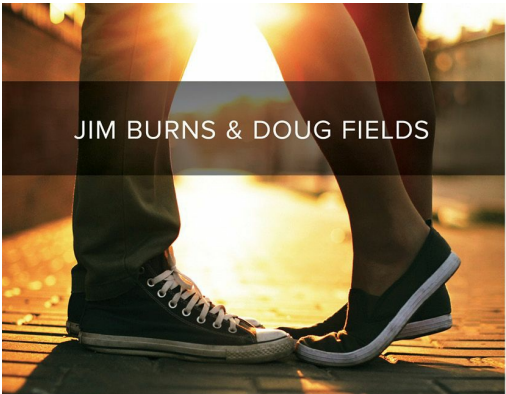


A close-up, low-angle shot of a couple's feet standing on a wooden boardwalk. The person on the left wears dark green pants and black high-top sneakers with white laces and white soles. The person on the right wears dark shorts and black low-top sneakers with white soles. The background is a bright, hazy sunset or sunrise over water, with the sun low on the horizon, creating a strong lens flare and illuminating the scene with warm, golden light. The overall mood is romantic and hopeful.

JIM BURNS & DOUG FIELDS

GETTING READY FOR MARRIAGE

A PRACTICAL ROAD MAP FOR
YOUR JOURNEY TOGETHER

A photograph of a couple's legs and feet walking on a wooden boardwalk. The person on the left is wearing dark trousers and dark sneakers with white laces. The person on the right is wearing dark leggings and dark sneakers with white soles. The background is a bright, hazy sunset over water, with the sun low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow. The image is partially covered by a dark horizontal band containing the authors' names.

JIM BURNS & DOUG FIELDS

GETTING READY FOR MARRIAGE

A PRACTICAL ROAD MAP FOR
YOUR JOURNEY TOGETHER

JIM BURNS & DOUG FIELDS

GETTING READY FOR MARRIAGE

A PRACTICAL ROAD MAP FOR
YOUR JOURNEY TOGETHER

David©Cook®
transforming lives together

To Cathy Burns I am the most fortunate man in the world to have you as my wife. Without your commitment to our marriage and to God, this book would not have been written.

To Cathy Fields I never imagined that when two young kids got married in 1985 there would be so many rewarding years to follow. I still can't believe you said "yes" ... Every day I'm thankful. My prayer is that our three amazing kids get to experience what we've shared. You're one of a kind!

CONTENTS

[Cover](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Foreword by Rick Warren](#)

[Before We Begin](#)

[Chapter One — Are You Ready for Marriage?](#)

[Chapter Two — Writing Your Marriage Script Through Goals, Hopes,
and Expectations](#)

[Chapter Three — In-Laws: You Marry the Family](#)

[Chapter Four — Communication: The Fastest Route to Connection](#)

[Chapter Five — Conflict: The Rules of Engagement](#)

[Chapter Six — Finances: The Best Things in Life Are Not Things](#)

[Chapter Seven — Sexuality: The Naked Truth](#)

[Chapter Eight — Spiritual Intimacy: The Power of Compatibility](#)

[Chapter Nine — Remarriage: A Fresh Start](#)

[Chapter Ten — Planning Your Wedding and Ceremony](#)

[In Conclusion — The Gift](#)

[Appendix A — Monthly Budget Worksheet](#)

[Appendix B — 50 Questions to Ask Before You Get Married \(or
Engaged\)](#)

[Extras](#)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Everything we do has the imprints of others we work with. We are so grateful to:

Cindy Ward: We are deeply indebted for your incredible attitude, beautiful heart, and amazing work ethic. We are honored to have you as a partner in ministry and on this project.

Christy Burns-Ruiz: Thank you so much for your additions and subtractions to this manuscript. You did a great job.

Andrew Accardy, Deb Pflieger, Shawn King, Seth Bartlette, Becca Burns, Dean Bruns, David Peck, and Krista Salazar for all your help, wisdom, support, and incredible talent with the Refreshing Your Marriage project. Also, thank you for the special friendships and roles you play in our lives. To tell you we are grateful doesn't seem to be enough. We are blessed, and so is HomeWord, by your talents and commitment.

The crew at Mariners Church, who allow us to teach, lead, and dream about making marriages great, and to experiment with ideas and content. We love being on this journey with you.

A very special thanks to Heather McGrath and the Windgate Foundation for your interest and support in the HomeWord 1% Marriage Initiative, and to Steve and Sue Perry for your support and belief in us with Refreshing Your Marriage and so much more. You are truly a godsend.

FOREWORD

As I read through this outstanding book, I kept thinking, *I wish Kay and I had this resource before we were married*. Far too many of the 2.4 million couples who get married each year are not adequately prepared to make it work. I am so happy that there's a book like this where every page is filled with practical God-honoring advice.

Not only are Jim Burns and Doug Fields experts in the field of family relationships, but they are my dear friends. Doug and I worked together for almost twenty years on staff at Saddleback Church. I love this man! He is one of the most gifted communicators I know. Plus, he lives out what he speaks about with his marriage—I've seen it firsthand. Jim has been a guest speaker at Saddleback several times throughout the years, and like Doug, he communicates practical truths with authenticity and power. Jim was Doug's youth pastor, and I have always admired their relationship. This book is evidence that two of America's most gifted marriage and family experts can come together to write a masterpiece to help couples get ready for marriage.

For years, many of us who care deeply about marriage and family have been concerned that the resources on premarriage are getting stale, and that's why I'm excited for *Getting Ready*

for Marriage to bring fresh content to the world. Doug and Jim know this generation of engaged couples like few in the world and have communicated the truth of marriage preparation in a down-to-earth, pragmatic, and helpful way. I believe in the importance of premarital preparation and counseling. Who wouldn't? Recent findings reveal that couples who go through a premarital book like this one will have a 31 percent better chance of staying married than couples who do not.

This book was written for engaged couples who want to make the most of their marriage. Often a family is only as strong as the marriage that keeps it together. The book is also written for those I have served most of my life—pastors, ministry leaders, marriage mentors, and counselors who will take couples through the beautiful process called engagement to prepare them for marriage.

Again, I love this book, the upcoming workbook, their online assessment tool, and their other resources. I suggest you use all of them to help ensure a successful engagement and eventually a wonderful marriage. I can't think of finer people than Doug and Jim to help lead you in this journey.

It was thirty-nine years ago when Kay and I stood together committing our love for each other, and asking God to bless our marriage. We would be the first to say that we have not had a

perfect relationship, but we have been committed to work on it and through God's faithfulness and our perseverance I can tell you that besides making a commitment to Jesus Christ, the most important decision I ever made was to marry Kay. As I read through *Getting Ready for Marriage*, it dawned on me that although we didn't do it perfectly, many of the concepts Jim and Doug have presented are the exact marriage concepts that have been the glue in our growing marriage.

If you are reading this, you are no doubt preparing for marriage or mentoring a couple through the process. Congratulations on picking up this book, and may God's blessing be upon your life and marriage.

Rick Warren

Pastor of Saddleback Church

Author of The Purpose Driven Life

BEFORE WE BEGIN

Imagine for a moment that you and your fiancé are boarding a plane. The flight attendant smiles at you and welcomes you on board, and then she says these stunning words: “I need to warn you there is a 30 to 50 percent chance this airplane will crash.”

Hello! Can you imagine your emotional whiplash? It’s not too difficult to guess how you might respond. Most likely you would stop smiling, look at your fiancé, and quickly get off that plane. Fortunately, flying is considered one of the safest ways to travel. However, this tragic 30 to 50 percent failure rate is a very real statistic when describing today’s marriage in America and the journey you are about to begin.

Before you close this book and say, “These authors are insane! I don’t want to equate marriage with plane crashes,” we have very good news for you: despite the stark realities facing modern couples, we believe you don’t have to become one of those depressing statistics. Yes, the divorce rate in the United States is disheartening, and we think you should be aware of the odds, but we also believe that with some premarriage help, you can beat those odds.

We want our readers to live in reality and acknowledge that marriage will be difficult at times. After all, no couple is

perfectly compatible—because no one is perfect. But, we also want to live in the positive, hopeful side of reality that believes you actually possess what it takes to make your marriage successful. One such action is taking the time to read and digest and interact with what we've written for you. More marriages could be saved if more couples would do what you're doing right now. Reading, reflecting, and discussing are some key actions you can take before you get married that will lead to a healthy marriage. Congratulations, you're off to a great start.

Chapter One

ARE YOU READY FOR MARRIAGE?

Kari is a researcher for our radio broadcast, and I (Jim) have known her since she was just a middle-school kid. She was squealing with joy as she showed off her brand-new engagement ring at work recently. Her boyfriend had proposed the night before in an elaborate adventure that involved the help of friends and family, hidden video cameras, a picturesque meeting along the Pacific Ocean, and an all-out party after she said “yes” to a very creative proposal. I immediately walked out of my office and gave her an enthusiastic hug, congratulating her on this exciting news.

Later in the day, Kari knocked on my office door and asked if we could talk. As she sat on the couch, she became very emotional and said, “Honestly, Jim, I’m kind of scared. My parents’ marriage is less than perfect, Mitchell’s parents are divorced, and though most of the people who have congratulated me have been so happy for me, they all say the same thing: ‘Marriage is great, but it is *really hard*.’ It’s quenching my excitement. What if we mess this up? Is marriage

even worth it anymore?”

Kari's friends were right on both counts. Marriage is one of the most thrilling, beautiful, meaningful, fulfilling, and amazing experiences of life. Every marriage also has its challenges, mysteries, regrets, and surprises.

We (Doug and Jim) need to be honest with you: we both married above ourselves—way out of our league. Our wives (both named Cathy, which may enhance the confusion of our illustrations—sorry, but we couldn't talk them into changing their names) are incredible women, mothers, and spouses. They have continued to work at being emotionally, spiritually, and physically healthy throughout their lives. Our marriages are good—not perfect, but very good. Oh, we've had our moments, lows as well as highs, but you need to know from the beginning of this book that we are pro-marriage and pro-family.

We are also unashamedly men who try to align our lives with the person and teachings of Jesus. We promise we won't shove our beliefs down your throat. In fact, some who read this book might even wish we were more spiritually focused. Regardless, we do strongly believe that marriage is a gift from God and that you and your fiancé are about to embark on the most exciting, wonderful, life-changing journey of your life together. And with the right commitments and actions, your

marriage will succeed.

When you consider boarding that airplane we talked about in the introduction (the one that has a 30 to 50 percent chance of crashing), you realize it would be a very unusual person who would risk their future on that aircraft. Yet tens of thousands of people take great risks with their marital relationships every day without thinking deeply about their futures. Actually, many engaged couples give more thought and consideration to their one-day wedding experience than they do to what will happen in the many years following.

We are excited to help prevent your marriage from becoming another sad statistic. One way you can do that is through premarital education, which can have a staggering impact on the quality of your life together. For those reading a book like this or involved with premarital counseling or taking a *Getting Ready for Marriage* class, the chance of divorce is lowered by 31 percent.¹ Please pause to think deeply about that statistic for a moment: by simply committing to reading a book like this one or meeting with a counselor, you could drop the odds of divorce from 50 percent to 19! That's an incredible figure, and we aren't sure why anyone entering into something as important as a lifelong marriage commitment would not do everything possible to improve the potential for a successful

marriage relationship. So, by reading this book, you are improving the probability of a successful marriage. Way to go! We are committed to helping make your future marriage a strong one so you can “fly” safely.

PLAN A SUCCESSFUL MARRIAGE, NOT JUST A BEAUTIFUL WEDDING

As a pastor for more than thirty years, I (Doug) have performed what must be hundreds of wedding ceremonies and spent countless hours helping couples with their premarital preparation. I’m consistently stunned at how many engaged couples are so focused on planning their single-day wedding celebration that they put relatively little energy into planning their married future. It’s almost as if they put “premarital preparation” in the same category as “pick a florist”—just another task on their growing to-do list.

We want you to have a great marriage ceremony. We love a great wedding party as much as anyone. But the reality of your multi-decade marriage must be stronger than the one-day wedding. As you plan, there must be less living in the clouds and more living on earth.

Premarital expert Dr. Roger Tirabassi describes counseling

engaged couples: “It’s like working with people on drugs.” He further explains, “Natural chemicals such as dopamine, endorphins, serotonin, and oxytocin can cause the same reaction as an illicit drug. Dating and engaged couples often find themselves in a chemically-induced condition. They have the uncanny ability to focus on their partner’s positive strengths and traits, rarely noticing the reality of their partner’s weaknesses.”² A loving feeling does release those chemicals to the brain, but that won’t help your marriage.

Your marriage will impact every aspect of your life—for good or bad. It’s sometimes difficult to bring this truth to a couple who walks into my office with stars in their eyes and a stuffed wedding binder under their arms. Please don’t be that couple! Yes, there’s a lot to do between now and the wedding day. But, make a commitment to put your best energy, effort, and even finances into your future, not your one-day ceremony.

FIVE CRUCIAL QUESTIONS

One of the joys of our lives is meeting with couples who are seriously considering engagement or who are already engaged. As we begin counseling, we always ask couples five crucial questions to help them think deeply about their futures and reduce the statistical wreckage that surrounds marriage today. While we may not have the privilege of meeting with you in person, we strongly encourage you to discuss the five questions below before you say “I do!” These questions are not easy, but they’re definitely essential and worthy of discussion.

We’re also well aware that these questions may seem unromantic (they’re not as much fun as talking about honeymoon locations and flower arrangements), but they are sure to either bring you great confidence in your compatibility or cause some doubt that will trigger further dialogue. Are you ready to improve your marriage odds and enhance your relationship?

1. ARE YOU WILLING TO WORK AT PREMARITAL EDUCATION?

We believe it’s possible for engagement to be a fun, romantic

season of life that you'll treasure forever. I (Doug) also believe it can be full of too many decisions that need to be made and can drive you crazy and not leave as many positive memories. When I became engaged, I was working full-time, taking a full load of graduate school courses, and overwhelmed with all the moving pieces of planning a wedding. While that may be my personal experience, I really do believe a fun engagement is possible—it just wasn't a fun time for me.

We need to bring up a four-letter word that may cause you some discomfort: W-O-R-K. Few couples ever think deeply about it, but the main reason for an engagement period is to prepare you for marriage. And frankly, adequate preparation requires significant *work*. Successful marriages are often the product of healthy premarital decisions and a willingness to work on the relationship before saying “I do.” In conversation with highly respected marriage experts Les and Leslie Parrott, they told us, “Couples will either do the essential premarital preparation or the painful postmarital repair.”

To prepare for your marriage and lower your chances of divorce by more than 30 percent, here is some of the work we recommend:

Read a book together.

Since you have this book in your hand, we hope you will invest in taking the time to read it. Some couples read it aloud when they are driving in a car or while hanging out somewhere comfortable. The magic isn't necessarily so much in the words on the page as it is in both of you investing the time to deal with essential issues that will either enhance or derail your marriage. Don't just read it; be willing to enter into dialogue about the content. The words you read, the information you put into your mind, and the discussions you have will profoundly solidify the foundation of your future marriage.

Don't underestimate the power of a healthy conversation. It can form the pathway that will guide you away from future pain. We realize this commitment to read requires time, and there will be plenty of reasons to skip the reading because it doesn't have the same deadline of the florist or caterer or wedding videographer. We guarantee, however, that you will reap huge benefits from your invested time and effort. Please, don't skimp here! Commit to at least a chapter a week and allow time for significant discussion. You can read a chapter in about thirty minutes, and chances are good you can find those minutes with a slight adjustment to your TV or social media routine. As tempting as they are, don't allow the digital distractions to stop you from reading. Your future may depend

on it.

Find a good premarital counselor.

Proverbs 11:14 states, “Where there is no counsel, the people fall; but in the multitude of counselors there is safety” (NKJV). While this biblical principle applies to all areas of our lives, it screams “this makes sense” in the context of getting married. Think about it: you would never have a surgical procedure without seeking the advice of a doctor. Unfortunately, too many couples don’t invest the time (or the money) to get the needed relational advice and guidance through premarital counseling.

For anyone who doesn’t believe they need premarital guidance, we have a question for you: “Are you crazy?” Seriously, are you? Everyone could use the wisdom of an experienced counselor. We can’t think of one legitimate excuse to keep you from moving in this direction. It doesn’t matter whether you choose a professional marriage counselor, pastor, priest, or marriage mentor (we understand that your decision of who you choose may be influenced by your finances, but there is nearly always free or affordable help available)—what matters is making the commitment to work through the issues

of preparing for your marriage with the help of an objective advisor. We suggest you meet with someone at least six times before the big day.

If one of you is unwilling to get premarital counseling, we actually would move your relationship toward the “red flag” section of this book (see [page 32](#)). Yes, premarital counseling can bring up tender issues that may create some relational pain. But if you’re honest, you know those issues are going to come up sometime anyway, so we suggest that you have the wisdom to tackle them on the “pre” side of the wedding rather than the “post” side. Getting good counsel will not only prepare you for the many years ahead, it will also help you identify the dangerous issues that could hold you back from having a successful marriage. Don’t convince yourself that you can figure it out on your own and that you don’t need the guidance of others. Look what that type of person is called in Proverbs: “Fools see their own way as right, but the wise listen to advice” (Proverbs 12:15 CEB).

Talk about everything.

Let’s face it, too many couples get into lazy patterns and take the path of least resistance, which leads to avoiding the

threatening issues. Please don't sidestep the tough topics. Avoidance is like feeding a monster that will come alive and plan a future attack, but this monster will lose power when it is brought out into the light.

Having honest dialogue about the key issues you face as an individual and as a couple is crucial to moving your relationship forward. If you think to yourself, *I don't know if I can share that with him (or her)*, that's the sign that you need to. Yes, this may lead to some tension and tough discussions, but those discussions will test and prove that you can face difficult times both now and in the future. Be courageous enough to care for your upcoming marriage right now. Talking about your past, fears, concerns, and frustrations will not only bring you closer together, it will also bring healing, hope, and grace to your relationship. Check out Appendix B for fifty questions to get these discussions started (see [page 209](#)).

2. ARE YOU WILLING TO HEAR FROM YOUR RELATIONAL COMMUNITY?

In past generations, family, friends, and relatives would provide couples with input on their relationship once it began to show signs of moving into the “serious” category. For good or for

bad, one's surrounding community had a say in his or her future spouse.

Many engaged and pre-engaged couples don't love this idea, but we are suggesting that you seek out the advice of those who know you and your fiancé the best. We all need friends and family who will be honest about their thoughts, fears, and concerns. It would be wise of you to give permission to those you trust to speak the truth to you before it's too late.

People typically aren't shy with their opinions. We heard of one parent who told her daughter, "I would rather have chronic rectal pain than have you marry him." Yikes! That mom probably wouldn't win any awards for tact, but her shocking comment caused her daughter to stop and seriously reconsider. Mom's comments triggered a series of decisions that ultimately led to her daughter ending the relationship. Fast-forward several years. She is now happily married to someone else and remains deeply indebted to her mother for those blunt, honest words.

I (Doug) recently asked one of my daughters, "If your mom and I had any red flags about your relationship, would you want to hear them?" She wisely said, "Absolutely! What are they?" I said, "Honestly, I don't have any red-flag warnings. I was just curious as to what your response would be. But, I do

have two yellow (cautionary) flags that I think are worth sharing with you.” I was grateful that my daughter was wise enough to receive input.

Gathering feedback isn’t just about if you should marry your fiancé or not; it can be about more general issues related to your relationship that you may not see. We all have blind spots—certain things we can’t see (or don’t want to see) that appear to others more clearly. We agree with Tim Keller who wrote, “Marriage should not be a strictly individual, unilateral decision. It is too important, and our personal perspective is too easily skewed.”³

We know not all of you reading this book will agree with what we are suggesting, perhaps because of enduring wounds caused by those closest to you—a parent, a sibling, or someone else who should have looked after your best interests but didn’t. Please hear this: not everyone deserves the right to speak into your life. Also, sometimes people we love very much aren’t exactly models of the kind of life and marriage we want for ourselves. We get that. Their opinion doesn’t hold much credibility. The most important thing is for you and your fiancé to seek out trustworthy people who know you both well, whose wisdom you respect, and who will not be afraid of speaking truth. Such people will have your well-being at heart

and won't be motivated by their own baggage or ego. What a gift those people can be to you! Be wise, seek them out, listen carefully, and then as a couple, be sure to thoroughly discuss what you heard.

3. ARE YOU WILLING TO LOOK HONESTLY AT "RED FLAGS"?

Anyone who travels as much as we do understands that flight delays due to mechanical problems are simply part of the transportation experience. As odd as this may sound, we really don't mind these delays. We believe in the principle that it is far better to be on the ground wishing you were in the air than to be in the air wishing you were safely on the ground. We bet you agree. Similarly, it is better to confront serious issues in your relationship before marriage, rather than after.

Chances are good that if you are reading this book, you are probably already engaged or very close to becoming engaged. Even so, if you haven't looked carefully at potential concerns in your relationship, it would be much better to postpone your wedding and try to work through those issues than to move forward hoping things will work out. You don't want a marriage built on hope. If needed, it's vital that you be brave enough to

delay the wedding. If you must do so, you won't be the first. Between 35 and 40 percent of all engagements in this country are broken.

People who ignore red flags in a relationship aren't willing to talk about them—or even worse, they just hope the issues will go away. These people are headed toward disaster. They get married, become miserable, and divorce (either quickly or after dragging it out for years). We often wonder how many marriages could have been saved from disaster if the couple would have been courageous enough to face the hard issues. No one gets married hoping to have a miserable relationship, but too many people who are having a difficult time during their courtship mistakenly assume it will get better after they are married. Unfortunately, marriage doesn't work that way. Often it gets more complicated if couples haven't looked at the issues ahead of time.

If you have any question about possible conflicts, see the list below and think through them as honestly as possible. Remember, no one individual is perfect. Two imperfect people marrying one another will absolutely have issues. We all bring our brokenness and pain into a relationship, but certain actions and beliefs should become automatic causes for alarm. These issues are not new. In fact, millions of divorces have preceded

your relationship. You would be a wise couple to consider the potential red flags that we've identified from failed marriages. If you see yourself or your fiancé in any of these, then it's time to slam on the brakes and get some serious counsel. Postponing a wedding is a much better option than naively moving forward, hoping things *might* change after you are married.

Red Flags:

Addiction: Alcohol, drug, sex, gambling, and pornography addiction are all issues that weaken the foundation of a healthy relationship. Addicts don't do intimacy well, period.

Abuse: Has physical or sexual abuse from the past not been addressed? When people bury their painful experiences, those issues have a way of coming back even stronger in a marriage.

Unfaithfulness: If your fiancé has cheated on you, are you positive you have dealt with all the issues surrounding that circumstance? If there is habitual cheating and you continue to allow it, you need to seek counsel for denial and codependency. Chances are good it will happen

again.

Community concern: If your friends and family are all in agreement that the relationship is not right, take the time to get some honest, objective counsel.

Cohabiting: Studies show that couples who are cohabitating have a much greater chance of marital dissatisfaction and divorce. ([See Chapter Seven.](#))

Sexual activity: Is a sexual relationship clouding your decision-making process? Too often, sex can fool couples into an instant intimacy bond. We have both counseled engaged couples who were active sexually, and many used sex to hide their deeper issues. They didn't clearly see their deeper issues as being particularly destructive because they were enjoying sex.

Pregnancy: For women under thirty, most births now occur outside of marriage.⁴ On a HomeWord radio broadcast, the “trainer of trainers” when it comes to premarital counseling, Dr. Norm Wright, said, “One out of four marriages

occurs because of pregnancy.” This is a complicated issue and definitely an important reason for additional counsel.

Different spiritual values: Do you and your fiancé have similar spiritual beliefs? Spiritual compatibility is a major part of a healthy marriage. ([See Chapter Eight.](#))

Poor communication and conflict-resolution skills: Communication is key to a successful relationship. Poor communication and conflict resolution skills can derail a relationship very quickly. Be sure to carefully read chapters 4 and 5.

Issues with previous spouses: If you or your fiancé has been married before, and you still have major “unfinished business” with your ex-spouse, this could destroy your marriage. ([See Chapter Nine.](#))

If you read through these red flags and felt uneasiness in your heart, mind, or soul, we implore you to listen carefully to those feelings. Now is the time to seek counsel. We also urge you to honestly answer the “50 Questions to Ask Before You

Get Married” on [page 209](#). To further prepare you, we suggest you work through the *Getting Ready for Marriage* Online Assessment Tool at GettingReadyForMarriage.com.

4. ARE YOU WILLING TO BE BRUTALLY HONEST ABOUT YOUR OWN BROKENNESS?

No one is perfect. Everyone has been hurt. The truth in relationships is that hurt people, hurt people. When it comes to your future marriage, there really is only one person who can make a change to ensure success, and that is you. Both of us have failed miserably at trying to change our wives. It simply doesn't work. Trust us, you won't change your fiancé, but you can change yourself. The best gift you can give your spouse is a commitment to work on your own spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional health. You will be ready for marriage *not* when you have your life in perfect order, but rather when you are willing to admit to yourself, your fiancé, and God that you are responsible for your own brokenness. You must be willing to do all you can as an individual in order to bring as much stability and health into the relationship as possible.

Despite what you've grown up seeing in movies, the success of your marriage does not come by finding the “right

person.” Your marital success and happiness depend on you *being* the right person. Marriage will not be a cure-all for your problems. Your spouse won’t make you whole; there will even be times when he or she won’t necessarily make you happy. It’s your responsibility to do your part to bring honesty, growth, and openness to the relationship by looking in the mirror of your life and facing your own brokenness.

We can all learn from Brittany’s story:

I was not happy being single, and I had the misconception that getting married to Jason would fix me in some way. I had not come totally clean with Jason about my past. Our pastor suggested I may want to get some counseling for the hurts and pain and overall baggage I was carrying. But I put it off because of all that was going on with the busyness of the wedding plans. Now I realize that was a huge mistake. Keeping my past from Jason was like ignoring an infected wound. I brought my pain into the marriage and it festered and became contagious in our relationship. After a few years of marriage, it wasn’t a major issue like adultery or alcoholism

that tore us apart; it was the little stuff that I was unwilling to deal with. Finally, the marriage just slowly faded away. I'm confident that if I would have taken my pastor's advice before we got married, the marriage would not have atrophied and died. Bottom line: I was too prideful and embarrassed and busy to deal with my stuff. The later hurt was so much greater than if I had not been afraid to face it early on.

5. ARE YOU READY FOR UNCONDITIONAL COMMITMENT?

Most people can quote some of the following words because they're spoken at almost every wedding. No doubt it will, in one form or another, be quoted at your wedding ceremony. It goes something like this:

I, _____, take you, _____, to be my wife/husband. I promise and covenant before God and these witnesses, to be your loving and faithful husband/wife in plenty and in want, in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow, in

good times and hard times, with God's grace and strength, as long as we both shall live.

Whatever words you say to each other at your wedding, they will be words of unconditional commitment. No one ever says, "I am committing to you for the moment, but let me be very clear, I make no promises that this marriage will last." Sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? Before you say "I do," you must be willing to make sure you do whatever it takes to make the marriage last for keeps. *Your level of commitment is the most vital factor in determining the success or failure of your relationship.*

Cathy and I (Jim) have been married for forty years. We often smile and say that all forty years have been "high maintenance" years. Because of the multiple issues we brought into our marriage, we have had to work hard at our relationship. Today we have a good relationship. When we're asked the secret to staying close, we always give the same answer: "perseverance and commitment." I know, it sounds unromantic, but those are words of a promise we made to each other four decades ago. If you aren't willing to make that promise of faithfulness, perseverance, loyalty, and commitment, then you may simply not be ready for marriage. Commitment is only one

of the key factors in keeping a marriage together. Too often, when a marriage gets difficult—and they all do—one or both of the people in the marriage simply give up. Interestingly enough, Shaunti Feldhahn, in her groundbreaking book *The Good News About Marriage*, quotes a study of couples who were not happy in their marriages. The results found that “if an unhappy couple *does* stick with their marriage, the vast majority are happy within five years” and “almost eight out of ten who avoided divorce were happily married five years later.”⁵ Sticking it out, being committed, and persevering is what is required of you. Are you both ready for that?

There was a day more than forty years ago (for Jim and Cathy) and thirty years ago (for Doug and Cathy) when before God, each other, friends, and family we said, “I will,” and “I do.” Looking back on our own engagement periods, we probably didn’t ask most of the questions we’ve outlined in this chapter. We stared in our soon-to-be spouse’s eyes and were a bit naive, a bit scared, and definitely a little too excited for the honeymoon (but that’s another chapter). By the grace of God, some hard and intentional work, and having amazing wives, we are still together and happier with our marriages than at any time in our life history.

Between the two

WE CAN HELP!

The *Getting Ready for Marriage* package includes:

- The *Getting Ready for Marriage* book (which you're reading).
- The *Getting Ready for Marriage Workbook* (use options include: on your own, small groups, counselor/mentor/pastor, or in a class setting).
- The *Getting Ready for Marriage Communication Online Tool*. This premarriage online assessment and communication tool is available at GettingReadyForMarriage.com.

of us, we have over five million frequent flyer miles from work-related travel and more than one hundred published books. We also have a combined six remarkable kids and our beautiful, incredible wives, and we remain convinced that marriage is one of

God's greatest and most life-changing ideas. There is nothing—and we mean nothing—like it on all the earth. It has brought us the greatest joy of our lives, and to be completely honest, it has also delivered its share of pain. Our hope and prayer is that as we take you on a journey in preparation for your marriage, we can impart some of our wisdom and insight and experience to help prepare and deepen you. We want you to be able to look back thirty to forty years from now and say, “My marriage is my greatest gift from God and has brought me more joy than

I ever imagined. It is the closest thing to heaven I will ever experience. It has been well worth the effort.”

NOTES

- 1 Sharon Jayson, "Premarital Education Could Cut Divorce Rate, Survey Finds" June 22, 2006, *USA Today*, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/education/2006-06-21-premarital-education_x.htm?csp=34.
- 2 Roger Tirabassi and Becky Tirabassi, *Seriously Dating or Engaged: A Premarital Workbook for Couples* (Newport Beach, CA: Change Your Life, Inc., 2009), 1.
- 3 Timothy Keller and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 248.
- 4 Jason DeParle and Sabrina Tavernise, "For Women Under 30, Most Births Occur Outside Marriage," *New York Times*, Feb. 17, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/18/us/for-women-under-30-most-births-occur-outside-marriage.html?pagewanted=all>.
- 5 Shaunti Feldhahn, *The Good News About Marriage: Debunking Discouraging Myths About Marriage and Divorce* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Multnomah, 2014), 52–53.

Chapter Two

WRITING YOUR MARRIAGE SCRIPT THROUGH GOALS, HOPES, AND EXPECTATIONS

If you had the ability to write an award-winning script about your life, what would it include? Would it be a drama or a comedy? Perhaps it would be a combination of both? Would it be depressing or inspirational? No doubt you have already had plenty of highs and lows in life ... We all do. While you may not have thought about it before, you have actually already been writing a script for your life since the day you were born. In your early years, the script was pretty much written for you by the family that raised you. But as time went on, you have had more and more to do with the writing and rewriting of your script. Thus far your script has played a very influential part in your life, and your narrative will continue to unfold.

We have a friend who makes his living writing scripts for television and movies. He once told us that while the plot and actors get most of the credit, the really difficult work is spent behind the scenes by the scriptwriters, who are carefully

orchestrating every detail that's played out in front of the cameras. He confidently states that all successful television shows and movies are really the result of excellent scripts.

As you enter into marriage, you have a chance to write, rewrite, and edit your life-script with purpose and intention. In chapter one we told you that too many couples spend their engagement time and energy planning for the wedding day and not on the essentials that will impact their marriage. We want you to realize that it's the marriage script that has the power to change the trajectory of your life and send it in a good direction. We want to help you with that scriptwriting, but we'll get back to it in a moment.

If you plan to be married by a pastor or priest, chances are high these words will be read at your wedding:

“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh”? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate. (Matt. 19:5–6)

This verse was read at both of our weddings (although if we're honest, we were both so nervous on our wedding days

that we don't remember anything other than the fear we felt about the potential of fainting, messing up our vows, or throwing up).

Jesus spoke those famous and powerful words about *two* becoming *one*. He was answering a question about divorce by quoting from the Old Testament,¹ and to reveal God's ultimate goal for a marriage relationship. Spiritually, it's no longer *two* people living individual lives, but in the eyes of God, it's *one* complete life. Later in the New Testament, Paul quoted the same passage of scripture, but right after the words "the two will become one flesh," he added, "This is a profound mystery" (Eph. 5:32). Such a perfect way to describe marriage—it is indeed a profound mystery when two totally unique and different individuals come together as one!

According to these words of Jesus, the transformative power of a marriage relationship is that you would leave your individual past and join together with your husband or wife to literally become a new creation through marriage. The idea of sexual oneness is evident in this text (two become one through intercourse), but it's the idea of oneness at an even deeper level that intrigues us (again, mysterious) in regard to marriage. This *oneness factor* is a spiritual reality.

At your wedding, you will tell the world in front of God,

each other, family, and friends that you are combining your life-scripts to write a whole new story as a couple. Your past and your future merge. From that moment you begin a process of weaving and meshing your spirits together to become one. You will bring your spouse both your strengths and weaknesses. You will bring your regrets and failures as well as your victories and dreams. One aspect of the wedding ceremony is the pronouncement that you are handing all that you currently are to your new husband or wife. In all marriages, there are times when becoming one feels more like a collision than a beautiful blending. Maybe that is why Paul called it “a profound mystery.”

For both of us, the “oneness” we had with our wives on our honeymoons and the first few years of marriage was nothing compared to the depth of oneness we now feel decades later. As we have gotten older and the length of our marriages has stretched out, we laugh at the fact that we can often finish our spouses’ sentences because we know them so intimately. Yet, we also laugh that there are seasons when, even though we know them so well, marriage still feels like an unsolvable puzzle.

Tim Keller, in his excellent book *The Meaning of Marriage*, put it this way: “There’s no relationship between human beings that is greater or more important than marriage.”² And earlier in

the book he said, “It is anything *but* sentimental. Marriage is glorious but hard. It’s a burning joy and strength, and yet it is also blood, sweat, and tears, humbling defeats and exhausting victories. No marriage I know more than a few weeks old could be described as a fairy tale come true.”³

While it may not be a fairy-tale marriage, it can be written to have more joy than pain. Fairy tales are fiction anyway, right?

SHARING YOUR PERSONAL HISTORY

Let's get back to the analogy of writing your life-script. In the critically acclaimed Disney movie *Saving Mr. Banks*, we experience a marvelous story about one of the greatest children's musicals of all time, *Mary Poppins*. The movie reveals the backstory of how Walt Disney courted, pursued, and handled the *Mary Poppins*'s author, P. L. Travers, to allow him to take her written words and put them into movie form. It took Walt more than twenty years to convince her to allow her book to be turned into a film script.

Mary Poppins is a beautiful story of a magical nanny who brings joy and happiness to a family. However, what we see in *Saving Mr. Banks* is that this imaginative tale was actually inspired by a life of deep, dark drama that included an alcoholic father who couldn't get his act together. Here's what we learned: before *Mary Poppins* could be written for millions to enjoy, the backstory had to be experienced. That's what this chapter is all about—helping you to understand and come to terms with your life's backstory.

You are the sum total of your past experiences, and the more you understand about yourself and each other, the easier

it will be to become one in your marriage. It's amazing to us that some premarital couples haven't taken the time to share their personal histories, expectations, hopes, dreams, or even life goals. Your backstory is essential material that makes up the depth of your life-script. Your fiancé needs to know it all. It is the things you hide that later make the marriage sick and sometimes even fail. It's only fair that both parties going into a marriage have the full story—no matter how painful it is to tell or hear.

Cathy and I (Jim) dated all through college, and during this entire time I sensed there would be some writing, speaking, and traveling in the future. But for some reason I was too embarrassed to share those dreams with Cathy prior to marriage. A few years into our marriage, as I actually began to speak, write, and travel more and more, this came as a shocking surprise to Cathy (even though I had been writing it as part of my own script for many years). My desire to travel created tension in our relationship. I viewed being gone as a good opportunity for my career, and she viewed it as an inconvenience in our marriage. It would have been so much easier on our relationship if I had talked about my dreams with her before they took her by surprise.

Because of my personal experience, I always ask couples

what kind of dreams (good) and baggage (bad) they will bring into their marriage. All people have experienced pain; that's part of life. But unfortunately pain leaves a residue that lives on. If you have experienced pain, it doesn't mean you're unworthy of being loved. It doesn't mean your past pain makes you unattractive. What it does mean is that your past experiences have had a shaping effect on your life—on who you are—and that must be shared with and understood by your future spouse.

GETTING TO KNOW YOU MEANS TELLING ALL

What has caused you pain? Did you have demeaning or demanding parents? What about physical or sexual abuse from anyone in any form? Have you experienced the tragic loss of a loved one? How about personal failures that you may have pushed so far down in your memory that you've actually forgotten about them? Or do you have an addiction? Porn? Drugs? Alcohol? Do you have an eating disorder? What about fears that you think about all the time or inadequacies that you don't like to think or talk about?

If you have experienced any of these things, does your

fiancé know about it? Is everything out in the open? Your fiancé needs to know about any pain in your life now, not later. Most premarriage experts state the two most neglected areas of personal communication in relationships are sharing about sexual history and financial history.⁴ You don't want to spring surprises on your spouse in the future that you could talk about today before you marry.

After a recent speaking engagement, Ashley came to us and told us she was engaged to marry her boyfriend of three years, Casey. She said, "I'm not sure I can do what you're suggesting. I'm afraid if I share the 'real me' Casey won't marry me." We looked at each other with that look of, "Who is going to speak the loving truth first?" I (Doug) jumped in and said, "Wouldn't it be better for him to know the real you and love you anyway than to meet the real you after you are married and wonder why he married a stranger?"

Ashley had deep spiritual roots and came from a strong Christian family. She met Casey during a time when she was straying from her faith. They had a lot in common, but Casey had strong anti-Christian beliefs. Because of this, she never told him of her faith background or shared her inner thoughts and prayers. She was afraid he would break off the relationship. Secretly she hoped and prayed he would change his views. In

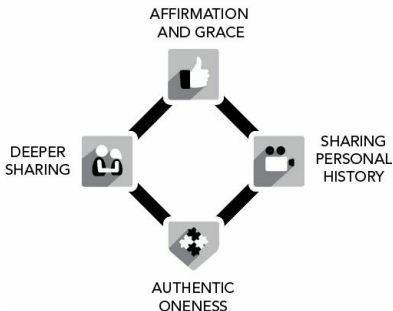
her dream life-script she would one day raise children with the same faith values her parents lived out in her own childhood. During her earlier years with Casey she had compromised her faith as well as her moral values, but now she was slowly coming back to her faith roots.

I (Jim) gently asked her why she was feeling so fearful. She boldly opened up that she and Casey had been physically intimate from the beginning of their relationship and she was embarrassed to share the truth of her faith journey, as well as her hope for the future. She admitted that even her decision to stay in a relationship with Casey had been clouded by their physical relationship. Our advice to Ashley: “Your future marriage to Casey is way too important and valuable to not deal with this issue *before* you get married.”

Let’s be clear: we’re not suggesting you dump your entire life story on your first date—probably not a good idea if you want a second one. But, we are in favor of sharing your personal story in full before you get engaged (and if you are already engaged then definitely share it before marrying). “No surprises” is the best and most authentic model for the foundation of a healthy relationship. To help you, fill out the Personal History Worksheet in the *Getting Ready for Marriage Workbook*.

TOUCHING ALL THE BASES

Let's consider a picture to help explain this idea of deepening levels of communication. Consider the progress that is revealed in this baseball diamond illustration.



The ultimate goal in this illustration is to arrive at home plate: authentic oneness. Just as you can't become one unless you literally leave your father and mother, you can't really experience the depth of oneness without sharing your personal history. Your goal is to be fully accepted by your fiancé despite your past, your sins, your doubts, your fears, and whatever burdens you've experienced in your life. The depth of

forgiveness and grace that only God can give is often manifested on earth when husbands and wives know each other fully—baggage and all—and love one another anyway.

FIRST BASE: SHARING PERSONAL HISTORY

Sometimes sharing personal history is spontaneous and romantic; other times it's planned and even awkward. Over the course of our marriage counseling careers, we've heard too many times, "I just never knew that about my husband (or wife)." Oops. Don't let that happen to you. The Personal History Worksheet in the *Getting Ready for Marriage Workbook*, along with the Online Assessment Tool, are very helpful exercises for any couple to help them share more effectively. Some couples will say, "What is past is past." Others may say, "You don't understand. My fiancé would be furious if he (or she) knew." Really? So, by not sharing parts of your life-script, you're stating that it's better to start a marriage with intentional deception than with the truth? That choice can't lead to a healthy marriage.

At the same time, we're not suggesting that you provide each other with every gritty detail, but we definitely believe in the principle "Pain comes before freedom." If you want to be

free of any guilt or the knowledge that you're withholding something important from your fiancé, then you'll have to experience the pain that may be connected to honesty.

SECOND BASE: AFFIRMATION AND GRACE

Affirmation and grace are crucial to developing authentic oneness. Sharing your personal history doesn't only mean talking about the hard stuff; it also means being met with affirmation and grace after sharing your personal history.

Just this week a great guy named Matt told us, "I felt so much peace when I told Kalie about getting drunk in high school and getting too physical with a girl that I didn't even know. I was definitely not proud of that long-ago moment." When we asked how she responded, he lit up. "It was beautiful. Kalie looked at me and said, 'Matt, what was then was then. You have always treated me with deep respect. I've never seen you even close to drunk. God has forgiven you, so why should I hold our future hostage to your past? I'm thankful you've trusted me with your history. I value and need your honesty in our relationship.'" Talk about freedom and grace! Now those two are definitely ready to move forward.

Kalie met Matt's honesty with grace and affirmation. They

took a huge and powerful step toward authentic oneness. That's why we always ask couples, "What kind of baggage are you bringing to the relationship or marriage?" The reason we ask this isn't to elicit shame, but simply to make sure there is an honest exchange taking place, a chance to hold each other accountable, and often the privilege of providing grace to a previously painful situation. Affirmation and grace are two of the most important gifts you can give one another.

THIRD BASE: DEEPER SHARING

Sharing on a deeper level comes most often after you have shared personal history and received the first experience of feedback that includes grace and affirmation. I (Doug) remember a tender moment when I watched a couple in my office work through the deep pain of dealing with a father who had abandoned the family for an affair with a coworker. This foolish dad chose an affair over walking his daughter down the aisle in marriage. His daughter sobbed as she described it. She was obviously angry, confused, hurt, fearful, and bitter. The pain was so deep that her body heaved and convulsed as she articulated her story. Her fiancé didn't have much to say, but he communicated the depth of his love and acceptance in his

physical posture. He held her and gently reassured her of his love as she wept. He heard her deep sharing and met it with grace (“I love you, and I am so sorry for your pain”) and affirmation (“I promise to never do that to you or to our future family”). Those moments are what bring oneness and wonder and depth to the relationship ... although they are often steeped in sadness.

I (Jim) sat with a couple as the husband shared his extreme addiction to pornography and the resulting consequence of losing his job. His wife was shocked, hurt, angry, and confused. She felt betrayed and experienced every emotion related to grief. Yet—in the span of an hour—she resolved to stand by him and get help for each of them. Because of their courage to take the tough steps of deep sharing and moving toward healing together, they have a strong sense of oneness in their marriage today.

HOME PLATE: AUTHENTIC ONENESS

This is our best attempt to describe the mystery surrounding the words of Jesus (“The two will become one flesh”). Lasting oneness comes through experiencing life as a partnership or a team. Cathy stood by me (Doug) as I watched my father

atrophy before my eyes and die a difficult death from Parkinson's disease. Cathy and I (Jim) worked through the issues of infertility and cancer, as well as the joys of adopting our first child. You can't manufacture authentic oneness. It happens as you share each day with the person with whom you are one. However, the best way to ensure that it will happen is to be intentional about integrating your lives with huge doses of grace and truth.

Everyone in marriage wants to experience authentic oneness, but few realize that you must choose it. It takes more than desire; it takes intentionality to move your relationship around the bases. Becoming one through sex is easy in comparison to the complete oneness that comes from seeking intimacy in all aspects of your relationship. Being one in the other arenas of your life won't happen by accident. You must make a lifetime of choices that move you in the direction of becoming one flesh.

SHARING EXPECTATIONS

We don't want to assume you are a "typical engaged couple," but allow us to let you in on a pattern we see quite often. Premarital couples tend to be overly idealistic about their relationship. They are in love, the brain is producing "pleasure drugs" like endorphins (we mentioned this in chapter 1), and the chemicals are clouding some foundational thinking. Most engaged couples tell us they have met their soul mate in one another. And while other marriages may struggle with communication and conflict, their relationship is something special and will be quite different. Their romance will never fade! While we appreciate the optimism, we also agree with Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott, who reveal that "happily married couples will have healthy expectations of marriage."⁵ That's what we want for you!

Because Cathy and I (Jim) really didn't have much premarital counseling, we never proactively walked through the sharing of expectations before we wed. Neither of us realized how many real and deep issues existed; we just assumed our past scripts wouldn't present future problems. Our first year of marriage wasn't easy, and it was partly a result of not dealing with our unspoken expectations. I recall one major fight that

happened at about one thirty in the morning. I had gone to bed a couple of hours earlier, frustrated that Cathy wanted to stay up to try to balance the checkbook for our measly checking account. I thought it was a waste of time. Plus, I didn't like the fact that Cathy was even handling the checking account because my father handled all the family finances. I thought that's how it should be in our marriage too. That was one of my unspoken expectations. Cathy thought differently. Her mother not only took care of all finances but handed out a "weekly allowance" to her husband, who was the sole breadwinner. That system was one of Cathy's unspoken expectations she was now expressing in our marriage.

After sleeping for a couple of hours, I woke up and realized that Cathy had not come to bed and was still trying to balance the checkbook. I stumbled into the kitchen where she was working and mumbled, "Why don't you come to bed?"

Frustrated, she replied, "I can't until I get this balanced."

I asked, "How much are you off?" Based on her appearance and angst, I assumed we were out of balance by hundreds of dollars.

Totally exasperated, she said, "One dollar and thirty-one cents." Now, I'm not proud of this, but I went back to the bedroom, pulled \$1.31 out of our change jar, returned to the

kitchen, and slammed it on the table. I said, “Here is your money. Now come to bed. This is absolutely ridiculous!”

Three things immediately happened. First, Cathy cried. Second, we had an intense argument that moved far beyond the \$1.31 deficit. Third, I spent the rest of the night on the couch. Some guys have said they don’t mind the couch because it’s kind of like camping. Well, not for me ... I hated that couch almost as much as I hated creating that argument.

Today, because of experience and failure, I possess a lot more wisdom than I did then, and I know we would have been much better off if we had we spent more time talking about the expectations connected to handling our finances prior to saying “I do.” Instead, we experienced a painful confrontation that pushed us apart.

You can avoid those types of mistakes by simply taking time to share with one another your expectations (that typically go unspoken) about issues that appear in every marriage—and money is a big one. A few other biggies might include sex, faith, parenting, time spent with friends, holidays, the role your home will play in entertaining, how to resolve conflict, and chores. If you don’t do this work now, your assumptions and expectations will probably divide you later.

We (Doug and Cathy) never even thought to talk about

household expectations prior to our marriage. But during her growing-up years, Cathy's dad was Mr. Fix-It. He did everything around the house, and she just assumed I would be like him and fix anything from car engines to washing machines—anything mechanical. Her dad saw every such challenge as an opportunity to learn something new and conquer that giant.

I am very different. Emphasis on the word *very*. I studied Greek in graduate school, but that wasn't going to help me know how to repair anything. I can't fix stuff. Unlike her dad, I see every such challenge as an opportunity to pay someone to do all that stuff.

Cathy thought I was kidding when I said I didn't know the difference between a flat-head and a Phillips-head screwdriver. And her unspoken expectation created a tension I could never solve. In our thirty-plus years of marriage, we've discovered many expectations that we both had and ignored by not addressing them prior to marriage. By the way, it's normal to have expectations that don't align with one another. However, that's precisely why you want to talk through those before you get married, rather than after.

One of the biggest areas to talk about before marriage is children. Before you tie the knot, get to know each other's attitudes, expectations, preferences, and anything else in your

minds about having and raising kids—including when to have them. We believe that a “no surprises” approach is the very best way to deal with expectations about children. This is definitely one of the most crucial issues to thoroughly discuss. Too many times we’ve seen, after the wedding, that a couple has very different hopes and expectations about kids.

A very distraught woman told us at one of our conferences that her husband was insisting on not having kids. We asked, “What was his opinion before you got married?” We were thinking maybe he had pulled a bait and switch, telling her one thing before the wedding and something completely different after they were married. Her answer surprised us. “We never talked about it. I just assumed he wanted to raise a family as much as I did.” She added, “That would have been a deal breaker for me.”

The lesson learned is obvious: don’t assume you know what your fiancé is thinking when it comes to children. Whether to have children is no doubt one of the most important decisions you will make as a couple and it will definitely have an impact on your marriage. (Make sure to take the “Family Expectations Inventory” in the *Getting Ready for Marriage Workbook*.)

We have put together a larger list of expectations in our

accompanying workbook, but here are ten questions to get you thinking and discussing now:

1. How will we handle finances?
2. What will we do if the toilet (or anything else around the house) breaks?
3. How often will we socialize and be with friends in a week?
4. What is your attitude and expectation about having kids?
5. What will be the spiritual component in our marriage?
6. What will we do for the holidays? How much time do you anticipate spending with your parents? My parents?
7. How often would you like to have sex in our first year of marriage?
8. Where do you want to live? What if I don't want to move away from my family?
9. What is an unrealized dream of yours?
10. How will we divide household chores? Dinner? Laundry? Groceries? House cleaning? Yard work? Auto repair?

SETTING GOALS

When marriages fail, it's often not because of the “big-ticket items” like adultery and abuse. Marriages typically die a slow, dismal death from a lack of intentionality and attention. Those who don't give their marriage focused attention quit setting goals and working on their relationship. Then, slowly and almost unknowingly they begin to *drift* as a couple, and one day they wonder why they are so different or feel so far apart ... they drifted too far.

My (Jim) father was raised on a farm that had cattle. He would often tell stories of the cattle regularly getting lost because they kept their head down to eat the grass and their simple life consisted of moving from one patch of grass to the next. Eventually, the cows veered off the property into someone else's territory and were completely lost. Maybe that's why we don't see cows in the circus—they're not real smart. That's a perfect picture of what can happen to a well-intended marriage that doesn't look ahead.

We encourage you to write a script for your upcoming marriage that ensures you won't drift. In order to do this, you will need to set some realistic goals that will become a significant part of your upcoming marriage script. You will be living out a marriage based on a script whether you write it

intentionally or not. When a couple is thoughtful and purposeful with their choices to be in an authentic relationship of oneness, outlining future goals is essential. Goals help you get where you want to go. They provide direction and give hope for the future. Only a very small percentage of engaged couples get ready for marriage by setting goals. We want that percentage to increase—starting with you.

WHAT ARE YOUR GOALS?

So, what are your goals for your current relationship and your future marriage? Have you taken time to articulate them? Defining even general, big-picture goals (e.g., “We want to have a great marriage”) can be an important place to begin. Later on you can move toward more specific goals. For example, here’s what one couple wrote:

- A weekly date without kids.
- Learn something new together, like photography or dancing.
- Pray together five times a week.
- Join a couples’ group at church.
- Create a budget and meet regularly to go over it.

Reaching your goals will require perseverance and determination. Most people who have achieved great things in their lives have had as many failures (if not more) as successes. Successful people set goals because they know the importance of having clear direction. How you spend your time and what you choose as goals will guide your priorities, and your priorities will play a significant role in the success of your marriage. Consider these five attributes of effective goal setting as you think through your goals. Ask each other:

Specific—Are the goals for our marriage super clear so that we both know what they mean?

Measurable—How will we be able to track our progress?

Attainable—What might be the primary obstacles that could keep us from reaching these goals, and how will we know when we've accomplished them?

Relevant—Why is this goal important to us and what impact will it have on our marriage?

Time-bound—What is the specific date by which we hope to accomplish this goal?

(If you need additional help setting your goals, be sure to look at our Goal-Setting Form in the *Getting Ready for Marriage Workbook*.) A woman accompanied her husband to the doctor's office. After his very thorough checkup, the doctor sent the husband into the waiting area and called the wife into his office for a confidential assessment. In a concerned tone, he said, "Your husband is suffering from a severe disease combined with horrible stress. It looks as though he may die soon unless you commit to the following actions: Each morning fix him a full, warm, healthy breakfast. Always be in a good mood. Be constantly pleasant to make sure he doesn't feel any additional stress. Make him a nice lunch, and for the next year really try to go overboard and cook his favorite meals for dinner. Don't burden him with household chores; he can't handle the additional pressure. Don't discuss your problems with him; it will only increase the tension. And most importantly, try to satisfy his every physical desire. If you can do this for the next ten to twelve months, I'm confident your husband will fully regain his health."

On the way home, the husband asked, "So, what did the doctor say to you?"

His wife paused for a long time and then responded, "He said you are going to die."

While that story is funny, the serious truth is that if you don't work on your marriage and become more intentional about expectations, your marriage could die. By doing the work ahead of time, you could save years of heartache and misunderstanding.

NOTES

- [1](#) See Genesis 2:24.
- [2](#) Timothy Keller and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 14.
- [3](#) Keller and Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 13.
- [4](#) Gary Chapman, *Things I Wish I'd Known Before We Got Married* (Chicago: Northfield, 2010), 152.
- [5](#) Les Parrott and Leslie Parrott, *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts: Nine Questions to Ask Before (and After) You Remarry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 15.

Chapter Three

IN-LAWS: YOU MARRY THE FAMILY

A young married couple drove several miles down a country road, intentionally not saying a word to one another. An earlier discussion had led to an argument, and now both were angry, and neither wanted to concede their position. As they passed a barnyard of mules and pigs, the wife took a cheap shot at her husband and sarcastically asked, “Are those relatives of yours?” The husband immediately snapped back, “Yep! They’re my in-laws!”

Family is a big deal. At a recent Refreshing Your Marriage conference, Trish approached us and made this comment: “I have few problems with my husband, but is it legal to divorce his family?” While that’s a funny question, she was well aware that divorcing her in-laws wasn’t an option. When you get married, you are morphing your relationship into a part of another family system that has its own established set of expectations, rules, opinions, and decisions—all of which have been around a lot longer than you have. This is one of the primary reasons in-law issues are a source of major conflict

with couples. Here is the reality you are facing with your in-laws: you can't ignore them or change them, so wisdom requires you to better understand them and your new role within the extended family.

I (Doug) love humor and comedies, and when I was growing up it seemed like every TV show made in-laws the butt of its jokes. Specifically, mothers-in-law seemed to be easy targets for comedians' rants. Thankfully, I was pleasantly surprised when I got to know Cathy's parents. They are some of the most wonderful people I have ever known, and for me, when our premarital counselor said, "Doug, when you marry Cathy, you're not just marrying her—you're also marrying her family," that was good news. I love Cathy's family! My wife has tremendous parents. Yet, thirty years ago when I married her, I didn't know how true the counselor's statement would be, and I definitely didn't realize the rarity of my in-law situation. I have been so very fortunate. Over the years, I've watched many of my good friends' in-law situations create horrible chaos in their marriages.

We definitely don't want that to happen to you, and we believe there are some actions you can consider before you get married that will help your future.

UNDERSTAND YOUR FAMILY OF ORIGIN

How deeply have you talked to one another about your soon-to-be extended family? Have you discussed how you will handle the holidays? That's definitely a biggie. What are the unspoken traditions and expectations that both families embrace during special occasions? How will you, as a couple, deal with crazy Uncle Phil? Every family has some crazy cast members, and yours will too. You can't avoid family.

Your future spouse has been greatly influenced by his or her parents—whether positively or negatively. Let's consider the negative for a moment. While you might be tempted to move to another country to escape each other's families, we should warn you that you can run, but you can't hide. Your fiancé has a script (remember the last chapter?) and there is shaping power in that script. In Scripture we're told that we inherit the sins of our parents all the way back to the third and fourth generation.¹ Yikes! What sin tendencies has your fiancé inherited from his or her parents? What about you?

Whether or not you like hearing it, most of what we bring to our marriage has been influenced by our family of origin. We all have what is called a *family system*, and that family system

affects our values, beliefs, attitudes, priorities, and definitely our actions. To put it bluntly, your family has been the greatest contributing factor in why you are the way you are and who you are today. Most engaged couples don't spend enough time thinking deeply about each other's family system. Your family and your spouse's family aren't going to go away after the wedding. Couples who try to ignore the impact of their family system will find their denial isn't a good long-term strategy. Your family system will come back to bite you if you try to ignore it. So here's our easy solution: don't ignore it. Simple, right? Let's talk about it so we know what we're going to be dealing with in our future.

EXPLORE YOUR FAMILY MAPS

Just as everyone has the life-script we wrote about in the previous chapter, every person also comes from a unique family system and has developed a family map (or a family script, if you will). During premarital counseling we will often begin by having each couple create a family map that shows awareness of their unique family backgrounds. This type of map can help you explore anything from relational patterns to health issues to emotional tendencies to spiritual-legacy issues. It really is quite fascinating to watch the stories unfold as you put names and issues on your map. Our *Getting Ready for Marriage Workbook* has an easy-to-use Family Genogram (and our Online Assessment will take the family map one step deeper) that helps you look for specific issues that will be important for you to discuss. As you explore your family tree, you often begin to see revealing patterns that may have been previously unknown.

Richard and Angie came into my (Jim) office with their Family Genogram finished. Richard handed it to me and confidently said, “I was a psychology major, and I did this once before in college. There were fireworks with some of the other students, but mine was really bland.” I think I said something like, “Okay, great, let’s see. I actually like bland—it

often makes for an easier marital relationship.”

Angie introduced her family. She started with her great-grandparents, who had passed away, but their influence remained strong in her life. She then showed me several sets of grandparents (because of divorce and death) before getting to her parents—who each had a couple of marriages. We counted twelve different marriages just from Angie’s side of the family. You don’t need a PhD to figure this one out—divorce was rampant in her family.

Now it was time to turn to Richard’s family. I was able to discover a little color in his “bland family” through a series of simple questions. What he thought was nondescript actually revealed alcoholism on both sides of his family and a significant history of financial problems as well as health concerns on his dad’s side of the family (uncles died at a young age from heart attacks). Quickly, three key issues emerged: Richard definitely had a biological predisposition to alcoholism, a family that modeled excessive spending resulting in deep debt, and a greater probability for heart disease.

As I began to probe, Richard admitted to some problematic drinking habits, described himself as a spender rather than a saver, and felt relieved that he had never had any heart issues (that he was aware of). His family system turned out to be quite

colorful. We decided to take an extra session to discuss his propensity toward alcoholism and some of the issues his drinking was already causing in their relationship. In a later session it became evident that this couple had never discussed budgeting, and it was absolutely necessary that they develop a workable budget. Angie even urged Richard to get a routine heart checkup, and they discovered a minor heart murmur—it wasn't a problem at the moment, but it definitely needed to be watched. Digging into their family system had a payoff and led to some important and powerful discussions.

Gaining a better understanding of how your family operates may not produce the dramatic results it did for Angie and Richard, but the process can be very beneficial in helping you identify patterns and shed light on why you may think and act the way you do. Don't be scared to dig deep and uncover some issues and potential pain, as those may lead to helpful discussions. Please understand, we're not suggesting that just because you see a pattern in your parents or grandparents that there's a 100 percent probability it will happen to you, too. Not at all. We believe you can rewrite and edit the script. We also believe there are deeper influences at play in a person's life and relationship that normally receive no attention, but should. You want to be wise and learn from the past.

Here is what we discovered with Angie and Richard:

Angie

- Divorce was a strong theme in her family system.
- Several family members had a propensity toward drug and alcohol addiction.
- Infidelity was rampant in this family.

Richard

- Most likely Richard had a biological predisposition toward alcoholism because of his family history.
- For generations, Richard's family had not handled money and stewardship well.
- Deep in Richard's family system were heart problems and heart disease.

When you better understand why you act the way you act, you may need to make a commitment to become the *transitional generation* for your future family.

RECOVER, DON'T REPEAT

Cathy and I (Jim) both came from somewhat dysfunctional families. There are definitely worse upbringings than the ones we had, but there are also better ones. As we began to understand how influential our family system was to our behavior and communication issues early in our marriage, we decided to do something about it. We made a commitment to one another that we would become the transitional generation for our future kids and grandchildren. Both of us inherited the sin tendencies of our previous generations. Because of this, we made a bold decision that we would *recover from* rather than *repeat* those sins. We would rewrite the script that we had been born into. In many ways our relationship together and our journey as individuals has meant putting into place some very necessary life changes so that our own children would have a stronger foundation of emotional, spiritual, and even physical health than we had experienced in our families of origin. It hasn't always been easy, but as we look back, it has all been worth it, and it all started with our commitment to become the transitional couple.

My (Doug) upbringing was different from Jim's—partly because my mother made the choice to be part of the transitional generation for our family many years ago. I was fortunate enough to be raised in a home where my parents

made a decision to discover faith and put their trust in the person and teachings of Jesus. It wasn't a perfect home by any means, but from a young age I was taught the biblical principles my parents were trying to live out in their own lives. My mom and dad got married in 1952, and while they were on their honeymoon—which was driving a car across America—they decided they wouldn't bring their family's pain and weirdness into their legacy of the Fields' family. I'm so grateful for Mom and Dad's decision to introduce us to Jesus, because it gave my sisters and me the solid faith foundation we have brought into our marriages today. I'm fortunate because not only is Cathy one of the most together people I know, but as I've already mentioned, her parents are amazing too. They also laid a strong spiritual foundation to help her make healthy life decisions, which has now influenced our young-adult children.

Are you seeing the picture we're painting? Whether you come from a broken family system or a healthy one, you are only one generation away from making good or poor decisions that will play a determining role in your marriage and family. You won't improve your family relationships by hope, circumstance, or chance. Change requires learning, reflection, focus, and work.

HOLIDAYS AND TRADITIONS

Someone once told us, “The past always presses for expression in the present.” This may be most true with your past holiday traditions. If you haven’t already begun discussing each other’s holiday experiences, specific traditions, and your family’s expectations, you need to get started immediately. We suggest you actually list the spoken and unspoken family “rules” governing important events like holidays, birthdays, and vacation time. Making this list can save a lot of hurt feelings and confusion.

Cathy’s family didn’t make a big deal about birthdays, while my (Jim) family treated a birthday like it was Christmas.

When we (Doug) first got married, both sets of families just assumed we’d be at their house on Christmas Day. Yes, that created tension. Why? Because traditions can become sacred within families.

Learning these things about each other will help you form a united front on how you as a couple will choose to celebrate. You can’t please everyone, but you will want to learn each family’s culture and their perspectives so you can better communicate your new expectations *before* they are expected of you. Obviously, you’ll want to be accommodating when appropriate, but you’ll also need to be firm when building your

own new traditions as a family. It's probably safe to assume your traditions will evolve over the years as your family grows and changes.

Before we had children, Cathy and I (Doug) would always spend the first part of Christmas morning with her parents, then we'd move to my parents' house in the afternoon to join my family. But when we were expecting our first child, we decided we wanted to do Christmas in our home during the morning hours, and then we'd navigate and negotiate what we would be available to do later in the day. We didn't know this before we got married, but as our ideas evolved, we tried to clearly and kindly communicate expectations to our families in order to minimize potential hurt and conflict.

The unfortunate reality is that when your decisions result in changes to family traditions, someone will have hurt feelings. While you can't escape the fact that you'll occasionally hurt the feelings of others, this doesn't mean that marriage will always be about disappointing your families. Once you establish new traditions and communicate them with love and respect, you'll most likely find that your families will accept the new reality with grace.

SPEND TIME WITH YOUR IN-LAWS

BEFORE YOU MARRY

The more you can get to know your future in-laws, the better. Frankly, your future will be much easier if you have a positive relationship with your spouse's extended family before you marry. When you spend time with them, it gives you a chance to not be blindsided by unmet expectations, and it also builds trust and connection.

I (Jim) remember the first time I went to visit Cathy's family while we were both in college. Not only was I a nervous wreck, but I really wanted to make a good first impression. My main worry was Cathy's dad. I had no idea what we would talk about. He loved tinkering on his car and other mechanical things, and I didn't own a single tool. I also knew he had a love affair with the San Francisco 49ers; I couldn't name one player on that football team. Basically, he could take a car apart and put it back together while quoting every statistic of his beloved football team.

Unfortunately, I didn't have enough time to prepare myself with any mechanical knowledge, but I did watch a 49ers game and read a few articles about their team in preparation. I wanted to be able to speak his language. When I entered the house, I was almost immediately ushered to the garage to meet Cathy's

dad, who was wearing a dirty, oil-stained 49ers T-shirt. Who knows, he may have been more nervous than me, but he looked emotionless and barely acknowledged me from under the hood of the car ... Until I said, “I hear you’re a big 49ers fan. Wasn’t that an exciting game last weekend?” Bingo! I was in. That comment broke the ice, and he engaged me in conversation. We soon began a friendship that carried over after Cathy and I were married.

When Cathy’s father died, he was buried in his 49ers jacket, and while it won’t be my chosen attire, I smile whenever I think of that final display of loyalty for the team he loved. My father-in-law and I didn’t have much in common, but our relationship was solid. He loved his daughter, and so do I. I made it my goal to learn everything I could about him and work at developing a healthy relationship with him in order to honor my wife. It paid off for many years.

HONOR YOUR EXTENDED FAMILY

In many ways, learning to navigate the choppy waters of the extended family can all come down to honor. When you show honor to your extended family, you are directly showing honor to your spouse. No matter how different you are from your extended family, you can still communicate respect and learn to be as positive as possible. Regardless of whether your mother-in-law remembers your birthday, make sure she gets a nice card from you on hers. You may need to compromise your expectations in order to show your in-laws respect. This doesn't mean you have to force yourself to be extremely connected with them. You don't have to call them "Dad" or "Mom" and watch TV with them every Sunday night. But if you choose to marry their son or daughter, it's your job to find ways to care for them (even if that care and respect are not always reciprocated).

Paying attention to the little things is often the simplest way to begin. When you are at their house, make yourself useful. Take out the trash, do the dishes, or offer to run errands. Thirty years later, my (Doug) mother-in-law still talks about when I won her over by doing the dishes the first time I

was at their house for dinner. She doesn't just mention that first time, though—I've continued to do them every time we're all together. It's still a very simple gesture of appreciation and honor to her. While the rest of the males tend to eat and then go watch football, I simply take a few minutes to help clean up. It's so easy, and yet it is very significant to Cathy's mom.

Whatever you choose to do to honor your in-laws, remember that your primary job is to be supportive of your future wife or husband no matter how much or how little you have in common with their family. Make it your goal to live out this biblical principle: "Outdo one another in showing honor."²

Our friend Ron is a quiet, unassuming guy. At times both of us wish we were more like him. One day we were all out to lunch and he was telling us that his father-in-law had recently passed away. We didn't know much about his father-in-law, but we knew that Ron's wife, Lori, had been raised in a pretty severe alcoholic home with an abusive father and a distant mother. Lori's mom and dad had divorced when she was quite young. When we asked Ron if he went to the funeral, we were surprised to learn that he delivered the eulogy.

Then Ron told us an amazing story of humility and respect. Without telling his wife every detail, he had decided to start visiting her dad when he found out he was ill. For most of his

marriage to Lori, Ron had basically ignored her father because of the pain he had caused Lori. As her husband, Ron was protective of Lori, and knowing that her father hurt her so deeply made him angry, which eventually morphed into bitterness toward him. Because Ron didn't want to live with those emotions, he chose to show up at his father-in-law's apartment with the goal of restoring the relationship. There wasn't a lot of meaningful conversation—they simply sat and watched the news together. Lori's father was a lonely, stubborn, empty person.

Ron increased his visits to a couple of times a week, and as his father-in-law became feeble, Ron began taking out the trash and doing some of the chores. Ron told us that he was deeply challenged by the words of Jesus: "When you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!"³ That verse motivated him to treat his abusive father-in-law in the same way he would if he were serving Jesus Himself. One day he showed up with the bestselling book *The Purpose Driven Life* and nonchalantly said, "Oh, I brought you this book in case you want to read something. It's been meaningful to me."

On Ron's next visit he was totally surprised that his father-in-law had not only read the book, but he wanted to talk about

it. Ron's simple and random acts of kindness slowly brought healing to the family before his father-in-law died. Even though his father-in-law had such a broken relationship with his own kids, he did his best to make things right before his passing. He wrote a letter of apology to his ex-wife, to whom he had been abusive and unfaithful, and tried to reach out to his kids. Granted, Ron's effort didn't change Lori's harsh childhood, but it gave her one of the most incredible gifts she would ever receive: a chance to heal the wounded bond with her father, all because Ron was mature enough to deal with his anger and bitterness and began caring for his father-in-law. Ron told us that during his times with Lori's father, he learned more about his wife than he ever imagined. What Ron had done so well was to follow a principle we have talked to couples about for many years: "Protect your family and do the right thing."

While you may not have that radical of a story, please don't miss one of the principles Ron taught us: the more you get to know the extended family, the more you will understand some of the *why* behind your spouse's actions. There's almost always a story behind them. Care enough to learn it.

TROUBLED EXTENDED FAMILY

You may be thinking that this honor stuff may work for some people, but it's not going to work with your family. Maybe your family is seriously broken. One of the common reasons couples get counseling is to learn how to respond to deep problems within their extended family systems. It could be anything from a mother-in-law who has no sense of healthy boundaries to family members who ignite constant turmoil within their relationships. Some families are more broken and messed up than others.

Jerald's father is in prison.

Tom and Janet cosigned on a loan for a family member, and now they are out \$15,000.

Carrie's sister is homeless and on drugs; she shows up when she needs money or a place to crash.

Karen's dad was abusive.

The list goes on and on. What can you do when you have a troubled extended family?

Let's return to what we discussed in chapter one. Do you

remember this? “A man will *leave* his father and mother and be united to his wife.” With no intention of sounding heartless, we have to say that you can’t allow your extended family to take your marriage down. Too many marriages falter and fail because the struggles and pain of extended family members take precedence over any kind of marital connectedness. The mandate from God is to leave your family and make your spouse your first priority. That doesn’t mean you ignore your extended family; it means keeping your marriage sacred and secure so that you remain united in the face of whatever challenges your families must confront. Protect your family and do the right thing.

If you need help developing healthy boundaries with troubled family members, do whatever it takes to safeguard your marriage. The process can be complicated, but establishing healthy boundaries by remaining firm, yet kind, is the direction you want to go. If your spouse’s side of the family seems to be needy, then you must display extra patience and generosity toward your future spouse. Where many couples encounter trouble is by not talking about the issues and not developing boundaries together, and then they gradually stop supporting one another. If you are dealing with a troubled family member who seems to be getting in the way

of your marriage, reach out to a mentor or counselor for support to ensure that, at all costs, you keep your marriage healthy.

My (Jim) dad was no saint. He was a good man and father, but he had his struggles, and he definitely wasn't raised in an easy home environment himself. I adored my mom's mom (my grandmother), but I never knew my maternal grandfather, who died of liver disease brought on by excessive drinking as an alcoholic. At the end of my mom's and dad's lives, they both seemed to grasp what it meant for them to finish life well. They wanted a right relationship with God and a right relationship with their loved ones.

In reality, when it gets to the end of our lives, those are the two most important issues. No family is perfect, and we all bring brokenness to our marriages, but one of the wisest decisions you can ever make is to commit to becoming the transitional generation in your marriage and for your future. Then your children and grandchildren will look back to you one day and be grateful you did the hard work to recover and not repeat the mistakes of those before you.

NOTES

1 See [Deuteronomy 5:9](#) (see also Exodus 20:5, 34:7; Numbers 14:18).

2 Romans 12:10 RSV.

3 Matthew 25:40 NLT.

Chapter Four

COMMUNICATION: THE FASTEST ROUTE TO CONNECTION

Communication is the lifeblood of marriage. It's a key that unlocks the door to a healthy, happy, and more secure relationship. Marriage research reveals that 86 percent of all marriages that derail place "poor communication" as the primary reason. In a recent poll, almost all (97 percent) who rate their communication with their spouse as "excellent" are happily married, compared to 56 percent who rate their communication as "poor." The poll concluded: "In an era of increasingly fragile marriages, a couple's ability to communicate is the single most important contributor to a stable and satisfying marriage."¹ It's pretty obvious that strengthening this skill is a big factor in the success of your future marriage. We are all about helping you become part of the movement to reverse those negative statistics.

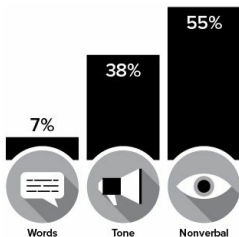
Our typical first session for premarital counseling is pretty much the same. We talk about how a couple met, and it's normally enjoyable to hear their falling-in-love story. The

couple usually smiles a lot and communicates joy as they relay their unique account. They hold hands. They gaze into each other's eyes and will usually make confident statements about their communication patterns such as, "We're really good at communicating," or "We communicate beautifully," or "We never have problems sharing our feelings." The one we hear most often is, "We don't think communication will be an issue with us; it's definitely one of our strengths." And in their minds, they really believe that ... and it may indeed be true. We hope it is. But most engaged couples haven't thought much about communication and connection and the need to practice good habits in this area. Good and intentional communication habits during your engagement period will absolutely lead to better communication during your marriage.

A lot of what we are going to share with you in this chapter comes naturally to engaged couples—many aspects of the relationship may feel easy and natural during the pre-engagement and engagement season. But, fast-forward six months to a year after the wedding where we often see signs that there are cracks in the communication armor.

Here's the big learning factor for many couples: communication isn't just about talking. In fact, talking is really just a small part of the actual communication process. Years

ago, the Kodak company did a study to determine the factors that make up “the total message” in communication.² Here is what they found:



WORDS—7%

Words hold the least statistical value, yet most of us believe they are the primary element in communication. Don't misunderstand; there is great power in *what* we actually say. Words can heal, affirm, empower, bless, enlighten ... and unfortunately words can also destroy. There is no doubt that words are powerful, but ultimately not as much as other forms of communication.

The book of Proverbs has a lot of relational advice when it comes to the power of words, and we would be wise to consider them. One verse says, “The tongue has the power of

life and death” (Prov. 18:21). Many marriages have been saved and strengthened with kindness and affirmation, and many have crashed and burned because of mean-spirited and angry words. Wisdom says, “Those who guard their mouths and their tongues keep themselves from calamity” (Prov. 21:23). Some marriages take this *guarding* caution to a negative extreme and just stop talking altogether. That’s definitely not the answer for your marriage. A better answer is to not say everything you are thinking. If words are going to hurt your spouse, don’t use them. Keep your mouth shut and be wise.

To develop a healthy marriage, you will need to learn to use your words to engage in intimate conversation, share feelings, express needs, inform your spouse, and bring delight. Words are powerful! The key to powerful spoken words is learning what to say, and more importantly, what not to say—which is often more difficult.

We recently asked an older, happily married couple attending our Refreshing Your Marriage conference, “What’s the secret to your longevity and success in marriage?” The husband looked at his wife and said, “One word: filter.” We pushed for more of an explanation, and what followed was powerful. He said that early in their marriage he needed to filter his words. “Sometimes I just had to bite my tongue and not say

what I was thinking. I had to learn that kind words *built up* and harsh words *tore down* my wife. I needed to filter my words and not say everything I was thinking unless they were words that were intended to build up. I guess I would say that's been the biggest secret to our longevity and success."

That is one wise man! We encourage you to steal his secret. It's not necessary to say everything you are thinking.

We believe most marriage communication issues can be helped and even fixed by making seemingly small changes and learning to speak well-intended words of encouragement. Everyone needs and loves a word of affirmation. One of the quickest ways to bring healing to a relationship is through those well-timed and specific words. Consider making this one of your communication rules: *compliment daily*. It sounds simple, but it's more complex than you might imagine. We hear from couples all the time who tell us they are starving for affirmation from their spouse.

Cathy and I (Jim) have made it a goal to live this out daily, and we've found practical ways that make it really easy to do so. We have a small erasable board in our bedroom, where we write each other compliments and words of affirmation. It's amazing how the right words at the right time can make a big difference. Again, words are powerful. Mark Twain once said,

“I can go two months with one good compliment.”

This idea of affirmation is difficult for those who were raised in a home where compliments were rare. We understand the difficulty this creates, and we're so sorry if that was your experience. These types of homes are what we call *shame-based homes*. If this was your experience, you might be bringing some of that baggage into your new marriage. If so, you may find it very easy and natural to withhold life-giving words. Normal couples who have even low-level bitterness and resentment toward each other have a hard time expressing encouraging words. So, if lack of affirmation is part of your family script, you're going to have to pay extra attention to be able to speak the types of words your spouse needs.

Even when your words aren't directed at your fiancé, the destructive power of negativity can impact him or her. For example, complaining is a form of destructive talk that becomes wearying to be around. Complaints often are the result of allowing negative expressions of your thoughts to become audible. While you assume you aren't affecting anyone by complaining, doing so regularly can become a drain on your marriage—even if your criticisms aren't about your spouse. A habit of complaining might have originated from your family background or you may have unconsciously formed the habit

over the years. Regardless of where or when it began, it's vital to take control of this negative behavior before it shuts down connectedness in your marriage (or other relationships).

Will Bowen wrote a bestselling book called *A Complaint-Free World* in which he challenged his readers to stop complaining for twenty-one straight days. He has said that to break this difficult habit, it may take several months of failed attempts to actually go for twenty-one days without a complaint. He also claims that no one who has ever tried the challenge of not complaining for twenty-one days has regretted it. If you tend to be the complaining type, try out the "Complaint-Free Challenge," and watch your relationship and communication improve dramatically.

There is another principle related to the use of words that many newlyweds often struggle to remember: *Don't put down your spouse in front of others*. Putting down your spouse publicly never works. *Never!* Even if you think what you are saying is harmless and you are trying to be funny, damage is always done. Even when you're "sure" your sarcasm won't hurt your spouse's feelings, it's just not worth the risk. Words can leave emotional scars.

Jenny and Ryan are newlyweds. Jenny grew up in a family that celebrated Christmas in big, over-the-top ways. This was

especially true when it came to filling the stockings—no ordinary stockings—think stockings on steroids. Ryan, on the other hand, had never even had a Christmas stocking when he was a kid. At their first Christmas dinner together, surrounded by several family members, Jenny made a snide comment about what a lousy job Ryan had done filling her stocking. She was partly teasing and partly stating fact. It was true that Ryan didn't do a very good job, but Jenny made light of this and put him down in front of his new family. Was it worth the put-down? Nope! What Jenny thought might be funny, Ryan experienced as wounding. There was nothing helpful in putting him down, and it was not the type of memory that either of them wanted for their first Christmas as a married couple. There is great power in words, and Jenny learned that lesson at Ryan's expense.

TONE—38%

When it comes to communication, even more important than words is the tone that accompanies them. You've most likely heard the phrase, "It's not *what* you said; it's *how* you said it." That's a very true statement connected to tone. If you want to succeed in your marriage communication, you've got to make

sure you don't become tone deaf.

Both of us are rhythmically impaired and musically challenged. Talk about a double whammy! It's a good thing we'd rather write and speak than play musical instruments and sing. Not that we don't occasionally sing; we just don't do it on key. The funny thing is that we would never have realized this about ourselves, but over the years many people have assured us of this reality, and we can no longer live in denial.

I (Jim) remember the exact day in fifth grade when Miss Funk (I sure hope she married someone with a better last name) told me to lip sync the words for the Christmas program so others wouldn't hear my singing voice. Ouch! I (Doug) also remember the day I lost my confidence in singing. A friend of mine was teaching me to play the guitar, and after the second lesson, he put down his guitar and looked like someone had killed his puppy. With a somber look on his face, he said, "Doug, you basically have two problems. You are the only person I have ever taught who has no rhythm, and to make things worse, you are tone-deaf." He then said, "It's just not your gift. You should stick to speaking and writing—you'll have better luck."

So basically, we are experts in being tone-deaf.

Couples who are not careful with their communication tone

in marriage can quickly become “tone-deaf.” When our words (even when truthful) are delivered with a negative tone, it triggers a different reaction than if we had used a positive tone. For example, the statement, “We are going to be late” may be a factual one (we’ve both said this many times in our marriages), but where that statement becomes ugly, hurtful, and primed-for-argument is when it’s spoken in a condescending tone. These words of truth, “We are going to be late” can come out sounding like, “We are going to be late and it’s all your fault and you do this all the time and I’m sick and tired of being late because you can’t get it together.” Six words of fact, and twenty-six words added by the recipient because of the tone. Tone matters.

As you pause to think about your own communication patterns, you must learn to pay special attention to the fact that it’s not just the words you use; it’s also the tone that projects your words. Sarcasm, shaming, pessimism, negativity, whining, and insincerity are really more about tone than words. Rolling your eyes, shaking your head, and shrugging your shoulders are obviously forms of nonverbal communication, but they can definitely serve to enhance a negative tone.

Your spouse may barely hear your words but will absolutely hear and feel your tone. The reaction to tone is usually

defensive. I remember an evening when Cathy was running late and I (Doug) was frustrated and said, “If I knew you were going to be so late, I could have stayed at work longer and got something done instead of just waiting around here. Didn’t you tell me to be home right at six o’clock for dinner?” Again, each of these comments was true and a statement of fact. But that didn’t matter because they were delivered with intent to wound with guilt and shame. Let me just say that dinner wasn’t as good as it could have been had I simply held my words *and* especially my tone. Sadly, the issue that caused the tension wasn’t Cathy being late—it was my tone. What’s even worse is that I would have never used that tone with someone at work or even a stranger, but I expressed it with the person I love the most in the entire world.

As you better educate yourself on tone, you’ll learn some common triggers that typically spark an atmosphere to turn negative. When you figure out what your triggers are, you need to discipline yourself to keep them from being triggers. Here are four of the possible triggers that can contribute to a damaging tone, found in the four letters H-A-L-T.

HUNGER

The apostle Paul wrote, “Your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit.... Therefore honor God with your bodies.”³ Experts tell us that our body is closely linked to our spirit and our actions, and even our reactions to each other. We don’t often think about it, but taking care of our bodies is actually one of the first steps toward building healthy relationships. Why? For starters, when people get hungry they become grouchy and irritable. Sometimes both of us get so preoccupied with work that we forget to eat. We’re hungry—maybe even famished—when we get home, and our bodies and attitudes are on edge. When we’re hungry, we’re usually more selfish and definitely not as sensitive to our spouse’s needs. We realize it may seem ridiculous for us to talk about eating in a marriage book, but there are just too many times when hunger has played a key role in arguments. Think about your own relationship and how often you have seen unnecessary conflict because one or both of you were run down and just needed some food. It’s difficult to pay attention to and adjust your tone when your mind and body are clouded by hunger. The makers of the Snickers candy bar have capitalized on this concept in their humorous commercials: “You’re not you when you’re hungry.” This is so

true.

ANGER

When it comes to being tone-deaf, anger is perhaps one of the most common threads for many poor responses. Anger is not bad; it's an emotion. What turns anger ugly is when it's expressed to hurt someone. In marriage, if your anger is not dealt with, then bitterness and resentment begin to influence the relationship. When this happens, the spoken tone goes south pretty quickly. That's why we're given such practical instruction on how to deal with our anger in the Bible: "Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry."⁴ This doesn't mean you won't get angry, it means you must deal with your anger in a constructive manner and not allow it to fester and drag into the next day where it becomes even more lethal. Little annoyances tend to become larger-than-life issues when anger isn't dealt with quickly. Anger and tone share a symbiotic relationship, and to prevent yourself from being tone-deaf, you've got to manage the anger piece.

LONELINESS

When loneliness isn't addressed in a marriage, it can move a couple toward anything from a general lack of togetherness to one of them having an affair. Most engaged couples don't often think about being lonely because there is so much happening with wedding plans. Actually, wedding busyness can mask loneliness. You might not even begin to imagine that you'll ever be lonely because you're currently going on dates, enjoying each other's company, and spending a lot of time together. Those things are great, but when a couple gets married, there can begin to be fewer fun times for connection. That's when loneliness isn't too far away. We hear this from married couples all the time: "We just don't connect as much anymore." Often the woman wants her husband to talk to her more, with the hope that his words will bring a feeling of connection. She thinks she wants words, but words don't always lead to connection. Connection, however, always leads to more words. There is nothing like a fun experience or a good laugh to connect a couple and improve the tone. When you are feeling lonely, you don't tend to feel as connected, and when you don't feel connected, your tone can become negative.

TIREDNESS

This is a big one. Too many couples truly want to connect and be closer, but frankly, they are just too tired. Exhaustion is one of the major causes of brokenness in relationships as well as poor tone quality. If you are rude, short, or abrupt toward your fiancé or spouse, then you may be too busy or too distracted. If you are negative, impatient, or cranky, you may be getting dangerously tired. You need the discipline to say “no” to the extra clutter in your life so that you can say “yes” to the most important things with a good attitude. Not everything in life deserves a “yes.” You have to protect your schedule so you will have the right tone for your spouse.

Here is a question every couple has to ask: Are our schedules impacting the tone that’s displayed in our relationship? A man we know, who had gone through a divorce, told us, “We loved each other. As odd as that sounds, a lack of love wasn’t the problem. It was our out-of-control, runaway schedules that eventually dulled our relationship. When we were busy, stressed, and preoccupied, we began to treat each other terribly. We just had nothing left to give. We were making each other miserable, and we finally ended it.” We actually believe their marriage could have been saved if only they had been willing to rearrange priorities so they could slow

down and connect.

What are the triggers in your current relationship that move the tone toward the negative? Once you know what brings you down, you will do a much better job of communicating and creating a positive atmosphere. The other question you may have to ask is this: Has your work schedule become a higher priority than your care for your spouse? Here is an easy way to determine the answer. Ask him. Ask her. He or she will let you know which priority is the higher one.

NONVERBAL—55%

When a person says, “I don’t feel loved by you,” or “You never listen to me anymore,” typically they aren’t talking about words; they are talking about actions. Who would have ever thought that facial expressions, body language, posture, eye contact, touch, and attitude had so much to do with communication? Research points to the influence and necessity of nonverbal communication; don’t underestimate its power to build up or tear apart your relationship.

A woman once told me (Jim), “I’m the luckiest person in the world. I feel cherished and loved by my husband. He has taught me to daily stop, look, and listen.” She went on, “I can’t

tell you how special it makes me feel when he stops what he's doing and just holds my hand and listens to me tell him about my day. He really fills our home with gratefulness and appreciation."

I said, "Wow, he sounds almost superhuman." She smiled before saying, "My husband was severely wounded in the war in Afghanistan. He can no longer speak or hear. He reads lips. He is a great listener, though, because he listens for my needs, hurts, fears, and hopes. He communicates with me so clearly by holding my hands. He brings such warmth to our relationship." Her description was tender and beautiful. She went on to tell me that after his injury and the painful time of physical therapy, she thought the quality of their relationship might be lost forever. Instead, she's discovered a new depth through his command of nonverbal communication. Their relationship has been healed and strengthened without the use of words. That courageous couple learned to practice what we call the *Triple A's of Communication*: Affection, Atmosphere, and Attention.

AFFECTION

In his book *The 5 Love Languages*, Gary Chapman calls affection a “love language.” Tim Keller calls affection “love currency” in *The Meaning of Marriage*. Too often couples don’t view communication as a language or currency that expresses their love. Affection is a nonverbal form of communication and one of the most powerful demonstrators of love. We aren’t referring to sexual intercourse here, although that is also a very strong form of affection and connection that we’ll discuss in chapter seven. We’d argue that consistent, nonsexual affection can oftentimes be one of the more powerful forms of communication. Chapman calls sexual intercourse “only one dialect in the love language of physical touch.”⁵ Love can be expressed through a caress, sitting closely together, holding her hand, rubbing his neck, a gentle kiss. Touch is a window to the soul of your spouse.

When we (Doug) celebrated our one-year anniversary, Cathy and I had a significant conversation to review and reflect on our first year of marriage. Somewhere in the discussion she made the comment, “I wish you would hug me longer. You’re not a very good hugger.” I was stunned, and I displayed that emotion with a genuinely puzzled look on my face. My wife

continued, “I’m not talking about hugs that you’re hoping will lead to something ... you’re great at those hugs. I’m talking about nonsexual hugs.”

Honestly, I didn’t know there was such a thing. I interpreted every touch as sexual. When she would accidentally brush up against me while approaching the refrigerator, I assumed she was being sexually aggressive (I was a newlywed—what did I know?). Then she made a remark that sank into both my brain and heart: “I’d really value some affection that you didn’t assume was foreplay.”

Ouch! But she was right, and I got the message. Since then, I’ve come to call this type of touch “affection without intention.”

It’s important to learn that the kinds of touch that bring you pleasure may not bring your spouse the same pleasure. A woman came up to us after a seminar complaining that her husband never touched her in the manner she wanted. I (Jim) asked her if she had communicated to him what she liked. She shook her head and said, “No, that would spoil the spontaneity of the romance.” I smiled and said, “We men are pretty simple creatures, and most of us really do want to please our wives. But we aren’t mind readers, so I would suggest, in the nicest way possible, you tell him what you’d appreciate. My guess is

that he will make attempts to please you if he knows how.” She gave me a look that communicated she really didn’t want to do it that way. I wish I knew if she ever went the simple route and just instructed him on how to best communicate affection to her. If she did, I bet she has forgotten all about spoiling spontaneity because she is experiencing what she most wanted.

Ultimately, affection is more than touch. A thoughtful gift (it doesn’t have to be expensive) or taking time to plan a special date together may be exactly what the relationship needs. Acts of kindness often display strong acts of affection. I’ve (Doug) learned that when it comes to gift giving, it’s really the thought that counts more with Cathy than the actual gift. When I was younger, I thought I needed to save big and make a once-a-year purchase that would wow her and express my love. I quickly learned that more frequent love notes, an occasional time of bringing home flowers, a stop at her favorite restaurant to pick up a dessert—these are the small actions that communicate big love.

ATMOSPHERE

We spend a lot of time with couples who have young children; this season of life is often difficult in a marriage. Our kids are older now, which presents a whole different set of circumstances. With young children and even teens, chaos comes with the territory. You may not have children for some years, but it's easy for a marriage to quickly become busy and chaotic—with or without kids. In the middle of the disorder, a couple has to learn how they can set an atmosphere of warmth in their home and relationship. We don't know of any home that has done this perfectly, but the difference between a successful marriage and a poor one is often found in the tone of the home. It takes incredible discipline to build a warm and positive atmosphere, but it can be done, and we believe you can make it happen.

Usually it takes leadership and initiative from one spouse, but it definitely works better when both are moving toward a common goal. One way to move toward building a positive atmosphere is to pause before you get home and prepare your heart. A peaceful heart leads to a peaceful atmosphere.

Terri told us that after work, she intentionally drives to “her spot” at a park with a lake and sits there for five minutes before she picks up her kids. She knows that as soon as she gets them

in the car, craziness ensues. Her spot gives her a moment of pause to slow down, focus on what's ahead, pray, and get her thoughts in perspective. It works for her.

Adam says that before he leaves the house each day, he quotes Psalm 118:24: "This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it" (ESV). He repeats the same psalm as he walks in the door after work. That focus on perspective works for him.

Stephanie has a stressful nursing job and has learned that she needs to sit in the driveway and chill for a few minutes before she makes the transition into the house to focus on her husband. Again, it works for her.

When my children were younger, I (Doug) would give myself enough time to make a quick stop at Taco Bell on the way home. I took just enough time to drink a large beverage and read the latest sports news. After a busy day at work, I needed to learn to turn the office off before I came into the house, where I needed to be a husband and dad.

As a newlywed couple, you'll need to figure out what it takes to create a warm atmosphere in your home. People who make the effort to make home a sanctuary do better with communication.

If you can't make the whole home a sanctuary, then make

sure you create a warm atmosphere in at least one room. We know a couple who moved their computer and laundry basket out of the bedroom. They bought a new comforter, got some inexpensive speakers to play their favorite music, and turned their bedroom into a stress-free zone instead of an extended workspace. Simple moves like this will keep the atmosphere of your relationship at the right temperature.

ATTENTION

We hear it all the time: “My husband doesn’t listen to me,” or “My wife is so distracted with everything else that I don’t feel like I am even a priority.” Listening—really listening—is another language of love.

Attentive listening is vitally important in giving your spouse attention. For most of us, attentive listening doesn’t come naturally, and as a result we become passive or even selective listeners. When a couple achieves the ability to experience intentional, empathic listening, their relationship attains a higher level of intimacy. Intentional, empathic listening is often a learned habit, and it is a wonderful gift to give your spouse. Listening requires more than our ears; it requires the focus from our eyes and the empathy from our heart as well.

If you can master any form of communication, it should be listening. This profound skill will serve you well throughout your marriage. We know a couple who are great marriage mentors, not because they are experts in the science of marriage, but because they are deep, intentional listeners. Because they ooze empathy, we are drawn to them and never want to leave their presence. The secret behind their listening success is that they are unselfish and don’t listen with an

agenda or with an answer in mind. Their influence and impact come from their ability to nonverbally give their undivided attention.

As an engaged couple, you may be thinking that you are great communicators, and you may be. But there is always, always room to improve. Make a special note that your communication is only partly about the words, but even more about your tone and nonverbal cues. If you make a commitment to become a better communicator and to never stop learning, you'll experience a great depth of relational oneness.

NOTES

- 1 Les Parrott and Leslie Parrott, *Saving Your Second Marriage Before It Starts: Nine Questions to Ask Before (and After) You Remarry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 93.
- 2 David and Claudia Arp and Curt and Natelle Brown, *10 Great Dates Before You Say "I Do"* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 52.
- 3 1 Corinthians 6:19, 20.
- 4 Ephesians 4:26.
- 5 Gary Chapman, *The Five Love Languages: The Secret to Love That Lasts* (Chicago: Northfield, 1992), 105.

Chapter Five

CONFLICT: THE RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

We heard about an engaged couple who went to premarital counseling, and the bride-to-be bragged that she and her fiancé had never had a major fight. Confidently she said, “If we have a difference of opinion and I’m right, then my fiancé always gives in.” The counselor asked, “What if he is right?” She looked puzzled and said, “That’s never happened.”

Unfortunately, that couple’s marriage has a high probability of failing. No one is always right or always wrong in a marriage. And no relationship ever goes very long without a significant fight. Tension, conflicts, and disagreements are part of all marriages, and yours will be no different.

As an engaged couple, if you are finding that you argue a lot, it may be a problem. Likewise, if you have never had conflict, that’s a problem too. Conflict is inevitable! It’s not unusual for couples to enter into marriage believing the lie that conflict shouldn’t exist in a healthy marriage. Not on this planet. Two individuals coming closer together as a couple will

bump into issues and rub each other the wrong way at times. Stuff happens. No two people see life exactly the same way. Life is a process. Les and Leslie Parrott say that “the average married couple argues about ... 312 times per year.”¹ When we mentioned that statistic to one of our marriage mentors, he looked surprised and said, “That’s all?”

Problems are inevitable, disagreements are inevitable, tension is definitely inevitable, but misery is optional. You can have tension and still have a great marriage. The conflict isn’t the primary problem; it’s how we choose to handle the conflict that can create so much chaos and so many problems. In his play *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, William Shakespeare wrote, “The course of true love never did run smooth.” That has been our experience too. There are bumps along the journey. Another voice from literature, Robert Louis Stevenson, said, “Marriage is one long conversation, checkered by disputes.” Are you beginning to see the picture clearly? You won’t avoid conflict, but you can avoid unnecessary pain, and that is our goal for your relationship.

David and Karen Olson, the authors of the excellent premarital assessment tool PREPARE/ENRICH, have studied more than fifty thousand couples. David, in his book *The Couple Checkup*, said that “happily married couples

overwhelmingly report feeling that their opinions and ideas are understood when they are discussing problems.”² The results are stunning: 87 percent of happy couples point to the power of understanding. In other words, happily married couples don’t necessarily have fewer problems; they have simply learned how to share their feelings and opinions within a disagreement and still feel valued by their spouse. How you deal with your conflicts will play a determining factor in the health and vitality of your marriage.

The bad news is that healthy conflict resolution doesn’t come naturally to most couples. The good news is that healthy conflict resolution can be learned, and we want to help you develop it.

THE “WE” FACTOR

Interestingly enough, “Thirty-seven percent of newlyweds admit to being more critical of their mates after being married. And thirty percent report an increase in arguments.”³ You can expect more tension when you are married, not less, if you fall into these percentages. This may sound shocking to you, but conflict can actually become an opportunity to deepen your sense of intimacy. One of the key skills that will lead you to

increased intimacy with your spouse is being able to avoid playing the “win/lose” game. While it may feel natural to want to prove your fiancé or spouse wrong, it’s helpful to your future to learn that every conflict doesn’t need a pronounced winner and/or loser. As a married couple, you’ll be working together as a team, and teams either win or lose *together*.

Jennifer and James are a great example of how many couples tend to react in the midst of conflict. When they came in to see us, they revealed they were surprised to have a lot of tension in their new marriage. It became immediately clear that James’s relating script was that of a *blamer*. Jennifer was a classic conflict *avoider*. We asked, “When you are in a fight, who is the enemy?” They looked at us with a bit of confusion, and then pointed at one another. An understandable response, but it was the wrong answer. For their marriage to be healthy, the real enemy needs to be the problem—not one another! We encouraged them to reframe their next conflict to view the problem as the real enemy, instead of one another. We assigned them a new task of figuring out a resolution as a team.

We refer to this as the “we” factor. Conflict doesn’t have to be a battle. Actually, it can become an opportunity to increase your intimacy and strengthen your marriage. When you work together to seek a resolution, you both win.

Consider this comparison: If your primary intent is to defend yourself and win, you won't get to resolution as a couple. If your intent during conflict is to grow and learn, you must drop your defense and pride and make your issue the target. Make it your common goal to solve the problem as a team and not necessarily to win the individual battle. A win-win can only be produced when a couple has been thinking "we" instead of "me."

The big idea behind the "we" is team.

In marriage, a man and a woman should become a new entity, functioning not as two individuals but as a team. They should learn to plan together and to carry out that plan together. Having a cooperative and caring life partner gives us a great advantage over anything we could have been as an individual. And we're much wiser than we could have ever been our own. But it takes skill to work as a team—negotiating skill.⁴

Negotiation is an art to be learned and it comes much quicker and easier when you are both committed to the "we" instead of the "me" goal.

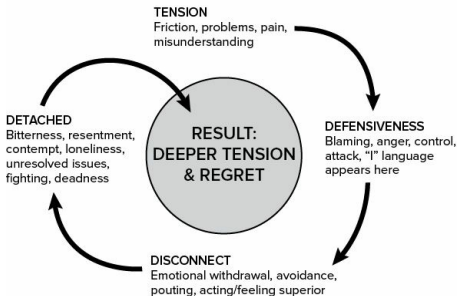
CONFLICT DANCE

When Cathy and I (Doug) married, she had an unspoken expectation that I might eventually learn to enjoy dancing. As a teenager, Cathy loved to dance and had opportunities to express that as a varsity song leader (which is essentially a cheerleader who dances). I've already explained that I'm rhythmically impaired when it comes to singing ... well, it's even worse when I try to dance. Typically, when I'm dancing in public (at a wedding) people are tempted to call the paramedics for fear I'm experiencing painful convulsions. I may not be a good dancer—and you may not be one either—but there's one dance I invite you to keep working on: the “Conflict Dance.”

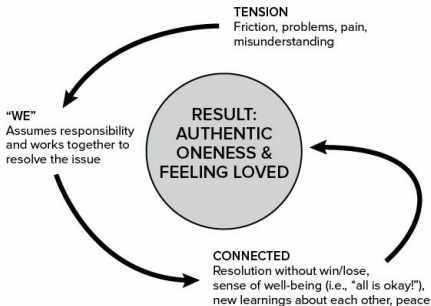
There are several ways you can deal with conflict in your marriage, but let's narrow them down to two different, broad approaches that will get you and your fiancé dancing the dance that counts. We have found it memorable to think of these different approaches as two different types of dances: One dance leads to emotional disconnection and a lack of loving romance. The other dance leads to deeper intimacy and increased love. Both of these dances require you to do something with your ego. The positive dance necessitates you to intentionally take your ego out of the spotlight, while the negative dance is made worse when you put your ego before

your spouse's feelings. Let's look at the negative dance first and start with the point of tension.

NEGATIVE CONFLICT DANCE



POSITIVE CONFLICT DANCE



As you can see, the negative conflict dance steps include blame and avoidance. This is essentially a defensive posture that closes up and creates superiority over your spouse. The results are destructive and can weaken the relationship and lead the couple to more pain. On the other hand, the positive conflict dance steps include understanding, honesty, trust, clarity, and a feeling of togetherness. Look at the results in the middle of both graphics, and it becomes very clear which one is your desired outcome.

When you consider the impact that each dance could have over many years of marriage, it's essential that you both commit to handling your conflict through a positive dance. The

steps may not be as easy, but the results are much more powerful.

CONFLICT BLOCKS

Dealing with conflict in appropriate and positive ways is a learned trait. Typically, we'll begin learning conflict management at about the same time we learn to talk and walk. You may not want to admit it, but you probably apply some of the same patterns your parents used when they dealt with conflict. It's natural for you to simply pick them up through years of observation. For some of us who come from strong, stable families, this is a good thing. But for those who were raised in an environment where disagreements and arguments were handled poorly, you may have learned some defense mechanisms and poor patterns that block positive resolution. Below is a list of some of the blocks to healthy conflict resolution.

Busyness—Someone once said, “If the Devil won’t make you bad, he will make you busy.” An overcrowded schedule and overworked body can turn anyone into a coward when it comes to conflict. Let’s revisit the question we presented in the last chapter: “Is your overcrowded schedule destroying the tone of your relationship?” Your answer can have a direct correlation to how you

handle (or mishandle) conflict. Here's another good question to consider: "Is the pace of your life sustainable?" If your answer is no, then it's time to be courageous and take the initiative and do whatever is necessary to adjust your priorities and stabilize your marriage. Busy people tend to be tense people, and that's not a character quality that leads to good conflict resolution.

Gadgets—Comedian Will Ferrell once tweeted, "Before you get married ask yourself: is this the person you want to watch stare at their phone the rest of your life?" This is comical because it's so close to the truth—it's a real possibility.

I (Doug) realize that this is going to put me in the weird and/or lurker category, but I enjoy taking photos of couples sitting at a restaurant or fast-food establishment who are eating together but not connecting because both of their heads are down, lost in their phones. My wife thinks I'm obnoxious for taking these photos, but it has become a hobby (again, I realize I'm strange), and I'll often use those images during my presentations on communication. Honestly, I

can't remember the last time I was in a restaurant and didn't see a couple on their phones in some way. I'm too scared to do this, but I'm always tempted to approach them and say, "Do you really need to be on your phone right now? You have a chance to connect with your partner through life-giving words, and you are wasting those precious opportunities." Cathy thinks I'm doing the exact same thing—wasting time—by trying to take these photos without getting caught. I explain it away as research. She uses a different r-word: ridiculous. I now only do it when I'm by myself. I'm constantly amazed at what a communication block our little mobile devices have become.

What about you? Is your smartphone making you dumb? Has it become a technological leash that is getting more attention than your fiancé? There is compelling evidence that phones, computers, and tinkering on social media can not only trigger conflict but also become a block to good communication. If your gadgets are getting in the way of healthy dialogue, you may need to

put yourself on gadget restriction or media time-out. In a previous generation we were warned that too much TV could stunt the health of a relationship. Today's generation has diversified their media time to include much more than TV, and the accessibility and portability of our gadgets are creating addictive behaviors. All addictions—whether to digital devices, work, hobbies, shopping, or something else—are proven to shut down intimacy. If gadgets aren't your distraction of choice, search your heart to ensure that there isn't something else acting as a block to authentically connecting with your spouse and having adequate time to deal with your conflicts.

Avoidance—Many couples admit they will do almost anything to avoid conflict. Their goal with avoidance is hope related. They simply hope the problem will go away, but what typically results is the opposite. Not addressed, the problem expands and emerges with force. If you avoid, withdraw, deny, or aren't willing to deal with a problem, it will come back at you even stronger.

Avoidance can cause you or your fiancé or spouse to stockpile hurts and grievances. These feelings, simmering right below the surface of your emotions, can easily be triggered.

When I (Doug) was first married, I tended to display what is referred to as passive-aggressive behavior. I would act passive when conflict appeared. I'd be quiet, withdraw, and not engage Cathy in the conflict, while "pretending" that nothing was wrong. But in reality, I was being aggressive, because instead of dealing with the issue at hand, I hoped that by going silent I would actually punish Cathy—hence the term passive-aggressive.

Passive-aggressive behavior is really an immature avoidance technique that gets quite ugly. Stuffing your hurt and anger inside and hoping to manipulate others to make yourself feel better is an immature way of dealing with conflict. Trying to make your fiancé or spouse feel guilty while not sharing your true feelings won't do anything to strengthen your marriage; it damages your relationship.

Negativity—As soon as you turn negative toward your spouse, healthy conflict resolution stops. It's difficult to be in relationship with negative people, and they make conflict even more painful. Negativity causes the other person to go on the defensive. Negative people constantly criticize, and criticism stops intimacy. Contempt for one's spouse ends up causing bitterness, resentment, and anger. From there, it's just a short leap to detaching emotionally and withdrawing into our own world. Basically, we begin to live separate lives.

Assumed Mind Reading—Chances are good that your fiancé wants to please you and work through conflict in a positive manner. That's a good thing, but it's important to fully understand that you aren't marrying a mind reader. In his book *The Marriage Makeover*, Philip Wagner wrote: "Too many couples act as if 'hinting' is a superior form of communication."⁵ He challenges us to not speak "the language of hint." This is common-sense relational wisdom, but so many couples expect their spouse to read their minds.

As much as we wish our spouses could read our minds, they can't. In a healthy marriage couples learn to clearly express their expectations while focusing on resolving the conflict. Unfortunately, real-life marriages are very different from the cinematic, idealized versions of love that we grew up imagining. People are complicated and messy and don't always follow our cues and hints. If you make yourself vulnerable by clearly sharing what's on your heart and mind, there is a very good chance your spouse will respond in kind and be more willing to find a positive compromise. Just don't expect him or her to read your mind, and you won't be disappointed.

Attack Mode—Nothing will inflame conflict like attacking your fiancé or spouse. Attacking appears in the forms of blaming, shaming, yelling, bringing up the past—all of these will trigger defensiveness, fear of disapproval, and feelings of rejection. The moment the attacking begins is the moment healthy communication stops. As you move toward marriage, it's important to learn that some actions just never work—this is one of

them. You will get mad in marriage. We promise it will happen ... probably many times over the course of your lives together. She may become more like her mother or he may treat you exactly like his father treated his mother—both in negative ways—but those realities will never be healed or reconciled if you yell or move into attack mode. Add this one to the list of “things not to do.”

Superiority Attitude—If one person in the relationship becomes the dictator (or boss), the relationship will head toward destruction. As long as you feel superior to your fiancé or spouse, you won't resolve problems together. A dictator spouse can become scornful and harsh because he or she doesn't see the other as an equal. A healthy marriage requires you to be committed to serving one another. Paul's relationship advice in Ephesians 5:21 summarizes this beautifully: “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” In a growing marriage, there is no room for superiority, but there is always room for emotional humility (or what Tim Keller

calls emotional wealth, which is fundamentally an inner joy and confidence). To keep an attitude of superiority from becoming a block in your marriage, we encourage you to learn to walk humbly with God and with your fiancé or spouse. You will find it much easier to serve your spouse when you realize God is the One who is superior—not you.

Anger—Anger could fit in with almost all of the other blocks previously mentioned, but it definitely deserves its own place here. There is nothing wrong with anger as an emotion (as when it's directed toward injustice). Anger isn't sin. But sin appears when we display our anger with the intent to wound others. Anger is like adding fuel to the fire of conflict. Among other causes, anger can originate with unmet or blocked needs, trampled values, or unexpressed expectations.

There are really only three ways to handle anger: fight back, repress it, or deal with it. For a successful marriage, the only healthy way is to deal with anger. If you fight back by exploding,

yelling, or becoming sarcastic, those reactions create a block and make the conflict more difficult to repair. Repressed anger only leads to withdrawal, which can cause both physical and relational health issues. The productive path you'll want to take is to deal with conflict (without sinful anger) when it appears. A helpful way to learn to deal with your anger constructively is to ask yourself, "What is causing me to be so angry with her (or him) right now?" Don't start with the other person. Start by looking in the mirror and reflecting deeply on where the anger originated. Remember: anger isn't usually the problem; it's how you deal with it that becomes the problem.

How you deal with these blocks will determine which conflict dance cycle you'll experience. In a healthy marriage you can't allow conflicts to go unresolved or they can spread like cancer and become deadly. Les and Leslie Parrott say that "unhandled conflict acts as a cancer that erodes the passion, intimacy, and commitment of marriage."⁶ Obviously, that's the last thing you want to happen, and you're proving that by committing to

learn before you get married.

HEALTHY CONFLICT RESOLUTION

No one who takes time to read this book hopes for a passionless marriage. Yet that's exactly what can emerge over time as a result of poor choices and the blocks we just described. For greater intimacy and satisfaction in your marriage, we encourage you (actually, if we were with you, we'd beg you) to decide today how you will choose to manage your disagreements and difficulties. The question isn't, "Will we have conflict in marriage?" The question is, "How will we choose to manage our conflict?" Please talk about this now, and commit to some agreed-upon patterns and rules of communication.

Some conflict will appear in your marriage because of your deepening intimacy. Think about how much more is at stake with your spouse. Conflict with strangers isn't going to radically impact your day, but conflict with your spouse can feel like a repeated kick in the stomach. The more intimate you become, the more the conflict is likely to hurt. So while this may sound crazy, especially from two guys who admittedly don't like conflict, we encourage you to *embrace conflict* as a sign that your relationship is deepening and that it really matters.

Don't go looking for it, but lean into it when it appears. Here are four actions you can take during conflict that will build a stronger foundation for your marriage:

Be Vulnerable. Being vulnerable simply means you have to be real. Honest. If you feel scared, tell him. If you feel hurt, share your feelings with her. Good marriages require you to have the strength to be vulnerable. For most of our marriage, Cathy has said that I (Jim) don't need her as much as she needs me. It's not true, but her comment is a sign to me that I need to be more vulnerable with her about how much I really do need her. My experience has been that when I am vulnerable and share my feelings, fears, doubts, and struggles, she doesn't think less of me; her concern for me increases (after forty years, I'm still learning). Even though vulnerability is not natural, I know it's important to be more vulnerable. In marriage, you won't lose when you're authentic and transparent.

Identify the Issue. Have you ever had a conflict with your fiancé, and in the middle of arguing or

being passive-aggressive or retreating you actually forgot what the conflict was all about? That can happen when you focus more on the hurt than the real issue. Sloppy communication causes couples to inaccurately or inadequately define the problem or focus on the other person rather than the source of conflict. When you turn your attention toward the issue, it becomes easier to not be frustrated with each other. This is the time to work together on the “we” part of your relationship. All those times in my (Doug) marriage when I thought that I was mad that Cathy was making us late, I made “time” the issue. Upon deeper reflection, the issue wasn’t about being late; it was about me feeling disrespected. When I’m focused on the wrong issue, it’s difficult to move toward a solution.

Focus on the Solution. Don’t let yourself get bogged down in dealing with too many issues at one time. Focus on problem solving, but take issues one by one. At its simplest form in marriage, conflict resolution is a problem-solving exercise. Both of us are pretty emotional (which is

tough for two guys to admit), and our emotions can fluctuate and distract us from seeing things clearly. It's normal to feel emotions—even strong emotions. But as the emotions minimize, you need to tap into your logical side and explore the options for solutions. Commit to staying on one subject at a time, and aggressively go after a solution. The more often you come up with a workable solution to your problems, the more confidence you will gain to face other issues.

Apologize. Embrace this simple truth, and conflict will be much easier: there is almost nothing as powerful as a sincere apology. A heartfelt apology can repair harm and heal a broken heart. Not only will it move you toward reconciliation, but it will also provide emotional healing. Of course, the apology must be sincere for it to be powerful. An apology becomes powerful when it contains at least one of the following three elements: regret, responsibility, or remedy.

Regret: this type of apology truly shows regret and remorse for causing hurt. It might sound like this: “I am truly sorry for saying that. I

spoke in anger, and not only do I not mean it, but I am deeply sorry for saying it. Please forgive me.”

Responsibility: this type of apology requires that you take full responsibility for actions, words, or tone. You own your part in the conflict. For example: “That was not about you; it was all about me. I blew it. I tried to make my issue about you. It wasn’t. I caused you pain, and I am deeply sorry for offending you. Please forgive me.”

Remedy: While you can’t always undo the past, you can often repair a wrong. This could include taking action on the conflict and making restitution. “I was wrong. I can see now that I hurt you. I need to make that right and will do so by _____. Please forgive me.”

Be liberal with your apologies, and you will be able to love deeply.

One of the best parts of conflict can be the making up that takes place afterward. After the apologies have been given and received, make sure you take adequate time to be together.

During the heat of conflict, things said or done may have brought about a significant sting. It's essential to not only apologize but to also spend time healing and reconnecting. Go on a special date, take a walk together, pursue physical romance. The act of making up can not only be fun, but it can also become a powerful form of expressing grace and commitment to one another.

SHOW GRACE AND FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness is the glue that will keep your marriage together. Without giving and receiving forgiveness, you will disconnect from one another and lose intimacy. Forgiveness does not mean you will forget the wrong committed against you, but it does mean you make a choice not to hold a grudge. You don't forgive because you feel like it, but because it's a step toward healing. Forgiveness is a conscious decision. It may not necessarily remove the consequences or repair broken trust, but it does make reconciliation possible.

Because of our faith, we believe the greatest act of grace appeared when Jesus died for our sins. The sacrifice of His life on the cross made forgiveness possible, and now we are able to experience abundant life on earth and eternal life in heaven. This is the epitome of unconditional love. For us to receive God's forgiveness and then choose not to forgive our spouse is the highest form of arrogance. When you forgive your fiancé or spouse, you are choosing to deliberately "drop the charges" of the wrong done to you. You are never more like Jesus than when you forgive. A healthy, thriving marriage is made up of two imperfect people who will hurt one another, but who also

know how to forgive one another.

AGREE TO DISAGREE

There will be times in your marriage when a conflict arises, and the only acceptable solution will be for the two of you to agree to disagree. That's okay. It's going to happen, and if you know this is a viable option for conflict resolution then you agree not to bring on additional wounding. Remember, the goal is not to make every conflict become a win-lose scenario. Circumstances may require you to meet halfway or even allow your spouse's view to prevail. Occasionally, this is a good step to take. Unresolved conflict isn't healthy, but there will be times in your marriage when the best outcome is to set the issue aside.

Our wives are strong individuals. They have opinions, and sometimes those opinions are different from ours. From time to time we've both had to simply respect our spouse's feelings and opinions, suspend our individual need to be right, and just go with their judgment. In parenting issues, Cathy and I (Jim) don't always agree. Most of the time we are on the same page, but when it comes to discipline and education we see things differently. Since Cathy is a teacher, and I know her motives are pure, I will occasionally agree to disagree with her. I'll state my opinion. I'll listen to hers. As much as I like to think I'm persuasive, I don't try to bring her to my opinion. I respect that she has opinions that are strong. When it's not a moral issue,

there are times when I say (genuinely), “I wish we saw eye to eye on this one, but it doesn’t look like we will, so let’s go ahead with what you think is best, and I’ll support that.” There have also been plenty of times when she has done the same thing with me.

THE CONFLICT BIGGIES

You may be thinking that this chapter has a lot of good suggestions for “normal” conflict, but what about the biggies? Some relationships experience adultery, abuse, addictions, and other severe problems that cause conflict. While we hope that won’t happen to you, we feel the need to present you with a question before we end this chapter. If big issues that haven’t been resolved are currently part of your relationship, should you be planning a wedding? There is too much at stake for you not to get some serious help before you consider marriage. You’ve got to work through major issues *before* marriage, not after. We know couples who have called off their wedding because of serious, unresolved issues. We applaud them.

We actually have a good friend who canceled her marriage the week of the wedding because her fiancé was cheating on her. Smart move on her part. Today she is happily married to a different guy and has no regrets—only joy—about her very difficult decision. If you are experiencing any of the biggies in your relationship, we challenge you to consider and embrace Solomon’s wisdom: “Where there is no counsel, the people fall; But in the multitude of counselors there is safety.”⁷ Thousands of years have passed, yet his advice is still spot-on! Seek the

guidance of a qualified counselor who can help you deal with severe issues before you get married, so you aren't stranded with even larger problems after the wedding.

NOTES

- [1](#) Les Parrott and Leslie Parrott, *The Good Fight: How Conflict Can Bring You Closer* (Brentwood, TN: Worthy, 2013), 1.
- [2](#) David Olson, Amy Olson-Sigg, and Peter J. Larson, *The Couple Checkup: Find Your Relationship Strengths* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 70.
- [3](#) Les Parrott and Leslie Parrott, *Becoming Soul Mates* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 120.
- [4](#) Willard F. Harley Jr., *He Wins, She Wins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, 2013), 23.
- [5](#) Philip Wagner, *The Marriage Makeover: 10 Days to a Stronger More Intimate Relationship* (Franklin, TN: Authentic, 2013), 102.
- [6](#) Les Parrott and Leslie Parrott, *Saving Your Second Marriage Before It Starts: Nine Questions to Ask Before (and After) You Remarry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 135.
- [7](#) Proverbs 11:14 NKJV.

Chapter Six

FINANCES: THE BEST THINGS IN LIFE ARE NOT THINGS

A newly married couple asked a mentor couple, “What will it take to become financially healthy in our marriage?”

The couple smiled at the question, and the husband quickly said, “Two words: good decisions.”

The younger couple asked, “How do you learn to make good decisions about finances?”

The wife chimed in: “One word: experience.”

The younger couple pressed them, “But how do you gain that experience?”

The wise couple smiled at each other and said in unison, “Two words: bad decisions.”

As you move toward your marriage, we want to offer you some experience that may help you avoid those two words, “bad decisions.” In the area of finances we believe you can make good decisions, but it will require you to do hard work. There are some relatively simple ways for you to avoid getting in financial difficulty if you’ll commit to learn them and then

work as a team to implement them.

Talking about money makes many people uncomfortable—probably because it's such a personal subject. When it comes to your future marriage, the issue of money is a big deal. It's a very big deal! Even in our own marriages, after many years, we still have important money discussions.

MONEY AND MARRIAGE

Here are the facts: financial issues are the most common source of stress for couples. Everywhere you look you'll see that this is the number-one issue impacting marriages. Sixty-six percent of American couples spend more time thinking about money and careers than they do about sex, health, and relationships.¹ No question about it—finances, debt, and spending will invite tension into your upcoming marriage. The question will be: How much? Money can be to a marriage what a match is to gasoline ... explosive. This is true even if you have a lot of money. The impact of financial stressors affects couples regardless of their income level. You may be wealthy, but you can still become *relationally poor* in your marriage if you don't handle your finances well.

As with everything we've written, we want to cheer you on in your upcoming marriage and challenge you to consider some very important questions as we try to set you up to win. When it comes to the topic of money, we're going to make this simple and straightforward. We encourage you to dig into the *Getting Ready for Marriage Workbook* we've created for more practical help related to your individual situation. As we begin discussing finances, please embrace this idea that may feel like

an oversimplification, but is quite deep: *happy couples tend to deal with their finances well, and unhappy couples tend to not handle their finances well*. It's quite simple.

This could be a short chapter if everyone fully understood this basic financial principle: *don't spend more than you make*. Unfortunately, many of us make simple, ordinary issues much more complex than they need to be.

THE “PRICE” OF TWO WEDDINGS

Let us introduce you to two couples we know very well: Phil and Amanda and Brandon and Cheryl. Both entered marriage with about the same amount of debt and similar paying jobs. One couple managed their finances well, and the other collapsed financially, which added intense pressure to their relationship and they eventually divorced. We don't think it had to end that way.

Brandon and Cheryl were in their midtwenties when they married. They both earned college educations, which resulted in some tuition debt. Their other debt included two car payments and an engagement ring payment plan. In addition to their debt, they had their basic living expenses.

Phil and Amanda (similar ages) had more college debt,

though only one car payment, and chose to pay cash for a less expensive engagement ring. Of course, they also had basic living expenses.

Both couples married with very little in their savings, which isn't totally unusual, and their first financial choices had to do with their wedding and honeymoon.

Brandon and Cheryl borrowed money so they could be married at their ideal location—a beautiful winery in Northern California. They had great food, a lot of fun, and threw an incredible wedding party. They went on their dream honeymoon to Maui, which they financed on a credit card. From their wedding rings to her wedding dress to the reception to honeymoon locations, this couple celebrated in first-class style. Their motto was, “You only get married once!” Had they only recognized the irony in that statement.

Phil and Amanda made financial decisions that resulted in a much more modest wedding. They married at Amanda's church and had a backyard reception that included a catered taco bar. Their friends played music and they inexpensively turned their limited space into a festive, fun, homey atmosphere. It wasn't as stunning as Brandon and Cheryl's winery venue, but it was nice and charming. They drove to a friend's lake cabin that was graciously loaned for their weeklong honeymoon. They loved

their wedding and honeymoon and couldn't imagine it being any different.

The difference between the two weddings, honeymoons, and all the rest came down to *choices*. Phil and Amanda didn't want to go into debt. Their motto was, "When we have the money, we'll take a second honeymoon and go to Maui."

Please understand. We aren't against fancy weddings. If you can afford a pricier party and honeymoon, great! The key word is *afford*. Brandon and Cheryl made choices they couldn't afford, and in doing so added to their debt burden. They were never able to recover and come out from underneath the weight of the financial pressure. They were always trying to catch up financially, and the added stress created an uncomfortable environment. For most couples, the first years of marriage come with a degree of anxiety because everything is so new and different. For Brandon and Cheryl, their added money woes created a burden that was heavier than they could handle. It wasn't *just* the extravagant wedding and honeymoon that was their downfall, but both admitted that their wedding and honeymoon plans were the first of many unwise choices regarding money.

Phil and Amanda chose a different route. You can learn from their decisions to delay some gratification, save diligently, and

pay off their debt. They did such a great job with their finances that they were able to celebrate their fifth anniversary in Maui debt-free and with money in the bank. How great is that? Even more wonderful, they told us that Maui was where they conceived their first child, Bella.

We can't express this clearly enough: how you handle your finances—both as individuals and as a couple—is a crucial element in the development of a healthy (or unhealthy) relationship.

PAIN OF DISCIPLINE OR PAIN OF REGRET

There is no question that there will be pain in life. Some of the pain will be delivered from other people that you can't control. But, a lot of pain is generated by our own decisions. This principle is especially true with finances. The question for you to consider essentially boils down to what kind of pain you would rather experience with your finances. You have a choice: you can experience the pain of discipline, or the pain of regret. Both routes deliver their own degree of discomfort, and you won't escape them. You will choose one consciously or subconsciously. We recommend that you make a conscious, wise

choice.

We are not financial experts, but we do believe that the choice of delayed gratification (which is what we refer to as the pain of discipline) will ultimately ease the financial burden on your young marriage. Phil and Amanda chose this direction, and they're still married and doing well in the financial domain of their life. The pain of discipline means you will make disciplined choices with your spending and saving.

Are you the type that likes to spend like Brandon and Cheryl? If so, your future is fairly easy to predict. We won't go so far as to assume divorce, but we'll make the bold statement that spenders usually end up with more financial conflict and experience the pain of regret. We aren't encouraging you to become a miserly, Scrooge-like couple who doesn't have any fun with their finances. Actually, we'd argue that fun doesn't have to be expensive and can be discovered without causing undue hardships on your finances and relationship. Life is a lot more fun when you're not fighting over money. Statistically, spenders experience the pain of regret.

In the last several chapters, we've been trying to convey that relationships can be complicated. This is absolutely true! However, we also believe with all our hearts that a disciplined financial plan can help to reduce some of the tension and

stress that come with joining your lives together. Money problems are a recognized reason for divorce. In fact, a recent study by researchers at Kansas State University found that fights about money are the leading contributor to getting a divorce.² You can create strong security by choosing not to live on the edge of budgetary disaster. The pain of disciplined spending and saving is definitely the way to begin your marriage.

A financial philosophy that we subscribe to is that the best things in life are not things. When you have to choose between the health of your relationship and family togetherness or buying more stuff, we hope you'll be wise enough to choose people over things. It's always the wiser choice.

The pain of financial discipline might mean that you will need to make some difficult sacrifices and choose not to live at a level you can't afford. Some engaged couples have told us, "You don't understand our financial situation, we're NOT living at a *higher level*, and yet we are buried just trying to pay the bills." We understand that pain! We know from our personal experiences that sometimes you may have to make decisions that are inconvenient (again, that's the pain of discipline) and may appear radical in order to get caught up

and then move ahead in your finances. We know of newly married couples who chose cheaper apartments, bought a used car rather than new, and had to limit how often they ate out in order to make their budget. As we look at our own marriages, some of our happiest memories have come from simplifying our financial decisions. It's easier and better than living with the pain of financial regret.

MANAGING MONEY

Few people realize before marriage that their own personal relationship with money is critical to the health of their relationship when they're married. As odd as it sounds, everyone really does have a relationship with money. You can't escape it; you can only make sure that it becomes a positive bond and not a source of bondage. Martin Luther once said, "There are three conversions: the conversion of the heart, the mind, and the purse [money]." The sooner you figure out the role of money in your life, the better you will be.

We wonder if Luther's thoughts were inspired by the words of Jesus: "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."³ Jesus wasn't bashing money. Contrary to what some believe, God isn't down on money; He's against the *love of* money (see 1 Tim. 6:10). Jesus simply understood that money can become a trap for people, and we need to understand that there are more important things to capture our heart than money.

Being a good manager of money is often a matter of attitude. Your actions toward money will reflect your attitude. Some people have a stronger love relationship with the almighty dollar than with their chosen spouse. They even love

money more than God. However, when you learn to put God and your family ahead of money, you are beginning to practice healthy money management.

Speaking of God, did you know He gives us a lot of instruction about money? In the Bible, there are about 500 verses on prayer, 500 verses on faith, and more than 2,350 verses on money!⁴ Management of one's finances is a spiritual issue. In the church world, money management is often called *stewardship*. For those of us who follow Jesus, we are called to be faithful stewards (essentially, *managers*) of our resources. Many financial counselors wake up every day excited to help others become good stewards. Ron Blue is one advisor so inspired to help couples find financial success and happiness. A couple of his key principles of stewardship are that God owns it all and delayed gratification is the key to financial maturity.⁵

As a couple, you will need to decide how you handle your finances. The big question is: Will you choose spending and debt, or delayed gratification and a responsible budget? If you haven't already discussed this, you need to give this question serious consideration, and then plot your action steps to ensure your long-term success.

CREATE A SIMPLE AND WORKABLE PLAN

We know! It's a bummer. Just at a time when you are thinking of the romance of the wedding and a wonderful honeymoon, we are adding the idea of creating a financial plan. The plan doesn't have to be complex; as a matter of fact we would encourage you to **KISS—Keep It Short and Simple** (how's that for adding some romance to budgeting?). Perhaps the greatest irony with the money issue is that almost all couples who struggle with money don't have a spending plan they can articulate. Unfortunately, if you aim at nothing, you will hit it every time. Because of that, we want you to aim your finances toward a detailed and realistic budget. Chances are good that you've had to consider a budget for your wedding day, and that has forced you to make many value-oriented decisions. Now, in the midst of focusing on your wedding budget, we want you to create a financial plan for your life that goes beyond the ceremony.

Keep in mind that once you make the decision to be married and join your lives, it is no longer "my money," but "our money." One bride-to-be told us, "I don't really have any interest in a financial plan. My fiancé is great with money, so

I'm letting him manage all our finances.” You may have a similar confidence. It's fine to allow your future spouse to do the *heavy lifting* when it comes to budget preparation or balancing the checkbook, but it's essential for you to fully participate in creating an overall financial plan. You will better support what you help create. There will come a time very soon when you'll have to make some financial decisions as a couple, and if you haven't been a part of setting your financial goals, it will add unnecessary pain to your relationship.

No one likes to think about the possibility, but sooner or later (and sometimes it's sooner), death comes knocking at the door. When that happens, both parties in a marriage need to know the financial situation of the family. Too many women put their heads in the sand when it comes to finances, and then when their husband passes, they don't have a clue what money the family has. Too many men don't account for the services their wives provided that might have to be hired out to others in the event of a tragedy. It's best to take a page from the Boy Scouts handbook and “Always be prepared”—both of you. It's much easier said than done, but you will avoid heaping unneeded stress and pressure on your marriage if you will commit to live by the following financial principles:

- Make a budget and stick to it.
- Deal with your debt.
- Delay gratification and get on the same page.
- Give and save.

MAKE A BUDGET AND STICK TO IT

The authors of *The Millionaire Next Door* conducted research on the richest of the rich in the United States. Their findings were surprising. The millionaires didn't live in the most luxurious homes or drive the expensive cars like the ones you see in Hollywood depictions. These wealthy Americans were fairly ordinary individuals, living normal lives, who had embraced some key principles for developing wealth. The most basic was *spend less than you make*. In other words, they made decisions to ensure that they lived within their established budget. Please take this principle to heart, and see how well it will serve you.

You won't know if you are succeeding financially if you don't create a measurable budget to keep you accountable. While it may seem like a budget is reducing your freedom, it's actually freeing to know what you can afford. A budget is simply a list of your expenses subtracted from your generated

income. If your expenses are more than your income, you're headed toward debt. Always make it your goal to spend less than you make. Yep, we know ... easier said than done.

Take a look at our simple budget example (see [page 205](#)) to see exactly what we're suggesting. We have a more detailed budget worksheet in our *Getting Ready for Marriage Workbook* that will help you work together to create your actual budget. After that's completed, you begin to make money choices that reflect the amounts you have already put into your budget. An example of delayed gratification is when your budget calls for \$200 per week for food. You spend \$192 at the grocery store, and then friends ask you out to dinner. You know right away that you can't say "yes" to the invitation because there is not enough of your budget left after buying groceries. You tell them you'll meet them for coffee instead. That's when you will spend your remaining eight dollars and enjoy their friendship.

If you are serious about creating a budget and have never done one before, we encourage you to follow these simple steps:

1. Determine your total, combined "take-home" monthly income.

2. Write down all your defined expenses (for example: cable is always \$ ____ a month) and estimate your variable expenses (electricity fluctuates between \$____ and \$_____).
3. List as many nonessential expenses as you can think of (movies, eating out, Netflix, etc.).
4. Make best-guess estimates about occasional expenses like Christmas, birthday gifts, car repair, and vacations. It's better to estimate higher than lower.
5. Total the amounts from steps two through four. Subtract this total from the total amount of step one.
6. If your math reveals that you're planning to spend more than you make, look for what you can trim or cut from your expenses in steps two through four (again, remember the pain of discipline). Make the adjustments until your bottom-line number is not a negative one.
7. Make a commitment that you won't spend more than your budget allows.

Creating the budget is the easy part. Following it is much

more difficult. Making a commitment to “live within your budget” is the best form of accountability to help you reach your financial goals. Don’t get married without making a commitment to create a budget and stick to it. We promise, you will be so glad you did.

DEAL WITH YOUR DEBT

At one of our recent conferences, we met a really sweet couple who told us, “Our marriage is drowning in debt.” They loved each other, they were committed to improving their marriage (evidenced by the fact that they were at our marriage conference), but the financial pressure they were experiencing was bringing so much additional stress and tension that they found themselves constantly arguing. We give a simple answer in that type of situation: “Do whatever you can, and make every sacrifice possible to pay down your debt.” You don’t slip out of debt—you crawl out of it. You must make conscious, difficult, oftentimes heartbreaking decisions to remove yourself from financial burden in order to find financial freedom.

As you prepare for marriage, you’ve got to realize that once you are married debt moves from “your debt” to “our debt.” Your premarital financial planning must include a plan for debt reduction. Current statistics reveal that the average American family has nine credit cards and is more than \$27,000 in debt.⁶ We see too many couples bringing debt into their marriage without a plan to pay it off. This can get ugly quickly. After the “honeymoon period” wears off, debt can begin to slowly and subtly awaken resentment and bitterness, and it can be

expressed in how spouses treat one another.

Often the main culprit behind debt is the easy-to-use credit card. Credit cards look so innocent and can make you think, “I don’t need to use *real money* to buy this.” Then, a few months later you’re saying, “I didn’t realize all the interest and fees would add up so fast.” Credit cards are definitely convenient, so if you choose to use one, we would encourage you to make it a goal to pay it off every month. By doing this, you avoid paying the insanely high interest rates. No wise money manager will ever suggest that paying high credit-card interest is a good financial move. It’s just too easy to get into money trouble with credit cards.

Here are our simple suggestions regarding credit-card usage: Use only cash or a debit card so that you’ll spend only the money you have. If you do use a credit card, pay it off each month. Lastly, only incur credit-card debt when it’s for an actual emergency—and we believe you’ll find that not too many purchases qualify as emergencies.

Spending Choices

Allen and Brianna wanted to get in better physical shape, so they decided on a new hobby they could share: cycling. They

didn't have the funds to purchase new bikes with cash, and since they had "only" \$3,900 in credit-card debt, they decided to buy new bikes with a credit card. The bikes were \$700 each, which made their debt immediately jump to \$5,300. When their credit-card bill arrived, they simply made the minimum suggested payment of \$39 per month. By the time they eventually paid off their \$700 bikes, they had actually paid \$1,528 per bike. Ouch! Their financial pain was more than doubled, and they were often so mad at each other about it that their now very expensive bikes were seldom used. Allen told us that he later saw the same bike on Craigslist for \$100, and it felt like adding salt to an open wound. Unfortunately, we hear credit-card horror stories like this every week.

Our advice is: don't add new debt while you're trying to pay down your current debt. Some financial planners suggest that you pay off your highest-interest debt first—which is usually the credit card. Others recommend you pay off your smallest debt (regardless of the interest rate) in order to get it out of your budget and have a psychological victory of paying something off. There are multiple actions you could take, and you'll need to decide what works best for you.

We ask couples, "Which debt keeps you up at night?" Whatever that is, pay it off first. If you have a car you really

can't afford or are living in a house with a rent or mortgage burden that is crippling you, don't wait for a tax return or a "promised" raise to ease the pressure. Take action! Sell the car. Move to a more affordable location. While it might be unpleasant or disappointing, reducing your cost of living by cutting back expenses can have immediate benefits for your wallet and your marriage. You can always get another car.

Remember, there will be pain—choose the pain of discipline now so you don't have to experience the pain of regret later. Your marriage is much more valuable than a nicer car or a pair of fancy bikes. Staying out of debt will create freedom in your marriage.

Suggestions for Paying Down Your Debt

Here are a few suggestions to help you save some money and pay down your debt:

- Cut the number of meals you eat out by at least 50 percent.
- Sell the stuff you're not using on Craigslist or eBay.
- Babysit a few hours a week to earn money.

- Buy a used car rather than a new one.
- Enjoy free or cheap dates.
- Make your own gifts instead of buying things from the store.
- Give services for gifts rather than wrapped packages.
- Write out a list before you go shopping, and stick to it.
- Cancel unused club memberships and subscriptions.
- Cash in any gift cards you have for things you need, not want.
- Try generic brands of items you buy regularly.
- Check your phone bills regularly and look for services you don't use. Get rid of them.
- Barter for services.

Make a list for yourself. We think there is always, always room to cut your expenses. If you're in debt, you need to be ruthless about how you spend your money.

We like financial expert Dave Ramsey's simple plan for reducing debt and finding financial freedom. He calls it "the

seven financial baby steps.”⁷

Step 1: Put away \$1,000 in an emergency fund

This is for unexpected events in life. Once you use the fund, immediately replenish it.

Step 2: Pay off all debt with the debt snowball

List all debts, then pay off the smallest balance first. The thinking behind this is that it is the best psychological winner to reduce debt. Small changes roll into large results (hence the term “snowball”).

Step 3: Secure three to six months of your budget in savings

This is in addition to your \$1,000 emergency fund and helps in the event of job loss, health issues, or other major issues that may appear.

Step 4: Invest 15 percent of household income into Roth IRAs and pretax retirement

Once you have reached this step, you have reduced your debt, you have an emergency fund, you have three to six months’ salary in savings, and now you can begin to build toward future security. Look for safe investments that will grow over

time.

Step 5: Pursue college funding for your children

It takes time and foresight to help your kids get a college education. Funding a college plan in small increments by starting early is the answer to being prepared for the very expensive future college costs.

Step 6: Pay off your home early

The way to be truly debt-free is to pay off your home mortgage early. The earlier the better, and the closer you are to financial freedom.

Step 7: Build wealth and give

At this stage you still aren't living an extravagant lifestyle, but you have reduced the burden of financial struggles in your marriage and found the joy of giving to others to make a difference in the world.

DELAY GRATIFICATION AND GET ON THE SAME PAGE

It takes discipline for a couple to get on the same page financially, especially when it comes to delaying gratification.

Do you really need to go into debt for that vacation, new car, or nice bicycle? What about that new surround-sound system or designer handbag? Impulse buying costs more than just money in marriages—it also costs relational harmony. In order to truly figure out what are important and necessary purchases, you might want to conduct an experiment and only use cash or a debit card for two months. If you really want to feel the power behind this idea, don't even use a debit card. Using only cash will cause you to pay closer attention to costs, prioritize your purchases, and probably save you from impulse buying. (Save your receipts so you know exactly where you spent the money.) A very wise person once told us, “Cash never sends you a bill.” We like the sound of that!

Newlyweds Derek and Holly were struggling with finances. It wasn't that they didn't have good jobs, but that they were spending more than they were making. One day Derek came into my office (Jim) holding his favorite grande Starbucks Latte. He called it his “addiction.” Derek explained that he just couldn't figure out how to keep from going into debt each month. Basically, he had two options: cut back on spending or make more money.

We talked all about budget, housing costs, the price of gas, and so on. Then it dawned on me. I asked Derek how often he

frequented the Starbucks across from his house. His answer was insightful. “I’m a regular. I go every day. Sometimes Holly and I will go there just to hang out in the afternoon as well.” Apparently Holly visited Starbucks just about as often as he did. I asked, “So how many drinks do you have in a week, and how much is a grande latte?” It was as if a light went on in his head. He admitted that he had up to ten coffees a week, and Holly probably had the same.

That was twenty drinks at over four dollars a pop! They were spending eighty dollars a week, roughly \$360 a month, and \$4,320 a year—just on coffee. He was shocked. It hadn’t dawned on him that by cutting back to only a few visits a week to Starbucks he could save enough to get his finances on the right track. Derek and Holly both agreed to quit their daily visits immediately. Now their trips to Starbucks are less frequent, but they’ve saved hundreds of dollars and even bought their own fancy coffeemaker with cash!

GIVE AND SAVE

Do you think it's possible to live on 80 percent of your income? We encourage you to make that one of your first financial goals as a couple. Many engaged couples respond to this challenge with the word *impossible*. Before you answer too soon, consider that most of the people in the world make a lot less than you do. The average income in developing countries is less than \$2.50 a day.⁸ When compared to those people, you are considered rich, and we bet you could probably make some wise and strategic decisions to cut back on your living expenses so you could get to 80 percent. The goal of living on 80 percent of your income is so that you can save 10 percent and give away (tithe) 10 percent. Yes, even as newlyweds, these are great habits to start right now.

Even if you feel like you can't give 10 percent or save 10 percent right away, we encourage you to make it your goal. Start with baby steps and move in that direction as soon as possible. It all comes down to what we've been suggesting—delayed gratification. Saving will prepare you for emergencies, retirement, insurance, and larger purchases. Saving is important to create financial security and be prepared for a potential financial crisis. Giving is also important for your faith and being

a good steward of the resources God gives you.

We can't quantify this with empirical data, but no one we know who saves 10 percent and gives 10 percent has major financial problems. And we've never met a couple who has committed to live on the 80 percent principle and regretted it. But, we knew many who made poor financial decisions and now live with the pain of regret. Our prayer is that you will choose wisely.

NOTES

- 1 David Olson, Amy Olson-Sigg, and Peter J. Larson, *The Couple Checkup: Find Your Relationship Strengths* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 79.
- 2 Sonya Britt, “Researcher Finds Correlation Between Financial Arguments, Decreased Relationship Satisfaction,” Kansas State University, July 12, 2013, www.k-state.edu/media/newsreleases/jul13/predictingdivorce71113.html.
- 3 Matthew 6:21.
- 4 Howard Dayton, *Your Money Counts: The Biblical Guide to Earning, Spending, Saving, Investing, Giving, and Getting Out of Debt* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2011), 2.
- 5 Ron and Judy Blue and Gary Smalley, *Money Matters for Parents and Their Kids* (Alpharetta, GA: Oliver Nelson, 1988), 73.
- 6 “Marriage and Money,” Early Spring 2009, *Trinity Center Times*, <http://www.trinitycenterinc.com/newsletter2-09.pdf>.
- 7 Dave Ramsey, *The Financial Peace Planner: A Step-by-Step Guide to Restoring Your Family's Financial Health* (New York: Penguin, 1998), 7–8.
- 8 Anup Shah, “Poverty Facts and Stats,” January 7, 2013, *Global Issues*, <http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats>.

Chapter Seven

SEXUALITY: THE NAKED TRUTH

Having sex with your spouse can be one of life's most enjoyable and fulfilling experiences. Maintaining a healthy and beautiful sexual relationship will be a very important part of being husband and wife. Sex is fun, pleasurable, sacred, serious, and it can create an amazing bond and intimacy that is just as deep and necessary as having a significant conversation or reconciling a conflict. At the same time, a sexual relationship can be very misunderstood and become the source of significant tension in marriage. Statistics revealing the top reasons for divorce put *sex-related issues* near the top of the list.¹

What we want you to understand is that great sex doesn't *just happen* in a marriage; it requires work. As you are preparing for marriage, we assume that your sexual relationship may be a source of great anticipation as well as some confusion and even a little anxiety. We're not surprised at some couples' confusion since so many mixed messages are promoted on this subject. Perhaps author Frederick Buechner

summed it up best: “Contrary to [what some believe], sex is not a sin. Contrary to Hugh Hefner, it’s not salvation either. Like nitroglycerin, it can be used either to blow up bridges or to heal hearts.”² We agree that sex holds great power.

SEX: MIXED MESSAGES

The Bible is very clear when it comes to sex: God invented sex and sees it as good and beautiful in the marriage relationship. Unfortunately, we find that far too many couples don’t carry God’s intentions for sex into their marriages. Instead they bring bad or mixed messages into their sexual relationship. Some of these messages were birthed in their minds long before they ever met their fiancés. Here’s how we know this to be true: when we talk to parents about teaching their children healthy sexuality, we ask how many of them received positive, healthy, values-centered sex education from their parents. Surprisingly only a few hands are raised.

Chances are good that you didn’t receive great, helpful sexual education, either. As a result, many younger people pick up their sexual ideals and values from culture, friends, and the Internet. This is why we see so many people with wrong and damaging “tapes” playing in their head when it comes to

sexuality. The sooner you get rid of the negative tapes and develop a healthy view of your sexuality, the easier it will be to develop a beautiful foundation of physical intimacy within your marriage.

Many—especially those who have grown up in the church—have heard parents and pastors say something like, “Don’t do it! It’s dirty, rotten, and horrible. So save that dirty, rotten, horrible experience until you are married!” Hmm. How’s that for a mixed message? Your wedding night can include a beautiful sexual experience, but if tapes full of distorted information are stored in your mind, one great night won’t make them disappear. The sad truth is that negative and damaging sex tapes are difficult to erase. Why? Because the biggest and most powerful sex organ isn’t below your waist (sorry, men)—it’s your mind.

CREATING A FOUNDATION OF HEALTHY SEXUALITY

No matter what your experience is with your sexuality, we’re convinced those who handle their physical oneness best in marriage are the couples who have developed a healthy view of sexuality. Since sex was God’s idea and creation, let’s move

past the Hollywood stereotype of it and go to the original source. God intended sex to be beautiful, pleasurable, and to create oneness within marriage. Sex wasn't *accidentally* discovered by a caveman and cavewoman who were out wrestling one afternoon. If you believe in God, then the only answer is that He not only created sex, but also sees it as *great* within marriage. Here's what the Bible reveals about sexuality and sexual relationships:

- God created sex, and He sees it as very good (Gen. 1:27).
- We become one flesh when two become one (Gen. 2:24, Matt. 19:4–6).
- God protects the beauty of marriage by telling us to refrain from adultery and sexual immorality (Exod. 20:14, 1 Thess. 4:3).

In the Genesis creation account, God made male and female (and their sexuality) and sees them as “very good.” He created their physical bodies in such a way that *two can become one* in a celebratory and pleasurable way (intercourse). Sex between a husband and wife can become one of the deepest and most tender expressions of love, trust, and commitment.

In other words, God isn't the disapproving ogre in the sky who has an unfavorable view of sex. That couldn't be further from the truth. God created sex for pleasure and reproduction and oneness. As Creator, He takes joy in a married couple's healthy sexual expression.

Because sex is God's creation, He has established boundaries not to limit enjoyment but to enhance His designed and desired oneness. God's sexual limitations—basically warnings to refrain from (1) adultery and (2) sexual immorality—are not established to condemn sex but rather to keep marriage pure and honorable. Why go to the hassle of providing guidelines? Because He wants the best for you. God's words on sexuality are beautiful and sacred, and when experienced His way sex can provide the physical, emotional, and spiritual connection for which we long. Sex will be a seal and a celebration of your marriage.

Without this theological framework, sex simply becomes reduced to nothing more than a recreational pleasure act that can produce children. Culture has embraced and promoted a much lower view of sex where *anything goes*. As a result, we are seeing marriages crushed by adultery and pornography. Sex has been turned into a cheap thrill, or even worse, a way to manipulate and enslave one another. That's not God's design

for the sacred act of sex.

Jesus said, “‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh.”³ Jesus meant that “becoming one flesh” is more than just having sex; the sexual act is clearly an experience of literally joining your bodies as one. Your sexual relationship is a uniting experience. Your sexual relationship becomes a sacred seal of the lifelong commitment you make toward oneness. You really can’t understand your sexuality and the important role it plays in your relationship if you don’t view it as a gift from God. It’s a gift that keeps on giving and connecting the two of you into one.

DEVELOPING SEXUAL INTIMACY

We don't want to deflate your fantasy, but typically honeymoon sex isn't the best couples will ever experience. Sexual intimacy and connection take time and practice. We want you to practice a lot ... often ... yes, as much as you can! What a wonderful gift to be completely naked and unashamed with your husband or wife, trying to figure it all out. Sex won't be perfect immediately, but who cares? You'll have decades to practice and improve. We think that's awesome!

Here are several thoughts on how to develop sexual intimacy that we believe are important to share with you.

SEX WITH YOUR SPOUSE WON'T BE LIKE IN THE MOVIES

Don't expect fireworks, lightning bolts, and tears of joy every time you have sex. Sex can be romantic and magical and unbelievable, but just like anything else in life it can also be more complicated than the romanticized version depicted in the media. Learning about each other and how to sexually please one another is part of the process that accompanies marriage. So relax, have fun, and don't try to imitate what you think your

spouse wants. All he or she really wants is you.

SEXUAL INTIMACY BEGINS WITH YOUR CLOTHES ON

I (Doug) remember when our premarital counselor told me, “Doug, you’ve got to understand sex starts in the morning.” I immediately thought, “That’s awesome! It starts in the morning and moves into the evening—a whole day of sex. I can’t wait. I’ll be ready every morning.”

Fortunately, he calmed me down and cleared up his comment by explaining, “Sex starts in the morning with the way you begin treating and responding to Cathy.”

I said, “Oh, bummer. That doesn’t sound like as much fun.” He was trying to help me understand that emotional intimacy precedes sexual intimacy.

Good sexual chemistry requires energy, focus, communication, and even flirting. Intimacy is not just about the good physical feeling (orgasm) that happens while you’re having sex. It is much more emotionally complex. If you are too busy to emotionally connect with each other or have any meaningful nonsexual interaction, then you’ll probably be too busy to have a good sexual relationship. Good sex begins

before you ever get to the bedroom.

Here's an important principle to remember: typically women feel emotional connection *before* sex happens. That emotional connection is what helps her want to have sex. Women operate more like a dimmer switch than an on/off switch. The husband's job is to slowly turn that dimmer switch throughout the day. That may be an unusual thought to a guy, because most guys don't have dimmer tendencies. They are as simple as an on/off switch, and when it comes to sex, they are mostly "on." Unlike women, guys typically feel emotional connection *after* sex. This creates problems if the male is not attempting to connect before the sex act. Obviously, there are exceptions to this basic principle, but it will help you to remember that most women feel emotional connection *before* sex, and most men feel emotional connection *after* sex.

YOU NEED TO NURTURE ROMANCE

Just because you went on dates regularly throughout your courtship and engagement doesn't mean you will when you're married. You must make a commitment ahead of time to keep dating. Agree with one another that you'll both work to have nonnegotiable dates within your marriage. After the wedding happens, you are at risk of the busyness of life taking over. Be consistent and block out a weekly date night (or day) and alter your schedule as much as is needed in order to find time to be alone together so that you never stop working on your romance.

FLIRTING IS FOREPLAY!

Flirting doesn't need to stop just because you're married. Make it a habit, and it can become a form of foreplay. Flirting can be a whisper, a touch, a hug, or a kiss. Flirting can include a gift, a sexy text message earlier in the day, or any small expression of your love. Learn what it is that triggers excitement and romance in your spouse.

Typically, men are quite easy to excite (especially if they're breathing). Women can pretty much take off any item of

clothing while expressing interest and/or initiative in their man and they've accomplished foreplay. Men may have to work a little harder and be more creative than stripping. Kind words, acts of affection, even acts of service are winners with wives. A simple act of service around the house can turn into a major turn-on. We have a friend who said, "If I had understood how doing the dishes impacted our romance, I would have cleaned the dishes every day. Forget that—I would have polished them!"

TELL YOUR SPOUSE WHAT YOU NEED

Remember in chapter four when we suggested that the *art of hinting* is not a good form of communication? That also applies to your sexual communication. There will be times when you must tell your spouse exactly what you need and what you'd like him or her to do. You need to feel safe enough to speak up. This type of emotional intimacy is powerful, and it will often require vulnerability and honesty about your needs. You're already naked and vulnerable. You now need to be vulnerable in other ways too. Chances are good you will each have a different sexual temperature. Statistically speaking, men are usually more sexually needy and aggressive than females.

This can and will create tension unless you're willing to talk about your feelings and needs. Be gracious, kind, and positive—but use your words.

CREATE A POSITIVE ENVIRONMENT IN YOUR BEDROOM

As you know, if you bring emotional chaos or negativity into any conversation, it spoils the dialogue and blocks communication. The same principle applies to your bedroom. If your bedroom is always chaotic and messy and there are loads of unfolded laundry, a pile of unpaid bills on the nightstand, if the TV is loud, or your phone is active with messages, these can ruin a romantic environment and distract your mind from one another. Remember, your most powerful sex organ is your mind. Make sure yours is clear of clutter and distractions so you can mentally and physically focus on your spouse.

IF YOU NEED HELP ... ASK FOR IT

Sometimes sexual difficulties in a marriage happen. If you need help, don't delay in asking for it. You have the options of talking to mentors, reading books, or seeking professional advice from a certified sex therapist. Please don't suffer in

silence. Many before you, and there will be many after you, have struggled with some element of sexual activity. Don't allow this to become a major factor in your marriage. Drop your pride, and pick up some help. Most of the time, it's not the physical act of intercourse that creates trouble; it's the mind and the emotional, mental, or spiritual element that needs special attention.

PROTECT YOUR MARRIAGE WITH A COMMITMENT TO PURITY

The safest road to emotional, physical, and even spiritual intimacy always comes through purity and fidelity. When we speak to teenagers, we often challenge them to live by what we've termed "the purity code." We've come to believe that the purity code isn't just a good idea for those who aren't married. It's an excellent suggestion for those who are, and therefore we adapted the purity code for engaged and married couples to make a promise: "In honor of God, my family, and my spouse, I commit to sexual purity."

I (Jim) remember that at our thirty-fifth wedding anniversary dinner with our children, I publicly thanked and honored Cathy for her thirty-five years of fidelity. In today's world that type of

commitment is rare, and it is a big deal. I've never worried about Cathy's purity and fidelity within our marriage.

As you prepare for your own marriage, it is imperative that you also commit to the purity code. This one sentence can make a difference between a successful and protected marriage and a destroyed one: *"In honor of God, my family, and my spouse, I commit to sexual purity."*

To help you better understand the purity code, here's a list of what it involves:

- Honoring God with your body.
- Renewing your mind for good.
- Turning your eyes from worthless things.
- Guarding your heart.

You will bring honor and security to your spouse when you give her or him your sexual purity. This means all of your sexual energy, desires, and passion will be directed at your spouse. He or she gets it all! Everything you have is his or hers. That's a powerful code, and a commitment we believe is worth keeping.

We've made it clear that your most important sex organ is your mind. The discipline of dealing with your mind is key

when it comes to protecting your marriage. Currently, one of the major issues we're discovering in premarital and marital counseling is pornography. Mostly these are male issues (although definitely not exclusive to men), and guys are coming into marriage with many sexual scenes—like tapes—seared into and playing in their minds because of their involvement in pornography—from minor dabbling to full-on addiction. What guys once viewed as a harmless sexual experience that “wasn't hurting anyone” has now morphed into a harmful sexual problem that's ruining marriages.

Sex lives are being destroyed because of pornography being so easily available and so highly addictive. Here's how it works: a man brings visual sex scenes that have been stored in his mind through porn into his marriage and transfers his sexual fantasies onto his wife with the expectation that she will perform in a similar fashion to the scene he fantasizes. In addition to finding men bringing unrealistic expectations into marriage, we're also finding men who are either not interested in sex with their wife or are unable to perform sexually because they are so used to performing solo with graphic images.

If you have been involved in viewing pornography—even if you don't think you're addicted—please, by all means, pursue some help and accountability. Proverbs says, “Guard

your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life,”⁴ and this could not be more applicable than with protecting your marriage. Pornography is a *very big deal*, and don’t fall for the lie that it’s harmless! It is a destructive force that doesn’t just go away on its own; you have to send it away by getting some help and becoming accountable. Be honest. Bring it into the light by telling someone who you trust, who feels safe, who won’t judge you, and who will be willing to walk through this with you. The issue will only grow more destructive in darkness.

Maybe your problem isn’t that you have stored sexual images in your mental hard drive, but that you have had past sexual relationships. Those experiences carry with them their own set of tapes, and they are not easily erased from your memory. Before marriage is the time to be honest, transparent, and straightforward about your past relationships. Spare the nitty-gritty details, but make sure there are no surprises on the other side of the wedding. If you can’t be honest now, we’re afraid you won’t be honest in the future. We are big fans of grace and forgiveness and fresh starts, but we also know the damage that happens when you bring unresolved issues into a marriage.

When it comes to protecting your marriage, we also believe

strongly in setting healthy boundaries with the opposite sex. One of my (Doug) good friends was a pastor serving in a church. He was too loose with boundaries regarding the opposite sex and found himself having lunches and coffee with a woman who was not his wife. It started out innocently, but as time passed their feelings evolved. My friend began sharing intimate secrets with her, he started dressing more for her than for his wife, and he began to fantasize about being with this other woman sexually. Finally, he went exactly where his mind had already gone. He crossed the line physically, and that was the beginning of the end.

Today he is divorced, and unfortunately it wasn't just his marriage that was shattered. His careless actions took down two marriages with a total of seven kids who lost their mom or dad over this whole situation. Years after the divorce my friend confessed that if he would have thought more deeply about the purity code, established better boundaries, and invited accountability into his struggles, the affair would never have happened.

At all costs, discuss what boundaries you will place around your marriage. Talk about them and then commit to them. Why? Because everyone is capable of anything—even you. You are just a few bad decisions away from messing everything up and

destroying a lot of lives. Please don't take this lightly.

SEX BEFORE MARRIAGE

We are amazed at the fact that God could have dreamed up all kinds of other ways for a couple to have intimacy and procreate—yet he created sex! Our sexuality is a gift from God, and it's beautiful, enjoyable, sacred, and even spiritual. In today's culture, however, sex has been cheapened into a casual hookup or “sex without strings and marriage without rings.”

As we shared earlier in this chapter, most people received incredibly mixed messages about sex when they were young. Most adults tell us that their parents never talked to them about it. Others were told it is evil. But if you are breathing, you have also heard and seen the prevailing message of the culture that encourages sexual intercourse with whomever—just make sure you use birth control and practice “safe” sex. The vast majority of people with whom we do premarital counseling have tapes in their head from all of these mixed messages about their sexuality.

So let's get it straight ... Sex is GREAT. Sex is beautiful. Sex is fun. Sex is sacred. Sex is a gift from God. Your sexuality is such an important part of your relationship and life that we want to challenge you to treat your sexuality with the highest respect. It is a rarity in this culture for couples to wait to experience sexual intercourse until they are married. The Bible

is clear that sex before marriage is not what God intended. His desire is for you and your spouse to choose the very finest sexual relationship and not settle for second best when it comes to the beauty of the marriage bed. Too many couples struggle with their physical intimacy because they have brought too much baggage into their relationship.

Dr. Ray Short from the University of Wisconsin wrote that “science has established nine facts concerning the probable effect of premarital sex on your marriage.” We find these scientific facts to be very compelling.

Fact 1: Premarital sex tends to break up couples.

Fact 2: Many men do not want to marry a woman who has had intercourse with someone else. (This fact can also be said for many women as well.)

Fact 3: Those who have premarital sex tend to have less happy marriages.

Fact 4: Those who have premarital sex are more likely to have their marriage end in divorce.

Fact 5: Persons and couples who have had premarital sex are more likely to have extramarital affairs.

Fact 6: Having premarital sex may fool you into marrying a person who is not right for you.

Fact 7: Persons and couples with premarital sex experience seem to achieve sexual satisfaction sooner after they are married. HOWEVER—

Fact 8: They are likely to be less satisfied overall with their sex life during marriage.

Fact 9: Poor premarital sexual habits can be carried over to spoil sex in marriage.⁵

No doubt for many reading these words, this can be troubling because you have already chosen to be physically intimate. Others are waiting and yet wondering if it is worth the wait. We want to offer you a challenge. No matter what your past or present situation is, invest in your marriage by abstaining from sexual intercourse for the rest of your engagement. (By the way, we would say the same thing about oral sex or anal sex.) Because of your love and commitment for each other, this may not be easy, but the gift of premarital abstinence you give your spouse on your wedding night is one of the greatest gifts you could ever give. They know how difficult it is to resist the temptation to compromise what is best, so when they see you commit to sexual purity, you are

speaking volumes about your love and commitment to them.

Some may call us old-fashioned or prudes. We are neither. We are simply passing on what we know to be true from God's Word. And, we have never had one couple who has taken our challenge tell us they regretted honoring each other with sexual purity. If you have chosen not to have sexual intercourse until your marriage, we congratulate you on that decision. We know it's not easy, and we also know you won't regret it. In today's culture sexual abstinence is more about your spiritual commitment to each other and purity as opposed to trying to "white knuckle" it. Again we cheer you on. Good friends of ours waited until their wedding night to consummate their marriage. As part of their wedding ceremony, Kristi gave to Todd the purity ring her father gave her when she was a girl. It was a beautiful act of commitment and obedience to God. And there wasn't a dry eye in the place.

We know another couple who had been sleeping together, but from the moment we gave them this challenge, they also chose to refrain. We cheer them on just as much. Today they have a beautiful marriage, and we think part of it was the amazing display of respect and discipline it took for them to change course in their physical relationship midstream and do it the way God intended. It is never too late to do the right

thing.

Okay. We have thrown down the challenge. Now we suggest you talk about it together and commit to sexual purity. Then on your honeymoon and forever more enjoy one of God's greatest inventions—your sexuality.

THE SCIENCE AND HIDDEN CONSEQUENCES OF COHABITATION

Today, a majority of couples consider cohabitation before marriage an option. In fact, the rise of cohabitation in the United States is a staggering statistic of sociological change. Despite what many people think, cohabitation isn't the strongest option for building toward a healthy future marriage. Some have called it "practice marriage" or "pretend marriage." It's neither.

Daniel and Emmy were a typical late twentysomething couple. They both had good jobs and good friends, and they were living together. Although this was not the first sexual relationship for either of them, they had pledged their love to one another and were seriously considering taking the next step toward marriage. They had moved in together to "save money" and make sure the relationship was what they had

dreamed it would be. These were well-spoken, educated, and thoughtful people. Both Daniel and Emmy knew we were pro-marriage and not in favor of cohabitation. They came to us for counseling and asked us to shoot straight with them. Basically here is what we said: cohabitation is not the same thing as marriage, and there are numerous scientific facts that must be looked at in order to understand that this is not the road to go down if you want to beat the odds and have a successful marriage.

Studies consistently show that living together before marriage increases the likelihood of divorce.

Noted sociologist from Johns Hopkins University, Andrew Cherlin, said, “Marriages that are preceded by living together have 50 percent higher disruption rate than marriages without premarital cohabitation.”⁶ Other experts indicate that “people with cohabiting experience who marry have a 50 to 80 percent higher likelihood of divorcing than for married couples who never cohabited.”⁷ We have heard all the different defensive reasons couples give to protest our opinion. Ultimately, the facts are the facts, and science points to cohabitation being a bad choice.

Studies consistently reveal that there is a lower level of relational satisfaction among cohabiting couples than married

couples. Many sociology scholars now look at cohabitation as a substitute for being single rather than an alternative to marriage. There are just too many differences. Without the marriage license, wedding rings, and wedding vows, the commitment is just not there. Couples are freer to exit the relationship, and they do so at alarming rates.

Marital status also matters not just to the couple but to their extended family as well. Couples may not make marriage a big deal, but most extended families still maintain a traditional view and hold marriage in higher esteem. For example, Susan and Todd asked her parents for a loan so they could buy a condo together. Her parents had the money, but didn't feel like they could trust Todd and Susan's relationship because it didn't match their view of commitment. The parents turned them down on the loan. While some don't value the institution of marriage, the majority still do.

One study showed that there are much higher levels of infidelity with couples who live together before marriage. The University of California, Irvine, studied couples who live together and discovered "the odds of a recent infidelity were more than twice as high for cohabiters than for married persons."⁸ Again, these are alarming considerations but not all that surprising. Where there is no strong, foundational

commitment, it's much easier to compromise values.

While these well-researched facts are powerful, none of them take into consideration what the Bible offers on the subject of sex outside of marriage. It's very clear. "Flee from sexual immorality" (1 Corinthians 6:18a). When God establishes a mandate, He does so for two reasons: (1) It brings honor to Him, and (2) He wants what is the very best for his people. Living together before marriage does neither. God has a preferred future for you as a couple, and it's found within the commitment of marriage.

Steve and Tracy were both previously married. When they found each other, they "knew" this relationship was going to be different from their first marriages. They moved in together after only a few months of dating. About that same time they started attending a church with some of their friends. During one Sunday morning service, they listened intently to a sermon about how to find the will of God for your life. The pastor used an illustration about being sexually pure, even in today's sexually permissive society. Steve and Tracy were unfamiliar with biblical principles, so they made an appointment with the pastor to better understand what he was talking about. At the end of the meeting, Tracy turned to Steve and said, "It looks like I need to move out tonight." She had a sudden sense of

conviction, and she really wanted to live the next season of her life by God's standards and try to do things right. She explained that she loved Steve too much to mess up the relationship. He respected her feelings and helped her move to a friend's spare bedroom.

Something changed in this couple. They sought out some pretty extensive premarital counseling to make sure they didn't repeat their past mistakes. Fast-forward nine years, and today they are very happily married. Their courageous decision cost them some short-term convenience and pleasure, but their obedience to God's standards allowed them to build a foundation that has led to a successful marriage. It's our prayer the same will be true with you.

NOTES

- 1 Divorce.com, “Top 10 Reasons Marriages Fail,” <http://divorce.com/top-10-reasons-marriages-fail/>.
- 2 Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 87.
- 3 Matthew 19:5–6.
- 4 Proverbs 4:23 NLT.
- 5 Ray E. Short, *Sex, Love, or Infatuation: How Can I Really Know?* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990), 97.
- 6 Larry Bumpass, James A. Sweet, and Andrew Cherlin, “The Role of Cohabitation in Declining Rates of Marriage,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 53 (1991): 913–27.
- 7 William G. Axinn and Arland Thornton, “The Relationship between Cohabitation and Divorce: Selectivity or Casual Influence?” *Demography* 29 (1992): 357–74.
- 8 Georgina Binstock and Arland Thornton, “Separations, Reconciliations, and Living Apart in Cohabiting and Marital Unions,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 65 (2003): 440.

Chapter Eight

SPIRITUAL INTIMACY: THE POWER OF COMPATIBILITY

Do you think you and your fiancé are spiritually compatible? Have you ever thought about it?

Spiritual intimacy is sometimes one of the least-developed areas of a relationship for couples, and yet it's one of the most important issues in determining your marital happiness. In premarital counseling we can trigger some interesting conversations when we ask the compatibility question. For some couples their spiritual life is a major focus, and for others, we can tell the question has never even entered their minds. If you haven't yet discussed your spiritual compatibility, now is a very good time to begin the dialogue.

Shaunti Feldhahn, in her book *The Good News About Marriage*, claims that couples who have an active faith actually lower their chance of divorce. Feldhahn thoroughly researched this subject and discovered, "The rate of divorce in the church is 25 to 50 percent lower than among those who don't attend worship services, and those who prioritize their

faith and/or pray together are dramatically happier and more connected.”¹ After researching more than fifty thousand couples, David Olson and Peter Larson came to the same conclusion. Couples who have a similar faith background and integrate their faith into their relationship have less marital conflict. Olson and Larson learned that couples with a high level of spiritual agreement reported much greater levels of satisfaction in most of the important areas of their relationship. “Those with high agreement had greater marital satisfaction and felt better about their communication and conflict resolution, financial management, sexual relationship, closeness, and flexibility as a couple.”²

The reason developing spiritual intimacy is a big deal to us is because it has played a key role in the depth and stability of our thirty (Doug) and forty (Jim) years of marriage. Not only are our marriages much stronger because of the faith we share with our wives, but our faith has also played a defining role in establishing who we are as individuals.

We have discovered through our many premarital counseling sessions that it’s common for couples to struggle in this faith area of their relationship. Many are simply too busy or distracted and haven’t committed to making spiritual growth a priority. For others the faith issue is nonexistent because

they've never had role models of faith. Some couples have simply turned faith into an “agree to disagree” issue. There are even a small percentage of couples for whom one partner doesn't respect the other's display of faith, and it shows up in a low level of anger and a spirit of resentment. What about you? Do you fit into any of these categories?

Marriage studies show that if someone comes from a different faith than his or her spouse or that one is a practicing believer and one is not, the couple will experience a degree of tension that will deeply impact their marriage.³ (We discuss this more when we reference being “unequally yoked” on [page 167](#)). Spiritual intimacy goes to the deepest and most vulnerable parts of our souls, but couples must learn to invest in that intimacy in order to make it a source of strength rather than a strain.

Mark and Ellie met at the hospital where they worked in the pediatric wing. They both enjoyed the outdoors, loved children, and were totally committed to helping make sick kids better. With all this in common, they thought they were a perfect match. Ellie was raised in a strong Christian home and at one time had been very active in the expression of her faith. When she met Mark, she basically put her faith on the shelf since Mark was essentially an agnostic and had very little

interest in anything spiritual. Mark and Ellie married and now have two children. After becoming a mom Ellie felt her heart being drawn back to God, and she returned to her faith. She wants Mark to share her faith, but he just can't "go there." She suffers a deep sadness that her husband and kids don't share her spiritual values.

We confidently believe that the best way to develop spiritual intimacy and compatibility in your marriage is to begin growing together spiritually *before* you get married. We want to guide you in some doable actions to help you move in that direction.

DEVELOPING SPIRITUAL INTIMACY

Finding spiritual intimacy will be as important as any other part of your marriage. Here are some tips for developing and deepening spiritual intimacy.

FIND A MARRIAGE MENTOR COUPLE

Spiritual intimacy goes to the deepest and most vulnerable parts of our soul, and often we need a wiser couple to help guide us. Bob and Tanya are grandparents with a passion to help marriages succeed. They are an ideal mentor couple because they are authentic, not preachy, have practical ideas that are based in reality, and are not afraid of any question. They will challenge a newly married or engaged couple when necessary, but mainly they see their role as a source of support. They have younger couples at their church begging to get together with them. They are definitely not as “cool” as some of the couples they meet with, but their wisdom and willingness to share is having a dramatic influence in many marriages.

Engagement and the first few years of marriage can be difficult if couples are without any mentoring or role modeling.

Some churches have made marriage mentoring a priority, which makes it so much easier for couples to get help. Keep in mind that marriage mentors are not necessarily trained counselors, but they are gracious people who are supportive, encouraging, and can offer practical input as they share their lives with you.

I (Jim) had the privilege of performing the wedding ceremony for a beautiful couple several years ago. Four months later, they called and asked if they could get together with Cathy and me. We had them over for dinner, and they came with articulate questions about concerns they were having in their marriage. It was a great time. A few months later they invited us to dinner at their place and had several more questions. Once again we had a great time and some amazing dialogue.

When they had their first child, Cathy and I were aware that they didn't have family in the area, so we offered to babysit so they could go on their first post-baby date. When they came to pick up the baby, the new mom asked if she could have coffee with Cathy to talk about raising kids. Soon after, I ran into the husband at a local restaurant and he introduced me to his coworker with these words: "This is Jim. He and his wife, Cathy, have been our marriage mentors since before we got married." Honestly, until that very moment it had not dawned

on me that we were their marriage mentors. In fact, if they would have officially asked us, we may have turned them down because of time constraints. They slowly adopted us as their mentors, and we slowly leaned in and kept saying “yes” to their occasional requests. They were wise in their approach, and it has served to be a great relationship for both of us.

Who will be your marriage mentors? What will you do to proactively develop a stronger relationship with them?

DEVELOP A SPIRITUAL TIME TOGETHER

Developing spiritual intimacy as a couple is very similar to developing other important life disciplines. All disciplines require time, focus, and energy. As a couple making a commitment to developing spiritual intimacy, you will want to find a plan that works for you. We don't have a one-size-fits-all recommendation. Actually, we've learned that developing this type of spiritually intimate relationship may take several different attempts until you discover something that works for you.

Our story (Jim and Cathy) basically comes out of failure, but so many times we learn more from our failures than our victories. For the first years of marriage, we prayed together irregularly and, honestly, didn't do much else to develop our spiritual intimacy as a couple. Because we were involved in youth ministry, we had no problem helping teenagers with their spiritual lives, but we seldom focused on each other. Knowing this was an underdeveloped area of our marriage, we decided to buy a marriage devotional book. It was one that couples were supposed to read together every day. We were amazing at it ... for the first four days. Then we started missing a few days,

and before we even realized it, we weren't really doing it anymore. We blamed it on the book, so we bought another one. The same thing happened. After failing the second time, we decided that maybe it wasn't the book's fault.

The next time we met with our marriage mentors, we asked, "What do you do to enhance your spiritual intimacy together?" They immediately displayed one of those smiles that nonverbally communicate understanding. They said, "We spend twenty minutes a week focused on our spiritual intimacy." I'm embarrassed to admit that my initial reaction (that I kept to myself) was, "Only twenty minutes a week? Really?" That seemed like a pretty wimpy amount of time considering these were Christian leaders. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that Cathy and I weren't doing any spiritual connecting—not even for twenty minutes.

As we were driving home from that meeting, Cathy said, "Jim, I would really like to try that twenty-minutes-a-week thing they talked about." We agreed to start the next night. I'm happy to report that we've been doing it pretty consistently for more than thirty years.

Please note: twenty minutes is not a magical amount of time. What becomes magical about this whole idea is that you are carving *focused* time out of your schedule to talk together

about what God is doing in your life and what you're learning about His love, and to pray together. You figure out how much time you need for this, but the idea of knowing that you and your spouse will connect on a regular basis and commit to doing something to develop your spiritual intimacy is a huge step forward.

You may find it helpful to go through a book, workbook, or devotional that will guide you during those minutes together. Several great devotional books are on the market (including Jim and Cathy's book, *Closer: 52 Devotions to Draw Couples Together*).

If going through a book together doesn't fit your style, you might simply set some time aside and share from the following agenda (this is a sample; feel free to edit, change, delete, or make your own).

- Share your greatest joy of the week.
- Confess your greatest struggle of the week.
- Speak a specific affirmation about your spouse.
- Relay a hope or a wish.
- Make a statement about a physical goal (e.g., run three times, push-ups every morning, etc.).
- Pray together.

PRAY REGULARLY

Prayer can be a very personal and deeply connecting experience with God. It can also serve to become a time of deep connection with your spouse. Dr. Dave Stoop is one of the most respected marriage specialists in America and is a mentor of ours. While speaking at one of our marriage conferences, he said, “The divorce rate in America is horrible. However, studies show that if a couple prays together on a daily basis, there is about a one in one thousand chance of them getting a divorce. As marriage therapists, my colleagues and I would be out of jobs if couples just prayed together on a regular basis.” He challenged everyone in attendance—including us—to commit to praying together daily, even if it is only for a short period of time. It’s doubtful he will be out of a job anytime soon, but he made a compelling connection between spiritual intimacy, prayer, and a healthy marriage.

It’s easy to make excuses, and when tension arises it has a way of stopping your desire to pray together. It’s difficult to talk to God as a couple when you don’t even want to talk to one another. The discipline of prayer moves you beyond tension and differences and bonds you together as a couple.

WORSHIP TOGETHER

We have both worked in the church and speak often in churches, so we're probably a little biased here. But we believe that couples who participate in a worship community are going to benefit from the praising of God and the connection with other like-minded people. We are well aware that not all church services we have attended have been lively and exciting. But, sometimes, something happens as a result of the discipline of being together with our wives and focusing on God. Not only do we leave feeling more connected to God and others, but we feel more connected to one another.

Ultimately, the worship service is not about you being entertained as much as it is about focusing on God together. When you go to church, you don't ask, "How was it?" but rather "How did I do?" That's a great reminder that worship isn't about how others perform.

If you are not committed to worshipping together, we encourage you to make some sacrifices for the good of the marriage and attend at least once or twice per month as a couple. We know one man who agreed to attend a worship service once a month even though his wife went every week. She never nagged or shamed him about it. Within a year he made the choice to go weekly because he was learning and

changing—and he felt closer to God and his wife because of worship.

SPEND TIME WITH OTHER COUPLES

We have discovered that some of our greatest spiritual-growth times have happened when we've been with other couples who challenge us through their thinking, heart, and lifestyle. We've learned that we're ultimately better when we're together with others who share our faith in Jesus. This simple motto, "Better together," is a good one as it applies to marriage and faith. You don't want to live out your marriage or your faith on an island. Others can provide the needed encouragement and challenges that will provide strength to different aspects of life. This might mean joining a couples' small group or being intentional about seeking out other couples (see [page 160](#)).

READ A MARRIAGE BOOK OR ATTEND A MARRIAGE CONFERENCE TOGETHER

Many couples can look back at a spiritual-growth moment and point to it as a catalytic event that helped moved their relationship forward. We believe this could happen for you by committing to read together at least one Christ-centered marriage book a year and by attending an annual marriage conference. Your marriage doesn't have to be in trouble to go

to a marriage seminar, workshop, or conference—it can simply serve as a tune-up or a shot-in-the-arm for your marriage and your faith. Continuing education is a requirement for many of our jobs; it should be no different for our marriages. As a married couple, you'll always want to keep your eyes and ears open for opportunities where you can grow in your faith and as a couple. Even if you gather just one new idea, tip, or technique, it could revolutionize your marriage.

PERSONAL GROWTH

In addition to growing spiritually as a couple, you need to be focused on growing as individuals. Just as you can't look to your spouse to fill up your spiritual tank in a way only God can, you shouldn't demand that he or she try to fulfill needs that really should be met through your own relationship with God. Although growing spiritually together is a beautiful experience, it can't replace what each person should be experiencing with his or her own spiritual disciplines.

The marriages we respect the most are the ones where we see people who have managed to bring their spiritual growth to a place of importance in their lives. One man we know said, "The secret to my marital joy and success is found in the foundation I have built in my own life of trusting in and practicing the presence of God. I find that if I focus on Him throughout the day, it gives me more patience and better understanding of my relationship with my wife."

THOUGHTS ON BEING UNEQUALLY YOKED

There are strong biblical warnings about being spiritually disconnected and unbalanced, not just personally, but also as

a couple. The apostle Paul instructed followers of Jesus by writing, “Do not be unequally yoked.”⁴ This unique phrase refers to those who have a relationship with Jesus but are married to people who don’t. The term *yoked* literally refers to what happens when two oxen are connected by the neck. When these animals were yoked (joined) together, they would work in the field and operate as one. When connected, they had more power and were stronger.

Paul is applying this concept to a marriage relationship, warning against being joined in marriage to an unbeliever. What was written two thousand years ago as a warning is still solid wisdom for today’s marriages. Those who share spiritual intimacy and who are equally yoked tend to have happier and more successful marriages. Because of that, we urge those who are “unequally yoked” to give the spiritual area of their life serious consideration and make attempts to reconcile this spiritual issue *before* marriage. If not, the same thing that happened to Ellie (whom we introduced in the beginning of the chapter) could be in your future. We want to keep you from the deep sorrow that appears when your spouse and kids don’t share your faith.

If you are not a person of faith, but your fiancé is, then there is absolutely no better time than now to put energy and

time into investigating what it means to have a personal relationship with God through Jesus. God wants the very best for you and for your marriage.

FIVE REASONS TO WORK ON YOUR SPIRITUAL RELATIONSHIP

Here are five reasons why we believe you will want to work on your spiritual relationship before you get married.

1. *If you and your spouse do not share the same faith, then your spouse will never be able to fully understand you from the inside.* Making a relationship work best requires total transparency and vulnerability. If you have put your faith in the person of Jesus and your fiancé has not, there may be times when you feel like you need to minimize or hide your real feelings or your desire for God and His presence in your life. This means you aren't being completely transparent or vulnerable, and this could lead to loneliness for you.
2. *When you marry an unbeliever, you are*

basically moving your relationship with God out of the central place in your life. To make the relationship with your spouse work, you will most likely make sacrifices and compromise your relationship and commitment to God to meet the demands and expectations of your nonbelieving spouse. For those who have wandered away from their faith, it's not uncommon to return to their spiritual roots after the wedding. If this happens for either you or your spouse but not for both of you, this can put extra strain and pressure on the marriage.

3. *Although many couples say it won't happen, we see children in an unequally yoked marriage living with confusion and often missing the opportunity to experience faith during the formative years of their life.* This sometimes becomes deeply sad for a parent.
4. *When a Christian is in a relationship with a non-Christian, he or she is typically not*

listening to the advice of the community. To develop healthy relationships it's better to listen to sound advice from family, friends, a pastor, and God-honoring people you know and respect.

5. Being involved sexually is what causes instant intimacy and eventual confusion about whether this is the right relationship or not. Don't let sex fool you into making a poor, lifelong decision.

We realize that some couples will skim the section about being unequally yoked, and for others it will be a major point of conversation. All we ask is that you don't ignore the issue of spiritual unity, hoping that someday your fiancé will eventually change his or her mind about God. Biblical wisdom and current statistics paint the picture that couples with shared faith values are happier and more successful in the long run. If this is an area of concern for you, we suggest you not only have a good discussion with each other, but that you also make an appointment with a spiritual leader for further wisdom and insight.

NOTES

- [1](#) Shaunti Feldhahn, *The Good News About Marriage: Debunking Discouraging Myths About Marriage and Divorce* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Multnomah, 2014), 86.
- [2](#) David Olson, Amy Olson-Sigg, and Peter J. Larson, *The Couple Checkup: Find Your Relationship Strengths* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 149.
- [3](#) Olson, Olson-Sigg, and Larson, *The Couple Checkup*, 156–57.
- [4](#) 2 Corinthians 6:14 NKJV.

Chapter Nine

REMARRIAGE: A FRESH START

Rob and Tracy have an excellent second marriage. They jokingly refer to it as a “beautiful mess.” They were the first to admit their life was complicated and sometimes even messy, yet because of some of their healthy decisions when going into their second marriage, it was beautiful at the same time. Over coffee they told us their story, and two of their statements really stuck with us. They are worthy of being passed on to you:

“We had to adjust and readjust our expectations.”

“We had to learn from our past.”

Rob and Tracy knew they needed to do extra work to make sure their remarriage didn’t end the same way their first marriages did.

One of the primary reasons remarriages fail is because couples don’t learn from past relationships. If they were

unwilling to do the work to salvage marriage number one, odds are high they won't approach marriage number two much differently. Rob mentioned that his workaholic tendency was the cause of his previous divorce. And when he and his ex-wife would have conflicts, he tended to hide behind his busy schedule and add to his workload rather than cut back on his schedule and invest in his marriage. Rob knew that if his new relationship with Tracy was going to work, he would need to deal with his workaholic tendencies before getting married. Tracy said that her ex-husband had complained that she was constantly critical of him and she seldom affirmed him. She smiled and said, "My criticism was mostly accurate, but I now understand that berating him wasn't going to change him or bring us closer together." She needed to rid herself of that tendency with Rob so she could be a more positive presence in their marriage.

Rob and Tracy say it was love at first sight when they met. They were both pretty fresh out of their divorces, and several friends told them to move slowly and not get caught in a rebound situation. Both felt the same way, but they were also convinced they had met someone too special to lose. Rob shared, "I still had to adjust my expectations. If it feels too good to be true, it usually is. We especially had to readjust our

expectations about our children. We were madly in love, but our children didn't embrace our relationship as quickly. The kid issue became a constant source of struggle for us."

From the very beginning, Tracy and Rob made two healthy decisions that set up their remarriage for success: they learned from their past relational mistakes, and they adjusted their expectations. Clearly, there are several issues to cover with a remarriage, but frankly, the two listed above are a good beginning. (Be sure to fill out the "What I've Learned from My Past" questionnaire in the *Getting Ready for Marriage Workbook*, as well as the worksheet on "Adjustments to the Marriage Expectations.") When you are thinking about adjusting your expectations and learning from your past, here are some important questions to consider:

- What mistakes did I make in my first marriage that caused tension, lack of intimacy, and brokenness?
- How have I changed so that I won't repeat those mistakes? (This is a question to move blame from your ex-spouse to yourself. Of course he or she made mistakes, but so did you. How do you keep from repeating those mistakes

in your next marriage?)

- What will I do more effectively in this new relationship?
- What expectations did I have in my first marriage that I just don't need in this relationship?
- What can I learn from my past parenting experience that I can bring to this new relationship if children are involved?

TAKE CARE OF YOUR PAST

Andrea and Alex walked up to me (Jim) at church, holding hands, looking happy, and asked if they could schedule some time with me. They wanted to talk about their relationship. There was a sparkle in their eyes, a look I had not seen in either of them for some time. I knew both of their stories fairly well.

Andrea had divorced seven years prior. She was essentially raising two sons on her own. Her countenance often betrayed her exhaustion and emotional weariness. She was an attractive person, but didn't always take the time to care for herself—she was usually exhausted.

Alex had just gone through a messy separation, and his divorce papers would soon be signed. But he had told me during a previous meeting that the fights with his ex would no doubt continue.

In spite of their pasts, though, in this moment they both looked radiant with their newfound relationship.

When they walked into my office for our appointment a few weeks later, they were again holding hands, looking very much in love. Alex got right to the point. “Jim, would you do some premarital counseling for us? I feel like the luckiest man in the world to have found Andrea, and I know Andrea has similar feelings about me.” Andrea affirmed his comment with a big

smile. There was definitely love in the air.

I then asked a very simple question: “Have you both made peace with your past relationship? If either of your spouses came back today and asked you to give it another try, what would you tell them?” Andrea told me her ex-husband had remarried. Over the years she had grieved the loss, and with the help of close friends, a counselor, and her faith, she was ready to start over with Alex. Alex was slower to answer. He turned introspective. He paused, looked at Andrea, and said, “I believe my relationship with my wife is totally over. Andrea knows everything there is to know about that marriage. It was a battle from the honeymoon right up until the divorce. However, divorce was my wife’s idea, not mine. I can’t even imagine my wife coming back to me now, but if she did, I guess I would probably have to give it another try.” I wish I could have taken a picture of the look on Andrea’s face to show you what complete shock looks like. She immediately transformed from love in the air to hurt, deep concern, and confusion. Obviously Andrea had not imagined a moment like this one. Alex tried to backtrack on his comments, but it was quite clear that these two needed to have further discussion. Alex obviously had some unfinished business with his past relationship.

Our experience with remarriages is that the strongest ones

don't emerge on the rebound from the first. Health seems to appear only after both people have done the work it takes to deal with their past. Divorce is a huge loss! It's a loss of home, often a loss of finances, and definitely a loss of the way things were. Divorce also involves more than just you.

I (Doug) remember a teenager saying to me, "My family just got a divorce." What an insightful phrase. He was going through the end of his parents' marriage. It wasn't just his mom and dad experiencing loss—his entire family was breaking apart.

Since divorce is loss, you need to fully and completely grieve the loss before you enter into a new relationship. Alex knew he wouldn't be getting back together with his ex-wife, but he hadn't completely worked through the grief of his failed marriage. He needed more time, work, and counsel before he could enter into a committed relationship with Andrea.

DON'T KEEP SECRETS

If you want your new marriage to thrive, don't keep secrets. We hear too many stories of secrets that emerge after remarriage.

After Jon and Barb were married, Jon found out Barb had

piled up a great deal of debt during her single years. Caroline learned from a conversation with a friend (after the wedding) that her new husband, Franco, had cheated on her while they were engaged. We could share many more examples, but you get the point.

The ideal place to be in a relationship is a place of truth-telling and openness. If you are hiding secrets or stories that could impact your relationship, then you are not ready to be remarried. This Old Testament passage reveals the outcome of honesty: “Whoever walks in integrity walks securely.”¹ You obviously want security in your marriage, and honesty is always the safest and most direct route to find it. Hidden secrets are not the foundation you want to build your marriage on—and this is true if it’s your first or fifteenth marriage. Come clean, and allow the gifts of grace and forgiveness that will deepen your relationship to be displayed.

TAKE THE PATH OF PURITY AND FIDELITY

A friend of ours went through a nasty divorce. After a couple of years, she said she was ready to test the waters of dating. She decided to try out the singles’ group at a large church. The

first night there she was asked on a date, and for the next six weeks several different men from the group asked her out. On the dates she was surprised to find that they expected to be physically intimate. She wasn't new to men making aggressive moves, but she had already chosen to live by a higher standard, and easily refused their advances. We think she made the right choice, and unfortunately those men were only creating complications for their future marriage partners.

In our discussion on sexuality (chapter 7), we showed how sex can create an instant intimacy and cloud good decision making. Sex and the feelings connected to it can often cast a depth of confusion when trying to discern real love. Sexual abstinence is very challenging, but it is a far better option than making poor choices and compromising your values in search of relational security. You will win in your future marriage with a commitment to purity.

HANDLE EXES WITH HONOR AND INTEGRITY

A majority of couples who have remarried find that dealing with their ex-spouses is more difficult than they thought it would be. One remarried man told us, "I had no idea the baggage left by

her ex-husband would follow us even on our honeymoon. Conversations about his previous painful actions pop up in the strangest places in our relationship.” The ghost of marriages past can become very present in your new relationship if you’re not careful. Being aware of this reality can save you from some surprise pain. Someone once said, “The past has very little substance, but it stays close to your heels.”

It is completely natural to draw comparisons between your new relationship and your previous ones—for good or bad. Stepfamily expert Ron Deal said, “It is human nature to view new relationships in light of the previous ones.”² When dealing with your fiancé’s ex-spouse, you will need to work hard to show respect and consideration. Try to think of him or her like you would your in-laws. Your job is to honor your mother-or father-in-law, whether or not you like her or him, because when you do that you are honoring your spouse. Let your fiancé do the venting and complaining while you play the supportive role and listen. Try the best you can to not be the one to pile on and put an ex-spouse down.

Your ultimate job is to support your future spouse, not make a difficult situation even worse. You don’t want your new relationship defined through the grid of an ex.

HOW TO SUCCESSFULLY BLEND A FAMILY

To be successful with stepfamilies, your goal does not actually need to be a perfectly blended family. Many stepparenting experts have moved away from even using the term *blended family*.

A man and woman fall in love. Perhaps their previous marriages were difficult or maybe they experienced the death of a spouse. At any rate, the new love is wonderful and there is great excitement over the chance for a relational fresh start. All is going well until the kids enter the picture. This is not always the case, but many couples say that managing their own relationship as a couple is easy compared with the challenge of dealing with the children in their new relationship.

If issues with children aren't dealt with properly, a barrier to marriage oneness can build very quickly. With a stepfamily, allegiances are often drawn along biological lines. Jill stated emphatically, "My new husband just can't seem to understand that my loyalty to my kids is stronger than my loyalty to him." Another remarried friend told us, "We do great in our new marriage, except when his kids visit on the weekend. I've grown to hate those weekends. They're filled with tension and

turmoil, and we always end up in a fight.” When you mix a remarriage with kids, stepparenting, ex-wives, in-laws from previous marriages, holidays, different parenting philosophies, and diverse lifestyles, life can become pretty hectic and confusing.

FIVE MYTHS AND UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

Ron Deal shares five myths and unrealistic expectations in *The Smart Stepfamily*.⁴ Consider the following myths:

1. *Love will happen instantly and between all family members.* This is a fantasy. Yes, the newly married or engaged couple has bonded, but don't expect the rest of the family to be as thrilled or to quickly embrace the new relationship. Give it time.
2. *We'll do better this time around.* Many couples make the mistake of comparing their new relationship to their previous one. It's unavoidable and natural to compare on some levels, but you need to instill confidence for the future. Ask: "What can I learn from my past mistakes?" Learn from the past, but don't *dwell* on it. Love in the present.
3. *Everything will fall quickly into place.* That's probably not going to happen. Just as you have to process your divorce, your kids will need time to process this new relationship.

Kids are pretty resilient, but few adapt quickly to new environments and new marriages. Be patient and let it move slowly—too much pressure could fracture your kids' trust.

4. *Our children will feel as happy about the remarriage as we do.* Stepfamilies are born out of loss. Different individuals grieve loss at different speeds and in different ways. Not all families have a difficult journey, but most experience unexpected challenges. Your children aren't the ones who usually fall in love with your new spouse. You might want to settle for them *liking* him/her first and allow love to develop over time.

5. *Blending is the goal of this stepfamily.* Let's put it this way: most stepfamilies don't blend very well. It's normal for the biological siblings to be closer with their blood relatives. Over a long period of time, it is possible for them to develop deeper emotional connections and bond with their stepsiblings, but don't count on it at the beginning of your relationship. If it happens quickly, great! But

know that you are in the minority in that situation.

COMBINING HOLIDAYS AND FAMILY TRADITIONS

One of the toughest issues of remarriage with children is how to manage holidays and family traditions. This is where you will simply have to give up elements of “how it used to be.” The stepfamilies that are flexible, sacrificial, creative, and take extra time to plan are the ones that see the most reward for their efforts.

Steve and Rhonda didn't see it coming. Their first year of marriage was going pretty well until the Christmas schedule was discussed. They had to make a big choice: fight for custody over the holiday, or celebrate Christmas two days later with their entire family. They grieved their loss, but they took the smart approach and had a quiet Christmas Day celebration with each other, and then enjoyed opening presents and eating dinner with the children on December 27. It didn't seem fair—and it wasn't—but instead of turning it into an explosive issue, they decided to change the tradition and create a new one. They learned quickly that they need to start talking about holiday plans and special traditions long in advance and hold their ideas loosely.

We think they're wise. It's good advice to do what you can

do, and learn to accept what you cannot change. If you try to fight every battle, your children may feel like ping-pong balls being bounced back and forth.

Stepparenting offers everyone involved a second chance. As with your marriage, you can learn from the past and work toward a much more effective stepfamily structure in the future. Making the new family work will require your faith, forgiveness, patience, and the support of one another. Only together will you be able to tackle the beautiful but challenging opportunities to bring love and grace to your new family. Today's families take on all kinds of shapes and structures, but with God's grace it is still a family ... and it's your family. Thank God for new beginnings!

NOTES

[1](#) Proverbs 10:9.

[2](#) Ron L. Deal, *The Smart Stepfamily: Seven Steps to a Healthy Family* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House, 2014), 113.

Chapter Ten

•

PLANNING YOUR WEDDING AND CEREMONY

You might be thinking, *What do two old guys know about planning a wedding?* Fair question. We made some mistakes along the way in helping plan our own weddings back in the Stone Age. Since then we've watched and participated in hundreds of weddings and are definitely much better equipped than we were thirty and forty years ago.

I'm (Doug) still embarrassed that I told Cathy, "I really don't care what color the napkins at the reception are going to be." I shouldn't have said that. What I meant to say was, "I'm good with whatever you decide; you have great taste. Which ones do you like best?" When I said, "I really don't care," which was the truth, she heard something I wasn't saying: "I don't care about you or about our wedding!" Talk about miscommunication. Looking back, I wish I had understood then what I know now about engaging in attentive listening and thoughtful conversation.

It doesn't take a great amount of research to know that weddings are a *really* big deal. Taking the time to plan both the ceremony and the reception is a very important part of engagement. You must work hard on communicating

expectations (your own and those of your respective families), looking at the financial details, and making space to relax and enjoy the process as a couple. Your wedding day really is one of the most memorable days of your life. It's much bigger than the food you serve at the reception, the color of the napkins, or the dress you wear. This day represents the official starting point as husband and wife and the beginning of your life as one!

Today there are a multitude of wonderful websites, magazines, and books that can give you more details for your wedding than we could ever provide in a few short pages. However, we do have a lot of experience with weddings—specifically the ceremony portion of the day, and we want to share with you what we've learned. Imagine that we are sitting with you at a local Starbucks sharing brotherly, pastoral advice. This is what we'd tell you ...

GET ON THE SAME PAGE

The fight happened in my (Jim) office. Kristen had been dreaming of her wedding since she was a little girl. She had collected bridal magazines for years and knew exactly what she wanted: a big wedding with lots of people and all the latest wedding trends. Kurt, on the other hand, was hoping for a simple wedding with just a handful of close friends and family. He envisioned the wedding to be much more casual ... and inexpensive.

By the time the fight occurred, they were only a few months away from the wedding. Money had been a challenge, yet the venue, catering, dress, photographer, and several of the other big-ticket items were either already paid for or reserved with a deposit. I innocently asked how the wedding plans were going. Kurt answered curtly (pun intended): “Kristen’s wedding seems to be going just fine.” Listening to his tone and observing his tightened lips, it didn’t take a seasoned counselor to see he was holding back anger. We’ll save you from the blow-by-blow verbal punches, but needless to say, this beautiful couple had never gotten on the same page prior to their wedding preparation, and it was now creating major tension that threatened to tear them apart.

Obviously we don’t want this to happen to you, so be sure

to talk early in the planning process about the kind of wedding you *both* want. Be clear and honest about your hopes, dreams, and expectations—especially in terms of finances and the roles each of you will play in the planning process. Try to be aligned on as many of the larger wedding details as you can be, and then negotiate the smaller factors as the wedding plans progress.

AGREE ON A BUDGET

We discussed finances in chapter 6, but we want to expand that conversation here to include wedding plans: develop a wedding budget and commit to stick to it. This may be one of your first *significant* opportunities as a couple to work on communication, expectations, and roles as they pertain to finances. Too many couples start with a budget and then throw it out the window when they become emotionally involved in the details of planning. Your wedding experience should be special and memorable—and not lead to financial trouble. Within the first couple weeks of your engagement, we suggest you begin putting together a budget. You would be very wise to add at least an extra 10 percent to cover hidden costs, surprises, or last-minute additions.

For most families money is difficult to talk about. With a wedding there may be some assumed financial expectations from parents or the bride and groom. Even various cultures have different ways of looking at who pays for what. For example, we have a friend whose son is marrying a terrific woman from China, and in China the groom's side of the family finances the wedding. In the United States this responsibility traditionally falls on the bride's family (which has proven to be unfortunate for us since five of the six children between us are

girls).

Because of varying traditions and financial situations, it's wise to gather the details of who plans to pay for what, and how much they intend to pay, before you develop your budget. Get everything out in the open. The more clarity you have up front, the fewer chances there will be for hurt feelings. There is too much pain surrounding poor communication—especially poor financial communication.

One last word about finances: be sensitive and grateful. Some couples are easily offended by a restricted budget. Please be careful here. Don't assume you know your parents' financial situation and what they will be able to afford. Everyone's finances look better from a distance. Parents have to juggle many factors when deciding what they can afford to spend on their child's wedding. When you are given money, view every dollar as a gift of love. Develop and maintain a thankful attitude throughout the entire process and shower your parents with gratitude. It hurts a parent's heart to give and give and not be thanked. Be thankful and content with what you're given and simply adjust your budget as needed. Your wedding day can be magical on any budget.

WORK ON THE WEDDING CEREMONY

TOGETHER

We love performing weddings! It's one of the most amazing experiences in life when all who are present witness the miracle of two individuals becoming one. There are nerves, laughter, tears, and just about every emotion in between. At weddings, people's hearts are sensitive to romance, warm to God, and delighted by the beauty of marriage. A thoughtful wedding ceremony can become an incredibly powerful, personal, and beautiful expression of all you hope your marriage will be.

With the rush and preoccupation of planning all the wedding and reception details, we find that many couples give little thought to the actual ceremony. This is where we can help with specific ideas we've garnered from our experiences. If your pastor is not doing your premarital counseling, we encourage you to make an appointment to talk through the ceremony early in the wedding-planning process. Most pastors are flexible with some components of a wedding, but others will have a default format they are familiar with or tied to because of religious tradition. You don't want to be surprised a week before the big day.

We've outlined several significant components within a wedding for you to consider, along with some of the details

involved in each one.

REHEARSAL

We suggest you leave very few decisions to be made at your rehearsal. The rehearsal should be a fun, easygoing opportunity for everyone involved in the wedding to gather, experience a precelebration, rehearse their assigned tasks, and feel a sense of confidence that the ceremony will go smoothly. If you don't have the wedding ceremony totally planned out, you will leave room for well-meaning relatives and friends to give advice that you probably don't want about details such as where people stand, parents' roles, and music. The day before the wedding is a time for fun—not additional planning. The better prepared you are going into the rehearsal, the better chance you have of keeping stress away and enjoying the rehearsal dinner celebration with family and friends.

SEATING OF THE FAMILY

Where do you want special family members to sit? If you have a potentially awkward family situation, be as considerate and strategic as possible without going overboard. You won't be the first couple with a challenging family dynamic, nor will you be the last. Pleasing everyone is impossible, and that's okay, but do the very best you can and communicate everything far in advance so there are no emotional fireworks at the rehearsal or on your wedding day.

PROCESSIONAL

In what order will the wedding party walk down the aisle? Will the groomsmen walk separately from the bridesmaids or accompany them? No decision is a bad decision. Think through all of the options, and then choose the one that works the best for you.

BRIDE'S ENTRANCE

In a conventional wedding, the bride is escorted by her father, although other combinations work just as well. There is powerful symbolism in this tradition because it displays a literal handing off from the bride's family to the groom. You'll often hear the minister say, "Who gives this woman to be married to this man?" Answers can be: "Her mother and I" or "Her family." There is no one right way. After she is presented to the groom, the bride joins him, and the ceremony continues.

WELCOME AND PRAYER

At this point, with the bride and groom facing the officiate, the pastor will typically greet those who have assembled and offer an opening prayer, thanking God for the couple and asking His blessing for the marriage and ceremony (depending on your spiritual tradition, there could be additional liturgy). Here's one example:

On behalf of the Fisher and Veale families, it's my pleasure to welcome you to this unique celebration. A lot of people can say they've been to a wedding, but not many can say they've been to a wedding that's truly a celebration. Today is a celebration where two people will leave here as one. These two people have done things right. They have loved with wonder and innocence, depth and compassion. They have taken intentional plans to make sure they're ready for today and the incredible commitment that follows. Thank you for being here. Let's begin this celebration by thanking the One who gives us reason to celebrate. Join me in prayer.

VOWS

Wedding vows have the potential to be some of the most special and beautiful words spoken to your fiancé. On your wedding day, you are committing your lives to each other in front of God and the people you love most in the world. As you think through what your vows should be, we encourage you to make yourself aware of the different types of vows available. You might choose one type or include elements of all three:

Original/Personal Vows. Many couples like to write their own vows as their expression of love and commitment. Writing your vows has the potential of being powerful and uniquely meaningful. There are no rules, but we suggest you agree on a similar word count so the bride doesn't have ten minutes of vows and the groom reads his from a cocktail napkin. Here's a sample:

Lindsey, I love you and I know this love is from God. Because of this, I want to be your husband so that we might serve Christ together. Through all of the uncertainties and trials of the

present and future, I promise to be faithful to you and love you. I promise to guide and protect you as Christ does His church, as long as we both shall live.

Kevin, I love you. I prayed that God would lead me to His choice. I praise Him that tonight His will is being fulfilled as I marry you. Through the pressures of the present and uncertainties of the future, I promise my faithfulness, to follow you through all of life's experiences as you follow Jesus, that together we may grow in His likeness and our home may become a praise to Him.

Vows of Intent. The vow of intent is often at the beginning of the ceremony. Some people call them the “I do” or “I will” vows.

_____, will you have _____
to be your husband/wife, and will you pledge your life to him/her, in all love and honor, in all duty and service, in all faith and tenderness, to love him/her and cherish him/her, according to

the ordinance of God, in the holy bond of marriage? (I will.)

Vows of Commitment. These often represent the most sacred vows of commitment, faithfulness, and fidelity. Some refer to them as the repeat vows (the couple repeats what the officiate says). Here are three examples:

I, _____, take you, _____, to be my husband/wife. I promise and covenant before God and these witnesses to be your loving and faithful wife/husband—in plenty and in want, in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow, in good times and hard times, with God’s grace and strength, as long as we both shall live.

I, _____, take you, _____, to be my husband/wife, I promise before God and these witnesses to cherish you, and to be your loving and faithful wife/husband, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live. This is my

solemn vow.

*I, _____, take you, _____,
to be my husband/wife, to honor and to cherish
forever; in plenty and in want, in sickness and in
health, in joy and in sorrow. With God as the
center of our marriage, I look forward to sharing
our lives, our dreams, and our love. Thank you
for being my friend and my equal. I love you.*

SCRIPTURE READING

Many couples choose to have a special friend or family member read a Bible passage that has been significant in their relationship. It can be helpful if you let the minister know ahead of time what passage is being read in case he or she wants to include that as part of the message. There are many possibilities for Scriptures to include in your wedding, but here are some of the most popular:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. (1 Cor. 13:4–8)

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as

the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Col. 3:12–17)

But Ruth replied, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.” (Ruth 1:16–17)

Two are better than one, because they have a

good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken. (Eccles. 4:9–12)

But at the beginning of creation God ‘made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate. (Mark 10:6–9)

And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love. But

perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us. (1 John 4:16–19)

Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot sweep it away. If one were to give all the wealth of one's house for love, it would be utterly scorned. (Song of Sol. 8:6–7)

CHARGE

If you have a relationship with the person performing your wedding ceremony, it creates an opportunity for the minister to speak personally to you, which makes the wedding unique and memorable. Personal is always more powerful. We also like it (and so do the wedding guests) when the charge is brief. Most pastors do a good job with this part of the ceremony, but if you have anything specific you want communicated, let your officiate know ahead of time. We regularly have couples ask us to use a specific scripture or theme or tell a piece of their story. Normally we are glad to accommodate them to make it as special as possible.

EXCHANGE OF RINGS

Your wedding ring is a symbol of God's unconditional love for you. The ring represents the eternal perspective of God's love, and as you place the ring on your new spouse's finger, you are making that same commitment. You are also acknowledging that you will need God's power to help you keep that commitment (along with the purity code from chapter 7). Most officiates use their own wording, but here is one phrase you might consider repeating as you exchange rings:

This ring I give you is a symbol of my pledge of constant faith and abiding love.

One of our minister friends adds a special touch prior to the placement of rings. He says:

Before you put the ring on one another, I want you to pause for just a moment, and hold each other's hands. Stephanie, take a look at Zack's hands. They are strong hands, good hands. Zack, focus on Stephanie's hands. They are also strong, beautiful, and shapely. As you hold each other's hands, know this: These are the hands

that are going to hold you when life gets tough. These are the hands that you clasp as you walk through the good things of life together. These are the hands that will hold your children's children. These hands get to grow old together. And may they be a reminder to you that you are in God's hands, that He holds you close to Himself, that He holds and cares for your marriage, and that He holds and loves you dearly. As you put these rings on each other, repeat after me: "This ring I give you as a symbol of my constant faith and abiding love."

A word of caution about the rings: Don't have the ring bearer hold the actual ring. We've seen rings fall off of pillows and very young ring bearers decide at the last minute not to walk down the aisle. Another time the flower girl dropped the groom's ring as she tried to hand it to the bride. And once we were on a boat for a wedding when the ring was narrowly rescued by the pastor, who made a diving save at the edge of the boat! Think this through and know that the best man and the maid of honor can handle that important responsibility.

A SYMBOL OF UNITY

Many couples choose to use a unity candle as a beautiful visual of two people becoming one. Another great idea is for the bride and groom to pour two different colors of sand into a vase to communicate the same principle. The unity expression in the ceremony can be a good time for a song if you choose to use music.

COMMUNION

For some couples taking Communion as the first act of marriage is very meaningful. Some religious traditions make Communion a part of every wedding while others keep it optional. It is a beautiful act of obedience to God and remembrance of the sacrifice Christ made. Not all churches have the same standards for Communion, so if you want to celebrate the Lord's Supper, be sure to check ahead of time with the minister so you're not caught by surprise.

A SONG OF JOY

Most wedding ceremonies have music in some form, and it's usually a great addition to the ceremony. We have one caution: don't get carried away with so many songs that your ceremony becomes a concert. Our rule of thumb is that good music wins; bad music loses. If you ask tone-deaf Aunt Agnes to sing because she means so much to you, you will create a mockery and a memory that wasn't intended. Thoughtful music can definitely enhance the joyful wedding celebration. Opportunities for music can be right before the ceremony begins, during the processional and recessional, and the unity moment.

THE PRONOUNCEMENT

Few people give a lot of thought to the pronouncement, but it's actually the declaration of the miracle of oneness. Consider what you'd like said during this portion of the ceremony. One example is:

By the authority committed to me as a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, I declare _____ and _____ are now husband and wife; in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

KISS

The kiss is a symbol of your love for each other. It represents romance, affection, and a commitment to be in a physical relationship with no one but your spouse. Enjoy that moment, but don't enjoy it so much that you make your guests feel uncomfortable. You'll have many moments on your honeymoon. Also, consider popping in a breath mint prior to the start of the wedding, as nerves can make an odd combination with your breath.

THE INTRODUCTION OF ONENESS

You came into the ceremony as two, but you will be leaving as one. The theme of unity and oneness is woven throughout the ceremony. The pastor typically says something like, “May I introduce to you Mr. and Mrs. _____.” The only decision involved here is how you want to be introduced. You may not even care, but we always give couples the options. Here are four to consider: Mr. and Mrs. Jones, Mr. and Mrs. Pete Jones, Mr. and Mrs. Pete and Sandy Jones, or Pete and Sandy Jones.

RECESSIONAL

The recessional triggers the completion of the actual ceremony and the celebration of your new, lifelong commitment to faithfulness and fidelity. We suggest you plan out all these elements early so that you have time to make it more personal. Long after you forget what food was served or what songs were played at your reception, you will remember the beauty and majesty of your wedding ceremony.

CREATE A GREAT PLANNING CHECKLIST

Obviously your wedding is much more than a checklist, but the most efficient weddings we've been part of all had lists. It is exciting for a couple to watch this lifelong memory happen before their very eyes as they methodically work through to-dos. What we've listed below is not meant to be the ultimate wedding-planning checklist, but it will be a good place to start. We highly recommend that you compare our introductory list to a more comprehensive one that is tied to a suggested timeline.

SIMPLE WEDDING CHECKLIST

- ☐ Celebrate your engagement with a party, photos, and public announcement.
- ☐ Create a wedding folder.
- ☐ Develop a wedding budget (there are many wedding budget-planning tools available online).
- ☐ Decide on your wedding party and thoughtfully ask them to be part of your day.
- ☐ Choose who will do your premarital counseling. (Will you find a marriage mentor couple? Will you attend a class? Will you meet with your pastor or officiate? We offer additional premarital preparation with the *Getting Ready for Marriage Workbook*, video, and online tool.)
- ☐ Begin working on the guest list.
- ☐ Set a date for the wedding.
- ☐ Find the venue and reserve it.
- ☐ Send or email save-the-date cards.
- ☐ Decide on a wedding planner. Will you do it yourself, ask a friend, use a wedding coordinator from your church, or hire an outside wedding

coordinator?

- ☐ Choose a photographer.
- ☐ Choose a florist.
- ☐ Decide on the food and caterer for the reception.
- ☐ Choose reception music. This may include hiring a DJ or live band, or creating a playlist.
- ☐ Purchase a wedding dress.
- ☐ Decide what your bridesmaids and groomsmen will wear.
- ☐ Register for wedding gifts.
- ☐ Reserve hotel rooms for out-of-town guests.
- ☐ Mail invitations.
- ☐ Plan the honeymoon—location, transportation, and accommodations.
- ☐ Plan the reception.
- ☐ Purchase the wedding rings.
- ☐ Plan the ceremony with the help of your officiate.
- ☐ Assign seating at the reception if necessary.
- ☐ Create a “wedding weekend” timeline for the wedding party.
- ☐ Plan the rehearsal dinner.
- ☐ Enjoy the honeymoon!

We are cheering you on toward a strong, healthy, happy, and

long marriage. Our prayer is that you've gleaned insight from these chapters and are now better prepared for your incredible marriage journey. Our goal is to be there to help you at different phases of your life. Visit us at Homeword.com for helpful resources targeting different stages in your marriage and parenting, and after you return from your honeymoon, consider reading one of our other books as you begin your new life together: *Closer* by Jim Burns, *7 Ways to Be Her Hero* by Doug Fields, or our upcoming new book *Your First Few Years of Marriage*.

In Conclusion

•

THE GIFT

You are about to embark on the journey of a lifetime. Other than your relationship with God, there is nothing more important than your marriage. Marriage is a gift. By this time you know our slant. We believe your marriage is not a marriage of two hearts and two souls, but rather, it's a marriage of three. When you do marriage God's way, you are building a friendship and marriage bigger than each of you. Your marriage is literally a gift from God, and it's a matter of choice. You can do marriage on your own or with God's help. Since He is the creator and sustainer of marriage, and since marriage is as complicated as it is, we sincerely hope you choose to do it with God.

God gave you a gift of sacrificial and unconditional love. His grace (unmerited favor) and His forgiveness are staggering. His kindness to you is stunning. As you accept His gift offered to you through the Savior Jesus Christ, you can then offer those same gifts to your spouse in marriage. Nobody said it would be easy. Nobody said you wouldn't have your moments of doubt and hardship. We all do. But holding on to the gift makes the difference. As you grow in your relationship, you will also give those gifts of sacrificial and unconditional grace and forgiveness, and never forget that kindness matters.

As you have seen in this book, marriage is made up of

many ingredients, but in conclusion, the two that come to our minds are romantic emotion and willful commitment. You really need both to make your marriage thrive. A very wise mentor told us once, “Without a willful commitment marriage is mockery, and without romantic emotion it is drudgery.” The best relationships have both. A willful commitment to make your marriage work will bring more romance, and your marriage will be deeper, fresher, and stronger than you can even now imagine. Sometimes love is hard work, but it’s always worth it. Receive God’s gift of love—and then offer it to your spouse.

Appendix A

MONTHLY BUDGET WORKSHEET

Income:	
Wages (combined)	\$
	\$

Extra income	
	\$

Total monthly income	
	\$

Total annual income	
Expenses:	

Home

\$

Mortgage or rent	\$

Homeowners or renters insurance	

\$

Property taxes	
	\$

Home repairs and maintenance	
Dues or assoc. fees	\$
	\$

Home improvement	
Misc.	\$

<i>Utilities</i>	
Telephone—cell and/or landline	\$
	\$

Natural gas or oil	

\$

Water and sewer	\$
-----------------	----

Trash collection	
	\$

Electric	
Internet/cable	\$
	\$

Netflix or other subscriptions	

<i>Food</i>	
	\$

Groceries	
Eating out, snacks, coffee	\$

<i>Auto</i>	
Auto payments (combined)	\$
Auto insurance (combined)	\$
Gas/oil	\$
Auto repairs/maintenance	\$
Other transportation (tolls/taxis/bus/subway)	\$
	\$

License and registration	

\$

Other	

<i>Entertainment</i>	
	\$

Vacations	
	\$

Movies	
	\$

Hobbies

--

Sporting events	\$
-----------------	----

Theater	\$

Concerts	
CDs/DVDs/downloads	\$
	\$

Apps	

<i>Investments</i>	
	\$

Savings	
401(k)	\$
Stocks/bonds/mutual funds/college fund	\$
<i>Giving/Donations</i>	
	\$

Tithe	
	\$

Charities	
Clothing (combined)	\$

Pets

\$

Food and grooming	
	\$

Vet	
	\$

Other	

<i>Grooming</i>	
Hair/makeup	\$
	\$

Toiletries	
Manicures/pedicures	\$
	\$

Computer expense	
	\$

Subscriptions and dues	

<i>Debt</i>	
	\$

Credit cards	\$

Student loans	
	\$

Other debt	

\$

<i>Family Obligations</i>	
Day care/babysitting	\$
Child support/alimony	\$

Insurance	
	\$

Unreimbursed medical insurance	
	\$

Counseling	
	\$

Medication	
	\$

Dentist	
	\$

Health club	
Other _____	\$

<i>Gifts</i>	\$

Christmas	
	\$

Birthdays	
	\$

Anniversaries

\$

Other	
Dry cleaning/laundry	\$
Taxes (not included elsewhere)	\$
Total Income:	
Total Annual Income:	
Total Expenses:	
Total Annual Expenses:	

Appendix B

50 QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE YOU GET MARRIED (OR ENGAGED) 1. CAN YOU ENVISION BEING MARRIED TO HIM/HER FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE?

2. How well do you handle conflict as a couple? When you have conflict, do you fight fairly?
3. Do either of you carry addictions or major baggage from your past that you have not completely addressed?
4. Marriage authorities say when you get married you also marry the extended family. How do you feel about your fiancé's family? In what ways might they be a healthy support for your marriage? How might they add extra stress?
5. Do you have similar thoughts about having children? If not, what's your plan to reconcile those differences?
6. Do you share the same spiritual values? If not, is that okay

with you, or are you expecting him/her to change and move toward your values when you get married?

7. Could your physical/sexual relationship be clouding your decision-making process? (Sex can fool couples into instant intimacy.) 8. What don't you really like about your partner? Are you okay living the rest of your life with those things that bug you?

9. Have either of you experienced any abuse that has not been addressed?

10. Would either of you come into the marriage with a great deal of debt?

11. How do you and your fiancé handle money? Are you spenders? Savers?

12. In your relationship, has there ever been unfaithfulness?

13. Have you talked openly about your sexual history? Family history? Financial history?

14. Are both of you willing to seek premarital counseling?

(There is a 35 percent better chance of staying married if you seek premarital counseling.) 15. Are you cohabitating? While it may not be financially practical, what are your thoughts about living separately until your wedding? (If you are cohabitating, there is a much greater chance of marital dissatisfaction and divorce. [See Chapter Seven](#).) 16. What do your family and close friends think of your partner? (It's very important to listen to others' input.) 17. Is this relationship in any way a rebound from a previous relationship?

18. What is your greatest fear or concern about getting married? What have you done to address this?

19. How will your fiancé get along with your family and extended family? Friends?

20. Is it easy or difficult for you to pray with your fiancé? Why?

21. What are the primary issues you continue to disagree and argue over? How are they being worked out? When you have conflict, do you fight fair?

22. Do you get the attention and healthy affection you desire

from your partner?

23. What are your beliefs about pornography? Have either of you been actively involved in viewing pornography? What is the current status of your pornography use?

24. What is your belief about drinking or drug use? Have either of you been involved with alcoholism, problem drinking, or drug addiction? Do you have a family predisposition toward alcoholism or drug addiction?

25. What is there about his/her life and personality that concerns you at this time?

26. What are your financial goals? Spiritual goals? Relational goals? Future children goals?

27. How do you know you are in love with your partner?

28. During conflict a person either yields, withdraws, compromises, wins, or resolves. Which of these tends to be your style? Which of these tends to be your partner's style? In what specific ways do your styles differ?

29. What is it about your partner that makes you proud of him or her? What is it that worries you most?

30. In light of the number of divorces today, if you were to marry, why would your marriage last and not end in divorce?

31. Do you feel you need to compromise or sacrifice anything that is extremely important to you to be a part of this relationship?

32. Do you as a couple have the same mentors? If not, do you respect the advice of the same kind of people? Social, financial, spiritual, political, etc.?

33. What are five to ten actions that make for a strong marriage? Which do you envision being the easiest? Most difficult?

34. Can you be totally honest (real) with your partner? In what areas do you feel you have trouble being real?

35. Experts tell us that romantic love lasts about two years, then couples either move out of love or toward a more mature, committed love. Do you believe your love for your partner and

his/her love for you have moved toward committed love? (When there is already a sexual relationship, authorities tell us that the difference between infatuation and true love can be misunderstood for up to three years.) 36. Do either of you struggle with apologizing or owning your mistakes? How might you grow in this area?

37. What steps will you take to give one another healthy personal space or alone time?

38. Do you have a general uneasiness that something is wrong with the relationship?

39. Do you find yourself arguing a lot with your fiancé?

40. Do you refrain from giving your opinion or true thoughts because of fear of your fiancé's reaction?

41. Are you and your fiancé unable to resolve conflicts? Can you both deal with constructive criticism?

42. Does your fiancé show a pattern of dishonesty?

43. Do you or your fiancé have the propensity to consume vast

quantities of something (TV, food, alcohol, money, attention, exercise)?

44. Do you or your fiancé have a problem handling anger?

45. Are you or your fiancé secretive, or do you suspect your fiancé hides things from you?

46. Do you have trouble trusting your fiancé?

47. Do you have thoughts of what it would be like to marry someone else?

48. How do you plan to share normal household responsibilities such as finances, yard work, meal planning, house cleaning, etc.?

49. Are you or your fiancé always involved in some sort of relational drama?

50. Does your fiancé constantly complain?

GETTING READY FOR MARRIAGE

Published by David C Cook

4050 Lee Vance View

Colorado Springs, CO 80918 U.S.A.

David C Cook Distribution Canada 55 Woodslee Avenue, Paris, Ontario, Canada
N3L 3E5

David C Cook U.K., Kingsway Communications Eastbourne, East Sussex BN23
6NT, England The graphic circle C logo is a registered trademark of David C
Cook.

All rights reserved. No part of this ebook may be reproduced, scanned, resold, or distributed by or through any print or electronic medium without written permission from the publisher. This ebook is licensed solely for the personal and noncommercial use of the original authorized purchaser, subject to the terms of use under which it was purchased. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights.

The website addresses recommended throughout this book are offered as a resource to you. These websites are not intended in any way to be or imply an endorsement on the part of David C Cook, nor do we vouch for their content.

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™

Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide.

www.zondervan.com; Scripture quotations marked NKJV are taken from the New

King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved; Scripture quotations marked ESV are taken from

The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission.

All rights reserved; Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2007 by Tyndale House

Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved; Scripture quotations marked RSV are taken

from The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version. Copyright 1946, 1973 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

LCCN 2014943141

ISBN 978-1-4347-0811-3

eISBN 978-1-4347-0856-4

© 2014 Jim Burns, Doug Fields

The Author is represented by and this book is published in association with the literary agency of WordServe Literary Group, Ltd., www.wordserveliterary.com.

The Team: Don Pape, Gwen Ellis, Nick Lee, Carly Razo, Karen Athen Cover

Design: Nick Lee

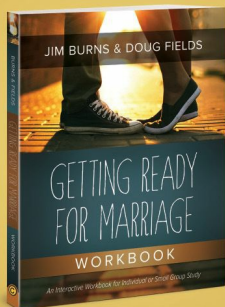
Cover Photo Credit: Shutterstock First Edition 2014

JIM BURNS is the president of HomeWord and the executive director of the HomeWord Center for Youth and Family at Azusa Pacific University. Jim speaks to thousands of people around the world each year. He has more than 1.5 million resources in print and a radio broadcast heard on over 800 stations daily. He, his wife, and three daughters live in Southern California.

DOUG FIELDS is the senior director of the HomeWord Center for Youth and Family at Azusa Pacific University. Doug has been a youth and teaching pastor at Mariners Church and Saddleback Church, and has authored more than fifty books. He is a passionate speaker and blogger, reaching thousands of leaders, teenagers, and parents every year. Doug resides with his wife and three children in Southern California.

Visit DCCeBooks.com for more great reads.





WORKBOOK ESSENTIALS FOR MAKING A MARRIAGE THRIVE

Perfect as a stand-alone resource or as a companion to *Getting Ready for Marriage*, this premarital workbook from Jim Burns and Doug Fields uses key biblical and relational touchstones to help you confront big issues—including communication, finances, spirituality, and intimacy—prior to your wedding day.

David Cook®
transforming lives together

Rave reviews from leading marriage experts, pastors, and counselors for ...

GETTING READY FOR MARRIAGE

“Most of us spend more time preparing for our vocations than we do preparing for marriage. Maybe that is why we are more successful in our jobs than in our marriages. Yet life’s meaning is not found in money but in relationships, and marriage is designed to be the most intimate human relationship. If you want a successful marriage, then spend time preparing. *Getting Ready for Marriage* is an excellent and practical tool to aid you in the process. I highly recommend it.”

Gary Chapman, PhD, author of *The 5 Love Languages*

“Before you say ‘I do,’ read this book! Jim and Doug have directed scores of people in the direction of healthy, happy, vibrant marriages. They can do the same for you.”

Max Lucado, pastor and *New York Times*
bestselling author

“*Getting Ready for Marriage* is filled with practical, biblical insights gleaned from Jim Burns’ and Doug Fields’ years of experience counseling couples. I wish every engaged couple could read through this book together before tying the knot!”

Jim Daly, president — Focus on the Family

“I absolutely love this book! Over years of research with singles and those dating and married, I’ve seen a need for a simple, compelling book like this, one that will walk a couple through the process of ... well ... getting ready for marriage! I’m thrilled Jim and Doug have put this together. Everyone contemplating marriage, and everyone helping couples who want to get married, will want this outstanding resource!”

Shaunti Feldhahn, social researcher and
bestselling author of *For Women Only* and *For Men Only*

“I’ve never known which book to recommend to engaged couples—until now. Jim and Doug have taken their combined seventy years of marital wisdom and boiled it down to the pressing questions and practical ideas every couple needs to read.”

Kara Powell, PhD, executive director of Fuller
Youth Institute

“Marriage is one of God’s greatest gifts. But to be fully experienced, it requires some peeks under the hood before

driving it off the lot. This makes the probability of lifetime love, intimacy, and friendship much more of a reality. Jim Burns and Doug Fields have written an essential book for the premarital relationship. Highly recommended.”

Dr. John Townsend, author of the bestselling
Boundaries series, psychologist, and leadership
consultant

“We all hear that marriage is hard work and that we need to be prepared. Now Jim Burns and Doug Field have written a book to do just that—prepare people for marriage. In their honest and witty style, they offer practical help that can guide couples as they prepare for the greatest adventure of all. I highly recommend this book and think it would make a great wedding gift!”

Holly Wagner, pastor of Oasis Church and
founder of GodChicks

“As a pastor, I’m so excited for fresh material to help couples prepare for marriage. This is a much-needed resource! I know this content is excellent because I’ve seen it help young couples in our very own church—both Doug and Jim are leaders at Mariners and are committed to helping our marriages

succeed. I'm so excited to have them share what they're doing here with others around the world."

Kenton Beshore, senior pastor of Mariners
Church

"With about one-third of Christian marriages ending in divorce, about one-third in misery, and another one-third ranging from doing okay to great, we obviously need this book. Both Jim and Doug have shown in their personal and professional lives that they know what they are talking about. I hope a lot of churches make this required reading before marriage in their church."

Steve Arterburn, president of New Life
Ministries and *New York Times* bestselling author

"Here's a great premarital book that every couple contemplating marriage needs. Couples will find everything from how to understand family systems and their in-laws to how they can learn to develop spiritual intimacy together. Jim and Doug have put together a valuable resource, and I intend to use it in my practice."

David Stoop, PhD, clinical psychologist and
author of *Just Us*

“There is a window of time when couples are really willing to focus on what it takes to have a great marriage: when they are engaged. In *Getting Ready for Marriage*, Jim and Doug help seize this opportunity by giving couples fresh, practical, guy-friendly, and memorable ways to love each other ... once the fantasy of marriage turns into reality. This book is also a great resource for churches to use in their overall approach to marriage ministry, or for anyone who is interested in helping couples get off to a great start.”

Ted Lowe, founder of MarriedPeople.org and
author of *Married People*

“Some books prepare you for marriage. This book pictures a very special future for your marriage. Jim Burns and Doug Fields paint a beautiful picture of marriage by giving you practical ways to honor, enjoy, and prioritize each other. Whatever questions you have about this lifetime commitment, this book will answer them with great hope.”

Ted Cunningham, senior pastor of Woodland
Hills Family Church and author of *Fun Loving
You*

“Choosing the person who will become your spouse and

choosing wisely is the most important thing you can do to prepare for a fulfilling lifelong marriage. *Getting Ready for Marriage* is gold! I wish Holly and I had this kind of guidance when we were preparing for our marriage. I will be recommending this book to every couple who comes to us wanting to get married, as well as those couples who are already married but still aren't ready yet. Buy one right now. And buy another for a friend."

Philip Wagner, lead pastor of Oasis Church in Los Angeles and author of *Love Works* and *The Marriage Makeover*

"Jim Burns and Doug Fields are two of the most trusted names I know to deliver a message like this, and such a needed message it is in today's world! Just as a firm foundation is vital to the structure and integrity of a house, this book is a perfect foundation for your marriage relationship!"

Shannon Ethridge, life/relationship coach and bestselling author of the Every Woman's Battle series, *The Sexually Confident Wife*, and *The Passion Principles*

"As I read through this outstanding book, I kept thinking, *I*

wish Kay and I had this resource before we were married. Far too many of the 2.4 million couples who get married each year are not adequately prepared to make it work. I am so happy that there's a book like this where every page is filled with practical God-honoring advice."

Rick Warren, pastor and author of *The Purpose
Driven Life*