

Revisiting a Very Old Discussion

The wife is speaking to her husband of many years. She asks him, "Why don't you tell me that you love me anymore? The husband's response is, "I told you that I loved you when I married you, didn't I?" She admitted that he had. "Well, then, if anything had changed, I would have told you."

To men of my age and older, at least in northern New England where we are from, that joke was funny. Notice that I wrote "TO MEN." It can be quite painful to listen such jokes if you are a girl or a woman. If you really want to know how hurtful it can be for a woman to have to listen and be nice while we men share our brand of humor, ask a few women how they feel after you tell your joke. They just might tell you. We men often ignore the impact of what we say about others. We may try to write it off by saying "Oh, we were just kidding," or else we accuse the woman of being "too emotional."

Sadly, there are far too many men like me who grew up hearing this kind of humor at the expense of women. We are not even conscious of how mean we can be. We may spend a lot of time studying the Bible, listening to our pastors, and even working hard on good deeds for our church. That does not make up for our mistreatment of women. Here and throughout the world we still see girls and women who are being used to take care of the household, bear and raise the children and satisfy their husbands sexually even when the women are bone-tired. The rebel group "Boko Haram" in northern Nigeria kidnapped 300 girls about 2 years ago, raped and forced them into sham marriages, and they've done it again. Last month (Feb 2018) this group of men kidnapped another 173 girls.

Women in First World nations may be gaining more access to education, jobs and healthcare, but when they go to work outside of the home they are, on average, paid 78 cents for every dollar that men make in the same or equivalent jobs. In a training session in 1971 when I worked at Polaroid, the instructor told us that in the U.S.A. women were paid 71 cents for every dollar that men made in the same jobs. Do we really believe that a 7-cent increase in over 45 years is adequate? Is that what equality means? This issue is personal for me because, like so many of you, about half of our family members are women. I don't want any of them to endure discrimination or other forms of suffering just because they are women or girls.



But it does not end with being paid an inferior wage. Women are likely to experience demeaning or otherwise depersonalizing comments from a significant number of the men they meet. Some of that depersonalization originates with fathers who don't teach their children that girls deserve as much respect as boys. Some of it is our refusal to recognize that women who are called by God to serve are every bit as capable, willing and ready to love and serve God as any man. Their individual gifts will differ, of course, but each woman brings her gifts into the lives of the people who are part of her life. We need to respond to each girl and to each woman as a unique creation—a person who should be recognized as being loved by God. Instead, many are abused.

Discrimination, harassment and abuse are not justifiable by anyone, anywhere at any time. So, why are boys and men mistreating girls and women? The superficial answer is, "Because they can!" That, of course, can only work when those who know of the abuse don't tell anyone. Not telling anyone is one part of my working definition of dysfunctional families.

Another part of the answer is that this maltreatment of women is learned behavior. We should not be surprised, horrified yes, but not surprised, when our children literally grow up and repeat the pattern of abuse that they learned at home. They watched their fathers or other men humiliate, isolate and violate the boundaries of their mothers, sisters, aunts and other women. Men are not taught to respect personal boundaries. We are taught the exact opposite. We watch other boys and men as they demand, coerce, intimidate and ultimately use violent force to get what they want. We learn that it is somehow acceptable to hurt people as a way to dominate them. It's as if we men don't believe that women deserve our respect. From there it's not a huge step to lying, manipulating, demanding or coercing girls and women to give us what we want.

Although stories of men violating women's boundaries are reported in the media, it is hardly a new problem. It has been happening for a hundred generations or longer. The specific ways of dominating women may vary with location, time and culture, but the goal is the same. It is to control women so that they won't pose a threat to men.

As a result, women have to take precautions to minimize their risk of being assaulted. Even so they are not infrequently pressured, harassed and even sexually assaulted by their fathers or other family members, colleagues, supervisors, therapists, clergy, etc. It happens in military, industrial, educational, and religious settings as well as at home.

How do we men reconcile our view that a woman is less of a person than a man especially wherever the Second Great Commandment is honored: "Love Your Neighbor as yourself?" (see [Leviticus 19:18b](#); [Matthew 18:19](#); [Romans 13:9](#); [Galatians 5:14](#); [James 2:8](#)). The answer is simple. We don't. We use very limited sections of the Bible to justify our subordination of women just as our ancestors in the faith did with slaves.

We may say that we didn't choose to learn to disrespect women, but once we know that we have a choice, we are responsible for changing and doing better. God's love for women is equal to God's love for men. It is vital that we teach this to our children by example. As they grow up we explain using words and our ongoing example that women are equal in God's view to men and that women are invited and welcomed into the presence of God even here on Earth as much as men.

When we know that we are all created by God, then we are free to love our neighbors as ourselves. Specifically, that means that men must love their wives, partners, friends and every other person we meet with the love that Jesus had for his disciples. Do you recall how much that was? It was enough to come to us as a human and to die for all of us.

As always, I welcome your [responses](#).

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