



An Unbelieving Spouse

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The Burden of Not Sharing

How do you deal with
the rejection?

by Janine Petry

It's a lesson we try hard to teach children: share. If you've ever been around more than one child for more than five minutes, you've probably had to step in and reinforce the lesson. And it's worth the trouble. We want them to grow up into caring, thoughtful adults who are ready to give generously of what they have to those in need.

Perhaps this is why it's so hard when it comes to sharing—or not sharing—faith with a lost spouse. In the marriage relationship, we have the greatest opportunity for sharing—in fact, there's really nothing we want to hold back. We share friendship, finances, parenting, and problems. It's natural to want to share what we find to be most important. And for the believer, that's Christ.

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How do you deal with the rejection of the One you hold most dear, or encourage someone under your care who is struggling with this issue? As a leader, the issue of *not* feeling free to share Christ is a great burden—but it's not one we bear alone. In Matthew 11:28–29, Jesus said: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” Christ has the answers for our most difficult burdens in life.

As you seek wisdom in this area, this download will help guide you. In it, you'll find articles that will inspire and challenge you to see this situation through new lenses. And you'll be encouraged as you enter the company of authors who understand what you're going through, and can offer help. We've also packed in plenty of other resources for you to go even further in finding hope and joy in Christ in the midst of a difficult situation.

Blessings!

Janine Petry
Contributing Editor, Gifted For Leadership
Christianity Today International

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THE HEART OF THE ISSUE

My Husband Doesn't Share My Faith

But I'm not letting that
ruin my marriage.

by Nancy Kennedy

I've rehearsed this scene in my mind 10,000 times: My husband, Barry, walks through the front door and says he has a surprise for me. He asks, "What's the one thing you want most in the world?" At first I'm confused, but when I look into his eyes, I know. He doesn't have to say it, but he does anyway: "I've given my life to Christ." But after years of praying, waiting, and hoping, so far that's still a daydream.

Barry and I met and married 24 years ago. It was a spur-of-the-moment thing: He liked my then-red hair and green eyes; I liked his broad shoulders and sense of humor. Plus, he was easy to talk to. As unbelievers, neither of us had a clue what our future would be. We just thought a life together would be a kick. A relationship with Christ was the last thing on our minds!

Our first three years of marriage were filled with partying, softball, and the birth of our first daughter. Then, almost without warning, God drew me into a relationship with himself. After overhearing some Christians in the office where I worked talk about heaven, I began asking questions. Although I'd attended church as a child, I knew

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nothing about the Bible and salvation. Then one day after a long talk with Rita, one of my coworkers, I prayed a simple prayer: “Jesus save me!” That prayer forever changed my life—and my marriage as I knew it.

Unfortunately for Barry, right from the start I was one of those obnoxious “Jesus freaks.” I didn’t share my new faith with my husband; I pushed, forced, and shoved. Believe me, I wrote the handbook on how not to win your spouse to Christ. I didn’t speak, I preached. I didn’t live out my faith quietly; I trumpeted my every minute change. I’d say, “See what God’s done in my life? See how loving and humble I now am?” I prayed loudly in Barry’s presence and made sure he knew he was a sinner destined for hell. I even packed gospel tracts in his lunch and added a Bible verse at the end of all my love notes to him.

To Barry’s credit, he remained incredibly patient. (Maybe he was just tuning me out.) Most of the time he avoided my religious rampages by tinkering with our car. Sometimes, though, he’d get angry and yell, “Stop with all the Jesus stuff!” Barry told me he threw the gospel tracts away because they embarrassed him in front of his friends. Once in a while he’d get a pained look on his face and say he wanted his “old wife” back—Jesus-free.

Soon we were at odds with each other. I blamed any and all our marital problems on his unsaved status. After all, if we were both Christians, life would be “happy-ever-after.” Or so I imagined. I tried even harder: blasting my Christian music and scattering opened Bibles around the house; crying and pleading with him to go to church with me. Sometimes, Barry would go. But instead of enjoying him next to me in church, I’d sit there chewing nervously on the end of my pen, praying madly that this would be *The Day*. Afterwards, I’d quiz him in the car, “What did you think of the sermon? Did you like the music?”

“It was okay,” he’d say. “Do we have any turkey at home for a sandwich?”

The rest of the ride home, I’d sit and fight back either tears or angry words. *Why couldn’t he see his need for Christ?* I’d fume. Then Barry, sensing my disappointment, would pat my shoulder and say, “Look, I

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believe in God, but not in the same way you do.” That was not the answer I wanted to hear.

Then something unexpected happened. I'd been reading a book about intercessory prayer when I had a sudden flash of insight. I told myself, *That's it! I'm going to pray for Barry for the next 80 years, if that's what it takes. And I'm going to love him. Period.*

That was 21 years ago—and I'm still praying and loving. But I'm no longer pining away in self-absorbed isolation waiting desperately for my husband's salvation to bring marital fulfillment. Instead, I've decided that if it takes 80 years, then I want those years to be as enjoyable as possible for the both of us, despite our spiritual differences.

When I first came to faith in Christ and Barry hadn't, I thought God had made a huge mistake. After all, two following God together made more sense than one. But I now know God never makes mistakes. Since I'd been an unbeliever when we married, I hadn't willfully disobeyed God by marrying Barry. My situation is by God's sovereign design. Reminding myself of that enables me to relax my spiritual chokehold on Barry.

The way I see it, God has a plan for each life. And no matter how hard I try, I cannot transform someone else's heart. I can't coerce, sweet talk, or plead my husband into being a Christian. In fact, when I do try, it only drives him away—sometimes literally. If I start nagging him, he'll get in his truck and drive for hours.

I decided long ago to accept that it's God's job to change hearts. That decision frees me to pursue my relationship with God without the added burden of having to bring my husband to faith. All I have to do is love and enjoy him. That's God's plan for me, and he gives me all the grace I need to accomplish it.

That doesn't mean I'm not lonely at times or that I do everything right. The other day I grabbed Barry by the shirt and yelled, “Don't you see Christ in me?” Struck by the irony of the question, he laughed—and to my surprise, said *yes*. It helps to remember that Barry's not my enemy; he's my husband. I'm just as much a sinner as he is—maybe more so because I have the power to say no to sin and often don't.

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I don't understand why God does what he does. We have two daughters who don't have the role model of a Christian husband and father. I used to worry about that. As it's turned out, each daughter gave her life to Christ as a preschooler. Alison, now married, lives out her faith with a believing husband, while Laura's going through a time of teenage rebellion—but even that's in God's hands. As evidenced throughout the Bible, God is in the habit of saving families. That gives me great hope.

Even so, sometimes I get discouraged. Sometimes I sit in my brown armchair and question whether God even hears my prayers. Or I sit in church and count the couples and ache because few know what my husband even looks like. Or I'll hear yet another testimony about someone else's husband coming to faith, and wonder why mine still seems oblivious to his need. But then there are times when Barry exhibits greater faith than I do. In fact, that's a joke we share. I'm the one who says I have faith, while he's the one who seems to live it.

He's always telling me, "Why do you worry about things? God always takes care of us." Barry almost always knows the right thing to do when it comes to leading our family. I believe that because God sees us as one flesh, my husband shares in my blessings. Because God's promised to lead me, he leads my husband as well. I don't have to fret. God's in control.

The truth is, I might not ever see Barry walk a church aisle, but that's okay. I have hope that I'll see him walk through heaven. In the meantime, I live my life as a gift—one I never would have chosen, but one I've come to accept with gratitude. I know it comes from the hand of a loving God who only gives his children the best.

Nancy Kennedy, the author of numerous books, including Prayers God Always Answers (WaterBrook), lives in Florida. This article first appeared in the November/December 1999 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

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Thought Provokers

- *How have you handled a spiritually mismatched marriage? What advice would you offer to someone else?*
- *The author admitted to her thought that “if we were both Christians, life would be ‘happy-ever-after.’” How is this false? How are you seeking to thrive in your marriage, despite having an unsaved spouse?*

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FAITH IN ACTION

Stand By Your Man



Here's how three strong women willingly and humbly served their families.

by Edward Rowell

They have a saying in Arizona: “cowboy up.” It means never give up, do whatever it takes to get the job done.

For a cowboy like Don Pock, manager of the N Bar Ranch in western New Mexico, this was more than just a saying; it was a way of life. A typical morning for Don involved such activities as roping a cow from the back of a horse loping at full speed, all the while dodging 26 species of cactus and innumerable boulder piles. Such work fostered extreme self-reliance. Don also had a hair-trigger temper and was prone to humiliate his cowhands, especially after he'd taken an extended beer break. At 17, I was one of those cowhands. But I was a lazy, smart-mouthed kid, so I didn't last long there. I thought I'd seen the last of Don.

Fourteen years later I became the pastor of Lifegate Baptist Church in Phoenix, Arizona. There among my new flock sat Don Pock and his wife, Rosemary. In fact, Lifegate was home to four generations of this family; Don and Rosemary's oldest daughter, Donna, and her husband, Gary Mallory; their daughter, Rosie, and her husband,

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Jim Sander, and their daughter, Ramie. My first thought was, *What could've changed the heart of that old coot?* Little did I know the answer was sitting right beside him.

Throughout years of weddings and funerals, births and baptisms, I observed firsthand how the faithful witness and persistent prayers of Rosemary, as well as her daughter, Donna, and granddaughter, Rosie, greatly impacted each of their husbands. Although my family and I left Lifegate six years ago, my wife, Susan, and I flew back to Arizona recently to visit our friends. We spent a few days reminiscing about how these three generations of godly women stood by their men in good times and bad—and loved these tough cowboys into an active faith in God.

We began our conversation around the kitchen table in Rosie and Jim's new home in northern Phoenix. They now have three children: Ramie (eight), Alyssa (four), and Newton (two), who were racing in and out of the back door with their cousins. Donna had driven in from the ranch, about 90 minutes away on a rough dirt road. Just five feet tall, she can barely see over the steering wheel of her massive four-wheel-drive truck. Rosemary and Don had come from Wilcox, Arizona, where they moved to retire two years ago. After we caught up on all the recent news, I asked when their family's journey of faith began. Donna sat quietly until she realized both her mother and daughter were waiting for her to respond. All three laughed in unison.

"I guess it began with me," she said, and began to share her story.

In the early seventies Donna was a young mother with three small children. She and Gary lived on a remote Arizona ranch where he herded cattle and she "herded" the kids from daylight till dark, seven days a week.

But come Saturday night, the Mallorys were part of the hard-living, hard-drinking crowd. She recalls, "I was always right in the middle of the fun, but in my heart I knew our lifestyle was displeasing to God." Though Donna had responded to an altar call as a child, she had no peace that she belonged to Christ.

Beyond that inner turmoil, Donna wrestled with the issues of her generation. "We were told that a woman had to demand her rights in order to be happy," she said. She bit her lip. "I treated Gary so bad. I was so determined to be independent that I'd refuse to get him a glass of iced

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tea when he came in from a rough day of riding. I thought, *He's got two good legs; he can get it himself.*"

She paused, fishing for words. "On one hand, I was full of guilt over our lifestyle; on the other, I was dissatisfied and selfish. But the more I pushed for my rights, the more Gary stayed away from home. I was miserable."

When the guilt finally won, Donna began reading her Bible. A few weeks later, she confessed her sin and surrendered her life and stubborn spirit to God. She immediately received a new heart, and gradually, a new perspective on marriage.

At the time, Donna's parents were running a ranch clear across Arizona. When her mom, Rosemary, read a letter from Donna describing her new-found peace, she wondered how she could have that same assurance. *Do I belong to the Lord?* Rosemary wondered, so she looked up some verses Donna had recommended and rededicated her life to Christ. She began reading her Bible and praying regularly, seeking to share what she was learning with Don. "I was so zealous," Rosemary recalled. "Don resented me preaching to him. So I decided to quit talking about it and just try to live what I was learning."

Her granddaughter, Rosie, decided to follow Christ when she was seven years old. Her mother had taught her numerous Bible stories and had prayed and sung with her and her siblings. "I remember sitting in the desert and asking Jesus into my heart," she said. Rosie grew up and married in 1988. Her husband, Jim Sander, worked long hours as a maintenance supervisor on a golf course. Though Jim had received Christ as a boy, he didn't share Rosie's interest in spiritual matters.

Three generations of women now shared a common faith, a commitment to prayer, and a heartfelt desire to see their husbands know and grow in the Lord. So Rosemary, Donna, and Rosie prayed, fasted, and hoped.

When Donna and Rosemary tried to talk to their cowboy husbands about submitting to the Lord, Gary and Don didn't get the concept. After all, they'd never surrendered to anything in their lives.

So, like Christ washing the feet of his disciples, these strong women willingly and humbly began to serve their families. For Donna, this meant simple acts like having that cold drink ready when Gary came in from the desert.

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“I’d seen the way Mom always treated Dad,” recalled Donna, “even when he wasn’t that easy to live with. Instead of arguing with him, she would just smile and go along with him. And she went out of her way to compliment him in front of others.”

“It wasn’t that hard,” Rosemary explained. “I always knew Don loved me. I was just doing what it says in the Bible: ‘Wives, be submissive to your husbands.’”

“But that word made me crazy,” Donna interrupted, eyes flashing. “I couldn’t even hear the “s-word” without getting mad. After everything I’d been hearing about women’s rights ... Well, as I began understanding the nature of the Christian life, I realized that even if I could somehow get around Ephesians 5:22 and 1 Peter 3:1, I still had to deal with dozens of passages like Philippians 2, where we’re told, ‘In humility, consider others better than yourselves.’ If Jesus had to take upon himself the nature of a servant, who was I to say, ‘I won’t serve my husband’s needs?’”

Rosie joined in. “I grew up with both my mother’s and grandmother’s example, so I never thought of submission as a degrading thing. It was so obvious that Christ made a difference in my dad and my granddad through the unconditional love of their wives.”

“At first, I wanted Gary to get saved so my life would get easier, not for his well-being or eternal security,” Donna admits. “I was determined to make him change. But you can’t make a cowboy do anything. So I started praying that God would change me.”

There’s no telling what God will do through this family in the future. God honored that request after Donna quit going to the bars with Gary and their friends. One evening, left alone with her small kids, Donna read, “Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your hands.”

That verse from 1 Thessalonians 4:11 motivated her to pick up a block of wood and a knife. “I began wood carving as a way to keep my hands and mind occupied, instead of fretting about where Gary was. As I worked, I prayed for him. When he did come home, instead of chewing on him, I was actually in a good mood. So he wanted to stay home more!”

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Rosie grew to share her mother's aptitude for art, and several years ago began painting her mother's eclectic carvings of cowboys, angels, and desert animals. Today they use their thriving craft business, Two Branches (taken from John 15), as a platform for sharing Christ at Arizona galleries and shows.

Faithful prayer and examples of authentic Christ-living warmed the hearts of their husbands. But before God could break their wills, they each had to be confronted with circumstances beyond their control. Don's crisis came first, when he finally admitted he couldn't win a decades-long struggle with alcohol. In late summer of 1980, Don asked his whole family to join him at the top of Rhinoceros Peak, in the remote Bradshaw Mountains of central Arizona.

"I'm tired of being a bad example for this family," Don told them. "With your help, and especially the Lord's help, I'm going to change." Donna, her sister Roseanne, and Rosie prayed for him and quoted Scriptures about the Lord's grace and mercy. They discussed salvation, how it couldn't be earned, only accepted as a gift. Don accepted Christ on top of that wilderness mountain and admitted he was totally dependent on God to beat the bottle. He's been sober ever since.

Gary's confrontation with his need for God came years later. After a family reunion in northern Arizona in 1988, Donna drove home with her mom and youngest daughter, Rachel. Gary stayed behind to party with friends.

A passing car cut too close, sideswiping Donna's truck, causing her to lose control and roll several times. Rosemary and Rachel were bruised but okay. Donna's jaw was crushed, and she sustained serious neck and shoulder injuries. When Gary arrived, he felt humbled and powerless to help. Clutching Donna's Bible, he prayed over her with a broken spirit. During the weeks Donna was hospitalized, her sister, Roseanne, prayed with him.

As God spared Donna's life, Gary responded with a genuine commitment borne out of gratitude. After Donna's convalescence, the family began attending church together for the first time, not long before I arrived as their pastor in 1990.

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Though Rosie had seen God's grace in the lives of her father and grandfather, she was eager to see him work in her own husband's life as well. She, too, went through a period of trying to force her husband to change.

"I wanted Jim to pray out loud at meals—even though he didn't like to," Rosie recalls. "I thought he watched too much TV, so I griped. I nagged him about going to church with me, mostly because I was tired of sitting in church alone. But I had a selfish motive, and Jim sensed that.

"I finally learned to pray for his heart—and mine—to change. I also prayed for other men to come into Jim's life and encourage him to grow in his faith."

Only God has the ability to really change people. God answered that prayer when I became their pastor and struck up a friendship with Jim. Attending a Promise Keepers rally with other men from church had a significant impact on him, and Jim began to grow spiritually.

But his emerging faith was also tested by a crisis. Jim and Rosie's son, Newton, was born in 1995. When he was seven months old, doctors discovered a rare heart deformity. Risky surgery was the baby's only chance for survival.

"I was really shaken," Rosie recalled. "And Jim was a boost to my faith while we waited. He prayed with confidence, and Newt came out of surgery in great shape. That crisis showed me just how much Jim had changed."

Rosie paused, wiping away a tear. In almost a whisper she continued, "It's what I wanted most—a husband who loves the Lord first. But I found out I couldn't force or control Jim. Only God has the ability to really change people or situations."

In our three days together with these women and their families, Susan and I continually marveled at their appreciation for God and his grace. At one point, as they listed the numerous family and friends who had come to know Christ in the past 20 or so years, I joked aloud, "Who's left to pray for?"

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Without hesitation, all three said in unison, “The kids.” Rosemary looked at her great-grandchildren running around the yard and added, “We old-timers have had a lot of catching up to do. But these little ones have their whole lives ahead of them. With the head start they’re getting, there’s no telling what God will do through this family in the future.”

Donna said, “God is faithful to his Word. He tells us exactly what real love looks like in practice: It is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. And that’s all we’re doing. Just serving, hoping, and persevering.”

Ed Rowell was assistant editor of LEADERSHIP JOURNAL. This article first appeared in the September/October 1997 issue of TODAY’S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

Thought Provokers

- *In each of the testimonies of these women, prayer played a major part in their spouse’s coming to faith in Christ. What role is prayer playing in your life as you seek to reach a lost spouse? How do you pray, and how can these ladies’ examples encourage you?*

Donna commented: “At first, I wanted Gary to get saved so my life would get easier, not for his well-being or eternal security.” How can you relate to Donna’s experience? What effect can this goal have on a marriage relationship? What difference does praying for change in you, as opposed to just praying for your spouse, make?





PRACTICALLY SPEAKING

The Day I Left My Marriage

(And the unusual advice that challenged
my decision.)

by Becky Zerbe

The day had come. I'd lasted as long as I could in my marriage. Once my husband, Bill, left for work, I packed a bag for myself and our 14-month-old son and left our home. It was the only year in our married life when we lived in the same town as my parents. Obviously the convenience of being able to run to Mom and Dad made my decision to leave Bill easier.

With a tear-stained, angry face, I walked into Mom's kitchen. She held the baby while I sobbed my declaration of independence. After washing my face and sipping a cup of coffee, Mom told me she and Dad would help me. They'd be there for me, which brought me great comfort.

"But before you leave Bill," she said, "I have one task for you to complete."



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Mom put down my sleeping son, took a pen and sheet of paper, and drew a vertical line down the middle of the page. She told me to list in the left column all the things Bill did that made him impossible to live with. As I looked at the dividing line, I thought she'd then tell me to list all his good qualities on the right-hand side. I was determined to have a longer list of bad qualities on the left. *This is going to be easy*, I thought. I immediately started to scribble down the left column.

Bill never picked his clothes off the floor. He never told me when he was going outside. He slept in church. He had embarrassing, nasty habits such as blowing his nose or belching at the dinner table. He never bought me nice presents. He refused to match his clothes. He was tight with money. He wouldn't help with the housework. He didn't talk with me.

The list went on and on, until I'd filled the page. I certainly had more than enough evidence to prove that no woman would be able to live with this man.

Smugly I said, "Now I guess you're going to ask me to list all Bill's good qualities on the right side."

"No," Mom said. "I already know Bill's good qualities. Instead, for each item on the left side, I want you to write how you respond. What do you do?"

This was even tougher. I'd been thinking about Bill's few, good qualities I could list. I hadn't considered thinking about myself. I knew Mom wasn't going to let me get by without completing her assignment. So I had to start writing.

I'd pout, cry, and get angry. I'd be embarrassed to be with him. I'd act like a martyr. I'd wish I'd married someone else. I'd give him the silent treatment. I'd feel I was too good for him. The list seemed endless.

My pride was hampering a valuable portion of my life—my worship. This problem wasn't Bill's; it was mine. When I reached the bottom of the page, Mom picked up the paper and went to the drawer. She took scissors and cut the paper down the vertical line. Taking the left column, she wadded it in her hand and tossed it into the trash. Then she handed me the right column with the list of my reactions.

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“Take this list back to your house,” she told me. “Spend today reflecting on these things in your life. Pray about them. I’ll keep the baby until this afternoon. If you sincerely do what I ask and still want to leave Bill, Dad and I will do all we can to assist you.”

Leaving my luggage and son, I drove back to my house. When I sat on my couch with the piece of paper, I couldn’t believe what I was facing. Without the balancing catalogue of Bill’s annoying habits, the list looked horrifying.

I saw a record of petty behaviors, shameful practices, and destructive responses. I spent the next several hours asking God for forgiveness. I requested strength, guidance, and wisdom in the changes I needed to make. As I continued to pray, I realized how ridiculously I’d behaved. I could barely remember the transgressions I’d written for Bill. How absurd could I be? Nothing immoral or horrible was on that list. I’d honestly been blessed with a good man—not a perfect one, but a good one.

I thought back five years. I’d made a vow to Bill. I would love and honor him in sickness and in health. I’d be with him for better or for worse. I said those words in the presence of God, my family, and friends. Yet only this morning, I’d been ready to leave him for trivial annoyances.

I jumped back in the car and drove to my parents’ house. I marveled at how different I felt from when I’d first made the trip to see Mom. I now felt peace, relief, and gratitude.

When I picked up my son, I was dismayed by how willing I’d been to make such a drastic change in his life. My pettiness almost cost him the opportunity to be exposed daily to a wonderful father. Quickly, I thanked my mother and flew out the door to return home. By the time Bill returned from work, I was unpacked and waiting.

I’d love to say that Bill changed. He didn’t. He still did all those things that embarrassed and annoyed me and made me want to explode. The difference came in me. From that day forward, I had to be responsible not only for my actions in our marriage, but also for my reactions.





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I think back to one of the items on my list: Bill slept in church. The minute he began to doze always marked the end of my worship time. So often I thought he was rudely uninterested in the message—and my dad was the preacher! It didn't matter that Bill was unable to stay awake any time he sat for a longer period. The entire time he spent nodding, I spent fuming. I'd squirm in the pew, feeling humiliated. I'd wonder why I ever married this man. I knew he didn't deserve a wife as godly as I was.

Yet now I could see myself as I truly was. My pride was hampering a valuable portion of my life—my worship. This problem wasn't Bill's; it was mine. When Bill fell asleep in church, I began to bathe that time in gratitude and prayer. I took my eyes off Bill and myself and looked to God. Instead of leaving the services in anger, I left in joy.

It wasn't long before Bill noticed a difference. He remarked at lunch one Sunday, "You seem to be enjoying the services more lately. I was beginning to think you didn't like the preacher!" My immediate instinct was to explain how he'd ruined so many services for me. But instead, I accepted his statement without defense.

Many times through the years I've had to remake the list of my responses to my husband. I've continued to ask God to forgive my pathetic reactions and give me his wisdom in dealing with my marriage.

Fifteen years later, at the age of 49, Bill was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. He had to quit his teaching job, leaving me to support our family, which has led to trying days and nights of worry. Watching him fight to maintain his abilities to function daily has been inspiring to my sons, as well as to me. We've had to depend on our faith that God is in control—especially when we feel so out of control. We've searched the Bible for answers to questions we struggle to understand. We've spent hours with every emotion from anger to grief. We've asked, "Why?" We've claimed God's peace that passes all understanding.

Regrettably, many days I've run short on patience, even though I know Bill can't prevent himself from doing things that try my nerves. I realize my responsibility is to respond with the love God would have me show. I cry to God to love through me—because I know I'm not as capable of loving Bill as God is capable of loving him.

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Many times I've thanked God for a mother who was a spiritual mentor. Though she must have been tempted, she didn't preach to me or offer her opinion on my behavior. She guided me in discovering a truth that's saved a most treasured possession—my marriage. If I hadn't learned to respond as a Christian wife to Bill's small problems, I wouldn't be able to respond appropriately to his larger ones now.

My son came home one day and asked, "Mom, what are we going to do when Dad doesn't remember us?" My reply was, "We'll remember him. We'll remember the husband and father he was. We'll remember him for all the things he's taught us and the wonderful ways he's loved us."

After my son left the room, I chuckled. I was thinking of all the things I'd remember about this man who loved his family and his God. Many of those enduring memories are those same annoying little habits that made their way onto a list of bad qualities so many years ago.

Becky Zerbe was a freelance writer who inspired many with her articles. Becky and her husband, Roger, were killed instantly in an automobile accident in 2007. Her articles are reminders of the powerful legacy the written word can have on our marriage and family. This article first appeared in the Fall 2005 issue of MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP.

Thought Provokers

- *Take a few minutes to complete the exercise the author's mother led her through: on a piece of paper, list all the things your spouse does that make him "impossible to live with," and on the right side, list your responses to these things. Instead of focusing on your spouse's shortcomings and lack of faith, think about your issues. How can you begin drawing closer to God and becoming the woman he wants you to be in your marriage?*
- *How can you begin expressing your thanks to God for blessing you with your marriage and husband? Reflect on the marriage vow you made; how are you being faithful to that covenant, "for better or for worse?"*

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BRINGING IT HOME

When Daddy Doesn't Believe

7 strategies for spiritually single parents.

by Nancy Sebastian Meyer

“**H**alf my heart believes in Jesus, but the other half isn't sure he's real.” Seven-year-old Becky hugged me. “What am I gonna do, Mom?”

Her honest words grieved my already aching heart. After four years as a youth pastor, my husband had traded ministry for business. He allowed me to worship God freely, but he eventually stopped going to church and started calling himself an agnostic. I knew Becky would notice our spiritual differences someday, but I still felt unprepared for her question.

God, however, wasn't surprised. As we sat on the bed and opened her Bible, Jeremiah 29:13 provided his answer: “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”

“How do we seek him, Mom?”

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I read the previous verse, “Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.”

An idea I'd heard several months earlier came to mind. “Let's make construction paper flowers and write a prayer request on each one. We'll pray every day for the requests. When God answers one, we'll stick the flower on the wall until we have a whole garden of answered prayers. We'll be able to see God in how he answers us.”

When my husband fails to be a spiritual team player, I picture myself yoked with God— who lends me his power and hope. By the end of that first week, God answered five of Becky's simple requests, including healing her teacher's illness and allowing a friend to visit for a sleepover. At Becky's suggestion, we stuck the flowers to her bedroom ceiling where she could read them day and night. By the end of the month, 20 flowers graced her ceiling garden. One of them read, “Please help me to know you, God.”

Becky is 15 years old as I write this story. Her dad, an awesome father by the world's standards, still considers himself agnostic. Becky, on the other hand, steadily grows in her walk with God. So how can we raise kids to love God when Dad doesn't? I hope the following suggestions offer encouragement.

1. Remember, although you may be required to answer questions about God single-handedly, you're not alone. When children ask, “Where is God when I hurt?” or “Why doesn't God make Daddy believe in him?” answers may not always seem as obvious as God's leading in Becky's ceiling garden. However, God promises in James 1:5, “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault.” Connect with God immediately through prayer and listen to his gentle promptings in your heart and from his Word.

2. Respond honestly, briefly, and positively to questions about Daddy. Even worse than fielding questions about God is answering questions such as, “Why doesn't Dad go to church?” or “Why was Daddy so mean tonight?” Since you can't honestly answer for him, you might suggest: “Why don't you pray about asking Dad that question.”

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When an immediate reply is necessary, I pray for guidance and then keep my response honest, brief, and respectful. For example, if Becky asks me about a questionable CD Dad just purchased, I express concern about the issue, while remaining nonjudgmental toward her father.

3. *Speak the truth in love.* When Becky first learned the health risks of smoking, she immediately related her new knowledge to the next smoker we encountered! A stranger might excuse tactlessness from a child, but Dad can get touchy when reprimanded by his daughter.

Jesus spoke honestly with compassion. John 1:14 describes him as “full of grace and truth.” A wise pastor once said, “Jesus was not so gracious he was not truthful, nor so truthful he was not gracious.” Encourage your children to think, *What would Jesus say and how would he say it?*

4. *Provide a spiritual heritage beyond your home.* As Becky’s closest Christian role model, I tried to be perfect—and ended up defeated, discouraged, and exhausted! When Becky needs more than I can give, where can I turn?

Within our local church, one of Becky’s friends enjoys spiritual adoption. Lili’s “Gram” and “Grand” live authentic Christian lives in front of this preteen, continually reinforcing the fact that Christianity is more than just “Mom’s religion.”

Ask God to provide friends who will be encouraging and pray regularly for your children (and you). If these special people attend your local church, they may be the added incentive your child needs to get to church on Sunday morning!

5. *Attend church regularly.* Often I must remind myself to “not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing” (Hebrews 10:25). Becky and I need teaching from God’s Word and fellowship, but going to church alone is tough.

One mother commented, “My husband doesn’t want to go, and it’s just too much work to get the kids up and out without his help.” I encouraged her to find an accountability partner—someone to pray for her daily and hold her to her promise to get to church regularly.





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What do you do if your husband resents being left behind when you go to church each week? Because Jesus taught us to prioritize people over programs, occasionally we enjoy a “family Sunday” away from church. Becky and I sometimes accompany Dad on a Jeep trail ride or go to the city aquarium together. Additional weekly “God-times,” like Pioneer Clubs and daily devotions, help keep our faith growing even when we can’t get to church on a Sunday.

6. Learn to recharge your spiritual batteries. While I don’t experience the physical exhaustion of single parenting, my spiritual battles still leave me emotionally wrung out. I find my key to tapping into God’s energy in Matthew 11:28–30: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you ... for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” When my husband fails to be a spiritual team player, I picture myself yoked with God—who lends me his power and hope. I spend time alone with God every day and find this commitment produces a powerful, positive, refreshed mother.

7. Get involved in regular Christian service with your kids. Are your kids accomplishing God’s work? Consider Philippians 2:12–13, which tells us to work out our salvation. This means we need to flesh out, day by day, a relationship with God that serves others. Becky and I sing at retirement homes and run errands for our neighbors. These and other activities put our faith into action, giving us joy, purpose, and unity as a family—especially when Dad joins in!

One of Becky’s friends helps out in our church nursery one Sunday evening each month. Becky told me she’d like to volunteer too, but she’s not keen on babysitting young children. As a result of her search for a ministry, Becky began writing a kids’ page for our church newsletter. Recognizing a child’s skills and interests can provide ideas about where God desires to use him or her.

Perhaps right now you’re thinking, *Whew! These seven strategies sound solid, but can I apply them all?* Take a deep breath and ask God to show you one or two things he wants you to focus on at this moment. Maybe he’s asking you to cut out paper flowers and watch your children’s faith grow. Or perhaps he’s nudging you to find that accountability partner who can encourage you when life seems impossible.

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If you've read this article on behalf of a friend, ask God to reveal ways you can help: Pray with her weekly, offer to take her children and her to church with your family, or even watch her kids so she can spend quality time with her husband. Above all, keep praying for her family.

Regardless of which strategy helps you or a friend become a successful spiritually single mom, remember, we're never alone. As God promises us, "I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20).

Nancy Sebastian Meyer is the author of Beyond Expectations (Moody) and lives in Pennsylvania with her family. This article first appeared in the March/April 2006 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

Thought Provokers

- *What do you struggle with most when it comes to single-spiritual parenting? Which of the author's seven suggestions offers you the most encouragement with this issue?*
- *Reread Matthew 28:20. How does this encourage you as you raise your children in the faith?*





How To

Good News!

You don't need a soapbox or a tract to share your faith.

by Suzy Ryan

I hate to admit it, but sometimes I'm afraid to open my mouth to talk about Jesus. Oh, I love the Lord and want all my friends and family to know him—but when I try to witness, sometimes I feel as though there's a sock stuffed down my throat.

Perhaps you've felt the same way. You're just not comfortable with witnessing tools like tracts but you feel guilty about not sharing Jesus' love with others. If you can't relate to traditional methods, there's another option I've found successful in leading several others to Christ—lifestyle evangelism. I let my natural personality show those around me the love of Christ as I walk with Jesus moment by moment.

Scripture tells us “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44). This basic backdrop of truth to witnessing relieves me of the burden of perfectionism. It's God doing all the work—I'm just the vessel. As I align my life with him according to his Word, I can more easily share how the Lord has intimately changed the flawed woman I am into a usable woman! Here are some steps I've found helpful in sharing the Good News with those around me.





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Pray for Opportunities

The Bible tells us that “the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much” (James 5:16, NKJV). So I ask the Lord whom he is drawing to himself, and within that parameter, how he can use me.

You can do the same—then make a list of those he brings to mind and pray that God will soften their hearts and give them faith to believe in him. Pray for their salvation and petition Jesus to help you meet their needs and reveal himself through your actions. When God nudges you to share your faith, say a silent prayer for him to give you his words. If all goes well, the Lord receives the glory. If disaster occurs, he takes responsibility. No pressure!

Obey God’s Promptings

Several years ago, I invited an unchurched friend, Marion, to our church. Unfortunately, the Sunday she and her husband attended, our church was going through an intense fundraising drive. Marion wasn’t interested in going back. But the Lord prompted me to invite her to go with me to a Bible study. I adamantly replied, “No way!”

I still remember the battle in my mind. I arrived home from the Bible study and heard the Holy Spirit prompt, “Invite Marion.” I argued, *She already gave church a try.* I can’t! And Who am I to ask her? But no matter how I tried, I couldn’t shake the words, “Invite Marion!”

Finally I picked up the phone. When Marion answered, I literally held my breath and said, “I feel God telling me to ask you to my Bible study. If you can’t go or don’t want to, I understand, but I can’t get you out of my thoughts.” Surprisingly, she agreed, and has been attending ever since (this is her fourth year). She accepted the Lord, and now has more Bible knowledge than most lifelong Christians!

Watching Marion love the Lord so intensely has touched my very being. This precious soul mate has filled empty holes in my own life with her love and encouragement. To have the privilege to introduce her to Jesus is an unbelievable honor because she’s an absolute treasure for a confidante. Being obedient to the Holy Spirit—even when you feel awkward—can reap unexpected blessings.

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Walk the Walk

One of my neighbors, Melissa, used to push every one of my buttons possible. She constantly judged my actions and belittled my faith. Her son spent a lot of time at my house playing with my son and would tell his mom, “We prayed today at lunch for good behavior. I also learned God can change bad men into good men, like he did with Paul in the Bible.” In a rush of anger, she once stormed into my house lecturing, “My child is not to pray. If you want to teach your children to depend on a God who lets innocent babies die and earthquakes kill people, fine. But I will teach my child all he has to depend on is himself. Your religion is for the weak.”

Many nights, I cried out to the Lord, “Bring someone else to minister to her!” But the Lord continually reminded me, *With my power, I can give you genuine affection for Melissa and her family.*

God’s might was tested the eight years they were our neighbors. But before they moved, God laid it on my heart to speak to Melissa one last time. Obediently I offered, “I know you don’t understand and share my faith, but I want you to know that if you ever get to the place where you want to know God personally or have any questions, please know my door is always open to you.”

Being obedient to the Holy Spirit—even when you feel awkward—can reap unexpected blessings. Her reply brought tears to my eyes. “Suzy, I’ve watched you, and you really live your Christian faith. It isn’t something you just talk about. I’m beginning to think more about religion, since my son is curious on this subject.”

Her words encouraged my soul—and made me realize anew that people on my street are watching me. Your neighbors will notice if you still go to church in bad weather. They’ll notice if you forgive a friend who treats you poorly or exercise self-control with an out-of-control child. They’ll note if you choose not to complain about your absent, working husband or opt out of gossip sessions concerning a mutual acquaintance. When you choose to represent the Lord, you must hold yourself to a higher standard.

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Meet Others' Needs

Analyze pertinent ideas to help friends. Do they need an encouraging note? Why not have your children make a picture with a treat attached? Can you offer to babysit for a weary mother or make dinner for a working couple? Or maybe you can think of a book or tape that's appropriate to encourage a harried mom, a woman irritated with her husband, or a friend grieving a loss. Why not furnish welcome baskets for new neighbors, with Bible verses attached? Meet your neighbors' needs as you impart God's Word, making it come alive by your consistent conduct of unconditional giving.

Unconditional love without expectation is a powerful testimony. And God has blessed me with the opportunity to implement all these suggestions. However, one word of warning: Know your limits. Since I have three children five years and under, my garage door shuts at 2 P.M. for naptime, and I hang a "Do not disturb" sign on my door. Start by praying where God would like you to begin, and obediently listen to his voice. He will not stretch you past your limits.

Be Willing to Be Inconvenienced

"To live is Christ and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21). God can't work through you if you're filled with self. To be an effective witness, you may have to drive out of your way to pick up a friend for church, but will losing a little sleep really kill you?

If you're discussing a controversial topic, how about giving up the last word for the Lord? Remain steadfast in your commitment to basic biblical truths, but don't cram them down another person's throat. If a friend wants to discuss abortion, compassionately listen to her point of view. Agree to disagree. These healthy dialogues actually solidify the position in your own heart. Don't apologize for your opinion, but respect hers. Admit more Christians should support unwed mothers. If the neighbor wants to discuss hypocrisy in church, confess that it is rampant, but that God remains true and trustworthy. My secular companions know where I stand on social issues, but I never allow myself a defensive or holier-than-thou attitude.





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Practice Patience

Cultivating the right to share your faith means building respect. Sometimes this seed is sown for years, but many times it's overnight. Pray where God would like you to embark, and then ask questions. "How can I pray for you?" might help console a depressed friend or an unsaved spouse.

Several months ago, a friend and I started praying God would bring Christians into our neighborhood. The day we prayed was the day Troy and Susan's family bought a house on our street. Although they weren't yet Christians, Susan expressed her desire to find a church to attend with her two young daughters, so I immediately invited them to our place of worship. Basically, all I did was extend the request—and the Lord graciously used me as the vehicle for this precious family to get to know him. Today they're attending church, their children are in a youth program, and she attends a Bible study.

There's another neighbor, Lisa, who moved in six months before Susan. At first she seemed interested in the Lord, even asking me for an explanation of salvation. But she's backed away after we went to church together. I'm waiting patiently, praying for her. I don't request her presence at Christian functions any more, because she's made it clear she needs space. Discernment is key in every situation, and God liberally provides this gift. When he is ready for me to start the invitations again, he'll let me know.

In the end, lifestyle evangelism's really about allowing the Lord to change and use you when you make your life available to him. There's no greater pleasure in life than to introduce someone else to God's grace.

Suzy Ryan is a freelance writer who lives with her family in California. This article first appeared in the September/October 1997 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

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Thought Provokers

- *What is “lifestyle evangelism?” How could this method be an effective tool to use in your marriage and family? Which of the author’s suggestions do you find most helpful for your marriage and family situation, and why?*
- *Reread John 6:44. How does this affect the way you view your role in seeing your spouse come to Christ? How are you aligning your life with Christ as a first priority to demonstrating the Good News to your spouse?*

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LEADERSHIP TOOLS

Leading an Unbelieving Spouse to

Here's how to show grace, humility, and unconditional love.

When Christ wanted to teach his disciples how to treat each other, he realized that experiencing something is more life-changing than words alone. So Jesus got up from the meal, took off his outer garments, and began washing their dusty feet—a service usually relegated to the lowliest servant. Then, based on the powerful experience they'd just shared, he taught his disciples about serving each other.

In the same way, your spouse may need to experience Christ's love through you before he can believe it's real. If you consistently demonstrate Christ's love by serving your spouse, you appropriately give him the opportunity to experience Christ's love in a way that goes beyond mere words and religious talk.

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If your spouse is receptive, link your service with an explanation that you're following Christ's example. Christ didn't intend to become a perpetual doormat. He said, "You call me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am" (John 13:13). But he explained that this ceremony modeled the attitude of service that ought to develop among his disciples (John 13:12–20).

In the same way, your service to your spouse should model Christ's love—so that your spouse will be drawn to faith. Your service also provides an example of the servant attitude that should eventually characterize both you and your spouse. (See also Genesis 39; 41:39; Song of Solomon 2:16–3:4; 1 Peter 3:1–8; Revelation 21:9–22:21.)

Good Words to Remember: I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. John 13:15

Challenge: Read John 13:1–17. In what ways do you “wash” your spouse's feet on a daily basis?

This article first appeared on ChristianBibleStudies.com, 2003.





Additional Resources

More places for more information.



Can Two Walk Together? Encouragement for Spiritually Unbalanced Marriages, by Sabrina D. Black (Moody Publishers, 2002). Find spiritual balance in your marriage. Many Christians are in spiritually unbalanced marriages, desperate for someone to minister to them in their unique place. This is a wonderful tool to provide those in unequally yoked relationships with hope and help in dealing with disappointment, hurts, and heartaches. Sabrina Black brings her counseling expertise to bear on this difficult subject, assisting couples with creating and maintaining a vibrant, growing relationship despite their differences.

Get Out of a Spiritual Rut, a downloadable resource from the **Today's Christian Woman Store.com**. Revitalize your relationship with God the Father. Use this resource as a tool if you are entering in, sitting in, or climbing out of a spiritual rut. These articles act as a safeguard and provide helpful tips. Read the testimonies of others, who by faith and perseverance, reached out and were met by God.

Listening to the Holy Spirit, a downloadable resource from **Gifted for Leadership**. Learn to follow as you lead. This packet helps you see what it means to lead in the power of the Holy Spirit and invites you to see if you are using the gifts the Spirit gives us.



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Recalibrating Your Marriage, a downloadable resource from **GiftedforLeadership**. This downloadable packet offers you and your spouse—whether your marriage is in crisis or need of a simple tune up—the wisdom and encouragement to make your marriage a high priority again.

Running the Race Well, a downloadable resource from **GiftedforLeadership**. As leaders in the body of Christ, we share a purpose, and it's not only to run, but to finish well—more than that, to win (1 Corinthians 9:24). If you're looking for ways to succeed in doing this, this guide will help you. In it, you'll find six tactics you need to run and finish well, and to encourage those you lead to do the same. We've also packed plenty of other resources inside to help you go even farther in getting the advice and support you need. Happy trails!

Spiritually Single Moms: Raising Godly Kids When Dad Doesn't Believe, by Nancy Sebastian Meyer (NAV Press, 2007). Nancy Sebastian Meyer offers hope and help to moms trying to provide spiritual guidance—and grow spiritually themselves—when dad doesn't believe. Includes advice on showing respect to your spouse, drawing godly boundaries, staying positive, and teaching kids to serve others.

When Your Husband Doesn't Believe, a downloadable resource from the **Today's Christian Woman Store.com**. If you're married to an unbeliever, your issues in marriage regarding faith are probably difficult and stressful at times. In this guide, you'll read many stories of women in situations like yours. Some have happy endings; others are still hoping. But the purpose of these stories is to help you find hope and comfort in the God who does hear your prayers and loves you—and your husband.

Witness to Your Family, a downloadable resource from the **Today's Christian Woman Store.com**. If you find yourself hitting a brick wall or dodging questions when it comes to sharing your faith with family members, then this Life Guide will help. You'll find witnessing help and testimonies from others who have put their hope in Christ for the salvation of their loved ones. Remember that the Lord hears your prayers and that your loved ones willingness to know the truth doesn't lie in your hands.

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Do You Feel **Alone** as a Woman Leader?

IF you're a capable, called, and gifted Christian woman in leadership, join the conversation at **GiftedForLeadership.com**. This blog, along with downloadable resources, will help you safely converse with other women about the issues you face. You'll walk away feeling encouraged, supported, challenged, and definitely not alone!



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