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## Thinking the Best of Our Spouse

Guest: Sheila Wray Gregoire  
From the series: 9 Thoughts that Can Change Your Marriage (Day 2 of 2)  
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**Bob:** Sometimes, when couples are in conflict, the issue is not the conflict—it's the way they are trying to fix the conflict. Here's author Sheila Gregoire.

**Sheila:** We've got to get out of this "Who's right, and who's wrong?" Normally, when we're having conflict, that's the thing—we go into it, saying, "Okay; I'm going to prove I'm right," or she's going to prove she's right, or whatever. As soon as you frame the issue as in "Who's right and who's wrong," you've already lost; because, if you are trying to win the argument—and if you're trying to win every argument with your spouse—you're just going to be married to a loser.

**Bob:** This is *FamilyLife Today*. Our host is Dennis Rainey and I'm Bob Lepine. Think back to the last time there was conflict in your marriage. Was there a way you could have changed your thinking that might have helped get that conflict resolved? We're going to talk about that today next. Stay with us

And welcome to *FamilyLife Today*. Thanks for joining us. We're spending some time this week talking about how we think about our marriage / how we think about one another; because, honestly, our thinking about each other and about marriage is going to influence how we're doing as a couple. It may be that we need to adjust our thinking. But Dennis, sometimes, the issue is not just what I'm thinking or what you're thinking but what we're thinking together. Sometimes, we need some communication so our thinking can come into alignment.

**Dennis:** You're talking about—when you mentioned, "you"—it was your wife—

**Bob:** Yes. When I said, "our," I'm talking about a husband and a wife—

**Dennis:** Yes; exactly.

**Bob:** —not you and me.

**Dennis:** Not you and me. [Laughter]

**Bob:** Although sometimes—we've had those times.

**Dennis:** Oh, we have had those times.

We have the author of a brand-new book called *9 Thoughts that Can Change Your Marriage*. Sheila Gregoire joins us on *FamilyLife Today*. Sheila, welcome back.

**Sheila:** Oh, thank you. It was a lot of fun yesterday.

**Dennis:** Yes; you're teaching us how to have a thinking wheel alignment / kind of a realignment of how we think about our spouse. You've been married for over 25 years / two children—have been writing on this subject for a number of years.

**Bob:** Well, we haven't mentioned, yet, that you and your husband also speak at FamilyLife® *Weekend to Remember*® getaways in Canada. Sheila, you'd encourage people to go to a getaway; right?

**Sheila:** They are *awesome*. Every couple should go to one.

**Bob:** Yes.

**Dennis:** And we've trained folks in more than 100 countries around the world

**Bob:** Yes; it's fun to hear about the different ways that people approach these weekend getaways in different countries. I think it was New Zealand, where everybody shows up—the wife gets a rose when she comes to the weekend getaway.

I'm thinking, "Their budget is bigger than our budget." [Laughter]

**Sheila:** How about chocolate truffles?

**Bob:** There you go!

**Sheila:** I could do the chocolate truffle thing; yes.

**Dennis:** There you go! There you go! There you go!

You've written nine thoughts down that a wife ought to focus on and really get a perspective about so that her marriage can be stronger. A couple of them are around the subject of being a peacemaker and not a peacekeeper.

**Sheila:** Yes.

**Bob:** And this is where we have to be thinking on the same level or at the same time. This is not just one person's thinking that we're talking about here but how we think, as a couple; right?

**Dennis:** And how we approach conflict.

**Sheila:** Exactly. It's how we approach conflict; because Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, because they'll be called children of God." There is a big difference between a peacemaker and a peacekeeper.

When I think of peacekeeper, I think of two warring nations. Let's even look at Israel and Egypt, for instance.

Technically, there is peace. There has been peace since the late-'70s; but it's not like an Israeli is going to feel really comfortable on the streets of Cairo or vice versa; because the countries may technically be at peace, but there are so many issues.

What a peacekeeper does is—they try to keep those issues contained / they don't fix anything. They just keep them under the surface, where they're still bubbling.

**Dennis:** It's a *truce* while war is still going on.

**Sheila:** Exactly. Whereas I'm from Canada—you know Canada and the States have real peace because—at least, I hope we do—[Laughter]

**Bob:** Right.

**Sheila:** —we see each other as friends. We can certainly talk; we have so much in common. There are still differences, but they're not important. So, there is this real sense that we're on the same side.

What God calls us to is—to be in unity—to be of one mind / to share one mind and one purpose. And the problem is: "If you think your job in marriage is to keep all of those issues under the surface, you're never going to be of one mind and one purpose."

**Bob:** You say in the book—that when we get angry, typically, the first thing that will pop into our head is: "Why is this person inconveniencing me?" or "Why is this person doing something that's annoying to me?" rather than a more objective: "What's going on here?" and "What are all of the factors involved?"

**Sheila:** That's right. And that's why the first few thoughts really are about: "How I can get my head and heart right with God," so: "How I can make sure I'm thinking about my marriage right. I'm realizing that God loves my husband—He's not on *my* side—and God wants my husband to flourish too." Let's get our *own* thoughts right.

But, then, what do you do when there actually is something big between you? And this is where this thought comes in about being that peacemaker, who says: "Okay; right now, we're seeing things really differently. There are some problems here, but we've got to address them and smooth them out."

I think a lot of women equate conflict with fighting; and those two things are *not* the same, necessarily.

In fact, there have been studies that have shown that a marriage without conflict is actually very *dangerous*; because it means that you're *not* addressing the real things that are going on between you.

**Bob:** Explain about the time when Keith wanted to spend—I think it was one night a week involved in historical battle reenactment. [Laughter] Is that what it was?

**Sheila:** My husband is extremely geeky, but he's geeky in a good way. He has these little, miniature soldiers; okay?

**Bob:** Right.

**Sheila:** He paints them. Then, he gets together with friends; and they act out Civil War battles, or Ancient Roman battles, or whatever. And my husband is a pediatrician—wonderful guy—but very, very busy.

Early in our marriage, when he was just starting his practice, he was working five days a week. He was on-call several nights a week. We had two young children, and he just wanted one night a week where he could relax with some friends. Normally, this doesn't sound like an insane request; but I was a stay-at-home homeschooling mom.

I was also starting to write—I had a book contract, and I needed more time to write. He says, "I want to spend this time with my friends"; and I'm thinking, "Yes; but when do I get to spend my time writing?"

This was a *real* conflict for us until my husband, in his wisdom—it's usually him who figures these things out before I do—but he stepped back and he said: "This is ridiculous. We're fighting about something stupid. We just have a *time* issue, and let's look at how we can both get our needs met." He actually ended up taking some time off during the week and took the girls so that I could have some time to write. Then, he still went and played his games on Tuesday nights. That worked out wonderfully.

**Bob:** Played his games.

**Sheila:** Played his games—isn't that just—okay; [Laughter] reenacted his battles or whatever—

**Dennis:** Well, we're kind of laughing about this; but I have to believe today—with video games being what they are—

**Bob:** Yes.

**Dennis:** —with sports—especially for newly-married couples, who are trading in one lifestyle for a lifestyle of “we” it may take a few years for that husband to understand: “You know what? When you said, ‘I do,’ you were pledging your allegiance and loyalty to your bride. It may mean you have to give up some of those sports / some of these games in order to meet her needs.”

**Bob:** So, let me ask you about that; because here’s what I will often hear as a scenario for a marriage. A husband and a wife get married. The guy would like a night a week to hang out with his guy friends. The wife thinks to herself, “He doesn’t want to be with me.” She feels lonely / she feels devalued in that. She thinks, “What is it that the guy friend is going to offer him that I can’t offer him?” She’s offended by that. Is one of them right and the other one wrong? How do they get to thinking alike on a subject like this?

**Dennis:** Well, they’ve got to have what Sheila is talking about here, which is an honest conversation about one another’s needs.

The guy needs to make sure he really *understands* what his wife is saying—not be defensive about what he wants to go do but listen carefully—maybe, even take notes. Then, attempt to articulate back to her—to say: “Let me tell you. This is what I hear you saying. You’re feeling isolated because I’m going out with the guys to a sporting event. What you need me to do is to make sure there is romance in our marriage—that I’m pursuing you, that I want a relationship with you, and where you’re not feeling like you’re left in the dust.” Then, wait for your wife to be able to affirm, “You’ve got it, sweetheart.”

**Sheila:** I think that’s very true. In fact, I think that *that* is the *main* problem with our conflict resolution model—is that we don’t talk about *needs* / we talk about the issue. That’s the wrong thing because—and in this case, for instance—if they start having an argument over whether he should spend a night with the guys or not, there is no way to win that because he’s saying, “I need this time with the guys,” and she’s saying, “Well, I need you at home.” They’re just arguing over who is right and who is wrong.

As soon as you frame the issue, as in—“Who’s right and who’s wrong?”—you’ve already lost; because, if you are trying to win the argument—and if you are trying to win every argument with your spouse—you’re just going to end up married to a loser; you know? Nobody wants want to be married to a loser. We’ve got to get out of this “Who’s right and who’s wrong?” Normally, when we’re having conflict, that’s the thing—we go into it, saying, “Okay; I’m going to prove I’m right,” or she’s going to prove she’s right, or whatever.

Here’s a *much* better way of doing it—which is what you were talking about, Dennis—is sit down and say: “Okay; forget the issue / forget the night a week. Let’s just talk about what it is that I need right now.” He can say, “I need some time with the guys / I need some guy time. She can say, “Well, I need some time with you, and I need to feel like I’m the number one thing in your life.”

Then, they can each look at that and say:

“Okay; okay. This is good. So, you need time with guys, and you need to feel like you’re the number one thing in my life. We can say, ‘Well, how can we meet those needs?’”

Then, it’s not about who’s right and who’s wrong; it’s about: “We each have needs. So, let’s brainstorm / let’s throw out different ideas. Okay; how can I meet your needs? How can you meet my needs?” And then, it’s no longer this win/lose thing—it is: “How can we build each other up?” It’s a whole different dynamic.

**Bob:** We’re talking with Sheila Gregoire, who has written a book called *9 Thoughts that Can Change Your Marriage*.

What I hear you saying here is: “Forget the details of the issue,”—you call it the love issue in your book—you say, “Get to ‘What is the relational issue?’—not the presenting issue or the circumstances that brought the love issue to the surface.”

**Sheila:** Exactly; that’s the number one mistake couples make—is that they debate that circumstance problem / set out a win/lose model—and then, someone is going to feel terrible instead of getting to the underlying thing: “What is it that we both are needing right now?”

**Dennis:** That’s one of my favorite questions to give to a guy, who is going: “I’m going out on a date with my wife. Can you give me a—coach me a little bit on a question or two I should ask her?” I said: “Yes; but don’t tell her I said to ask her this question—just ask her the question. Let it be from you, and make sure you really want to hear her answer.” The question I encourage most men to ask their wives is, “Sweetheart, what are your top three needs right now?” And then, make sure you *understand* what the need is she’s expressing.

I can tell you—from a lot of guys who’ve done that on a date with their wives—there has been a lengthy discussion that’s occurred that’s been very healthy for their marriage.

**Sheila:** And I think a wife, asking a husband that, too, is so important. Here’s something interesting—I did not always know what my needs were. We can *think* we know what our needs are, but often we don’t. So, here is another way of asking that same question say to your spouse: “When are you most frustrated? When are you most angry? What are the biggest things that frustrate you right now?” And often, there is a *link* between the things that we’re frustrated about and our needs.

I didn’t even realize—but a big need for me is to feel safe / to feel like I’m supported. And the times where I was often the most frustrated were the times where I felt like he would often just step back—I felt alone in that. When I realized: “Okay; wait! I’m frustrated right now because I’m feeling alone; and I’ve got some personal baggage

from my childhood, which makes me scared when I'm alone." When he realizes that—"Okay; I've got to come alongside her and really support her in that,"—but I didn't know that was a need of mine until we started analyzing: "When are you most frustrated?"

I think men, especially, don't always know what their needs are. So, to start talking about: "When are you most frustrated?"

"When do you get most anxious?" and "What can I do to help you through that?"—that's where we can sometimes know what are needs are.

**Bob:** Tell our listeners about Jonathan and Terri, the couple that had the house that was kind of a wreck; and it was driving him crazy. Do you know who I'm talking about?

**Sheila:** Yes; okay. So, here's a couple—she's got a toddler / she's pregnant with twins. They're going to be delivered in about two months, and she's *exhausted*. She's overwhelmed with the thought of, "How am I going to deal with *three* under the age of three?" And her husband is thinking: "Okay; now is a really good time to buy a house, because there is one that's really affordable," and "We need to get our finances right, because we're having these kids." The thought of moving is overwhelming to her.

So, here they are—and they are fighting about whether or not they should move. There is no way to win that fight because they simply have different perspectives. I mean, how are you supposed to win that? He's trying to prove to her that it makes financial sense to move. She's saying: "I don't care that it makes financial sense to move. I'm *exhausted*." There's no way to win.

But when you take a step back and say, "Okay; what is it that we *need* right now?"—he can say, "Well, I just need to feel like we've got a financial plan, and that we're financially secure, and we're making good decisions." And she can say, "Well, I need to feel like I'm not going to be overwhelmed when the babies come and that I'm going to get enough sleep."

Then, they can brainstorm together: "Okay; how can we meet each other's needs?" They may find a solution they never even thought of before—you know: "Let's ask friends to bring over casseroles," "Let's fill the freezer," "Let's get someone to come help you with the babies once a week," "Let's talk to a financial guy and make a budget,"—whatever it might be. When you start reframing the issue so that it's not about real estate—it's about emotional needs—then, it's so much easier to make that peace.

**Bob:** Well, you talked about, maybe, getting a financial counselor to help.

I do think, when we get locked up in these kinds of issues—this is where other couples, and community, and having the opportunity to just be transparent with somebody and say, "You know, we're missing each other here. Can you help us?" Oftentimes, another

couple / some friends can say: “You know what? We’ve been through this. Here’s how it worked out for us.” They can help unlock you from the jigsaw puzzle you’re in.

**Sheila:** And Dennis—okay; your wife is a very good gardener; right? She loves putting colors together.

**Dennis:** She does.

**Sheila:** Now if someone who is 20 years younger than Barbara came to Barbara and said: “Oh, Barbara, I don’t know what to do with my front lawn. Can you just help me with some ideas?” Would Barbara like that?

**Dennis:** Well, not really about the lawn; because she’s not into growing a lawn. She’s into growing flowers.

**Bob:** If they wanted the garden and know how to grow hydrangeas for instance.

**Dennis:** Oh, yes; she’d be all over that.

**Sheila:** This is the thing—people that are good at something *love* telling other people how to do it—they do. And yet, you can’t just walk up to someone and say, “You know, I noticed your garden was really ugly; and I would like to help you,”—you can’t do that, because that’s rude. But if someone were to come to you, then you’d be like, “Yes; I’m all over it.”

We need to get this in our churches; because my husband and I—if a younger couple came up to us and said, “You know, we’re really struggling with how to get our kids to sleep at night,” I’d be like: “Yes, I can help you. I can fix this. This is amazing. I love giving advice about that.”

But you can’t just go up to a couple that you think is in trouble and say, “Hey, can I... I see that you’re struggling.” Younger couples, if you are listening to this, I guarantee you that if you identified some couples who are just a little bit older than you, who have a really great relationship, if you went up to them and said, “You know, we’re just struggling with a couple of issues right now, could you meet us for coffee?” that couple would be like all over that. But they can’t come to you, so you just need to come to them and just ask because people want to help.

**Dennis:** I want to put a double underline about what you just said. If more younger couples would reach out to an older, seasoned, more veteran couple and ask those kinds of questions, I think there’d be a lot of isolation defeated between husbands and wives that marriages would be in a much healthier growth position.

**Sheila:** It doesn’t matter if a couple hasn’t gone exactly through what you’ve gone through: they know how to communicate well; they know how to resolve conflict; they

know how to prioritize their relationship. So just go up to someone and ask them to be your mentors. I know—I know, as an older couple, I wish people would ask me; because I can see them struggling.

**Dennis:** A lot of older couples don't feel like they have anything to say and the younger couples won't ask the question, so it's a fascinating dilemma you find yourself in.

**Bob:** So help this younger couple. It's a couple you write about—she was a homeschooling mom of six, and the house was a wreck. The husband would come home. He couldn't get through the hallway, and was looking for a place to put his feet up, and there was nothing to do. It was driving him crazy to come home every day to a house that looked like this. His wife was just doing what she could to survive. How do they get on the same page?

**Sheila:** Yes; here's what I would say to that couple. They have very different things that they need in their house. She needs to feel like, as a homeschooling mom: "My kids are free to explore. If there's a microscope left out, if there's a few dead butterflies that we're dissecting left out, if there's some craft projects, that's a good thing; because its creativity. He's thinking, "When I come home, I just want some place to sit. I just want the couch to be cleared out so I can sit,"—that doesn't seem that unreasonable. They're fighting about this.

Here's what you do. You name your top five things that he needs for it to be to feel like home and the top five things she needs for it to feel like home. I find the top five things can work really well when you're having a disagreement like this. Maybe what he needs is the front hallway needs to be clear so that: "The first thing I see is not mess. I need the couch cleaned off. I need the kitchen table set and not have school projects on the kitchen table. I need dishes done,"—whatever it might be.

But she may say: "I need to have craft projects in the living room. I need to have our homeschool area. It's okay if it's a bit chaotic. I need to not always make the bed,"—whatever it is for her.

So: "Here's my top five," "Here's his top five." Then she honors his, and he honors hers; and we're good.

**Bob:** Well, okay; that sounds simple. [Laughter] But if she's been living one way—now, she's trying: "Okay; he wants this and he wants this. There's no way I can keep the kids if he wants the carpets vacuumed every day when he comes home / he wants to make sure the dishes are all done every day. I just can't do that with six kids!"

**Sheila:** Well, that's where you get your kids involved too. You just start getting a routine. Again, if you don't know how to do this, ask an older woman in your church if she will help you.

**Bob:** There you go; right?

**Sheila:** We had certain times a day where we cleaned up. We homeschooled; yes, the house gets really messy when you have that many people in it all the time. You just need to stay on top of it.

**Dennis:** I married a couple this past weekend. It's really fun because you look at this new couple, starting out, and you think, "There is so much optimism, so much hope, so much looking to the future. They have no idea what's ahead of them"; but you know what? If they are yielded to Jesus Christ, and using the Bible as their blueprints for building their marriage and family, they're going to do just fine. There will be some difficulty / there will be some dark valleys, but they will be able to achieve oneness in their marriage.

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We'd love to hear from you.

Thanks for listening. Thanks to Larry Loraine, Dennis Leake, Rhonda Street, and our entire broadcast team. We hope you've enjoyed the broadcast and that you'll be back for another edition of FamilyLife Today.

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