

Ministering to the Heart of a Woman

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Understanding the uniqueness of women helps us to know how to minister to one another most effectively. While congregational settings are an important part of a woman's spiritual health, nothing ministers to a woman like one-on-one encouragement from a godly woman.

Let's take a look at the following ideas:

1. The Relational Nature of Women
2. Basic Differences in Men and Women
3. How Society Has Affected Women's Relationships
4. What Ministers to a Woman?
5. Benefits of Women Ministering to Women
6. How to Maintain Proper Boundaries When Ministering to Women

► The Relational Nature of Women

In the beginning, God created the heavens, the earth, and all that is on it—including man. Genesis 2:15 tells us that God took Adam and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and care for it. God gave Adam one command to obey and paraded the animals so Adam could name them. At the end of each creative day, “God saw that it was good;” however, the second chapter of Genesis tells us that God saw something was *not good*: “But for Adam no suitable helper was found” (Genesis 2:20).

Genesis further explains: The Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.’ . . . So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs. . . . Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib . . . and he brought her to the man (Genesis 2:18,21,22).

Whereas God formed Adam from the dust of the ground and assigned him tasks, God literally formed Eve from Adam's side. She was created to meet Adam's relational need—for God had said that it wasn't good for man to be alone. And Eve was uniquely designed to be able to physically bear and emotionally nurture children. As we take a close look at the account of creation, we can clearly see that woman was actually created *in* relationship and *for* relationship.

Adam and Eve were created male and female—two distinct creations, designed to become one flesh (Genesis 2:24). They were perfect for each other, but even in perfection they were different. Men and women have been different from the beginning—and it is all by Divine design. God created us to bring unique and valuable traits to one another.

► Basic Differences between Men and Women

Every person is created uniquely by God. The following characteristics are general in nature and may not apply to all men and all women.

Mentally

Beverly White Hislop, in her book *Shepherding a Woman's Heart*, explains, “A woman's brain is structured differently from a man's. The two sides of her brain have a larger number of connections, which allows for more information to be exchanged.”

Because the emotional and verbal parts of a woman's brain are more integrated, each life issue tends to be intertwined with all other life issues. Bill and Pam Farrel describe this in their book, *Men Are Like Waffles, Women Are Like Spaghetti*. They explain how men process life issues by moving from box to box, while women process life in a way that resembles looking at a plate of spaghetti.

A man's singularly-focused brain gives him greater ability to ignore distractions, while women have the ability (or disability!) to think of many things at once. Women are typically better at multitasking, are more alert to surroundings and body language, and have a greater capacity to integrate visual and verbal information.

Emotionally

Despite common belief, studies show that men and women experience emotion at generally the same rate; however, men typically process their emotions without having to verbalize them as women do. Men's brains are wired for problem solving and delayed reactions.

When men experience an emotion, they are not yet ready to talk about what they feel (nor do they find talking about it necessary). Men often take action to help them think through their emotions, and they need time to collect the words to express each new emotion that arises.

In contrast, women generally talk about an emotion to think it through. As women talk, they are able to determine what they are feeling, usually without help, because the emotional and verbal sides of their brain are closely integrated. Women can feel and verbalize their emotions at the same time with a wider range of expression.

In his book, *Marriage on the Rock*, Jimmy Evans explains that women are "physically modest" and "emotionally immodest," while men are physically immodest and emotionally modest. Many women will openly share their emotions with strangers, yet most "men need a protected environment in which to open up emotionally and begin to talk."

Verbally

Dr. Norman Wright explains how men and woman communicate based on different goals. Men have learned to speak "report-talk," communicating primarily to exchange knowledge and express skills. Women, on the other hand, speak "rapport-talk," communicating in order to create and strengthen bonds in relationships.

Likewise, the language used by each gender is different. Men speak the language of "resolvers"—giving condensed, bottom-line, factual information. Women speak the language of "expressers"—sharing expanded details and including emotional aspects in communication.

Relationally

Women are more relational by nature. Because the female brain is more integrated, we may actually attach our identity to our relationships and surroundings more than our male counterparts do. This distinction is most notable at puberty, when a female's body begins mass production of *oxytocin*. This hormone supports lactation and promotes a strong desire to build and nurture relationships.

Puberty in males has a very different effect. Rather than increasing their bonds with others, males develop through patterns of separation and power. While males still find relationships important, they migrate toward distinguishing themselves individually.

As men and women pass midlife, male and female hormones level out. Men generally become more relational and sensitive, while women become more assertive and independent.

Intuitively

Several psychology resources logically explain what some people call “women’s intuition.” Dr. Gary Smalley comments, “It’s not something mystical; rather, it is an unconscious perception of minute details that are sometimes tangible, sometimes abstract in nature. Since it is usually an ‘unconscious’ process, many times a woman isn’t able to give specific explanations for the way she feels. She simply perceives or ‘feels’ something about a situation or person, while a man tends to follow logical analysis of circumstances or people.”

Because men are more singularly focused, they can simply overlook body language, eye movements, and facial expressions that a woman notices more naturally.

Physically

Men and women are physically different in many ways beyond their reproductive organs. Differences occur in life span, skeletal structure, organ size, breathing capacity, brute strength, hormones, and metabolism. Basically, men and women differ in every cell of their bodies.

What Do All These Differences Reveal?

Here is a very basic summary of what we learn about women by looking at the differences between men and women:

- Women are very relational beings.
- Women are always thinking, and each area of their lives impacts every other area.
- Women generally process and resolve their emotions by talking through them.
- Women generally have the ability to share their emotions quite openly.
- Women communicate to build relationships and express themselves.

Simply understanding these characteristics can help us know how to minister to one another.

► How Society Has Affected Women’s Relationships

Before the industrial age, extended family and neighbors were a necessary part of everyday life. Women had a sense of community and belonging in which they naturally “ministered” to one another. But today’s women face new challenges. Beverly Hislop observes, “Societal structures moved women from a place of interdependent collaboration and community to a place of isolation, of disconnectedness from one another. The physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual needs of women may be greater than at any previous time in the history of the United States. There may have been more traumatic circumstances in the lives of American women, but there probably has not been a time when women have had fewer helpful connections and less effective ministering.”

We need to understand that many women who walk through the doors of our churches are relational beings who are feeling isolated and disconnected. Because of the breakdown of the family unit, many of them have not had godly examples in their homes and neighborhoods. Our society hasn’t adequately prepared them for the challenges they are facing. Many don’t have a biblical foundation which would provide them guidelines for having healthy relationships, raising children, working with integrity, etc.

► What Ministers to a Woman?

As we understand the unique makeup of a woman and the changes in our society, we can then begin to see the need for relational ministry that includes:

Presence—because relationships are so important to women, simply “being there” is extremely important.

Understanding/Compassion—the understanding a woman brings to another woman can be a catalyst for healing and strength. Because most women process emotions verbally, the need for a compassionate listening ear is imperative.

Conversation—Rapport-building conversation opens the door for biblical instruction and guidance. Simply providing a step-by-step resolution isn’t as effective as it would be with a man.

Example—living godly lives and sharing lessons learned from our own experience can make a lasting impact on the women in our life.

► **Benefits of Women Ministering to Women**

The apostle Paul instructed a young minister named Titus to train the younger men and the older men. But he told Titus that the more experienced women should teach the younger women (Titus 2:1-6). Paul was establishing a healthy model for ministry. While men are able to minister to women in a group setting, it is potentially very unhealthy for a man to enter the emotional world of a woman and really minister to her one-on-one.

- 1 Women ministering to women will give freedom to church staff, and can help keep unhealthy emotional and physical attachments from forming between male pastors and women in the congregation.
2. Women instinctively understand other women. Godly women are the best role models for other women.
3. The New Testament encourages us to love, encourage, and instruct one another, and to be kind and compassionate to each other. These mandates are for every Christ-following woman. An effective ministry to women, by women, provides the environment for every woman to fulfill her Christ-given mandate to love others.

► **How to Maintain Proper Boundaries When Ministering to Women**

If we do not establish and maintain healthy boundaries when we are ministering to others, we will quickly burn out and lose our desire to reach out to others.

Many of us have memorized Galatians 6:2, “*Bear ye one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ*” (KJV). This may seem like an overwhelming challenge—to bear others’ burdens. However, if we read Galatians 6:2-5, we will see the full insight of this passage.

²Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. ³If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. ⁴Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, ⁵for each one should carry his own load.

Notice what verse five says, “*for each one should carry his own load.*” So how do those two verses work together? One says to carry each other’s burdens, and the other says every man shall carry his own load.

In their book *Boundaries*, Dr. Cloud and Dr. Townsend do a great job explaining this passage by defining the words *burden* and *load*. “The Greek word for *burden* means ‘excess burdens,’ or burdens that are so heavy that they weigh us down.” The authors explain that we face these burdens in times of crisis and tragedy. They further write, “In contrast, the Greek word for *load* means ‘cargo’ or ‘the burden of daily toil.’ This word describes the everyday things we all need to

do...they are our responsibility to carry. We are all expected to carry our own. We are expected to deal with our own feelings, attitudes, behaviors, as well as the responsibilities God has given each of us.”

Cloud and Townsend show us that we are responsible *for* ourselves and *to* others. We must understand that we are completely responsible for our own thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and actions. We cannot blame anyone or any circumstance. Our reactions belong to us alone. When we say things like, “that woman makes me so mad,” we are actually handing her the keys to our responses. We must also realize that we are completely responsible for our own disciplined pursuit of God, no one can do it for us. We’ve also been given individual responsibilities to carry out.

This truth translates to every individual—each person is responsible *for* themselves. You are not responsible for the thoughts, feelings, attitudes, or actions of anyone else. Isn’t that liberating! You see, when we carry responsibilities that we were not intended to carry, we will wear out emotionally.

While we are responsible *for* ourselves, we are responsible *to* others. Once we began taking full responsibility *for* our self, we have a much healthier understanding of what it really means to minister *to* others:

1. We must grow to say, like the apostle Paul, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1). This is taught by attitudes and actions more than by the words we speak.
2. We must come alongside others when their burdens become excessive and too big for them to carry alone. This happens in times of illness, loss, tragedy, and even mistakes. The Holy Spirit will help us to know when and what we are to carry.
3. We must remember that while we are responsible to minister to others, we are not responsible *for* them. They are responsible for their own attitudes, responses, and behaviors.
4. We many need to eventually help carry someone’s burden, but the greatest gift we can give them is helping them to develop dependence upon the Holy Spirit. Even Jesus, while He was walking on the earth, was limited by His human form. He told His disciples that it was good for them if He left, because the Holy Spirit would come and be their Comforter, Teacher, and Guide.

It is *very* important that women don’t become dependent upon those who are ministering to them. We must constantly point women to God, helping them understand that their dependence must be on Him and that He alone is worthy of their complete trust! Here are some practical guidelines:

Do:

1. Discover if she really wants to grow or change—understand she has a choice.
2. Pray and then rely on the Holy Spirit for compassion and timely life-giving insights.
3. Understand that your presence matters.
4. Listen before sharing insights from God’s Word—this will build trust and receptivity.
5. Understand what you can and cannot do.
6. Know referral resources.
7. Feel free to set time limits.

8. Believe God restores, comforts, redeems, heals, guides, and strengthens—He is all powerful!
9. Encourage her to become involved in the church (Bible studies, small groups) and to nurture other Christian friendships—one person cannot meet all the relational needs of someone else.

Don't:

1. Try to fix her or her problems!
2. Make promises you cannot keep.
3. Make premature judgments; her story is only one side of the story.
4. Allow her to become dependent upon you.
5. Take personally her rejection of truth or help.

Our Goals in Ministering to Women:

It is important for us to know what we can and can't do as we minister to women. We can't "fix" women or their circumstances. However, we can help each woman know:

1. She is not alone.
2. Her feelings matter, but they don't have to control her.
3. God loves her, He is with her, and He is her help and strength.
4. She can choose to obey God's Word and can expect God to keep His promises to her.
5. As she obeys and fully depends on God, she can move forward. She has hope in Him!

► Rethinking Ministry to Women

While big events and small groups are vital components of ministry to women, we must remember to intentionally establish ministry to the individual women in our churches and communities. We must help equip every Christ-following woman to be able to minister to the other women in her life.

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