

## **Giving the Blessing To Your Spouse**

An excerpt from

*The Gift of The Blessing*

By Dr. John Trent and Gary Smalley

During early research on the book – “The Blessing”, I (John) went through the material with several couples in a Bible study group. I asked for the participants’ honest evaluation of the material during the sessions, and then had them fill out an evaluation at the end.

One of my favorite comments was written by a wife in the group. Commenting on what her husband had learned during the class, she wrote: “Dennis has learned so much about how to “bless” the children. It has made a real difference in his relationship with them. How about teaching him how to bless me!!!”

This woman’s request was right on target. The elements of the blessing are not just limited to the parent/child relationship. We feel strongly that they can be found at the heart of *any* healthy relationship.

Let’s continue to discover just how valuable applying the five elements of the blessing can be to important relationships besides those with our children. First we will look at how the blessing can and should be given to a spouse and the relationship gains that can happen as a result.

### **Being a Source of Blessing to Your Spouse**

Laura was fed up with her husband and with all the upheaval in their lives. He often traveled out of town, and when he was home, he drank and made life miserable for her.

In her frustration, Laura came within an eyelash of throwing in the towel and filing for divorce, but her good friend Gayle talked her into going to see her pastor who she felt might be able to help. Even though Laura was reluctant at first, she was at the end of her rope. Against her better judgment, she made an appointment and went to see him.

For nearly forty minutes this wise pastor simply listened to her story. After Laura had shared her nonstop description of every one of her husband’s faults, she finally sat back with a loud “Humph.” Smugly she waited to hear an “Amen” from the pastor or at least a hearty confirmation that hers was the worst husband he had ever heard about.

At first the pastor didn’t say a word. Deeply engrossed in thought, he literally waited several minutes before he spoke. Finally he sat up, looked her in the eye and said gently, “Laura, have you ever forgiven your husband for all his many faults?”

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You could have heard a pin drop. Laura had not expected to receive this kind of advice. (“No wonder his counseling is free,” she thought.) Of course she had not forgiven her husband! He had never asked her to, and she wasn’t about to bring it up. He had caused her to suffer and she wasn’t going to let him off the hook that easily. “Laura, would you think about what I’ve said today, and would you promise to come back and see me next week?” As she grabbed her purse and headed for the door, she heard herself mutter something like “That would be fine, Pastor”; but she never thought she would be seeing him again. Yet something happened that week that began to change Laura’s perspective on her marriage. Something drew her back to this man’s office next week.

In spite of telling herself repeatedly that she should simply forget what he had said, Laura did get a great deal of thinking during the week. While it didn’t all make sense, it began to dawn on her that it wasn’t her husband who was on the hook—she was! He didn’t lose any sleep about his behavior; she was the one getting the ulcers.

Laura was still confused and had a great many questions for the pastor the next time they met. However, God had already begun to do some miraculous things in Laura’s life. That afternoon, in the quietness of the pastor’s study, she surrendered her life to Christ. She also decided to give up her need for revenge, to forgive her husband for all he had done, and to learn to love him unconditionally.

Laura’s husband was a truck driver, and almost a week went by before he returned home. When he came into the house, he could have sworn he was at the wrong address. He couldn’t believe how peaceful things were. Just a week ago everything he did made his wife mad; now she was going out of her way to do things for him. When this rowdy truck driver found out Laura’s change of heart had something to do with religion, he tossed his behavior aside as though it were another diet his wife had discovered. While it made things a lot nicer in the short run, soon her willpower would fade and they would be back at each other’s throats.

After five months, Laura’s husband made an appointment to see the same pastor she had seen. “You’ve got to tell me about what happened to Laura.” the truck driver said. “She’s changed so much. It’s made me realize what a rotten husband I’ve been these past years. Pastor, I have a drinking problem and I need help with it.”

What made all the difference for this couple was that Laura, in spite of the fact her husband didn’t “deserve” it, decided to give him the blessing. For years she had made just the opposite decision. She had devalued him and even cursed him to his face. She hated his occupation that took him out of town and filled his clothes with the smell of diesel fuel.

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When Laura's life was changed by the Source of blessing Himself, she was able, out of the overflow of her life, to attach high value to her husband and bless him. Instead of riding him about getting another job, she found ways to build him up and encourage him. Where once she had gone days without speaking to him when she was angry, now she told him her feelings, but without anger and hate. Meaningful touching even began to come back into their relationship, something that Laura had withheld from her husband when her spirit was unforgiving and bitter. As a result, her husband became so convinced about his behavior at home that he also made an appointment to see the pastor.

Granted, this is a dramatic example of what can happen when one spouse decided to be a source of blessing to the other. Their problems were of the major league variety and they needed to make a great deal of changes. However, in everyday households all across the country, with everyday problems and tensions, providing the elements of the blessing to a spouse can revive, encourage and rejuvenate a marriage.

Let's look briefly at each element of the blessing and see just how important they can be to a healthy marriage. In fact, show us a couple that is growing together and we'll show you two people practicing these principles of blessing.

### **Meaningful Touch in Marriage**

The same need for meaningful touching we saw with our children is equally important in a marriage. One wise husband realized the importance of this need during a difficult time for his wife, and it did more to minister to her than anything else he could have done.

When Marilyn was getting dressed one morning, she noticed something that didn't seem quite right. She noticed a small lump on her breast that she had not been aware of before.

Marilyn wasn't overly concerned, but she knew enough from reading magazines and watching television to know that she needed to get it checked. She told her husband, Art, what she intended to do, and then called the doctor for an appointment. Two weeks later, Marilyn went to the doctor to have a biopsy done on the lump. Three days after her appointment, she was lying in a hospital bed facing a radical mastectomy. Besides coming to the hospital twice to deliver their two boys, this was the first time in forty-seven years that Marilyn had to undergo an operation.

For Marilyn, the hardest thing she faced after the surgery wasn't her recovery, but what Art would think of her now. Would she still be attractive to him? How would he

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feel about touching her? Questions like these ran over and over in her mind.

The morning she was to be released from the hospital, Marilyn and Art were alone in her room. Her husband sat on her bed and took her hands in his. "Sugar," he said. "I want you to know something. You're as beautiful to me now as you were on our wedding night. Don't you ever forget that." Then Art looked over to make sure the door was shut, winked at her, and said, "After you get home and get rested up, we're going to have to get the lock fixed on the door."

Marilyn hugged her husband, and tears came to her eyes. She knew exactly what he meant by that last statement. Early in their marriage, when someone had forgotten to lock the door, one of the boys had walked into their room at a most inappropriate time. The result was that a new lock was installed on the door the next day, and a new saying began for them, "We're going to have to get the lock fixed on the door." became their private password to an intimate evening.

What had concerned Marilyn was not only how her operation would affect their sexual relationship, but also whether it would keep Art from touching her outside the bedroom. His words and actions that morning assured her that this important element of the blessing would still be a part of their relationship.

Sexual touching is important in any growing relationship; however, it should not be the only time a couple touches. Our friend, Dr. Kevin Leman, notes this in his book, *Sex Begins in the Kitchen*. He points out that genuine intimacy is developed in the small acts of touching in the kitchen, or walking through a mall together hand in hand, or sitting close together on the sofa watching television.

Speaking of "sex beginning in the kitchen," we heard a true story from a recent participant in a seminar who tried to apply the concept of meaningful touching with his wife, and it left him in an embarrassing situation!

After hearing the concept of meaningful touching talked about over and over, it really stuck with this man. One afternoon after cutting the grass, he came in to take a shower and clean up. He had left the bedroom door open and when he finished his shower he walked over to the rack to get a towel. From where he stood, he could see his wife standing in the kitchen preparing their dinner.

*What a time for meaningful touching*, he thought to himself. Without a moment's thought, he ran down the hall in his birthday suit and burst into the kitchen to give his wife a big hug. What he couldn't see from the bedroom or as he raced down the hall was his neighbor's wife who had come over to visit. That shocked neighbor saw a

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great deal more of this husband than she had ever expected! His timing was terrible, but no one could fault his commitment to meaningfully touch his wife!

Meaningful touch can enrich your relationships in many ways. Studies show that regardless of gender, people who were comfortable with touching were also more talkative, cheerful, socially dominant, and nonconforming; those uncomfortable with touch tended to be more emotionally unstable and socially withdrawn. Those more comfortable with touch were less afraid and suspicious of other people's motives and intentions, and had less anxiety and tension in their everyday lives. <sup>1</sup>

Yet as powerful as touch is, it is not enough to sustain, alone, a growing marriage. Researchers at the University of Illinois used three measures of intimacy to assess marital satisfaction and happiness. They found that each form of intimacy made its own important contribution. However conflict and divorce potential were most closely linked with a lack of the next two elements of the blessing-emotional and *verbal* intimacy.<sup>2</sup>

### **A Spoken Message Attaching High Value to a Spouse**

Let's combine the next two elements of the blessing into one way of making sure your spouse receives the blessing. When we decide to place high value on our spouse, and then back that up with spoken words to that effect, it can do wonders for a relationship.

(Using a word picture to praise a character trait of our children or our spouse is something we spend several pages discussing in Chapter Five of *The Blessing*. )

A popular bumper sticker slogan reads, "Have you hugged your kids today?" Another, equally important phrase that you can copy and paste to your refrigerator, bathroom mirror, or forehead is:

### **Have You Praised Your Mate Today?**

An everyday dose of praise, whether in the form of a word picture or just a statement like "Great dinner, Honey" or a "You are so kind to other people" or even a "You make me so proud the way you handle the children" can do wonders in a relationship.

Spoken words that attach high value to our spouse are so powerful that they can enrich almost any marriage. Why not try a project in your home to discover just how true this statement can be.

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For one month, thirty days, praise at least one thing you appreciate about your spouse each day. Be sure you point out things about his or her character (being kind, generous, thoughtful, punctual, organized, and so on), as well as what they accomplish. Don't tell your husband or wife you're doing this. We give this assignment to many couples in counseling, and it in itself has caused positive changes in relationships.

While we have talked exclusively about using word pictures to praise a husband or wife they can also be used to help discuss an important issue or avoid a heated argument. By using a word picture to convey a concern we have, instead of lashing out with damaging words, we can often motivate our mate to change and get across a message we can't seem to get across with only words.

One woman at a conference Gary was leading had a concern she had unsuccessfully tried to communicate to her husband for years. Yet by using a single word picture, she so affected him that he was willing to write her a large check right on the spot to build her dream house!

When we were talking through this story for the book, we kiddingly talked about asking people to mail in a dollar with a stamped self-addressed envelope to find out the word picture she used. We'd be rich in no time! We're sure every wife in America would like to know what she did to motivate her husband to respond the way he did. You'll be glad to know that at absolutely no extra charge, we have decided to go ahead and tell you the word picture she used. Actually this story is not just about how one woman got her dream house. It is a beautiful example of how attaching high value to a spouse (in this case, not wanting to devalue a spouse in any way) can be powerfully communicated through a word picture.

Don and Bee are dear friends who have attended several relationship seminars that our ministry has put on. As part of these seminars, Gary teaches couples and singles how to use word pictures with their spouse their children, or in any meaningful relationship.

Bee had been struggling with something in her marriage for quite a long time. Something that ate away at her self-confidence and caused her constant embarrassment over the years. She was bothered about the condition of their house. The Lord had greatly prospered Don's business, and much of their resources went into supporting their church and various ministries. They were both generous with their time as well. Don especially was always inviting a new couple from church home to dinner or offering to put up this missionary or that speaker.

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Bee was every bit as hospitable, but she was the one having to struggle in an undersized kitchen to feed all the guests, or skip taking a shower because the hot water heater allowed only three hot showers, or somehow finding a place for six or even ten people to sleep when there were only two beds in the house.

It was not a question of finances that held Don back from moving into a larger home rather it was his desire not to be ostentatious and flaunt what God had given them. Bee understood her husband's motives and made do with the situation as best she could.

When Gary came back to their city for a second time, they signed up immediately for the seminar as a "refresher" course. After listening again to Gary share about using word pictures to communicate a concern with her spouse, Bee decided she would share one with her husband to describe her feelings toward the home she was living in. That night, she did share with her husband, and here is the word picture she used. "Don, I feel like you're the game warden who takes such good care of the trout in the waterways around our house. You help keep the streams and ponds clean, and even make sure that when the trout are spawning, they have help getting upstream. "When we were first married, I felt like I was one of those trout in the stream. I could see you standing on the bank, and I longed for you to scoop me up in a net and take me to the stream by your house. Then one day you did come for me with a net and gently picked me out of the water. It was the happiest time of my life; but instead of ending up in the little stream, you put me in an old, rusty barrel filled with fresh water.

"For twenty-two years you've made sure I had plenty of food and you've kept the water clean, but I long for the day when you will pick me up in your net and put me in that little stream by your house. Don, that's the way I feel about living in this house. I feel like we're living in a rusty barrel, and it makes it hard on me and the people we have over to the house."

Bee's years of longing came to an end that night. She had talked to her husband numerous times about this subject and had even tried to share her feelings with him about their living situation. Yet Don had never seemed to understand how important it was to her, until she shared this word picture with him.

Don loved his wife deeply and had attached high value to her throughout their marriage. He did not want to devalue her in any way, so when he finally understood through this story how she really felt about their house, he responded immediately. Don wrote her a check that night to hire an architect to draw up the plans for a new home, a home where she could enjoy having people over, serve them better, and

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have a comfortable place for them to stay.

We were so convinced of the benefits of using word pictures that we wrote an entire book on the subject, *Language of Love* (Focus on the Family, 1989). And we hope by this story you can see their usefulness in a marriage. Whether you use a word picture in praising your spouse or in sharing a concern, it can be a helpful tool to communicate words of high value to your mate.

### **Providing A Special Future for Your Spouse**

The other night my (John's) wife and I were watching part of a comedy show on television that we thought was funny. The scene was a forest meadow where an outdoor wedding was taking place.

There in the clearing were the bride and her attendant, and the best man alongside the bridegroom, who looked worried and out of place. The minister asked the bride to say her vows, which she had made up especially for this occasion. Unhesitatingly, she launched into goal after goal, commitment after commitment, and dream after dream she had for herself, her husband, and their marriage. In fact, she went on so long night fell in the forest.

When she finally finished, the exhausted minister turned to the groom and asked him to repeat the vows *he* made up. Looking around nervously, his only words to the minister were, "Well, I hope this works out!"

His vows were not the kind of words that a new bride could build a secure future on. They were funny all right, but they did not provide the kind of security a wife needs to know that she had a special future ahead of her.

In a marriage, our mate needs to know that he or she is a special part of our future. What's more, our spouse needs to know that the way we look at him or her today leaves room for positive change and growth in the future. Tod learned this lesson the hard way with his wife, Betty.

Betty was not the world's best house cleaner. Her home was not what you would call neat and clean before they had children, and with three little ones running around she had nearly given up on their home ever being clean. Like what happens in many marriages, her husband, Tod, had a different temperament. He was incredibly neat and clean. Tod even kept his workshop, where he spent time on his hobbies, so clean a person could safely eat off the floor.

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Tod was so frustrated with his wife's sloppy ways, he spent much of his time berating her for being a poor house cleaner. She would *always* be messy and could *never* change. Tod told her stories about how, in the future, their house would become so dirty that their grandchildren would catch incurable diseases and the County Health Department would come out and shut them down.

Not only was Tod not placing high value on his wife, he was helping to see that the very thing he sought to change became a lasting part of their future! By painting a picture of his wife with no window of hope or door for change, he literally boxed her in to viewing herself as the "world's messiest housekeeper" that he thought she was. In a Sunday school class, Tod saw for the first time how his words of a negative future had hurt his wife, not helped her. He learned that he was effectively killing any motivation his wife did have to change. His words of a negative future were telling his wife that it was impossible for her ever to please him, so why should she bother trying?

Tod thought back on what he had said to his wife. The times she had tried to make a dent in the house cleaning chores, he had met her with a "Finally!" or a "Why can't you keep things like that all the time?" But then he began to change.

Tod started to praise small things Betty did and to put aside the criticism of her poor performance. He even began to change his picture of her future and their house to a positive one. Change is always slow to take root, but it can grow ten times faster in the soil of encouragement than in the hard, rocky soil of criticism.

By picturing a special future for his wife in this area and encouraging her for small accomplishments, a miracle began to happen. Even though the house is not Tod's workshop standards, no longer does he have to fight his way through the laundry in the washroom or fear going into a shower that has things growing in it.

Whether it is the fear of entertaining, the need to go on a diet, failing to discipline the children promptly, or keeping a messy house, we do not motivate our mate to change by picturing a negative future. Our mate needs to hear words that picture a special future in the same way our children do, positive words that provide our spouse the room to become all that God can help him or her to become.

### **Active Commitment to Your Mate**

As we have discovered in earlier chapters, providing the individual elements of the blessing without the glue to hold them all together is not enough. That glue is our active commitment. In fact, this final element of the blessing is at the heart of

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“cleaving” in a marriage.

When the Scriptures tell us we are to “cleave” to our spouse (Gen. 2:24), the root word in Hebrew means “to cling, to be firmly attached.”<sup>3</sup> It takes a firm decision to be committed to blessing your spouse, a decision that will not remain intact if you don’t make room for your mate’s fallibility.

In the 1929 Rose Bowl Game, Georgia Tech came to California to meet the mighty football team from the University of California. In that game, something happened that demonstrated how fallible even a star could be.

Roy Riegles was a starter and star athlete for California. He had performed admirably during the regular season and was expected to make a great contribution to the team that day. What actually happened was that Roy made a winning contribution to the *other team!*

In a brilliant defensive play late in the first half, Roy intercepted a pass, fought off several would-be tacklers, and headed for the end zone and a touchdown. What he didn’t know was that in fighting off the tacklers, he had gotten turned around and he actually scored a safety for the other team! When the half ended, Georgia Tech had gone ahead of California because of Roy’s safety, and they hung on to win by that margin.

At halftime, everyone was wondering the same thing. Would Roy’s coach, Nibbs Price, yank him out of the game? When it came time to announce the starting lineup for the second half, Price called out Roy’s name! This coach had watched Roy work hard all season, and he remained committed to him even when he made a major mistake.

Another football coach, at the University of Texas, made famous an old country saying. Darryl Royal was like Coach Price; he remained committed to his starters in the game, even if they were fumbling the ball or missing a tackle. The press constantly asked him about this, and his reply was always the same, “You dance with the one who brung ya”-not good English, but an excellent example of active commitment.

What these two coaches had, and what every man or woman owes his or her spouse, is the willingness to stay committed, even if the other person fumbles the ball. Amy did this, and it was the very thing her husband credits with saving his life.

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Grant owned a manufacturing business that had done quite well. His business was small, but it found its niche in the marketplace and was growing by leaps and bounds. Borrowing against the property and expecting his profits to continue, Grant took out a large loan to expand the facilities. No sooner had construction begun on his new plant than a multinational manufacturing concern decided to go into competition with Grant's product.

With cash flow tight because of the huge interest payments on the loan, Grant did not have the resources to put more salesmen on the street. Neither could Grant lower the price on his produce because of the profit margin needed to keep the business afloat.

In less than a year, Grant had literally gone from riches to rags. His competitor had undercut his prices drastically to get into the marketplace, and it literally drove Grant out of business. Saddled with unpaid employees, lawsuits from suppliers, and with the bank breathing down his neck, Grant had to shut down his plant and liquidate his equipment at a fraction of its actual worth. He even lost his home that had been collateral for the note and had to move into a small apartment. Perhaps the crowning blow came when he had to explain to his children at midyear that they would have to change from the private school they loved to public school.

Grant was not a believer at the time of his business's collapse, and he was devastated as he had never been before. He even contemplated suicide, but one thing held him back:

I didn't know the Lord at the time my business went under, and my whole world seemed to end. I would like to say it was the thought of my children that kept me from ending it all, but that wouldn't be true.

The one thing that kept me from it was Amy and the way she constantly believed in me and blessed me with her love. Listening to her pray for me at night and having her hold me and let me cry were what pulled me through. I tell everybody she saved my life "twice." The first time was when the business failed; the second was when she led me to Jesus Christ!

Grant could no longer provide for his wife and family "in the manner to which they had become accustomed." Yet because of this loving wife, who based her blessing for her husband on active commitment instead of material possessions, their relationship remained strong and secure.

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Every husband and wife will drop the ball and prove themselves fallible time and time again. If we are to be people of blessing, our commitment will rest on our decision to love our spouse “in spite of.” Our love must be the kind of love that motivated our heavenly Father to bless us with His Son, in spite of the fact we didn’t deserve it and because He knew we needed that blessing so much in our lives.

The blessing can make a tremendous difference in marriage, but it takes work to pull these principles off the page and apply them with our spouse. Even so, we know you won’t regret a minute of time you spend cultivating each of the elements in your home, especially when you see the harvest of love and happiness that can result.

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Thayer, “Close Encounters,” *Psychology Today*, vol. 22, no. 3, March 1988, p. 33. <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34. <sup>3</sup> *Hebrew Lexicon*, p. 174.