

Blessing Your Husband

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INTRODUCTION

If anyone was ever entitled to be served by other people, Jesus was. But think about how He treated his closest companions: He got out a towel and started scrubbing their feet. Why?

“God sees us with the eyes of a Father,” asserts author and minister Max Lucado. “He sees our defects, errors, and blemishes. But he also sees our value. What did Jesus know that enabled him to do what he did? Here’s part of the answer. He knew the value of people. He knew that each human being is a treasure. And because he did, people were not a source of stress but a source of joy.”¹

In marriage, most of us are willing enough to serve—if our spouse is equally willing, that is. When our husband lets us down, keeping our minds on marital ministry can be more difficult. But foot washing, not bookkeeping, is the first order of business on our personal agendas, especially where our marriages are concerned: “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:2-3).

Completely humble? *Every* effort? That’s a tall order, and one I’ll be spending more time on over the course of this book. Until then, however, let me give you a snapshot to refer to in the event you are wondering, “What does the biblical concept of blessing actually mean, and what does it have to do with my marriage?”

Family counselors Gary Smalley and John Trent, authors of *The Blessing*, offer the following explanation:

Genuine acceptance radiates from the concept of the blessing. For sons and daughters in biblical times, receiving their father’s blessing was a momentous event. At a specific point in their lives they would hear words of encouragement, love, and acceptance from their parents. [Some] aspects of this Old Testament blessing were unique to that time. However, the relationship elements of this blessing are still applicable today. In Old

Testament times, this blessing was primarily reserved for one special occasion. In contrast, [family members] today can decide to build these elements of blessing into [one another's] lives daily....²

Ephesians 2:4-10 gives us a small glimpse of blessing's definition in the matchless blessing our Father bestowed on us through His Son:

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Talk about *blessing!* Words can't begin to describe the fullness of blessing God has bestowed upon us by His grace: Our debt has been canceled; God has made us alive with Christ! And that is the basis for the blessings we bestow on our husband.

In the following chapters, I want to help you nurture your understanding of the many ways in which you can bless your husband. As your understanding increases, so will your capacity for putting your God-given gifts to use for His glory. Jesus calls each of us to use what the Father gives us (see Matthew 25:14-30; Ephesians 2:10). When we do, we invest valuable treasure where it can never be taken away from us—no matter what tomorrow brings.

In the meantime, as St. Augustine advised, “Do what you can do, and pray for what you cannot do.” Although our exclusive, committed love for our husband can't come close to approximating the Lord's unfailing love for him, God asks us to partner with Him in blessing our husband on His behalf.

Blessing our husband conveys our approval of him, thereby affirming he is lovable, capable, and valuable simply because of who he is. Dr. Smalley and Dr. Trent suggest that blessings include meaningful touch, spoken messages, attaching high value to those we bless, and picturing a special future for them.³ In each case we base the blessing on our commitment to seeing God's blessings in their lives come to pass. We bless our husband, for example:

- by our words and actions, by way of our prayers, through our body language, with our facial expressions and physical gestures, and in the tone of our voice
- with nurturing touch and loving caresses as we welcome him with our body
- when we give him gifts, write birthday cards and notes of appreciation, make a surprise phone call in the middle of a busy workday, or extend an invitation for lunch
- through sending him spoken and unspoken messages that honor and encourage his God-given position of spiritual leadership, side-by-side ministry, and sacrificial service within marriage

By blessing our husband and holding him up in prayer before our loving Father, we quietly exercise the privilege of participating in the work of heaven. Blessing our husband for our Father's glory—investing time, prayer, and tender loving care on our husband's behalf—is an essential means of home and kingdom building that brings lasting rewards: “For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have shewed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister” (Hebrews 6:10, KJV). Additionally, blessing our husbands:

- enables us to “do what we can do” even as we lift our unmet needs, innermost desires, and private concerns to God
- turns our eyes toward the solution for the helplessness we feel when God asks us to abandon our well-meaning but futile attempts to direct, lead, steer, or otherwise reroute our husband's life
- helps us walk with our husband through his defeats and triumphs in the strength of God's grace as we depend on the Holy Spirit's timely guidance and assistance

- teaches us the wisdom of waiting, listening, and looking for God's answers to our questions and concerns regarding our husband
- leads us to our Father's protective pastures for the Shepherd's safekeeping, the only place where we unflinchingly find trouble-free rest for our souls

Jesus modeled the concept of blessing for His disciples when He broke bread with them, cooked fish for them, and spoke of His Father's love and purposes for them. Jesus lived to do the will of His Father; He did not function independently but maintained the vital connection with His Father in heaven. In Christ's active and obedient ministry to others, we have a perfect example of the kind of active love on which the good work of blessing our husband is based.

By deciding to read *Blessing Your Husband*, you have expressed a desire to strengthen the bond you share with your husband. You honor the commitment you made on that memorable day when your lives were joined together in Christ. You recognize the importance of your role as a wife and realize, as I do, that this consecrated union is the most influential, exclusive, revealing, meaningful, and humbling relationship in your life. Whether you have been married for days or years, you understand that your words, actions, attitudes, and prayers have a big impact on your husband, your heart, and your marriage. It's my hope that you'll receive an ample dose of encouragement as you read this book and spend time thinking about ways to fortify the vital connection you share with your spouse.

I stand with you in your effort! I did not write *Blessing Your Husband* because I think I have all the answers (does anyone?) or because I can claim that my thirty-three years of wifely experience have been completely free of stress, strain, and disappointment. I wrote these pages because I want to, as loudly and clearly as I can, cheer you on toward reinforcing, valuing, and protecting your marriage bond. I want to affirm the eternal worth of your wifely role, and to ever so gently remind you that a successful, meaningful marriage *is* possible if you aren't afraid to ask God repeatedly for His help, strength, mercy, and wisdom.

It is my hope that this book will provide you with the tools you need to grow closer to God and to your husband. Each chapter ends

with several reflection and action points, and I urge you to set aside focused time as you can—perhaps weekly—with these:

- Focus Points—summaries of the most important points from each chapter for quick review.
- Words to Remember—scriptures to live by and meditate upon as you spend time with the Lord.
- Real Guys—thoughts from husbands about what their wives do that truly blesses them.
- Personal Reflections—questions and journal exercises to help you think more deeply and personally about how certain principles apply to your marriage.
- Prayers—adapted from Scripture and from the classics to assist you as you pray for your husband and your marriage. You might consider copying these onto index cards and placing them strategically in your purse, bathroom, kitchen, car, office, or wherever you will see them often.
- Blessings Now—collected ideas from which you can choose simple blessings to begin extending to your husband today.
- For Further Reading—a recommended reading list of books that will take you deeper into the issues discussed in each chapter. While the Christian books on this list are excellent in my opinion, they represent a variety of perspectives, so focus on those that are personally helpful to you in your efforts to strengthen your marriage. Out-of-print books can often be located through libraries, used bookstores, and online booksellers.

As we place Jesus above all other relationships and personal interests, we receive the grace to grow up into Christ as well as into our marriages—to increasingly surrender our biases, self-centeredness, and scorekeeping. In doing so, we experience the freedom that allows us to bless our husband not only with wisdom, but also with dignity and joy.



PART I

Reality
Check



ONE

Married Outside of Eden



Marriage is not simply the luck of the draw, or something that we get involved in which just unfolds before us like a long movie. Good marriages, like good individual lives or good art, are conscious creations. They are made.

KEVIN AND MARILYN RYAN

Do you sometimes wish you could once and for all insulate your marriage from failure and frustration, that you could shock-proof your sacred bond? Do you ever long for spiritual shortcuts on the road to holiness together?

Our easily distracted human heart seeks the easy detours. Whether living our life or loving our husband, we prefer wide, paved roads to the rugged, step-by-step path that requires us to continually seek and submit to God's will, pray about everything, get help when we need it, thank God for *all* He has done, and travel on.

But marriage, of course, isn't a smoothly paved, predictable journey; it's a bumpy love-in-action relationship filled with disorienting roadside challenges and constant surprises. Wedded life requires strenuous, open-hearted endurance—a continuing, conscious effort to remain obedient to

God’s transforming work in our life—over hundreds of months and thousands of days. A healthy marriage can’t be built *immediately*, but it *can* be built. Couples committed to creating one must carefully construct and cement their bond, layer by layer.

Arduous Demands and Astonishing Surprises

“The divine design is no mistake,” writes Gladys Hunt, author of *Ms. Means Myself*. “The mutual attraction of male and female calls us to confront our aloneness, out of our independence to see that we need each other. It is the foundation of human history. We are meant to enhance each other, to affirm the other’s personhood and to discover that in our mutual dependence we solve the mystery of our existence.”¹

The exclusive intimacy marriage requires is obviously part of God’s plan for us. Even so, loving our husband—*genuinely* loving him accord-



The Truth about Marriage

Marriage is the closest bond that is possible between two human beings. That, at least, was the original idea behind it. It was to be something unique, without parallel or precedent. In the sheer sweep and radical abandon of its commitment, it was to transcend every other form of human union on earth, every other covenant that could possibly be made between two people. Friendship, parent-child, master-pupil—marriage would surpass all these other bonds in a whole constellation of remarkable ways, including equality of the partners, permanent commitment, cohabitation, sexual relations, and the spontaneous creation of blood ties through simple spoken promises. As it was originally designed, marriage was a union to end all unions, the very last word, and the first, in human intimacy. Socially, legally, physically, emotionally, every which way, there is just no other means of getting closer to another human being, and never has been, than in marriage.

Such extraordinary closeness is bought at a cost, and the cost is nothing

ing to the way love is defined in the New Testament—doesn't come naturally for any of us. When our husband disagrees with us, offends us, or annoys us, our desire to continuously care for and cherish him is challenged. This, too, is part of God's plan for us: learning what love is, and what it's not, within the incredibly instructive context of marriage.

"Scriptures give us careful, meticulous descriptions of the many aspects of love," Stuart and Jill Briscoe point out in *Living Love*. "It's important to take a close look at the sixteen descriptions of love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 and not get sidetracked when reading it simply because it is so familiar or so beautiful. There are rugged, abrasive qualities in this passage that describe what love really is when it is in operation.... Love is not primarily something that you feel. You cannot love with God's love, merely by oohing and aaahing over the 'love chapter.' The Scriptures require action."²

Marriage is full of staggering wonder and risk, incomprehensible

more or less than one's own self. No one has ever married without being shocked at the enormity of this price and the monstrous inconvenience of this thing called intimacy which suddenly invades their life.... All of life is, in one way or another, humbling. But there is nothing like the experience of being humbled by another person, and by the same person day in and day out. It can be exhausting, unnerving, infuriating, disintegrating. There is no suffering like the suffering involved in being close to another person. But neither is there any joy nor any real comfort at all outside of intimacy, outside the joy and comfort that are wrung out like wine from the crush and ferment of two lives being pressed together....

The truth about marriage is that it is a way not of avoiding any of the painful trials and subtractions of life, but rather of confronting them, of exposing and tackling them most intimately, most humanly. It is a way to meet suffering personally, head on, with the peculiar directness, the reckless candidness characteristic only of love. It is a way of living life with no other strategy or defense or protection than that of love.... Marriage is a way not to evade suffering, but to suffer purposefully.³—Mike Mason



mystery and surprise, unique joys and sorrows. Over the course of a marriage, life can be amazingly serene at certain moments, completely exasperating at others. Given the imperfect, fallen world we live in, every day we face the startling possibility that we will experience the effects of sin, loss, and disappointment. As Eve's daughters, our marriage makes its way outside of Eden.

The apostle Paul expressed this reality well when he wrote, "We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (Romans 8:22). What a powerful statement! As a veteran childbirth educator and the mother of four children, my heart almost skips a beat when I read this Bible passage. *The whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth as it awaits its final redemption from the effects of the Fall*—and it still is. Can you hear the groaning?

Though it's easy on difficult days to forget our ultimate goal, our labor and our groans are deeply productive where God's eternal purpose for us is concerned: "For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:17-18).

The Real Task at Hand

Do you believe God is productively and perfectly working for the good of your marriage, for your husband, and for you? Do you daily trust God to shape and design your husband's life—and also your own?

I don't know about you, but when I experience frustration or anger regarding my husband's attitudes or actions, I usually slip into Control Mode. I tend to cope with both big and small concerns about my spouse by subtly (or not so subtly) attempting to redirect, reorganize, and redecorate him. When things start getting messy, I want to straighten up my husband's life.

For example, when David drives too fast, I tend to sigh loudly, raise my eyebrows in disapproval, and point out the obvious speed limit signs. Even though I know my tendency will fail to transform his

driving, I would like to spare both of us the embarrassment and expense of a traffic citation. It's hard for me not to say anything to my husband, even though one well-timed speeding ticket would have a far greater effect on David's driving than all my sighs, eyebrow raising, and finger pointing combined. As you can imagine, this same principle applies to any number of areas of our life together.

I realize my behavior seems fairly ridiculous. After all, what educated woman treats her husband as if he were a continuing interior design challenge? I can't help but think that if Eve had been completely content with Adam, God, and herself, she might never have presumed to eat the forbidden fruit, nor would she have offered "just a tiny bite" to her husband.

Perhaps you, too, see the problem. This age-old behavior pattern concerning husband improvement is, I suspect, something I share with many women, including my famous foremother from the Garden of Eden.

Regardless of how much we love our husband, we will dislike certain things about him, as he will dislike certain things about us. If we lay down our desire to control, however, and open our hearts to see our husband as he really is rather than focusing on who we want him to be, our ability to love and forgive and bless him will grow. When we accept the responsibility of understanding and appreciating our husband's uniqueness—the sum total of his singular spiritual, physical, psychological, and social attributes—our focus remains where it belongs: on God, and on His unchanging purposes and promises for our marriage, our husband, and ourself.

The inconstant world where we negotiate our *en route* existence is not what it once was, nor what it will one day be. Life, like labor, is full of arduous demands and astonishing surprises. We live in a physically, emotionally, and spiritually trying environment that C. S. Lewis, the inspired British writer and philosopher, called "the shadowlands." Our daily pilgrimage unfolds in a varied landscape of not-yet-fully illuminated places that continually challenge us to go deeper, go further, with God. If we rise to the challenge, we can expect to see and understand better His life-giving, glorious reality.

FOCUS POINTS

- Wedded life requires a continuing, conscious effort to remain obedient to God's transforming work in our life. God is productively and perfectly working for the good of your marriage, for your husband, and for you.
- Given the imperfect, fallen world we live in, every day we face the startling possibility that we will experience the effects of sin, loss, and disappointment. But our labor and our groans are deeply productive where God's eternal purpose for us is concerned.
- If we lay down our desire to control our husband—if we open our heart to see him as he really is rather than focusing on who we want him to be—our ability to love and forgive and bless him will grow.
- When we accept the responsibility of understanding and appreciating our husband's uniqueness, our attention remains where it belongs: on God and on His unchanging purposes and promises for our marriage, our husband, and ourself.

WORDS TO REMEMBER

- The Lord is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made. (Psalm 145:13)
- Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. (Ephesians 5:15-17)
- Your hands made me and formed me; give me understanding to learn your commands. (Psalm 119:73)
- Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children. (Ephesians 5:1)

REAL GUYS

“Kind, helpful, and unselfish actions always lift my spirits emotionally, spiritually, and even physically. But one thing transcends the attention focused upon me. I have heard friends of my wife comment, ‘What a great husband you have!’ Others tell me directly,

‘What a wonderful relationship you and your wife must have.’ You see, it’s not only that she has done something to me to be a blessing, but that she has acknowledged to other people the blessing of what we have together.”—Jim

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

1. At what point in your marriage, if ever, do you first remember thinking, “This is harder than I thought it was going to be”? How did God help you keep going? What have you learned along the way?
2. Complete these thoughts in your journal:
The destination we’re aiming for in our marriage is...
On difficult days, it helps to remember...
God met me at a point of need in my marriage when...
3. If you’re currently struggling with an annoying character trait or habit that’s really bugging you about your husband and it’s clear he isn’t interested in making a change right now, what will you do to relieve your feelings of anger, hurt, or frustration? Record your thoughts and feelings and prayers—for your eyes only.

PRAYERS

*Praying God’s Blessing for Our Marriage**

God, be gracious to us and bless us and make your face shine upon us, that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations.—Psalm 67:1-2

*Praying God’s Blessing for My Husband**

God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip my husband with every good thing for doing your will, and may you work in my husband what is pleasing to you, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.—Hebrews 13:20-21

Closing Prayer

O God of patience and consolation, give us such goodwill, we beseech Thee, that with free hearts we may love and serve Thee and our brethren; and, having thus the mind of Christ, may begin heaven

on earth, and exercise ourselves therein till that day when heaven where love abideth shall seem no strange habitation to us. For Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.⁴—Christina G. Rossetti (1830-1895)

*Pronouns in all end-of-chapter prayers for blessing are personalized.

BLESSINGS NOW

- Open your heart to seeing your husband as he is in his Father's eyes rather than thinking about who you want him to be.
- Nurture emotional as well as physical intimacy. Touch your husband while silently praying for his physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being.
- Admit it when you realize you're wrong: "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed" (James 5:16).
- For at least one day, set aside thoughts of your husband's faults or shortcomings. Focus instead on God's unchanging promises and purposes for him.
- Try to understand your husband's opinion during a disagreement or dispute. Aim to make allowances for the differences between you.
- Extend grace in place of negative criticism: Identify one thing about your husband that really bugs you and decide from this day forward you will avoid trying to change this particular behavior.
- Encourage your partner to play. Ask him what he would like to do with his evening, then help protect his time by taking his phone calls and limiting interruptions.
- Avoid taking your husband for granted today. Express your appreciation for your beloved by putting your love into action on his behalf in some noticeable, new way.
- Slow down. Savor a quiet moment together behind closed doors.
- Boldly go where no woman has gone before: Invite your husband to imagine a future with you in which you picture growing old together. Talk about your hopes, dreams, and fears about turning 30 . . . 40 . . . 50 . . . 60 . . . 70 and beyond.

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APPENDIX 6.1 TO YOUR HEALTH

These five key elements of a healthful life will improve your level of well-being and also reduce the effects of stress in your life:

1. *A balanced diet:* By avoiding excessive sugar, alcohol, and caffeine, processed meats, and monosodium glutamate, you will enhance your ability to cope with daily pressures. Several of these substances have been shown to produce rapid changes in heart rate and contribute to other problems, such as tooth decay, obesity, alcoholism, headaches, and nervousness. In addition, drinking at least two quarts of water and/or water-based, noncaloric fluid (diet soda, coffee, tea, or herbal tea) daily, including in your diet foods rich in complex carbohydrates (whole grain products, fruits, and vegetables), lowering your fat intake, and eating calcium- and protein-rich foods can promote your health and increase your ability to withstand stress.

“Have you ever said, ‘I wish I knew what I could do about my allergies, or weight problem, or headaches or blemishes, etc.?’” asks Dr. Susan Negus. “Well, the good news is that there are many steps you can take toward healthy living. It will take some discipline, but your willingness to give up some of the habits and foods that are bad for you and substitute them for good habits and foods will result in a healthier body and, more importantly, prepare you for God’s service.”¹

Living a healthful lifestyle involves more than just being “whole” spiritually. It means doing your part in changing your habits and developing an ongoing awareness of how your lifestyle affects your body. You can form realistic expectations and reject our culture’s one-dimensional view of the perfect woman. Take your eyes off of your failures, deficiencies, and shortcomings. Give yourself a break! Your amazing body, rich with imperfection as it may be, deserves your tender loving care. Each new day brings multiple opportunities to say yes *and* no to habits and foods that can improve your health.

2. *Exercise for energy and enjoyment:* Competitive activities or a mind-set that makes you push yourself too hard can increase stress

hormone levels in your body. Consequently, the activities you participate in for enjoyment as well as for fitness are the best forms of exercise. Swimming, walking, dancing, cycling, running, rope-skipping, and cross-country skiing are all excellent cardiovascular fitness activities for many women. These forms of exercise can significantly reduce your stress level and improve your sense of well-being, especially when you engage in them regularly for a minimum of thirty minutes at least three times a week. They might also just inspire your husband to better health as well: “My wife’s discipline in her exercising encourages me to continue my exercising,” says Don, “thus making me feel good about myself as I keep somewhat in shape.”

Not surprisingly, research has definitively shown that strength training also plays an important role in alleviating the effects of aging and improving one’s quality of life. By regularly engaging in resistance exercise (specifically prescribed weight lifting and other recommended strength training methods), you can build bone mass, improve your balance and flexibility, and enhance weight control.

Truth is, with appropriate, disciplined exercise, you and your husband can build your strength and enhance your energy level. As energy and stamina increase, everyday life becomes easier. Additionally, the calming effect produced by exercise can ease muscle tension, reduce anxiety, and relieve pain.

3. *A regular bedtime followed by uninterrupted sleep:* Irregular sleep patterns and frequent changes in bedtime schedules can harm your body by interfering with your ability to dream and reach specific brain wave patterns during rest. Dreaming allows you to release tension and anxiety; your metabolism slows down and your muscles relax when you achieve a deep-sleep state. Since your body and mind are renewed in many different ways when you sleep, getting the rest you need enables you to be refreshed each night. Adequate sleep and physical rest also enhance the immune system, as well as reduce the severity of premenstrual syndrome.

4. *Appropriate expressions of emotion:* It has been said that when one tries to bury her feelings, she only succeeds in burying them alive. In other words, ignoring or denying negative feelings does not make them disappear. When we take our real emotions directly to the Lord, it becomes possible to learn to trust Him more deeply.

“View life as a learning opportunity,” Jean Fleming advises. “Ask God what He wants you to learn from the situations you face. Daily Bible reading and prayer prepare us to receive instruction and direction from God. When we set aside specific time to listen, He often encourages us with His presence and promises, and interprets to some degree the circumstances of life. Take advantage of the natural lull after hard times when you’re pulling together the pieces to sort through the events and ferret out the lessons.

“The situation we face today can build a greater God-confidence in our life and give us the assurance that in Christ we can tackle what lies ahead. Incident after incident, lesson after lesson, year after year, as we experience God’s great faithfulness, grace, and power, we will gain the confidence to say, ‘I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength [Philippians 4:13].’”²

The Psalms vividly portray this wonderful principle: As David opens his heart to God, we see his heart changing in dramatic ways as he is humbled, strengthened, and renewed in the Lord’s presence. This theme is often repeated throughout the Bible. Like David, you too can invite the Lord to know your anxious thoughts and lead you in the everlasting way of His truth (Psalm 139). Learning to be open before God and actively listening to His voice through His Word will bless your life and your marriage.

5. *Quiet times for relaxation:* You can also promote your ability to handle stress on the physical, emotional, and spiritual levels when you take time out to reflect on God’s majesty. Taking fifteen or more minutes out of your busy day to set your mind on Christ as you relax in a comfortable position can effectively de-stress your mind, refresh your body, *and* nourish your spirit.

When you sit with your feet up in a recliner, soak in a warm bath, or lie comfortably on a soft, supportive surface, you help your body relax by releasing the muscular tension that has accumulated during the day. With closed eyes, reflect on how much the Lord loves you. Spending time in peaceful prayer with Jesus in this way is yet another means of learning about Him. Rather than only asking for His help and intervention, you will benefit from taking the time to enjoy the Holy Spirit’s ever-present comfort and counsel.

Relaxing in this way also stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS), or quieting response, as a means of countering the effects of stress hormones. Bodily processes slow down and permit the release of powerful chemicals called endorphins. The quieting response is the body's opposite response to the fight or flight reflex. Think about the tingling sensations you feel during a back rub or when someone else brushes your hair. These sensations are related to PNS activity as endorphins and other naturally secreted stress relievers diminish pain and promote a feeling of tranquility. These substances are also released after times of physical exertion.

APPENDIX 6.2

CALM, COOL, AND COLLECTED

In addition to relaxation, there are several other ways you can stimulate your quieting response. Though one of the best ways of provoking the quieting response is through touch, here are twelve things you can do on your own to calm down your nervous system:

1. Warm, leisurely shower or bath
2. Slow breathing: 6-12 breaths per minute
3. Soothing environment: candlelight, dimmed lighting, comfortable room temperature, pillows, loose clothing
4. Relaxing sounds: music, nature sounds, silence
5. Comfortable position that aids in releasing muscular tension
6. Avoidance of worry
7. Reflection on the beauty and majesty of God and His creation
8. Listening to an audio tape of someone reading Psalms
9. Resting in bed while awake
10. Massage: back, neck, face, scalp, arms, legs
11. Contemplative prayer
12. Sitting quietly for fifteen minutes, without distractions or interruptions

As you relax, remember the Lord is with you. Give thanks and praise the Lord for His blessings, entrusting Him with every burden weighing you down. Avoid thoughts that distract you from delighting yourself in God and resting in His presence. Find Bible passages that give you confidence and reassurance—God’s promises of peace—and think about them. Give thanks to and praise the Lord for His blessings, entrusting Him with every burden weighing you down.

APPENDIX 8.1

101 GREAT DATES

1. Go for a ride and a talk in the country.
2. Take a bicycle ride. For improving your teamwork, rent a tandem bike.
3. Sit outside in the moonlight, sharing goals and dreams, concluding with thanksgiving for the blessings given to you by God.
4. Work together outdoors, planting trees or gardening.
5. Offer to give your spouse a body massage with scented oil.
6. Get up early together and have coffee or tea out on the patio.
7. Go for a walk in the woods.
8. Go horseback riding and picnic on the trail.
9. Build sand castles at the beach.
10. Go out for dessert.
11. Rent a good movie and eat popcorn together.
12. Bathe together by candlelight.
13. Share a meal at a nice restaurant and go to a play afterwards.
14. Visit a planetarium.
15. Take a dinner train ride.
16. Go sledding or ice-skating. (Take hot cocoa along.)
17. Go for a walk and a talk in a small town with lots of history.
18. Try a water slide or go to a pool for a swim.
19. Get up and watch the sunrise together. (Someone suggested that playing golf at this time of day could be fun, too.)
20. Take a buggy ride together at Christmastime.
21. Take dancing lessons and learn something new about “partnering.”
22. Go to the state capitol building for a tour.
23. Attend a high school or college football game (or volleyball, basketball...).
24. Enroll in an adult education class together.

APPENDIX 8.2

HOW TO GIVE A GREAT BACK RUB

Human relationships thrive on touch when it is done appropriately and with respect. We have many examples in the Gospels of Jesus touching those around Him and of His disciples touching Him. I especially like the references to “the disciple whom Jesus loved” leaning back against Jesus at the Last Supper and to His taking the little children in His arms. The “laying on of hands” has great significance throughout the New Testament and continues to be used today in many different denominations during Communion, baptism, ordination, prayers for healing, and requests for special anointing. Through touch we let others know *we care*.

Nurturing, nonsexual physical expressions of love can be a key way of blessing our husbands. Between a husband and wife, the gift of nurturing touch is as significant as it is in any human relationship. If married partners touch one another only in sexual ways or in order to attempt to stimulate one another toward sexual arousal, a marriage can suffer.

Many women have told me of their resentment that their husbands only touch them when they want “something in return.” It is certainly true that many men have been raised in homes where cuddling, hugging, snuggling, and putting arms around male family members was uncommon. Discovering new ways of expressing love through touch can be a growing experience for anyone reared in a “low-touch” atmosphere. But learn we must. We can’t afford to abandon the caring communication *everyone* needs, whether they’re aware of it or not.

It’s unrealistic to think that your husband will know how to give you a good back rub if he has never received one himself. Thus, a good way to begin to foster more loving communication through touch in your home is by learning how to give your husband a relaxing massage. In this way, your hands will teach him gently about your love for him and will also “tell” him how you would like him to touch you.

Taking the time to learn this skill is well worth the time and effort.

The principles upon which an effective massage is based are fairly simple to learn and easy to remember. In following these steps, you will rapidly develop an excellent technique and have your husband expressing his appreciation to you even with your first attempt. These steps are:

1. *Reduce the friction* caused by your hands with an agent such as cornstarch or oil. The types of oil that work best are vegetable, nut, or cold-pressed seed oils such as peanut, almond, safflower, or corn oil. You may use them alone or in combination with one another. Scented oils may be obtained through some health food stores or specialty soap shops in eight-ounce or larger containers.

2. When you're ready to begin the massage, *put on some relaxing music and ask your husband to remove his clothing*. Give him a gigantic terry towel or flannel blanket to wrap around himself. When he lies down on his stomach for the back rub, be sure to keep him covered from the buttocks downward. By keeping areas covered that are not a part of the area you are concentrating the massage on, you will keep the focus on the back rub and away from his sexuality. Massage can be incorporated into lovemaking at other times. For learning these techniques as a means of stress reduction, however, it's helpful to agree on avoiding sexual stimulation.

3. *Have him lie on a comfortable surface* at a height that will help you to avoid back strain as you work. If he's lying on his stomach, place a small pillow under his abdomen to reduce back strain for him, if needed. You may also place a rolled towel under the front surface of his ankles to enable his legs to relax. When he is lying on his back, he may enjoy having a doubled up pillow under each knee to reduce back strain.

4. When you massage, *use strokes that conform to the contours of your husband's body* while at the same time applying pressure deep enough to promote circulation but not uncomfortable. Use your hands to "talk" to your husband lovingly, smoothly, and rhythmically.

5. *Stroke in particular patterns* at speeds described in the text. Rhythm and repetition are essential. Stroke without interruption over a specific area until you have completely massaged it.

6. *Pray for your husband while you're touching him.* Let your hands express how you feel about him and view them as a means of conveying not only your love for him, but the Lord's love for him as well. Ask him to do the same for you whenever he gives you a massage. Bless one another through soothing forms of touch.

7. *Obtain feedback from him* to find out what parts of the massage he liked the best and if he would like you to continue by concentrating on specific areas.

8. *Finish the massage one area at a time* by placing your hands flat on the surface that you have completed, pressing in slightly, then lifting up and off the surface. For example, when you have completed the back, place one hand between the shoulders and one hand at the base of the spine, press, then lift both hands at the same time. This quiet signal tells him you are done.

Now that you have learned these tips, you're ready to begin the back rub. Note that the circular and patterned movements you'll be using are directed toward the head and heart, while the long, flowing, relaxing strokes move toward the periphery of the body. In this way, circulation is promoted and relaxation is enhanced. In addition to putting on some soothing music, you might take the phone off the hook to better separate yourselves from the stress of the world outside. This can really be a special time between the two of you, as corny as it may seem. Most of us just get too busy and can use such moments to better appreciate the wonder of our relationships.

Massage Techniques for the Back

1. *Circle sweeps:* With your husband lying on his stomach, place both of your hands at the base of his back on his waist. Be sure to have enough oil on your hands so they glide smoothly over the surface of his skin. Begin to stroke up along the spine (but not on it), using circular movements that move up, over the surface of the back, toward the sides, then back around to the midline. Make the strokes six to eight inches in diameter, applying pressure as you move in an upward direction to the shoulders. It will take four or five circles spiraling upwards to cover the surface of the back.

APPENDIX 9.1

ARE YOU AVOIDING YOUR HUSBAND?

In the marriage classes I teach I hear many women expressing their desire to enjoy greater sexual intimacy with their husbands. Yet day-to-day realities can make this goal elusive. In exploring the most common reasons for avoiding lovemaking, class participants more easily identify the underlying reasons behind their avoidance. If a woman often tells her husband that it's too cold, too hot, too late, or too early, something more important is likely going on.

Below is an exercise that class participants have found to be an effective starting place to begin to evaluate and address these deeper issues. I encourage you to follow up by reading some books on sexuality written from a Christ-centered perspective. (See "For Further Reading" at the end of chapter 9.) You may also want to talk to your women's ministries coordinator or an older married woman at your church for additional ideas.

Check off any of the reasons you may have had for not making love during the past few months:

- I felt neglected by my husband.
- I felt resentful that he expected sex but had not related to me in a loving way.
- I felt unattractive.
- I have had difficulty feeling sexually fulfilled during lovemaking.
- I just wanted to be held or have a back rub without my husband expecting sex afterwards.
- I was sick and had no interest in sex.
- I feel that my husband just takes me for granted.
- My sex drive was low so I couldn't get excited about lovemaking.
- I resent his enjoying sex while ignoring my needs.
- I don't know how to tell him how to "pleasure" me or touch me.
- I have difficulty expressing my needs and end up feeling depressed or resentful.

APPENDIX 9.2

CULTIVATING SEXUAL INTIMACY

The Lord has designed a delightful dimension into the marriage bond—the reciprocal principle. Namely, that as you give pleasure, you enhance your ability to receive pleasure. How does your day-to-day life nurture this principle and nourish the sexual dimension of your marriage relationship? A summary of some helpful ways to cultivate sexual intimacy with your husband is listed below. Check off any steps you think would be helpful to you.

- ___ Bathe or shower before going to bed in order to relax.
- ___ Read the Psalms to gain a fresh perspective on life.
- ___ Take a nap before dinner to have more energy later in the evening.
- ___ Obtain help with household and child-rearing responsibilities to lessen the daily load you are carrying.
- ___ Have more alone time for quietly reading, writing, praying, thinking, dreaming, etc.
- ___ Ask your husband to plan interesting dates for you to enjoy together.
- ___ Try something new: Be open to enjoying your body and being more expressive with it during lovemaking. Ask your husband what would please him and try it.
- ___ Suggest to your husband that you both read a book on the differences between the way men and women communicate.
- ___ Assess how you feel about your body *just as it is*. Take steps to enhance your ability to feel attractive *just as you are* without resorting to drastic diets, an exhausting fitness program, complete beauty makeover, plastic surgery, or expensive clothes.
- ___ Reduce daily stress by taking two concrete steps to manage it (time by yourself for at least thirty minutes daily, a long bath, listening to music, etc.).

NOTES

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4. Christina G. Rossetti, quoted in *Prayers Ancient and Modern*, comp. by Mary Wilder Tileston (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1898), 351.

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