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Never Alone: Devotions for Couples

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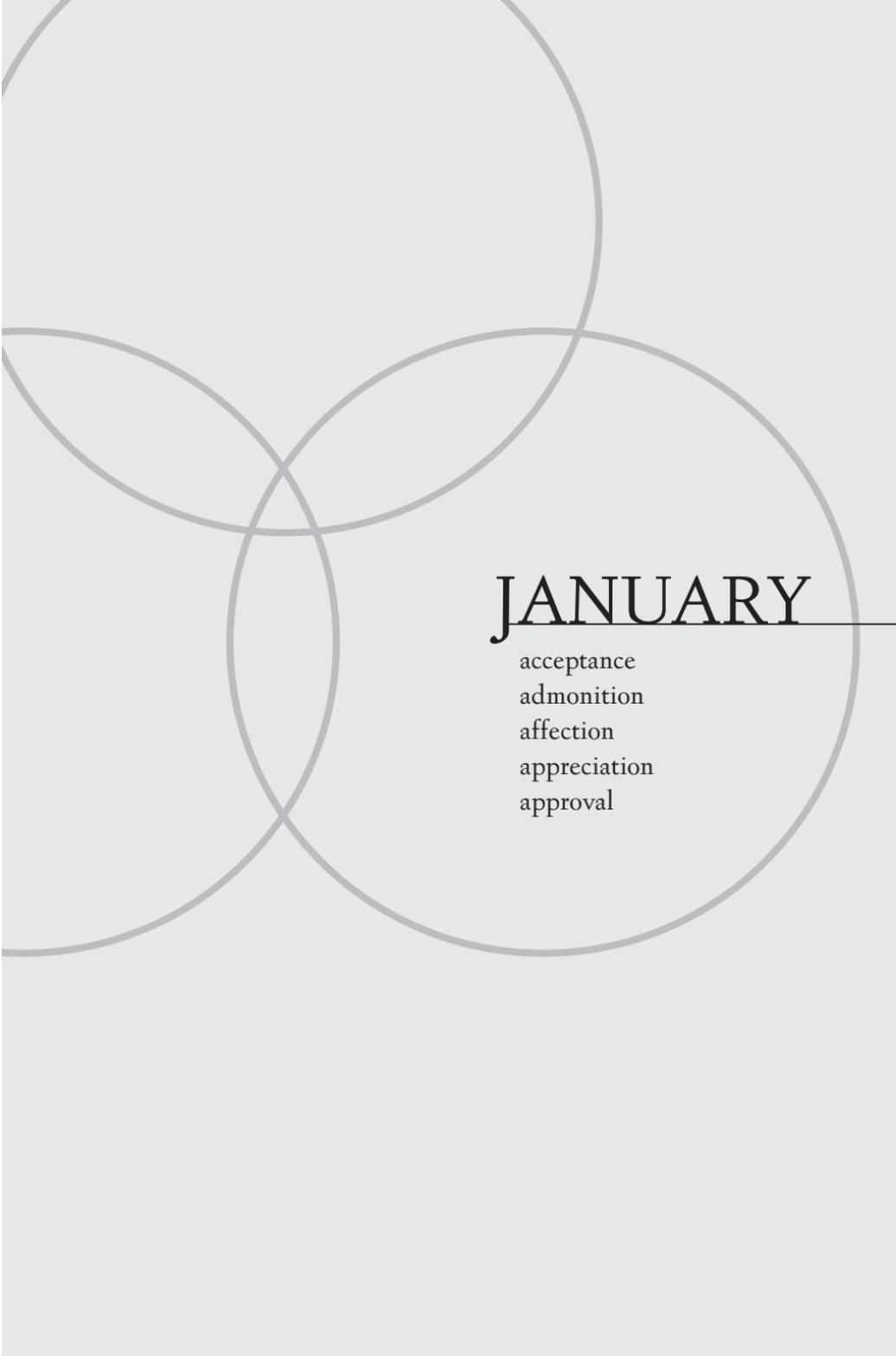
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JANUARY

acceptance
admonition
affection
appreciation
approval

A Deliberate, Unconditional, and Positive Response

Accept one another. Romans 15:7, NIV

My (Teresa's) ability to show acceptance of another is contingent upon my deep knowledge of a loving and accepting Christ. If I am to accept my spouse as Christ has accepted me, then I need to understand His wonderful love for me.



God, please help me to “look beyond” my spouse’s flaws and imperfections and unconditionally and deliberately love this person, just as You have unconditionally and deliberately loved me.

God made a deliberate choice to allow Christ to die on my behalf. It wasn't a convenient or easy choice, either. It was a choice that prioritized the relationship between my heavenly Father and me, His child. Christ took the initiative when He came to “seek and save the lost” (Luke 19:10). He didn't wait for me to “get my act together.” Rather, He looked beyond my actions and sins and accepted me as I was. This acceptance is unconditional and permanent. There is nothing I can do to earn it or lose it.

God demonstrated this unconditional acceptance when He looked beyond my faults to see my need. He didn't excuse my sin but instead gave the best He had as a remedy for that sin.

This kind of “looking beyond” makes marriage work, too.

Accepting my spouse as Christ has accepted me means making a choice. It won't be convenient or easy. It will mean taking some initiative. It may mean being the first to say, “Honey, I love you.” It may mean not waiting until he changes to tell him how glad I am to be his wife.

Unconditionally accepting my spouse means looking beyond differences, disagreements, and disputes. It means looking beyond irritations, personality flaws, and idiosyncrasies. It even means looking beyond wrongs and sins committed—not to excuse these things, but to see his worth in spite of them.

In what ways can you daily demonstrate your deliberate and unconditional love for your spouse?

Acceptance Begins with Him

Accept one another, then, just as Christ has accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. Romans 15:7, NIV

My wife is so different from me. I (David) am laid back and tend to go with the flow, while she's very punctual, even to the point of being compulsive about being on time. I'm flexible—maybe even a little oblivious to details—while she's a perfectionist. I'm quiet and reserved, while she's outgoing and likes lots of attention.

When my life gets stressful, these differences between us can make my wife seem—from my perspective—impatient, critical, and loud. Those character traits are difficult for me to accept.

I have learned, however, that acceptance doesn't mean condoning someone's behavior. It simply means looking deeper than someone's actions to see that person's true worth, just as God does with me when He sees my sin. Christ looked beyond Zacchaeus's selfishness and greed and offered kindness and warmth. Jesus separated Peter's impulsiveness and cowardly betrayal from his worth. Christ talked with the woman at the well, a woman who lived year after year in habitual sin, and offered her freedom because He saw her need for unconditional love.

Have I ever been selfish or greedy in my marriage? Undoubtedly! I've even cheated my wife out of undivided attention and stolen her joy at times. Have I ever acted without thinking or spoken without caution? Absolutely! Have I ever betrayed a confidence or trust? Are there sins I live with year after year? Yes!

And yet, despite these imperfections and sins, God still accepts me and offers me kindness and compassion.

As I look beyond Teresa's manner, my gratitude for her as a special and loving helpmate continues to grow. But that happens only as I remind myself of how Christ accepts me despite my own shortcomings.



*Lord, may my
gratitude for Your
unconditional
acceptance of me
prompt within me
today a joyful
acceptance of
my spouse.*

In what ways can you continually remind yourself of your spouse's true worth, despite that person's imperfections?

I'm a 10!

For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. Hebrews 10:14, NASB

I (Teresa) had always been critical of myself—and of everyone else, for that matter.



***Lord, help me put
down the tally
sheet and
magnifying glass
I hold over my
spouse.***

The way I understood God, He was up in heaven with a great big magnifying glass and tally sheet, inspecting every move I made. When I went to church or did a good deed, He'd make a mark on His tally sheet. But on that same sheet, He'd make a mark for every blunder, sin, or imperfection. I believed that my net number of "good" marks determined how much of God's love and acceptance I would receive.

This faulty perception of God had a huge impact on my marriage. I believed that since God was constantly inspecting me and looking for faults, then surely I should inspect my husband just as closely.

In the midst of one of my inspections, I said some really hurtful things to David. Immediately, I knew I needed to confess this sin to God and ask for forgiveness.

In times past, as I confessed my sins to God and told Him how bad I'd been, I would have expected a halfhearted response: "Okay, Teresa," I could hear God reluctantly saying. "I'll forgive you. I'll mark your confession on the tally sheet, and we'll let it go this time."

But this time, my heavenly Father very gently said, "I know what you've done. You're forgiven, Teresa."

When I heard God's truth—that He already knows my sins and accepts me anyway—a burden was lifted. I realized that God doesn't hold a magnifying glass and tally sheet over me. Instead, He holds the crown of thorns that His Son wore and the nails that pierced His hands and feet.

I saw God as He really is: the heavenly Father who sees me as one being perfected because of the Cross.

How have your wrong perceptions of God affected your relationship with your spouse?

Acceptance in a Sycamore Tree

Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today. Luke 19:5, NIV

Zacchaeus—a hated tax collector, a traitor to his own people, and a thief—was no doubt often ridiculed and attacked for his sins. Lonely and curious, he climbed a tree to get a good look at this “Messiah.” He had to wonder if Jesus would notice him. And if He did, would He too reject him?

What a miracle Christ’s call must have been to this outcast!

Our Savior called Zacchaeus to fellowship with Him by the sharing of a meal, which was one of the most intimate social settings of the day. This was a deliberate offer of welcome, reception, and loving relationship.

In the midst of Zacchaeus’s failures, Jesus offered compassion, companionship, and acceptance. It’s interesting to note what Jesus didn’t do that day: He didn’t attack the tax collector’s behavior, point out things that were wrong with him, or even give helpful advice. He didn’t remind Zacchaeus of what he should be doing or criticize him for not taking more responsibility. Jesus didn’t quote Scripture to Zacchaeus or make comparisons with other tax collectors in town. He didn’t try to manipulate change or withhold affection.

I (Teresa) want to respond to David the way Christ responded to Zacchaeus. As I encounter David’s inevitable failures, I want to be free from the impulse to be critical and give advice. I want to say words that are tender and welcoming, rather than judgmental and comparing. I want to make certain that the “welcome mat” is always out. To be like Christ will mean that I consistently invite David to fellowship with me.

I want to respond to David with words and actions that invite him to “come down out of the tree.” After all, it gets awfully lonely up there!



***God, remind me
to look to You
as my example as
I respond to the
imperfections
of others.***

What steps can you take today to replace words of judgment, comparison, complaint, and criticism with words of unconditional acceptance and love?

Welcome Home!

Anyone who welcomes you is welcoming me, and anyone who welcomes me is welcoming the Father who sent me. Matthew 10:40, NLT

When Jesus returns to His hometown with His disciples, they file into the back of the Nazareth synagogue where He had worshiped as a child. The priest has just finished his closing remarks, and the musicians begin to lead the people in a song of worship: “Praises to Jehovah! Hosanna to the Lord our God!”



**Lord, remind me
daily to welcome
You by welcoming
the spouse You
have sent to me.**

The Savior is overwhelmed with feelings of joy and gratitude. He is in the company of His family and friends, and together they are worshiping the one true God.

Before anyone has a chance to move, Jesus begins to speak. He teaches with uncommon boldness and clarity about the God they have just studied in the Scriptures.

When Jesus finishes teaching, the people leave the synagogue a little bewildered. A few of the neighbors come to shake His hand. Some of the synagogue officials extend to Him an uncomfortable, “Thanks for being with us today.” But the Savior reads their hearts, which are filled with questions such as, “Who does He think He is? Isn’t He just a carpenter’s son?” Scripture puts it this way: “And they took offense at Him” (Matthew 13:57, NASB).

Can you feel the rejection? Jesus is in His hometown, the place where He should be most accepted, yet His friends and neighbors take offense at Him and in their hearts put up a sign that clearly reads, “Unwelcome.”

Would you have offered Jesus acceptance and welcome in that situation, or would you have put up the “Unwelcome” sign? Before you answer that question, think about these words of Jesus: “Anyone who welcomes you is welcoming me.”

When I (Teresa) accept my husband, I am accepting Christ, who sent him to me. Every time I welcome David, I am saying, “Welcome” to the Lord.

In what ways can you daily accept and welcome your spouse into your life?

Just As I Am

Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? Matthew 7:3, NIV

I (Teresa) grew up in a family that valued routine and schedules. However, my husband's family was much more laid back. Both of his parents worked, and their routines were never the same each day.

Because of this difference in upbringing, when David and I married, our expectations clashed like brown shoes with a tuxedo. For example, I'd cook David's favorite dishes for dinner, just certain that he'd come through the door promptly at 5:30 each day, kiss the kids and me on the cheek, and sit down to a family dinner. But on more nights than I care to count, I'd end up with a tapping foot, a disgusted look on my face, and a cold dinner in the oven as I waited for my husband to come home.

Looking back, I have realized that I didn't respond well to the situation. In fact, I was pretty intolerant. I had come to view David's seeming lack of appreciation for my cooking as absolutely unacceptable. But God showed me that this wasn't necessarily David's problem. In His gentle voice, He prompted me with these thoughts one day: *Teresa, could it be that the intolerance you have for David's schedule has actually become a "plank in your eye"? Don't worry about the speck in his. Your lack of acceptance of David's differences is a part of the conflict between the two of you.*

I still need David to keep me informed about when he's coming home, and I need some "thank you's" every now and then. But each late dinner is a reminder to me to accept David as he is rather than trying to change him to be like me.



*God, help me
accept my spouse
as he or she is,
focusing instead
on the changes
I need to make
in my own life.*

What changes might God be trying to make in you, using your spouse's flaws and shortcomings as the tools to make those changes?

Accepting an Imperfect Person

God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Romans 5:8

This verse tells us that Christ died for us even though we were sinners. The best word in this verse is “while.” He died for me *while* I (David) was still rebellious and hostile to the things of God.



**Heavenly Father,
keep me aware
that real love is an
unconditional
commitment to an
imperfect person.**

We are to love our spouses in the same way Christ loved us. We are to love them even though they are imperfect and sinful. How do we do that, you ask? By reflecting on the fact that He first loved us.

Most couples go through several stages in their marriage before they reach the ability to commit to loving a real and admittedly imperfect person. It takes a while for some couples to stop trying to change one another and to choose to accept one another *while* both are still sinners.

Which stage are you in?

Romantic Stage: You see your spouse as perfect, as everything you need.

Bargaining Stage: Your spouse surely isn’t perfect, and you will change if your spouse does.

Coercive Stage: You will change your spouse, whether or not he or she likes it.

Desperation Stage: You give up trying to change your spouse, believing that person will never change.

Romantic Realism: You are finally at a point where you can live out Romans 5:8 and love your spouse, who sees and admits his or her own imperfections. This stage of marriage is summed up with this kind of vow:

“I take you to be my spouse with full knowledge that you will sometimes disappoint me gravely and hurt me deeply. In spite of all your weaknesses and failures, I commit myself to loving you. I am able to do this because of the acceptance of Christ, who loved me and died for me while I was still a sinner.”

In what ways can you demonstrate unconditional love for your spouse?

Constructive Guidance

Do nothing out of selfish ambition . . . but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Philippians 2:3, NIV

Admonition: constructive guidance in what to avoid; warning.

That definition of admonition has a positive feel to it. But I (Teresa) must admit that my admonitions have not always sounded so positive. I readily confess that I'm a take-charge kind of person. David has called this my "whip and drive" mode of operation, and it has at times been a point of contention in our marriage. No matter how good my intentions may be, sometimes my tendency to "whip and drive" overshadows my well-meaning attempts to give constructive guidance.

I certainly had the best intentions when I warned David about the speed traps lurking around the next turn in the road. I really didn't want to see him get another ticket. But, unfortunately, David didn't receive my admonitions as positive or constructive guidance. I suppose my technique needed some work. I don't think I used the most positive words when I said, "David, slow down! Didn't you see the speed limit sign back there? You're going way too fast for this neighborhood."

David might have sensed that I was sharing these words because of my own agenda. I didn't want to hassle with the insurance company. I didn't want to be stopped by the police and embarrassed once again. I didn't want David to have to be gone another Saturday for a defensive-driving course.

I must admit, my attempt at admonition that day was all about me. Me! Me! Me!

I finally decided to stop trying to control David's driving and let God do the admonishing. When I did that, I soon discovered that not only was he more responsive to my warnings, but I was freer to focus on all the things he does right.

That's what true admonition looks like!



*Heavenly Father,
help me work on
the way I present
my constructive
guidance. Give me
the right words,
tone of voice,
and timing.*

What steps can you take to be certain that your motivation for admonishing your spouse is true care and concern for him or her?

Admonition in the Garden

The day that you eat from [this tree] you shall surely die.

Genesis 2:17, NASB

Remember God's admonition to Adam? What an act of love it was for God to warn him!



*Father, help me
to examine my
motives before I
speak admonitions
to my spouse.*

A few years ago, I (David) would have never been able to say that it was “loving” of God to warn Adam about the tree. Instead, I saw this warning as God depriving Adam, as dangling the proverbial carrot in front of the man then yanking it away.

I have since come to realize that God's warning was an act of profound love for humankind.

The truth is that God created an incredible paradise for Adam and provided generously for his every need and desire. He placed only one limitation on mankind: There was one tree in the midst of the garden that Adam was not to touch, for God knew that if Adam ate from it, he and all the generations to follow would be destined for pain.

God put the tree in the garden because He wanted the man to choose a relationship of mutual love. Had there been no “forbidden tree,” there would have been no choice, and the man would have obeyed God simply because there was no alternative. God warned Adam about the tree because He didn't want him harmed or separated from Him. What an awesome God!

As we travel the narrow path that leads to life, we must remember that God's admonitions are always clear and in our best interest. His warnings serve to protect us, to shield us, and to defend us from harm, not to place limits on us.

Our admonitions of one another should be the same.

When I feel prompted to admonish Teresa, I must first thoroughly check my heart to see that my motivation is right. I have to ask myself if I'm motivated to speak out of her best interest and a concern for her well-being, or if I'm speaking out of my own selfish desires for convenience, retaliation, judgment, or accusation.

How can you be absolutely certain that your heart is truly in the right place when you feel the need to admonish your spouse?

A Voice of Admonition

You also are full of goodness . . . [and] knowledge, able also to admonish one another. Romans 15:14

Like the proverbial sheep, I (Teresa) tend to wander among the conflicting pulls on my life. For that reason, I rejoice often that I've not been left without God's admonitions.

I have a tendency to be self-reliant and stubborn. I sometimes ignore God's guidance, thinking all the while that I can handle my problems on my own. And just when I've needed it the most—and when I've finally admitted it—God has been there to lovingly see me through.

I know others of God's sheep who have a tendency to blatantly ignore the admonitions of the Shepherd. They take risks, almost seemingly "daring" God to save them at their most dire moment of need. Still other sheep have a mind-set that says, "What's the point of following God's guidance? I don't know that He cares about me one way or another."

All of these sheep—including me—have the wrong idea about God. The Great Shepherd has promised that He will guide and direct us through His Spirit and His written Word. Our only responsibility is to pay heed to His wonderful guidance and direction.

God has also provided us with other sheep who can serve as voices of His guidance. Among those "other sheep" He has provided are our spouses. Because Jesus lives within the heart of my husband, God actually uses him to guide me and instruct me.

The Bible says that because David has a relationship with Christ, he is "full of goodness and knowledge." Therefore, I want to hear the admonitions for me that God has laid on my husband's heart.



Father, make my heart sensitive to Your admonishing voice and to the voice of my spouse, whom You involve to bring me warnings and correction.

What factors can keep you from heeding words of admonition that come through your spouse? What can you do to overcome those factors?

Who Needs Admonition?

I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children. 1 Corinthians 4:14, NASB

“Sweetheart, do you really want to go down the interstate?”

It was an innocent enough question. Teresa was just trying to help us make our social engagement on time. So what was my response?

“I’ll get us there,” I replied sharply and sarcastically.



Father, please grant me a heart that is soft and receptive enough to receive loving admonition from my spouse.

Why did I (David) react with such quick anger? Because although I need admonition, I tend to resist it. To me, constructive guidance implies that I don’t know everything, that my way is not perfect. That truth is hard for me to swallow.

At that moment, I began to reflect on how God had encouraged me to relate to my children. I had warned them about climbing on the stairs and crossing the street. I had admonished them about their attitudes with teachers and motives with friends at school. Did I do those things because I wanted to make my kids miserable or spoil their fun? Of course not! Did I say those things to expose my children’s ignorance? No way! My motivation for these admonitions was love. I didn’t want my kids to get hurt or to hurt others.

My next thought was the most sobering. As I examined my interactions with my kids over the years, I realized that they have had a much more teachable spirit than I’ve had. For the most part, they have received and followed my instructions and warnings.

I wondered if I could cultivate this same willingness to receive instruction, if I could have a more teachable spirit.

At that moment, I asked God to make me more childlike in spirit and more willing to receive admonition from the spouse He had lovingly placed in my life.

What steps can you take to allow your heart to be receptive to the admonition God brings through your spouse?

Warning: Trouble Ahead

He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way.

Psalm 25:9, NIV

There are many warning signs in life. Signs that read “DO NOT ENTER,” “DON’T WALK,” “CAUTION,” or “DANGER AHEAD” are put in place to help us avoid dangerous situations.

I (David) must confess that I have a difficult time heeding warning signs. I see “CAUTION—ICE ON BRIDGE” and speed on, only to slide out of control. I see “DON’T WALK” and think, *Oh, I’ll ignore this warning just this once!* I see “DANGER AHEAD” and barrel on through, oblivious to the hazards that lay ahead.

In His written Word, the Bible, God has given me plenty of warnings to help me avoid danger zones in my marriage. I have to admit that there have been times when I failed to pay heed to those warnings as well. For example, in Ephesians, He tells me to “let no unwholesome word proceed from [my] mouth,” but only those that “give grace” (4:29, NASB). But I have to wonder how many fights with Teresa I could have avoided had I only paid attention to this warning. In 1 Timothy, God tells me to avoid the foolish pursuit of money (6:9-10). But I wonder how many conflicts I could have avoided had I given priority to my relationship with my wife and not to money.

The Word of God gives us all the guidance we need to keep our relationships—relationships with imperfect people, including our spouses—on the right track. It is in that Word that we find not just encouragement to do what we should, but warnings against what we should avoid.



God, let me approach Your Word with openness and with humility in spirit. Make me teachable and receptive to the guidance and warning signs within that Word.

In your reading of God’s Word, what admonitions have you seen that you can apply to your marriage?

Where Do Your Loyalties Lie?

Guard yourself; always remain loyal to your [spouse].

Malachi 2:16, NLT

My (Teresa's) family had just left after the holiday celebration. The house was finally quiet, but David seemed unusually withdrawn.



God, help me to remember that aside from my relationship with You, I am to place my relationship with my spouse above all others.

"Sweetheart," I asked, "what's bothering you?" David began to tell me about how he felt left out and unprioritized during my family's visit, and about how he was the last to receive my attention whenever my relatives were around. He spoke with gentleness, but his words cut to the bone as he said, "Teresa, I just need to know that you care about me, even when your family is around. I need to know that I'm your top priority."

I listened intently, but I had a hard time receiving his words. My immediate response was defensive: "You've always had a hard time fitting in with my family. I just pay a lot of attention to them because I don't get to see them very often." I could see that all my excuses wouldn't make the hurt in his eyes go away.

I called a friend that evening to talk about my predicament. "Amy," I said, "several of my brothers and sisters are hearing impaired, so there are many times when most of the communication is in sign language. David doesn't know sign language, so it's tough to involve him in everything. Besides, isn't he just being oversensitive?"

My friend listened for a while and then gently reminded me that my husband needed me to be his wife first, and a daughter or sister second. She reminded me that he needed the reassurance that I thought of him first, before my relatives. He needed me to sit beside him and include him in family conversations. He needed me to make sure *his* glass of tea was filled and that I carefully prepared *his* pumpkin pie.

What acts of love can you perform to assure your spouse that he or she is your number one earthly priority?