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Keys to a Healthy Marriage

Guest: Barbara Rainey
From the series: Letters to My Daughters (Day 1 of 2)
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Bob: Barbara Rainey likens intimacy in marriage to a secret garden—a place that only a husband and wife go together. She says it’s a risky place.

Barbara: It *is* a place of raw exposure. It *is* a place of being real with one another. It *is* the place where we are most transparent in our marriage relationship, so we need the walls of a commitment. Both of us need the security and the comfort of knowing that we’ve got a perimeter around our marriage much like a rock wall around a secret garden. We need that commitment to be in place.

Bob: This is *FamilyLife Today*. Our host is the President of FamilyLife[®], Dennis Rainey. I’m Bob Lepine. We’ll talk today about how a husband and wife can work together to cultivate the secret garden of their marriage. Stay with us.

And welcome to *FamilyLife Today*. Thanks for joining us. It’s been almost a year now since the release of your wife’s book, *Letters to My Daughters*. We’re finally getting around to Chapter 6—

Dennis: You’ve got—

Barbara: —which rhymes with—[Laughter]

Dennis: —you’ve got a cheesy grin on your face.

Bob: You—you know, Chapter—

Dennis: The listeners can’t see your face! [Laughter]

Bob: —six!—six. If you replace one letter in “six,” you get an idea of what we’re going to be talking about—

Dennis: Well—

Bob: —today.

Dennis: Barbara's book, *Letters to My Daughters: The Art of Being a Wife*, has flown off the shelf. It's really doing well. I understand why, because I think this is Barbara's best book ever. It is certainly a very honest look at our marriage.

I want to welcome her back to the broadcast. Thanks for coming back in, Sweetheart.

Barbara: I'm happy to be here.

Dennis: I know you are.

Barbara: Yes.

Dennis: I know you are. Since we're going to talk about s—s—s—

Bob: Sex. Just say it—sex.

Dennis: Chapter 6.

Barbara: It is not that hard for you to say! [Laughter]

Bob: You've heard him say it before?

Barbara: I don't think it's that hard for him to say! [Laughter]

Dennis: I just want to pray for our audience; because as I was preparing to come in here, reading Barbara's book, I thought: "You know? Oh my! How broken are we as human beings—how many different perspectives we come at this subject." There are some listeners who've been hurt deeply by their past choices and some are in present relationships. I just want God to intervene and minister to—whether they're single, married, divorced, single parents—I just want to ask God to meet every person where they are:

Father, You made us, male and female. There is no surprise in terms of how we function. You made us to merge together and become one.

Yet, what You designed, man has degenerated and has twisted. You know that as well.

You know where each listener is, who is tuning in to our broadcast today. I just would ask You to be gentle with each of them. Use these broadcasts, I pray, to minister to them just where they are. Produce some hope, some help, and some encouragement to each person listening.

For the guys, who are listening in, Father, I pray that they might listen with some understanding. We tend to be too quick to judgment on this subject. I pray for all of us just to be wise in terms of what we hear and what we apply. In Christ's name I pray. Amen.

Bob: Amen.

Barbara this is a subject that obviously is personal—it's intimate—it really does get to the core of who we are as human beings. It can be threatening for a lot of people.

I was very interested—as you invited your daughters and daughters-in-law to ask questions about marriage, the first question you got related to this—I'm just going to read it from the book—it says: "So yeah. Sex. You gave me "the talk," and we had our pre-wedding conversation that was pretty short and hurried. No offense; it was busy. I get it. But now I'm married. And it's um...different. Fine. FINE. But, well, I have to ask this...what's the big deal?" I thought that was an interesting question from a daughter to say, "I'm in the midst of it, but I'm not sure I understand why it's as big a deal as people say it is."

Barbara: It's a great question. You know, it was one that I just had to think about a lot. Actually, I had to think about *all* these questions a lot because, as Dennis prayed, this topic—this part of our marriage relationship—is not easy.

It's not simple. It's not cut and dry / it's not black and white. It's very complicated; and even though it's very good, it's very complicated.

My short answer to "What is the big deal?" is that it takes a long, long time to understand what God has built into us, as men and women. It takes a while to understand the purpose of sex. It takes a while to undo things that we've brought into our marriage. It just takes time. I think, in our culture today, more than in any other generation, we expect instant results in every area of our lives. We're so used to having instant access to information. We just don't know how to wait—we don't know how to persevere. We don't know how to have patience.

I think, in this area of marriage, our expectation for change to happen quickly and for results to be mastered fast, is a misplaced hope; because I think, in the long run, the goal of marriage is a marathon—it's a lifetime race. Figuring out why it's a big deal takes a lot of time. It's me getting to know my husband, as a man, and him getting to know me, as a woman. That isn't going to take place quickly.

Dennis: If you go back to Genesis, as it describes two people becoming one—there was a progression that God declared. He said, "For this cause a man shall *leave* his father and mother, shall *cleave* to his wife and the two shall become one [emphasis added]." One of the problems, Bob—and many of our listeners may be experiencing this right now—we have reversed the order.

Bob: Yes.

Dennis: We're trying to become *one* without the leaving and the cleaving—the commitment that really bonds two broken human beings hearts to one another and gives you the *only* chance of two broken people experiencing marriage for a lifetime, as Barbara was talking about here.

Bob: Barbara, explain to our listeners why, for a wife / for a woman this issue of a solid commitment is so critical when it comes to intimacy.

Barbara: In the book I tell the story of a book that we used to read when our kids were growing up, called *The Secret Garden*. It's the story of a young woman / a young girl, who grew up in a huge manor estate in England. As she was growing up there, she discovered this garden; and it was a secret garden. It had walls all the way around it that were six to eight feet tall, brick or stone walls. As she dug through the ivy, she found a door. The door was locked and she couldn't get in. Over time, she began to continue to dig around. One day, she found a key and was able to unlock the door and go in.

I use that story in the book because I liken this area of our marriage—this intimacy / this sex in our marriage—to a secret garden.

It's a place that only a husband and wife go together—no one else is allowed. It is for them only. I think the reason commitment is so important is because it is a place of raw exposure—it is a place of being real with one another—it is the place where we are most transparent in our marriage relationship. We need the walls that that secret garden had. We need the walls of a commitment. We need that security, as women in particular, but men need it as well for us to experience what God intended for us to experience in marriage. Both of us need the security and the comfort of knowing that we've got a perimeter around our marriage much like a rock wall around a secret garden. We need that commitment to be in place.

Bob: You're talking about something that goes far beyond just the biological experience of intimacy—

Barbara: Absolutely!

Bob: —because the biology may not need that, but the *oneness* we're talking about here—

Barbara: Correct.

Bob: —really requires that we can trust one another—

Dennis: Yes.

Bob: —in order to be vulnerable with one another.

Dennis: In fact, Bob, I think what you're hitting on here is so important. I think one of the least understood passages in Scripture—there's a reason why we can't understand it—Genesis, Chapter 2, verse 25. I'm going to read it and then I'm going to explain why we don't understand it—it says, "And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed." That verse comes right after the leave, cleave, and become one. The reason we can't understand what that means—we have *never* experienced what Adam and Eve did in the garden *before* the fall.

Barbara: That's right; yes.

Dennis: Two people, *totally* naked, *totally* exposed, *totally* transparent with one another—and there was *no shame*. There was joy / there was delight—there was the experience of God and one another—there was no hiding in a marriage back then.

When it comes to the subject of sex, I think we're trying to get to that point of being naked and unashamed; but we don't know how to get there. So a lot of single people are co-habiting—they're thinking they can experience the sexual delights of marriage without the commitment—

Bob: Right.

Dennis: —and they *can't!* Barbara's talking about a commitment that creates safety around this garden.

Bob: There is something about being able to say: "You're safe. I'm not going anywhere."

Barbara: Yes.

Bob: "I will not *expose* what happens here. You can be who you are and still be loved." That's what we long for—

Barbara: Yes.

Bob: —and that is what is supposed to be going on in intimacy in a marriage relationship.

Barbara: That's what we get married for—we get married to be loved unconditionally. That's our expectation and our hope when we say, "I do"; but we don't realize that it's not *just* the physical oneness that produces that. It's *all* of the conversations—it's learning to be, as Dennis just said, naked and unashamed. That does not happen quickly.

If you'll think about what happened in Genesis—after that verse where Adam and Eve were naked and unashamed—and then, when the fall happened, what was the first thing that Adam and Eve experienced?

Bob: Their shame.

Barbara: Their shame and they were afraid.

Bob: Yes.

Barbara: I think we *vastly* underestimate the *fears* that we bring into marriage. All of us come into marriage with fears, even if we don't have past experiences that were negative or were difficult. We still have the fear of rejection; we have the fear of exposure; we have the fear of being known just the question, "If you really knew me as I am inside—as I know I am inside—would he still love me?" A man thinks the same thing, "If she really knew what I thought—if she really knew who I was—would she still accept me?"

I think that fear—that we all bring into a marriage—takes time to expose those fears because it's a risk to do so. It takes time to work toward that place of being unashamed. It doesn't ever totally go away, because it won't until we go to heaven; but we can make *great* progress / we can make *great* strides in that comfort level that we all long for when we get married.

Dennis: That's exactly right.

I have to use a present-day illustration, Bob, of something that really makes me sad—but immediately after the evening news / the local news here, there's one of these Hollywood reports. It usually shows women in various arrays of undress. They are trying to be naked and unashamed, but they are not getting there obviously. It always is telling of some breakup of some Hollywood marriage.

I really feel a great deal of compassion, because they don't understand the God who made this relationship and how He made them to function. In their lost-ness, they're just trying to reach out to one another and experience that oneness and experience the intimacy of a great relationship.

But I've got to tell you—Barbara and I have been married 44 years, 44 years, that's a long time—and there have been a lot of incredible highs and sadly, some tough, tough lows. The thing that has kept us safe and secure in our relationship is we've never/ever used the "D" word—divorce. It has never crossed our lips. We have used the "C" word—covenant-keeping love for a lifetime. In the process of doing that, two imperfect people are *wobbling* their way to the finish line, attempting to represent how God designed marriage to proclaim His love to the world; because a marriage is to be a model of Christ and the church.

It is representative of a husband who loves, serves, leads, and gives his life on behalf of his wife—and a wife who supports her husband and loves him back. One of the ways they both do this is through the gift of sexual intimacy in marriage.

Bob: Barbara, I had to smile when I read this letter from your daughter, saying, “So, what’s the big deal?” for two reasons. One is because there is a stereotype that says: “This is how women view sex in marriage.” Men are very different. I stop to think to myself, “Would a man ever write to his father, ‘So Dad—’

Barbara: “What’s the big deal?” [Laughter]

Bob: —“What’s the big deal? We’re married now. I don’t get it—what’s the big deal?” I also smiled because there’s a sense in which the mystery of marital intimacy—

Barbara: Yes.

Bob: —is just beginning to unfold in the early days of marriage; right?

Barbara: That’s a word that I use a lot in my book—is the word, “mystery,”—because I think it helps us be more at peace with the process. When we realize that marriage is a mystery—that we will never, totally understand it—because, as Dennis just said, it is a picture of Christ’s relationship with us. Just accepting the fact that marriage is a mystery kind of gives you a sense of: “Ah! I can rest. I can relax.” It is a mystery and it is a process of beginning to discover what God has built in this, all along, from the very beginning. As we’ve been saying, it’s about getting to know one another and being transparent with one another.

Dennis: When we think of a mystery, we think of an unsolved murder case or a crime.

Bob: —a puzzle.

Dennis: Yes; exactly. This mystery is going to be revealed—[Laughter] —in heaven, in eternity, with Jesus Christ and the church at the wedding feast of the bridegroom and the bride—the church being the bride.

In between time, between now—this thing called “time”—and eternity, here you are, as a couple, hammering out your commitment and attempting to be naked and unashamed in a way that honors God. It’s tough, and it’s hard.

I would ask you, Barbara, as a young wife might come to you—what would you say is the most important thing she needs to know as she approaches this most intimate area of the marriage relationship? What does she need to know and do?

Barbara: I think the first thing she needs to know—and she may already know this—but I think it bears repeating—and that is that marriage is *holy*. I think that when we see it as—not just a gift, not just a privilege, not just something we get to experience—but there is an element of marriage that has a *holy* aspect to it; because God created it and because He lives in our lives, there is a holiness there.

I think that helps us put it in right perspective—it helps us go: “Well no wonder it’s so hard! No wonder it’s a challenge to discover the kind of oneness that we got married for.”

Secondly, from there, I want to say, too, that I would strongly encourage any young wife to remember that it’s an important part of the relationship. It’s really a mirror of the rest of your relationship. You may feel like you’re having good sex; but if you’re not really becoming one—if you’re not really being transparent with one another—then you’re not going to be really growing together in other areas of your relationship.

It’s important that you keep that area of your marriage healthy and growing and keep it alive. The temptation is—when it gets hard, is to just say, “Well, forget it!” but you can’t give up on it because it’s one of the important parts that God has built into a marriage. Because God created it and God sanctioned it, then we need to learn what He wants us to do with it—we need to figure it out.

Bob: You know a lot of wives, who are saying, “I hear you and I agree with you; and if I was not tired all the time,—

Barbara: Yes.

Bob: “—I would give more attention to this! But I am tired *all the time*! How do I make this a priority, and how do I make it important when I’m exhausted?”

Barbara: Did you read that in my book?

Bob: Well, I did. Yes! [Laughter]

Barbara: Yes; I talk about that in the book, because that is such a common complaint for women. I get it! I was *tired all the time*—and Dennis used to say he would be a very wealthy man if he had a dollar for every time I said, “I am *so tired!*” [Laughter] Right?

Dennis: Right! [Laughter]

Barbara: But even if we are so tired—and we are—and a lot of women are exhausted all the time because of the responsibilities of jobs and kids—and just the emotional weight of being in life. There are just so many ups and downs that we feel so deeply; and yet, it’s learning to prioritize your life.

It's deciding, during a particular day, that you're going to take a nap so you've got more energy for your husband at night or it's choosing not to add these things to your schedule so that you can have more energy and more focus for your marriage. It's choosing to keep your marriage a priority—make it a priority. That's hard to do sometimes. There were *plenty* of times when I would take a nap in the afternoon and I'd still be exhausted at night.

Dennis: That's correct! [Laughter]

Barbara: It's not a quick and easy solution. [Laughter]

Dennis: I just want to insert something. There are men, who are listening right now: "That's right! She's just tired too much." To which I would say to the guys: "Are you cleaning up the kitchen—

Bob: Yes.

Dennis: "—after dinner? Are you helping to get the kids ready for bed?—brush their teeth, read them a story, pray with them. Get down on your knees, next to them, and look them in the eyes and ask them how their day was,"—but take some of your wife's load off of her and assume it yourself!

There is a concept in the Bible called "bearing one another's burdens." I do think some guys—they want sex, but they don't want the process of loving—that means nourishing, which is creating growth—and cherishing, which is creating value—

Bob: Yes.

Dennis: —they don't want to do that with their wife. When you help your wife with her household duties, with the kids and all—you're making a statement of value to your wife that she ultimately *will* hear.

Michelle: *FamilyLife Today* is brought to you by FamilyLife in Little Rock, Arkansas. And although FamilyLife is located in the United States of America, we understand that our cultures vary but the issues facing us are similar. We all have joys in life, we all struggle and we all want to love and be loved. And we want your family, your marriage and your relationships to succeed.

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I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, and our global broadcast manager Rhonda Street. I also want to thank our editor Larry Loraine. For Dennis Rainey and Bob Lepine, I'm Michelle Hill and I invite you to join us again tomorrow for another edition of *FamilyLife Today*.

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