

CHRISTIAN "NICE GUYS"

Why does his heart appear so close to God but is in reality so far away? Because fear is in the driver's seat of his life. And his evil buddy, anxiety, is often in the backseat as well, telling him where to turn.

Christian men settle for a marriage based on rules, and a religion of checklists as well. Neither last very long since intimate relationships require vulnerability, trust and acceptance. Sadly, it takes some of these men numerous marriages and the destruction divorce creates to make them desperate enough to change. In a sense, they go through numerous gods as well before they see the one true God who wants our heart and all it represents, such as trusting faith—not a slavish adherence to dos and don'ts.

What's So Bad About Being Nice?

First things first. The most asked question I receive when I explain the *Christian Nice Guy* problem is "What's wrong with being nice?!" After all, the word is synonymous with being "kind, pleasant, respectful, friendly and considerate." That may be true, but the word has also meant "dainty, unable to endure much, strange, lazy, foolish and naive." It comes from a Latin root word for ignorant, or literally "not knowing." For most of history, calling someone

"nice" was an insult.

If nice Christians were genuinely kind, pleasant and respectful then life would be great since all three are virtues. But as you can probably tell by now, this isn't how many "nice" Christians actually live. They pretend to demonstrate such virtues.

For example, it is a *Nice Guy* trait to appear respectful when he refuses to argue with his wife. But he's not trying to be friendly or gracious. He's afraid of potential conflict. A married *Nice Guy* may keep his sexual desires to himself, appearing to be considerate to his wife's end-of-the-day exhaustion. But the real reason he behaves so is because he fears her potential rejection and possible hostility. His "niceness" is really cowardice in disguise. His same hiding takes place in his relationship with God.

He may sing praise songs in church and appear caring, but he means none of it. He's play acting and it's usually his wife who sees it first and who tells others at church about her husband's fake life. And to her astonishment, no one believes her because he's such a "nice" guy. Such wives walk on eggshells around their

by Paul
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A compelling study from the University of Virginia found that the single most important factor in women's marital happiness "is the level of their husbands' emotional engagement—not money, the division of household chores, or other factors."

This is great news for husbands who are emotionally alive, who as the expression goes, "know how to treat a woman." But for the kind of man I help, *Christian Nice Guys* who hide their fear and passivity behind a deceptive smile and fake demeanor, this study is a sobering wake up call that some refuse to hear, especially when tied to another startling statistic.

Wives over age forty file for divorce more than husbands, around 66 percent. And when asked why, the majority say a general "lack of love and appreciation." This is horrible news for *Nice Guys*, men who have a harder time giving and receiving love, and who often can't express appreciation given their stunted range of emotion.

Their inability to connect with others haunts their relationship with God as well. As a result, many "nice"

husbands. Some tell me that they think they're "going crazy."

Something Has a Hold on Him

Why does his heart appear so close to God but is in reality so far away? Because fear is in the driver's seat of his life. And his evil buddy, anxiety, is often in the backseat as well, telling him where to turn. And as long as overarching fear has him captive, he can forget about real closeness with his wife and God. He must deal fear a substantial blow because, though all of us are familiar with the potent truth that perfect love casts out fear (I John 4:18), the inverse is true as well—fear casts out love. Fear acts like plastic wrap around a *Nice Guy's* heart, crippling his ability to give and receive love. But real love requires moral courage and a certain toughness of soul, something we don't hear much about in church today. With the best of intentions, Christian men are encouraged to be nice to a fault, which forces them to be dishonest with their wives and God.

Origin of His Fear

I've explained how fear reduces a *Christian Nice Guy's* life to a lists of dos and donts and how checklists do not foster abiding love in marriage (don't be abusive, do hold down a job, don't yell at the kids, do get them to church on time) or abiding love and genuine faith in God (don't swear or drink, do give money, do sing-along during worship even when you disagree with the lyrics). Such men need to find out where their fear came from, since nice guys are made by life experiences. God did not give them their timid heart but wants to give them a spirit of power and self-control instead (2 Timothy 1:7).

Most *Nice Guys* received either a very conditional kind of love, or a pretty low-grade love, as kids. I sure did. I was emotionally and physically abused as a kid, which instilled in me a fearful mindset that for most of my life made me think that God was out to get me as well. I did what any normal person would do—try to appease God

with a list of good behaviors, hoping I could earn God's love instead of accepting it as a gift of mind-blowing grace, no strings attached.

It wasn't until I talked with a counselor who pointed out what fear does to a person's soul, that I was able to graduate from dos-and-don'ts-Christianity and really accept God's *agape* love, amazing grace and seemingly naïve forgiveness for those who turn from falsehood to truth. It was like being born again, *again*. My faith blossomed, as did my ability to love him and my neighbor better. Sometimes this love drew me into redemptive conflict with others, creating even greater closeness, which surprised me.

Brother, You've Got Soulwork to Do

Overarching fear is a smarmy liar. It is often *False Evidence* that Appears *Real (FEAR)* that suckers you into bad decisions. Consuming fear deceives you into forming a false understanding of who you are (you don't really matter), who God is (He's out to get you) and others (they are constantly critical of you). No wonder Jesus said that the devil "is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). This is why your battle for marital harmony and a faith worth having in God is a combination of psychological and spiritual transformation. So commit it today to prayer. Ask God to show you where this fear came from and for the strength to face it. When you face your fear, look for the lie and the deception it fosters that slants your thinking to worst-case scenarios.

Focus on Emotions, Not Rules

Guys, you must be willing to grow your emotions and then express them with your wife. If you don't, some other guy probably will. Remember those divorce statistics? A lot of men still think that expressing emotions makes them appear weak. Not so. Not only does exposing your emotions make you more like Jesus, who was more emotional than those around him, but it makes you feel alive in ways you never could before.

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Emotions, properly handled, can make you more manly and attractive. They grow our souls. They make us more loving, protective, authentic, honest, faithful and optimistic, which is important since *Nice Guys* often suffer from undisclosed depression, addiction and even impotency, which is caused in part by repressed anger, another *CNG* characteristic.

Write down the 10 most impacting events of your life. Travel the spectrum from happy (wedding night) to sad (the day Buddy your dog died). Then share them with your wife over the next two months on date nights. In addition to sharing the facts of these events, share how they made you feel. If tears come, so be it. You'll feel so much better afterward and she'll find you more knowable and loveable.

Quit being so safe with God and start wrestling with him. God gave Jacob the name Israel after wrestling with his supernatural antagonist (Genesis 32), an agent of God or perhaps even God himself, and won. Converse with God. Ask him questions that have eaten you up inside. But like Job, be willing to listen.

Jacob and Job argued with God because they loved him and could trust him, though they didn't always understand him. Tangle with God. He loves that holy and intimate behavior. □

Paul and Sandy Coughlin are the authors of Married But Not Engaged: Why Men Check out and What You Can Do to Create the Intimacy You Desire, which helps Christian Nice Guy marriages grow and deepen. For more information about the Christian Nice Guy problem, read No More Christian Nice Guy or visit Christianniceguy.com.