

1 Introduction

In the past year we have discussed the issue of leadership and submission in the family. We have looked in detail at the roles that God has given to husbands and wives in a marriage, at possible reasons why we fail to fulfill this God-given role, and ways to overcome these problems.

Today, I want to begin a new series, which looks at marriage from a different perspective and shall help us to deal with the practical problems that we have to face every day.

Most of us come to Sunday School because we try to live our lives in the right way and hope to find some inspiration how to do that. We try to do a good job with our marriage, raise our children in the right way, be responsible and successful in our job, maintain or build relationships with family and friends, in all that be a witness for Christ, do a good job at church, and of course spend enough time with our Lord as well. Often we feel overwhelmed by the sheer number of duties we have.

Many of us have the impression that we simply can't do it. We just don't seem to have enough time to do everything we have to do. We struggle with our finances, because we want a nice home for our family, a good education for our children, enable them to have a good life, and our income doesn't seem to allow us to do that and still give our tithe to the Lord. In addition to that illnesses get into our way and make both our time and financial problems more difficult. And the people around us don't make it easy for us – most of all the people we feel closest to.

Life puts a lot of pressure on us and occasionally we get the feeling that everyday life is just beyond our control. And Christians struggle with this problem more often than the rest of the world, because they feel responsible for so many things and people around them and have a hard time saying “no”.

As an illustration I would like to read a description of a typical day of a typical Christian mother who is just loaded with burdens. It's a fairly long story but I would like you to listen closely and tell me later what you think the cause for all these problems were.

6:00 a.m.: The alarm jangled. Bleary-eyed from too little sleep, Sherrie shut off the noisy intruder, turned on the bedside lamp, and sat up in bed.

“Why am I dreading this day? Lord, didn't you promise me a life of joy?”

Then, as the cobwebs left her mind, Sherrie remembered the reason for her dread: the four-o'clock meeting with Todd's third-grade teacher. The phone call returned to her memory: “Sherry, this is Jean Russell. I wonder if we could meet about Todd's performance and his . . . behavior.”

Todd couldn't keep still and listen to his teachers. He didn't even listen to Sherrie and Walt. He was such a strong-willed child, and she didn't want to quench his spirit. Wasn't that more important?

“Well, no time to worry about that right now. I’ve got enough troubles to keep me busy all day.” Under the shower, Sherrie’s mind moved out of first gear. She began mentally ticking off the day’s schedule. Todd, nine, and Amy, six, would have been a handful even if she *weren’t* a working mother.

“Let’s see . . . fix breakfast, pack two lunches, and finish sewing Amy’s costume for the school play. That will be a trick – finishing the costume before the car pool picks her up at 7:45.”

Sherry thought regretfully about last night. She had planned to work on Amy’s costume then but her mother had dropped in unexpectedly. The memories of her attempts to salvage the time weren’t pretty.

Trying to be diplomatic, Sherry had told her mother, “you can’t imagine how much I enjoy your surprise visits, Mom. But I was wondering, if you would mind if I sew Amy’s costume while we talk?”

“Sherry, you know I would be the last to intrude on your time with the family.” Sherrie’s mother, widowed for twelve years, had elevated her widowhood to the status of martyrdom. “I mean, since your father died, it’s been such an empty time. I still miss our family. How could I deprive you of that for yourself?”

I bet I find out how. Sherry thought to herself.

“That’s why I can understand why you don’t bring Walt and the children to see me much anymore. How could I be entertaining. I am just an old lady who gave her entire life to her children. Who would want to spend any time with me?”

“No, Mom, no, no, no! That’s not what I meant at all! I mean . . . it’s so special to have you over here. Goodness knows, with our schedule, we’d like to visit more, but we just haven’t been able to. That’s why I am so glad that you took the initiative.” *Lord, don’t strike me dead for this little lie,* she prayed silently. “In fact, I can do the costume anytime. Now, why don’t I make us some coffee?”

Her mother sighed. “All right, if you insist. But I just hate to think that I am intruding.”

The visit lasted way into the night. By the time her mother left, Sherry felt absolutely crazy, but she justified it to herself. *At least I have helped to make her lonely day a little brighter.* Then a pesky voice piped up. *If you helped so much, why was she still talking about her loneliness when she left?*

6:45 a.m. Sherrie returned to the present. “No use crying over spilt time,” she mumbled to herself she struggled to close the zipper of her black linen skirt. Her favorite suit had become, like many others, too tight. *Middle-age spread so soon?* she thought. *This week I really have to go on a diet and start exercising.* The next hour was, as usual, a disaster. The kids whined about getting out of bed and Walt complained, “Can’t you get the kids to the table in time?”

7:45 a.m. Miraculously, the kids made it to their rides, Walt left for Work in his car, and Sherrie went out, closed the front door after her, and rushed to work.

4:00 p.m. Most of the day passed uneventfully. She was out on the way out of the office to the teacher's meeting, when her boss, Jeff Moreland, flagged her down.

"Glad, I caught up with you, Sherrie. Listen, I am in a time crunch," he said, handing her a large sheaf of papers. "This is the data for the final recommendations for the Kimbrough account. All it needs is a little writing and editing. And it's due tomorrow. But I'm sure it'll be no problem for you."

Sherrie panicked. Jeff's "editing" needs were legendary. Sherrie saw a minimum of five hour's work. *I had this data in to him three weeks ago! Why does this man get off having me save his face for his deadline?*

Quickly she composed herself. "Sure, Jeff. No problem. Glad I can help. What time do you need it?"

"Nine o'clock would be fine. And . . . thanks, Sherrie. I always think of you when I am in a jam. You're so dependable"

4:30 p.m. The meeting with Todd's teacher began, as so many before, without Walt. Todd's father hadn't been able to get off work, so the two women talked alone.

"He's not a bad child, Sherrie. Todd is a bright, energetic boy. When he minds, he is one of the most enjoyable kids in the class. The problem is, that he doesn't respond well to limits. For example, during our task period, when children work on assignments, Todd has great difficulty. He gets up from his desk, pesters other kids, and won't stop talking. When I mention to him that his behavior is inappropriate, he becomes enraged and obstinate."

Sherrie felt defensive about her only son. "Maybe Todd has an attention-deficit problem, or he's hyperactive?"

Mrs. Russell shook her head. "When Todd's second grade teacher wondered about that last year, psychological tests ruled that out. He stays on tasks very well when he's interested in the subject. I am no therapist, but it seems to me that he's just not used to responding to rules."

"Are you saying this is some sort of home problem?"

Mrs. Russell looked uncomfortable. "As I said, I am no therapist. I just know that in third grade most children resist rules. But Todd is off the scale. Any time I tell him to do something he doesn't want to it's World War III. And since all his intellectual and cognitive testing comes out normal, I was just wondering how things were at home."

Sherrie could no longer hold back her tears. "I need to be honest with you. Walt and I have a real struggle making Todd mind at home. When we're playing or

talking, Todd is the most wonderful son I could imagine. But any time I have to discipline him, the tantrums are more than I can handle. So I guess, I don't have a solution for you."

Jean nodded her head slowly. "It really helps me, Sherrie, to know that Todd's behavior is a problem at home, too. At least now we can put our heads together on a solution.

7:00 p.m. Halfway through the dinner, the phone rang. Sherrie jumped up from the table to answer the phone. "Hope I'm not disturbing anything," said Phillis Renfrow, the women's ministries leader at church. "Sherrie, I am in deep water. Margie was going to be our activities coordinator at the retreat and now she's canceled. Something about 'priorities at home'. Any way you can pitch in?"

The retreat. Sherrie had almost forgotten that the annual gathering of church women was this weekend. She had actually been looking forward to leaving the kids and Walt behind and strolling through the beautiful mountainous area for two days, just herself and the Lord. In fact, the possibility of solitude felt better to her than the planned group activities. Taking on Margie's activities coordinator position would mean giving up her precious alone time. No, it wouldn't work. She would just have to say

But automatically, her second thought pattern intervened. *What a privilege to serve. Sherrie! By giving up a little portion of your life, by letting go of your selfishness, you can actually make a big difference in some lives. Think it over!*

Sherrie didn't have to think it over. She was used to responding unquestioningly to this familiar voice, just as she responded to her mother's, and Phyllis', and maybe God's. "I'll be happy to help. Just send me whatever Margie has done."

Phyllis sighed, audibly relieved. "Sherrie, I know it's a sacrifice. But isn't that the abundant Christian life? Being living sacrifices."

If you say so, Sherrie thought. But she couldn't help wondering when the "abundant" part would come in.

7:45 p.m. Dinner finally finished. Sherrie watched Walt position himself in front of the TV. Todd reached for the phone, asking if his friends could come over. Amy slipped unobserved into her room.

The dishes stayed on the table. The family hadn't quite gotten the hang of helping yet. But maybe the kids were still a little young for that. Sherrie started clearing the dishes from the table.

11:30 p.m. Years ago, Sherrie could have cleaned up after dinner, gotten the kids to bed on time, and performed Jeff's handed-off project with ease. A cup of coffee after dinner and the adrenaline rush galvanized Sherrie into superhuman feats of productivity. She wasn't called "Super Sherrie" for nothing!

But it was becoming noticeably harder these days. More and more she was having trouble concentrating, forgetting dates and deadlines, and not even caring a great deal about it all. But by sheer will-power, she had completed most of her tasks now. Now she had to get on with her real task for the evening: her talk with Walt.

Her and Walt's courtship and early marriage had been pleasant. But over the years, she had noted a shift in the relationship. It started subtly, but then became more pronounced. She saw it in the lack of respect in his eyes, when she tried to tell him about her need for more support from him, in his insistent demands for her to do things *his* way, and in his temper and anger.

At first, she had thought she was imagining things. Later, she had tried "Loving Walt out of His Anger". But nothing really worked and she felt that her love for her husband was eroding. And that was, what tonight was all about. Things needed to change. Somehow, they needed to rekindle the flames of their first love.

Sherrie walked into the family room. "Honey, can we talk?" There was no answer. Walt had fallen asleep on the couch. She turned off the TV and lights and walked into the bedroom.

11:50 p.m. Lying in bed, Sherrie couldn't tell which was greater, her loneliness or her exhaustion. She picked up her Bible and opened it to the New Testament. *Please, Lord, give me something to hope for.* Her eyes fell on the words of Christ in Matthew 5:3-5:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

But Lord, I already feel poor in spirit. I mourn over my life, my marriage, my children. I try to be gentle, but I just feel run over all the time. Where is your promise? Where is your hope? Where are you?

Sherrie waited in the darkened room for an answer. None came. The only sound was the quiet pit-pat of her tears running off her cheeks and onto the pages of her Bible.

We probably can all identify with Sherrie's dilemma – her helplessness, her confusion, her isolation, the feeling of guilt, and the feeling that life has gotten out of control. But what is the cause of all that? Is it just an accumulation of bad circumstances that will go away after a while? Or would things get better if she were to try harder? What did you observe while listening to her story?

1. She spends a lot of energy on trying to be successful
2. She tries to please people without getting the close relationships she wants.
3. She is taking responsibility for the feelings and problems of others
4. She doesn't take ownership of her own life.

The last items are the key to her problem and those of many Christians. *We fail to take ownership of our own life while taking responsibility for the lives of others.* This is *not* how God wanted us to be. After creating us in his own image, he told us

Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. (**Genesis 1:28**)

God gave us responsibility for certain tasks. And part of this responsibility is knowing what *is* our job, and what is *not*. People who constantly take on duties that aren't theirs will eventually burn out. We hear about such burn-outs quite often and it always involves people who seem to have a great sense of responsibility and reliability. But their true problem is *not* that others abuse them or that they have too many duties. It is that they take on problems that were never intended to be theirs while neglecting their own life.

Married Christians are probably much stronger affected by this than any other people. Most of us have no greater desire than a lifetime of love and commitment of the air, and onto the person with whom we share our life. We want to become one flesh with our spouse. This is what marriage is about:

Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh. (**Genesis 2:24**)

Marriage is about love, care, need, and companionship of two people who overcome immaturity and selfishness in order to form something better than what each person alone can produce. Love is at the center of marriage, but love cannot grow without *freedom* and *responsibility*. When we are free to disagree, then we are free to love. If we are not, we live in fear and love dies. When we both take responsibility to do what is best for our marriage, then love can grow. If we don't, then one of us will take too much responsibility and resent it and the other will not take on enough and become self-centered.

But freedom and responsibility requires us to respect *boundaries*, that is the invisible property lines which describe where a person begins and where it ends. Within these boundaries, a person must be able to act freely without being controlled by anybody else, and to take on responsibility for everything that happens. The mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual boundaries for our lives are the essence of our personality. If

we can't set and respect appropriate boundaries at appropriate times, we will easily run into serious problems without ever finding out how we got into all this mess. But setting boundaries is very difficult, since there are many questions that need to be answered:

1. Can I set limits and still be a loving person?
2. How can I set limits without being selfish?
3. How do boundaries relate to submission?
4. What if somebody is upset or hurt by my boundaries?
5. Why do I feel guilty or afraid when I consider setting boundaries?
6. How do I react to someone who wants my time, love, energy, or money?
7. What are legitimate boundaries, anyhow?

Misinformation about the Bible's answers to these questions has led to a lot of misunderstandings and problems that result from the absence of proper boundaries. In the weeks to come we want to take a biblical view of *boundaries* and particularly of *boundaries in marriage* that will help us to live our faith practically in everyday life and to grow in our marriage towards the blessed union that God intends us to have. We will discuss what they are and why they are necessary. We will look at various boundaries conflicts with ourselves, friends, our work, family, children, and our spouse – and how we can deal with them. We will then look in detail at building proper boundaries and resolving conflicts in our marriage; and finally clarify some misunderstandings that help us to develop healthy boundaries while avoiding their misuse.

In all this we should keep one thing in our mind. Setting boundaries is not about fixing, changing, or punishing our spouse or other people. It is not about *somebody else* grow up. It is about us, about learning self-control – one of the nine fruits of the spirits described in **Galatians 5:23** – and about taking ownership of our own life, so that we are protected enough to allow love to grow.