Bob: So what happens when a nice girl marries a nice guy? They should have a nice marriage, right? Sandy Coughlin says that isn't the way it always turns out.

Sandy: You look around in churches and at work and there's always guys that women will say, "He is such a nice guy, he's such a nice guy, he smiles all the time." And so that was definitely Paul with some other wonderful qualities. But what I didn't realize was that he was passive, and so he was hiding behind a lot of things in life. I did not have a clue about that.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Thursday, January 10th. Our host is the president of FamilyLife, Dennis Rainey, and I'm Bob Lepine. If you married a nice guy and found things aren't as nice as you thought they were going to be, stay with us.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today, thanks for joining us. If you met a young lady who was engaged to be married, and you said, "Well, tell me about your fiancee," and she said, "Oh, he is a really, really nice guy." You would think, "Well, that's great," wouldn't you?

Dennis: Even a Christian nice guy?

Bob: Well, yeah, if he's a Christian, he's a really nice guy, that should be the perfect marriage, shouldn't it?

Dennis: You'd think that would be all a young lady would want.

Bob: Right, but we're going to find out today that there can be problems if you marry a nice guy.

Dennis: Well, actually, we're going to find out there is no more Christian nice guy. Paul and Sandy Coughlin join us on FamilyLife Today. Sandy, Paul, welcome to the broadcast.
Paul: Thanks for having us.

Sandy: Thank you for having us.

Dennis: Paul and Sandy live in Medford, Oregon, and Paul hosts a radio program up there and speaks nationwide, has a prolific writing ministry and has just finished a book – they've finished a book called "Married but not Engaged," and subtitled, "Why Men Check Out and What you Can do to Create the Intimacy you Desire."

Now, the reason Bob kind of went off on this "no more Christian nice guy" is that Paul authored a book by that title.

Paul: That's right.

Dennis: And you found that resonates with the audience today.

Paul: Absolutely. It was written toward men, it's written in a style that, you know, is straightforward to the matter and men tend to like that style of writing. What was interesting is that many women read the book as well, and they said, "Paul, thank you very much for explaining the Christian nice guy problem." It's not real niceness, it's fake niceness that I'm writing about, not real kindness, which is, of course, is a virtue. I'm writing about fake niceness, this hiding behind a mask in life so people don't know really who you are.

Well, I wrote a book that explains why that happens to some men and the women readers said, "Thank you very much. Now what do I do if I'm married to a Christian nice guy?" So Sandy and I wrote a book together.

Bob: Now, Sandy, were you married to a Christian nice guy?

Sandy: I was. I was married to one, but I didn't know it at the time, because when Paul and I got married, he was nice. And I thought, you know, this is …

Dennis: You thought it was the real deal.

Sandy: This is great. But we didn't really figure this out until a few years into our marriage how the repercussions of his niceness and what it was doing to us.

Bob: Okay, I'm still – I understand fake niceness versus real niceness a little bit, but explain to me what's wrong with being married to the kind of nice guy that your husband is talking about.
Sandy: Well, I think sometimes we mistake niceness as an inner quietness, you know, somebody who is really quiet, smiles all the time, just pleasing, goes with the flow, they’re the nicest guy at work, they’re the nicest guy at church, and you say, “Oh, wow, he is such a nice guy. He smiles all the time.”

Dennis: Right.

Sandy: And so that was definitely Paul with some other wonderful qualities. But what I didn't realize was that he was passive, and so he was hiding behind a lot of things in life I did not have a clue about that.

Dennis: So to further unpack this concept of no more Christian nice guy, you are actually – what you're saying is the guy is not real.

Sandy: Exactly.

Dennis: He doesn't really let you into the interior of his heart. It's veneer, and you never get beyond the surface.

Sandy: Right.

Dennis: When did you discover that you were only getting the veneer, and you weren't really getting below the surface in Paul's life?

Sandy: It was actually pretty soon into our marriage that it happened. I found myself walking on eggshells a lot, but I didn't realize why. And if I would try to express my feelings, he was not able to take those feelings and try to understand where I was heading with them.

Bob: Okay, now, I wouldn't think, Paul, if somebody is married to a nice guy that she has to walk on eggshells.

Paul: You wouldn't think so, would you, but it's true because nice guys don't want to be known. Nice guys aren't real. They are nice not because they're virtuous but because they lack virtue. They will not disagree with you. I would not disagree with someone not because I cared so much about whether or not it hurt them, but I couldn't stand conflict. So I would just submerge – literally submerge who I was around other people because of fear. Fear was in the driver's seat of my life, and so in regards to relationships, it's not my proudest moment in life, but I feared my own emotions. I feared particularly negative emotions.

Dennis: Like anger?

Paul: Anger, sadness, in particular, those things – I just – I didn't know what to do with them.
Dennis: Were you afraid you'd lose control?

Paul: Not so much that. What it did is it flooded me with some pretty bad memories as a kid, and so Sandy would express negative emotions. I mean, news flash, there's negative emotions in marriage. You know, you've got to learn how to handle them, you've got to know how to deal with those emotions, right? It's just human, that's what happens.

Well, I couldn't stand negative feelings of my own, and then when Sandy would express them, and I learned this at Marriage Encounter, Sandy would express negative emotions, and Mr. Passive – I would get very aggressive on one thing – negative emotions coming toward me. So I would shut them down right away, right? Everything had to be logical and reasonable, as if she married a Star Trek Vulcan, right? That's largely what she did.

Of course, that's what women want, right, in marriage? Is someone who has no emotions, and so I would work really hard to shut her emotions down because I just didn't know how to handle them. They're very frightening things to me.

Bob: So give me an example of what this would look like. Do you remember a time when she got …

Paul: Well, she would get upset and rightly so because, you know, our people marry their people, you know, passive guys tend to marry assertive women. My wife could teach assertiveness training classes, you know, that's just what happens. It's such a common dynamic.

Well, she, not being fearful or anxious about things, in general, would just look at life from a much more healthy, non-cloudy way, and then when I would behave in a hidden manner, which is what Christian nice guy is all about, she would point it out, and then she would point out how she felt during those times, and that it was upsetting to her, and instead of me acknowledging those upset feelings, I would go after it and say, "Oh, well, no, that's not true. Oh, no, don't get emotional. We need to be reasonable about this."

Dennis: You'd discredit her emotions?

Sandy: Exactly.

Paul: Absolutely, absolutely. It was wrong. You know, it's cruel. It is cruel to do that to a person, but I didn't know it.

Bob: Do you remember a time?
Sandy: Well, when it really came to light, as Paul mentioned a couple of minutes ago, was when we went to Marriage Encounter, and we were forced to spend three days together and to write out our feelings. So that was huge in our marriage, and that was pretty early on in our marriage, and so we were forced to deal with this, and this is when I believe Paul realized what his pattern had been with shutting down my feelings in the past.

Bob: You had to be a little confused just in yourself thinking, "I married this guy who is a nice guy. Now it feels like I'm married to a guy, and there is wall around him that I can't get over, but he's such a nice guy," you had to think what's wrong here and why isn't this relationship working?

Sandy: It was frustrating.

Dennis: And, you know, when men aren't men – that frustrates women.

Sandy: Yes, it does.

Paul: Absolutely, it hurts kids, too.

Dennis: Oh, it does? But this culture is not friendly to men who act like real men, and I'm not talking about macho men.

Paul: I know what you're saying.

Dennis: I'm talking about the essence of masculinity, which his initiating and, yes, expressing emotion and yet this culture is trying to turn men into passive males who appear to be – I hate to use a biblical term – but I don't mean it as I'm speaking of Christ – meek and mild.

Paul: Yeah, absolutely.

Dennis: I believe Jesus was totally masculine and meek and mild at the same time, but He wasn't passive.

Paul: No, and we have to ask – He said Himself that He was meek and lowly of spirit, but we have to ask ourselves, what was He meek toward? The word "meek" is also synonymous with being submissive and yielding. You cannot read the Gospels and tell me that Jesus was yielding and submissive to the will of man. Rather, he was yielding and submissive to the will of God.

So we've got to be very careful when we think about the word "meek" with Him. It's not the kind of meekness that we often use in order to, frankly, avoid conflict.
Dennis: Right. Where did you get your concept of passivity then? Was that learned as a little boy growing up? Did your mom punish you as you began to emerge as a young man?

Paul: Yeah, well, yeah, absolutely. I wish it were punishment. It was more like cruelty. It wasn't discipline, you know, it was so mercurial. You never knew from one day to the next what to expect as a young man. I would come home from school, and I didn't know whether I was going to be hit or hugged. I don't know if I remember too many hugs, but I do remember getting thrown across the room.

You know, I'm not a robot. That does something to a person, right? So what I did is largely submerge my emotions because if I allowed my emotions to come up, if I allowed who I was to exist in a room, that may not match what she wanted. So I had to learn to be a chameleon in order to simply just survive.

The motto of a nice guy – "If I live small my troubles will be few." Nice guys are made not born. Paul wrote to Timothy, "God did not give you a spirit of timidity but of power and self control." I was given a spirit of timidity, and I had to confront that spirit of timidity in order to be more the man you spoke about previously.

Bob: Sandy, did it dawn on you at all when you were dating Paul that the wall was there?

Sandy: Oh, no.

Dennis: Did you ever meet his mom?

Sandy: I did.

Dennis: Never saw anything taking place there and their interaction that tipped you off that maybe …

Sandy: No, because he lived down – we lived farther – we lived five hours away, so we had a few visits to his home.

Bob: But here is where I think of the dating time, which is where you're starting to get to know one another. But here is a guy who doesn't let you get to know him – or did he, during the dating period?

Sandy: Yes, I do believe that he allowed me in.

Paul: I allowed you in to a point. I wouldn't allow complete access because I thought I might get hurt.

Bob: So it was let enough of the veneer down to snag the wife.
Paul: You put it that way?

[laughter]

Bob: I mean, is that what it was?

Paul: You know, I have some of the charm of the Irish, I suppose, and so I do know how to do that side of things. Now, here is the wild thing, Bob. I didn't know I was doing this. You know, Paul talks about the sins that you know you're committing and the sins that you don't know you're committing.

These were sins I didn't know I was committing. I just didn't know. I had to receive additional insight to see it, and then, from there, to be freed from it.

Bob: So you let enough of the wall down that she's attracted, and you get married. Then, at that point, does the wall go back up? Do you reinforce or do you say, "I'm okay to here, but don't go beyond that."

Paul: I don't think I tried to reinforce it. I think, at that point, when you're in a young marriage, things are new, you have two lives coming together, and you're hoping that they dovetail but in many cases, it's more like a collision, right? And so you have – Sandy wanted to get closer, wanted more intimacy. I would only take it to a point. I was just afraid to go further because I thought I'd get hurt if I opened up.

Bob: Did you not recognize even in the dating relationship that, again, there's just – you can only go so far with this guy, and then he kind of backs off? Didn't you see some of the passivity or some of the nice guy in him?

Sandy: You know, Bob, I grew up in a church where there were plenty of Christian nice guys. So what I saw in Paul fit what I knew.

Dennis: You thought all guys were like that?

Sandy: I did, I did. Or, if they weren't, I thought they should be.

Dennis: And you get into a marriage relationship where it's a permanent commitment, and now his veneer and passivity begin to frustrate you.

Sandy: Exactly.

Dennis: What do most women do with that passivity? Not only what you did, but what have you see other women do with that kind of passivity?

Sandy: Well, Paul and I call it the "bazooka of shame."
Dennis: The bazooka of what?

Sandy: Shame.

Dennis: Oh.

Sandy: Yeah, it's very easy for women to want to correct their husbands and to – I was pretty assertive so …

Paul: You still are, baby.

Sandy: Yeah.

Bob: You're saying you're skilled with the bazooka of shame.

Sandy: I was.

Dennis: Give us an illustration of how you would have shamed ball at point-blank range.

Sandy: Okay, all right. Probably a church situation would have been – we're not praying together like we should be. We should be going to church more, we should be doing this, we should be doing that, because I would look at maybe our pastor or somebody else, thinking, you know, this is the way it should be.

Dennis: You're using Christian language then.

Sandy: I'm using Christian language – very easy to over-spiritualize.

Paul: One time I was teaching from the Gospel of John. We were talking about it, and I had said something, and then Sandy says to me, "Well, that's not the way the pastor said it."

That is a very difficult thing to handle as a man. This is a long time ago, so it's not all that painful, but it was painful back then. But that just takes a Christian nice guy, because we're not prone to step up to begin with, right, not prone to do that. So it's kind of like a mini miracle when a Christian nice guy tries to be more assertive, more leadership-oriented, and when you do that and you get shot at, boy, you're going to be 10 times less likely to do it in the future.

Dennis: I've got to be right now we're talking to a lot of wives who are married to the nice guy and, frankly, I don't know what your thoughts are on this, Paul or Sandy, but it seems to me their love, their acceptance, their belief, their
patience in their husband is one of the keys for him coming out from underground and out in the open and becoming real. Am I right?

Sandy: Yes, you are. We talk about the secret weapon in our book for women is empathy. And that is to feel – try to get behind the eyes of your husband or his heart and kind of feel where he’s been, what has led him to this passivity in his life. As Paul said, you’re not born a passive person, and I had no clue that I needed to do that, because I do believe that I am a woman of goodwill, and if you’re a woman of goodwill, you will want to try to understand your husband more.

Paul: We need to make the distinction between a passive personality and a reserved personality. Reserved people may not be that quick to reveal their will – who they are, what they want, their desires in life. But eventually they do. Passive people are deliberately not knowable. They put, again, this force field around them so you will not understand, know who they are, because they fear that if you get to know them, you might reject them. So they keep people at arm’s length with a smile. It’s ironic, but it’s true.

Bob: When did it dawn on you that you were a bazooka user.

Paul: Was it our honeymoon? No, baby, I …

[laughter]

Dennis: I think I just heard the bazooka fire.

Sandy: Actually, a few years into our marriage, because Paul started – he actually had an amazing night – was it in Philadelphia?

Paul: Yeah.

Sandy: Where he had just kind of a life-changing event take place, and I’ll let Paul talk about that, but, at the same time, I really started doing some soul-searching and realizing that the way that we were living was not that healthy. We wanted abundant life – I wanted abundant life, and so, at the same time, you know, I would go to the Word, and I was starting to realize about my tongue and how I talked to Paul in an attacking way. We call it "pushing the men deeper into the nice guy ice cave" is what it does. The more you attack, the more you nag or coerce, the farther they just shut themselves down.

Dennis: Burrow.

Sandy: They don't even want to talk about it, and that's even more frustrating to the wife.
**Bob:** Did you realize what you were doing because the Holy Spirit was starting to stir, or was there something somebody said? Did Paul say something to you? What triggered it, do you think?

**Sandy:** I think it was the Holy Spirit and just reading some great books, reading the Bible and, at the same time, Paul started dealing with his past.

**Bob:** And that happened on this night in Philadelphia?

**Paul:** I call it a conspiracy of good. All good things come from above, though I did not know I was caught in a net of a conspiracy of good. It was good at the time, it felt like chaos. I had just realized that this cold winter night in Philadelphia that this just wasn't working at almost all levels of life, and so it was just a very humbling experience.

Like a lot of men, I feared humility because I thought it was synonymous with shame. I thought you had to feel just horrible shame and rottenness in order to be humble. And that's not what I experienced. In fact, I experienced, thought I was wrong, I was, it was wrong, and I regret that, this humility of admitting that I didn't have the answers, I didn't have the answers, and that was actually okay and, in fact, by not having the answers, it was rather freeing because I didn't have to pretend anymore. I could just be there, “Okay, Lord, I know You're real, I know You care about me, so I believe You're going to reveal some things to me, and I'm going to wait – and more than wait, I'm going to go look for these things.”

**Bob:** So, again, it was God stirring in your own heart and mind.

**Paul:** I believe so, absolutely. All good things come from above. This was a good thing in our lives and, again, it doesn't necessarily feel good at the time but do not let your feelings fool you. Substantial change sometimes is not comfortable but that's okay. That's the way it was designed.

**Dennis:** Yeah, God is a God of great grace, and He meets us at our point of need, and He leads us through those times even though it feels dangerous, it doesn't feel safe.

You know, as you all have been talking here today, it just occurred to me, your story is really a love story, a love story of a different kind – of you loving Paul and beginning to express a biblical kind of love that made it safe for him to come out from underground and begin to allow him to be the man God made him to be. And you really became the first woman in his life that was safe for him to be real with.

And, you know, all of us need instruction from above, the good gifts from above, and from the Scriptures. In 1 Corinthians 13, I have to believe there are some wives right now who need to go read that chapter in 1 Corinthians and just
read all of chapter 13 and just soak it in about what is love. It's not the emotion that Hollywood makes it out to be. It is a commitment to stand fast and firm with a person and, again, not to fire the bazooka but to help the person come out from underground and be real.

**Bob:** I'm thinking about one of the key things we talk about at our FamilyLife Weekend to Remember Marriage Conferences – we talk about the need for us to receive our spouse as a gift from God, as God's perfectly designed gift for us. And sometimes you look at the other person, you're frustrated, and you think, "This doesn't look like a very good gift." But until we have the safety and security of that unconditional acceptance that I think you're talking about, there is not the freedom to grow and to risk and to change. That's a part of what's fundamental in a marriage relationship.

This spring we're going to be hosting dozens of these conferences that I'm talking about in cities all across the country, and this week and next week we're encouraging FamilyLife Today listeners to register for one of these upcoming conferences because if you register this week or next week, you can save $60 per couple off the regular registration fee by identifying yourself as a radio listener.

So you go to our website, FamilyLife.com, where you call 1-800-FLTODAY, get more information about when the conference is coming to a city near where you live, which weekend it's going to be in which location. Then you circle that on your calendar, and you contact us again either online or by phone, and you register for a conference, and if you do it this week or next week, and you identify yourself as a friend of Bob, a radio listener, you will save $60 per couple off the regular registration fee for an upcoming FamilyLife Weekend to Remember Marriage Conference.

If you're registering online, the way you identify yourself as one of my friends is there's a keycode box on the registration form, and when you get to that keycode box, you just type my name in there. Just type in "Bob" and we will automatically then take care of providing you with this special offer to FamilyLife Today listeners.

Or if you call 1-800-FLTODAY and you register over the phone, just mention you listen to our program, and that you're a friend of Bob and, again, you'll be able to take advantage of the special offer for radio listeners. It's good this week and next week so make sure you get registered and plan to attend an upcoming FamilyLife Weekend to Remember Marriage Conference.

And then make sure to get a copy of the book we've been talking about today from Paul and Sandy Coughlin. It's called "Married but not Engaged." It's a book that helps husbands and wives deal with this persistent problem of being too nice in marriage.
The book’s in our FamilyLife Resource Center, and you can request a copy online at FamilyLife.com or you can call 1-800-FLTODAY, and we’ll make arrangements to have a copy of this book sent out to you.

Now, tomorrow we’re going to continue to talk about this whole issue of nice guys and talk specifically about what a wife can do if she’s married to a guy who is just a nice guy, and it’s starting to drive her a little crazy. We’ll talk about that tomorrow with our guests, Paul and Sandy Coughlin. I hope you can be back with us for that.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, and our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our host, Dennis Rainey, I'm Bob Lepine. We'll see you back tomorrow for another edition of FamilyLife Today.

FamilyLife Today is a production of FamilyLife of Little Rock, Arkansas, a ministry of Campus Crusade for Christ.

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