

The Feminine Virtue of Mary Bailey

“Is this the ear you can’t hear on? (Bending down and whispering) George Bailey, I’ll love you ‘til the day I die.” Mary Hatch, age eight.

*Attention—this article has many, many spoilers. If you haven’t watched **It’s a Wonderful Life**, stop reading this now, and watch it. Then come back and read this.*

It’s a Wonderful Life is a movie about George Bailey, without a doubt. It’s a Christmas classic, but more than that, it is one of the greatest American movies ever made. Jimmy Stewart’s performance is a perfect blend of exuberant expectation and dark, brooding despair. But I want to talk about George Bailey’s wife, Mary, played by Donna Reed. For without Mary Bailey, there is no George. Without Mary Bailey, there is no Bailey Building and Loan, no fixed-up old Granville house, no home at all. No marriage. No Zuzu. No Pete, and Janey, and Tommy. Without Mary Bailey, there is no movie. For without George’s wife, there is no George.

In this article, I’d like to honor the feminine virtue of Mary Bailey by considering how she expressed her devotion to George, how she prayed for him, and how she made him a home. While George showed courage throughout the movie, by standing up to Old Man Potter, by sacrificing for the sake of others (including saving his brother’s life), he spends a good chunk of the film either with his head in the stars, or down in the dumps. But it’s Mary who *always* shows devotion to her husband, in ways he didn’t always deserve. It is Mary Bailey who, in many ways, is the heroine of *It’s a Wonderful Life*.

At first blush, eight year old Mary’s declaration might seem silly and childish. But the viewer is let in on the secret—*this young lady is and will always be devoted to her future husband*. Her words are prophetic. And they’re not based in sentimental, fleeting feeling. Mary Bailey, at every turn, is devoted to George Bailey. It’s not always the other way around. It is George who has to be cajoled and coaxed to pay attention to Mary. Speaking of Mary, George’s mother tells him, “Why, she lights up like a firefly whenever you are around!” In most of the early part of the movie, George doesn’t seem to notice Mary...not much anyway.

“You look at me as if you didn’t know me.”

“Well, I don’t.”

“You pass me on the street almost every day.”

“Me? Naw...that was a little girl named Mary Hatch, that wasn’t you?”

Even after his mother encourages him to call on Mary after she returns from college, George lingers outside her house, whacking the front gate with a stick.

“Have you made up your mind?”

“What’s that?”

“Have you made up your mind!”

“About what?”

“About coming in!”

And that is the point. George's *mind* (his heart) is on other things. Shaking the dust off of that crummy little town, building sky scrapers, lassoing moons...but all along, Mary knows that it is George, and only George, she is devoted to. The scene where he *finally* comes to terms with his love for Mary is *painful* to watch.

"Now you listen to me! I don't want any plastics, I don't want any ground floors...I don't want to get married—ever—to anyone! You understand that? I want to do what I want to do."

And there it is. He wants to do what *he wants*. But Mary's devotion finally wins him over. As he runs out of words, runs out of steam...when sees her crying, he finally gets it. But even then, he can't actually ask her for marriage. Her words—George, George, George. His—would you? Would you?

Yes, she would.

People confuse this kind of devotion. Some consider Mary to be weak, merely fixated on "some guy." No...she saw in George something special, and saw herself as the wife of someone special. An observation a colleague recently made about men and women is apt—women see their potential husbands as *how they could be*, but men see potential wives *just as they are*. In other words, Mary wasn't weak, or settling, or throwing her life away. She saw in George Bailey a spark of greatness, a potential *potential*, that often (in the movie) was lacking or left unrealized. But this type of devotion is often mocked today. "What about Mary's potential?" people are sure to ask. "What about her hopes, dreams, and aspirations?" What Mary wanted was a life with George, shown in her unwavering devotion to him, directed toward their lives together. For that is what Mary helped make for them. *Life together*.

On the day of their wedding, driving out of town to embark on a world cruise, they notice a "run on the bank." Against Mary's wishes, George dashes out of the taxi to see what was happening. As things had gotten dire, and the Building and Loan was about to go bust, Mary Hatch Bailey pulls out her "dowry," a stack of cash she had scrupulously saved, and gave it to her husband to "tide people over." While it was George who handed out the money, it was *Mary who saved the day*. But then she disappears...while George stays behind to manage the crisis. It's only later one finds out where Mary went—to prepare a make-shift home in lieu of their world cruise. The old, abandoned Granville house.

It finally dawns on George that yes, he's married and his wife is on the phone. He is told to come home. What home? The Waldorf Hotel! George walks to his new abode in the pouring rain, looking on in amazement as he finds that his wife had worked a *second* miracle that day. Mary had taken a disappointing situation (imagine a modern bride losing her honeymoon trip!), and instead went to make a home for her husband *that very night*. We see Mary standing proudly at her table, with a roaring fire behind her, roasting chickens turned by a phonograph machine, the bridal suite set for two, as George in wonder scans the scene and takes it all in. "Welcome home, Mr. Bailey" she softly says. In the montage to come, we are shown Mary Bailey (literally) fixing up that drafty old house to be a place for family and love.

We pause here a moment and ask, "Would this movie be made today?" Not a chance. Our contemporary age has no room for Mary Bailey. She would be deemed a "sell-out," trapped in

her “comfortable concentration camp.”¹ And even if someone dared to remake *It’s a Wonderful Life*, Mary Bailey’s character would be completely rewritten. First of all, she has too many children. Two is the max. She’d have to have a career. Corporate attorney? Marketing Executive? Also, why is she just giving up *her* money to bail out the Building and Loan? Men and women today are to keep their finances separate! Besides...why should she let George mismanage the building and loan? She should run it herself! Fire Uncle Billy and hire a wise-cracking administrative assistant (cast as a gay, effeminate male). George would stay at home and do yoga and learn to make a killer lasagna. In the course of things, Mary would take on Mr. Potter directly herself. That’s what Hollywood would do to *It’s a Wonderful Life*. “What’s all this ‘homemaking’ and ‘devotion’ stuff about? C’mon Frank Capra—we need ‘strong’ female characters! Mary has to run the show! Not play second fiddle to some sap.” In short, in today’s remake—*Mary Bailey would be changed into a man*. A *man* who does things better than any male could. For the alternative, to be a homemaker and mother, is seen by many to be a betrayal to the feminist movement. As Simone de Beauvoir grumbled, “No woman should be *allowed* to stay at home to raise her children. Women should not have that choice, precisely because if there is such a choice, too many women will make that one.”²

You may feel like I’m being harsh, or misrepresenting the modern female view. While, I use inflammatory language, there is much more of the above sentiments in the cultural mainstream than Donna Reed as Mary Bailey. What we hear incessantly is that we need “strong women.” But what does *that* mean? Let’s reframe the question: *is not Mary Bailey a “strong woman”*? Does she not show strength, purpose and resolve? Does she not stand up for herself? Anyone who has watched the movie is forced to answer, “yes.” The first time George goes to kiss her, she knows the place that kiss is coming from (not pure!) and she deftly turns and walks away, singing. When George mercilessly teases her after she comically loses her robe, there is not a moment where *she* thinks this is funny. She fiercely protects her chastity! And when George comes home, after Uncle Billy loses the money, and truly is “unhinged,” she moves to protect her children and stands up to her husband.³ No, Mary Bailey is not weak. She is *strong*...stronger than any female homicide detective or ace fighter pilot commonly seen on the silver screen.

There are several feminist “deconstructions”⁴ on *It’s a Wonderful Life*. These articles celebrate Mary Bailey as the real hero of the movie. I even agree with some of the assessments made. But none of the articles (all written by women) ever emphasize the source of her strength and where she turns to—God. When she becomes desperate, *Mary prays for her husband*. “I love him, dear Lord. Help him tonight.” In fact, behind the “angels-getting-wings” thing, there is a robust picture of *God listening to prayer and acting on pleas for mercy*. Mary turns to the Author of all good, and Creator of all things. She prays for her husband. It’s such a simple thing. But is this ever shown in movies today? A wife praying for her husband?

Of course, the prayers of others also rise before the Lord as incense. God listens to their prayers and sends help. While Clarence is able to show George that his is truly a wonderful life, and

¹ Yes, a real quote from a real feminist! Outrageously asserted by Betty Friedan, the founder of the National Organization for Women.

² Another angry feminist of the twentieth century. Also a drunk and a Communist.

³ Truly, it is one of the most disturbingly *accurate* portrayals of a husband losing it ever in film.

⁴ Deconstruction, in post-modern literary theory, does not mean to “destroy” something, but to read “against the grain” of a work of art, often with a world view or ideology foreign to the author’s own.

through this intercession, George realizes that he wants to live, God works (through the hands of his wife) to save him from financial ruin and prison. It's Mary who rallies people to George. "Mary did it, George! Mary did it!" Uncle Billy wildly tells him. "She told some people that you were in trouble, and they scattered all over town collecting money!" Yes, Mary went out to help save her husband—to find him, to rally people to him. But it started with prayer...and ended with joyful thanksgiving.

There is no greater ending to any movie than *It's a Wonderful Life*. The joy of reconciliation, of redemption, as George and Mary stand receiving God's miracle from the people of Bedford Falls. Mary's hands are clasped in prayer, as Janey plays *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*. I couldn't help but think, as George looked into the little white book left him by Clarence, reading his inscription, that it could be changed to: Remember, no man is a failure *who has a faithful wife*.⁵ That's who Mary Bailey is to me—a faithful, excellent wife.

Mary Bailey was not a perfect woman, nor sinless, nor a "saint." She was a wife, who was devoted—to her husband, to her family, to her community. She was not weak, but strong. Mary made a home for him and prayed for him. It was God, through Mary, who saved George, in too many ways to count. Mary Bailey is a reflection of an exemplar we meet in the Scriptures:

An excellent wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels. The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life. She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands. She is like the ships of the merchant; she brings her food from afar. She rises while it is yet night and provides food for her household and portions for her maidens. She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard. She dresses herself with strength and makes her arms strong. She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. Her lamp does not go out at night. She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle. She opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy. She is not afraid of snow for her household, for all her household are clothed in scarlet. She makes bed coverings for herself; her clothing is fine linen and purple. Her husband is known in the gates when he sits among the elders of the land. She makes linen garments and sells them; she delivers sashes to the merchant. Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come. She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. She looks well to the ways of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: "Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all." Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates. Proverbs 31:10-31

Mary Bailey is a cinematic example of that godly wife. Strong, virtuous, faithful.

In light of all of this, is my point that every woman should be exactly like Mary? That every woman should stay home and raise kids? No...but I often wonder...is *that even a vision promoted in the Church anymore?* Is it okay for a man and woman to come together, to share dreams, to raise families in the faith, to sacrifice for one another, to be devoted to the other? Do

⁵ The original is: no man is a failure who has friends.

we actually aspire to anything like the feminine virtue showed by Mary Bailey? Do we celebrate it? Or is it written off as quaint and archaic and even despised? I would argue that we should teach this brand of feminine virtue in the home and from the pulpit. For Mary Bailey's feminine virtue is godly virtue. And without models to imitate, what are young women and men to follow?

Several of the feminist articles I perused scoffed at the notion that in the life *without George* that Clarence showed, Mary's future was as a mere "librarian" and an "old maid"...as if her future "self" was inextricably bound up in his existence. In fact, what is *not* explored in the movie, is what George's life would be *without Mary*. I believe that answer is—*he would be dead*. From despair. The fact is, George could never have succeeded, and built up the loyalty and gratitude shown to him in the movie's end without his wife. Mary was God's gift to George, and without George in her life, there would have been no one for Mary to give what she had to give. That's the point of Mary-as-librarian. This doesn't argue for the terrible modern notion of "soul mates,"⁶ *but it speaks to marriage*, and the true devotion and sacrifice in marriage for the other. In marriage, the two become one flesh. Without George, Mary was missing a lung, a leg, and half a heart. Mary's dream was to love her husband. While George wanted to lasso the moon for Mary, she had a different wish. "Remember the night we broke the windows in this old house? This is what I wished for."

Here's to all young people in the Church finding their Mary and George Baileys. Here is to the Church teaching and promoting the feminine virtue of Mary. Teaching and promoting marriage, and family, and children. For marriage is a gift of God. Family is God's desire for all people. It is something to aspire to and pray for. The world needs more Mary Baileys, her example of feminine virtue and all that comes with it—more families, more devotion, more homelives, more prayer to Jesus. Having more Mary Bailey's would make for a much more wonderful life.



⁶ The idea of "soul mates"—that only one person is meant to be another's unique match—is not biblical. At all.