

BUILDING HER HOUSE

Commonsensical Wisdom for Christian Women

Nancy Wilson

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Commonsensual Wisdom for Christian Women*
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*Lovingly dedicated to my granddaughters Jemima,
Belphoebe, Hero, Lucia, Ameera Margaret,
Evangeline, and Daphne:*

*May you grow up to be mothers and grandmothers,
ever trusting in the God of your own mothers and
your own Nana.*

Preface

It was some time ago now—so long ago it makes me feel quite old—that my husband had one of my taped studies for women transcribed and put in a column titled “Femina.” When he brought it home for my perusal, I was of course appalled by the writing—reading transcriptions is a very humbling experience for a speaker! But I got to work and cleaned it up so it could appear in the pages of *Credenda/Agenda*. So this is all really my husband’s fault. He is the one who handed me that first column. He knew that if I saw it already on the page, even if it was in shabby condition, I would be far more inclined to think I could write a column for women. So I must thank him here for tricking me into writing.

Canon Press has kindly put together a collection of some of those essays, and here they are bound together. I have tried to arrange them under general headings, but I did not originally write them to organize in this way, so it is not a tight arrangement.

As we pray and labor for reformation in the church in America, we have to keep our eyes on the little things that are not as little as we think—things like feasting together around our tables, loving the little people in our families, and living sacrificially for one another. These seemingly “insignificant” duties are far more potent than we realize, for God sanctifies them and uses them to bless us, transform our communities, and bring glory to His name. It is my prayer that God might use these little essays to encourage faithfulness and joyfulness in the women who read them.

Chick Flicks

GOD CREATED men and women with many differences, and one of the significant differences is how we are wired sexually. So, of course, given our differences, our temptations are not the same. The enemy of our souls, being an experienced strategist, hits us where we are weak.

Generally speaking, men are aroused by sight and are wired to their appetites, and so we have the porn industry working hard night and day to devise ways to devour and destroy men. Millions of men have been seduced, captured, and made slaves, all the while thinking they are exercising their “freedom.” The attack is straightforward, in your face, and with no subtlety at all.

Women, on the other hand, generally speaking, are seduced emotionally and perhaps more subtly. Women are wired to their emotions and respond to touch, as well as to tenderness, thoughtfulness, sacrifice, and sentiment. Thus we have an industry devoted to producing sappy romantic novels, hours of TV time filled with soap operas, and films that aim to seduce women by drawing them into a vicarious illicit relationship.

In drawing these distinctions between men and women, I am not saying that either set of strengths/weaknesses necessitates falling into sin. And I am certainly not saying that women cannot be seduced by sight or men by tenderness. These categories are generalizations. Still, if we are going to understand how to resist our own temptations, we must be acquainted with our vulnerabilities.

One genre of film that has achieved popularity in recent years

among women is what is commonly called the “chick flick.” This is the movie that revolves around a relationship; it satisfies the emotional feminine need for masculine understanding and tenderness and has a happy ending culminating in a successful relationship. Now of course not all chick flicks are necessarily bad. But it is helpful if women understand what is going on in these stories, and it is crucial that we see what effect they are having on the women who watch them. And of course romantic novels present the same temptations as romantic films.

A chick flick may be great art, like some adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice*, or it may be altogether poor, like so many movies that come and go. Just because it is a story geared for women does not mean it is necessarily evil; women must guard themselves no matter what they are reading or watching. I am addressing here a particular temptation involving romantic works of fiction or film.

If watching or reading *Pride and Prejudice* causes a woman to become discontented with her own husband because he just doesn't match up to Mr. Darcy, then she is not reading cautiously. Works of fiction (including film) should delight and instruct us, not cause us to get into sin. If they do, either they are not worthy of our time, or we are not thinking properly when we watch or read them. Let's consider each of these categories separately.

In *The Discarded Image*, C. S. Lewis pointed out three essential tests of literature: It should teach what is useful, honor what is honorable, and appreciate the delightful. If a book or film is teaching destructive philosophy, if it is honoring fornication or adultery, if it is appreciating what is reprehensible, then we can safely conclude that this is not what we should find amusing or entertaining. A film that elevates adultery and leads us to sympathize with sin cannot be good for our souls. The romantic hero is often rebellious, individualistic, and guided by his passions. Women who are sucked into reading book after book with this kind of hero are going to be affected in an unhealthy way.

On the other hand, even if a film or book is first-rate, we still have to be thinking as we read or watch it. Even the good stuff can

cause us to stumble, and we need to be paying attention. Guard against fantasizing about other men, even if they are just from the pages of a book. Both the married and the unmarried woman need to consider this. Some have called the emotional, romantic film “feminine porn”—it can seduce women into approving of ungodly conduct and relations. It can arouse the passions in an ungodly way, encouraging women to fantasize about men who are not their husbands, or lead to unhealthy mental role-playing. Unmarried women can be misled into thinking this is what a loving relationship is like. Married women can become discontented that they are not lusted for, sought, and chased after like the women in the book or film.

Women are led into lust in a different way than men are. Women lust to be lusted after, and seeing a film or reading a book that arouses this kind of lust can be very destructive. Though a woman may not be aroused at the sight of another woman taking off her clothes, it can make her wish she could do that, or look like that, or get men to look at her that way. This is clearly sinful thinking that needs to be repented of and forsaken, and it cannot be justified by saying, “But I am imagining seducing my husband like that woman on the screen.”

Women may think when a “bad skin scene” comes on that only the men should turn their heads. But this is indeed a double standard. Women can be tripped up by such scenes as well, even though it represents a different form of lust. Such lust can lead to discontentment in her own relationship, and a little discontent can lead to a host of other sins.

A steady diet of romantic novels and films can have a devastating effect on the home. Women can begin to look to their books for fulfillment instead of to their husbands. They can view their own relationship in terms of their “unmet needs” and view their husbands as falling far short of the romantic ideal. This can lead over time to the desire to find a new, “satisfying” relationship where someone will sweep her off her feet and carry her away to a world where there are no responsibilities, only passion.

A good dose of biblical thinking is the best way to counter romanticism of this kind. God wants us to honor Him in our long-term relationships that are hedged in by His covenant of love. We are not to live for the moment, from one emotional high to another. And He knows what is good for our souls.

Contentious Women

EVERYONE WANTS a pleasant home. And it's probably safe to say that nobody wants to live in a miserable, unhappy place. But it's very clear that a pleasant home is not something that can be bought with cash. If that were the case, rich people would be happy, and we all know that very few of them are.

What is it that makes our homes truly pleasant places? Without a doubt, it is godly wisdom. When wisdom is at home, home is a delight. So it follows that a pleasant home is one that has a wise, virtuous woman in the center of it. Proverbs has many vivid descriptions of the wise woman and the foolish woman. For starters, consider Proverbs 14:1: "Every wise woman buildeth her house, but the foolish plucketh it down with her hands." Both these women are busy, and their behavior has a considerable impact on their homes and families. But the wise woman is constructing, while the foolish woman is destructing. We could argue that at least the foolish woman is home-centered. Sure she is. The same way a demolition crew is home-centered when it aims the wrecking ball. The home is a sad target, and what a tragedy it is when the person designed by God to be one of the chief blessings becomes instead a shame and a destroyer.

Charles Bridges, a pastor from the late nineteenth century, says in his commentary on Proverbs, "Many are the miseries of a man's life; but none like that which cometh from one who should be the stay of his life." He goes on to say that a contentious wife is a great domestic calamity, and there is no lawful escape. A rebellious son

can at least be thrown out of the house, he says, but a bad wife must simply be endured.

The book of Proverbs backs this up. A brawling, contentious, quarrelsome, indiscreet, ignorant woman is a great affliction to her husband and family. It would be better to sleep on the roof, or in the desert, than to endure her anger and bitterness. Solomon says it would be better to face rough weather than deal with her. After all, in this case, the weather may be worse inside than it is out. A man is better off alone than living with a woman like this.

Most Christian women readily assume they are not in this category of “brawling and contentious.” But I would like to fine-tune this concern a little so we can all take heed. I’ve seen women destroy their homes, and it usually didn’t happen in a day. It was years of nagging, complaining, discontentment, annoyance, and other petty sins that were not dealt with. And this turned into a deep resentment that eventually surfaced in a spectacular demolition of the home.

“Little sins” of irritation, displeasure, self-pity, and a critical spirit are like little swings with the sledge hammer. Eventually a wall gives way. Little sins always turn into big sins. Song of Songs says that the little foxes spoil the vineyard. Women need to have a zero-tolerance policy when it comes to their own sins. All must be repented of immediately. Lies must be confessed. Restitution must be made. Forgiveness must be sought in every case. Otherwise, one sin leads to another, and soon the things that should be the sweetest home comforts, the dinner table and the marriage bed, become stages for the impending tragedy to play out.

How can a woman seek out wisdom so this does not happen? How can she turn things around if the home is already in a state of rubble and confusion? As I said above, sin must first be recognized and dealt with. But next, she must consider the characteristics of wisdom as described in Proverbs and diligently seek it. “Do not be wise in your own eyes. Fear the Lord and depart from evil” (Prov. 3:7). The wise woman looks for wisdom from the Lord, not herself. This humility makes her teachable: “The wise in heart will

receive commands, but a prating fool will fall” (10:8); “He who keeps instruction is in the way of life, but he who refuses correction goes astray” (10:17). A foolish woman will not receive commands, instruction, criticism, input, or correction from anyone. Not from her husband, not from the pastor, not from her friends, not from the Word. She is wise in her own eyes and needs nothing. She justifies her behavior to herself. She tells and retells her story in her own words and adjusts it to make sure she is still the sympathetic character. But the other characters in the story—her family—see her very differently.

The wise woman is not only teachable herself, but she teaches others good things: “The tongue of the righteous is choice silver; the heart of the wicked is worth little. The lips of the righteous feed many, but fools die for lack of wisdom” (10:20-21). When the wise woman speaks to her husband, it is nourishing. When she talks with her children, they are blessed. She becomes a source of strength to her family, rather than a drain on their joy. She is a crown, bringing her husband “good and not evil all the days of her life” (31:12).

A home with wisdom in it will be a “well of life” (10:11). A woman who seeks this kind of wisdom will necessarily grow to be cheerful, prudent, obedient, disciplined, respectful, and submissive to her husband, a blessing to all around her, building up her home. This is in sharp contrast to the foolish woman who is tearing down her house by being quarrelsome, noisy, indiscreet, ignorant, self-indulgent, disputatious, argumentative, never satisfied, and always complaining. There is a reason for the repetition in Proverbs on this subject: Women are prone to this common temptation of being dripping faucets. And they radically underestimate the impact of their disobedience: “A continual dropping on a very rainy day and a contentious woman are alike” (27:15).

Criticism That Kills

ONE OF THE great hindrances to Christian unity, whether in the home or in the community at large, is a critical, backbiting tongue. It is not just a “bad thing” that we generally ought to avoid; rather, as Paul says, it kills and destroys real people. Those people whom it crushes and drives away are most often our own parents, husbands, children, and our fellow saints who should be our friends.

I believe it was Spurgeon who said, “Fault finding is the easiest thing in the world.” Backbiting is a work of the flesh; it is not a fruit of the Spirit. Wisdom and grace and maturity are not needed to have an eye to see the shortcomings of others. Any fool can see how others fall short. What requires wisdom is the ability to see our own sins and to think soberly of ourselves, not our normal fleshly tendency to think “more highly” of ourselves than we ought (Rom. 12:3).

Paul addresses this again in Philippians 2:3: “Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than themselves.” Where there is criticism and backbiting, the root problem is always pride. The other associated sins may be jealousy and envy, but either way, pride is at the bottom. We have no need to learn to think much of ourselves, to care for ourselves, to consider our own needs, wants, and desires. We already do that far too much. The problem is getting us to think of others, to have a lowliness of mind that springs from humility and love.

Spurgeon also said, “Faults are thick where love is thin.” God never said we would not live with people with faults. But He has told us that “love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Pet. 4:8). Peter says to “have fervent charity among yourselves.” This is what is needed in a world full of sinners. Not just charity, but *fervent* charity. Criticizing and backbiting, rather than covering sin, expose it and breed more sin.

A critical spirit does not need to look far to find material for its favorite pastime of running people down. And because family members are usually in closest proximity, they get it the worst. Let’s start with husbands. A wife commits the sin of backbiting when she runs her husband down to her parents, her children, her friends. She may laugh when she says these things, or she may tag “bless his heart” on the end of her remark, but when she shares his faults, his shortcomings, or his sins to others who have no need to know, she is sinning against the husband she is commanded to respect. This is one way a foolish woman tears down her house with her own hands (Prov. 14:1).

A wife can kill her husband with criticism to his face as well as behind his back. This comes in many forms: complaining, arguing, attributing motives, not responding, sighing, rolling her eyes, or ignoring. A critical spirit says, “You are not meeting my needs. You are not being a spiritual leader. You are not being a good husband or father. You are not providing for me the way I want. I wish you were more like so-and-so.” This is the kind of wife Proverbs describes as being a drippy faucet (19:13). And it’s no wonder a man would rather live in the desert or up on the roof than in the same house with such a cantankerous woman.

But this is the point where women begin to justify. “I know that’s all true, but you don’t know my husband. You don’t know what a poor leader he is.” Even if he is an unbeliever, Scripture tells women how to live with difficult husbands. It is always sinful to run people down in this manner, and it is especially sinful when it is the man who is to receive honor and respect from you. We do not render obedience to God only when we think it is a good idea;

we are to obey God with a whole heart all the time in every circumstance by the grace He provides. Once we compromise, it is a slippery slope into many other sins. In this case, a wife is alienating the one who should be the closest to her. Then she wonders why he isn't very loving toward her.

Of course all of this applies to other family members as well. Mothers who glibly criticize their children are driving them away. When they do this to their face, it is destructive and alienating. When they criticize them to their friends, it is spreading the devastation even further. Children should receive our input in a loving manner, and only after much has been covered with love. But there is no excuse for parents to share negative things about their children to anyone else. This springs from a self-righteous "I have been wronged" attitude that is looking for pity. Sometimes it can come from a desire to lord it over our children or to try to maintain some kind of control, but it can never come from a charitable, merciful, gracious spirit.

Finally, repent of a critical, backbiting spirit. If you have sinned with your mouth, repent and make restitution. Do not say you were just joking. Confess to God that you have a proud spirit and seek to be lowly of mind. Seek forgiveness of your husband or your children, and by all means go to your friends who have heard you speak unkindly and seek their forgiveness as well. Ask God to cover your own sins and ask Him for love to cover the sins of those around you. This is the only way to rescue a marriage or family from impending destruction. It may not be too late to turn back the awful results of a backbiting spirit.