

**The "Cinderella" and "Sleepless in Seattle"  
Syndrome: Building Intimacy  
in Marriage**

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The military is a microcosm of our nation in a "small-town" environment. Couples with different educational, ethnic, geographic, and denominational backgrounds appear at my door. They are different, yet they often have one similarity. I call it the "*Cinderella* and *Sleepless in Seattle Syndrome*."

This "syndrome" is subtle but it affects almost every couple I counsel. The plot line of most movies involves a "boy meets girl" story. This can be in cartoon form, as in *Cinderella* or adult versions like *Sleepless in Seattle*. These movies discuss *only* the courtship aspect of the relationship. At the end of the movie, "they lived happily ever after" floods the screen, whether written or understood. Unfortunately, this is not reality. The real work of nurturing healthy relationships in a marriage is never discussed. With more and more young married couples having not been reared in a nuclear family and consequently guessing at what marriage is, the subliminal messages of the 'video age' pose grave problems, for these messages incubate in the non-verbalized expectation levels of those entering marriage.

These are some of Hollywood's subliminal messages.

1. Courtship is exciting and marriage is boring.
2. Courtship is an end to itself and marriage is an afterthought.
3. Courtship is spontaneous and marriage is structured.
4. Courtship is hard work and marriage is easy.
5. Courtship is enjoyable and marriage is tedious.
6. Courtship is a time of giving and marriage is getting.
7. Courtship is adventurous with multiple relationships and marriage is monotonous because of monogamy.
8. Courtship is the real world and marriage is fantasy.

The true quest of every couple is intimacy. Unfortunately, today many succumb to Satan's short-cut of sexual immorality as the fulfillment of this God-given desire. Dennis Rainey in his book, *Staying Close* contends isolation is the natural tendency of every marriage.<sup>1</sup> Intimacy is hard work. When one accepts Satan's offer of immorality, however, 'intimacy' seems easy. Unfortunately, this natural tendency toward isolation directly opposes the subliminal teachings of Hollywood. Once isolation is recognized, three responses can take place. The first is divorce. The second is resigned acceptance. The third is forgiveness and change through the Spirit's power. The latter is God's will for marriage. God created us to have intimacy with Him and our spouse. Yet, once marriage begins couples are amazed at the ease of isolation and the difficulty of intimacy.

For some, the sacrifices for intimacy seem to be too great. They continue their quest by moving from one fractured relationship to another. Unfortunately, many Christians swallow the worldly philosophy of a "short cut" to intimacy. Others may not be unfaithful, but accept a marriage less than God's desire because it is easier than intimacy's hard work. Accepting the

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<sup>1</sup>Dennis Rainey, *Staying Close* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1989), 7.

*status quo* in a marriage, filled with isolation, accepts Satan's lie as surely as if the couple were sexually immoral. Intimacy is God's plan for your marriage. As you and your spouse move into closer intimacy with Him, fully understand His law, accept, and live by it, you will discover a deepening intimacy in your marriage. You must understand what destroys intimacy and the steps needed to reassert the biblical model for marital relationships. What follows are five principles that if appropriated in one's marriage will help to build genuine intimacy in marriage.

### Intimacy is God's Goal for Marriage

The first principle that must be acknowledged by every couple is that intimacy in marriage was something designed by God. The word intimacy has a variety of connotations. It is important therefore to have a proper definition of the term. Intimacy is the created environment allowing an individual to be comfortable enough to honestly share who they are or what they think and feel without fear of retribution or retaliation. Unfortunately, what often characterizes individuals in a marriage is not intimacy but isolation. The word isolation comes from the Latin word island. Being stationed on the island of Guam, we appreciate how an island makes one feel isolated. Sin brings the same kind of isolation. Adam and Eve became isolated from God and each other when they sinned. Unless premeditation creates an environment for intimacy's growth, isolation will be the *natural* tendency of *every* marriage. We bring our selfish sinfulness into marriage. 1 Peter 3:7 teaches the husband is to be considerate of the wife and her needs. Prayers will be hindered if intimacy is not a 'growth industry' in marriage.

Both partners *create*, through their words and deeds, all day and every day, a conducive or destructive environment for intimacy. We deny the cultivation of intimacy by a caustic and sarcastic tongue, or an unforgiving and critical spirit (Eph 4:32).

These activities, whether directed at others or our spouse, damage intimacy's environment. Marriage should be a safe haven in life's storms, but often a spouse's presence means pain rather than comfort. A spouse fears sharing when that same tongue may be used against them.

Gary Smalley uses the analogy of the boulder and pebble to explain this concept in his book *Love is a Decision*. Many times a man believes he dropped a verbal pebble on his wife, but by the time it hits her, it feels like a hurtful boulder.<sup>2</sup> John says perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18). If your partner fears sharing their thoughts or feelings, then somehow, whether created by you or the result of pain in a previous relationship, an environment was created which is not conducive to intimacy. James marvels in his third chapter how the same tongue which praises God can also curse men. When we praise God in church and are sarcastic with our spouse on the way out the door, we destroy intimacy with the tongue's hypocritical usage.

God's intimate relationship grew with Adam and Eve as it was planted in the ground of regular communication. This is God's model for an intimate relationship. Hollywood tells us if intimacy is not spontaneous, usually meaning sex, the relationship is lacking. Yet, God's intimacy with His first creation was planned. If a couple does not plan for "mommy and daddy" time, at a minimum of every other day, those individuals will slowly slip into isolation. Quite often the less communicative spouse will be oblivious to intimacy's passage, until it is too late. If your schedule is such that you do not have time for each other, you must re-prioritize your life. It may mean changing jobs, living at a lower economic standard or doing less volunteer work. The family was God's first institution. Its health is of ultimate importance.

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<sup>2</sup>Gary Smalley and John Trent, *Love is a Decision: Ten Proven Principles to Energize Your Marriage and Family* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1989), 84.

## Selfish or Unexpressed Expectations Destroy Intimacy

Expectations are not wrong. Unfortunately, most of them are non-verbalized. Many couples expect the other person to be the answer to his/her problems—and not only be the answer, but know the right questions as well. I call it "marital jeopardy." One spouse is given 'the answer' (i.e. anger, yelling, quiet, etc.) and the other spouse is supposed to know the right question. This is often phrased as, "If you don't know what's wrong, it reveals you for the insensitive person you are." An important rule to remember is your spouse cannot read your mind nor always understand your 'gender' language. Rather than assuming you knew what your spouse meant it is often good to ask, "What did you mean?" or "Would you be saying . . .?"

Sometimes a spouse will say, "But I have told him a thousand times." My response is, "Tell him again." Instead of saying, "You are a lazy husband because you won't . . ." Say, "My expectation today was I could have a couple of hours of your time to . . ." In this way you are not attacking your spouse, but explaining your expectations in a positive rather than negative manner.

Many men do not wish to talk after work, but the wife often desires to converse. This may be a gender issue as men "do" intimacy (i.e. hunting, fishing, ballgame, etc.) while women "verbalize" intimacy (i.e. shopping, coffee and teas, and talk shows, etc., as they are a means for conversation). Clayton Barbeau makes this point in his video series on intimacy. He explains a man's indifference to a wife's expectation of intimacy as a verbal exchange which communicates to her that she is not worthwhile. When a man reads the paper or watches TV while attempting to listen to his wife, he non-verbally "yells," "you are not *worth a while* of my time." She hears, "My husband does not consider me *worthwhile*." Isolation's tentacles slowly begin to wrap themselves around this relationship.

This is often complicated by men not being interested in conversation as an end, but rather as a means to an end, namely

problem solving. While women are often comfortable having their husband listen without any expectation of problem-solving, a man is generally frustrated by this attitude and does not "see the point," if nothing is solved. Many men will stop listening to their wives by saying, "I told you what to do about . . . and if you won't do it, don't talk to me." This shows a man's expectation is to "do" intimacy while failing to realize the joy of conversation as a vehicle for a deeper understanding of who the wife is and how she feels and thinks.

Sometimes people are confused concerning their expectations. When asked what they expect out of marriage, they do not know. Anger, irritation, and frustration are the "signs" of unmet expectations. When you feel these emotions, write them down in an "expectation format." You might write, "I expect my husband to pick up his clothes" or, "I expect my wife to allow me an evening with the guys." The next step is to share your expectations with your spouse in a non-confrontational manner. By understanding your expectations, you then discuss your desires without attacking your spouse for his/her perceived failure. You no longer say, "You are a slob because. . ." or, "You control every move I make by . . . ." You can discuss either changing your expectations or see your desires realized in the changing behavior of your spouse.

### **'Bartering' Destroys Intimacy in Marriage**

Many marriages are built on either the verbalized or non-verbalized concept of 'bartering'. "If I carry out the trash, then you have to . . ." This kind of marriage is built on the shifting sands of feeling. When the newness of the marriage wears off, each partner believes they do the most work. They get angry because they give more than their 'fair share'. Both quit giving as they are individually convinced their partner is taking advantage of them. The marriage then becomes a vicious death spiral as it dives out of control into the cold dry earth of loneliness and isolation.

A 'barter' marriage is based on feelings. God's love is *not* feeling-oriented. Many are fearful of unconditional love, having previously lived in such a marriage. They fear their spouse will take advantage of unconditional love. Christ loved me sacrificially when He knew I would "take advantage" of his love by sinning (Romans 5:8). Unconditional love means, at times, your spouse *will* take advantage of you. True love casts out the fear of one taking advantage of your goodness. You are not bartering your love to gain something in return (1 John 4:18). You are freely giving it.

John 3:16 and 1 John 4:9-11 explain unconditional love. In Ephesians 5:25, Paul uses the same word to describe the husband's love for the wife as he does God's love for us. This is decision-oriented love; it is not *feeling-oriented* love. No matter what the wife does, God tells the husband to decide to love as Christ loved the Church. The cornerstone for personal relationships is found in a correct understanding of Ephesians 5:21. This verse is a one-sentence paragraph used as an overarching principle to introduce 5:22-6:9. Mutual submission is the principle of *all* Christian relationships. The overseer submits to the worker (Eph 6:9). The worker to the overseer (Eph 6:5-8). The husband submits himself (Eph 5:21) to his wife through a modeling of Christ's submission to the church (Eph 5:25) which is rooted in the decision to commit rather than a feeling which retains the possibility of future disposal. God's love is built on permanent commitment (Heb 13:5).

However, within these relationships roles exist. God chooses the most difficult aspect of each role to teach the individual he/she is not to respond to the other person by their feelings but through commitment. Whether children *feel* like obeying, they are to obey (Eph 6:1). Whether fathers *feel* like being consistent in discipline, they are to discipline, for this is the child's need (6:4). Whether husbands *feel* loving, they are still to love (Eph 5:25). Whether women *feel* like submitting and respecting does not matter (Eph 5:22). (Some become incensed at the idea of roles in the home and yet there are roles in the

Trinity. Others become irritated at the idea of the woman in the role of helper, yet the Bible says God is my helper (Ps 54:4; Heb 13:6). Helping is not a demeaning role, for it is one of God's roles.) Her command is to live by biblical principle rather than her feelings. She is not to base her decisions on the latest talk show or soap opera which incited her to a similar dissatisfaction with God's law as the Serpent did with Eve.

Why did Christ 'give up' His life? He unconditionally gave His rights and life because humanity had a need. Sin isolated man from God. Man was dead (Eph 2:1) yet God desired a creation which could live in deepest intimacy with Him. This could only be accomplished in an environment free from sin; made alive through the death of a perfect substitute (Heb 9:22, Is 53:5-6). He came to heal His creation. This is why I always ask a couple when they get into disagreements, "Do those words heal?" At death, Christ did not give up his role as head of the Church and neither should the husband give up this role: Submitting to the needs of the loved object does not change the role of the one who submits. Christ's role as Head of the Church did not change when He submitted, in death, to our need.

Each woman has individual needs. Smalley has three interesting questions a husband can use to ascertain his wife's needs. 1) On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being hell and 10 heaven, what type of marriage did you desire when we got married. 2) Where is our marriage today? 3) What can I do to bring our marriage to a 10?<sup>3</sup> (If the number in the second question is quite low, using 10 in the third question may be unrealistic. I suggest using a number 3 to 5 points higher than where she said she thought the marriage was.) *Do not debate or demean her perceptions*; if you do, you will destroy an environment of honest disclosure. Accept what she says and attempt to meet her needs without complaining. Your actions will have the greatest effect (Js 2:14-18). Every woman knows

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 52-53.



how the marriage could become more intimate. She simply needs the environment to share what she *already* knows. If Christ was willing to submit to the extent of death to meet my need, in that same manner I should be willing to submit to the needs of my wife. If my goal is to present my wife spotless to God, just as Christ's goal is to present His Church spotless to His Father, then why would I antagonize her through harsh words and be a cause of her sinful anger? Her spotlessness is my mission, just as it is Christ's mission toward the Church.

In many marriages the wife believes if her husband is not as spiritual as he should be or if he does not love her, she does not need to respect or submit to him. Sometimes she believes her needs are more important than God's leadership in the home. Again, this is a feeling-oriented thought life. If he is to love her when she is unlovely (Eph 5:25), she is to respect him when he does not deserve it (Eph 5:33b). She shows her lack of submission and respect when the husband rejects her wise counsel and then fails. Many women will say, "I'll let him squirm for a while to teach him a lesson." This attitude will not lead to intimacy.

### **Spousal Manipulation Stunts the Growth of Intimacy**

If you give or withhold time, kindness, affection, and recognition because you want to 'prove your point', you are a manipulator of your spouse. This is a selfish activity which wants its own way. Sometimes a spouse will be nice, but when their non-verbalized expectation of a returned response is not realized, they will get angry and either yell or become silent. These are the selfish tactics of a child. Sometimes people will change and start on a path of biblical giving only to get frustrated in a few weeks. When I inquire as to the reason of their frustration, they always tell me their spouse is not responding in the right way. I always then ask, "Is it biblical to be kind, forgiving, thoughtful, etc.?" Then I ask, "Why did *you* begin this process of obedience, to please God or manipulate your

spouse?" The frustration indicates an unfulfilled expectation. The non-verbalized expectation was, "If I'm nice, my spouse will do what I want." Many people go from mean manipulation to 'kind' manipulation. (If you are biblically obedient in giving love or submission to your spouse, God will work in that individual's life to accomplish His purpose; however, His purpose may not be in your time or way.) We rarely respond correctly to God's love, yet He still unconditionally loves us. Give your spouse to God. Claim 1 Peter 3:8-17. (Notice the preceding context concerns marital relations to an unsaved individual (vv. 1-5). God's command is to do what is right no matter what the spouse chooses to do.

### Spousal Competition Retards the Growth of Intimacy

Sometimes when a couple is arguing in front of me I will ask, "Was your discussion's goal to understand or win?" This 'need' to be right (i.e. 'win') is a sinful tendency which we inherited from Adam (Gen 3:12). No one ever wants to admit being wrong. Some never cultivate the art of listening which is at the heart of intimate understanding. Our whole culture from athletics to politics, from war to business is based on winning. Unfortunately, marital intimacy has little in common with these activities. If you wonder if this attitude is a part of your marriage, answer these questions. Will you remind your spouse of past arguments and re-fight them when you remember another reason on your side of the ledger of 'rightness'? Do you carry on arguments for days or can you let it go (Eph 4:32)? When you disagree with your spouse are you listening to offer rebuttal to what they say or are you listening to hear their perspective, feelings, and thoughts? Listening without having to be 'right' or 'win' brings intimacy. Poor communication often results in discussion time seen only through the eyes of winning and losing. Many disagreements offer a cease-fire as the defeated opponent withdraws from the field of combat only to re-arm. Just as the uneven *Treaty of Versailles* after World War I guaranteed the rise

of Hitler, so many arguments guarantee further conflict because the discussion's goal was winning, not understanding.

These are five ways you can overcome the *Cinderella and Sleepless in Seattle Syndrome*. Building the superstructure of regular and consistent time spent with your spouse on the biblical foundation of mutual submission and understanding gives your marriage the intimacy God desires. By incorporating these five principles into your marriage, you will give your children security and stability as well as demonstrate before them Christ's love for the Church. Your children can then pass these principles to your grandchildren.