

Why Husbands Aren't Enough

It's funny how a slow death can take you completely by surprise. I was killing my 2-year-old marriage and didn't even know it.

What I did know, and know very well, was the ache of a vague yet familiar yearning for all things intimate and emotional. Because I wasn't experiencing such things in my marriage, I set out to make intimacy happen—only to find myself, months later, more isolated than ever—from both my husband, Rick, and God.

I was a bottomless pit of emotional need: No matter how much love was poured in, I was never filled up. My expectations had become like carbon monoxide—slowly, invisibly asphyxiating the sweet breath of life from my newborn marriage. If my husband jumped through one hoop, there would be another one waiting on the other side.

I knew things had to change when Rick's words laid bare my insecurity. "It's a shame, Alyssa; you spent most of your single life trying to figure out what a man should do for you, yet you have no idea what you should do for a man," he said. Ouch! How dare you, Mr. Model of Christ's Love for the Church! But it was the truth.

I sat there, stunned, an unrepentant, emotionally-unfulfilled, selfish heap. My husband doubted that I loved him more than I loved myself, and do you know what? So did I.

Pathetic as it might seem, I had not seriously gone to the Lord with my need. I knew going to Him would hurt because my main issue was not an intimacy problem with my husband; it was an intimacy problem with God.

The Lord had seemed so far away for so long that I wondered

whether He could make a difference. I had wanted Jesus to swoop down on me and overwhelm me with His love, just as I had hoped my husband would do. When neither came through—in my way and in my timing—I became resentful.

Still, God patiently pursued me—in His way and in His timing. As I sat before Him in prayer, the Holy Spirit began to show me that I needed to stop focusing on my unmet needs and my husband's weaknesses and put my eyes on Him.

My prayers were simple: "Lord, show me how to be a godly wife. Show me how to love my husband."

The Three Deadly C's

God was faithful to answer these prayers. But first He convicted me of developing false expectations based on worldly attitudes. I had seen the movies, watched the sitcoms and read the end of *Cinderella*; I naturally presumed my life would follow the same script. As a result, I formed an immutable mental concept of what love looked like, acted like and sounded like.

I had become a breeding ground for disappointment. Though my husband had always deeply loved me and wanted to make me happy, he was unable to live up to the Superman standard I had set for him—a standard that was not only unrealistic, but also unfair and hurtful.

The more Rick fell short of my expectations, the more damage I did to my marriage with the three deadly C's: complaint, control and comparison. Day by day I shot more holes in it by depending on him instead of on God to meet my needs.

Complaint. When you're not living for, and giving to, someone else and are focused on only your own need, externals become a really big deal. I'm not a chronic complainer, but shortly after getting married, I found myself *frequently* commenting that the Florida heat was unbearable, the little town we lived

in was ugly and outdated, and if it weren't for marriage, I'd still have a life as a glamorous, single public relations executive.

I began to look to my husband to make my life what I thought it should be. I decided he ought to call more during the day; be more sensitive to the huge sacrifice I made by marrying him; send more flowers. If only he would do these things, I would be content.

Control. I also decided that in the areas where Rick wasn't naturally the way I wanted him to be, I would just show him the way. A couple of pointers, a few subliminal suggestions and bingo! He'd immediately follow suit, and then I would be fulfilled.

Conflicts would usually surface right around special occasions such as birthdays (mine), Christmas, Valentine's Day and our anniversary—any occasion on which Rick was supposed to come through with “the” gift.

Not just any old gift—the *right* gift. To eliminate the possibility of disappointment, I would tell him weeks—sometimes months—in advance exactly what I wanted. Then I would remind him of my desire at regular intervals preceding the special occasion.

I realize now that my behavior was simply an attempt to stave off the fear of being forgotten. But my annoying reminders and rules of gift-giving were saying to Rick, “I don't trust you.”

Comparison. I have to admit, I really like watching a popular television sitcom in which the main characters, a married couple, have a great rapport. I wanted Rick and me to connect like that.

But Rick wasn't anything like the TV husband. He wouldn't say 99 percent of the things the TV husband says. He wouldn't even *want* to! The problem was, I would want him to. Whenever I

compared Rick to my television idol, he always came up short.

He didn't measure up to the standards set by my relatives, either. My two sisters and my sister-in-law were all happily married. Discussing questions with them such as, "What did you get for Valentine's Day?" and "How many times a week are you intimate?" provided a yardstick by which I could determine the status of my own marital relationship.

If it wasn't on a par with that of my sisters and their husbands, the enemy would have a field day with my thoughts. He'd whisper: "You and Rick weren't good enough friends when you got married.

"You don't relate to each other as well as your sister and her husband do. You don't have the sex life of your sister-in-law. Maybe if you had married another personality, it wouldn't be so hard. Maybe you deserve better."

God's Solutions

Obviously, my ways—complaint, control and comparison—were not the ways of love (see 1 Cor. 13). As I spent time in prayer and studying the Word, God began to show me how—after I had thoroughly repented of indulging in them—to replace them with His ways.

He gave me the weapons with which to fight for victory over my weaknesses. First, He taught me to have an "attitude of gratitude." So instead of complaining, I started to thank God for my husband, focusing on all the good things about him (see 1 Thess. 5:18).

I thanked Him for the person He made Rick to be and for the spiritual gifts and fruit He was bringing about in Rick's life. I also started thinking about all the things that were "lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy" in my husband (Phil. 4:8, NIV).

Amazingly enough, the image of who I thought my husband was started to change in the midst of my thankfulness. Rick's positive attributes began to emerge afresh, helping me put my pet peeves into perspective. Newfound respect and admiration were awakened, which naturally flowed into an increased desire to love him as he deserved to be loved.

Second, God taught me to surrender. Instead of trying to exert control, I learned to relinquish myself—and all my preconceived ideas about what love is—to Him. This set me free to love my husband without conditions and to release him from the pressure of demands that say, "I love you, but you'd better (fill in the blank), or I won't be happy."

What if I don't feel as if I have enough love to give him? I admit it. Within myself, I don't. I take Paul seriously when he writes, "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me" (2 Cor. 12:9). I continue to ask God to impart His unconditional love to me for my husband and to enable me to see Rick through His eyes.

Third, God taught me to combat comparison with prayer and intercession for my husband. Praying for him has become the manna from heaven that feeds selfless love. I don't have time to comparison-shop when I'm busy asking God to bless Rick and help him become all that He intends him to be.

I told the Lord that I would intercede for Rick and his business every day. At times when I sat before God, He gave me encouraging words and Scriptures for my husband that helped keep him spiritually fueled in the midst of rigorous business trips. Knowing his wife was at home praying for him gave Rick the extra "umph" he needed to go out there and work for our family.

I also noticed a budding empathy for my husband that nurtured our oneness. I became more concerned with his needs than I was

with my own. Prayer changed my perspective and gave me a heart for Rick.

Being a bride of only two years, I know there's much more sanctification yet to come in my marriage. I also know there's more love, joy, intimacy and freedom as I submit to the Holy Spirit.

But at least I have learned that God never intended for my husband to meet all my needs. God alone is to be my all in all. The Lord Himself—not my husband—is to reign on the throne of my heart and satisfy its deepest longings. He wants my heart to be able to declare with joy, "Though heaven and earth and husbands may fail, You are enough, O God!"

If you have ever been deceived into thinking, as I once did, that it is solely your husband's responsibility to fill your emotional tank, take the following steps:

1. *Repent of idolatry.* No man can take the place of God in your life.
2. *Admit your need.* Ask God to make His love real to you.
3. *Learn to love.* Pray that God will impart to you His agape love for your husband.
4. *Intercede for your husband daily.* Pray as the Holy Spirit directs for God's will to be manifest in his life.
5. *Develop an attitude of gratitude.* Thank God for your husband just as he is.
6. *Live to forgive.* Only God is perfect; give your husband the grace to make mistakes.
7. *Reject worldly standards of love and romance.* Meditate on scriptural standards as expressed by biblical models such as Jesus, Boaz and Hosea.

I believe you will experience a new freedom, develop a healthy dependence on God and release your husband from the need to perform. And over time, you will learn to love him as he is, without placing undue expectations on him, and your marriage will become—for both of you—all God wants it to be.

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