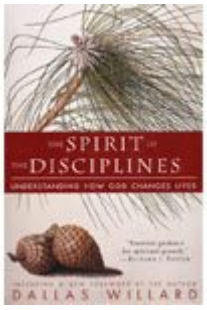
Spiritual Disciplines and the Modern World

The spiritual disciplines help us cooperate with God in our transformation into the likeness of Christ. Don Closson discusses disciplines of abstinence and of engagement.

This article is also available in Spanish.

Spirituality and the Body



As a seminary student I was given the assignment to read a book on Christian spirituality called the *Spirit of the Disciplines* by Dallas Willard.{1} I obediently read the book and either wrote a paper on it or took a test that covered the material (I can't recall which), but the book didn't have a major impact on my life at that time. Recently, over a decade later, I have gone back to the book and found it to be a jewel that I should have spent more time with. In the book, Willard speaks to one of the most important issues facing individual Christians and churches in our time: "How does one live the Spirit-filled life promised in the New Testament?" How does the believer experience the promise that Jesus made in Matthew 11:29-30: "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light"?



Willard argues that modernity has given us a culture that offers a flood of self-fulfillment programs in the form of political, scientific, and even psychological revolutions. All promise to promote personal peace and affluence, and yet we suffer from an "epidemic of depression, suicide, personal emptiness, and escapism through drugs and alcohol, cultic obsession, consumerism, and sex and violence . . . ."{2} Most Christians would agree that the Christian faith offers a model for human transformation that far exceeds the promises of modern scientific programs, but when it comes to delineating the methods of such a transformation there is often confusion or silence.

Christians frequently seek spiritual maturity in all the wrong places. Some submit themselves to abusive churches that equate busyness and unquestioning subservience with Christ-likeness. Others look for spirituality through syncretism, borrowing the spiritualism of Eastern religions or Gnosticism and covering it with a Christian veneer.

According to Willard, Christians often hope to find Christ's power for living in ways that seem appropriate but miss the mark; for example, through a "sense of forgiveness and love for God" or through the acquisition of propositional truth. Some "seek it through special experiences or the infusion of the Spirit," or by way of "the presence of Christ in the inner life." Others argue that it is only through the "power of ritual and liturgy or the preaching of the Word," or "through the communion of the saints." All of these have value in the Christian life but do not "reliably produce large numbers of people who really are like Christ."{3}

We evangelicals have a natural tendency to avoid anything that hints of meritorious works, works that might somehow justify us before a holy God. As a result, we reduce faith to an entirely mental affair, cutting off the body from the process of living the Christian life.

In this article we will consider a New Testament theology of human transformation in order to better understand what it means to become a living sacrifice to God.

A Model for Transformation

Faith in Jesus Christ brings instant forgiveness along with the promise of eventual glorification and spending eternity with God. However, in between the believer experiences something called sanctification, the process of being set apart for good works. Something that is sanctified is holy, so it makes sense that the process of sanctification is to make us more like Christ.

Even though the Bible talks much of spiritual power and becoming like Christ, many believers find this process of sanctification to be a mystery. Since the Enlightenment, there has been a slow removal from our language of acceptable ways to talk about the spiritual realm. Being rooted in this age of science and materialism, the language of spiritual growth sounds alien and a bit threatening to our ears, but if we want to experience the life that Jesus promised, a life of spiritual strength, we need to understand how to appropriate God's Spirit into our lives.

According to Willard, "A 'spiritual life' consists in that range of activities in which people cooperatively interact with God—and with the spiritual order deriving from God's personality and action. And what is the result? A new overall quality of human existence with corresponding new powers."{4} To be spiritual is to be dominated by the Spirit of God. Willard adds that spirituality is another reality, not just a "commitment" or "life-style." It may result in personal and social change, but the ultimate goal is to become like Christ and to further His Kingdom, not just to be a better person or to make America a better place to live.

The Bible teaches that to become a spiritual person one must employ the *disciplines* of spirituality. “The disciplines are activities of mind and body purposefully undertaken to bring our personality and total being into effective cooperation with the divine order.”{5} Paul wrote in Romans 6:13 that the goal of being spiritual is to offer our body to God as instruments of righteousness in order to be of use for His Kingdom. Moving towards this state of usefulness to God and His Kingdom depends on the actions of individual believers.

Many of us have been taught that this action consists primarily in attending church or giving towards its programs. As important as these are, they fail to address the need for a radical inner change that must take place in our hearts to be of significant use to God. The teaching of Scripture and specifically the life of Christ tells us that the deep changes that must occur in our lives will only be accomplished via the disciplines of abstinence such as fasting, solitude, silence, and chastity, and the disciplines of engagement such as study, worship, service, prayer, and confession. These disciplines, along with others, will result in being conformed to the person of Christ, the desire of everyone born of His Spirit.

Salvation and Life

When I first read in the Bible that Jesus offered a more abundant life to those who followed Him, I thought that He was primarily describing a life filled with more happiness and purpose. It does include these things, but I now believe that it includes much more. Salvation in Christ promises to radically change the nature of life itself. It is not just a promise that sometime in the far distant future we will experience a resurrected body and see a new heaven and new earth. Salvation in Christ promises a life characterized by the highest ideals of thought and actions as epitomized by the life of Christ Himself.

Although there is no program or classroom course that can guarantee to give us this new life in Christ, it can be argued that in order to live a life like Jesus we need to do the things that Jesus did. If Jesus had to "learn obedience through the things which he suffered" (Hebrew 5:8 KJV), are we to expect to act Christ-like without the benefit of engaging in the disciplines that Jesus did?

In *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Willard argues that there is a direct connection between practicing the spiritual disciplines and experiencing the salvation that is promised in Christ. Jesus prayed, fasted, and practiced solitude "not because He was sinful and in need of redemption, as we are, but because he had a body just as we do."{6} The center of every human being's existence is his or her body. We are neither to be neo-Platonic nor Gnostic in our approach to the spiritual life. Both of these traditions play down the importance of the physical universe, arguing that it is either evil or simply inferior to the spiritual domain. But as Willard argues, "to withhold our bodies from religion is to exclude religion from our lives."

Although our spiritual dimension may be invisible, it is not separate from our bodily existence. *Spirituality*, according to Willard, is "a relationship of our embodied selves to God that has the natural and irrepressible effect of making us alive to the Kingdom of God—here and now in the material world."{7} By separating our Christian life from our bodies we create an unnecessary sacred/secular gulf for Christians that often alienates us from the world and people around us.

The Christian faith offers more than just the forgiveness of sins; it promises to transform individuals to live in such a way that responding to events as Jesus did becomes second nature. What are these spiritual disciplines, and how do they transform the very quality of life we experience as followers of Jesus Christ?

The Disciplines of Abstinence

Although many of us have heard horror stories of how spiritual disciplines have been abused and misused in the past, Willard believes that "A discipline for the spiritual life is, when the dust of history is blown away, nothing but an activity undertaken to bring us into more effective cooperation with Christ and his Kingdom."{8} He reminds us that we discipline ourselves throughout life in order to accomplish a wide variety of tasks or functions. We utilize discipline when we study an academic or professional field; athletes must be disciplined in order to run a marathon or bench press 300 lbs. Why, then, are we surprised to learn that we must discipline ourselves to be useful to God?

Willard divides the disciplines into two categories: disciplines of abstinence, and disciplines of engagement. Depending on our lifestyle and past personal experiences, we will each find different disciplines helpful in accomplishing the goal of living as a new creature in Christ. Solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy, and sacrifice are disciplines of abstinence. Given our highly materialistic culture, these might be the most difficult and most beneficial to many of us. We are more familiar with the disciplines of engagement, including study, worship, celebration, service, prayer, and fellowship. However, two others mentioned by Willard might be less familiar: confession and submission.

Abstinence requires that we give up something that is perfectly normal—something that is not wrong in and of itself, such as food or sex—because it has gotten in the way of our walking with God, or because by leaving these things aside we might be able to focus more closely on God for a period of time. As one writer tells us, "Solitude is a terrible trial, for it serves to crack open and burst apart the shell of our superficial securities. It opens out to us the unknown abyss that we all carry within us . . ."{9} Busyness and superficial

activities hide us from the fact that we have little or no inward experience with God. Solitude frees us from social conformity, from being conformed to the patterns of this world that Paul warns us about in Romans 12.

Solitude goes hand in hand with silence. The power of the tongue and the damage it can do is taken very seriously in the Bible. There is a quiet inner strength and confidence that exudes from people who are great listeners, who are able to be silent and to be slow to speak.

The Disciplines of Engagement

Thus, the disciplines of abstinence help us diminish improper entanglements with the world. What about the disciplines of engagement?

Although study is not often thought of as a spiritual discipline, it is the key to a balanced Christian walk. Calvin Miller writes, "Mystics without study are only spiritual romantics who want relationship without effort."{10} Study involves reading, memorizing, and meditation on God's Word. It takes effort and time, and there are no shortcuts. It includes learning from great Christian minds that have gone before us and those who, by their walk and example, can teach much about the power available to believers who seek to experience the light burden that abiding in Jesus offers.

Few Christians deny the need for worship in their weekly routines, even though what constitutes worship has caused considerable controversy. Worship ascribes great worth to God. It is seeing God as He truly is. Willard argues that we should focus our worship through Jesus Christ to the Father. He writes, "When we worship, we fill our minds and hearts with wonder at him—the detailed actions and words of his earthly life, his trial and death on the cross, his resurrection reality, and his work as ascended intercessor."{11}

The discipline of celebration is unfamiliar to most of us, yet Willard argues that it is one of the most important forms of engagement with God. He writes that "We engage in celebration when we enjoy ourselves, our life, our world, in conjunction with our faith and confidence in God's greatness, beauty, and goodness. We concentrate on our life and world as God's work and as God's gift to us."{12} Although much of the scriptural argument for holy celebration is found in the festivals of the Old Testament and the book of Ecclesiastes, Jesus was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard because he chose to dine and celebrate with sinners.

Christian fellowship and confession go hand in hand. It is within the context of fellowship that Christians build up and encourage one-another with the gifts that God has given to us. It is also in this context that we practice confession with trusted believers who know both our strengths and weaknesses. This level of transparency and openness is essential for the church to become the healing place of deep intimacy that people are so hungry for.

Walking with Jesus doesn't mean just knowing things about Him; it means living as He lived. This includes practicing the spiritual disciplines that Jesus practiced. As we do, we will be changed through the Spirit to be more like Him and experience the rest that He has offered to us.

Notes

1. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines,* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).
2. Ibid., viii.
3. Ibid., x.
4. Ibid., 67.
5. Ibid., 68.
6. Ibid., 29.
7. Ibid., 31.
8. Ibid., 156.

9. Ibid., 161.
10. Ibid., 176.
11. Ibid., 178.
12. Ibid., 179.

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Back Infections and Heart Infections

My husband Ray knew something was wrong as soon as he got out of bed.



His lower back, where he'd had back surgery six weeks before, was wet. His t-shirt was wet. The sheet was wet. His fingers glistening with a strange wetness from reaching back to investigate, he asked me to check what was going on. I saw a rivulet of fluid pouring out of the top of his surgical incision. Something was really, really wrong.

As I gently pressed the skin around the incision, pus kept flowing out. He had a serious infection under the incision. It had been hidden, but it literally rose to the surface of his body and forced its way out. His problem wasn't that pus was being discharged from the inside to the outside—that was just the symptom, the manifestation of the true problem: a deep and serious infection.

He'd had the infection before he was forced to be aware of it. There were indications: fever, and just not feeling right.

The Lord is quite adept at using the physical to show us truths about the spiritual and emotional. I started seeing parallels between the two worlds.

The undealt-with, unhealed spiritual and emotional hurts in our souls don't just sit there under the surface—our awareness—forever. It's like emotional pus. Eventually it starts leaking out sideways: addictions, anger, isolation, rebellion, self-destruction. These are the presenting problems that drive people to seek help through recovery programs such as Re:generation and Celebrate Recovery, or counseling.

Just as a rivulet of pus wasn't Ray's true problem but merely a symptom, our heart issues are the true problem that Jesus wants to point to and say, "Let Me heal them. You can't do it on your own."

Ray's infection was so large that he needed "wash out" surgery. He needed a skilled surgeon, in the sterile, controlled environment of the operating room, to open up his incision and clean out the infection. Before he even got to the OR, the doctor ordered IV antibiotics to attack and disarm the destructive power of the multiplying bacteria. By the time the surgeon got to the washing-out stage, Ray's infection had been disarmed, turned into "clean gunk." No bacteria was left, just the debris of the now-dead bacteria.

In the spiritual realm, it's truth that functions like powerful antibiotics. Truth attacks the destructive power of lies and decision. There is still leftover debris of lies—bad thinking habits and bad behavior habits—but when the lies are disarmed, it's a lot easier to replace the old habits with new, healthy, godly habits.

This was a serious infection. The day after surgery, they put in a PICC line that threaded a tube from his upper arm into a

vein, ending just above his heart. This is a very effective way to infuse health-building antibiotics into his body, medicine that can't be taken orally—it has to be pumped directly into his bloodstream. He gets five antibiotic infusions a day, which we can do at home instead of needing to be hospitalized or having to go a doctor's office (which would be hard to do at 6 a.m. and 9 p.m.!).

The PICC line allows us to keep a constant level of antibiotic in his blood. He needs this constant flow to attack the infection over a long period of time. We also need a constant infusion of truth into our souls, into our minds, to counteract the destructive power of lies and deceptions and schemes. In fact, one study revealed the it takes a minimum of four infusions of truth weekly through time in the Word for spiritual growth and healthiness.

I like thinking about the infusion of truth through God's Word as I connect the tubing to Ray's PICC line catheter. God is so good to give us physical lessons to show us spiritual truths!

Ray sure couldn't heal himself on his own. He pointed out that he had to surrender control over this entire "adventure" (to use my dad's word to describe his cancer journey). There was absolutely nothing he could do to fix the spinal stenosis that squeezed nerves, causing shooting pains down the backs of his legs, and he couldn't heal the infection that came later. He had to place himself in the hands of the surgeon both times. He had to place himself in the hands of the anesthesiologists to put him to sleep and wake him up. He had to place himself in the hands of the nurses to administer his pain meds and the IV antibiotics. He had to surrender control to those who knew how to help him.

At any point, he could have shut down the process—not having the surgery, or walking out of the hospital, or refusing the home infusions of IV antibiotics. He could have refused to wear the back brace after the spine surgery; he could have

refused to submit to the BLT restrictions (no bending, lifting or twisting).

But that would have also shut down the healing.

When we have soul sickness—a heart infection, if you will—we need to entrust ourselves into the hands of people more educated in the healing process than we are. We need to surrender our false sense of control and invite others to lead us from sickness into health. And we need to not shut down the process by thinking we know better, or thinking we're fixed or even just "good enough." We need to not push back against restrictions suggested by those who know better than we do what it will take to help us climb of our pits to get to the place of spiritual and emotional health.

God provides help for physical challenges like infections, and through the "one anothers" of scripture He provides help for spiritual and emotional challenges as well. And He lets us connect the dots to learn transferable concepts from each.

This blog post originally appeared at
https://blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/back_infections_and_heart_infections
on Sept. 4, 2019.

"My Son Wants To Go to a Britney Spears Concert"

My son is 15 years old. My husband and I have differing opinions on our son's attraction to Britney Spears. Our son has requested tickets to her concert. The photographs I've

seen are extremely sexual and seem pornographic. Her physical gyrations at the concerts are repulsive to me but I know my son loves it. It seems that this fixation on Britney is cultivating a strong appetite for more sexually explicit visual stimulations in the future. Share your thoughts or scripture please.

Dear _____,

I know what ***I*** think, but I thought it might be helpful to ask my son Kevin, a college sophomore home for a visit, how HE would answer your question.

First of all, he just shook his head and said "Keep that boy away from her!! She has incited so many guys to lust—I don't care WHAT she says about being a virgin. She's a tease."

Then he sat down with his Bible and provided the following perspective:

Proverbs 5:3-5 says, "For the lips of the adulteress drip honey. . . her steps lead straight to the grave." Verse 8 says, "Keep far away from her and do not go near the door of her house." Kevin pointed out that Britney's provocative dress and onstage behavior has invited so many men to lust after her that, according to the way the Lord Jesus equated lust with adultery in the mind, she could reasonably be considered an adulteress. Not literally, of course, but acting deliberately with the intent of making young men lust after her. And not very different from the woman warned against in Proverbs.

2 Timothy 2:22 says, "FLEE youthful lusts. . ." Don't even let there be an opportunity, either in behavior or in one's mind, to pursue unholy thoughts. Going to a Britney Spears concert is the exact opposite of fleeing youthful lusts.

And finally, Kevin brought up Proverbs 6:20 and 24-25: "My son, observe the commandment of your father and *do not forsake the teaching of your mother* . . . To keep you from the evil

woman, From the smooth tongue of the adulteress. Do not desire her beauty in your heart, Not let her capture you with her eyelids."

My mother's heart is delighted that he put such emphasis on your (and my!) role in your son's life. From that same mother's perspective, I would put this in the same context as the kind of unpopular decisions we make all the time:

- "I realize you don't want to brush your teeth and you don't see any reason for it, butyou need to do it anyway."
- "I realize you prefer pizza and chocolate cake to anything green, but it's important for you to eat vegetables, and there will BE no pizza or chocolate cake until you eat the healthy stuff."
- "I understand you hate pain and so do I, but you have to go to the doctor and get this booster shot, and I'm afraid you don't have a choice in this."

So it follows that we would say, "Yes, son, I know you think Britney Spears is the hottest thing since fire and this constitutes child abuse, but because I love you and want to protect you from your own flesh and hormones, you can't go. End of discussion."

Part of the value of God placing parents in a place of authority and protection over children is that we are able to see farther down the road than they are, and we can see the big picture of life better than they can. So we make them do things they don't want to do, and we prevent them from doing things they really want to do, because acting in their best interests is more important to us than feeling popular and well-liked by our kids. We are no longer in high school; we can choose being wise and responsible over being popular.

But then there's the other issue, which is that your husband and your son are apparently in agreement *against* your position

and beliefs. I’m so sorry you have to deal with that!

But according to what the scripture says about our role as wives, we need to be in submission at the same time that we support our husbands by providing our God-given woman’s perspective. So all you can do is speak to your husband (ALONE) about how you think about this issue (and I would use the word “thoughts” rather than “feelings” since it’s a temptation for many men to dismiss women’s feelings as unreliable and not valuable. Not fair, I know, but it seems to be the way it is a lot of the time). The more logical and analytical you can be in sharing your perspective, the better the communication will probably be. Once your husband knows your position, leave the final decision up to him (which it should be anyway since he’s the dad) and turn over the situation into God’s hands. (This reminds me of a word of wisdom I heard the other day: If you can’t change something, release it.) If your son ends up going to the concert, pray for him! Pray that he will have eyes to see the truth about what Britney’s doing; pray that he will feel guilty; pray that he will have a growing discomfort with this kind of self-absorbed fleshly behavior. And if you haven’t read *The Power of a Praying Parent* by Stormie Omartian, get it and pray it!

I hope this helps.

Blessings on you,

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries

“What Does It Mean for a Wife to Submit?”

Do you have information on what it means for a woman to submit—is obedience in some sense a part of it? When might she come out from under his “lead”?

I’m doing a bible study and the issue came up last week. In my home I basically submit to my wife because her judgement has been proven to be better in most things and I have a very flexible temperament. Am I a wimp??? Sometimes I wonder if we are doing it right.

Dear _____,

Biblical submission is a military term meaning “to arrange oneself under,” the way a soldier places himself under the authority and leadership of his commander. God’s plan is for male leadership and authority in the marriage relationship, the home and the church. . . and for men to lead, it’s important for women to follow them. It does NOT mean being a doormat or denying one’s gifts, talents and passions; it means using those very things to help her husband be the best he can be and to help their family and home be and run most effectively.

Submission does involve obedience, as we all obey God, the governmental authorities and the elders in our churches as we submit to them; however, the submission of a wife to her husband has a different flavor because of our one-flesh intimacy. Obedience is a function of a power differential, seen best in the parent-child and government-citizen relationships. If the husband-wife relationship is characterized by the husband giving commands and the wife obeying, that kind of power inequity will destroy intimacy. Nonetheless, wifely submission does involve cooperating with

and deferring to her husband.

The only time a woman should come out from under her husband's leadership is when that would mean sinning. For instance, I know of husbands who wanted their wives to have abortions, to dance at a strip club to make money, to engage in pornography, and other immoral, unacceptable behaviors. In those cases, to submit to their husbands would have meant taking a stand against God and His standards of right and wrong, so it is wrong to submit in those admittedly (but unfortunately real) extreme situations.

I'm glad to hear you're studying the Bible to see what God says about His intent for the marriage relationship. He has ordained that husbands be what some have called "servant leaders," serving their wives by leading them as men under submission to Christ, and He has ordained that women should serve our husbands by submitting to them as we submit to Christ. This is not an effect of the Fall, because as you read Genesis 2 you can see that Adam had authority over Eve when he named her, and Eve was created for Adam to be his helper and meet his needs. (The reason we rebel against this arrangement is our own self-centeredness, exacerbated by the effect of feminism's objection to the idea of women being submissive to their husbands.)

It's wonderful that your wife has good judgment, and I humbly suggest that you see this as an asset to your marriage. But having good judgment and being right don't have anything to do with who submits to who. If you have been gifted with a wise wife, then it is your responsibility to seek out her input and perspective before making a decision of what to do. There is a big difference between listening to your wife and saying, "That sounds really good. Let's do that," and saying "Yes dear, whatever you say dear, you just tell me what to do and I'll do it."

Are you a wimp? I don't know and sure wouldn't want to call

you any names! <smile> Are you passively allowing your wife to dictate how things should be done in your home, instead of discussing things as equal partners? May I strongly suggest you read Stu Weber's extraordinary book *Tender Warrior*, which Ray and I believe is the best book out there for men. In fact, the cover of the book is appropriately intriguing: "every man's purpose, every woman's dream, every child's hope."

I hope this helps, and I send this along with a prayer that you and your wife will find joy in God's intention for husband and wife roles and functions.

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries

"What Do You Think About Headcoverings for Christian Women?"

Sue,

I am intrigued by this article "Should a Christian Woman Wear a Headcovering?" by Daniel Botkin (enclosed by mail and also available online here) about headcoverings, and it makes sense to me, but I would really like your input as a woman.

I read the headcoverings article with a huge smile across my heart. Its an excellent article! . . . And I couldn't agree more.

Before I go further, though, let me first state that Probe does not have an official position on this issue; my answer is about me and my response to this issue. For six years or so I

struggled with the plain command of scripture [*1 Cor 11:10 Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.*] and finally gave in. I just could not get around the phrase "because of the angels," which has absolutely nothing to do with cultural- and time-bound practices. So, about a year ago, I started wearing hats to church. Recently, I purchased a couple of scarves which I also use as a headcovering in worship and for public prayer.

It's been interesting the strong response I've received from men, who absolutely love to see a woman in a hat, even though they usually don't know it's not a fashion statement for me. They just know something strikes them as very, very right about it. What startled me was the effect on ME: I have so enjoyed feeling so feminine! I have also enjoyed experiencing the peace that is the fruit of obedience.

I started out wearing lace doilies or some other kind of headgear when I was in Catholic grade school. In the 60s and 70s, there was a wholesale dropping of the headcovering in almost all Western churches (with the rise of feminist thought, and I think they are related). I never even thought about how quickly 1900 years of church history were overturned in a mere decade until I couldn't come up with a single good reason to disobey scripture.

So there you have it! Thanks for sharing the great article with me!

Sue Bohlin

Hi Sue!!

Your response was such a blessing and encouragement to my wife and me! Thank you so much for taking the time to read it and respond. Because of your response actually, my wife went out and bought a couple of scarves today! Well thank you for your faithfulness and may the Lord continue to guide you in His word and in His love.

See Also:

- "Do the Bible's Statements on Head Coverings Apply Today?"
- Sue Bohlin's Blog Post: "Why I'm the Lady in the Hat"

The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands: A Christian View

Sue Bohlin looks at this important book from a distinctly Christian perspective. Filtering the advice through a biblical worldview increases the purity and strength of the message on how to minister effectively to your husband.

Why We Need This Book

Talk show host Dr. Laura Schlessinger has written a book that is improving thousands of marriages: *The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands.*{1} We need this book because millions of wives either don't know how to love their husbands wisely and well, or they're too self-centered to see it as important. Dr. Laura credits this dismal condition to forty years of feminist philosophy, "with its condemnation of just about everything male as evil, stupid, and oppressive, and the denigration of female and male roles in families."{2} While the women's movement certainly had a hand to play in the disintegration of relationships and the family, I believe the core cause is our sinful self-centeredness, just as the Bible says.{3}

Which is why we need help, and God instructs older women to train younger women to love their husband and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and

to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God.{4} *The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands* is a great resource for learning these important values and skills.

God gives us great power as women. Dr. Laura says, "Men are borne of women and spend the rest of their lives yearning for a woman's acceptance and approval. . . . Men admittedly are putty in the hands of a woman they love. Give him direct communication, respect, appreciation, food and good lovin', and he'll do just about anything you wish—foolish or not."{5}

We'll be looking at these aspects of the proper care and feeding of husbands in this article, starting with a man's need for *direct communication.*

• We can improve on communication by doing it less. God made us verbal creatures, which can frustrate men with the overwhelming amount of our words. Instead of expecting her husband to be a girlfriend (and men make wonderful husbands, but not girlfriends), the wise wife selects for true connecting value, gives the bottom line first, and chooses her timing well.

• Men make terrible mind readers, so be direct. Dropping subtle hints doesn't work with most men, and it doesn't mean a man is insensitive, uncaring, or oblivious.

• Spell out whether you want help and advice, or if you're just venting. God made men to want to be our heroes, so understand you can frustrate him if he can't fix what's hurting you because all you want is someone to listen.

• And finally, take whatever he says at face value. Women tend to overanalyze men when they are just not that complicated.

Respect

A listener to Dr. Laura's radio show named Edgar wrote, "There are a few things that men want so bad they would do anything for it. I think a good number of men want respect more than love. They like to feel they have some power. I nearly cry when you tell a woman caller to respect her husband. There is so much selfishness in the world—in marriages. Prosperity has allowed women to be so independent, and thus so selfish. I always feel as though I come last—my feelings come last, my needs come last."{6}

"A good number of men want respect more than love." God knew this when He made us. His commands to husbands and wives in Ephesians 5:33 reflects each one's deepest needs: "Each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband." Dr. Emerson Eggerichs of LoveandRespect.com points out that this verse commands a husband to love his wife. Why? She needs love like she needs air to breathe. This same verse commands a wife to respect her husband. Why? He needs respect like he needs air to breathe.{7}

• Respect means treating someone in a way that builds him up and doesn't tear him down, never denigrating or attacking.{8}

• Respect means always treating the other person with the dignity they deserve as a person made in the image of God.

• Respect means grasping that a man's needs and wants are every bit as valid and important as a woman's needs and wants.

• Respect means not venting to others, *especially* the children. One woman wrote to Dr. Laura, "No emotional outlet is worth damaging my husband's reputation."{9}

There are three A's that men long for from their wives: attention, affection, and affirmation. Respect involves paying attention to what they do simply because they're the ones

doing it.

Respect means allowing the other person to be different and do things differently than you. One repentant wife told Dr. Laura, “And in the end, it doesn’t much matter that they eat PBJ sandwiches for breakfast, lunch and dinner for a day or that one tooth brushing gets overlooked or whatever little thing that used to set me off!”{10}

One way to give respect is to give grace instead of resenting the things he does that complicate your life (like leaving drinking glasses in the living room or clothing on a chair). Ask yourself, “Is he *intentionally* doing this to bug me? To make my life difficult? If he were to die tomorrow, what wouldn’t I give to have him back leaving these things out?”

Appreciation

Ask any woman what she wants, and near the top of her list she’ll tell you, “I want to be acknowledged and appreciated for the things I do.” Well, men want the same thing!

A man named Evan wrote to Dr. Laura: “My wife feels that if she doesn’t remind me again and again, something won’t get done. But the fact is, it makes me feel like her child and that Mommy needs to check up on me. It’s degrading. I want to be admired. I want to be acknowledged for being the breadwinner and making sure that we are all well taken care of. My greatest pleasure is when I feel like her hero. Like her ‘man.’ Not her boy.”{11}

It doesn’t matter what a husband’s primary love language is, every man wants to be shown appreciation for who he is and what he does.

I love to suggest to young wives and mothers, “Keep a gratitude journal to help you be on the lookout for the things your husband does that you appreciate. Every night, write down

three things you noticed. And then *tell him* the kinds of things that are in your book!”

• Thank him for going to work every morning even when he doesn’t feel like it.

• Thank him for being faithful to you.

• Thank him for loving you.

• Thank him for giving you children—or even desiring to.

• Thank him for taking out the garbage, and changing the oil in your car, and mowing the yard.

• Thank him for bringing home his paycheck and not spending it on gambling or booze or drugs or women.

And then there’s the opposite of appreciation. The universal complaint of men who e-mailed Dr. Laura about her book “was that their wives criticize, complain, nag, rarely compliment or express appreciation, are difficult to satisfy, and basically are not as nice to them as they’d be to a stranger ringing their doorbell at three A.M.!”{12} So allow me to make some suggestions:

• Request, don’t demand. Demanding is rude and disrespectful.

• Don’t nag. If you have to ask more than once, ask as if it were the first time you were making the request.

• Keep your mouth shut about things that don’t matter. Ask yourself, is this the hill you want to die on?

• Don’t be controlling—which is micromanaging. Dr. Laura wrote, “When women micromanage, their husbands give up trying to please them, and then the wives complain that their men don’t do anything for them.”{13}

Proverbs says, “Kind words are like honey—sweet to the soul and healthy for the body.”{14} (This is truer no place more than in marriage.) Let your words be kind and full of appreciation.

Support

A man named Roy wrote to Dr. Laura with some good advice for wives: “If you can’t accentuate the positive, at least acknowledge it. The world is full of messages to men that there are standards we don’t meet. There is always another man who is more handsome, more virile, or more athletic than we are. None of that matters if the most important person in our life looks up to us, accepts us as we are, and loves us even though we aren’t perfect. . . . All I know is that the husband who has a wife who supports him and praises him for the positive things he does is the envy of all the other men who have to live with criticism, sarcasm, and constant reminders of their failures.”{15}

Men desperately want and need the support of their wives. This is reflected in what God reveals in His Word when He says, “It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”{16} And through the apostle Paul, God instructs wives to relate to their husbands in a way that meets this need when He says, “Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord.”{17}

Submission is basically giving support with a willing, cooperative heart.

A wife’s submission includes knowing her gifts and strengths, and using them to serve her husband and family.

Service has a bad name, but both husbands and wives are called to serve God first and then each other; husbands are called to sacrificially love and serve their wives with Jesus as their pattern.{18}

So what does support look like?

• Believing in him. Telling him, “You have what it takes.” Being his #1 fan.

• Cultivating a cooperative heart.

• Being generous and openhearted—willing to use your gifts and strengths to help him succeed.

• Understanding the importance of making him look good: never saying anything negative in public.

• Creating a home that’s a safe haven from the world.

• Having a warm heart with a positive, cheerful demeanor. Women set the temperature of the home; we are thermostats, not thermometers, of the family. (On the other hand, Proverbs says “A quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping on a rainy day; restraining her is like restraining the wind or grasping oil with the hand.”{19})

• Being interested in him and his life.

• Showing thoughtfulness. What does he like? Do it.

• And though by no means exhaustive, it also means being a person of faithfulness and integrity. That means keeping your promises and being dependable. As Proverbs 31 puts it, “Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value.”{20}

Good Lovin’

Dr. Laura writes that men need to feel the approval, acceptance and attachment from their women that comes from physical intimacy.{21} For women, emotional intimacy leads to physical intimacy. For men, it’s the other way around; physical intimacy is the key to opening their hearts.

A man named Chris writes: “I don’t understand why women don’t understand that sex is a man’s number one need for his wife. It’s not just the act and sensation of pleasure, but it’s the acceptance by a woman of her man. There’s a communion that happens during intercourse that will bond a man to his woman, and he in turn will then begin to give of himself emotionally to her.”{22}

Wives can discover that giving themselves sexually to their husbands with a warm, open-hearted, loving spirit, can be the most effective encouragement to getting their husbands to open up emotionally.

“What attracts men to women is their femininity, and femininity isn’t only about appearance, it’s also about behaviors. Looking womanly and behaving sweetly and flirtatiously are gifts wives give to their husbands.” We see this modeled in the Song of Solomon, where the King’s bride displays her feminine charms in a holy seduction of her husband, and the way she tells him what she loves about his body.{23}

Instead, our culture has things backward; many unmarried girls and women flaunt their bodies with a total lack of modesty or propriety. Once they marry, it’s flannel nightgowns, wool socks, and no makeup.

Dr. Laura calls wives to give themselves sexually to their husbands, even when they don’t feel like it, as an act of love. It’s really no different, she points out, than the fact that they expect their husbands to go to work and earn money to support the family even on days they don’t feel like it.

She’s echoing what God said in 1 Corinthians 7 about husband and wife both fulfilling their marital duty to each other because each one’s body belongs not just to themselves but to each other. He also said not to deprive each other for extended periods of time lest we be tempted.

Consider the wisdom of radio listener Herb: “Sex is to a husband what conversation is to a wife. When a wife deprives her husband of sex for days, even weeks on end, it is tantamount to his refusing to talk to her for days, even weeks. Think of it that way, wives, and realize what a deleterious impact enforced sexual abstinence has on a good man who is determined to remain faithful.”{24}

I can’t recommend *The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands* highly enough. In fact, I gave a copy to my new daughter-in-law! Let me close with one more piece of wisdom from Dr. Laura: “[M]en are simple creatures who come from a woman, are nurtured and brought up by a woman, and yearn for the continued love, admiration and approval of a woman. . . Women need to better appreciate the magnitude of their power and influence over men, and not misuse or abuse it.”{25} Amen!

Notes

1. Laura Schlessinger, *The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands*, New York: HarperCollins, 2004.
2. Schlessinger, 3.
3. Jeremiah 17:9
4. Titus 2:4
5. Schlessinger, xvii.
6. Schlessinger, 1.
7. http://www.loveandrespect.com/Articles/article.asp?aid=43&cat=1
8. Schlessinger, 157.
9. Schlessinger, 159.
10. Schlessinger, 158.
11. Schlessinger, 31.
12. Schlessinger, 37-38.
13. Schlessinger, 57.
14. Prov. 16:24
15. Schlessinger, 47-48.
16. Gen. 2:18.

17. Eph. 5:22, 24.
18. Eph. 2:25, 28.
19. Prov. 27:15.
20. Prov. 31:11.
21. Schlessinger, 25.
22. Schlessings, 129.
23. Song of Solomon 5:10-16
24. Schlessinger, 119.
25. Schlessinger. 10.

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"I'm a Feminist and a Christian, and I Didn't Like Your Article."

Concerning your article "The Ten Lies of Feminism."

I believe John Gray has been divorced 3 times. Surely not an expert on women and men's relationships that you would like the reader to believe.

Remember that before it says women submit to your husbands—it says husbands and wives submit to EACH other.

You said "It's important for men to experience personal significance by making a mark on the world. But God calls women to trust Him in a different area: in our relationships. A woman's value is usually not in providing history-changing leadership and making great, bold moves, but in loving and supporting those around us, changing the world by touching hearts. Once in a while, a woman does make her mark on a

national or global scale: consider the biblical judge Deborah, Golda Meir, Margaret Thatcher, and Indira Ghandi. But women like these are the exception, not the rule."

Please be aware that besides women, there are few people of color—men AND women—who have gone on to be exceptional in a publicly recognized way. It is not because they are in the "roles" God ordained them to be, but because of the man made white patriarchal society that has oppressed and dominated them.

In the spirit of the Lord who spent so much time with the downtrodden, and rebuffed the Pharisees for only giving lip service to the word, I am careful to not just "accept" what has been instilled as doctrine, but question and question again as God encourages us to do. God is not about oppression.

I could take on everything you have written, but the great thing about this country is our freedom of speech.

I'm a feminist—and a christian.

Just a couple of thoughts in response to your letter. . .

First, citing something John Gray said doesn't mean we endorse everything about the man. Even a broken clock is right twice a day!

Secondly, concerning mutual submission: if you check Ephesians, it does not say that husbands and wives are to submit to each other. The context is that Paul is writing to the entire Ephesian church, and he is telling the Ephesian believers to have an attitude of submission toward each other. The phrase "submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" can mean "Everyone submit to everyone" or "some submit to others." It is not addressing husbands and wives. Some relationships are a one-way sort of submission, and this would include wives submitting to husbands, children submitting to parents, employees submitting to employers, and church members

submitting to church elders. If you try to turn Eph. 5:21 into a doctrine of mutual submission within marriage, then you have to extend it to the other relationships as well, and common sense tells you that won't (and doesn't!) work. I don't know if you have children yet, but I assure you, Paul isn't telling me as a mom to submit to my kids! :::smile::: And I don't know if you are married yet, but I can assure you that submission to a man who loves, cherishes, respects and supports me, and who leads me as he is led by Christ, is not in the least burdensome but a true joy.

Third, I certainly won't argue that women have been disrespected and oppressed women throughout time. I see this as a horrible consequence of the Fall. But as a Christian, I believe that God defines power and influence and what it means to be exceptional very differently from the way the world does, and I believe that women have been very powerful in ways that the feminist mindset refuses to acknowledge. I respect your identification as both a Christian and a feminist, but please be aware that it is easy to let the world (read: feminist thought) squeeze you into its mold so that you see things from a worldly perspective instead of a biblical perspective. To use a phrase like "man made white patriarchal society that has oppressed and dominated them" tells me that you have bought into the feminist perspective. May I suggest that the evil is not patriarchy, but the sinful abuse of power within patriarchy?

You are right, "God is not about oppression." He is about freeing the captives through Jesus Christ, not through man-made political systems and philosophy. Jesus was absolutely radical in His respect for, treatment of and elevation of women, and when people follow the Bible's actual mandates they move from oppressing others to true freedom and celebration of others' dignity, abilities, gifts and calling.

Sincerely,

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries