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LOVING IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES

For married men, and those who will marry, our sexuality is, or will be, a gift that we offer to the woman with whom we are called to share our life. The road we have discussed thus far is the road that leads towards the perfection of that gift. We are guided down that road by the vision we have for that gift made perfect.

And yet love, especially the agape/eros love of which we speak, depends not only on how well *we* love. Such love by its very nature involves two people, the lover and the beloved. For marital love to move towards the heights of its God-given potential, the response of our wives is critical. And herein lies a whole series of potential problems, for our wives, like us, are fallen creatures. Their sins, and the sins of others against them, quite likely have affected their sexuality and thus their capacity to receive the gift we offer and, in turn, to freely offer their gift to us.

I am not speaking here only of the cold and frigid woman (nor am I excluding her) but of all women who because their ideas about sexuality and because of their past experiences cannot freely enter into the one flesh union God designed for husband and wife. Rare will be the situation where a husband does not face challenges with respect to how, to some degree, sin and brokenness have affected his wife's sexuality. Our journey forward on the road must take this into account. Our loving our wives as our Lord commanded us to do, as Christ loves the church, must not falter on this account.

"My wife has never had an orgasm." My wife is content to have sex once a month, or not at all." "My wife wants sex all the time." "My wife will only have sex with the lights off." "My wife doesn't want to do some of the things I want to do." "My wife doesn't take care of herself any more and I just don't find her sexually attractive." These are the kinds of things I have heard men say, and I suspect that they are mostly true.

My wife, Willa, in her many years of ministry to wives of men with sexual identity and sex addiction problems long ago discovered—and taught me—that even in marriages where the husband has horrendous sexual problems, most of the time the sexual problems in the marriage do not all originate with the men.

Of course, men being men, when we face such situations, our first inclination is to want to fix it, to help our wives change, or get healed, or repent, or whatever is needed to free them up sexually. There are some things we can do, but making our wives change is not one of them. and I will discuss this shortly, but to get our hearts right let's look at some of the problems she might be dealing with. But first; a warning.

PROCEED CAUTIOUSLY

Going down this road of talking about our wives' problems—her sins and her brokenness—is fraught with real dangers, not the least of which is using *her* problems to justify *our* sins. How many of us have used our wives' "unreasonableness" or "coldness" to justify our little excursions into lust? I have. And how easy it is to focus on our wife's shortcomings at just the time when the Lord would have us focus on ours.

In the early years after my wife found out about my deceptions and sexual unfaithfulness, she went through an extended period where she felt enormous anger towards me, and although she tried to not let it, her anger affected her ability to give herself to me sexually. It took years—and a wonderful Christian counselor—for her to truly forgive me. From my perspective at this time I was now "alright" and Willa was a mess, so quite naturally I prayed to God that He would change her. *Every* time I prayed this I sensed the same response from Him, "Let's work on you." He did, and eventually my wife did forgive me and we were able to go on and build a beautiful marriage.

The whole issue of judging comes to the fore here. It is essential that we seek to discover the log in our own eye before we try to deal with the speck in our wife's eye. A woman who is hindered in her sexual responses to her husband does so because of sin or brokenness, or more likely, some combination of the two. Few of us are wise enough to know why another behaves as he or she does. Is it sin that she could control, or is it brokenness that limits her ability to respond? Oswald Chambers in a message on judging hits the target perfectly when he writes, "There is always one more fact in every man's case about which we know nothing."¹⁹

The sin of judging can go hand in hand with a whole bevy of other deadly sins: self-pity, bitterness, pride. Her them all is a statement such as, "Why do I have to live with such an unreasonable person?" All of these sins focus on ourselves, our needs, what we deserve, and thus they run contrary to the focus on the other that lies at the core of love. The prideful, self-pitying, angry man is not apt to be a good lover.

Even to write about what might be wrong with our wives in a book dealing with male sexuality seems like an unmanly thing to do. Indeed, man has a shameful history of blaming the woman that goes all the way back to our ancestor Adam. But we are not called to be just our wives' lovers; we are called to minister to them. If in reality, they do have problems with their sexuality, as priests in our homes, we are called to help them as best we can, and where we cannot help them, seek to remain Christlike in our lives with them. We cannot do this if we do not realistically and prayerfully face their problems.

SINS AND BROKENNESS

I have used the phrase "sins and brokenness". I think it is important, if we are to minister to our wives in their "sins and brokenness" that we recognize the powerful link between these two factors that are so much a part of all of us. Of course, one—sin—is a behavior, and it calls for repentance, and the other—brokenness—is a condition, and it calls for healing. But I have found, especially in women, that *sin is most often a wrong, usually defensive, response to brokenness*. It is not an inevitable one, so each woman is

¹⁹ Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, (Westwood, NJ, Barbour Books, reading for June 17th).

accountable for her sin, but understanding this relationship can help us greatly in ministering to our wives, even in giving us the heart to minister to them.

I have seen this over and over again in Regeneration's ministry to lesbian women. A high proportion of these women had childhood experiences of having been sexually abused by men. Their response, clearly a defensive one, was to reject their femininity, harden their hearts against all men, and seek to have their sexual and intimacy needs met by another woman.

By contrast, another woman who suffered similar sexual abuse may have held onto her femininity and sought to love a man, but once married, because of her wounding, found herself unable to give herself fully to her husband. Both women still carry their wounds, but one woman has chosen a sinful response to try and compensate for her pain, the other has not. The lesbian woman has chosen her sinful response, but as we understand why she chose this response, our hearts can be enlarged and our judgementalism can be diminished

Brokenness and sin can be so intertwined in a woman that trying to "figure them out" is a hopeless task, one made even more so when *our* emotions and egos are impacted upon by their behavior. My personal philosophy is, when looking at my own problems, look for the sin (it's easier to deal with than brokenness anyway) and when looking at the problem in another, my wife for instance, look for the brokenness.

Without trying to "figure them out" completely, I do want to address four areas of problems that commonly affect a woman's ability to respond sexually. After discussing them, I will address how we can best respond to them in ways that will help our wives heal and grow, and how we can deal with ourselves when we don't see change come about.

A DISTORTED VIEW OF SEXUALITY

How we view sexuality is a learned thing. Some women enter marriage with a distorted view of sexuality. This can come in what I call a conservative version or a liberal version. My wife, growing up in a devout family with parents who came of age in the early part of the twentieth century, was certainly subject to the conservative distortion. "It's your duty as a wife to have sex with your husband, so grin and bear it" was the message she received. This was a reflection of the Manichaeism mentioned in Chapter 2, an error that keeps coming back into the church. Sex is a necessary evil. This view still occasionally shows up in very conservative Christian families, especially ones where sex is "dirty" and never talked about.

The liberal distortion, like so many liberal errors, is an overreaction to the conservative error. Through its feminist spokespersons it declares that in the area of sexuality (as in many other areas) women are just like men. They can enjoy sex without commitment just as well as any man. Denying the special gifts and needs of women, they chuck the love stuff and go for the orgasm. Of course it is true that women can enjoy orgasm, but in denying her true feminine nature which is tuned into the relational more than the physical, trying to be like a man, she is denying both herself and her husband the true

joys of experiencing the complementarity of the masculine and the feminine that God built into us, a complementarity we find can be so perfectly expressed in the sexual relationship between a husband and wife.

If a woman brings either of these distortions into her marriage, her sexual relationship with her husband is apt to suffer.

SEX AS A PART OF A LARGER MARITAL PROBLEM

Some women use sex as a means of control. Although the need to control may be rooted in the vulnerability we are about to discuss, this is the antithesis of the concept of sex as a gift, and so it is deeply sinful. In some marriages a larger battle for control spills over into the bedroom. In fact, serious problems in any area of marriage can impact on the ability of a woman to give herself to her husband. A man can be as angry as can be with his wife, but if he is “horny” still go for sex. I am not commending this because in such a situation he is just using his wife, giving evidence of how much he has separated sexual desire and love, but I offer it to contrast to how women typically respond. Many women actually go to the other extreme, and given their more integrated nature, any relational problem with her husband can become a sexual problem.

LOW SELF-ESTEEM AS A WOMAN

Some women’s brokenness has to do with their perception of themselves as women. They struggle giving themselves to their husbands because deep in their hearts they don’t believe they have much to give. The teenage girl who all through high school is never asked out on a date, in most cases is going to start questioning her value or her desirability as a woman. Girls who are overweight or exceptionally tall, or who for whatever reason, seem unable to attract a boys attention would often be vulnerable to forming an image of themselves as undesirable as women. We may try to teach our daughters to find their value in the Lord, or in other sources, but I am certain God placed in woman a desire for motherhood and a desire to be loved by a man, and when a woman has trouble seeing herself in these roles, her self-esteem as a woman is damaged. In the worst situations, such damage may lead to a belief that no man could really love her for who she is, and thus her husband’s love is really just lust.

A WOMAN’S EXCESS FEAR OF VULNERABILITY

In Chapters 4 and 14 I addressed a woman’s need to feel secure, a need coming out of her innate feeling of vulnerability. In fact women *are* vulnerable. They are especially vulnerable in their relationships with men. Their smaller size and lesser strength, men’s more aggressive nature, their tender hearts, make them vulnerable in any serious relationship with a man. And in the mutual self giving of the marriage bed, a woman willingly makes herself extremely vulnerable.

So vulnerability is a fact of life. It is not the problem. The problem is an excess fear of vulnerability, an excess that makes it difficult or sometimes impossible for a woman to truly give herself to, and to receive, her husband. This vulnerability goes all the way back to the fall and the special curse that fell upon women. *Your desire shall be for your*

husband, and he shall rule over you (Genesis 3:16). We could restate the curse as “You will want to have a husband, but he will have the power to control and hurt you.”

In many women this control and hurt has been experienced in real life. It is reported that 30% of all women experienced some form of sexual abuse as girls growing up. Others saw their mothers suffer from some form of wrongful domination by their husbands. In today’s sexually permissive culture, so many young women have given themselves—including their bodies—to men who have quickly discarded them.

For a wounded woman, the sexual act itself can symbolize male control and domination. In fact, women are especially vulnerable in the sexual act. With the man usually being much bigger and stronger than she, with him most often on top of her, with his firm member entering her most tender area, with him thrusting his body anxious to achieve climax, she is by anyone’s standards extremely vulnerable. For the totally healthy woman, these aspects of manhood can be a part of what draws her to a man. For the wounded woman, they can be a signal of danger and a sign that she needs to protect herself. This need for self-protection can become an unhappy constraint—unhappy for the wife as well as for the husband—in what is meant to be the free-flowing joy of making love

OUR ROLE AS MINISTERS TO OUR WIVES

Where something is amiss with our wives, we cannot make them change. However, where sin or brokenness hinders them from experiencing—and offering—the full joy of the sexual union, God may give us the privilege of being agents of change—if we are willing. Whether the source of a wife’s problems with sexuality are her sins or her brokenness, or some combination of the two, I believe there are two areas in which we can minister, two needs that she has, that if we can fulfill them, we are very likely to find her changing in positive ways with respect to her sexuality. The two things our wives need are these: They need to know they are loved, and they need a manly man. Furthermore, we their husbands, are uniquely placed as the ones who can fill those needs. As we husbands change; as we learn to express love for our wives, and as we grow as manly men, in almost every situation our wives will change for the better.

TO KNOW SHE IS LOVED

We cannot make our wives change, but we can love them. Look at each of the problems just described, and consider the impact that a man who loved his wife and expressed that love in words, touch and deeds could have on her.

The heart of a woman who thought of sex as merely a duty could be touched by a man who in himself was re-integrating love and sexuality. Her duty could become her joy as “love making” became truly an expression of love.

The heart of a woman who saw sex as mainly orgasm could be stirred as she experienced true one-flesh union. In the love of her husband she could find that sex can be so much more than sensual pleasure.

For the woman who used sex for control, coming to know that she is loved could diminish her need to be in control. Where other marital problems intrude on the sexual relationship all kinds of things may need to happen, but given women's relational nature and their need to be loved, surely the love of her husband is going to be a central part of any solution.

And for the woman who didn't feel she had much to offer a man, what could better disprove this than having a man truly love her?

But it is perhaps for the woman with an excess fear of vulnerability that a husband's love offers the clearest and strongest remedy. Next to her security in the Lord, the greatest security a woman can find is in a man who loves her. As she gains the knowledge, eventually the heart knowledge, that this man will not hurt her, will not use her, she becomes freer and freer to give herself to such a man.

But this woman and the other women I have described, need one more thing. They need a manly man. I will explain why.

TO BE WITH A MANLY MAN

A woman's assurance that she is loved goes a long way towards meeting her security needs, and it does much to show her of God's plan for a the full expression of a one-flesh union. But because of woman's inherent vulnerability, she needs not just a man who shows that he loves her, but she needs a man who she believes will stay with her in all circumstances, who will protect her when needed. The only kind of man who can offer this security is a manly man, the man described in Chapter 4.

If a wife has a husband who fulfills his God-ordained roles of protector, initiator and authority, and who manifests the qualities of strength, courage, fortitude and honor, she knows she is with an authentic manly man, and all of the complimentary feminine qualities in her are drawn to this kind of man. And she can be freed to give herself totally to such a man, knowing that this man of integrity and character will not abandon her.

I once overheard my wife telling a lady friend that when I said "No" to her, it really turned her on. Knowing the context in which this was said, it made perfect sense to me. For years my wife had been married to a weak, people pleasing, timid man. With my conversion, and my being set free from homosexuality, I started to grow as a man. My new ability to say no to her was a manifestation of my emerging manhood, and she was sexually drawn to this manhood.

As we learn to express our love for our wives, and as we grow in our manhood, we not only minister to our wives directly, but other good things start to happen in us that will make us better lovers. As we grow in our manhood, many of the things that can cause us to stumble sexually will start to dissipate. Any fear of our wives or of their rejection will start to fade, as will our need to feed our ego needs through sexual fantasies. Our inner strength will start to stand up to the power of sexual temptations. Our deep desire to be a protector will find expression in our trying to safeguard the fragile hearts of our wives,

hearts that could be so wounded by any unfaithfulness on our part. We will want to take steps, bold steps if necessary, to remove ourselves from situations where we are sexually tempted and could prove unfaithful.

When a woman sees these things happening in her husband, she knows she has a manly man.

We love our wives by doing the things that show love. We grow as men by doing the things that men do, by exercising the manly virtues and by consciously trying to fulfill as best we can the roles God has assigned us as men.

WOMEN STRUGGLE TO CHANGE

We men can be slow to change. If you have tried to change any deeply rooted patterns of behavior or ways of responding emotionally to certain things, you don't need me tell you how difficult it can be. Difficult as change is for us, I believe it is far more difficult for women. I found this out in our ministry to same-sex attracted men and women. We have always experienced a higher rate of success with men than with women.

There can be a number of reasons for this, but one major reason I believe goes to one of the most fundamental differences between men and women. Men, in their total being, just as in their brains, tend to be compartmentalized, while women, like their brains, are more integrated. This means that you can take a man apart, so to speak, and work on one part at a time. During one period a man might work on his belief system, another, his habits, another, the development of his manhood, another, his ego needs, another his capacity to forgive, and on and on.

It is different with most women. With her more integrated personhood, when one part is wounded or otherwise amiss, it affects her whole being. Her beliefs, her imagination, her emotions, her behavior are all more closely interconnected. In giving her special feminine virtues, this is her strength. But when she is wounded, this trait presents problems. When a woman is wounded, the whole woman needs to be healed.

I bring this up to encourage husbands to have an extra measure of patience with their wives. We might tell another man, "Get over it," and he might actually get over it. Not likely with a woman. It took my wife years to get over what my deception and unfaithfulness had done to her. During that time, I believe God gave me an extra measure of patience and endurance for her. God loves our wives, and He loves marriage. If you are seeking to love your wife, and you need a special measure of patience, a love that will endure, He will give it to you.

WHEN CHANGE DOESN'T COME

I have been discussing how changes in us might facilitate changes in our wives. But all the changes in the world in us, our becoming perfect husbands and lovers, our achieving world class manliness, does not assure change in our wives. They remain free agents before God; He gave them that freedom, and He does not take it away. In some situations

her wounding could be so deep that only a miracle would change it, and maybe you are in a situation where God, for His reasons, chooses not to work a miracle.

My experience has been, however, that almost always, change in the husband, brings about some change in wife, and specifically, change for the good in the husband brings about change for the good in the wife.

But there is no time line for change, and there is no assurance that it will come. However, so long as our wives are alive, we can never say with certainty, “She will never change.” For the Christian, hope always stays alive, or should. Remember the words from the Bible’s love chapter, *love...hopes all things* (1 Corinthians 13:6).

At the same time we need to recall other words that come next in this passage, *love...endures all things*. As Christian men who have committed to marriage for better or for worse—that is to say for life—some may have to adopt Job’s attitude expressed in the face of the calamities that faced him, *Though He slay me, I will hope in Him* (Job 13:15).

Hope and endurance can coexist, and they are necessary in every marriage.

THE SEXUAL RELATIONSHIP IN PERSPECTIVE

One more thing needs to be said to the husband whose sexual relationship with his wife is not all that he hopes it would be, and that is this: A good sexual relationship is a gift; it is not a right. A good sexual relationship is a gift; it is not a necessity. Just as God gives different spiritual gifts to different individuals (1 Corinthians 12:1-11), so in the natural realm we are all blessed with different gifts. I think I received what was left over in the bottom of the barrel when God gave out musical, artistic, and athletic gifts, and yet I live each day in awe of how God has blessed me in the overall circumstances of my life. In other areas I am abundantly blessed.

Not long ago I was with a friend who, like me, had had to deal with prostate cancer. I had elected to go with surgery to remove the cancerous prostate and he had chosen treatment with radioactive seeds. My surgery had eliminated my ability to have sexual intercourse. Because I had considered the seeds, I asked my friend what his treatment had done to his sex life. Apparently I had overstepped my bounds with such a personal question for my friend snapped back, “There are more important things than sex.” A bit shocked that in a friendship that went back to our college years, he considered my question to be intrusive, I had to admit, he spoke an important truth.

An ideal sexual relationship in the marriage can be an enormous blessing, and if we don’t have it we should work for it and continue to hope and pray for it. But it is just one of many possible blessings that God gives His people. Focus on the good. Focus on what is good about your wife. Focus on what *is* good about your sexual relationship, and more importantly, continue to love your wife. As I thought about it, I don’t know of any man who appears to love his wife more than my friend who said, “There are more important things than sex.”