

Taking the 'I' Out of Marriage

Selflessness is not a marriage strategy but a heart transformation in Christ.

by Clem Boyd

It was late Sunday night. Julia had slipped into something more comfortable. I could hear water running and smell scented soap. I knew what she was up to, and I loved her for it — she was cleaning the kitchen. This is usually one of my household duties. After a weekend of nonstop activity, it would be understandable if Julia just plopped down and rested. Instead, she chose to clean the dirtiest room in the house — for the sake of the family.

Acts of sacrifice, sprinkled freely throughout a marriage, make love richer and deeper. We know that, so what's the problem with doing it? Self. Self constantly asks for more: What about my needs? What about my hurts? What about my time? Sacrificial love challenges us to give to our spouse in uncomfortable or unreasonable ways — ways that cost us emotion, time and pride. If we pray to become more selfless, God will act. But self-giving love as a regular virtue in marriage means that we deal with some tough questions:

How can I love this way when I'm feeling unloved? For newlyweds, giving comes easier. After a few months, though, we need renewable motivation to maintain selflessness for our husband or wife, in spite of the cost to ourselves. Selflessness has to start with turning to Jesus. Through Christ, we are promised God's love forever. To be selfless requires thinking about how God's love for us cost Him His Son. How can we apply this type of selflessness to loving our spouse?

Why put myself out when my spouse is acting like a jerk? What better time is there? Jesus didn't wait till we became more kind or thoughtful before He died for us. He did it while we were still selfish and uncaring. This same extraordinary kind of love, shown in small acts of generous behavior, will improve your marriage. One of the most selfless things about Julia is the way she listens when I'm a jerk. Recently, I was pretty negative about a youth ministry we're involved in. It was hard for her to hear that I questioned why I was doing this outreach, that it felt burdensome, that I thought it was really more her thing than my thing. Julia didn't respond in anger. She listened, expressed her feelings and prayed quietly. She offered a gentle answer that settled my wrath, allowing me to think through the real problem. (As much as I love working with kids, it drains me.)

What's the difference between selflessness and passively letting my spouse get his or her way? My friend Martha Manikas-Foster puts it this way: "Selflessness costs something dear, and conflict avoidance protects something dear. When my husband David became more willing to work out conflicts, putting aside his natural tendencies to avoid them, then I saw he was being selfless." Often I'll find ways to care for Julia, but if it means discussing a problem and enduring the intense discussion that might ensue, I avoid it. The most loving thing I should do is pray about it, talk about it and stop pretending it's not there.

How can I love my spouse more when I feel as though I'm giving so much already? You may feel overwhelmed with work, kids and church. How can you do something extra for your spouse? When I'm out of energy, I admit it to God, then my weakness becomes a conduit for divine strength. Maybe I'm extra tired, and Julia asks me to rub her back. So I pray, God, give me energy. Other times we may want to be the giver but won't admit our own needs. Occasionally, the most selfless thing we can do is to acknowledge feeling overwhelmed and articulate our inadequacies.

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Selflessness is not a marriage strategy but a heart transformation in Christ. "Jesus defines selflessness from the Incarnation to Calvary, so to be selfless is to identify with Him," says Martha's husband, David. "The point is to value your spouse so much that her best really is your goal." *This article first appeared in the December, 2006 issue of Focus on the Family magazine. Copyright © 2006, Clem Boyd. All rights reserved. International copyright secured.*

Three Keys to Marital Commitment

Keeping marital stressors at your back requires unconditional commitment to a three-step process. When maintained, these iterative steps engender a climate of trust and respect that honors God and protects the marital relationship.

1. **Keep Facing One Another.** You are most likely to move in the direction that you are already facing. Frustrated couples often look outside of their marriage for answers to their emotional needs. Then, as difficulties push them, it is only natural that they move towards that which meets their need rather than towards the spouse. Spouses who make a decision to satisfy their emotional needs (especially romantic ones) only within the confines of their marriage satisfy the fundamental requisite of unconditional commitment.

2. **Communicate Honestly.** Effective communication is the glue that binds marriage. Conveying your needs, wants and feelings with your spouse, even in stressful situations, creates unity. Always remember that the complementary aspect of communicating honestly is listening actively. Active listening relies more on your heart than your ears.

3. **Encourage Each Other.** Many couples fail to encourage one another either because they do not think it is needed or because of their own insecurities and shortcomings. God, however, placed you and your spouse together to shape each other into His likeness. Encouragement soothes the pain of this molding process. Encouragement provides validation and legitimacy in discouraging and distressing circumstances. Look at how God offers you encouragement in Deuteronomy 31:6: "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you." I doubt there is any clearer model of unconditional commitment.

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