

## ***Grit 'n' Grace: Good Girls Breaking Bad Rules***

Episode #107: Gain More Life with Less Self-Focus

### **Cheri**

So, Amy, we're always talking about how ultimately perfectionism makes everything all about us. Let's talk about ways that we make things all about me. And just so I don't make it all about me, I'm going to let you go first.

### **Amy**

Oh, awesome! Well, this I guess starts with a confession about an unfortunate habit that I've had, the habit of needing to add my story to your story. I'm not really a one-upper, you know, there's that person, who their story has to one-up yours. But I always, when you're telling your story, I'm thinking about my story that's like yours, and I just can't wait to tell it. The worst is when you get in a room full of women who have had babies, and there's a pregnant woman who has never had a baby yet, and they all start telling their delivery stories. That's the worst. But I will have to say that I have been the person who's does that. What that does is diminishes the other person's story, of course, and makes it all about **me**. How about you? You don't have any nasty habits like that, do you?

### **Cheri**

Oh, none. Absolutely none. No, I like to think of it as me using the artistic improv technic of yes and. So somebody asks me to do something, and I say yes, but in my mind I say yes and. So I do whatever they expect me to do, and then they get a bunch of bonus help from me that they didn't even ask for and extra favors that they didn't necessarily want. Aren't I just generous, Amy? Isn't that sweet of me?

### **Amy**

It is really sweet of **you**.

<Laughter>

Well, one of our listeners said it this way, "I struggle keeping all the plates spinning in my relationships. For me, I'm a yes girl. I feel I must do what others ask of me otherwise they'll think I'm lazy, unwilling, uncaring, selfish, and besides, what I have to do isn't as important. It can just be all about us, and it's human to make it all about me. Today, we're going to find out in our interview what a terrible habit it really is and how to reform it to improve our relationships.

### **Cheri**

Well, I'm Cheri Gregory.

**Amy**

And I'm Amy Carroll.

**Cheri**

And you're listening to *Grit-n-Grace: Good Girls Breaking Bad Rules*, the podcast that equips you to lose who you're not, love who you are, and live your one life well.

**Amy**

Today, we're processing what we learned from our interview with Sharon Hodde Miller, author of *Free of Me: Why Life is Better When It's Not About You*. Sharon Hodde Miller is an author, speaker, pastor's wife, mom, and PhD. In addition to her own blog, sheworships.com, she is a regular contributor to She Reads Truth and Propel Women.

**Cheri**

A number of months ago your publicist contacted us about potentially interviewing you, and I took one look at your book title, *Free of Me*, and it made me so mad. I was like, "I have made it to fifty. I do not want to be free of me. I am finally at the stage where I feel free to be me." And so I sent her a very polite, but probably terse email back, saying, "No, I don't think our listeners would be a good match for this book." Well, then I found your book online, and I started reading the back and then I started reading the inside and I was like, "Oh my word. We need - we need this. I need this. Our listeners need this." And so I contacted your publicist and I said, "If I promise to eat an entire humble pie myself, can we please interview Sharon?" So as I sit here, eating my humble pie, I do want to let you know you are completely welcome, and we are so thrilled that you're joining us.

**Amy**

Well, and this is a total God thing because the funny thing was we had just said no to Sharon's book, and Sharon and I ended up across the table from each other. Like the next day or two days later, and I was like, "I don't think Sharon knows this," but I was like "Oh my gosh, that's that girl we just said no to," and we live in the same area. And after I met Sharon, not only was Cheri reading Sharon's book, but also I had just met Sharon. And both of us came to each other almost simultaneously and said, "Oh my gosh, I think we missed the boat on this," because I fell in love with you instantly.

**Sharon**

That is so funny!

**Cheri**

It occurred to me that I might have had a slight overreaction. That's all.

<Laughter>

**Amy**

So tell us about the title of your book, Sharon. What led you to write *Free of Me*, and also has anybody else reacted to the title or are Cheri and I the only ones with the issues here?

**Sharon**

Well, it's funny that you reacted so strongly to the title because in my working title – you know when you pitch a book you have to have a title – and my original working title was simply called *It's Not About You*. That's what I wanted to call the book, just like straight up. And my publisher was like, no.

**Amy**

We've had that too, Sharon.

**Sharon**

Yeah, their objection was because of everything you just said. It was too in your face, and it would come across too harsh - that kind of thing. And y'all have probably seen in the introduction, that I kind of clarify what I mean when I say my life is better and it's not all about you that this is not me trying to scold people or wag my finger but to say that there is so much freedom when you say that parent who was absent that wasn't about me. Or that neighbor who treated me badly today that was not about me. There's a lot of freedom in realizing that this isn't all centered on you. The world is not just reacting to you – it's not a mirror. And so, yeah, but .... yeah, the publisher nixed it, but they let me keep it in the subtitle so I was glad for that. But, yeah, that was my concern, that I didn't want women in particular to feel like I was getting in their face because women, lots of times, especially moms I think are losing themselves in raising their kids and being there for their families. And so I wanted to make sure I wasn't communicating something really harsh, but I wanted to communicate just the freedom that I have found in that perspective.

**Amy**

Well, we were wrong, and you're right. So, let's just clarify right here.

**Cheri**

So what in your life, kind of brought you, is there a journey? I mean what caused you to write this kind of book in the first place?

**Sharon**

Yeah, so like you all, I am a writer. I've been writing for a long time, and probably, like you two, I started writing because I felt called to it and I felt gifted for it and I found a lot of joy and a lot of purpose in it. But over the years, I realized that as I was kind of running this race of faith and running in the lane of my calling, I guess you could say. I started looking at the women who were running next to me, or the women who were running slightly ahead of me comparing myself to them, and when I started doing that it changed a lot about my calling. Specifically, it took a lot of the joy out of my calling, and I started feeling just very insecure for the first time, really. I'm not someone who has struggled a lot with insecurity throughout my life and that was kind of a new thing for me. My response, when I realized something was going on inside of me,

my response was to get proactive and to research and read and what does the bible say and what is wise counsel on this? And so, I started reading a lot of books and blog posts and articles about insecurity and started reading what does the bible say about me, what is true about me, so I could stand on those truths. And so, I did that for a number of months, maybe even a year, and at the end of it all I realized that I knew all these truths, and I believed all these truths, and they had not helped me one bit.

### **Amy**

Oh, wow.

### **Sharon**

And that's when I had a realization; okay, there's something else going on here underneath my insecurity. Like something else is causing me insecurity besides just needing to believe truth about myself or needing to believe that God created me with a purpose, because I believed all those things. And so that's when I kind of started over, and someone who was a huge help for me in this was Tim Keller, and his book called *Self-Forgetfulness*, and I recommend it for everyone. It's a teeny tiny, little book; you could read it in an hour. And that's when I started to think maybe the issue for me is not that I need to focus on myself more positively, but that I just need to focus on myself less. And that was like a breakthrough moment for me. And that was kind of what sent me on a journey of freedom, and when I came out on the other side of it I thought, you know what, I bet other people are struggling with this too, and this might help them also. And that was the birth of the book.

### **Cheri**

Wow. Alright, well, one of the things that jumped out at me in the book ... you said, "People-pleasing is a funny thing because it seems others-focused, but it's not about others at all." How's that even possible?

### **Sharon**

Yeah, well, that was something that I really had to grapple with personally. I do a lot of excavating of my soul in this book. And one of the things that I realized about myself is that I was raised in the church, like, I've been a Christian as long as I can remember. And I've always been a good Christian girl. And I've always been a rule follower, and I've always done the right thing. But I realized at some point that I couldn't sort out, okay, when am I doing this for Christ and when am I doing this for myself? Because being a good Christian girl, like, a quote - "a good Christian girl" won me a lot of approval. It won me the approval of my parents. And it won me the approval of my teachers. And it won me the approval of my pastors and my Sunday school teachers. And so, I think those motives got tangled up and just realizing how much of my faith that I had made about me. And how easy it is to have that happen because people like it when you're a good person. People reward you when you're a good person. You get treated really well. And I think people pleasing is tied to that. That it's really easy to become a slave to people pleasing and kind of anoint it as well I'm being a Christian. I'm being a good Christian here. Like I'm modeling Jesus here. But it's not really about Jesus at all. Or at least your motives are mixed. Sometimes we're doing it because people like it when you're pleasing to them. So that

was one of the things that I had to grapple with in terms of how this self-focus had infected my faith as well.

**Cheri**

And one of the terms that you use in your discussion of people pleasing is the term *mirror-reflex*. Talk to us about that, because I think that is so important and that then sets up the seven chapters on the seven mirrors.

**Sharon**

Well, one of the things I realized. And just to use an example from my book, I tell this story about when I was in college, and I was having lunch with a woman who was a mentor to me. We were talking and at some point she interrupts me and she says, "Is there a mirror behind me?" And I thought that's a weird question. Why is she asking me that? And she said, because you keep looking past me. I know! I know! It's so embarrassing!

**Cheri**

No I've done the same thing.

**Sharon**

And she cranes her neck around and sure enough there was a mirror right behind her head, and I had been making eye contact with myself the entire lunch conversation. I share this story because looking in a mirror at ourselves, for whatever reason, is this human reflex where if we pass by a reflective surface, even if it's just a shop window, we tend to look into it and sort of size ourselves up. And another side note that I discovered since writing the book is that women do this all the time to make sure everything is in place. And studies show that men do this too, but they do it to admire themselves.

<Laughter>

**Amy**

We're critiquing, and they're admiring - how funny is that!

**Cheri**

Mm-hm. Yep.

**Sharon**

Look at those calf muscles? You know? I'm trying to be nice. But anyway, just realizing that this is a human reflex. That whenever there is a reflective surface, we always look at ourselves. And realizing that we don't just do this with physical mirrors. We do this with everything in our lives. We're constantly looking at our relationships and our possessions and our work, and we're looking, and we're kind of sizing ourselves up based on what this reflection tells about us. And so I call that the mirror reflex, and I think that we do it to really everything in our lives. One of the problems with it is when you, especially if you're doing this in your relationships, like if you're looking at your marriage or your kids and saying how does this reflect on me. How do my

kids reflect on me? Obviously, that creates a really toxic situation. Like, a toxic dynamic where you're taking all of your insecurities and you're putting them on your kids so they have to bear the weight of their own insecurities and your insecurities, and you're never really seeing them, you're just seeing yourself. And so, I wanted to explore all the ways, the different ways that we make these areas of our lives about us, which are not about us.

**Amy**

So you say that there are seven mirrors that we often make about us, and you go into those in the book, but which of the seven mirrors has been the greatest personal challenge for you?

**Sharon**

Yeah, so I look at family, and the possessions, calling, and I even look at your actual appearance as a mirror. I think that the one that I mentioned already that sort of inspired the book was calling. That was a big one for me. I tend to, my identity gets really entangled up in what I do, like, my work and whether or not I'm achieving and whether I'm seen and affirmed by the right people. So that's probably been, I would say, the biggest struggle for me. I think for a lot of women, in general, we struggle with family, is a big one, and then appearance. I think we're kind of taught the way you look reflects on your actual value.

**Amy**

Which of the seven do you think is the most subtle and that we might not have even considered and why?

**Sharon**

So the very first one I have is God. That we turn God into a mirror, and we approach the bible by always asking what does the bible say about me. And the person who really helped me out with this was Jen Wilkin. She touches on this some in her book, *Women of the Word*. It's another book I'd highly recommend. She pinpointed how often we approach the bible by asking what does the bible say about me. It's not that the bible doesn't have answers to those questions, because it does and those answers matter. They're really, really important. But if we treat God like a mirror, we're never actually seeing him. When we do that it takes all the power out of our faith. And it makes our faith human-centered and small. And I think that's a lot of what had happened to me as well. But I think it's very subtle. I think that as Christians it's really easy for us to kind of co-opt this self-help language that is in our culture and give a Christian spin to it. And I think there's a time and a place for that, but if we're not careful, we take God out of the center and place ourselves at the center of it instead.

**Amy**

Very insightful! So what hope do you offer the reforming perfectionist who is listening right now, feeling convicted, knowing this is true about her, just like Cheri and I reacted that way, but wondering how on earth she's going to change so much now that she realizes she has to change so much.

**Sharon**

Yeah, you know, it's funny, at church this past Sunday, someone came up to me, and this goes back to your earlier question about how people responded, this woman comes up to me at church and says I started your book, and she says, "I don't think I like it very much."

<Laughter>

And I kind of paused and I was like, okay, where this is going?

### **Amy**

Yes, how does a writer react to this? Yes.

### **Sharon**

She kind of smiled, and she said, "It's just really convicting me and really stepping on my toes in ways that I didn't expect." And she said, "Are you going to lead me out of this, like, as I keep reading is there going to be an answer here? And I said don't worry, I don't just tear you down and leave you there to languish in pain. But yeah, that was a big part of my own story, not just diagnosing the problem, but walking my way out of it towards freedom from self-focus. And so, after I look at these seven mirrors, I look at four different practices for reorienting our souls back onto God. There's more than four. I mean there's so many different ways that you can get outside of yourself, but I just focused on four that were big for me. And really the main one for me was worship, honestly. That chapter was just simply called Praise. Part of what was helpful for me is that my husband and I, ever since we got married, we've been seeing a marriage counselor. That was just something that we've wanted to make a priority, and she's been a huge part in our lives, and we really value her. And she had taught us this technique for something else, but it was this idea that when your mind spirals out of control with like worry or fear or anxiety or insecurity, in my case. I'm sure you know what I'm talking about where something happens and it kind of takes hold of you and you try to think of something else, but it's this gravitational pull that your brain just goes back. Where you're thinking what's wrong with me, why don't they like me, or it could be something like, if I could go back to this situation I would say this again and, you know, things like that. And she said when you're in that situation, when that train of thought is spiraling out of control; you've got to figure out a way to stop the train. Stop the train. And so, what I realized with me, is that when I was having these self-centered thoughts, you know, if someone treated me badly, and I didn't understand why, and I was asking all these questions and examining myself, and wondering what was wrong with me. If I wrote something that wasn't received the way I wanted it to be received. Why aren't people applauding me? You know, all these thoughts that we have. And I realized, I need to figure out a way to stop the train. For me, what that looked like, was worship essentially. But not, you know, it's so much easier said than done. You just need to focus on God instead of yourself. If that was all it took, it would be so easy. And so, what I did is I went through scripture, and I just wrote a list of attributes of God. And I have them, like, a literal list on my phone. And when my brain was spiraling, and I needed to stop the train, I would pull up that list and I would read out loud this list of truths about God. And that way it kind of forced my brain to get off myself and back onto him. I found this practice was really helpful for me not just as a technique, but also because this is what we were created to do. We were created to praise and

to attribute honor and glory to God. I wasn't just interrupting the train of thought, but I think I was returning to my soul's resting place in a sense. And so, that became a big practice for me, where I would do it, and for a long time my brain still wanted to go back to the trains of thought. Like, it takes a while to rediscipline your mind, but that became something that I could run to mentally and find refuge in was just the character of God. So that was a big one. Another is loving others, the actual work of putting others before yourself. My kids are an obvious example of that.

<Laughter>

**Amy**

They sort of force that, kids do.

**Sharon**

That pulls you out of yourself. Purpose. Finding your purpose is another. So I looked through these different practices that are all rooted in scripture that naturally God has given us to draw us out of ourselves.

**Cheri**

Just in wrapping up our time together, what words of encouragement would you like to leave with our listeners today?

**Sharon**

Well, I would say, first of all, if you take a look at my book and see what it's about and feel at all a sting of conviction, know that you're not alone and that this is a really common struggle and that's one of the reasons why I wrote the book. And it's really humbling. When I wrote this I thought, "Are people going to read this and say she's that's just her problem, like she's just self-centered?"

<Laughter>

I was really nervous about that. That people were just going to say that this is her deal; she just needs to get over herself. But I've been really amazed at the people who have read my book and written me and said, "I felt like you were reading my mail." It seems like you're in my house or reading my diary, because I have these struggles, too. So just to say that I think this is the human default, is kind of inward turned; is that we just turn back on ourselves, and you're not alone. And I really hope that the book - I tried to write it in a way that's not condemning but is coming from my own journey and my own confession and my own experience of freedom and saying that this has actually set me free. And I really, really want that for you, too.

**Cheri**

Head on over to [gritngracegirls.com/episode107](http://gritngracegirls.com/episode107).

**Amy**



There you'll find this week's transcript, our digging deeper download, the bible verse art, and we'll tell you how to enter to win this week's giveaway of *Free of Me*.

**Cheri**

We are having so much fun getting to know the Grit and Grace growth team. If you'd like more information check out [patreon.com/gritandgracegirls](https://patreon.com/gritandgracegirls)

**Amy**

And make sure and to join us next week when we'll be processing together what we learned from Sharon.

**Cheri**

For today, grow your grit, embrace God's grace, and when you run across a bad rule, you know what to do. Go right on ahead and...

**Amy & Cheri**

Break it!

**Outtakes**

**Cheri**

That's even funnier, at least in my own head. I run a complete comedy show in my mind. And the audience goes wild! Okay, never mind.

<Laughter>

**Amy**

I'm a very appreciative audience. Bring it on!

**Cheri**

All right. Head on over to [gritandgracegirls.com](https://gritandgracegirls.com)...