proud of you. I love you. I'm for you." And that will have heart-transforming effects in that husband's life.

Now, flip the coin. A husband pursuing an unbelieving wife, or a wife that's completely cold to him, or called to the faith, that's a lot more rare. And I think it's rare because... I don't want to go down the infidelity route because that's not the scope of our conversation today. But typically, in the household... This is what I'll end with. In the household, if the husband converts to Christianity, it's like an 80% chance that the rest of the family will convert. If the wife converts to Christianity, it's like a 25% chance that the husband and the kids will convert.

**Selena:** Yeah. And I don't know if that speaks to the roles that God has given-

**Ryan:** Absolutely does. Well, yeah, absolutely does.

**Selena:** ...as the head of the home.

**Ryan:** And so if a husband has responded to the Gospel, it's far more likely that the family will now walk in light of that than it is if the wife alone responds to the gospel in that way. [00:20:00] So a bit of a sidebar, but I think it's interesting. Just know that dynamic exists.

**Selena:** Right.

**Ryan:** Wives, especially if you're looking up at this hill and the husband has yet to believe, all the more prayer, all the more love, all the more encouragement, all the more teamwork will speak to your husband's heart.

**Selena:** Another question that sort of comes from this. You know, you have kids, how do you...

**Ryan:** What do you do with kids?

**Selena:** Because as a Christian wife, you want your husband to be the head of the house? So at what point do you feel like you are treading on that role? But if he doesn't value it, where does that leave you in terms of teaching children scriptures and whatnot?

**Ryan:** To speak pragmatically, clearly teach your kids scripture. There's no question in my mind that that's what you should be doing regardless of what your spouse believes. That's what you are called to do as a parent of those children. And now to speak pragmatically to it, it's very rare that a spouse will object actively to you teaching them unless, like I described, unless they have a faith that is-

**Selena:** In opposition.

**Ryan:** ...in opposition to it. The reason why I mentioned the Muslim thing earlier is because Muslims have a very clear view of Jesus being not the Son of God. And that is directly opposed to us believing that Jesus was the Son of God.

So in most cases, though, you're gonna have a spouse who's just kind of like, "Hey, I gave up on God when I was in college because I got just smart enough to ask questions but not smart enough to see the questions through. Yes, I was sub texting some of you. So I thought I was smart enough, I'll say. And so yeah, I don't really need God. I kind of outgrew God. I don't need that stuff."

But you know, if you want to teach your kids morality, like I'm cool with that. That's typically what I see. Now, if you're husband or a wife, yes, teach your kids regardless of what your spouse says. That's the command because we honor God more and honor God first. And do so lovingly. Don't do it, you know, in their face just to spite them.

**Selena:** "Read my Bible. Did you hear what I said? Did you hear what we read, daddy?"  
*[chuckles]*

**Ryan:** You gotta be tactful and loving in that.

**Selena:** Right. And I think just closing with this, again, an encouragement, emphasis on finding help. Don't live in isolation and don't try to live in your marriage by yourself and try to fight the battle on your own. Like be known by people in your church. Be known by a community that surrounds you, that supports your marriage, that wants to pray for your spouse as well. We call those marriage advocates. Find them. Be in place.

Remember first and foremost that your hope, your security, your identity, everything that you need for contentment in life, in the fullness is found in Jesus.

**Ryan:** Amen.

**Selena:** The rest, trust the Lord right to work out. Know His scriptures. Be in His word every day. Dwell in it richly.

If you don't know what we're talking about, if you're like, "Oh, I've heard Christian, I've heard moral goodness, something. What does that even mean? What does that even mean?"

**Ryan:** Well, we have a website for you. It's [thenewsisgood.com](http://thenewsisgood.com). And that just lays out biblically what it means to respond to the gospel. And we want to invite you to do that. If you're not a believer, we want you to become a Christian because we want to one day meet you in heaven. We want to call you brother, we want to call you sister because Christ is that good. We have to tell you about Jesus.

And here's the thing. No amount of facts are going to change your heart. There's no debate that you can watch that will all of a sudden just say, "Okay, now I have enough information that I'm just gonna believe." No. Because that's not how it works. That's not how it works.

Everyone believes in something. No matter what you say, everyone has to, on some level, believe. Whether you call it belief or not, that's what it is. The point is, the Gospel changes hearts. So just proclaiming the gospel, hearing it, reading who Christ was, what He did, the Holy Spirit will then come in stir your heart, and change your heart. It's not something I can ever predict or explain. It's just what God does. So thenewsisgood.com. We want to invite you into that. And with that, why don't I pray?

Jesus, thank you for what you've done. Thank You that we can stand on this side of all you've accomplished and say yes, the news is very good. We pray for the spouses who were in an unequally yoked marriage. We pray that You would give them endurance, give them hope, give them peace, and even give them joy.

Give them the supernatural desire to love their spouse extraordinarily well just because you've placed them in your life. And give them a supernatural trust in what You might do. And I pray that their prayers would be faith-filled prayers, they'd be big prayers. And, Lord, I pray that You would answer their prayers. In Jesus' name, Amen.

**Selena:** Amen.

**Ryan:** All right. Thanks for joining us for the Fierce Marriage podcast show/video thing *[both chuckles]*. [00:25:00] So this episode is—

**Selena:** In the can.

**Ryan:** We'll see you again in about seven days. So until next time—

**Selena:** Stay fierce.

**PODCAST NOTES**

- **Referenced scripture**
  - 1 Corinthians 7:12-14
  - 1 Peter 3:1
  - John 13:34-35
  
- **Recommended resource**
  - [thenewsisgood.com](https://thenewsisgood.com)

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