



When Trying Harder Becomes Destructive **Leslie Vernick**

Christian women who have gone to biblical counselors with marriage problems are often encouraged to work on themselves and try harder to be more submissive, more caring, and more attentive to their husband's needs; more respectful, and less demanding. In many marriages, this might be wise counsel. When one person starts to try harder, it often begets a reciprocal response in the other person. He begins to try harder too. Amends are made and the relationship is repaired. This is a good start and when the marriage stalls, someone needs to get some movement forward. Otherwise, if repairs are not made the marriage will soon deteriorate and become worse. However, in certain kinds of marriages, it is not a good idea and can actually make the marriage worse.

When I wrote my book *How to Act Right When Your Spouse Acts Wrong*, I was careful to be clear that there is no cookie cutter approach to being a godly spouse. What might be the right thing to do in one marriage might be the absolutely wrong thing to do in another.

Briefly, let me explain why, in some marriages, trying harder to accommodate one's husband, do what he wants and needs and be more compliant and submissive to what he says becomes destructive not only to her but also to her husband as well as their marriage.

Our Brokenness and Blindness

God knows that because of our fallen human condition we are inherently self-centered. Self-indulgence, self-absorption, and self-deception are just part of our broken-ness. We are born believing the lie, "It's all about me." Part of a Christian parent's task in raising healthy children is to challenge this lie with the truth. "You are not the main character in your story, God is." However, even when parenting has been exceptional, the sins of the self are like stubborn weeds. They always come back because no matter how much we pull them out, they have deep roots.

In addition, we have 20/20 vision to see these sins in other people but are blind to them in our own lives. We're experts at self-deception (Jeremiah 17:9). We are masters at rationalizing, minimizing and justifying our own selfishness and lack of love. The Bible calls it blindness. Therefore, God has determined that we need one another to help us see ourselves more truthfully because we are blind to our own blindness (Obadiah 1:3).

Recognizing our own self-sins without the help of others would be like trying to get dressed and groomed for a big event in the dark. You can't see yourself properly to make adjustments to your hair or clothing without the benefit of lights and mirrors. Likewise, people with whom we are in close relationship function as lights and mirrors reflecting back to us how they "see" us and how we impact their lives. The Bible warns us that without the mirror of community life, we all have the potential to be blind and deceived toward our own sin (Hebrews 3:13).

With those thoughts as a backdrop, let's look at the problem with advising a woman to try harder to be what her husband wants.

It Feeds the Lie

Some men do not want to be married to a real woman who has her own feelings, her own needs, and her own brokenness. Instead, they want a fantasy wife. A blow-up doll wife that continues to bounce back with a smile even when he knocks her down. He wants a wife who always agrees, always acts nice, always smiles and thinks he's wonderful all of the time no matter what he does or how he behaves. He wants a wife who wants to have sex with him whenever he's in the mood, regardless of how he treats her. He wants a wife that will never upset him, never disagree, never challenge him, and never disappoint him. He wants a wife that grants him amnesty whenever he messes up and never mentions it again.

The more a woman colludes with her husband's idea that he's entitled to a fantasy wife, the more firmly entrenched this lie becomes. She will never measure up to his fantasy wife because she too is a sinner. A real wife will disappoint him sometimes. She won't always be able to meet every want or need. A real wife also reflects to him her pain when he hurts her and God's wisdom when she sees him making a foolish decision.

In a healthy marriage where both individuals are allowed to be themselves, couples must learn to handle disagreements, differences, and conflicts through compromise, mutual caring, and mutual submission. Sacrifice and service are mutually practiced in order to love one another in godly ways. When we fail (as we will) we see the pain in our partner's face and with God's help, make corrections so that damages are repaired, and love grows. In an unhealthy marriage, when real wife and fantasy wife collide, it's never pretty.

So, how do we counsel wives in destructive marriages? We must help her gain a vision for God's role as her husband's helpmate. According to the Bible, a helpmate is not an enabler, but rather a strong warrior. It means she will need to learn to fight (in God's way) to bring about her husband's good. She will need to think and pray about how God can use her to meet her husband's deepest needs, not just his felt needs.

I often give women in these situations this challenge. Ask God what are your husband's biggest or deepest need is right now. Is it to continue to prop him up, indulge his self-centeredness and self-deception – or does he need something far more radical and risky from you?

I encourage her to prayerfully and humbly ask God to show her how best to biblically love her husband. It may be to stop indulging his selfish behavior and speak the truth in love. It may be to reflect back to him the impact his behaviors have on her and their children. It may be to set boundaries against his misuse of power under the guise of headship so that he doesn't remain self-deceived. It may mean exposing some of his sins to the leadership of the church so that they too can act as a reflective mirror so that he has the best opportunity to look at himself from God's perspective and repent.

That kind of love is indeed risky, redemptive, and sacrificial as she does not know what his response will be to this kind of love. But if he wakes up and repents of his demand for a fantasy wife that would be a positive change for her, for him, and for their marriage.