

# Who Will Call Her Blessed?

Restoring dignity to the stay-at-home mom

by Fran Sciacca

IT SEEMS TO BE a principle of culture that, given enough time, an art will eventually become a maintenance role.

My late father-in-law was a retired master plasterer. He once created artwork on the ceilings and walls of homes and buildings. But he didn't work much near the end of his life. People didn't seem to want craftsmanship anymore. They preferred sheet rock and applied textured ceilings. They wanted homes and buildings that went up fast instead of those that take time. They preferred polished chrome instead of finished oak.

Part of this was certainly due to an increase in labor and material costs, but have we also lost the vision for art in craftsmanship? My father-in-law still got an occasional call, but only to maintain the cracking, crumbling work of the past—never to create anything new for today. A craftsman had become a maintenance man; another creative art had vanished.

My wife also is an artisan, a craftsman of the highest order. She is proficient in a multitude of culturally

crucial, life-shaping skills. My wife, by choice, is a stay-at-home-mom.

So I'm frightened to see homemaking degenerate into a maintenance role from the craft that it is by God's design. In a recent issue of a local newspaper published exclusively for parents, homemaking was clearly outlined as a necessary pause in the woman's trek toward her inevitable career. The issue is no longer *will* she go to work, but simply *when*. The question "Do you work?" never anticipates homemaking as a respected answer.

A friend of ours, when visited by the local humane society because of her gregarious puppy, was fined for not keeping better watch on her dog. When the official filling out the citation came to the place asking the "occupation" of the guilty party, he jotted down "N/A"—not applicable! The fact that she was a homemaker was not significant.

Why is this happening? Is it an inevitable cultural decline to which God's people must adjust before they can relevantly minister in the world? Or can we substantially reverse the tide by standing against it? Can the church, the people of God, restore a measure of dignity to this career?

One of the common explanations for the decline of the homemaker is economic in nature. Mothers, it is said, "need" to go to work to meet the financial obligations of the family.

This is sometimes true. One of our close friends is a husband whose wages are not enough to meet his family's basic needs. So the wife has had to go to work outside the home, while someone else cares each day for their little daughter. I must add that they both long for the day when that will be only a memory.

Sadly, the issue of economics is too often really a question of lifestyle. Many of us are simply not willing to eat beans and bread for a season, or live in a small home in a less prestigious section of town. Too often, the mother goes to work to pay for a short-term goal such as new carpeting or a second car, only to discover that the second income has slowly led to an equivalent rise in their standard of living, and the option of her working has become a necessity.

This is a delicate issue, but we need to be honest with ourselves. Marriage, family, and standard of living are certainly not exempt from the pervasive influence of the modern American ethic, which has little to do with biblical values.

My wife is a college graduate with a degree in journalism. She has worked as a well-paid executive secretary, a photographer for the advertising department of a large Minneapolis newspaper, and a copywriter for a radio station. Culturally speaking, she is a fool for "giving up" her career to stay at home.

But there are certain things money can't buy, including the awesome

influence of a mother at home. We get by on my income. We have little or nothing left of my paycheck at the end of each month, but we have "money in the bank" as far as our marriage and family life go. Our children are developing character qualities and a spiritual world view that no childcare service could accomplish. Our life centers around our home. When the bottom falls out financially, as it undoubtedly will for one reason or another, we'll have resources to draw from that many Christian families lack.

My wife and I are certainly not ignorant of the negative effect financial stress can have on a marriage. It is a specter on our horizon almost daily. But I feel that a mother going to work should never be a couple's first choice in responding to financial stress.

Many mothers are eager to abandon homemaking for a career outside the home, but this eagerness is often a reflection of our *values* rather than our *need*. And our values are really a product of what we *feel* we need to be secure and significant as human beings. This brings us to the real heart of the issue for women: self-esteem.

In *What Wives Wish Their Husbands Knew About Women*, James Dobson spotlights low self-esteem as the number one malady of homemakers. Depression, alcoholism, weight problems, even infidelity can often be traced to a

crumbling foundation in the woman's view of herself.

This is further amplified by the homemaker's image portrayed in our society. According to the advertising world, the average American homemaker has the I.Q. of a backwoods mountain man, the cultural influence of a pencil eraser, and a consuming obsession to find the best laundry detergent and a lasting hemorrhoidal cure. By contrast, the "working" woman (as if a homemaker doesn't work!) is featured closing business deals and wearing luxurious suits. She's as scintillating and relevant as "Sixty Minutes."

With these as role models, any woman who stays at home is obviously an unqualified, uneducated, culturally illiterate failure. But now that women constitute a more significant portion of our work force, interesting data is coming to light. One observer on a recent television talkshow commented that women who work outside the home tend to have high self-esteem, but a low sense of fulfillment. On the other hand, women who choose to remain at home have a high sense of personal fulfillment, but low self-esteem. Outside the home, women are feeling good about themselves but poor about what they are doing. The homemaker feels good about what she does but terrible about who she is.

The point seems to be that homemaking is a potentially fulfilling

career, apparently even more so than working outside the home. But that fulfillment is weakened and destroyed by the parasite of low self-esteem.

Rebuilding self-esteem for the homemaker therefore seems to be the obvious prerequisite for restoring dignity to that profession. And responsibility for that task lies squarely on the doorstep of the Christian husband.

Husbands, especially Christian husbands, have done a great deal toward fueling the feminist fires. The doctrine of submission and the primacy of male leadership in the church have spawned some unfortunate fruit in the Christian home. In some cases, a degradation of women has resulted in deliberate suppression of their ideas and their involvement in church and family affairs.

But more often than not, the husband has contributed to his wife's low self-esteem not by what he has done, but by what he has withheld.

A growing consensus among secular and Christian marriage counselors is that the leading cause of our divorce epidemic is *not* problems with finances or sex, or even "incompatibility." It's neglect. Couples are breaking up for what they've failed to do right more than for what they've done wrong.

In Galatians 6:7, Paul's comment about the cause and effect principle of sin certainly rings true in the arena of human relationships: "A man's harvest in life will

depend entirely on what he sows" (Phillips). The arresting truth here is that "sowing" implies a *future* harvest. By sowing neglect now, we have nothing to reap later.

Many couples, blinded by the illusion of unity created by the task of raising children, find after their kids are grown and gone that they are strangers to each other. They have no harvest because of a neglect to sow years earlier.

This is compounded by the fact that a man's need for intimacy seems to be strongest at this time in his life, but his wife's major personal need is for significance and self-worth. If the husband has neglected her needs for intimacy in the early years when they were greatest, it is doubtful that he will be interested in meeting her need for significance now. This conflict of needs and wants may lead to infidelity or divorce in the absence of the common goal of child-rearing which once held the couple together.

## WHAT TO DO

What can the concerned Christian husband do? In the New Testament we find clear and profound commands to the Christian husband, and to the Christian male who aspires to marriage.

First of all, a husband's love is to be *sacrificial*. "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and *gave himself up for her* to make her holy" (Eph.

5:25). This means that our love for our wives is to be costly and active. It's not a token—not just a paycheck, or a new car; it's not really even an emotion! *Agape* love, the love this verse speaks of, is not a feeling. It's an active, costly service to our wives. It means laying our personal goals at the feet of the priority of loving her, meeting her needs, and helping her become what God wants for her.

Jesus laid down his *life* for the church. That's the husband's charge. And just as Jesus' love for his church is not dependent upon what he sees in us, so too we are to love our wives simply because they are our wives—not because they are always lovable and beautiful, but because we are commanded to lay down our lives for them. This is not an option only for "committed" husbands. This is God's charge to any married man who names the name of Christ.

How can a husband fulfill this command? By regularly laying aside his own personal desires to meet her immediate and long-term needs.

When our second child arrived, our firstborn was about two and a half. I was in my first year of teaching school, and this brought extra demands upon my time for designing and preparing my curriculum. But my wife's needs were accelerating too. Finally, one Friday night she said, "I need to get away from these kids, or I'm going to snap! I'm going out

alone for breakfast tomorrow." I'd like to boast that this was my idea, flowering from my sensitive, godly character, but I had been oblivious to her need.

She went out that next morning for food and refreshment, while I fed on feelings of bitterness and hostility. *It's my day off*, I stewed. *Why should I be babysitting?* All in all, it was a long morning! When Jill appeared in the doorway two hours later, the glow on her face—the obvious fruit of this brief excursion—melted when confronted with the sour countenance of her husband.

We tried the same routine in the weeks ahead, but my inner struggle continued for about three more Saturdays before I began to be convicted by this passage in Ephesians. Slowly a sense of joy began to grow, and the Saturday morning times alone with my two boys became a highlight of my week, not to mention the ministry of refreshment it had in my wife's life and outlook.

More than that, I think her self-esteem was nourished by the fact that her husband really cared enough for her to "give up" two or three hours for her every Saturday. When I look at the insignificance of this sacrifice on my time, I am embarrassed at the self-centered egoism that encased my first response to her suggestion. Three years and two more children later, Jill still goes out every Saturday morning for breakfast. And I've grown some too: Now I babysit four

children, dust the house, do two loads of laundry, and clean both bathrooms while she's gone!

Saturday mornings are a tradition now. It's my boys' "morning with Dad." The opportunities for loving and teaching them during these times are priceless. I still struggle periodically even though my convictions in this area are pretty well settled.

I'll never forget a recent Saturday when a friend caught me in rubber gloves while I was cleaning the upstairs toilet. He was on his way to a local fitness center for a two-hour workout. His passing comment—"You make a good housekeeper"—rooted itself in my heart and festered like an open sore. Soon I was engaged in a mental debate about my masculinity and freedom. Was Jill running this home? Was I doing what should be "women's work"?

Again Ephesians 5:25 came to mind and I was assured that if there ever lived a man who was masculinity's epitome, it was Jesus—and he gave himself up for *his* bride.

A husband's love should also be *sensitive*. "Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them" (Col. 3:19). A husband's love is not to be loud, demanding, or abrasive.

I was an analytical chemist for more than five years. My job required me to quickly, logically, and efficiently discover answers to problems. That's a

tremendous asset if you're a chemist, but it can be an awesome liability for a Christian husband. When my wife was ready to sell the kids to the gypsies or put the dog in the food processor, the "answer man" was on the spot with a smorgasbord of palatable solutions to her problem! Time management, scheduling, prioritizing—you name it, I had just what she needed.

With one exception—*sensitivity*. Jill needed an ear, not a mouth.

Probably no area in our marriage has been so difficult for me as that of learning to simply *listen* to my wife. Our schools offer courses in speech at every level, but no one teaches us how to listen. The more my wife resisted my sage counsel, the more vocal I became, until my earnest desires to help deteriorated into a crushing harshness.

James's admonition that we be "quick to listen, slow to speak" (Jms. 1:19) certainly applies to men. Howard Hendricks calls our malady as men an "omniscience complex." We think we know more than women, and are more logical, more competent, and on and on. So we are quick to speak and slow to hear. Harshness is often the result.

A husband's love is to be sensitive. It deals with the wife at the level of her feelings. I now call my wife at least once each day, just to find out how she is. It's like a pressure valve for her, and it also

keeps our worlds from becoming polarized.

I also fight the "call of the sirens" that lures me to the couch when I walk through the door each night. I walk to wherever Jill is, give her a cordial kiss, and talk with her about the events of her day. Helping set the table or getting the beverages ready serves to make dinner a pleasant time to talk, even with four children. We also have a "tea time" immediately after supper when the boys are dismissed and Jill and I can talk more.

Learning to listen to my wife is as hard for me as pushing a chain, but I'm committed to being sensitive in obedience to Colossians 3:19.

Finally, a husband's love should be *considerate*. "Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers" (1 Pet. 3:7). The words "be considerate" are the translation of a prepositional phrase that literally means "according to knowledge." It speaks of insight, a studious awareness of who your wife is and what is involved in the marriage relationship.

Getting to know your wife—taking an avid interest in who she is and in how God made her unique—is the single greatest method of building or repairing damaged self-esteem. But doing this

requires creativity, and I have about as much creativity as a snowbank!

I'm learning, however, that creativity is contagious. Once I start trying to be considerate and thoughtful, God is faithful to show me new areas where I can serve my wife. I remember one Saturday morning when I was folding a load of laundry, I suddenly realized that all of my underwear and socks were inside out, just the way they had landed in the laundry basket when dirty. It took considerable time and hassle to reverse them all. I purposed from that day on that I would make sure they were right-side-out *before* they went into that basket!

Another inconsideration at which I am a "professional" is cluttering up our home. With little difficulty you could reconstruct my evening's activities by the little "landmarks" I leave: lunch bucket by the door, shoes by the couch, socks in the den, mail by the chair. They all add up to work for someone. My wife likes to have the house straightened before bed each night, so that when she arises for her devotions the next morning she isn't greeted by a load of housework. I'm making an effort now to support her spiritual life by reducing that load each night.

During a twin pregnancy when Jill was confined to bed for ten weeks, two of which were in the hospital, I learned volumes about her daily tasks as a mother and homemaker. I vividly

remember a near nervous breakdown one morning when the pancakes, eggs, and toast were all done at the same time! With blue smoke billowing out of the toaster, my sons' chorus of "I'm hungry" did not exactly minister to me like Handel's *Messiah*!

The one thing that has ministered to my wife most is our weekly date. For eight years I have taken her out each week, alone. We established this tradition long before we had children. We were faithful to this weekly adventure even while in seminary when money was scarce to nonexistent. (In those days, having a cup of coffee at a deli after supper at home ministered to us just as much as going out for a delicious meal.)

Now we usually go out to eat, and then for a walk. During these times we share our hearts the most, laughing and sometimes crying, praying and planning. It's an indispensable cure for the exhaustion and defeat that "life in the fast lane" with four preschool children produces.

I've learned through my mistakes that most of us men have two myths about taking our wives out. One is that she *has* to go to some really nice place. I've found that Jill enjoys a place with an atmosphere conducive to talking much more than a place that leaves the prices off the menu.

The other myth is that going to dinner with another couple or going to a movie is

a "date." I've discovered that my wife wants to be with *me*—to talk to me, see me, interact with me. Movies and friends are great for social events, but they don't develop intimacy in marriage. If you're going to take your wife out, make it count. Being considerate, in the final analysis, is a thoughtful assessment of what will minister to *her* the most.

This passage in 1 Peter also speaks of the married couple as "joint heirs of the grace of life" (RSV). That's really the proper perspective. It's a partnership, a joint effort to convince the watching world that, in Jesus Christ, marriage is the most mutually exciting and fulfilling adventure on earth, and homemaking is a respected, powerful, and effective career.

The charge to believing husbands—to love their wives sacrificially, sensitively, and considerately—is no easy task. Your wife's self-esteem is a lifelong project. You need to be careful how you build it, but more important is that you do in fact build it.

Scripture says that the children of the homemaker will "rise up and call her blessed." But I don't believe this will happen unless they continually find those words on the lips and in the actions of their father.

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