

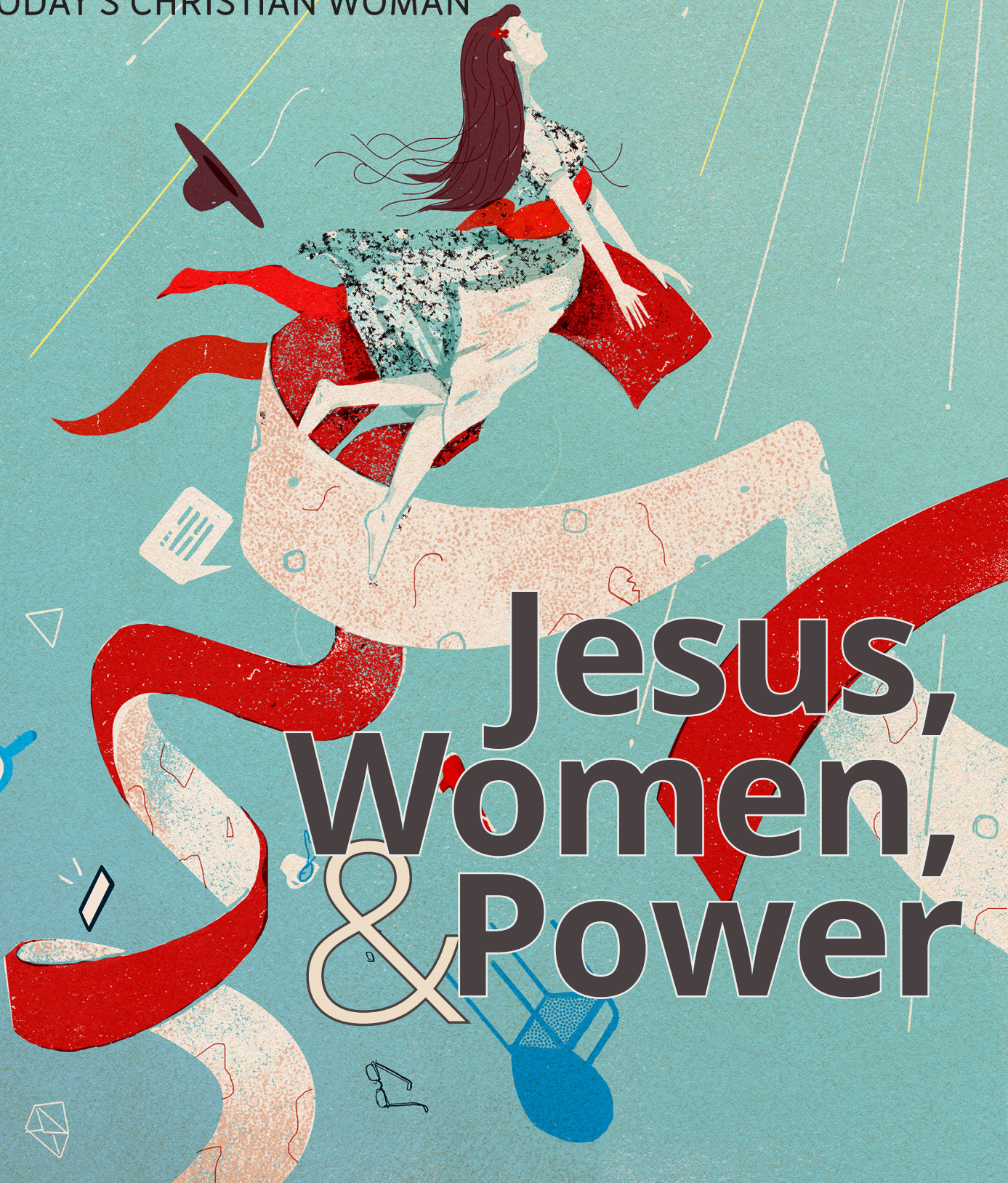
TCW

TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN

MARCH 16, 2016

THE STAGES OF SEX

TRANSFORMING
HABITS



Jesus, Women, & Power

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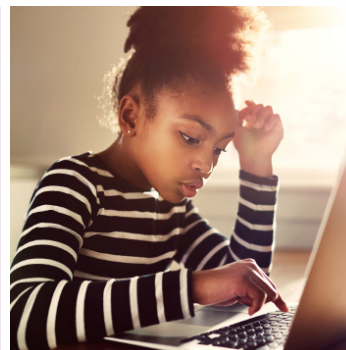
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The Global “Glass Ceiling”

*A Christian response to gender-based
inequity*



Kelli B. Trujillo, Editor

Wait. . . What?!" After marching around the living room, singing along to "Sister Suffragette" from our *Mary Poppins* soundtrack, my daughters had stopped to ask me what in the world a *suffragette* was. When I started to explain that women at that time didn't have the right to vote, I was interrupted by my incredulous third-grader, eyes wide in disbelief. She simply could not comprehend a world in which it was normative for *only men* to vote.

Thankfully, my daughters are growing up in a world in which women now have the right to vote in **every country** on the planet (with the exception of Vatican City). Economists note that women are wielding increasing economic power, both in terms of **employment** and **spending**.

Yet inequities certainly still remain: Women continue to face a significant **pay gap** when compared to men doing equal work; a "glass ceiling" **persists** when it comes to women in positions of executive leadership; and while women's political power is increasing, globally women make up only about one-fifth of national **governing bodies**. Meanwhile, **millions** of girls are barred from access to education. And as women around the world face gender-based discrimination, we're simultaneously subjected to cultural messages linking female "power" primarily with sexuality and the male gaze—a distorted understanding, to be sure.

As Christians, what are we to think of these disparities and distortions of power?

First, we understand power differently. We humans tend to hunger for power—for control over others, for self-aggrandizement. In Scripture, we see this human view of power repeatedly linked to vices like greed, lust, pride, and injustice.

Yet redeemed by Jesus, we can embrace an entirely different understanding of power. Rather than self-aggrandizement, we aim to grow toward **Christ-centrality**. Instead of

leading by our own strength and initiative, we seek to rely on the power of the **Holy Spirit**. And we take confidence in the paradox that the power of God often shines brightest through our own **weaknesses** and **inadequacies**. Rather than brashness or dominance, this type of power is demonstrated in **grace** and **love**.

Second, we embrace our calling and influence our world. We’ve each been **called by God** and uniquely gifted by him to embody the gospel message in our community and to build up the church. Christian virtues like humility and service do not require us to mask our gifts, shirk leadership opportunities, or stay in the shadows! Whether God is calling you into an official leadership role or to influence others in other, less “official” ways, that calling is *significant*. As you step into that calling, embrace your God-given gifts and use them to influence others for his kingdom.

Finally, we stand against gender-based inequity. Scripture offers a clear and resonating affirmation of the **God-given dignity** and equality of women and men. We also see in Scripture God’s consistent call for his people to speak up for and protect the rights of those who are **marginalized**, overlooked, or rendered powerless. So wherever we see women being demeaned, used, marginalized, or victimized, as a church we speak up and take action in Christ’s name.

In this issue of *Today’s Christian Woman*, we’re exploring how Jesus invites us to understand power differently. In **“Jesus, Women, and Power,”** *Christianity Today’s* executive editor, Andy Crouch, invites us to contemplate Jesus’ encounters with women and to consider what they teach us about authority and vulnerability. And in **“Don’t Underestimate the Power of Prayer,”** Priscilla Shirer prompts us to reimagine our approach to prayer, enlarging our perspective on the **power** this discipline truly has.


How might God be calling you to reimagine your understanding of power and influence? Our hope is that these articles equip you to utilize that God-given influence to impact your world.

Grace,



Kelli B. Trujillo

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● Cover Story

Jesus, Women, and Power

Christ turns our assumptions upside down and inside out. | **ANDY CROUCH**

We get just one glimpse of Jesus as a boy: the time when he deserted the family entourage at age 12 in order to settle down in the temple ([Luke 2:41–52](#)). After three days of frantic searching, Mary rebuked her child with words any mother could say to a child today: “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety” (NRSV).

Jesus posed a question in return. “Why were you searching for me?” he asked his mother in words any 12-year-old boy might say, still innocent of the vulnerability and anxiety of parenthood. And then words not any 12-year-old might say: “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”

Later on in Luke’s Gospel ([Luke 10:38–42](#)), we again see an imperturbably seated Jesus and an extremely agitated family member. His host Martha confronted Jesus and, indirectly, her sister, Mary, who was sitting with him just as the temple scribes did: “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me!”

“Martha, Martha,” Jesus replied—Is this a sign of affection, or does it take two repetitions of her name to break through her anxiety?—“you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.”

We can readily see ourselves in these troubled people—in Jesus’ worried parents and his busy, anxious friend Martha. But the great value of these stories to us is that they help us

see Jesus better, and they help us begin to see the world the way he sees it. The Christian life is one long story of disorientation and reorientation, being patiently led by Jesus away from the things we are anxious about and toward the things that matter to him.

This painful disorientation ultimately touches on the things we think we most value—life, honor, power. To follow Jesus is to have our assumptions about all these things turned upside down and to have our hopes for them disappointed—and yet to find that the life he offers is far better than we could have guessed.

To put it another way: Being a disciple of Jesus means losing everything you thought you wanted and gaining more than you ever thought you could have.

Or to put it one more way: Being a disciple of Jesus means taking off our bubble wrap.

To understand that, we must visit with Jesus three more times in the company of more anxious families.

WHEN JESUS WON'T BUDGE

There's another time we see Mary and Martha together, in the Gospel of John ([chapter 11](#)). They sent an urgent message to Jesus about their brother, Lazarus: "Lord, he whom you love is ill." Delivering such a message would entail a fair amount of travel and searching. And yet, when the message reached him, Jesus stayed put. When he finally arrived, four days after Lazarus's death, Martha offered a barely veiled reproach, not so different in tone perhaps from Jesus' mother years before: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

No matter how urgent your situation, no matter how anxious your search and seemingly great your need, it is quite difficult to get Jesus to budge.

No one discovered this more viscerally than a man named Jairus, one of the leaders of the synagogue. We meet him in [Mark 5](#) at the moment when he fell at Jesus' feet and begged him—"repeatedly," Mark says: "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live."

For once, Jesus budged. He followed Jairus, a crowd pressing around them as they went.

But in the crowd there was a woman. She had been bleeding for 12 years, and her condition was as chronic as Jairus's daughter's was acute. And her approach to Jesus was as indirect as Jairus's was overt. She threaded her way through the crowd, believing there was no need for a glance or a word, let alone a visit to her home—just the briefest brush with Jesus' robe.

Whatever we make of this bit of sympathetic magic, the woman was right. The moment she touched Jesus' robe, she knew she was healed. She began to slip away.

And then Jesus stopped, suddenly unbudging again.

"Who touched my clothes?" he asked.

Now Jesus was the one on a relentless quest.

If you can't get Jesus to budge when he doesn't want to, you certainly can't hide when he wants to find you. The woman came forward, trembling. She fell at Jesus' feet, where Jairus

had been a few minutes earlier, and told him “the whole truth.”

The whole truth of enduring much under many physicians, of spending a life’s savings on health care all the while getting no better but only worse—this whole truth was not told quickly.

Jesus wanted to hear it all. And so, in the presence of the crowd and Jairus, he listened to all the humiliating details of a 12-year medical history. And then he said, “Daughter.”

Well, he said more than that, of course. He pronounced her healed. But that first word is the most remarkable. “Daughter of Abraham” was the conventional phrase, but Jesus—who even at 12 years old called God “Father”—signaled this woman’s membership in an even more extraordinary family. Her faith had not just made her well; she had not just been healed and heard; she had been adopted.

You may know the rest of the story—Jairus’s ashen-faced servants arriving to tell him his own daughter is dead; Jesus’ sudden, more determined resumption of his journey to Jairus’s home; his improbable claim that the girl is just sleeping, prompting general grim hilarity; his secretly taking her cold hand in his, saying, “Little girl, get up”; and the 12-year-old girl suddenly waking, rising, walking; the disciples and parents bound to secrecy.

FIRST HE STRIPS AWAY OUR SECURITY

These stories help us begin the real process of conversion—turning our assumptions about the world, and our place in it, upside down and inside out.

Jesus confounds our assumptions about privilege and exclusion. In a thousand ways, we learned early on that some daughters are more equal than others—that some people have the status, popularity, and position from which others are excluded. Indeed, the very basis of such things is that some are included and others are excluded.

Not for Jesus. You may be the daughter of a synagogue leader, or you may be an unknown, invisible to the crowd. Jesus cares for you just as much either way. He will name you “daughter” either way. Jesus has as much time for the daughter of the powerful as for the daughter of the powerless. He has, that is, exactly enough time.

Jesus confounds our desires, so dramatically escalated in this modern technological world, for control and comfort. There’s a saying my wife and I have repeated over and over to help our children navigate the suburban affluence in which they have been brought up at such peril to their souls. We use it to remind them that money can buy insulation from the dangers of life but also from life’s true joys. We tell them, “The only thing money can really buy is bubble wrap.”

Following Jesus will strip you of your bubble wrap, your insulation from anxiety and pain. Jesus has a terrifyingly high tolerance for discomfort, even or especially among those he calls his friends.

Following Jesus strips you of your bubble wrap in another way as well. It strips you of the insulation that prevents you from knowing true life—from the busyness, worry, and self-importance that keep you from having the one true thing that really matters, from everything that prevents you from hearing and telling the whole truth, from all that might

keep you from seeing, in the end, the resurrection power of God.

THEN HE CONFERS HIS AUTHORITY

Jesus confounds our expectations about authority. We think of authority as vested in people with particular kinds of position and roles—we think, frankly, of power as invested in *men*. But title and role mean nothing to Jesus, and women and men have equal access to him—equal ability to command his attention and equal inability to command him to do what they want.

The woman Jesus called “daughter” was highly vulnerable in her society, but she acted with almost as much authority and confidence as Jairus, making her way, like him, through the crowd and ending up, like him, at Jesus’ feet. Then she was given far more authority than she ever imagined or feared: the authority to tell Jesus, and everyone listening, “the whole truth”—something Jairus was specifically told, once his own daughter was raised from the dead, not to do. Mary the sister of Martha, too, spent time at Jesus’ feet—and a long Christian tradition says she, as well as her sister and other women, was one of the women at the empty tomb, commissioned with them to become the first heralds of the Resurrection. Follow Jesus—or to put it more precisely in the context of this daughter’s story, pursue Jesus—and you will be granted more authority than you ever dreamed.

Jesus confounds our expectations about vulnerability. Falling at Jesus’ feet, begging him repeatedly to heal his daughter, Jairus, the synagogue leader, was probably more vulnerable than he had ever been in his life. We think of vulnerability as characterizing people who inherit legacies of exclusion and who live on the margins. We think, frankly, of vulnerability as characteristic of women, the “weaker” sex. But before Jesus, women and men, the powerless and the powerful, are equally vulnerable. As Jairus followed Jesus—as Jesus stopped, searched, and refused to budge—Jairus’s worst fears of vulnerability came true. His daughter died as he waited. The healing procession became a funeral procession (until, eventually, Jesus demonstrated miraculous power once again). Follow Jesus, and you will be called to more vulnerability than you ever imagined.

THE REAL JESUS IS MORE THAN WE IMAGINE

Ultimately, Jesus confounds our expectations about—well, about Jesus himself: “Child, why have you treated us like this?” “Teacher, do you not care?” “Lord, if you had been here. . . .”

If you call Jesus your friend and brother, expect to spend a lot of time complaining to him that he isn’t moving.

He doesn’t budge.

He doesn’t come when we call.

But in the end, he also listens more intently than anyone has ever listened to us.

And then he speaks.

“Daughter, your faith has made you well.”

“Lazarus, come forth.”


“Little girl, get up.”

“Son, behold your mother. Mother, behold your son.”

“It is finished.”

“Behold, I make all things new.” ●

Andy Crouch is executive editor of *Christianity Today*. His latest book is *Strong and Weak: Embracing a Life of Love, Risk and True Flourishing*.



Don't Underestimate the Power of Prayer

Rise up from your rut and reclaim your spiritual passion. | **PRISCILLA SHIRER**

Have you ever found yourself in a spiritual rut? I know I have. Life gets busy, church feels like one more thing on your to-do list, and prayer feels both cumbersome and ineffective.

Beyond the fact that life itself can become overwhelming, even sapping your spiritual vitality, there is a more pressing culprit that threatens to marginalize your prayer life: You have an Enemy waging war on your soul.

Make no mistake, this *is* a war. You are in the fight of your life. A very real Enemy has been strategizing and scheming against you, assaulting you, coming after your emotions, your mind, your future.

But I say Satan's reign of terror stops here, now. He might keep coming, but he won't have victory because his power starts failing when we start praying.

THE MYSTERY OF PRAYER

I'm willing to admit, right up front, that I don't fully understand this. There's an undeniable, unknowable, invisible mystery to the power of prayer. That's why our first reaction to prayer may be to dismiss it, downplay it, or even devalue its critical importance. Prayer, we think, is a good idea in theory—if only it would actually make a difference.

That thinking is what gets us in trouble. When we underestimate the power of prayer, when we think it doesn't work, when we choose to believe that God won't answer our

prayers or that he isn't listening, we wave a white flag and invite Satan into our situation.

Believe me when I say that praying is the last thing Satan wants you to do. He will discourage you from doing it. He will dissuade you from it, and he will disarm you by putting a distaste for prayer in your mouth. He wants to see you passionless, prayerless, and powerless. Perfectly quiet. And because prayer is the divinely ordained mechanism that leads you into the power and victory of Christ, Satan knows you'll remain defeated and undone without it.

THE POWER OF PRAYER

Despite what we may or may not understand about prayer, God has deliberately chosen this particular vehicle as the one that drives his activity in his people's lives. It is the means by which he allows us to partner with him in the fulfilling of his will. He has created prayer as a primary way of putting us into personal contact with him and with his eternal realities, any hour of the day or night.

Prayer is the portal that brings the power of heaven down to earth. It is kryptonite to the Enemy and to all his ploys against you.

When Paul describes our **spiritual armor**, he includes the belt of truth, the body armor of God's righteousness, the shoes of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit—the very Word of God. But he doesn't stop there. "Pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all believers everywhere," Paul says in Ephesians 6:18.

There it is. The fuel that drives everything: *prayer*.

REKINDLING YOUR PASSION

Now you can understand why Satan would want to masterfully engineer the spiritual rut you may experience from time to time—for a week, months, maybe even years. Your get-up-and-go has simply gotten-up-and-gone.

Maybe you've prayed and prayed for the same thing, over and over. Maybe you've wanted God's will so badly and wanted life to look different for so long that you're ready to give up. Maybe you're feeling utterly discouraged or disappointed right now and not sure why you keep being surprised every time the same difficulties pop up again and again. Maybe other demands and distractions have leaked into your heart over time, crowding out space where older, nobler priorities once ruled. I understand all of that, and I have felt a lot of it too.

But nothing—*nothing*—in your life is too far gone that God's power cannot resurrect it—not even your passion for prayer. So go to him to get it back. Don't try to regain your passion for prayer yourself. Don't set your hopes on other people or circumstances to fuse it back into the fiber of your being. Trust this desire into God's care. Only his miraculous work can make your belief in the power of prayer bubble back up to the surface where it belongs. And he is more than willing to do it!

PRAYING FOR PASSION

Since filming *War Room* last year, I've devoted space in my closet to this specific request. It's a tiny space, but I've made whatever room I can to plaster my prayers to God on the wall. And along with the requests for my husband, children, friends, and our ministry's impact, I also pray fervently and regularly for God to stir a passion in my own soul that cannot easily be snuffed out. The unique, pressing demands of the last couple years have taken their toll, sometimes showing up in hints of spiritual apathy that I know the Enemy relishes. So I've had no shame in praying for myself, that God will stir passion in me.

God's plan for me and you is to move us into a position of impact by infusing us with his truth and employing us in powerful and effective prayer. You don't need to be a genius to do this. You don't need to learn ten-dollar words or be able to spout theological terms with ease. You just need to bring your honest, transparent, available—and let's just say it—fed-up, over-it, stepped-on-your-last-nerve self to the throne of God. Get ready to become fervent and relentless, all in his name. ●

Priscilla Shirer stars in the family drama *War Room* and is the author of *Fervent: A Woman's Guide to Serious, Specific, and Strategic Prayer*. She is a *New York Times* best-selling author and speaker. You can learn more about Priscilla's ministry at GoingBeyond.com.



Are Unrealistic Expectations Hurting Your Kids?

Parent with grace, not perfectionism. | JILL SAVAGE

If I'm being downright honest," she shared through tears, "sometimes I parent out of embarrassment. Sometimes my correction comes from what others think about my child rather than something that's between me and my child." My young friend stood in the hallway at church, sobbing.

"I understand," I responded with a hug. "I've been there way too many times."

Perfection. It's all around us. We see images of perfect bodies, perfect families, and perfect houses on the covers of magazines at the grocery store. Scrolling through Facebook, we unfavorably compare our family's insides to other families' outsides. It's no wonder we too often have unrealistic expectations of ourselves.

Without much effort, the dreaded illness of *perfection infection* can slip into our parenting. When it does, we develop unrealistic expectations for our kids as we compare them to their siblings or a friend's children. Add the church environment into this mix—where all want their children to be on their best behavior—and we're set up for the nightmare of perfection parenting.

Perfection infection happens when we react to our kids' surroundings rather than lead them according to their own needs. It's when we discipline or motivate or shape their behavior based on the mistaken belief that they must meet *other people's* standards rather than our own—or God's. It's when we nitpick even minor errors, leading our kids to believe

they have to be flawless and never make mistakes in order to meet our approval. God doesn't expect perfection from us, so why do we expect it from our kids?

I remember when our children were learning to walk. It was two steps and a fall, then three steps and a fall. We never called that failure. Their steps and falls marked progress. We cheered them on because they were moving toward walking.

Why then, when children get older, do our expectations change? Why do we start thinking of the "falls" as mistakes, failures, or imperfections? Why are we unable to see them as progress? It's because our thinking has been infected by the notion that *perfect* is the only acceptable standard for our kids—and we don't even realize it.

DANGERS OF PERFECTION PARENTING

Parenting for perfection is costly; the damage to our children can be profound. Whether we are explicit about our expectations or not, children will pick up on them. It doesn't matter what we say we want from them. If the "perfect" bug has infected our parenting style, our children will react to it negatively. Here are some of the dangers that can develop if we continue in that direction.

Our children may not ask for help. When kids think they *should* know something, they usually are afraid to ask questions—because perfect people never need help.

Our children may resist trying new things. When kids believe failure isn't tolerated, they can become stressed because it's hard to be perfect at a brand-new task. Rather than risk failure, they may opt out.

Our children might have trouble developing resiliency. Failure crushes them because they think all mistakes are terrible.

Our children may relate to us based on fear. They may tell themselves, *Mom and Dad are going to be so mad when they find out I made another mistake.*

Our children may develop a negative self-image. In an atmosphere where perfection is the standard, they may become overwhelmed by what they can't do rather than pleased with what they can do. Parents who desire perfection tend to point out what children do wrong rather than acknowledging what they do right, which puts kids more in tune with their weaknesses than their strengths.

Our children may not believe in or experience unconditional love. Perfection parenting is about performance. This drives kids to want to perform well in order to keep their parents happy. Eventually, they may feel the need to perform for God to make him happy too.

Our children may associate God with rules rather than relationship. Parenting that's focused on actions (behavior) rather than attitudes (heart) leads kids to "play the game" until they are old enough to call out hypocrisy.

Of course, not every child who deals with perfectionism gets it from the way they are parented. Birth order, temperament, and personality contribute to their high expectations of themselves and the world around them. Yet we should be alert for ways we may

inadvertently put unhealthy pressure on our kids.

THE ANTIDOTES

The good news is that perfection parenting is completely reversible. God has provided four antidotes we can begin using today. Remember them with the acronym CLAP.

Compassion

Before I got serious about addressing perfectionism in my own parenting I was a “buck up” mom. Buck-up parents *fix*. Compassionate parents *feel*. Responding with empathy rather than asking my kids to buck up and get tough built trust and intimacy in my relationship with them—even today as they are young adults. Compassion creates an environment of safety and security in the home.

Love

Our imperfect children need to know that our love is never at stake. We always protect, always trust, always hope, and always persevere. I’ve found [1 Corinthians 13](#) to be helpful in evaluating how I’m really doing with loving my kids: Am I patient? Am I kind? Do I wish my children were more like another parent’s son or daughter? Am I quick to share what my kids do well, or do I hide areas where they don’t seem to measure up?

Acceptance

Every human being has a core need to belong. We want to know that people believe in us, approve of us, and accept us for who we are. We especially long for this from our parents. In the midst of mistakes, poor choices, or—as we determined earlier —progress, we need to make sure our children know they are still loved and accepted. We want them to know they belong to us no matter what. “Therefore, accept each other just as Christ has accepted you so that God will be given glory,” Romans 15:7 says.

Perception

It’s important to be in tune with our kids. I’ll admit that, with five children, there have been times when I’ve simply parented “the herd.” I’ve seen them as a group rather than the individuals that they are. The more perceptive I’ve become, the more I am able to see them as unique human beings with different God-given personalities, temperaments, and skills. I’m able to live out the wisdom of Proverbs 4:25 in my parenting—“Look straight ahead, and fix your eyes on what lies before you”—by truly seeing my kids for who they are.

GAINING FREEDOM

Peer pressure is strong in the parenting world, both in and outside the church. As a pastor’s wife, I have been tempted all the more to pressure my kids to look good in others’ eyes. I’m so glad God helped me see the dangerous direction I was heading.

When I began to embrace God’s perfecting work in my own life, I stopped worrying about what people thought. When I stopped worrying about what people thought, I stopped being a controlling parent. When I stopped being a controlling parent, I increased my ability to influence each of my kids by using the antidotes of compassion, love, acceptance, and perception. Today I can tell you that leaving perfection parenting behind resulted in a sense

Are Unrealistic Expectations Hurting Your Kids?

of freedom and contentment in my relationships with my beautifully created, perfectly imperfect children. ●

Jill Savage is an author, speaker, and founder and CEO of [Hearts at Home](#), an organization for moms. The author of several books including *No More Perfect Moms* and *No More Perfect Kids*, Jill is passionate about calling women to embrace authenticity. Connect with Jill on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), or at [JillSavage.org](#).



The Stages of Sex

Like every other part of marriage, your intimate life will be ever-changing.

DOROTHY LITTELL GRECO

If married women graphed their sexual lives for enjoyment and frequency, most would have a visual that resembles a roller coaster. Almost all of the friends I informally surveyed agreed—predictable variances in our intimate life are inevitable.

Though people rarely talk about it, being aware of the ebbs and flows of sexual enjoyment in marriage can prevent us from being blindsided or feeling like there's something terribly wrong with us.

Unfortunately, in Christian circles, communication about sex is often either avoided, sparse, or overly simplistic: "Wait until you get married—then everything will be amazing," or "Your sex life will be rewarding because you waited for marriage."

While I agree that it's important to wait until marriage, the reality is *slightly* more complicated and complex. Even the honeymoon fireworks sometimes get rained out! Personally, I've experienced four stages of intimacy so far in my marriage—and I believe most couples will navigate these common phases as well.

1. THE EARLY YEARS

Whether we marry at 22 or 42, the initial phase of married sexuality tends to be intoxicating. Even if we've had previous sexual experience, there is an excitement about discovering one another within the safety of the marriage bed.

Typically, couples who marry young have more energy and therefore stronger sex drives, but regardless of age, these first years of marriage often bring robust and frequent sex. (By

the way, avoid comparing your frequency with the national average, which I believe is totally skewed due to the inclusion of college students.) During these early years, we learn how to laugh together when the inevitable missteps happen. Though sex always appears perfectly choreographed in the movies, most of us have our share of comic moments.

The transition to married life can also bring its share of tears. Health issues, prior abuse, or deeply embedded shame can cause unexpected challenges in the bedroom. This can lead to both confusion and isolation, in part because of the aforementioned struggle to talk vulnerably about sex—even with our spouses. Conversations about what brings pleasure, what causes discomfort, what we want to try, or what feels discouraging may feel awkward and sometimes even risky.

If conversing with your husband about sex has not been a regular component of your married life, and you're uncertain how he might respond, consider simply flagging it for him as a conversation you would like to have whenever he's ready. When the conversation does happen, start by expressing what you appreciate and enjoy about your intimate life before you bring up any concerns. And know, these conversations get easier with practice.

2. POSTPARTUM

The length of the newlywed phase is not predetermined or universal; it might last two years or five, largely dependent upon the appearance of little people or other extenuating demands, like graduate school. As those of us who've borne children know, pregnancy, childbirth, nursing (if that's happening), and months of sleep deprivation significantly impact how we feel about our bodies. This, in turn, also impacts the way we feel about sharing our body with another person.

To further complicate matters, zones that were previously erogenous morph into multipurpose areas, sometimes resulting in ambivalence about our husband's touch. Additionally, there's often so little energy that the notion of staying awake for 30 minutes after the children fall asleep seems downright irresponsible.

Though it's both understandable and reasonable that sexual intimacy may happen less frequently during this stage of marriage, prioritizing it on a somewhat regular basis is important for a marriage's well-being. Because demands—and the Enemy—pull us in opposite directions, intentionally choosing to connect with our spouse in this deeply powerful context turns us back toward one another, reaffirming our love and commitment.

When our children were young and I was home full time, my husband and I set aside a minimum of one night a week to be intimate. Throughout that day, I reminded myself not to work too hard, wanting to make sure I had energy left for him that night. It may not sound terribly romantic to add "have sex" to your calendar, but it worked for us.

3. MID-MARRIAGE

This is the season where—if you haven't already—you will probably hit your stride. You're now familiar with the landscapes of one another's bodies, you're more comfortable expressing likes and dislikes, and you're at least somewhat fluent in each other's intimacy

language. All of these factors will have positive implications in the marriage bed.

One of the dangers of this period may be stagnation. This is less a function of needing to buy sexy lingerie or trying new positions and is more connected to the overall health and maturity of the relationship.

Before I got married, I worried that sex would become boring over time. After all, how many ways can a couple be intimate without it falling into a predictable routine? Thankfully, what I've learned is that as our love, trust, and commitment deepen, our lovemaking becomes richer and more satisfying. After 24 years, no two times have ever been the same—and we've never been bored.

If you find yourself ambivalent or disinterested in sex (and you have ruled out health issues), consider exploring if you need a marriage tune up. Go on vacation—just the two of you. Read a book on intimacy together or spend the weekend at a marriage retreat. Look for ways to incorporate more date nights—even if that simply means holding hands while you watch a movie together. Get creative!

4. POST-MENOPAUSE

Passing through the portal of menopause impacts many facets of a woman's sexuality. By this point, you're (hopefully) at peace with your body. You no longer back talk to your ever-widening hips, nor do you feel the need to make love with all the lights off.

The confidence and self-acceptance that comes with this age lends itself to more freedom in the bedroom, even as women deal with the many seismic shifts happening in our bodies. (Dryness? Oh my. Lower libido? Sadly yes.) Orgasm has always mystified me, but now the path to that destination tends to be a bit less predictable. I enjoy sex more even though our lovemaking may not culminate in an orgasm.

Though having an orgasm is obviously wonderful, it's but one of the many ways that we can connect and satisfy our longings for intimacy. This shift in perspective is crucial because sometimes intercourse is no longer an option due to health or aging issues. Cuddling naked, giving each other massages, deep kissing, and so on can be just as satisfying—but only when we let go of the belief that orgasm has to be the **pinnacle of intimacy**.

IN IT FOR THE LONG HAUL

God created us with a longing for intimacy and the capacity to experience sexual pleasure, and then he established marriage as the exclusive place for that pleasure to safely thrive. The holy limitations he mandates (one man with one woman, for example) are meant to remind us who we are: women of inherent worth created in the image of a loving and holy God. Scripture repeatedly communicates that our intimate life is meant to reinforce that reality. It's never meant to degrade or demean us.

All too often, contemporary culture not only degrades and demeans us (cue *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Edition* or *50 Shades of Grey*, for example) but also would have us believe that monogamy, mutual sacrifice, and patiently extending love and mercy are all misguided goals. What we really ought to do, culture says, is prioritize our desires and needs above our

spouse's. While that is an option, it's ultimately shortsighted if we're serious about following Jesus. The basic premise of the gospel is knowing that true life comes through sacrificial love.

As you consistently and intentionally sow intimacy into your marriage, I hope you're able to navigate the various seasons with grace, humor, and faith—and experience an abundance of pleasure along the way. ●

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Transforming Habits

Why spiritual disciplines are worth celebrating



Carolyn Arends is a recording artist, author, TCW columnist, and the director of education for **Renovaré**. Learn more at **CarolynArends.com**.

As a musician, I know that arrangements matter. I remember reading an interview with the guitarist from the Canadian group Blue Rodeo in which he explained that the band's signature song, "Try," had once been a lackluster rocker. Their record company had passed on the song, but the band experimented with the tempo. When they slowed "Try" down, it became a soulful ballad—and an obvious hit. The right arrangement made all the difference.

Every musician learns (sometimes the hard way) that making good choices about which notes are played—and how loud and long they are played—is the difference between cacophony and harmony. It's not just in music that arrangements matter. Event planners, travel agents, florists, and funeral directors will all tell you that making good arrangements is their stock-in-trade.

I wonder, what might it take to have a well-arranged life? I've been asking that question, intermittently, but with increasing urgency since I came across author Dallas Willard's definition of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus in *The Spirit of the Disciplines*: "The disciple is one who, intent upon becoming Christlike . . . systematically and progressively rearranges his affairs to that end."

I am interested in becoming more like Christ. I suspect that such a transformation might be the only way to make music out of the cacophony of my thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. But how do I "systematically and progressively rearrange my affairs" to that end?

AN INVITATION TO THE DISCIPLINES

Years ago, on a long concert tour, I noticed that our bass player, Dave, was reading a book called *Celebration of Discipline*. I found the title irritating. Dave was already notoriously more self-disciplined than your average musician. He ate raw vegetables while the rest of us devoured pizza. He went for morning jogs as we slept. His tour bus bunk was always unnaturally tidy.

So when I saw Dave reading *Celebration of Discipline*, I recoiled in a disgust fueled by self-recrimination. *Of course* Dave would “celebrate discipline.” He probably ironed his underwear.

After Dave finished the book, he began gently insisting that I read it. When I finally acquiesced, I discovered that Richard Foster’s famous treatise on the classic spiritual disciplines had something to say not only to neat freaks like Dave but also to messes like me.

“Willpower will never succeed in dealing with the deeply ingrained habits of sin,” I read in the introductory chapter. That rang true. There were small but insidious habits of my heart—petty pride, stubborn self-reliance, almost-unconscious strains of selfishness—that seemed hopelessly entrenched.

“The demand is for an inside job,” I read, “and only God can work from the inside.” In the Book of Romans, the apostle Paul refers to righteousness as a gift from God 35 times, emphasizing repeatedly that no one can achieve a justified and rightly ordered life on her own.

NOT WHAT I EXPECTED

So far, *Celebration of Discipline* was reassuring. I shouldn’t expect my willpower to be sufficient. (Amen.) I should understand that inner transformation is purely a gift of God. (Amen, again.) But just when I was beginning to relax, Foster’s argument took an interesting turn: “We do not need to be hung on the horns of the dilemma of either human works or idleness. God has given us the Disciplines of the spiritual life as a means of receiving his grace. The Disciplines allow us to place ourselves before God so he can transform us.”

Reading those words, a picture came to my mind. I could see a pool at the bottom of a waterfall that I knew represented the blessings God has for me—peace, love, acceptance, wholeness, and the fullness of his presence. There was no fence around the water. I could jump in any time I wanted. But I was running distractedly around the shoreline—sweaty, parched, and complaining about my need for refreshment. It occurred to me that maybe the spiritual disciplines were simply ways I could wade into the pool and stand beneath the waterfall.

If the disciplines could become habits that would help me rearrange my affairs to be more open and receptive to God, then, yes—they were worth celebrating. So I read Foster’s catalogue of classic spiritual practices: meditation, prayer, fasting, study, simplicity, solitude, submission, service, confession, worship, guidance, and celebration. Some of them were strange and new; others were old friends.

I found myself thinking about a season, back in high school, after my first serious boyfriend and I had broken up. My youth pastor's wife, Pam, sent me a card, and at the bottom she wrote Psalm 37:4: "Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart." There was little doubt about the desires of my heart, so I considered Psalm 37:4 a contract. All I had to do was delight in God, and he'd give me back my boyfriend.

I wasn't exactly sure what sort of "taking delight" in the Lord would meet my end of the bargain. So I picked up a copy of *Our Daily Bread* in my church's foyer and began reading it at breakfast and right before bed. Pam had also given me the devotional classic *The Practice of the Presence of God*, and I decided I'd try to be like the book's author, a 17th-century monk named Brother Lawrence, by practicing God's presence all day long. "I'm walking to my locker now," I'd whisper to Jesus between classes. "I'm going to science class."

Two strange things happened. First, I started to genuinely delight in God—to look forward to our set-aside times together and to have a sense that he was with me throughout the day. Second, the more I delighted in God, the more the desires of my heart changed. After a while, I didn't want my boyfriend back. God had literally given my heart new desires. An inner transformation had taken place, and I was learning to want the things God wanted for me.

The disciplines I had almost inadvertently practiced in that season—prayer, study, meditation, guidance—had indeed been means of grace. Years later, sitting on a tour bus reading *Celebration of Discipline*, I began to remember that spiritual practices were meant to be not chores but invitations—opportunities to "progressively and systematically rearrange" the habits of my life in order to delight in God—and to increasingly learn how much God delights in me.

A WELL-ORDERED LIFE

When I get up tomorrow morning, there will be a moment when I choose whether to start my day with the disciplines of silence and prayer or whether I simply hit the ground running. Either way, God will still love me. He'll still be near.

Yet I know from experience that I am likely to encounter a day I begin with prayer much differently than a day I don't. The events of a day initiated in my own strength seem to come at me frantically—as bullets to dodge in the hopes of surviving until dinner. When I begin the day in divine conversation, those events seem graced with potential and freighted with God's involvement. The notes are the same, but the song has changed.

The right arrangement makes all the difference. ●



Discovering God's Purpose for Your Life

Focus on what he wants—not what others expect. | **NATASHA SISTRUNK ROBINSON**

Understanding our identity in Christ gives us purpose. God has a specific purpose for each of us, a unique calling for every individual. Our shared and primary purpose is to become disciples of Jesus Christ. Our secondary callings are unique and birthed out of our submission to the primary calling.

The body of Christ misses out when we attempt to force all women into one constrained understanding of the role and responsibilities of women. Christ's transformation does not mean we blindly do as other good and godly people say we should. If we are simply content to go along just to get along, we'll never come to realize our true purpose in life. A great mentor and a safe community of believers will consistently point us to Christ and challenge us to follow him as we seek clarity on our faith journeys. A godly mentor models Christ's character, while calling us to completely surrender our will and desires to God's will for our lives.

God is the creator of all things, and his creative vision is big enough to include women from *all* walks and stages of life, from different backgrounds, cultures, and generations. His will is big enough to include young girls like [Rhoda](#), who commit themselves to prayer, and virgins like [Mary](#), the young mother of Jesus. His plans are big enough for women like [Elizabeth](#), [Rachel](#), and [Hannah](#)—all of whom experienced prolonged seasons of infertility. His purposes include women with pagan pasts like [Ruth](#), prostitutes like [Rahab](#), and rejected, widowed, or adulterous women like the Samaritan [woman at the well](#). He sees marginalized and enslaved women like [Hagar](#), and old women like the prophetess [Anna](#). We compassionately

embrace women like these because God's purpose and plans include all of them.

Sadly, we live in a world where women constantly receive messages that communicate, "You're not valuable": *You're not smart enough for this job or capable enough to earn that amount of income. You're not skinny enough to fit into those jeans. You're not attractive enough to date that guy or to have a man fully commit to only you. You're not competent enough to be a leader. You're not a great parent. You're not an excellent wife.* And when we are insecure or feel inadequate, it's easy to degrade or reject women who are either more confident than we are or who have made different choices from our own. This rejection somehow makes us feel better about ourselves and more comfortable with our choices, if only for a moment.

Does this happen in the church? Of course it does. This monster rears its ugly head in the guise of comparison and envy. In a shallow attempt to feel better about ourselves, women play games of one-upmanship. This game reveals that we lack confidence in our own skills, abilities, and choices, and our identity in Christ is not secure. As a result, we add to the mounting list of things our sisters in Christ "should" be doing to gain *our* approval and acceptance: Young, singles girls *should* go to college or to the mission field. Married women *should* have children. Mothers *should* stay at home or choose to homeschool. And what about the multitudes of women—some lost, some barren, some college students, some single, some old, some divorced, some widows, some single mothers—who come to church, waiting for someone to notice them and invite them in? These women are no different from me in that they want embracing and they need encouragement and direction concerning their role in God's kingdom.

The more I learn, the better I understand that God reveals his will for each of our lives in very specific ways at opportune times. In my own life, I find he often clarifies direction within the context of Christian community. In other words, my spiritual gift of leadership was not given to me so I can have a long title behind my name or earn a great paycheck. The gifts of God, however, are given for serving the people of God. There is a significant difference between living my life on purpose and aimlessly moving through life without direction. I'm able to do the former because I've been embraced and nurtured within Christian communities where God was clearly at work. First, I committed to the primary calling of being a disciple and follower of Christ, and only then did I get clarity about my purpose or role in God's kingdom. ●

Natasha Sistrunk Robinson is the visionary founder of [Leadership LINKS, Inc.](#) and the author of *Mentor for Life* (Zondervan, March 2016). You can find her at [NatashaSRobinson.com](#) and on Twitter at [@asistasjourney](#). This article was excerpted from *Mentor for Life* by Natasha Sistrunk Robinson. Copyright © 2016 by Natasha Sistrunk Robinson. Used by permission of Zondervan.

TCW

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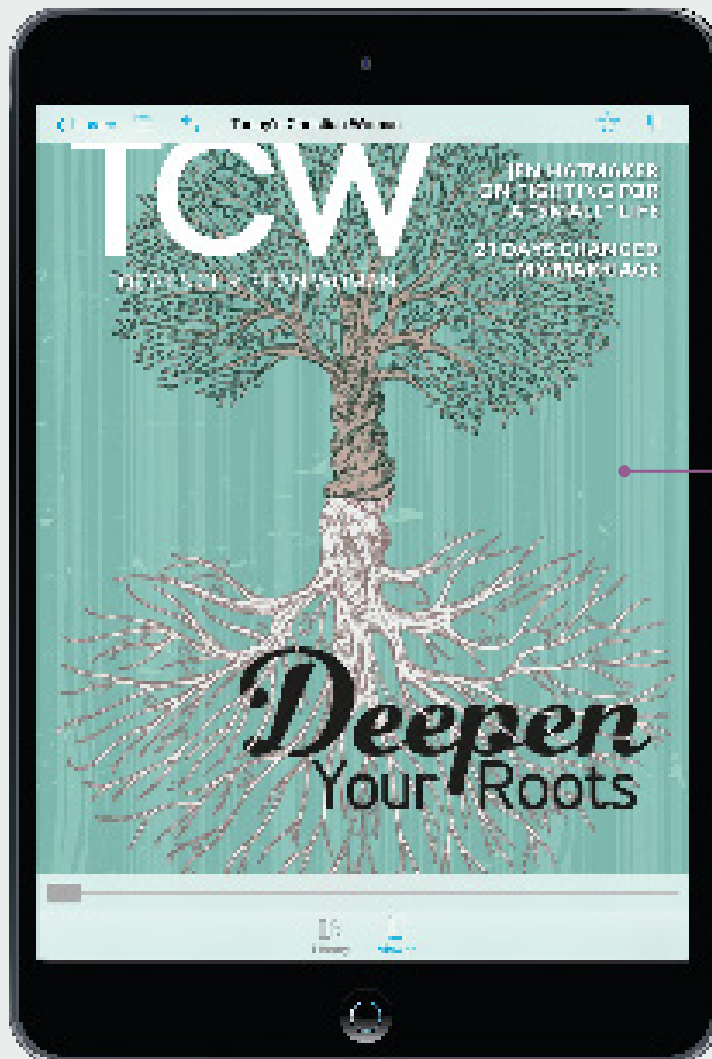
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