

Maximizing the Contribution of Women to Society^o

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It is obvious that no society can achieve its maximum strength unless each individual makes his or her maximum contribution. There is one group which exhibits feelings of disenfranchisement in every region of the world—and that is women. Women all over the world feel that they are second-rate and that only men can reach their full potential. This discrimination begins while the baby is still in the womb, so that a female baby is often considered of less value and the pregnancy terminated. This discrimination continues throughout the life of a woman. This discrimination is confirmed by tradition, by educational institutions, by the legal system,¹ within the family, and, sadly, even by religion in many cases.² As a result, women are often at a disadvantage in terms of education,³ job opportunities, and economically.

Added to this, there are sufficient numbers of men who want to place women into sexual slavery. This takes the form of rape,^{4,5} incest, involuntary marriages,⁶ selling daughters into prostitution, and a variety of other forms of sexual slavery.^{7,8} In times of war, women are freely raped. In this regard, at best, women are viewed as the spoils of war. At worst, women are the means by which one group of men humiliate another. All of this is dehumanizing to women.

That we should have to enact a Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women is a sad commentary on our world. If we are ever going to have healthy societies, we must give to women the dignity God gave them, and help to remove the shackles that they feel. We men are a large part of the problem. It is we men as a group that make women feel second-rate. Therefore, we men must take the initiative to change the way we view women and treat them. There are several issues we must deal with.

First, what is men's view of women? Women are viewed by men as beings who have something that men want—generally, affection. At the same time, men are afraid that women will not voluntarily give this precious gift and they, therefore, attempt to deprive women of their right to voluntarily give this gift—or to withhold it. The irony is that it is the tenderness of women that adds to our lives, and yet it is their tenderness that we abuse in insisting on our own way. Moreover, we men have too often attempted to get our way with women by manipulation, deceit and, regrettably, even physical force. The justifiable resentment on the part of women has led to a gender war. This war between the genders is difficult to break down in the warmest of male-female relationships. As a result, both men and women have scars that are passed down from generation to generation.

Men blind themselves to the fact that women have many strengths. We men fail to see the many beautiful characteristics that are unique to women. We fail to listen to the cry of their hearts.⁹ Instead, we are preoccupied with winning the gender war. Let me ask you two questions: Can women reach their full potential in a male-dominated world? NO! This is obvious. However, consider the second question: Can men reach their full potential in a male-dominated world? NO! Men who insist on dominating women, thereby preventing women from reaching their full potential, hurt their own selves. As a result, men live empty lives. Women

^o Statement delivered to a group of diplomats at the U.N. 3 April 1997.

experience a second-rate existence. — How sad! Men live empty lives and women experience a second-rate existence. Is this not blindness?

The second issue is: What is God's view of women? God created women to be different from men, with characteristics that make women unique and which enrich all of our lives—male and female alike. The characteristics which He built into women, including those under the category of nurturing, i.e., tenderness and sensitivity to human needs, are tremendous strengths when properly understood. As a result, women possess a wisdom that men do not have.

We learn the most about God's view of women through Jesus' interaction with women. His actions have such great impact because He is God who came in human form. Thus, through the life of Jesus, we can see God's perspective in action. We do not have to guess how the God of the universe wants women to be treated, because we have seen Him do it. Jesus gave women dignity and worth. He treated women with gentleness, taking into account their nature. The very God of the universe did not look down on women. He did not take advantage of their sexuality as men often try to do. He did not take advantage of their nurturing nature as men continually try to do.

We gain great insight into God's view of women from Jesus' first appearance to His followers after His resurrection from death to life. Earlier that very morning, Mary came to the tomb out of devotion to her Lord. When she discovered His body missing from the tomb, she told Peter and John, chief among the apostles. They came to the tomb, studied the situation and left. It was only after they left that Jesus appeared to Mary.¹⁰ Jesus refused to reveal Himself to the chief among His apostles, but rather to this woman. This was a deliberate, calculated act on the part of the God of the universe. Not only are woman just as important to Him as men, but in some cases He chooses women instead of men. This is to be expected. Often, when God wishes to reveal Himself to a person or to reveal a message for a group of people, He does it through a woman. He uses women as the bridge between Himself and humanity just as often as men.

God, in His sovereignty, distributes spiritual gifts to those whom He indwells through their submitting their lives to Him. These spiritual gifts involve supernatural ability which no human could exercise in his or her own strength. These gifts are distributed regardless of gender, based only upon the tender heart of the recipient and the sovereignty of God.¹¹ In His kingdom, women are highly lifted up.

God has both male and female characteristics. As such, no individual from either gender can fully comprehend the revealed mind of God. We men need the participation of women to understand the world God created. Women's insights and judgments need to be included in every decision. This became obvious to me a number of years ago when the Administrator of UNDP organized an afternoon workshop in the ECOSOC Chamber. He selected 6 or 7 experts on development to speak for 5 minutes each. When I came home that evening, I told my wife Elaine that the best speaker was a woman. She had the best ideas and the best sensitivity to the problems of the developing world. And why not? Into whom has God built a nurturing nature? Consequently, I am convinced that no decision which affects others should be made by males alone.

God has told us through His servant:

*You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*¹²

Does this mean that when we are all in Christ that there are no differences between women and men? Thank goodness, "No!" It means that neither one, with all the wonderful differences, is more important than the other.

The third issue is: What is God's view of the relationship between men and women? From God's view, there are several types of relationship between men and women. The central one is marriage. God has made it clear that the natural state for a woman or a man is to be in a marriage relationship. God describes, in part, the marriage relationship this way: "Those whom God has yoked together let no man pull apart."¹³ God used the analogy of two oxen working in a yoke together. Marriage is a yoking. The natural state is for a man and a woman to be yoked together. The yoking involves two and only two people, and this yoking is permanent. A married couple consists of one man and one woman who are yoked together for a lifetime.

When two oxen are yoked together, which one is the more important? Neither! Relatively speaking, how much may be accomplished by a pair of oxen? More than the sum of their individual abilities. Their value is based upon how much may be accomplished together, not individually. Their value as individuals is their ability to work together in the yoke. This is also true for a woman and a man who are yoked together in marriage.

This perspective affects my attitudes toward my wife. If I see myself in the yoke together with my wife, I will do everything I can to help her become as strong as she can. I will serve her in doing this. I will do everything I can to protect her. I will encourage her. I will help her overcome the damage to her self-worth inflicted multiple times per day by a society that does not give her the honour she deserves, and which degrades and dehumanizes her.

If marriage is properly understood, every other male-female relationship comes into focus. Given that God's plan is for each man to be yoked for a lifetime to one woman, the possibility of a sexual relationship with another woman is out. Therefore, in my interaction with every woman other than my wife, I must be respectful, giving her the dignity she deserves as a fellow human being, in part without regard to her gender, but in part being sensitive to her nature as a woman.

Clearly, there is a disparity between God's view of women and man's view of women. The lower one's view of God, the lower that person's view of women. Where Jesus has not adequately impacted a society, women are often the possession of men to do with as they please.^{14,15,16}

The important question is: How can we lift women to God's view? How can we make men's view of women the same as God's view? First, men must see women as God sees women. This means that we men must have God's mind. God taught us through the Apostle Paul:

*I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me.*¹⁷

We men must let Jesus live His life through us. We men cannot afford to continue to function in our selfish ways. We men must be able to treat women as God treats them. We need wisdom and power—wisdom to know the right way to treat women, and the power to actually do this. We men need God's power in our lives to overcome our selfish nature which hurts the women in our lives. Whenever I interact with a woman, I must continually ask: "How would Jesus treat this lady if He were interacting with her instead of me?" For example, with regard to my wife, God has told me through His Word:

*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her to make her holy....Each one of you must love his wife as he loves himself.*¹⁸

I want to love my wife in this way. And I am asking God to give me the power to overcome my own selfishness to be able to do this. I need God to give me the capacity to truly care about the women with whom I interact, always concerned for their best.

One female cadet who resigned from a military training academy after months of dehumanizing harassment from males said: “Those who did not [treat me as an equal] should take a long look at how they view their girlfriends, wives, mothers, sisters and daughters.”¹⁹ Men, let us hear the hearts of the women in our lives and let God change us into the men that these women need!

If we men are honest with ourselves over the way we have treated the women in our lives, we must repent.²⁰ We men need to apologize to the women in our lives for the way we have hurt them. About one year ago, I began to realize the pain I had inflicted upon Elaine during the first 32 years of our married life as I selfishly pursued my own goals, largely ignoring her dreams and aspirations for her life. This realization caused me much agony. It caused me to weep. It caused me to ask for God’s help in changing to become the yokemate that Elaine needs and deserves.

For those women here who have had the experiences I have been speaking about: I ask you to accept my apology on behalf of the men in your life who have hurt you. I ask you to forgive us for the way we men have taken away your dignity. I ask you to forgive us men for treating you in such a way that you are not thankful to be a woman. I ask you to forgive us men for treating you in such a way that you do not feel treasured and safe within our societies. You don’t deserve what we men have done to you. We want to help you to heal from the damage we have inflicted upon you. Would you forgive us?

In order for women to be set free to reach the full potential for which God created them, men are not the only ones who must see women as God sees them. Women must also see themselves as God sees them. There is far more to women than their nurturing nature. However, let us consider the strength of this characteristic. One commentator shared this profound perspective: “The hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world.”²¹ One of the most influential people in all of history is Suzanna Wesley. She was, in my mind, the person most responsible for preventing England from experiencing the same bloodshed as neighbouring France in the eighteenth century. She did this by training her two sons, John and Charles, who spearheaded the spiritual awakening that served as the foundation for the social, economic and political reforms.²² It was her nurturing of her sons that she used to change England.

Women must see their nurturing nature as God sees it rather than viewing it as the reason that men often step on them. Unless women are able to accept themselves as the special creations of God that they are, women will reject this beautiful aspect of their personalities.

Then, in order to be truly set free, we need healing from the scars resulting from the gender war. Women need healing from the scars inflicted by various men over the course of their lives. For many of us men, there must be emotional healing from scars from childhood or from earlier failed marriages. We all need to be healed from these scars in order to be able to participate fully in healthy relationships now.

My own precious wife, Elaine, was abused sadistically from the time she was 5 years old by a man who had never been healed of his scars resulting from the gender war. The abuse to my wife was so traumatic that she was not able to face it until the past few years. During the last year, I have seen God begin a dramatic healing from these scars, a healing which no human being could accomplish. God has told us: “I am the Lord who heals you”.²³ Not only does this mean spiritually and physically, but it also means emotionally. I have seen God perform a miracle in Elaine which has begun to take away the trauma from those painful memories and has made it possible for her to feel more secure in our relationship. Because it is deeply personal, I

will leave the details of this healing for Elaine to explain to you in person. I am sure some of you will be able to identify with Elaine's experience.

In summary, how can we men be changed? And, how can women be changed and, in turn, change others? The answer is the same for both. By God alone. We must both—men and women—see women through God's eyes. We both must allow God to change our attitudes toward women. And then we must both allow God to heal us. Thus, I am convinced that women will never be able to reach their full potential—to fully participate and contribute—unless we men walk in dependence upon God in accepting women as the special creation of God that they are and give them the dignity and respect they deserve; and unless women walk in dependence upon God and can truly thank Him for the beautiful uniquenesses that He has poured into them. The result is healing—personally, and of our relationships.

How can you and I have this intimate relationship with God where, men and women alike, we can see women as God sees them and where we can experience the healing that will allow us to participate in healthy relationships? God created us out of love and for the purpose of bestowing love upon us as part of this intimate friendship. The God who reigns over nations is holy—without moral imperfection. However, we are not morally perfect. We have the capacity for evil. We hurt others, even the ones we love, with our selfishness. Our moral imperfection—our unholiness—blocks this friendship with God. It excludes us from the presence of Holy God. Our unholiness is incompatible with God's perfect holiness. The problem is insurmountable from a human point of view. By ourselves, there is no way we can come into the presence of Holy God. By ourselves, we are eternally separated from the One who created us and loves us. The eternal consequences are great when one recognizes that being separated from our Creator at the end of this lifetime means a literal hell.

How can this blocked friendship with God be overcome? We need a way to be forgiven so that God can draw us close to Himself. By ourselves, there is no way we can accomplish this. Only Almighty God can do it. That is precisely why God Himself came to earth as Jesus to die on our behalf to pay the penalty for our sins. God has told us:

Jesus is the image of the invisible God....By Jesus all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together...He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything He might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Jesus and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things...by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross.²⁴

Mahatma Gandhi described that sacrifice when he said that Jesus, "a man who was completely innocent, offered himself as a sacrifice for the good of others, including his enemies, and became the ransom of the world. It was a perfect act."²⁵

Thus, Jesus has told us "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."²⁶ God has told us "There is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."²⁷ Through Jesus' death and resurrection, God is able to forgive us and to see us as holy. Jesus' death and resurrection is the only provision given to man whereby we can have our sins forgiven and have this intimate friendship with God. God has told us:

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour. But now He has reconciled you by Christ's physical body

*through death to present you holy in His sight, without blemish and free from accusation.*²⁸

*God took the sinless Christ and poured into Him our sins. Then, in exchange, He poured God's goodness into us!*²⁹

Let me be very clear: What I am advocating is not religion. It is the person of Jesus. As God Himself, Jesus is for all of us, not just certain races, cultures, or regions of the world. I believe this is what Mahatma Gandhi meant when he said:

*Because the life of Jesus has the significance and the transcendency to which I have alluded, I believe that he belongs not solely to Christianity, but to the entire world; to all races and people, it matters little under what flag, name or doctrine they may work, profess a faith or worship a God inherited from their ancestors.*³⁰

The repentance and forgiveness that allows us to have an intimate friendship with God, and therefore to truly care about others, is centered in the person of Jesus. Let us not leave here today thinking we can have this any other way but through embracing Jesus and Him alone.

How do we place our faith in Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins, so we can experience this intimate friendship with God that lasts forever and helps each of us to care about each other and to be healed of the scars inflicted by the gender war? The illustration that communicates best to me relates to the region where I grew up—near Niagara Falls. Many people do risky things over Niagara Falls to gain attention. One of these was a tightrope walker. He had a wire strung over the Falls, from one side to the other. This man first walked along this wire from one side of the Falls to the other, and back. Then, as the crowd grew, he repeated his walk but this time he pushed a wheelbarrow in front of him as he walked over to the other side and back. Then, he boldly filled the wheelbarrow with bricks and guided it along the wire to the other side of the Falls and back. By this time, the crowd had grown very large and was cheering loudly for him. He then asked the crowd "How many of you believe I can take this wheelbarrow to the other side of the Falls and back carrying a person inside instead of these bricks?" The crowd cheered wildly. Then, he asked the crowd "Who is willing to get into the wheelbarrow?" The crowd became silent. Their belief lacked 100% confidence. To place our faith in Jesus Christ means to get into the wheelbarrow with Him, making ourselves completely dependent upon Him. Our sole basis for having our sins forgiven and for entering a close friendship with God is Jesus' death on our behalf.

It is this making ourselves dependent upon Jesus that gives us the capacity to walk intimately with God. God's solution for the suffering and pain caused by male selfishness applies to everyone. No one—neither you nor I—can truly care about our wife or husband without the life of Jesus living through us. Therefore, if you are serious about improving the plight of women, and at the same time healing the scars of the gender war, I challenge you to come to Him. Jesus invites us:

*If any man is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, "From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water."*³¹

As we come to Jesus and drink, He will satisfy us and this will spill over to others in our societies, causing them to come to Jesus and drink. As sufficient numbers within our societies drink, our societies will be made up of individuals who have a healthy love and appreciation of themselves, and who can love others in the same way, regardless of gender.

For this reason, I can invite you to come to Jesus and drink. Let me encourage you to embrace the Master Designer of our world and your life. I encourage you to invite Jesus into your life by praying to God:

Holy God, please forgive me for sinning against You. Thank You for loving me enough that You came to this earth as Jesus and died on my behalf so that I could have real life with You. I ask You to come into my life to give me unbroken friendship with You forever. I ask You to change me and, with me, the world. Thank You. Amen.

Not only will this start you on the most exciting journey known to mankind, but it is the most significant thing each of us can do to lift the status of women. The beautiful result is that our relationship with God is the basis for our relationships between men and women. And our marriage relationship is a picture of our relationship with God. Both relationships reinforce each other.

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NOTE: All Bible references are from the New International Version unless otherwise indicated.

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