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# Why Won't I Pray With My Wife?

Breaking the barriers to spiritual intimacy.

*Louis McBurney*

**A** sick feeling takes over the pit of my stomach. The pastor's wife I'm counseling has just brought up a topic I'd rather avoid. Nancy is registering her hurt at the hands of her pastor-husband — and nailing me in the process. "I remember how excited I was when we fell in love, and I realized I was going to be married to a minister," she says. "I had always prayed for a godly husband, a man who would be a spiritual leader for

me and our children. I was sure Joe would be God's answer to those prayers. We even prayed together on our dates. It gave me such a secure feeling.

"I just don't know what happened. After we married all of that stopped. Oh, sometimes we still pray together or read the Bible, but only if I insist. That doesn't feel right. I want him to take the leadership for our spiritual life together.

I'm gulping hard and nodding knowingly — too knowingly. I've heard my wife echo similar concerns. One of my frequent failures: not taking initiative for spiritual closeness in marriage.

Why is spiritual intimacy with my wife so easy to avoid?

### **Reasonable Excuses**

I've discovered I'm not alone. Most of the ministers we counsel at Marble Retreat also struggle with this problem. Some common explanations have emerged.

The first is the professional exhaustion defense. It goes something like this: "I have to keep up this mask of religiosity almost all the time. From morning till night I'm 'the minister.' I can't just be me. I'm always the one called on to pray everywhere I go. The only other guy who's prayed at Kiwanis in the past four years is Father O'Roarke. Men in the locker room at the health club apologize for cussing in front of me. I'm always expected to have scriptural answers for every question and deliver them with a loving smile.

"I get sick of it. Home is the only place I can relax and be real. I want to share spiritual things with my wife, but quite frankly, when she says, 'Can't we pray together?' I feel attacked. Then I feel guilty. Then I feel angry. Then I just want to escape."

I can't use this excuse, however; I'm a shrink, not a man of the cloth.

However, the second one, the hypocrisy factor, does fit. My wife, Melissa, sees me offering sound spiritual counsel to others, but she knows I'm no saint. Sometimes I'm reluctant to pray with my wife because of this rationale:

"Melissa knows the real me. It's fine to offer holy solutions and wise biblical advice to others, but I can't get away with that at home. She knows I'm not very disciplined. She's seen my temper. She puts up with my pouts.

"She remembers the ways I've hurt her through the years by my selfishness or lust or thoughtless actions. She knows what I've been like as a father to our children. I'd feel like a total hypocrite expounding some Scripture verse to her or offering some pious prayer. She'd crucify me.

"No, it's safer to just play the game. She knows me too well. Maybe someday when I get my act together ..."

Of course, the problem with that is I'll never get my act together. I need at least one place I can let

down and be real. That seems more necessary than devotions.

The third factor is the spiritual dwarf syndrome. Many ministers believe, often accurately, that their spouse is a spiritual giant compared to themselves. They feel dwarfed by her deep faith. She doesn't seem to agonize with the same gut-wrenching doubts and questions as he.

Her quietly committed prayer life shines compared to his hasty, often desperate prayers fired off on the run. The Word really seems to speak to her. Ages have passed since he has even read the Scriptures to find God's message for himself, and she wants him to be her "spiritual leader"?

How can he risk the vulnerability that spiritual union would bring? She'd find out how shallow he really is. He feels less dwarfish behind the pulpit. Better stay there. It's definitely safer.

The other day a pastor friend told me, "I hate it when my wife asks me what the Lord has been saying to me. I've been feeling so spiritually dry I'm not sure the Lord even remembers me. He seems to talk to her all the time, and that just makes it worse. I'm ashamed for her to know how far ahead of me she is spiritually."

Entering into real spiritual togetherness is a distinct threat to him.

### **Holy Disharmony**

Another obstacle to spiritual intimacy is holy disharmony. Distinctive belief differences or style preferences may create dissonance when you try to pray, worship, or interpret Scripture together. Rather than unifying, it divides. You both agree with Paul that your joy would be complete if you were only of one mind, but that's about all you agree on. Common areas of disagreement include preference for time of day, interpretation of Scripture, devotional style, and issues of trust.

Melissa is a morning person, for example. For her, the most meaningful devotional experiences are flooded by the first rays of the rising sun. I'm pretty convinced, however, that God doesn't wake up till midafternoon. I'm sure the splendor of starlight was created to bathe our expressions of worship. That difference seems trivial until we try to adjust our biological clocks to find a time for devotional togetherness.

If your devotional time together includes reading

Scripture, you may find tension in how you interpret what you read. One of you may thoroughly enjoy a lively debate, discussing various interpretations. The other may shrink from such encounters, preferring to find a practical application or an inspiring devotional thought. It is easy for a win-lose dynamic to emerge that quickly poisons the wellspring of shared spirituality.

For example, a couple at our retreat just had a doozy of a battle over what Ephesians 5 means regarding a husband's giving himself up for his wife. Her list of ways that applies was much longer than his.

Another difference is style. When praying together, this includes the volume of words, the use of the language of Zion versus the vernacular, who does the praying, what resources are chosen, and what physical posture is preferred. Listening to public prayers in church, I realize the importance of these elements.

Just as in corporate worship liturgy, our private devotional styles create a sense of comfort. If our mate's style is too divergent from our own, the feeling of genuine contact with God may be destroyed.

A friend of mine told me once that he couldn't pray with his wife. By the time they finished, he felt his prayer had been rated like an Olympic diver. He usually got only about a 6.0. His wife went on to a 9.5 performance.

The issue of trust encompasses concerns about what to ask God for or depend on yourself to do. Whether or not God wants to heal our physical illness may raise anxiety. How to seek God's will is often understood differently. Should we take risks in life trusting God to provide for our plans or should we not extend ourselves beyond the provisions God has already provided?

Most of the aspects of trust carry intense emotion since this is such a foundational element of our personality. Taking a cautious approach seems to be showing a lack of faith for more adventuresome souls, while to more "practical" believers leaps of faith seem irreverently presumptuous.

### **Is It Wise to Confess?**

Another obstacle is the fear of confession. "Confess your sins to one another so you may be healed" sounds pretty good delivered from the safety of a pulpit. Applying it with your mate is a different

matter. Just how confessional can you be without creating hurt or anger or doubt?

I want to be totally open with Melissa, but at times I'm reluctant to disclose all of the sins of my thought life. Can she hear about my lust without feeling rejected? She faces the same dilemma. Can I face her admissions without defensiveness?

Quite honestly, I'd rather confess to God or to my buddy, Doug, than to my wife.

Let me mention a final, common explanation of why pastors avoid spiritual intimacy with their spouses: spiritual stone throwing. At times, the only time marriage partners feel safe to confront each other is in prayer or through Scripture.

One pastor's wife told me recently, "I hate to have prayer with John. He begins right away to beseech the Almighty to reveal to me my sins: 'Lord, help Susan with her laziness. Reveal to her how she can be more organized. Create in her a spirit of submissiveness so she can be the godly woman you want her to be. Protect her, Lord, from the evil influences of television and the covetousness that stalks her in the mall.'

"I come away from our prayer time together feeling flagellated and condemned. I think I'd rather be slapped in the face than deal with the guilt he heaps on me disguised as prayer. One of these days, I'm going to pray that the Lord will reveal to him his judging and lack of love. In the meantime, I don't want family devotions. Thanks, but no thanks!"

### **Digging Out**

So what's to be done? Most clergy couples agree they need the sense of spiritual oneness. Wives particularly crave the feeling of closeness nurtured in those moments of bondedness before the Lord. Avoidance or a frustrated acceptance of failure doesn't bring much peace.

You don't have to remain stuck, though, in the ditch of spiritual estrangement. Here are some steps Melissa and I have found helpful for ourselves and others.

**M**any ministers believe their spouse is a spiritual giant compared to themselves.

1. *Identify the problem.* Clear an afternoon or evening in your schedule to discuss this area of your relationship. Allow no interruptions, and covenant together to make understanding (not agreement) your goal. Enter the time without your usual agenda of proving who's right and who's wrong. Believe me, you both are — right *and* wrong.

Since who is in control is such a common marital conflict, it's particularly important to take conscious steps to avoid that dynamic. Lay ground rules giving each person time to speak and the responsibility of listening.

I frequently observe marital breakthroughs, when couples suddenly release their old perceptions and assumptions. I hear, "Oh, so that's how you've been feeling," or "I didn't realize you wanted *that*." When defensiveness is abandoned, it's possible to hear and really understand each other.

Trace the history of your spiritual relationship, recalling the times it went well and the times it didn't work for you. Then try to identify how you've felt inside about having a time of spiritual conversation.

Try not to let "time demands" be the rationalization. As difficult as it is, I find most people make time for the things that reward them. Push beyond your busy schedules, and search for deeper problems.

Your goal is to understand each other in a non-judgmental way. You may be uncomfortable with how your mate feels, but accept her perception as the truth from which she acts.

2. *Clarify expectations.* I used to believe Melissa wanted me to be something I'm not. She would talk about her desire for me to be more of a spiritual leader for her. That sounded pretty overwhelming to me. So rather than risk embarrassment or failure, I'd avoid even trying. I interpreted her expectations as wanting me to lead in deep discussion of the Scriptures or to expound on some dramatic vision the Lord had given me (a fresh one for each day, of course).

When I finally told her what I thought she craved, she was flabbergasted. I'll never forget the relief I felt when she said, "Oh, that's not what I want. I just want a spiritual companion, not a leader."

Compare your childhood experiences with family

devotions. Most of our expectations germinate in the rich soil of the family garden. The seeds of a disciplined but oppressive system may bear blossoms in marriage that look like weeds to a mate whose family had a freer style. Families who had no devotional patterns at all can create either a hunger for times together with God or a fearful resistance. When your childhood memories clash, then the bouquets of togetherness can lose their fragrance.

Often our expectations are totally unrealistic or simply indescribably vague. We may have developed an image of what spiritual sharing is supposed to look like from some conference or a book we read, but never stopped to define it clearly with our mate.

When our vision doesn't materialize, we get bummed out. Nothing leads more quickly to frustration and disappointment than unmet expectations. When those ideals are present as a hidden agenda and not spelled out clearly, you can predict failure.

## What my wife had been wanting was much easier than what I'd been assuming.

3. *Renegotiate a contract.* When I had a clearer idea of Melissa's expectations, I felt more comfortable working toward an agreement. What would "spiritual companionship" look like to her? What were specific things I could do that would invite her into my soul-life?

As it turned out, what she'd been wanting was much easier than what I'd been assuming. We began to spend a short time at breakfast reading Scripture (usually a paragraph or maybe a chapter), then praying together briefly about our individual concerns. It also helps when I talk about how the Lord is working in my heart. At times we get together for a longer period of prayer or discussion, usually when life's pressures seem to be closing in.

For Melissa the keys were two: that I would show enough interest to initiate spiritual conversation and that I let her peek inside my mind and heart. The first is accomplished by my reaching for the Bible when we finish breakfast. That's not too hard. The second is satisfied by my letting her know my prayer concerns. Looking back, it's sad we made such a difficult problem out of such a simple task.

4. *Avoid criticism.* You can be pretty sure that you're going to blow it somewhere along the way.

has redeveloped, start over identifying the causes. Focus on yourself and what you may have contributed. Then apply grace to each other where it's needed.

5. *Celebrate your steps toward spiritual oneness.* Every time Melissa tells me how good she feels when I initiate sharing, I get a renewed commitment to the process. Our unity is reinforced each time we tell others about the importance of having a soulmate as our spouse — for example, when we're with



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*"You're right, I've never actually been a pirate, but I think I can understand the world from a pirate's point of view."*

You'll get busy or be angry with each other, or somebody will have the flu, and then you won't do it the way you intended. When that happens, refuse to place blame and judgment *anywhere*. That's deadly.

A couple at our retreat is struggling with bringing some positive change into their lives. Just yesterday, Joe said, "I've discovered that I'm really resistant toward trying to change. I find myself feeling a lot of anxiety. I'm afraid that I won't be able to do it right, and then Sue will point out my failure. When that happens, I think, *What's the use?* and look for somewhere to run."

Whatever you do, don't get into a courtroom debate over whose fault it is, or who wants to quit.

You can express your sadness that your time has been interrupted. "I really miss our spiritual time together" is enough. You might ask, "How can we get things going again?" If some of the old resistance

friends and I tell them that Melissa and I were praying together for them the other day, or when she says, "Louis and I were just reading that Scripture recently."

Those comments are ways we let each other know how satisfying our spiritual closeness is.

Ours has been a rocky pilgrimage in this area. But we're finding a new sense of freedom and safety. Our growing spiritual oneness is helping us enjoy more fully the other dimensions of our lives together, whether long walks hand in hand or our sexual intimacy. It's still not easy, but the strength and joy we experience together makes the struggle worthwhile.

*"Sometimes God calms the storm — and sometimes he lets the storm rage and calms his child." Unknown*

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