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TO LOVE, HONOR, AND VACUUM

*When You Feel More Like a Maid
Than a Wife and Mother*

REVISED AND EXPANDED

Sheila Wray Gregoire

 **Kregel**
Publications

To Love, Honor, and Vacuum: When You Feel More Like a Maid Than a Wife and Mother, Revised and Expanded
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*To Keith,
who vacuums better than I do!*

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Foreword

My mother-in-law raised an amazing man. From the very beginning of our marriage, my husband carried at least half of the household responsibilities. Our relationship has never been defined by “his job” or “her job,” but by an “if it needs to be done, do it” approach. For example:

When he’s working out in the basement, he does laundry between sets.

While I’m homeschooling the boys, I bake bread.

Dishwasher needs emptying? He does it.

Furniture needs to be moved? I’ll give it my best shot with or without him.

We work together to make our house a home. It’s the way it’s always been, and it works well for us both.

That is, it worked until last winter, when my husband had unexpected ACL surgery.

It was the result of a moment of glory—while reliving his high school days in an alumni football game, taking the field in the green and gold of our alma mater one last time. Truth be told, he was a sight to behold. Watching him dive through the air and save a touchdown did wonders for our eleven-year-old marriage, reminding me of some of the reasons I was so attracted to him in the beginning. It helped me see my man through fresh eyes, and to appreciate his physical and mental determination to win. But midway through the second quarter,

he hurt his knee, and what started out energizing our marriage ended up sucking the life out of me.

After he underwent an intense reconstructive surgery to fix an almost completely blown out ACL, I was left to take care of everything by myself.

My husband couldn't even get off the couch for the first few days post-op, so as I nursed and cared for him, I also had to maintain our home (clean, shop, do the budget, pay the bills, do the laundry), teach our boys, run my online ministry, take care of both our Labs, and meet a book deadline of my own.

I nearly lost my mind several times. "I can't get it all done. I can't get it all done. I can't get it all done . . ." were the words filling my heart and mind each day.

Stress levels ran high, children were pushed to the side so Daddy's more intense and immediate needs could be met, and I scrambled to keep our home presentable as friends and family brought meals to support us. I was so flustered by everything on my to-do list that I managed to forget a national radio-show interview—something totally out of character for me—and had to beg my publisher for a book deadline extension. In short, I was a mess.

Then, about two weeks after my husband's surgery, it began to snow.

And snow. And snow. And twenty-three inches later, completely snowed in and unable to do anything related to the outside world for several days, our family began to have fun. We laughed, dug a trench to our neighbors' house, and surrounded my husband as he hobbled over to share meals, play games, and throw snowballs. As the days went by, I began to see the good in all the bad.

Sometimes, what we call "bad" isn't really bad at all, but God's perfect plan to prepare us for His purpose.

I had chosen Psalm 92:4 to pray for our family that year, and God was answering my prayers right before my eyes.

"For you make me glad by your deeds, O LORD; I sing for joy at the works of your hands."

It came in the meals lovingly prepared by friends, in an unexpected opportunity to bless and serve my husband, in opportunities to teach

my sons what real love looks like, and in simple evenings spent laughing as a family—the best medicine of all.

It's so easy to miss them—those moments of grace in the mess—but they happen most often in our homes. The place of our biggest to-do list can provide space for our greatest good. If we don't stop to look for the good, life and its massive, never-ending list of things to accomplish will suffocate us, stuffing down the gift of difficult times. But it doesn't have to be that way.

In *To Love, Honor, and Vacuum*, Sheila helps us see the gift in the mess and the purpose in the list. If you've struggled, like I have, to find the blessing of serving through your home, you're in the right place. Be prepared to look at your life through a whole new lens, and come out on the other side more grateful than ever before.

—Brooke McGlothlin
Cofounder of the MOB Society (for Mothers of Boys)
and author of *Praying for Boys*
February 2014

Preface

Diane is ready to snap. “Ted never lifts a finger!” she tells me. “He’ll watch me struggle to get both kids in their snowsuits and out the door, and he’ll just say, ‘Can you keep it down? I’m trying to work.’ He is always going out with his friends. But I have to ask permission to leave, and he hardly ever agrees. I’m just so tired. Every day, I clean up after them, I get dinner ready, I bathe the kids, I get them into bed, and I just want to collapse myself. But then he expects sex! How long do I have to put up with this?”

Laura is at a different stage in her life. When her four sons reached their teens, she decided to go back to work after being a stay-at-home mom for twenty years. She enjoys the work, loves her family very much, and appreciates their encouragement of her career. Yet their verbal encouragement has not been matched by any effort to help with managing the household. When she arrives home from work—usually after her sons arrive home from school—she is the one to start dinner. When her husband gets home, he disappears into the den and doesn’t reappear until she puts food on the table. No one helps with the dishes, let alone with the vacuuming, mopping, and laundry. Laura finds herself as tired as she was when the boys were young, and resents the fact that her husband and sons still feel everything in the house is her job.

Little in this world is more tiring than being a wife and a mother. If you’re a stay-at-home mom, you likely yearn for adult conversation and the chance to go to the bathroom in peace. If you also work outside the home, you could easily feel that you put in an extra eight-hour shift when you get home. And to make matters worse, there’s often no end in sight because we think, “this is my job.” You’re poured out and

exhausted, but this is the way it's supposed to be. That's what being a mom means.

As a Christian woman, that makes me sad. I feel like we're losing out on so much potential because we women are so tired! But then we seem to rub salt into the wound. Our solutions to women's exhaustion sound more like an admonition to "suck it up and get with the program" than a real acknowledgment that something isn't right. When it comes to housework, we ask, "Whose role is it to do it?" And if we decide it's ours, then the only solution is to buckle down and figure out how to do it better. It's as if our exhaustion and angst would disappear if we just learned to embrace our roles. And so many women do just that—they throw themselves into being a super stay-at-home mom, and yet the uneasiness, the restlessness, the doubt are all still there.

What if the problem is that we're asking the wrong questions? I don't think God actually cares who does the dishes nearly as much as He cares whether or not we're looking more and more like Christ. The issue to me is not, "Are you fulfilling your role as a wife and a mother?" but rather, "Is your family environment one where people actually learn to act like Jesus?" Personally, I believe being a mom is one of the most important roles we can have, and I believe building a strong family is one of our most important callings as women. But in emphasizing these roles, perhaps we've lost the bigger picture. The real question is not, "What should we do?" or "Who should do it?"; the real question should be, "Why are we doing what we're doing?" We emphasize form over substance, and that's where we often go astray.

Unfortunately, the message we so often get in Christian circles is, "If you just embraced your role, you'd find peace!" Then when we still feel exhausted and taken for granted, we think the problem is that we're selfish or not trying hard enough. We don't realize that maybe the route to peace was never going to be found in squeezing yourself into a mold in the first place. It only comes from asking God how to "do family" so that we all grow closer to Him.

And asking God how to do family is a pretty important issue—if not the main spiritual issue we face. After all, we spend two hours a week in church, but the bulk of our time is spent living as a family.

Which, in the end, do you think has more bearing on our kids' spiritual journeys, and on our spiritual life as a couple—those few hours in church, or our life at home? Getting right with God and finding peace is not about living up to an ideal of Superwoman, who manages to find the perfect organizing system to get everything done; it's about saying, "How can we, in everything we do, make sure that we reflect Christ and honor Him?" Since laundry and dishes and mopping take up so much of our time, and impact our emotional health, we can't separate them from what God may be trying to do in our lives.

Let's flesh this out a bit more. What are the repercussions if you are constantly overwhelmed with housework, children, and your other jobs while your husband doesn't seem burdened with his workload? Certainly it could mean you're physically and emotionally drained, but there may be more to it than that. If you feel like you work for your family, you may also feel taken for granted. And if you feel what you do isn't respected, you may also feel that you aren't respected. These feelings will affect your level of intimacy with your husband and your ability to raise your children well.

What are the repercussions for your kids if you throw yourself into being an awesome mom, paving the way for them to have a "great childhood," but you never expect anything from them in return? Creating a "perfect home" should have far less to do with being a Martha Stewart wannabe and far more to do with whether our children are on their way to becoming mature, responsible, independent adults.

No matter what your view on the role of women, I hope we can all agree on one thing: Jesus commended Mary for sitting at His feet and reprimanded Martha for being overly concerned with work. He did not say that Martha, who worried about preparations for a large meal, was concerned about things of no importance. Rather, He said that Mary had chosen what is better (see Luke 10:38–42). What is most important to Jesus is how we relate to Him. If there is anything hindering our relationship with Him, we are to "cut it off" (Matt. 5:30). We must allow God to structure our lives and our relationships so we are growing closer to Him.

So what does that look like from a more practical perspective? In some families it will mean mom does most of the housework. I

certainly have for most of my marriage! But in other families it may not. That's why in this book, I'm not going to tell you who should do what. Instead, I'm going to help us wrestle through the far more fundamental questions: Why are we doing what we're doing? Is the way we do family helping people see Christ, or not? When we start to answer those questions, then it's easier to figure out what your family should actually look like.

In these pages I want to show you that by refocusing your priorities and changing the way you work, you can improve your situation even if your circumstances don't change. If you feel overwhelmed, I want to show you how to focus on what feeds your soul, rather than on all those things that sap your energy. And I want to show you how, when you make these changes, you can actually encourage your husband and kids in their spiritual life. Instead of smoothing life for them, you can take that journey of faith together.

It's been eleven years now since I originally put these thoughts on paper in the first edition of *To Love, Honor, and Vacuum*. Back then Polly Pockets, Play-Doh, and pink tutus were major parts of my life. Today it's Facebook, iPhones, and "Please, Mom, can you drive me to work?" My girls have grown into wonderful, independent teenagers.

I get more sleep today. I don't have crumbs all over the floor. Comparatively, I have oodles of time to myself. And yet I find that the same questions that plagued me then still whisper at the back of my mind: "Are you focusing on the right things? Are you too busy? Are you pointing your family to Christ?"

Those, to me, are the important questions, and if we can answer them in ways that fit our unique families, then the answers to who-should-do-what will naturally follow. But too many women in my circles didn't ask those questions. They just grew frustrated and tired and came to the end of their rope. Some decided to leave their marriages. Others didn't, but their lives seem so heavy. My prayer is that as you read this book, you will allow God to work in your life and your marriage. I pray He will enable you to find true joy in Him as He develops your relationships so that they're characterized by mutual respect, healthy interdependence, and true commitment to spiritual growth. If all of our families become places where Christian love is

evident, and where we spur each other on to love and good works, instead of places where we try to live up to an impossible ideal, then the church will have found its most powerful weapon in transforming our culture.

Acknowledgments

It's been eleven years since the first edition of this book was published. Back then my children were barely in elementary school; today I'm almost an empty-nester. Life has changed. And just as my family life has changed, my professional life has grown. My blog has exploded; my writing has multiplied; and I speak all over North America now. I'm incredibly humbled.

So I just want to thank those who helped me on this journey. First, to my husband, Keith: for being the best husband in the world and always supporting my writing, thank you. You did a great job at holding off my recent nervous breakdown. You're awesome!

To my mom, Elizabeth Wray: I know I don't always talk about you that much in what I write, but know that everything I am able to do is only because you believed in me and gave me a great childhood. And it was a great childhood. Never doubt that.

To my agent, Chip, and my manager, Eric: it's fun having people who can tell me what to do and take some stress off of my shoulders. I appreciate you both!

To all my blog readers at To Love, Honor, and Vacuum: you have no idea how much you brighten my life. I hope I have even a small influence in yours.

To Fawn Weaver, Darlene Schacht, Courtney Joseph, Jennifer Smith, Julie Sibert, Julie Parker, and my other blog buddies: it's so amazing to be part of such a great online community.

And finally, to my guinea pigs, Becca and Katie: You have no idea how much I adore you. It's been the greatest privilege of my life to watch you both grow into lovely young women who love God. I'm so excited to see what He's going to do with you in the years to come.

Chapter 1

Diagnosis: Stress

*A*t any given time, we women are feeling guilty about something. I haven't called my mother lately. I let the children watch too much TV yesterday. I didn't serve all four food groups today. If you're not feeling guilty right now, I bet if you thought about it for a few minutes you could talk yourself into it.

Guys don't always understand this about us. They may think they've hit the marriage jackpot if they've mastered the sentence, "Whatever you want is fine with me, honey," but there are times when that's exactly the wrong thing to say.

If you ask your husband, "Do you think we should put Johnny in soccer this year?" and he replies, "Whatever you want is fine with me, honey," you're likely to want to bean him, because he just doesn't get it.

If Johnny signs up for soccer, someone is going to have to drive him. Someone is going to have to cart around those infernal canvas chairs with the soda holders. Someone will have to pack the cooler and then deal with all the dripping Popsicle mess. This is not a decision that can be taken lightly. And if he agrees that Johnny should play soccer, is he going to be the one to wipe up the Popsicle stains? Or is he volunteering you for the job? And if you don't want to wipe up the Popsicle stains—which is probably why you're going back and forth about the soccer decision in the first place—does that mean that you're a bad mother? Will you feel guilty the rest of your life because you've deprived Johnny of the Soccer Experience?

I once heard it said, “Motherhood is the guilt that keeps on giving,” and I totally believe it. Whatever we do, we can never quite be good enough. And guilt can be magnified when women feel as if all parenting decisions are in our hands, because then the repercussions are also in our hands. We’re the ones who will bear the blame if Johnny turns into a serial killer. So we overcompensate. We take on more and more of the parenting duties, because we desperately want our children to thrive. And in the process we may inadvertently crowd our husbands out, while driving ourselves to exhaustion.

A year after the birth of her son, my friend Rachel told me, “All I ever wanted was to get married and have a family. Now I’m a wife and a mother, but I’m so down all the time. At only twenty-three I’ve accomplished all I ever dreamed, and I’m so depressed.” All her life she had been led to believe that having a family would meet all her needs. But when she finally had that family, she found herself overworked and empty.

Like Rachel, some of you may feel overwhelmed at your seemingly endless hours of work. You love being married, yet you feel frustrated because your busy life leaves no time for the other things you yearn to do. You’re taking care of so many people, but who is taking care of you? You wonder why God would let you feel so drained when you have followed His will for marriage and motherhood. You have kept your end of the bargain, so where is the peace He promised?

Or maybe you feel like Brenda. Brenda has a wonderful marriage, and a fulfilling part-time job, but she never seems to have enough hours in the day to juggle the errands, her job, and all the kids’ activities. Every night she goes to bed exhausted, reluctantly admitting to herself that it’s not just the busyness that’s sapping her energy; no one seems to appreciate anything she does. Her children throw tantrums, talk back to her, and never clean up their own messes. Her husband doesn’t even notice anything is wrong. She thought family life was supposed to be peaceful, but peace is the last thing she feels.

Perhaps you’re more like Diane, whose story I told in the preface to this book. You feel like you work from sunup to sundown, while your husband takes it all for granted. You do all the work while he gets all the benefits. You’re tired and you resent it.

The Pressures Women Face

If you share any of these feelings, you're in good company. A recent comprehensive study on women's health found that women's biggest health concern wasn't breast cancer, or heart disease, or even their weight. It was much more mundane. We're all simply too tired.¹ And all too often we think the problem is inside us, rather than in what we're doing. To make matters worse, we tend to be more tired than our husbands. According to the 2010 National Health Interview Survey, in that critical 18–44 age group, women are twice as likely as men to report feeling exhausted.²

It used to be that the standard answer to “How are you doing?” was “Fine.” Over the last decade that's morphed into “I'm just so busy!” We're all feeling pulled. Many of us, though, don't even realize there's something wrong. We're on the go so much, we start to feel like that's natural. Anesthesiologist Dr. Bradley Carpentier, who has studied the effects of exhaustion, explains, “We're now primed to be fatigued from the get-go. Kids are loaded with after-school activities; high schoolers are busy getting into college, where they'll only get up earlier and stay up later. Then come careers, the iPhones and BlackBerrys, the 24/7 multitasking.”³

While Carpentier may think careers lead to exhaustion, I see that same frenzied pace whenever I speak at MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers) groups. Most of the women I speak to are stay-at-home moms, but they're tired. I remember Lissa, whom I met when doing a tour of the Northeast. She had four kids under four, but she also was a MOPS leader, had her own at-home business, kept her house reasonably clean, and oversaw the kids' Christmas production. She wore her exhaustion like a badge of honor. “I'm always tired, but if you want something done, give it to a busy person, right?” she said with a laugh.

And here's where I get a little worried. I think this is actually a bigger problem for Christian women than for others. The North American church as a whole really pushes maintaining the traditional family, often in the *Leave It to Beaver* style. Let me be clear—I'm not criticizing stay-at-home moms. I have always been either a stay-at-home mom or, later, a work-at-home mom, and I love it! In most cases, I think having a parent at home is best for all concerned.

But often there are underlying assumptions about this ideal that really aren't that helpful. For instance, in this "June and Ward" arrangement, the mother typically meets the family's emotional, physical, and spiritual needs by keeping a warm, comfortable, and clean home, while the husband earns the livelihood. The responsibility for maintaining the marriage and raising the children thus falls upon the wife, leaving men relatively free to pursue their careers and other interests as long as they remain the figurehead "leading" the family.

Pouring yourself out completely for your family then becomes this Christian ideal for women. Deep down you probably know what I mean. Have you ever felt that if you admit to feeling overwhelmed, then you're rejecting God's will for your life? If you have, then you're dealing with a struggle shared by most of your sisters.

As more women pursue higher education, increasingly we're faced with even more agonizing decisions. If you do work outside the home, you're probably quite familiar with guilt. Guilt's a firm taskmaster, too. Guilt says, "The only reason you're so tired is because you've abandoned your family, so you had better work twice as hard to make sure your family doesn't suffer at all!" And so we try to do even more. Society's idea of a successful woman is one who has it all—a career, a husband, a family—and yet balances all the demands effortlessly. If the effortlessly part has always eluded you, chances are you haven't given up. You're just pushing yourself harder.

Work

What is it exactly that's tiring us out, though? Well, certainly women are working longer hours than men—though not significantly longer. A 2012 study by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) found that American women's workday is twenty-one minutes longer than men's, if you add in both paid work and unpaid work.⁴ I don't think those twenty-one minutes are really the root of the problem—though they do give men three extra hours of leisure time a week. I know many moms of preschoolers would give a lot for those extra three hours!

Nevertheless, I still think the real root of our exhaustion lies elsewhere, and a 2010 Pew study gives us a hint. On average, women do

twice as much child care as men do, and men do twice as much paid work as women do. But women are twice as likely to rate child care as “very meaningful” as men are to rate their work as meaningful. And women are also twice as likely to rate child care as “very exhausting” as men are to rate their paid work as exhausting.⁵ Therefore, women’s work is both very exhausting and very meaningful, while men’s paid work tends not to be either.

Let me put it another way: just like we’ve always thought, raising kids is the hardest job in the world. Yes, it’s very meaningful, but it’s also downright exhausting. And perhaps one of the reasons that it’s so exhausting is because it’s so meaningful. We’re supposed to be enjoying it and cherishing every minute. We’re supposed to know that the way we interact with our kids today will influence who they will grow to be tomorrow. This is crucial stuff. So when all we can think about is, *When can I get my next cup of coffee?*, the guilt hits again. If this is supposed to be so meaningful, why am I so stressed? The fact that we’re tired makes us even more tired!

If our work as moms is meaningful, it means that we’re emotionally invested. But you can’t be emotionally invested 24/7 without wearing out. Men may work similar hours, but their work tends to give them a bit of a mental break. Women’s work doesn’t.

Obviously this is a generalization, since many men work in extremely stressful jobs. My husband, for instance, is a physician faced with life-and-death decisions on a regular basis. Playing the “Who is more stressed?” game isn’t really a recipe for marital harmony. So the point of this research isn’t to show you that you have it worse than your husband does; it’s only to show you that, just like most women, you really do have a reason to feel exhausted.

Here’s another element of that exhaustion: one of the roles that we take tends to be a managerial one. Just like that mom wondering about her son Johnny’s soccer experience, we tend to be the “family managers.” Men tend to spend the bulk of their child care hours playing with the children, while we tend to spend ours in physical tasks, like diaper changing and bathing, or in managerial tasks, like figuring out doctors’ appointments or supervising homework.⁶ Women are still the family’s primary organizers. “Women are ‘in charge’ of running

the house, while men ‘help out,’” says Professor Marcella Thompson at the University of Arkansas in Lafayette. We tend to be the ones juggling all the family’s balls in the air, trying to keep them aloft. No wonder we’re tired!

In the fall of 2001, my family decided to take the plunge and begin homeschooling our two daughters, then ages four and six. Because my husband wanted to be involved, and I also wanted some time to write, he cut back his pediatric practice to three days a week. He taught the girls for two days, and I taught them for three. This was an ideal arrangement, one for which I was very grateful. But after two weeks of trying it, he remarked to me that he was finding it difficult coming home to a house that was so untidy. He could keep the house tidy when he was home; why couldn’t I? I told him—rather frostily, I admit—that while he tidied up, he didn’t do anything else. I took the dry cleaning in, did all the laundry, planned all the meals, cooked all the meals, did the cleaning, and ran all the errands. The only difference is that while I once had five days to do these things, I now only had three. I had a list of what went into running a house in my head, and he did not.

We’ve since written up lists of everything that needs to get done, and the house runs much more smoothly now. I still annoy him because I don’t always tidy up, but I’m working on it. Most families, though, rarely come to such compromises, leaving the wife often very frustrated.

Men, of course, have not had an easy ride either over the last few decades. They’re working harder, too. The New York–based Families and Work Institute reports that the average workweek has increased four hours in the last twenty years, to 47.1 hours.⁷ And in many cases the work environment is much more toxic than it used to be. More work is being demanded from fewer employees. In the current economy, job security is almost nonexistent in many industries, so the pressure to succeed can be enormous. Increasingly, workers are being asked to sacrifice personal time for meetings, training, and other work-related functions, whether they want to or not.

Working women face many of these same pressures. In fact, pressure is probably the best word to describe what women feel. We’re

pressured at our jobs to work as many hours as we can; we're pressured at home to keep the perfect house; and we're pressured to raise godly kids, a difficult task these days. Our kids are growing up in a world saturated with sex, violence, and disrespect. Even teaching kids to obey is not an easy task. Every day, as we try to balance our schedules, our errands, and our enormous parenting responsibilities, we can feel the pressure building up.

There's no doubt that much of the pressure comes from maintaining our hectic schedules. A large part of it, though, seems to derive from the relationship patterns around the work we do, rather than from the work itself. When we feel responsible for everything—housework, child care, and everything that goes into managing a house—this can undermine our family relationships. Let's see how . . .

Exhaustion

First and foremost, women are physically exhausted. An anonymous mother from Austin, Texas, shared on the Internet some lessons she has learned while raising her children. Here are some of these treasures:

1. A king-size waterbed holds enough water to fill a 2,000-square-foot house four inches deep.
2. If you spray hair spray on dust bunnies and run over them with roller blades, they can ignite.
3. A three-year-old's voice is louder than two hundred adults in a crowded restaurant.
4. If you hook a dog leash over a ceiling fan, the motor is not strong enough to rotate a forty-two-pound boy wearing Batman underwear and a Superman cape. It is strong enough, however, to spread paint on all four walls of a twenty-by-twenty-foot room.
5. A six-year-old can start a fire with a flint rock even though a thirty-six-year-old man says people can only do it in the movies.
6. A magnifying glass can start a fire even on an overcast day.
7. Certain Legos will pass through the digestive tract of a four-year-old.

8. Superglue is forever.
9. No matter how much Jell-O you put in a swimming pool, you still can't walk on water.
10. Pool filters do not like Jell-O.
11. VCRs do not eject peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, even though TV commercials show that they do.
12. You probably do not want to know what that odor is.
13. Always look in the oven before you turn it on.
14. Plastic toys do not like ovens.
15. The fire department in Austin has a five-minute response time.⁸

I don't know about you, but if I had her children I think I'd be ready to snap. But we all have stories like these. I remember the time I found my children "helpfully" applying their own sunscreen—all over the chair, the dresser, the crib, and their clothes! But these mishaps, while funny in retrospect, are not usually the things that wear us out. It's the day-to-day caring for the children, looking after the house, and having to keep a million things straight in your head. It's hard to organize a house. It's so much more than just vacuuming. Housework guru Kathy Peel prefers the title "family manager," because it encompasses all that she does. And what she does do is very tiring.

Stress

Being a mother is hard. There's no one standing over you saying, "Wow, the way you vacuumed those stairs was inspirational. I have never seen anyone vacuum stairs as well as you can." No, when we're vacuuming stairs, washing dishes, throwing a load of laundry in the machine, or even talking on the phone, chances are little ones are pulling our pant legs, squabbling in the living room, or spilling paint on the floor.

When things are this difficult in other areas of our lives, we often give up on them. We tend to avoid things that make us exhausted. But kids are a different story.

No matter how tired or frustrated we are, I have yet to talk to a mother who regrets being home or raising kids. This gives a mom

her greatest sense of satisfaction in life. In a large-scale study done by Focus on the Family in Canada, 86 percent of parents said their lives were better since having kids.⁹ We love being moms. But on a day-to-day basis, there's little praise and a whole lot of hard work.

All of this is made worse by our culture, which assumes that kids will make us happy. The pinnacle of success for many women, as it was for my friend Rachel, was getting married and having kids. Motherhood, of course, can definitely bring happiness. But at 6:30 in the morning, when the baby is crying, the toddler is jumping on you, and your husband is storming through the closets because he can't find a clean shirt, "happy" may not be the first word that springs to mind.

"Stressed" is probably closer to the mark. Stressed, not only because we're wondering if we have enough energy to get through another day, but also because we're worried about what it means that we're not always happy in this role that was supposed to bring us bliss. In the process, we may try so hard to prove ourselves to others that we ignore our very real need for rejuvenation.

Harmful Coping Mechanisms

No one can sustain this behavior. Everyone needs an emotional outlet. And if we are dealing with pent-up frustrations, chances are that we have already adopted some coping mechanisms, many of which can actually make our situation worse.

First, when we are exhausted and struggling with the significance of our work, we may fill our head with mindless escapes. We spend hours on Facebook games, or scrolling through projects on Pinterest that we'll never complete. We become avid readers of romance novels, watchers of soap operas, and addicts of iPhones. Yet, because of their inherent emptiness, these activities can reinforce our negative feelings.

We can also turn to other things for comfort, and for too many of us, those other things are often found in our fridges. When we're home all day, it's all too easy to eat for pleasure, or even just to relieve boredom. One of my friends admits to hiding bags of cookies around the house, and sneaking off to munch on them where the kids wouldn't see. Not only did this affect her weight, she also felt extreme shame that she couldn't control her eating and embarrassment about being

intimate with her husband. Others turn to even more harmful things: drugs, gambling—even online affairs. Anything to give them something else to think about other than how tired and lonely they feel.

The Decision to Change

Even though the picture painted so far is bleak, it can get brighter! We need to let God in. Too often we don't go to God with these sorts of problems because they seem mundane. We think God isn't interested in the day-to-day of our existence. Yet don't you think God cares deeply about the things that occupy the majority of our time? He's going to help you find a way through this exhaustion (1 Cor. 10:13).

If you picture this way in your mind, chances are you see yourself walking along a road, arriving at a fork, and needing to choose whether to turn to the right or the left. Robert Frost immortalized this type of decision with the line, "I chose the road less traveled by, and that has made all the difference."

While this sentiment is beautiful, I don't think change usually looks like that. I think it looks more like this: picture point A, the point where God wants our relationships to be. When we get married, we start our journey toward point A. We're not perfect, but we haven't had time to mess up that much yet! As we move along, though, we tend to travel away from point A. Unless we make a conscious decision to let God lead us to Himself, our human nature will tend to develop relationships contrary to His best will for us.

Thankfully, God doesn't take a hands-off approach. He orders our lives so that, in almost every encounter, we have the choice to continue along our old and tired road, where the scenery is predictable and familiar, or to travel along a difficult mountainous road back toward point A. The road looks intimidating, so we usually keep walking straight along our old road. Here's the problem: the longer we walk on it, the farther we're going to get from this point. God will continue to give us the chance to get back to point A, but as time goes on, getting back is more and more difficult.

Often we don't even see the chance to change unless we search for it. Change must be a deliberate act and can often be scary. Generally,

it isn't something you happen upon, like a fork in the road, but something you have to initiate. Sometimes God gives us a nice kick in the pants to make us sit up and take notice, but it's quite possible for us to go through life with unsatisfying relationships that never grow any better.

The good news is that your family relationships can change, even if your family doesn't seem to want to. We have a God with great transforming power, abundant in grace and healing. So, how can you receive the help God can give?

The Foundations of Change

Some of you already place yourself squarely in the midst of your problems. Your husband is supportive, but you need some help organizing your life to better focus on what's most important. You may have an easier time with change because you've already put the onus on yourself.

Some of you will have a more difficult time because you think change involves your husband. He is the one making your life difficult; it's time the tables were turned. But change is not about taking away some of your husband's happiness so that you have more yourself. It's about you taking the bull by the horns to increase the level of happiness for both of you, so you can enjoy the kind of mutuality that God intended for your marriage. Sadly, some of us think that in marriage one person must lose for the other to gain. He's got that extra three hours of leisure time a week, and he had better cough it up! You may feel that he gets all the benefits while you have all the work. But change is not about reversing that equation.

No matter how it may feel, he does not have all the benefits, because if you are not happy, then he does not have you. Nothing in life is more satisfying than a marriage in which two people feel affirmed and accepted. If you find ways to increase your own peace of mind, that in and of itself will probably make him happier. He will sense the change in you, and that will change your relationship. And if he changes his attitudes and behaviors in response to your changes, your relationship can finally move to a place where you both feel fulfilled.

Ultimately your happiness does not depend on any change in your

husband or children. It comes from taking responsibility for your own feelings, surrendering them to God, and then adopting new behaviors modeled after Jesus. The goal of this change is not an independence that makes your husband and children irrelevant. It is instead to become capable of managing your own emotions and actions, while allowing other people to bring out the best in you. You are capable of functioning on your own, but you will always function better if you are part of the team.

The church has long recognized the necessity of this sort of community. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 12, writes about how the body of Christ consists of many parts, all of them vital. In many self-help books, buzzwords like interdependence and synergy express the same idea.¹⁰ Just like the Christian concept of community, interdependence is called the culmination of human relationships.

By its very nature, interdependence is two-way. Just as you require your husband, he requires you in order to live his life to the fullest. Now, many of you may stop here and say, “Well, of course he needs me! Without me he’d never eat. He’d lose his own head if I weren’t here to take care of him!” This is not interdependence. When we say that he needs me “to do” something, we are saying that he needs a function performed, not a person to do it. If the only reason he needs you is to take care of the house, then he doesn’t need you. Anybody could fit into that space.

But maybe that’s how you feel. Many of the women we’ve discussed already feel that their husbands don’t need them for their intellect or their emotions but only for their labor. Fostering interdependence means decreasing your family’s reliance on you for what you do, and opening their eyes to their need of you because of who you are.

This process requires a change in us. We can never change another person; we can only change ourselves. As author Marilyn Ferguson states, “No one can persuade another to change. Each of us guards a gate of change that can only be opened from the inside. We cannot open the gate of another, either by argument or by emotional appeal.”¹¹ We can pray for others, but we can only control our own thoughts and actions. We must first reevaluate our goals for our family to make them Christ-centered. Then we need to change our behavior to encourage these Christ-centered goals. Only then will we be able

to say that our own happiness does not depend on our family but on ourselves and our relationship with God. With God's grace, we do have the power to change!

Meeting the God Who Changes Us

Some of you reading this book may relate to everything I've been saying—except perhaps the last few pages. You know what it is to be overworked, conflicted, taken for granted, or just plain tired. What you may not understand is how God has anything to do with solving these problems.

I believe He has everything to do with it. He loves each of us desperately and He wants us to have abundant life. But that life is not something He just gives us automatically. Instead, it's something we receive from Him when we begin a relationship with Him. Our lives will never be at peace until we are at peace with the One who made us, then redeemed us.

Let me explain how this works. God created people because He wants a relationship with us. He wants people to love, and He wants us to love and honor Him in return. God gave each of us the choice—it's up to us whether we want to have this relationship with Him. After all, the only way to know someone truly loves you is to allow him or her the freedom to leave. That's what God does. God promises He will walk with us. All we have to do is believe in Him and follow Him. But we usually choose to go our own way.

Even if you're a good person, you know what I mean. All of us are selfish, or lie, or are hurtful to others. God, though, never does any of these things, nor can He be around anyone who does (Isa. 59:2). Our wrongdoing—our sin—has to be punished, and that punishment is death, eternal separation from God (Rom. 6:23).

But this God who created us for relationship with Him can't stand this separation. He sent His Son, Jesus, to earth to die in our place. Jesus, who never did anything wrong, allowed Himself to be crucified. He took our punishment on Himself. He saved us from death by dying Himself. Through Jesus' sacrifice, God offers us the gift of salvation. All we have to do is believe Him. If we accept His gift, we become God's children and have eternal life.

But it doesn't stop there. God didn't send Jesus just to give us life with Him after our death. He wants a relationship with us now. God's Spirit comes to live inside us. He helps us to become more like Jesus. He will give us peace beyond understanding, if we let Him. That's what this book is about: letting Him change us so we can start to experience that abundant life. If you've never taken that step to start your relationship with God, I pray that you will now. Accept His gift. Read the gospel of Mark so you can meet this wonderful Jesus who loves you so dearly and who yearns to help you find peace. Then find a local church with other Christians who can help you follow Him fully.

Quick Reality Check

Are you chronically tired? Do you snap at the people you love? Decide today to trust God to lift your burdens. Read Jesus' promise in Matthew 11:28–30. Write it on an index card and place it where you'll see it frequently throughout the day. In no time at all, you'll have it memorized.

For Deeper Thought

1. Are you happy with the role you play in life? Do you think this is what God wants for you? Read Ephesians 2:10 and Psalm 139. God has a perfect plan for you. Ask Him to reveal it to you.
2. What's your attitude about change? Do you believe it is possible for your life, even in your current circumstances, to get better? Write out a prayer to God of what you want Him to help you change.