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Sacred Influence

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Part 1

Your Marriage Makeover
Begins with *You*

Chapter 1

The Glory of a Godly Woman

Understanding Who You Are in Christ

I laughed out loud when I saw it. While waiting in line at a grocery store, I read the cover of a leading women’s magazine and just *had* to write down the title of one of its articles: “Why so many smart, good women put up with snarly, dreadful men.”

You know what made me laugh? I can’t even *imagine* a leading men’s magazine — say, *GQ* or *Esquire* — with an article titled “Why so many honorable, decent men put up with conniving, manipulative women.” It would never happen. Nor will you ever see books titled *Men Who Love Too Much* or *The Men-Haters and the Men Who Love Them*.

There’s a good reason for this. Historically, neurologically, socially, and even biblically, I believe one can make the case that women tend to be more invested in their relationships and marriages than are men. As my friend Dr. Melody Rhode, a psychologist and marriage and family therapist, puts it, “Women are bent to their husbands; we just are.” This reality has its roots in the very first family.

Back in Genesis 3, following the fall, God tells Eve, “Your desire will be for your husband” (verse 16). Respected Old Testament commentators Keil and Delitzsch suggest that the Hebrew language here evokes a “desire bordering on disease.”¹ It comes from a root word connoting a “violent craving” for something.

Some women exhibit more of this than others. I recently listened to a talk program in which a woman described how her husband had carried on a secret affair for more than four years. The husband had acted cruelly on many fronts. He had introduced his mistress to his wife, for example, and in his wife’s absence he had brought the mistress home. In fact, he even took his mistress into his wife’s bed. The illicit relationship ended only when the mistress died.

But do you know what most surprised me about the call? The wife seemed more concerned about losing this despicable man than she did about facing a life without him! Even though he had disrespected her as deeply as possible, trampled on their marital intimacy, and offended their marriage bed, she felt more afraid of waking up without him than of waking up next to him. In fact, she really wanted to find out more about the mistress! What did she look like? What kind of personality did she have? What did her husband see in her?

Contrast this with a recent question-and-answer article in *Sports Illustrated*, in which a number of professional male athletes were asked if they would ever take back a “runaway bride,” a woman who left them at the altar and embarrassed them in front of their family and friends. Not a single athlete said he would. One of the men responded so vehemently and colorfully that I can’t even print his answer in this book.

Why the discrepancy? In some cases, it may indeed be that women are more spiritually and emotionally mature, willing to forgive for the sake of the family and larger considerations. But in other cases, it might be less noble than that. Some women never rise above a sinful propensity to define themselves according to their likability — or acceptance — by men. Unfortunately, some men seem to have an ultrasensitive spiritual radar that picks up on this. They

somehow intuit a woman's spiritual neediness and will exploit it for their own ends.

Because of Christ's work and the conquering power of the Holy Spirit, however, Christian women can be set free from such psychological dependency and destruction. Listen to a passage from 1 Corinthians 7, as rendered by Eugene Peterson in *The Message*: "And don't be wishing you were someplace else or with someone else. Where you are right now is God's place for you. Live and obey and love and believe right there. God, not your marital status, defines your life" (verse 17).

Did you catch that last line? *God, not your marital status, defines your life.*

Is this true of you? The more it is, the more success you will have in moving your man, because weak women usually forfeit their influence.

Look at this from a very practical perspective: do you care much about what a person for whom you have little respect thinks of you? Probably not. So then, how is such a person going to influence you? When their opinion doesn't matter, they may communicate clearly, honestly, and practically — but you're still not going to listen to them. In the same way, if your husband doesn't respect you, if you have sinfully put his acceptance of you over your identity as a daughter of God, then how will you ever influence him for the better?

Now let's put a positive spin on this. If someone you really respect, greatly admire, and enjoy spending time with comes to you with a concern, aren't you going to give their words extra thought? Aren't you at least going to consider that they may have a point, and that you need to pay attention?

Of course you are.

This explains why the type of woman who moves her man is a woman who also *impresses* her man. I heard one husband gush about his wife's business acumen, while another raved about his wife's intelligence. Yet a third man went on and on about his wife's spiritual maturity and her ability to understand the Bible. A reserved, introverted husband spoke with great admiration about his wife's ability

to make friends, while another man described in detail his wife's most recent athletic accomplishment.

You may not have realized this, but husbands *like* to brag about their wives. They may not say it to you, but they notice your strengths and take pride in them. But far more important than your business savvy or social skills is your spiritual core. This is what will give you the strength and respect that are so necessary for being a godly change agent in your marriage. And it will bless your husband immensely. According to 1 Timothy 3:11, a man's qualification for spiritual office includes being married to a woman "worthy of respect."

The first step toward influencing your man is becoming such a woman — the unique person God created you to be, in all your glory.

Truly understanding the radical and liberating nature of Jesus' message concerning women will help you become such a person. In this next section, I'd like to move those of you who define yourself based on the fall ("I'm worthy because men like me") to defining yourself based on your relationship to God ("I matter because I'm made in the image of God, am loved by God, and am regularly empowered by God to make a difference in this world").

World Shapers

The Bible affirms women in a way that was quite radical for the time in which it was written. The Old Testament stepped outside its cultural milieu to insist that women mirror God's own character and image just as fully as do their male counterparts: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27). Right from the start, we learn that women and men *together* mirror the image of God. Males, by themselves, are not up to the task; since God is above gender, males alone (or females alone) fail to adequately represent his character and image.

While the apostle Paul does ascribe a certain significance to the man's being created first, if you look at the line of creation, females are the culmination! Everything keeps getting more sophisticated, more intricate, until finally a woman appears — and only then does God rest.

Just as tellingly, the admonition to act on this world, shape this world, and even to rule over this world is given to women just as much as it is to men: “God blessed *them* [the man *and* the woman] and said to *them*, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground’” (Genesis 1:28, emphasis added).

Women are not told to sit passively on the sidelines and cheer for their husbands as the men run the show. On the contrary, from the very beginning women share God’s command for humans to rule, subdue, and manage this earth. They are co-regents.

Some ancient theologians tried to amend this somewhat by blaming Eve for the fall, thus implying that women are spiritually weaker; but the Bible itself is far fairer to women. While it acknowledges Eve’s complicity in the fall, it also trumpets Eve’s redemptive role in the future. The Genesis account doesn’t end with Eve (and Adam) eating the fruit. God prophesies that though the serpent “won” this round, his certain and annihilating defeat would come *through the woman*. Keil and Delitzsch put it this way:

If then, the promise [to crush the head of the serpent] culminates in Christ, the fact that the victory over the serpent is promised to the posterity of the woman, not of the man, acquires this deeper significance, that as it was through the woman that the craft of the devil brought sin and death into the world, so it is also through the woman that the grace of God will give to the fallen human race the conqueror of sin, of death, and of the devil.²

Jesus, Friend of Women

This strong, affirming view of women continues into the very first book of the New Testament, with the inclusion of women in the genealogy of the Messiah (a literary act that breaks with the tradition of the first century). Yes, there is Abraham and David and Joseph — but there is also Rahab, Ruth, Mary, and even a reference to Bathsheba. Who would expect such a thing from a very patriarchal

and even misogynistic culture? It took *both* men and women to set up the human events that led to the birth of the Messiah. God chose women of diverse personality and status — including some women with less than pristine purity — to build the human line that ushered in the Savior of the world.

Just as significantly, Jesus came into this world through a woman. Not a single male had anything to do with the conception or birth of our Lord. Instead, God chose a woman to accomplish the miracle of the incarnation.

While the notion that we have to tear down men to lift up women is destructive and unhelpful, it is nevertheless amazing to realize how often the men who surrounded Jesus simply didn't get it, while the women did. One time, a Pharisee was having dinner with Jesus when a prostitute came in and washed our Lord's feet with her tears, drying them with her hair (Luke 7:36–50). This act appalled the Pharisee, but Jesus said (I'm paraphrasing and amplifying here), "You just don't get it! She understands who I am, while you, even with all your learning, remain blinded to my place and glory."

In addition to the clueless Pharisees, the male disciples of Jesus also occasionally revealed thick skulls. One time a woman poured costly perfume all over Jesus' head (Mark 14:3–9). Some of the disciples said to themselves, "What a waste!" while Jesus thought, "Finally, here's someone who really gets who I am." In fact, Jesus declared that this woman's action would be remembered wherever his gospel would be preached. Not one person out of a hundred can name all twelve disciples, but most people have heard of this bold woman.

Jesus also elevated women in his teaching. In Mark 10:11, Jesus astonishes his disciples when he tells them, "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her." Why was this astonishing? According to rabbinic law, a man could commit adultery against another married *man* by sleeping with that man's wife, and a wife could commit adultery against *her husband* by sleeping with another man; but no provision stipulated how a husband could commit adultery against his wife.³ According to one commentator, Jesus "is expressing a reaction against the frequently

low esteem of women, even in Judaism.... This sharp intensifying of the concept of adultery had the effect of elevating the status of the wife to the same dignity as her husband."⁴ Jesus was telling those first-century men, "Your wife has equal value in God's sight. It is possible for you to sin against her every bit as much as it is possible for her to sin against you."

And let's look at Jesus' death. While one male disciple betrayed our Lord and ten others cowered behind locked doors, some very courageous women (and just one male disciple) dared to watch Jesus' final minutes on this earth. Mark goes out of his way to emphasize the scene at the foot of the cross: "Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs. *Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there*" (Mark 15:40–41, emphasis added). In Jesus' most trying moments, he was supported by many women and one man. Modern readers might read right over this narrative fact — but in the early history of the church, this was a startling truth and a challenge to any false view of male superiority.

But perhaps the boldest statement came after Jesus died and was raised from the dead. According to ancient Pharisaic law, a woman's testimony was inadmissible in a tribunal as too untrustworthy. Only men could give witness. So when Jesus rose from the dead — the most important event that has ever occurred or ever will occur — who was present to give witness and testimony? Women! Jesus pointedly uses women, whose testimony could not be heard in contemporary courts of law, to proclaim his glorious resurrection.

This elevation of women at all points — in theological pronouncements, historical accounts, and practical teaching — should really astonish us, given the male-oriented culture in which the Bible took shape. Thousands of years before *feminism* had become a word, God repeatedly stood up for women, giving them a prominent place in the story of all stories.

Let the words of the Bible wash away any mistaken cultural notions you may hold that inaccurately depict God's view of women.

The Bible presents a woman as a strong image bearer of God, able to stand against the world, powerfully influencing men and culture (witness the case of Deborah in the Bible or Teresa of Avila in history) as she lives the life God created her to live. Despite the negative messages you may have received — whether from your family, church, or culture — you need to

- understand the glory of being a woman made in God’s image;
- experience the strength you have as the recipient of his Holy Spirit;
- and find refuge in the worth and purpose you have as his daughter.

Through this mighty spiritual core you can influence the world — including your husband. *God, not your marital status or the condition of your marriage, defines your life.*

You may have thought that biblical submission sentences you to a second-tier status, that you must be your husband’s doormat and allow him to walk all over you without ever raising your voice as you quietly pray in the corner. Such an outdated view comes from the culture, not the Bible.

Don’t think I am promoting a radical feminist agenda here! In fact, I believe it is important to affirm differences in gender roles (we’ll talk more about this later). Men and women *aren’t* the same — but they *are* equal in God’s eyes, and there is a unique glory in both genders.

I believe you owe it to the God who created you — and to yourself, to the husband who married you, and to any kids you’ve given birth to — to become the woman he designed you to be, in all your glory, power, strength, and wisdom.

When Marriage Becomes Idolatry

While some women define themselves on the basis of how one man (or men in general) views them and accepts them, as a *Christian* woman you have the opportunity to define yourself in relation to your Creator — not in defiance of your husband but in a way that

will complement your marriage and bless your husband. It will unleash in you the glory of being a godly woman.

Let's apply some simple theology here. Who does the Bible say is your refuge — God, or your husband? Deuteronomy 33:27 provides the answer: "The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms."

In whom does your hope lie? Your husband's continuing affection? First Peter 1:21 says, "Your faith and hope are in God."

Where will you find your security? Your husband's ability to earn a living and his commitment to stay married to you? Philipians 4:19 answers, "My God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus."

Where will you find supreme acceptance that will never fade or falter for all the days of your life? "As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride," replies Isaiah 62:5, "so will your God rejoice over you."

If you're trying to find your primary refuge in your husband, if you've centered your hope on him, if your security depends on his approval, and if you will do almost anything to gain his acceptance — then you've just given to a man what rightfully belongs to God alone.

And that means you've turned marriage into idol worship.

When you do that, both you and your husband lose. You can't love a false idol long term. You just can't. You may worship it for a while, but eventually that idol's limitations will show and you'll become bitter and resentful. Just as surely as a block of wood can't speak wisdom, so a human man can't love you as God created you to be loved. And what happens when an idol disappoints you? Ah, that's the type of experience that gives birth to the cliché, "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned."

In addition, how will you ever find the courage to confront someone whose acceptance so determines your sense of well-being that you believe you can't exist without him? How will you ever take the risk to say what needs to be said if you think your future depends on your husband's favor toward you?

Your future depends on God, not on a fallen man. Your security rests with your caring Creator's providence, not with your

husband's paycheck. Your acceptance as a person became secure when God adopted you, not when your husband proposed to you. If you truly want to love, motivate, and influence your husband, your first step must be to connect — and to stay connected — with God. Find your refuge, security, comfort, strength, and hope in him.

This line of thinking is neither academic nor theoretical. Statistics show that most women will die as widows. Women, by and large, live longer than men. Since most women marry men as old as or older than they are, the math isn't all that hard to figure out. *If you die while still married to your spouse, you'll be in the minority.* Sooner or later, you're probably going to have to live without your husband.

This means the day will likely come when you will need strength, courage, and character like you've never had before. You'll have to stand on your own. So then, why not develop that strength, courage, and character *now*, while your husband is still living and you're not beside yourself with grief? Why not bless this world with the example of a woman defined by God, living a life that reveres God, twenty or thirty years sooner than widowhood forces it on you?

Before I address the practical issues of how to influence your husband, I encourage you to reevaluate and affirm your biblical standing as a woman. More often than not, this will be a process — perhaps you'll have to pray over the Bible verses in this chapter until they become real to you. But you *must not* accept any identity that gives you less than the Bible offers you. Before you run the race, you have to train. Before you can influence someone, you must become spiritually strong enough to stand up to your husband's "functional fixedness."

We'll discuss this, and much more, in the next chapter.