

A woman's legs in denim jeans are resting on a large, textured rock. The background is a bright, sunlit outdoor scene with a large tree on the left and a hazy landscape in the distance. The overall mood is peaceful and serene.

Elyse majors on grace in real and practical ways.

—VERONICA GREER

Good news
—❧— *for* —❧—
**WEARY
WOMEN**

Escaping the bondage of
to-do lists, steps, and bad advice

ELYSE M. FITZPATRICK

The church should be the one institution in all of society that announces rest for the weary and heavy laden, but all too often what broken and burned-out people get instead is a to-do list. My friend Elyse (actually, more like my older, wiser sister) has written a book for all the women whose souls are burdened by the unending pressure to be the perfect woman. If you're in need of good news that relieves and liberates, please read this. And thank you, Elyse, for reminding me once again that "it is finished." . . . I keep forgetting.

TULLIAN TCHIVIDJIAN

Senior pastor of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church and author of *One Way Love: Inexhaustible Grace for an Exhausted World*

When you pick up a book written by Elyse Fitzpatrick, you know you're going to hear good news. And who doesn't need to hear good news? Weary women don't have time to waste on fake hope. Every woman needs to look away from herself and to the Man who is seated in heaven at the right hand of the Father. Every page in *Good News for Weary Women* is laden with the burden-lifting news that Christ is our sufficient strength.

GLORIA FURMAN

Pastor's wife, mom of four, cross-cultural worker, author of *Glimpses of Grace* and *Treasuring Christ When Your Hands Are Full*

I feel like Elyse Fitzpatrick has been mentoring me and discipling me for years through her books. You can find her words stacked on my nightstand and residing in the basket on my coffee table, and there are extra copies in tote bags, just waiting to be given to women I disciple myself. This

book, however, is one that needs to be read by every single gal I know. It's a loving and hope-filled coffee date for my entire generation. It's the words we're longing to hear, which I believe we can receive only from women like Elyse—women whose eyes are on Jesus and who are still running the race well in front of us.

JESSI CONNOLLY

Author and entrepreneur, naptimediaries.com

I first heard about Elyse Fitzpatrick when I picked up *Comforts from the Cross*, and was—right or wrong—refreshingly surprised that a devotional written by a woman could be so stinkin' good. Ever since, J. D. and I have been fan-club members for all things Fitzpatrick. She majors on grace in real and practical ways. Any woman who has ever thought, *I get that the gospel is the center, but what do I do with my screaming child, my screaming conscience, or this screaming voice of anxiety?* needs to pick up *Good News for Weary Women*. Elyse celebrates legitimately good news for women drowning in a sea of bad advice.

VERONICA GREEAR

Mother of four and wife of J. D. Greear, pastor of The Summit Church

Elyse Fitzpatrick is an unflinching, no-nonsense ambassador for the truth about grace. For the try-hard lifers, the weary worriers, and the never-enoughers, Elyse points again and again to this: *You are welcomed and you are loved because of Jesus. The End.*

EMILY P. FREEMAN

Author of *Grace for the Good Girl: Letting Go of the Try-Hard Life*

GOOD NEWS FOR WEARY WOMEN

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WOMEN

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ELYSE M. FITZPATRICK



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

IT'S MY HOPE that this book will be the catalyst for many discussions among women—whether over the phone, over coffee, in the park, or in small groups. It is also my hope that through these conversations, women will begin to open up about the ways they struggle to fulfill all the demands that are foisted upon them and that they will grow in their discernment—not only about the demands themselves but also about their own desire for approval as they check off all the little boxes on their list.

In all of this, I pray most sincerely that women will rediscover the profound grace that is ours through the good news: that we are forgiven, loved, and already counted perfect.

To help facilitate discussions, I have included questions at the end of each chapter. Feel free to use these questions in whatever way works best for you. For instance, you may want to look over them before reading the chapter so you'll have a sense of where the chapter is going. Or you may want

to wait until the end and then go back through the chapter, underlining and reflecting on the important points. Or you're welcome to ignore them altogether, if you like.

The final question for each chapter asks for a summary of what you've read. This is something I do myself, because it's way too easy for me to forget what I've read, and then two years later, I wonder what the book was about . . . or whether I actually read it. Again, do this if you'd like to and if you find it helpful, but don't stress over it. Enjoy.

VOICES CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS

MY HEART ACHES for all the weary women who are desperate for good news. My heart aches because I've personally spoken to countless women who are burdened and exhausted and on the verge of either giving up on what has been passed off as Christianity or are nearly killing themselves trying to keep up with impossible demands. I've wept with women who are shocked by the freedom and grace of the gospel message—women who have trouble believing it, who can't get over thinking that God is mad at them.

I've watched women sigh in relief when I tell them that God can't be disappointed with them because disappointment is a by-product of unmet expectations and that God has none when it comes to them. I've had friends who have cut, burned, or starved themselves because they can't take the pain of their failure anymore, and they simply don't have the faith to keep trying to be good enough. Did it hurt when they pressed the cigarettes into their arms? Of course it did.

But this was nothing compared to the pain in their souls when they failed to measure up once again.

I've had other friends who didn't do anything so drastic but suffered silently for years, weighed down by burdens and expectations they could never measure up to.

I've wept with women who have spent their whole lives worshipping their family, only to lose their husband to pornography or adultery and their children to rebellion or atheism. These things are happening all around us. They are happening in our churches; they are happening in the lives of the women we see on Sundays. They may be happening in your life too. Maybe you long to believe that God really loves you but you think there must be a catch. Maybe you've been a Christian for twenty years but all you hear about is rules, not good news.

I have a daughter, two daughters-in-law, and two granddaughters, and if there is anything I want them to know, it is this:

There is good news for you. You don't need to learn secret steps, try harder and harder, wear yourself out in an attempt to be beautiful, snag Mr. Perfect, or raise perfect children. You are already welcomed, loved, forgiven, and completely okay. You can laugh and rest and resist all the ways the world lies to you and tells you you're not good enough. And you can love God because He has already loved you. You can be free to fail, to rest, to love, to be weak, to grow, and to know that everything is already given to you in Him.

I've watched little girls who are told that their worth lies in their cuteness, in their ability to be a princess, in their being surrounded by all the right other little girls; and my heart breaks, because no one can maintain princess status her whole life. And I've cried for other little girls, whose moms didn't buy them tutus to wear to school, whose teeth aren't always gleaming, who would rather dig in the dirt than play with babies, who are shunned and teased, because I wonder if their lives will be marked by love and welcome or if they will always think that they don't quite fit in.

I've watched teen girls who define themselves solely by their friends and their looks and their worth in the eyes of guys, and I've feared that they will humiliate themselves to try to earn some guy's benediction . . . only to discover that it is not the same thing as love. And I've seen ungainly girls who hide behind food or drugs or self-harm only to discover that when they're seeking human approval, the emptiness never ends.

I've talked to women who are completely heartbroken because their daughters—the girls they homeschooled or sang with and taught verses to and who “should know better”—are now living with their boyfriends or their lesbian girlfriends, and these women are wondering why God isn't holding up His part of the bargain.

And I've shared coffee and tears with dear friends who admit that they never feel as if they measure up and they hope someone can magically make them better.

Why did I write this book? Because I love women and I love Jesus, and like a good friend of both, I want to

introduce them to each other. Maybe they've met before, but I'm sure that if they spend time together, everything will change.

The Facebook Post That Sparked It All

In the early fall of 2013, I posted the following on my Facebook page:

Okay, friends . . . I need your help. I'd like to know the dumbest things people tell women they have to do in order to be godly. Ready . . . *Go!*

I thought I might get a few responses, but what happened over the next twenty-four hours was mind boggling—and frankly pretty troubling. Nearly twenty thousand women read the post, and almost five hundred responded. And that was all within twenty-four hours! I knew that women felt burdened and wearied by to-do lists, suggested steps for improvement, and bad advice, but I didn't have any idea how much frustration, anger, angst, and despair was simmering just beneath the surface of so many hearts.

I already knew that women were worn down, because I've had the opportunity to speak with hundreds of them as I've traveled around the country speaking at churches and women's conferences over the past decade or so. And I want to be really clear about something here: my experience with burdened women has not been primarily with those who haven't yet come to faith. No, it is with women who self-identify as Christians, who regularly attend church, who

agree that Jesus is the truth and that the truth is supposed to set them free.

And the churches where I met these women aren't what one might call the First Church of Feel-Good-Now. No, these are churches where the Word of God is taught and where women are encouraged to take the call to discipleship seriously. These are serious women—women who would say that their faith in Christ is the most important thing about them. And yet there they were, telling me through tears that they were drowning in to-do lists and dying for some good news.

Based on feedback I've gotten from women I've met face-to-face at conferences, from those who replied to my question on Facebook, and from those who were part of focus groups, I know there is an undeniable groaning among women in what we might call modern American evangelicalism. I felt it myself as I struggled for years trying to be a great mom, a good wife, and a faithful friend, while spending hours at the gym and insisting that everyone else live a life that met what I thought were God's expectations. I carried a burden of responsibility for everyone else's success . . . all the while knowing I was failing. Yet even I was surprised at the depth of anger and despair my question evoked. The responses confirmed something I've long suspected: the landscape that evangelical women live in is a howling wilderness littered with the blood, sweat, and tears of thousands of hardworking, weary women . . . and also with the carcasses of the faith some of them have shed as they've given up in despair and exhaustion.

We've missed the point. We've majored on the minors and

Bad Advice WOMEN RECEIVE

What are the dumbest things people tell women they have to do in order to be godly?

(These are real responses to the question I posted on Facebook.)

- Decorate your home like a magazine.
- Cook only healthy, organic food for the family.
- Don't work outside the home for money.
- Don't be a leader, and don't come up with ideas for ministry. If you do come up with ideas, pretend like they came from your husband.
- Always submit.
- Have a daily Proverbs 31 checklist.
- Have an organized, clean, and "Pinterest-inspired" home. If Jesus were to knock on your door, you'd want Him to be pleased with what He saw.
- Women can "share" or give a greeting in church, but this should not be done from the pulpit—only

failed to fill the hearts of women with the only news that will set them free.

The Source of the Bad News

So where on earth are women getting all this heart-crushing, joy-stripping, bad advice? Everywhere we look. Yes, we get it in church, but we also get it in the checkout line at the grocery store. All we have to do is look up from our groceries

off the platform and behind a portable podium or music stand.

- Be the perfect housekeeper, wife, and mother. All the time.
- Master the arts of cooking, sewing, home decorating, gardening, canning, knitting, crocheting, and making the perfect piecrust.
- Be at your husband's sexual beck and call—and like it.
- Make sure your children always obey.
- Participate in every church activity. Do, do, do—all the time!

THE *Good News*

We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. GALATIANS 2:16

while fumbling for our ATM card, and we see headlines that function as hope-crushing rules:

- Zumba Your Way to Buns of Steel!
- Learn the Mystical Secrets to Great Sex So He'll Never Wander!
- 36 Recipes for Tummy-Satisfying Foods on a Pauper's Budget!

- Save the Planet (or the Whales or the Polar Ice Caps or Unwanted Puppies or . . .)!
- Seven Ways to Guarantee a Promotion!

The bad news creeps in when we're pressured to join this celebrity's nonprofit or sign that petition on the way out of the store . . . assuming, of course, that we donated to whatever charity was selling chocolate bars on the way in (which, by the way, we must never eat!) so that we can have a cause and feel virtuous as we heft our groceries into the back of our environmentally sensitive minivan, which leaves only a teeny-tiny carbon footprint on the planet.

We watch the local news and get reprimanded by the news anchor (aka the News Nanny) for giving our children sugar, caffeine, or fat, or for letting them play video games more than thirty-two minutes per day.

We read fiction books that portray women as weaklings whose theological insights were picked up in two summers of learning how to be like Esther or Ruth at vacation Bible school and who are unable to go through life without Mr. Right (who just happens to be Amish). Or, even more sadly, we read "romance" novels that tell us our womanhood is to be defined by our sexuality and our ability to achieve orgasm the first time, every time, with Mr. Right.

When we read "Christian" nonfiction books, we tend to read titles that are nothing more than the to-do lists, steps, and bad advice *du jour* pumped out by the world, baptized by a few out-of-context Bible verses. We're told that our children must behave in church, have coordinating

outfits, and close their eyes when they pray, and that we are responsible for building their self-esteem, even (or perhaps especially) when they fail. We are warned that our children's spiritual well-being (along with their physical and emotional well-being) depends on our ability to feed them home-cooked organic meals, sew all their clothing, have a Pottery Barn-worthy living room, make Pinterest-inspired crafts for every holiday, and post cute pictures of our happy family online. We're to live strictly on a budget, shun a career, never disagree with our husbands, never raise our voices in frustration, and religiously slather our children with SPF 70 PABA-free sunscreen and put UV-protective eye gear on them before they venture out of the house, even if we live in Anchorage and it's January. In a word, we're exhausted.

We're told that our husband's ability to lead depends on our ability to create a spiritual vacuum in the relationship that we hope will eventually suck him into his role as the head of the home. If we fail to submit properly, he'll never experience the respect and the wild, testosterone-fueled freedom that his masculinity requires. We have to be the Proverbs 31 woman 24-7-365, or all will be lost. In other words, our husband's success as a godly man is entirely dependent on our success at being a "godly" woman—as if success were a Christian construct or as if our sanctification depended on anyone other than Christ.

And that's to say nothing about one of the major sources of guilt, shame, and law in a woman's life: her body. It's not just that we shouldn't look like a middle-aged, slightly pudgy

woman trying to hide her muffin top beneath three layers of SPANX. We're supposed to look like a Nike triathlete supermodel who has had breast augmentation and spends six hours every day working out, even though she gave birth to five children, nursed them all until her breasts rested on her knees, and stayed up all night rocking the littlest, who just wouldn't stop crying.

And, of course, there's the goddess of exercise, to whom we must offer up vials of sweat every day or we feel so guilty we snap at our families and forget our identities as daughters of the King and instead feel like Jabba the Hutt. We're filled with guilt, exhausted, and terrified that Triathlete Woman will make a move on our stifled, wild-at-heart man.

We're told it is our responsibility to make sure the house is bacteria and virus exempt, the rescue dog eats gluten-free food, and the children are well mannered, cleaned, brushed, ironed, vaccinated (or not, depending on one's views on naturopathic medicine), and properly shorn. We need to make sure our husbands are completely satisfied on every level, the church is well staffed, the neighborhood is evangelized, and the world is prayed for. In other words, we've been told and we believe (at least in part) that the success of everything within our sphere of influence rests on our shoulders and that we'd better get it together before it's too late.

And we're weary.

This kind of exhaustion reminds me of the scene from the 1982 Steven Spielberg movie *Poltergeist*, in which the mom, played by JoBeth Williams, is drowning in an unfinished

pool filled with rainwater, mud, and skeletons.¹ The more she struggles to get out of the pool, the more it caves in on her and the more her terror grows.

I know that women (and men) have been overwhelmed by to-do lists, steps, and bad advice since the beginning of time. Even five hundred years ago, Martin Luther didn't need to read his Facebook friends' posts about their having fun without him to realize that there was something wanting in his life. He was aware of his inability to obey God's law from the heart, and he knew he didn't have his own self-approval, let alone God's. But I do think there is something a little more desperate, more frenetic about our present wilderness. There are so many messages being broadcast at us from every direction about "How to be perfect in 149 simple steps" or "How your life will become a self-inflicted Armageddon if you don't follow these rules."

As a woman who loves Christ, the gospel, her family, her church, and her country, I'm standing up to scream, "Stop this madness! Be done with the fluff, the bricks, and the despair-breeding, anxiety-multiplying self-righteousness! It's time to trust in Christ—and Christ alone! He has already done it all. Everything you need has already been given to you." Or in the words of the writer to the Hebrews, "Whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his. Let us therefore strive to enter that rest" (Hebrews 4:10-11).

My sisters, the Bible has surprisingly good news for you. You can rejoice and rest in all that Jesus has done. My hope is that by the end of this book, you are able to breathe a

great big sigh of relief and say, “Whew. He really does love me, and that’s all that matters.” Yes, He really will make good on His promise: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and *I will give you rest*” (Matthew 11:28, emphasis added).

CHAPTER I

HOW DID WE END UP HERE?

SO HOW DID WE end up here, with so many to-do lists, so many steps, and such an overabundance of bad advice? How is it that women feel so exhausted and are filled with so much despair? How did many of us fall into the belief that everything depends on us and that we've got to get it right or everything will go wrong?

As a woman who has attended church nearly every Sunday since the summer of 1971, when I was first brought to faith at the age of twenty, I think that much of this bad news comes from the Christian community and the church itself. I say this with trepidation and great sadness, so please let me explain. But first, let me make this clear: the church has not been the only source of bad advice I've received. Much of the bad news has come from the world, and much of it is simply

from my own heart. We'll talk more about that later, so for now let's return to how the church has shaped and added to the burden that is crushing women and making us weary.

I've heard countless messages about how I need to do better and try harder and never be satisfied until "my good is better and my better is best." I admit that it has been hard for me to be hopeful that I could ever make the grade as a "godly" woman and live my life in a way that would bless others and bring glory to God. No, let me rephrase that. It's been *impossible* for me to hope I could do everything and be all that I was told I should be by all the women (and men) who have brought the law to me without also assuaging my soul's fears with the gospel.

I've Got a Couple of Free Minutes . . .

That's not to say I didn't try to follow all the rules of Christian womanhood. I recall one afternoon about thirty years ago when it occurred to me that my hope to meet everyone's expectations was driving me (and everyone around me) a bit nuts. Aside from caring for our young family, composed of my husband and me, our three young kids, a dog, and some rowdy chickens, I also taught full-time in the Christian school associated with our church, was a deaconess, sang in the choir, went to church at least three times a week (more if there was a "revival" going on), and generally worked myself into an exhaustion-induced coma every day. To say that I was irritable and weary would be an understatement.

On that particular afternoon, when I realized that I actually

had a few hours to spare, I decided to make a new vest for our daughter Jessica's school uniform. In the midst of my harried pinning and cutting of the pattern, I looked at my husband, Phil, and joked, "I must have some guilt I'm trying to work off." We both laughed and shook our heads, but I was more right about that than I knew at the time. Because although I was a Christian and believed that Jesus had died for my sins, I didn't understand what that meant about my guilt. I didn't know that I was justified—or even what justification meant. And so I worked and worked and slaved away for decades, trying to prove that I wasn't the lazy, degenerate loser I used to be (and secretly feared I still was). I was never very happy, and all the people around me knew it. My unhappiness frequently demonstrated itself in self-indulgence (usually overeating) and in anger at anyone else who wasn't working as hard as I was.

I don't completely blame the church I was a part of in those days for my ignorance of the good news, although the truth is, I don't remember ever hearing it. What I heard consisted instead of a steady stream of messages about how I needed to do more and try harder and get really serious about working in and for the church. I needed to get rid of the sin in my life so I could be a victorious Christian and "go in and possess the land" (whatever that meant).

But my problem wasn't only with what I heard (or didn't hear) in church. It was also with messages that I heard in the broader Christian community. I was reading a lot of books about how to be a "godly" woman, but these messages only multiplied my guilt and splintered my soul. I knew I was really messed up and needed to learn how to be a better

wife and mother, and this litany of rules seemed to be the very thing I needed. But it was like the Turkish delight the White Witch gave Edmund in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*: it tasted really good at first, but it never satisfied my hunger and always left me aching for more.

Instead of freeing me to love and serve Christ and my family, all this “good advice” loaded me down with guilt and shame over my ongoing sin and piled on more and more wearisome rules. The very thing I was taking as an antidote for my failure was making me more and more ill. Instead of finding freedom, I was a slave to self-justification. And judging from what I’ve heard from other women, I don’t think I’m the only one who has ingested this poisonous brew.

Feminism: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Beginning in the nineteenth century in the United States, women sought to obtain equal rights with men in a number of areas, including the home, the workplace, the church, and the halls of government. In the 1800s, coverture laws were passed that finally allowed women to own their own property, even if they were married. It’s hard to believe now, but there was a time when a woman couldn’t inherit property or claim ownership, and without a husband, she would have to be dependent on her father or another male relative, or she’d become destitute. In 1919 the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution at last granted women the right to vote in the United States.

The quest for equal rights didn’t end with the right to vote; women have been fighting for equal rights under the

law ever since. Much of this effort has resulted in great good, such as giving women the right to hold public office, enter into legal agreements, get an education, and receive equal pay for equal work. Some of the results, such as on-demand abortion, have resulted in deep and heartbreaking evil.

In the 1970s, as the sometimes misguided cry for equality grew, the church began to respond to what it viewed as the threat of feminism. The evangelical church focused its response in three key areas: defining men's and women's roles in the home and the church, taking a stand against abortion (which was legalized in 1973), and opposing the Equal Rights Amendment. But it wasn't until 1979, with the release of Francis Schaeffer's and C. Everett Koop's groundbreaking book and film series *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* that the evangelical church began to awaken and respond to the horrors of abortion and then, by extension, to the feminist movement in America.²

At the same time, with the ordination of women in more liberal denominations, people started to ask questions about equality for women in formerly male-dominated leadership roles in the church. So churches began to formulate answers, set guidelines, produce literature, and host conferences to define and explain gender roles. Hence, the "biblical masculinity" and "biblical femininity" movements were born in the 1980s, reaching their full saturation in the evangelical church's culture by the early 2000s.

Generally speaking, biblical masculinity and femininity may be defined as the recognition that both men and women are equally created in the image of God but also have distinct masculine and feminine roles as part of God's created

Bad Advice WOMEN RECEIVE

What are the dumbest things people tell women they have to do in order to be godly?

(These are real responses to the question I posted on Facebook.)

- Refrain from reading the Bible or praying with your children so you don't usurp your husband's leadership.
- To have a "quiet and gentle spirit," you literally have to be quiet and gentle.
- Must be a stay-at-home mom.
- Be Mary *and* Martha.
- Get married and have children.
- Have *lots* of children.
- Look like June Cleaver by six o'clock in the morning.
- Study how to clean your house and cook.
- Don't be too smart so you won't intimidate men.

order. Those roles are expressed beautifully in the relationship between Christ and His bride, the church.³

Much of the material produced by the biblical masculinity and femininity movement has brought great good to many people. For one thing, it has emphasized the importance of marriage and commitment to family. Thanks in part to "no fault" divorce (beginning in 1969 in California and spreading to nearly every state in the union by 1983), the American culture began to experience the breakdown of the traditional

- If you are in the right place with God, you will meet your husband-to-be.
- Be a Proverbs 31 woman: tend to your husband and children, tend to the home, make your husband look good, be good with arts and crafts, make money to add to the family income, and look beautiful all the time.
- Be perfectly feminine.
- Don't be ambitious.
- Read the most current Christian book about how to be a godly wife.
- Consider marriage and motherhood your highest callings.

THE *Good News*

Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. ROMANS 10:4

home. At least half of an entire generation of children were being raised in single-parent homes where traditional gender roles were not modeled. In addition, many children (including myself) were raising themselves while their parents (or parent) worked.

To say that I personally had no clue what it meant to be defined as a woman according to a biblical understanding would be an understatement. I had never seen how a loving servant leader would care for and provide for his family. I had

never seen my mother model joyous support of her husband. What I did see was my mother working at least one full-time job and trying with all her might to provide for my brother and me. I never knew what it meant to be in a family, to work together for a common goal, to live intentionally as the person I had been created to be. Because of that, when I married, I had a lot of learning to do.

Let me say it again: I am very thankful for many of the values and much of the material produced by the leaders of this movement. I am also grateful for the courageous stand that they have taken against strong anti-God, antifamily forces in our culture, for their love for women and men and families, and for their love of the Word and the church.

But as with any movement that gains an audience and influence, the gender roles movement has also produced unfortunate misunderstandings and excesses. Due to a misinterpretation of biblical teachings, some materials have been produced that do not serve women well. To-do lists, steps, and bad advice have burgeoned, and many women find themselves exhausted and crushed by the dos and don'ts given to them in the name of biblical womanhood. Essentially we're told that we need to do more, be more, and perform more to be acceptable in God's eyes.

If you're wondering what form some of these steps, lists, and bad advice can take, you can glance through the sidebars throughout this book. These are just a few samples of the hundreds of responses given to me by women who have been harmed by this misunderstanding of what the Bible says about men and women.

The truth is that both radical feminism—lies sold to women in the name of equality—and radical femininity—lies sold to women in the name of Christianity—have harmed women and children. But while Christians have been quick to engage in conversations about the repercussions of misguided feminism, there hasn't been much acknowledgment of the way women are harmed when they are force-fed rules that go beyond Scripture and add to Scripture—rules that are products of a particular culture rather than of the gospel.

For instance, some people have taken the command in Ephesians 5:33 that a wife should respect her husband to mean that a man's masculinity and leadership depend solely on his wife's ability to be feminine. Some have misinterpreted Titus 2:4-5 to mean that a child's godliness and success depend entirely on his or her mother and her daily goodness, consistency, and healthy meal planning. And based on a misunderstanding of 1 Timothy 5:9-14, single women have been told that they have no value apart from a relationship to a man. This is simply ridiculous.⁴

The Proverbs 31 Woman

In an effort to formulate a biblical response to the gender-blurring roles developed by feminism, Christians did what they ought to do: they went to the Bible to see what roles the Bible lays out for women. In that search, they held up several passages as models for determining a woman's role, foremost among them Proverbs 31, Ephesians 5, Titus 2, and 1 Peter 3.

This wasn't a bad place to start, but the principles were often taken out of the larger context of Scripture.

Dr. Jerram Barrs, a professor and Francis Schaeffer scholar, says that this overly narrow focus about women's roles has caused significant damage, leading the Christian community to see women "*entirely through the eyes of men reacting to feminist emphases* by focusing all their deliberation on those four passages."⁵ He continues, "I am not saying that those passages should be ignored or set aside, for they are, of course important, but beginning and ending with them has given rise to *severe misconceptions*."⁶

Do you think that perhaps I'm overstating the problem here? I assure you that I am not. The Proverbs 31 woman has been written about in more than twenty books in just the last decade, ranging from workbooks to how-tos to steps in becoming a woman of virtue in thirty-one days (calendars included). And nearly ten books about becoming a Titus 2 woman have been written in the last decade.⁷

Many women look at these descriptions of the ideal woman and think, *There's no way I could pull that off—no way I could fit that mold*. I don't blame them. Other women work their fingers to the bone in the hope that on some future date their children will rise up and call them blessed. The number of sermons preached on Proverbs 31 and Titus 2 on Mother's Day is enough to tempt women to stay home, not wanting to hear again the ways they're failing.

Of course, the church isn't the only place women are receiving a flood of to-do lists, steps, and bad advice. But because the church's message carries more weight with

Christian women than other sources do, it is particularly destructive. Christian women want to please the Lord; we want to live in a way that positively impacts our children. We are, for the most part, serious about wanting to shine in our part of the dark world, so when the church speaks, we listen.

The problem comes when women (and men) haven't learned how to differentiate between law and gospel—when we don't understand how the good news of Jesus' perfect life, death, resurrection, ascension, and reign is meant to impact us. When we don't see the connection between the righteous life Jesus lived and our standing before a holy God, we are setting ourselves up for bondage. Many women don't understand the freedom that has been purchased for us, and we often get tangled up in legalism or moralism. We don't know what it would look like for obedience to be motivated by gratitude.

A Ministry of Death

Paul described the law as “the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone,” which “came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory” (2 Corinthians 3:7). Even the law in its purest form can only accomplish what the law by itself will always accomplish: it will always produce death.

My friends, if even God's law, written directly by His own finger and full of so much glory that it transfigured Moses' face, is a “ministry of death” to those who try to fulfill it, then these to-do lists, steps, and pieces of ludicrous advice will not produce the fruit we're hoping for. They will not build

or protect the family or God's people in the world. They will not glorify Him. They will not make Him smile. They will only breed pride, despair, exhaustion, anger, self-pity, hypocrisy, addiction to introspection, and even abandonment of the faith.

I believe there are specific instructions in Scripture regarding gender roles, including those in Genesis 2–3, Proverbs 31, Ephesians 5, 1 Timothy 2, Titus 2, and 1 Peter 3. I believe that these truths remain valid for today and that we ignore them to our great harm. But I also believe that much of what has been dished out to women under the guise of “biblical gender roles” has failed us in at least two ways. It has gone way beyond Scripture's bounds, while at the same time closing off much of the Bible's message of comfort and hope. In these ways, much of this teaching resembles Jesus' description of the Pharisees', for it gathers unnecessarily heavy burdens and lays them on women's shoulders (see Matthew 23:4). Meanwhile, those who teach these things effectively “shut the kingdom of heaven in [their] faces” (verse 13).

When we define gender roles too narrowly, overemphasizing a limited number of texts while completely ignoring the breadth of Scripture—when we try to make Scripture say more than it actually does or tell any segment of people that only certain parts of the Scripture concern them (whether we intentionally communicate this message or not)—we do so to the detriment of women and men, and to the detriment of the church and its mission in the world.

Here are just a few of the unnecessary burdens women are often made to bear. Single women are made to feel that

I feel a lot of pressure to be a “godly” wife and a “godly” mom—and that there’s a very narrow definition of what that looks like. The list of things I need to do to fulfill those callings is really long (and impossible): have a perfectly decorated and immaculate home, make all my own food from scratch, feed my family three perfectly balanced meals with ideal nutrition, study the Bible every day, pray often, never yell at my children, provide my kids with enriching educational opportunities every day, be frugal and under budget every month, exercise frequently, have immaculate personal grooming, be a fun mom who is also excellent at godly discipline and instructing, pursue my children’s hearts, pursue romance and physical intimacy with my husband, disciple other women in the church, be completely content and fulfilled at home but also find something really valuable to do in my community and church to serve others, host others in my home—the list just keeps on going! I’ve heard that in order to be the woman God wants me to be, I need to suffocate my feisty personality and be quiet and demure. But I believe God is bigger than these small boxes of what a woman should look like. After all, He’s the One who gave me this personality in the first place!

One Woman's
—©— **STORY** —©—

they are “less than” other women; women who are gifted for a career are made to feel that college or a career is a waste of time and that these women are resisting “God’s best” for them. Women whose interests, giftings, and opportunities do not fit the mold of post-industrial-revolution suburbia are disdained by other women who have been gifted with husbands, fruitful uteruses, and inclinations that better portray what has been elevated to the greatest expression of godliness for a woman: the stay-at-home mom. And stay-at-home moms are weighted with additional pressures: it’s not enough to be home; they must also serve on every committee, live in a perfectly decorated (and always clean) house, and have perfectly behaved children.⁸

Jesus and the Women He Loved

It’s interesting to note that nowhere in Scripture does Jesus fuss with women about embracing what we might consider feminine roles; in fact, He chided Martha for assuming that Mary’s theological studies and worship at His feet were less necessary than hospitality and making sandwiches (see Luke 10:41-42). Jesus never chastised the many women who left their homes and followed Him around, providing for His physical needs.

The twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza,

Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means.

LUKE 8:1-3

Notice that Jesus didn't tell Mary Magdalene to go find a husband, settle down, and have a family, nor did He tell Joanna that her place was at home with Chuza, grinding wheat for wholesome sandwiches. He invited women to step outside their culturally defined roles and follow Him, and He allowed them to support Him out of their means.

Paul and the Women He Loved

Paul spent time living in the household of a successful businesswoman named Lydia, who was his first convert from Philippi (see Acts 16:11-14). He also had obvious respect for the deacon-patroness Phoebe, a woman who delivered one of the most important letters ever written—the one Paul wrote to the church in Rome.⁹ Then there was Priscilla the tentmaker, who along with her husband corrected Apollos's doctrine (see Acts 18:26). Scripture doesn't indicate that Paul had any conversations with any of these women about how they really ought to be home tidying up and having more children, or if they were single, how they should be making themselves available to single guys. Surely if Lydia, Phoebe, or Priscilla were out of line by stepping outside the kitchen and the bedroom, someone would have said something about it, and we'd have a record of it today.

Yes, there are passages in Scripture—especially in Paul's epistles—about women's roles. But it is biblically untenable

and soul crushing to tell a woman that the only worthwhile activity she can do is to birth children and serve a husband and a family. This mind-set also creates an idol out of the family structure, making success as a homemaker/mother the most important vocation in a woman's life. And although this is a high calling, it should not trump our first and foremost calling: to believe in Christ.

In response to the evils of radical feminism, which shamed women who didn't work outside the home, the radical femininity movement has shamed Christian women who work outside the home (for a variety of reasons) or who are not married or who have been divorced. Many Christian women have been taught that motherhood is not only their highest calling but also that it is the *only* calling they should aspire to. It seems a little like the drunk man who falls off his horse on one side and climbs back into the saddle, only to fall off on the other.

Your Highest Calling

Motherhood is not a woman's only calling, nor is it her highest calling, just as fatherhood is not a man's highest or only calling. The Bible never makes such a claim, and shaming women who want to work in the marketplace (or have to) is unkind, unwise, and unbiblical. While it should be obvious that the Proverbs 31 woman does not fit the mold of a 1950s suburban housewife, that poor horse has been flogged to death by people telling women that the virtuous woman always gets up early and makes organic oatmeal for her family because

the spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being of everyone within her sphere of influence depends on her fulfilling her motherly role and being sure that her kids are regular.

Please don't misinterpret what I am saying. If a woman is blessed to have a husband who is able to financially support the family, and if she is gifted with children, I do believe that the best thing she can do is to be home with them. But many women simply do not have the option of staying home, even if they dearly want to. And perhaps more significantly, that is not a woman's highest calling, nor is it the only work her Savior has called her to.

I believe in the infallibility and timelessness of Scripture, and I would never want to discard the Bible's instructions about women and the way we've been designed. At the same time, though, many churches have blindly embraced twenty-first-century, post-industrial-revolution suburbia, where Hubby leaves the home to go to work during the day while the wife stays home with the kiddies, as the sole option for a woman who wants to be godly. We've bought into the notion that a woman who loves God should look like June Cleaver, the 1950s paragon of virtue, with her pearls and her crisply ironed dresses. These lockstep demands do not allow for differences in life circumstances, temperament, or gifting. Meanwhile, talented Christian women are being thwarted, crushed, disrespected, and manhandled. And many of them are simply giving up in despair, because it is just too painful to try to fit into Cinderella's size-5 glass slipper when you're a size-9 wide (and you prefer flip-flops or tennis shoes).

So if a woman's highest calling isn't to be June Cleaver,

what is it? Jesus addresses our highest calling as women (and men) in John 6, right after He multiplied bread for five thousand hungry wanderers. “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” they asked (John 6:28). Rather than tell them to get home and get to work, He answered in the most astounding way: “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” (verse 29).

Wait . . . just believe? But what about the work I’m supposed to be doing?

These people wanted to know how to acquire the life-giving bread that Jesus had spoken of. Here was His response: “Do not work for the food that perishes,” he told them, “but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you” (John 6:27).

The people wanted to know how to multiply bread, how to do miracles, how to make sure they were earning brownie points and fulfilling their callings. He told them flat out what their calling was: “Believe in Me.”

One commentary puts it this way:

The only “work” that guarantees the possession of this redemptive manna is to believe in Jesus (John 6:29). The gospel sabotages any notion of legalism or performance-based acceptability with God. The only thing we bring to Jesus is our need. All we offer is the admission that we have nothing to offer.¹⁰

What is our highest calling as women? Our highest calling is to believe. It consists of believing, resting, and rejoicing in the work that has been done for us by the Savior, who perfectly

fulfilled every gender role in our place. It might sound strange to think of Jesus fulfilling female gender roles, but He did so by wholeheartedly submitting to His Father's will and making it His own. When He was in the garden of Gethsemane, He gave up His desire to be released from the cup of suffering and placed Himself in submission to His Father's love. Jesus then died for all our skewed ideas about what we must do, all our failure in doing so, and our flat-out rebellion against the added-on laws that have been foisted on us.

Our highest calling is to believe in and love the gospel and then to live our lives in the light of all Jesus has already done for us.

Unbearable Responsibilities

When we try to make the Bible say more than it does by giving secondary passages ultimate authority, or when we snip passages out of context, we end up with nothing more than steps, lists, and bad advice that put women in bondage. Ultimately this leads to either pride (if we feel that we're doing pretty well at our to-do list—or at least better than the people around us) or despair (if we fear we'll never be able to measure up). For most women, the takeaway from all this bad advice has not been the righteousness, peace, and joy we're promised (see Romans 14:17). The takeaway has been unbearable responsibilities.

These misguided teachings burden women by telling us that God is pleased with us based on something other than our faith in Christ and His righteousness. This mind-set

crushes women by assigning to us a task we can never fulfill. A wife cannot control her husband's godliness. A mother cannot control her child's faith. A single woman cannot control God's plan for her life. No person can do what only Christ can do. These teachings cause women to try to pressure and manipulate those around us to conform in the hope that when we finally lay our weary heads on our pillows, we can breathe out an exhausted, "What a good girl am I," as we pass into desperately needed sleep. I know this is reality because I lived this lie for decades.

As a young mom, I would get up early in the morning, try to do my daily readings in an attempt to get through the Bible every year, and spend time going over my prayer list. Then I'd get my kids up and ready for school, spend the day teaching, come home, make sure everyone was doing all the things they needed to do, make dinner, clean the kitchen, read godly books to the kids, pray with them, try to create lesson plans, make sure all the animals were fed, try to find good recipes, try to connect with my mom, try to encourage my husband, and then collapse into bed . . . only to do it all over again the next morning. The truth is that I never felt as if I was doing enough, and every time someone in my household failed in any way, I assumed that it was a direct reflection of my own personal failures to do and to be enough.

How Can We Recognize the Good News?

Let me suggest one way for you to begin to judge whether a word you've just heard or read is rooted in grace and flowing

from the gospel. If you walk away from church or any other message saying, “I’m going to try really, really, really hard to do better—to be a better woman, wife, mother, daughter, or friend,” then you haven’t heard the message of the gospel. If you walk away feeling proud of yourself because you’ve got all those steps covered, then you haven’t heard the message of the gospel. If you walk away feeling shamed and full of despair because you know what a loser you are, then you haven’t heard the message of the gospel. If you walk away trying to figure out how to get everyone in your family on the same page so you can be successful, then you haven’t heard the message of the gospel. You haven’t heard the good news. And the good news is the only message that will free you to be the woman Christ has meant for you to be. The good news is what you need to believe. And belief in the good news is the only way for you to find freedom in your identity in Christ.

Questions FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What to-do lists, steps, or bad advice have people given you as a way to make God happy with you? What impact has this bad news had on your life and your faith?
2. What have you been taught about feminism? What good has come to our society as a result of the quest for equal rights? What harmful side effects have resulted?

3. What have you been taught about “biblical femininity”? What has been helpful for you? What has been harmful?
4. How do you think God sees you and feels about you? What is this impression based on?
5. As you seek to be a godly woman, how often do you remember the gospel?
6. As you look at the way Jesus and Paul interacted with and spoke about women, what stands out to you? Is there anything that surprises you or anything that differs from teachings you’ve heard in church?
7. Summarize what you’ve learned in this chapter in four or five sentences.