

Men: Your Marriage Matters...to God!

I'm sure that God must be pleased with what Peter has set out to accomplish; passing on to other men the lessons God has shown him and how he has applied God's ways. If the reader will diligently and unwaveringly pursue a quest for Christ-likeness, you too will experience the blessings and benefits of that pursuit!

Ken Nair, President and Founder of Christ Quest Ministries

I have had the privilege of sitting with Peter Bourke and other men discussing and pursuing this truth of, "Christlikeness" in marriage. This material is for real. Peter is a man who understands what it means to, "love his wife as Christ loves the church." He has radically changed the focus in his marriage and this book will help you build the strong, intimate marriage you have always desired. Read it. Do it. And you will experience the marriage you have always desired.

John Woodall, Retired Men's Groups Director, North Point Community Church

Additional Resources

Please visit our website:

www.menyourmarriagematters.com

for additional resources including:

- Free, PDF version of the book, *Men: Your Marriage Matters...to God*
- Leader's Guide PDF with helpful tips in facilitating men's small group studies using these materials
- 6-week men's small group Study Guide PDF
- Videos designed both for leaders and to help kickoff weekly group meetings
- Links to additional videos and resources that may be helpful for readers and participants

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Dedication

To Devonie – You know my strengths, my many flaws, and my heart. Thank you for being the love of my life and thank God that He has graciously allowed me to walk this marriage journey with you.

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Introduction

At the risk of being labeled an alarmist, traditional marriage in this country is in obvious decline and heading in the direction of being unimportant at the least and being close to extinction at the worst. Who would have thought that married couples in this country would drop from being 72% of the adult population 50 years ago to less than 50% of adults today? Extrapolate that trend for another 50 years and you'll better understand my alarm.

The implications of this marriage rate decline on our country and our culture are profound and lasting, not the least of which is the impact it has on the health and welfare of our children. Marriage is central to the delicate balance and the proverbial 'circle of life' in a healthy society. Marriage matters...a lot!

Marriage matters to God too. He designed this institution starting with the first humans when He proclaimed, *a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh* (Gen 2:24). His grand design was not just for utilitarian purposes like procreation and sharing the workload. Marriage was designed much more strategically than that – as a relationship intended to most effectively draw us to Him.

And yet, the average marriage in this country, for both Christians and non-Christians, is too often mediocre. You'd think that if our spouse is the most important earthly relationship in a married person's life, with whom we spend the largest amount of our time and energy, that it would naturally be the best, most fulfilling relationship in our entire lives.

Unfortunately, it is not usually. And it's not because we don't try hard enough but because marriage is nothing short of challenging. In no other relationship are we as exposed or more known by another human as we are in our marriage and that's not easy or comfortable for the average prideful, self-oriented man like you and I.

My paradigm and purpose

While the above sounds relatively demoralizing, there is hope! Before we go there I feel compelled to better explain why I've felt called to write this short book for married men and those aspiring to marriage.

I'm neither a trained marriage counselor nor a certified marriage professional. The good news, in a paradoxical way, is that I'm *not* a professional or certified marriage counselor. Instead, I'm a 44 year "practitioner" of marriage to my wife, Devonie, and ours is a marriage refined by time, mistakes, and the grace of God. I'm still a work-in-process husband, intent and enthusiastic to better understand God's design and purpose for marriage in His design and totally energized by the journey to an abundant marriage.

In this journey, God has birthed a passion in me for the marriage-related truths that I'll aim to share in this book. It's the second time in my life I've had this kind of zeal for a topic (the first time was related to helping people with career-related transitions - www.betterwaytomakealiving.com; www.c3g.org). I'm learning that when God creates a passion in me, He expects me to do something with it. Perhaps the parallel is a person who suffers from an illness and then discovers a miracle drug to eradicate the ailment. Would he hide the drug from people he knows and loves or would he shout about his discovery from the highest mountain and share it with everyone possible? I want to share this with you.

So, in my typical, type-A fashion, I followed this God-given passion to learn what I could to selfishly benefit my own marriage, knowing that others could benefit as well. I've read countless books and articles and listened to respected pastors and speakers on all things related to marriage – both secular and Christ-centered perspectives. The secular experts and resources were useful, but usually tactical and very 'tools and technique' oriented. Marriage strikes me as infinitely more challenging without a biblical foundation to the relationship.

I've also had the opportunity to share, test, and refine these principles with groups of 15-20 men at a time in a 6-week small group workshop format for well over a decade. We've wrestled with difficult issues, challenged each other's thinking, and provided support and accountability throughout. The most common feedback I've heard on the concepts we'll cover is: "Why, after X years of marriage, am I just now hearing these principles?" When men 'get it,' everything can change in your marriage... for the better.

Special acknowledgment goes to a self-described simple husband and now author, speaker, and discipler, Ken Nair, the author of *Discovering the Mind of a Woman*. Nair's book has been the centerpiece of these small group studies and has been the most life-changing and impactful book for me on the subject of marriage.

In the process of my research and study, I've focused less on the tips and techniques and more on the strategic dimensions of marriage, including God's original purpose for marriage in men's lives. I've attempted to capture the key truths that I pray will be as powerful, transformational, and encouraging to Christian men who have struggled with many of the same trials and tribulations of marriage that have stumped most of us. Let me share a few of the 'game changers' that may motivate you to read the balance of this book:

- Men who have a mediocre marriage shouldn't resign themselves to a life sentence of mediocrity. An attitude of, "at least my marriage is as good as other couples I know" is a compromise. You have an opportunity to experience a renewal in your marriage that you may never have thought possible – including a renewed intimacy (I knew that would get your attention).
- When a married man really understands God's purpose for marriage in our spiritual life – as the single most important vehicle God will use to make us more Christ-like – almost everything he's ever thought or learned about marriage will change.
- And the biggest game changer for me was the realization that men, singularly, without their wife's help, have the God-given ability to transform their marriages (and themselves). I used to believe that the only way a marriage could transform was if both spouses jointly confessed that they have a problem and together seek help. While that can certainly be effective, I no longer believe it's the only path to an abundant marriage, especially when you understand God's design for our role in a marriage done His way.

This book is intentionally brief and an easy read. Sometimes I think we overcomplicate marriage-related issues. It doesn't mean that transforming your marriage is an easy process though. It takes time, effort, and a commitment to not only strengthen your marriage but also to grow in your relationship with God at the same time. I pray that you and your wife will benefit from your investment of time and energy and that God will bless your marriage...for His glory and your joy!

The State of Marriage Today

If God cares so much about marriage, why is the institution of marriage in this country struggling so much today? Here are a few facts that highlight the struggle:

- 72% of adults in the U.S. were married 50 years ago; Less than 50% are married today. Consider what that percentage will be in 50 more years at this rate of decline. Imagine a time in this century when only 1 of 3 adults are married – that would represent nearly a 60% decline since 1970!
- Even twenty-somethings aren't marrying – 68% were married 50 years ago, today we're at 26%! A recent Time Magazine article, citing a Pew poll, found that 44% of Americans under 30 years old believe marriage is headed for extinction!
- The rate of cohabitation (living together without being married) has grown 15X in the last 50 years.
- The divorce rate today is still at an alarming rate of 45% - with the average for Christians and non-Christians being nearly equal.
- Studies conducted by the foremost researcher of marriage-related topics, Dr. John Gottman, show that marriages struggle less often from infidelity or crisis. More commonly, according to Gottman, marriages struggle because the couple develops a disdain for each other because they have lost their ability to be kind to one another in small, day-to-day interactions he calls 'bids.'
- There is even a growing epidemic of long-term marriages failing. Does it even seem possible that couples married for 25+ years would call it quits? Here's how an article in *AARP The Magazine* characterized the issue and the likely root cause:

Why do so many long-married couples decide to split? How can people be so happy for so long, only to then have the marriage turn sour in what are supposed to be their "golden years"

together? In most cases, the reasons are far less dramatic. Some relationships have been in decline for decades and finally lose all their juice. A marriage doesn't usually just blow up. It's more like a balloon that has been seeping air for a long time. After a while, it's totally deflated.

There are countless articles and plenty of research available to explain these precipitous trends. When you cut through the morass of data to determine the causes, there are a few particularly compelling factors that were identified in an article in *The University of Virginia Magazine* titled, "The Marriage Crisis:"

- The women's liberation movement in the late '60s saw more women earning college degrees, entering the workforce, and delaying motherhood. Thus, marriage became less necessary for their economic survival and effectively reduced the extra 'glue' of financial interdependence between men and women.
- The prevalence, availability, and affordability of birth control gave women "more confidence and control over the timing of fertility" (which in turn impacted marriage rates).
- Greater job instability and a more mobile workforce have changed the way we live (and marry). The more insecurity we feel in our careers, the more it impacts the stability of our marriages.
- The advent of no-fault divorce signed into law in California by then-governor Ronald Reagan, made divorce far more prevalent. (Reagan later confessed that this law was his biggest political/policy regret). And when divorce becomes prevalent, it makes young people less secure about the idea of committing to a lasting marriage. In fact, cohabitation has largely become the insurance policy against divorce for this group.

And yet, the news is not all bad for marriage. One well-known author, Shaunti Feldhahn, recently published the book, *The Good News About Marriage*, and found that 72% of people are still married to their first spouse. Why is this so different than the 45-50% overall divorce rate we most often hear in the news? According to Feldhahn, it's distorted by the number of people who are married and divorced multiple times in their

lives which raises the average divorce rate so significantly.

And marriages among higher socio-economic classes are still going relatively strong. There is clear evidence that people who are married tend to be economically more successful and happier than those who aren't. The UVA study referenced above concluded, "We're finding evidence that marriage is both a cause and effect of happiness."

The challenge is that 70% of the country doesn't fall into the higher socio-economic category. Today, 48% of children in this country are raised in households where there is not a mother and father living in the house. As marriage goes, so goes our culture.

The forces in our society are working against the health and longevity of marriages today and the decline is contrary to God's original and sovereign design and His will for marriage. My goal is to take one small step in sharing some perspectives designed to change the current trajectory for the benefit of those who seize the opportunity.

Why is Marriage So Hard?

There is one more reason that marriages are struggling today, perhaps the most significant one: because marriage is hard to get right!

It's entirely paradoxical. On one hand, my marriage is the most fulfilling and satisfying relationship in my life. On the other hand, it's also the most challenging relationship because it's so easy for me to mishandle it. Am I alone in this struggle?

If it were easy, why would so many marriages struggle? We love each other more than we love anyone else. We get to spend more time with our spouses than anyone else. We share an intimacy that is exclusive and incredible when it's healthy and done in God's way. There's every reason to believe that it should be the best, most natural relationship in our lives. But it isn't!

You likely have your own theories about what makes marriage challenging, allow me to offer a few:

- Whether it came from our fall in the Garden of Eden or to our inherent nature, we humans are innately self-oriented. Maybe that is too gentle – we're actually downright selfish at our core. The culture reinforces this nature by constantly reminding us that we deserve to be happy; that we should be able to 'have it our way;' and we're dominantly thinking, "What's in it for me?" When two married spouses carry these predispositions into a marriage, they're inviting a clash of self-interested humans.
- Is it because marriage is so 24/7? There is no other relationship that is designed to last for decades where we're so completely and endlessly 'exposed' (emotionally, spiritually, and yes – even physically) as marriage. Our spouse sees us in our best times, in our worst times, and even in times of stress or sickness, and this combination is bound to make us vulnerable.
- Maybe it's because we're so different from each other? Married couples often find they are polar opposites in personalities, interests, styles, and any other dimension you can fathom. We also have different family backgrounds (and the corresponding family 'baggage') which can further complicate our ability to connect effectively.

- It may be related to the lack of great role models we've had in our lives for what a great marriage really looks like. Divorce is certainly prevalent but even if your parents and grandparents stayed married their relationship may have been held together "for the good of the children" and had little semblance of a strong, loving marriage.
- Is it instead our naiveté and/or our unrealistic expectations that cause the biggest challenge? We often have a serious case of 'rose-colored glasses' when we meet our future spouse and we've likely convinced ourselves that the love and passion we have for her couldn't possibly diminish. Only to find out weeks later (or God-forbid, days later) that there are challenges in marriage we never would have anticipated until the rose-colored glasses were shattered.
- Or, could it be the pressures of everyday life that represent the real attack on our marriages? Raising children, paying off unmanageable debt, or balancing our career demands with the time and energy demands of our family and marriage often seem next to impossible. Life really does come at us pretty fast for most of our married lives.
- Some would argue that today's 'amazing' technology advancements (smartphones, social media, and, most recently the emergence of artificial intelligence) are compromising our ability to connect with our most important face-to-face relationships – like your spouse.
- It could be that making marriage work well 'till death do us part' is harder because we haven't 'burned the ships' (I have included a section of the book on this topic). If a couple genuinely enters a marriage with a philosophy that there is no turning back on their commitment to each other, how much more likely are they to work hard to resolve their issues and remain committed – in sickness, poorness, or worse?
- "Our marriage at least needs to be 'fair'!" This is the one I call, 'The Fairness Doctrine.' When both spouses embrace this doctrine, it not only makes marriage hard, it may be the single, biggest impediment to God's design for an abundant marriage.

The Fairness Doctrine explained:

Why is this concept of ‘fairness’ so prevalent? Because most of us have embraced the notion, since early childhood, that we are entitled to equity and fairness in life. And yet, in Jesus’ upside-down worldview, the concept of fairness is nowhere to be found. One verse that destroys the entitlement mentality of the Fairness Doctrine is Jesus’ final words in Matthew 20:16: “*So the last will be first, and the first will be last.*”

Here is the point and the promise – God designed marriage to be completely counter-intuitive. For a husband and wife to personify the gospel and glorify Him, we are called to tear up the Fairness Doctrine entirely.

A major source of marital dissatisfaction derives from clinging to the ‘Fairness Doctrine’ because when you expect ‘fair’ (which you cannot objectively judge because you have a tainted view of what’s ‘fair’ based on your own, self-serving definition) you are bound to be disappointed. Jesus calls us to “die to self” – and the Fairness Doctrine tugs at us to expect the opposite: “my interests are at least equal (or greater than) hers.”

It is undeniable that marriage is not easy and it takes a lot of work to get it right – especially done God’s way. This is particularly true if we don’t fully comprehend God’s design for marriage and for our role as husbands in that marriage. Understanding it better won’t make it easy, but it will make it worth it.

A Marriage Quiz

Maybe you are fortunate and your marriage is already ‘abundant.’ More likely, you have a reasonable marriage but you sense that it could be even better. Or for some of you, your marriage is deeply challenged. Regardless of the starting point, it’s worth taking a few minutes to reflect on the state of your marriage union. There are far more comprehensive marriage assessments than the one below but wrestle with this short list of challenging questions to get a sense of where you are in the scheme of marriage health.

Don’t think of this as a ‘pass/fail’ test to see if I should take the next step (to read the balance of this book as an example). Instead, look at this as an opportunity to experience a renewal in your marriage but also in your relationship with God – which may be the biggest opportunity of all. Here are a few questions to ponder:

- Are you satisfied with your marriage today? If not, why not? Is your wife (do you even know how she would answer)?
- What constitutes a great marriage (vs. a mediocre one)? In which category does your marriage fall?
- What is your view of the purpose of marriage? Is it largely utilitarian and practical, or spiritual?
- What is God’s view of the purpose of marriage from your perspective?
- How about God’s view of your marriage?
- How well does your wife know you – including your fears and vulnerabilities? Can you share your weaknesses and disappointments with her? How well do you understand hers?
- Would she say that you consider her input in key decisions?
- Do you know her dreams and aspirations in life? Does she know yours?
- What priority would your wife say she plays in your life? Does your calendar reflect the answer?

- How will your future ‘adult’ children honestly assess the strength/depth of your marriage?
- Who is responsible for the health of your marriage? Could this be what spiritual leadership really means?

If you’re less than comfortable with your answers to the above questions – you’re not alone. It’s the reason I’m excited to have you keep reading. You have a great opportunity to improve the trajectory of your marriage if you take the time and energy to understand God’s design for marriage, and your role in it, and then invest your time and energy to renew your marriage. It can start with you...and God is more than able to help with the rest.

Our Marriage Journey

Devonie and I met in college and have been married nearly 44 years. I knew her father, Stan, before I met her because he was my water polo coach at Cal Poly, Pomona University in California. I was raised in the Catholic Church and she was raised as a Baptist. Both of us were naïve when we married, assuming that our mutual love could overcome all potential problems – including our faith-related differences.

I had hoped that Devonie would convert to Catholicism so that our family could share a common “religion” and in short order, it was obvious she had no interest in doing so. She was active in her local Bible Study Fellowship (BSF) while I taught Catechism at the local church for our children’s classes. The truth is Devonie had a healthier and more mature perspective on God and where He fit into our lives than I had in the early years of our marriage.

I knew God (even accepted Christ as my personal Savior as a teenager in a Young Life program) but He was very compartmentalized in my life. My early career aspirations weren’t particularly conducive to God being “integral” to me. In fact, my type ‘A’ personality and workaholic tendencies made it seemingly impossible for God to be integral to anything, or so I thought. If a decision needed to be made, I needed to make it. If a deal needed to be closed in my sales territory – I had to make it happen. You get the picture.

We raised our three daughters in the Catholic Church for the first 12 years following the birth of the oldest of our three daughters but our separate faith walks were one of the difficult issues in our marriage in those days. She and I both wanted more in the faith arena but we wanted different things.

That dynamic changed significantly when I attended a weekend retreat in the mid-‘90s called Walk to Emmaus. God got my attention that sacred weekend and the clearest ‘download’ I received from Him was that Jesus Christ is non-denominational and that I shouldn’t be so concerned about what church or denomination we attended as a family. It changed everything for both of us.

I came home from the retreat that Sunday evening and suggested we go

to breakfast the next morning (which I had not done in the previous 15 years of marriage) to share with her that I felt we should find a common church that both of us and our children could be excited about attending. It was such a drastic transformation in Devonie's mind that she was half-way convinced that I had joined a cult.

We tried a few different churches over the course of the following 2-3 years and ultimately found a church we loved in our area. In retrospect, it was such a gift from God to change my heart in that way (and so drastically) because our three daughters found a strong sense of their faith through that transition and have all grown to follow Jesus – perhaps the one thing that most matters to God and to us as parents.

The other big challenge in our marriage was my over-zealousness about my work. I was extraordinarily career-oriented and success-driven which translated to classic workaholic tendencies. I didn't recognize it entirely at the time but I was overly concerned about 'getting ahead' so that I could attempt to create financial independence for our family. I also had an abundant craving to earn the respect of people in my life who would admire my business accomplishments. In those days, I was convinced I was just highly-driven. Today, I recognize it as excessive pride. Does that sound like anyone you know well?

Devonie, on the other hand, was faithfully managing the challenges of staying at home with three young children and suffered patiently through 6 moves (mostly across the country each time) in the first 9 years of our marriage. As you may have guessed, she was a trooper but harbored a lot of disdain for my career-related zeal.

My response to her disdain was not all that unique to what most other men have felt in that situation, "I can't believe she could take issue with my working hard! I'm not doing this for me – I'm doing this for her and for the kids." Truth be told, I had just as much disdain for her disdain as she had disdain in the first place. Sound familiar guys?

And yet, we continued to hang in there and had what we would have described as a great marriage, especially when we compared our marriage with most of the people we knew well. In fact, we (I suppose I really mean "I") thought it would be a good idea to use our marriage experience to minister to other couples who may not be as fortunate. Devonie, somewhat-reluctantly, agreed and we registered for a 13-week workshop at our church that was a prerequisite to qualify to help others.

Imagine the audacity... the church wanted to be sure our marriage was healthy before we ministered to others!

That is when the real fun started as we began to unpack the first 22 years of our marriage experience through a series of assessments, one-on-one discussions, and small group discussions with other couples going through the program. I recall attending the third week's session with 5 other couples (including a mentor couple) and Devonie, with tears obviously welling up in her eyes, asking with some degree of embarrassment, "Is it possible that our marriage could actually get worse in this process instead of getting better?" That was a real gut-punch and rude awakening for a guy who was convinced he had his marriage act together!

That workshop represented the beginning of a renewal and a transformation in our marriage. In the balance of that study, we focused on learning how to communicate more effectively and really worked through the hurts that I mostly caused Devonie in the first two decades of our marriage. We had to recognize our respective contributions, confess our roles in the hurt, and of course, repent and forgive as well.

The crazy part of our journey is that we, like so many other couples, felt our marriage was just fine. And I suppose it was relative to others from an outside-looking-in perspective. It's like the story of the frog in the pot of water that gets increasingly warmer and that ultimately kills him because he never really sensed that he was eventually sitting in boiling water. You don't even realize how hot you are because you learn to rationalize your reality.

There's a redeeming part of our story and perhaps encouraging for yours. You may feel resigned that your marriage is never going to get better. Or have the attitude, "you don't know my wife... she'll never change." Whether you are in an "adequate" marriage, in a struggling marriage, or in a marriage on life support, there is hope for what's possible in your marriage.

It has been over two decades since we started to really invest in our marriage and adjusted some of our old habits and ways of relating to each other. I am still a work-in-process but continuously learning that when a husband (and more specifically, ME) understands God's purpose for marriage, and our role in it, your perspective will change about how God can use your wife to draw you closer to Him and make you more Christ-like. In my case, things that previously would really frustrate me

about something that Devonie said or asked were no longer testing my patience – because I recognized how God was using her in a unique way for my benefit. I know it sounds hard to believe as you think of your own personal examples but I encourage you to keep reading as we discover the power and the peace that comes from getting marriage right.

I have no greater joy in my life today than to be able to say that Devonie is the person with whom I most enjoy spending time. We can communicate with one another today in a way that we genuinely know each other's hearts, desires, and even our respective fears. And we have a deeper sense of intimacy together than we have enjoyed in all the previous years of our marriage. She is truly my best friend in life.

I don't know entirely what God's optimum model is for a Christian marriage but I'm guessing He may be smiling as ours moves in small steps closer to what He had in mind. At the same time though, knowing God will use our marriage in a strategic way to make us more Christ-like, I still aspire to move even closer to experiencing God's design for an abundant marriage. I know we'll never be perfect because we're two imperfect people in a fallen world. Despite that, God has redeemed and renewed our marriage in powerful ways that I pray you will experience as well.

The marriage journey itself is as much a spiritual endeavor as it is a human one, designed by God to help us draw close to Him in the process of loving and nurturing our wives in the way God envisions. His desire for our marriage is one of abundance.

What is an Abundant Marriage?

It is almost natural for a married man to rationalize and accept the mediocrity of his marriage (i.e., “It’s as good as any marriage my friends have”). It’s also dangerous because both spouses will eventually convince themselves that they have a reasonably good marriage. After all, the dissonance of the reality that you don’t have a good marriage is emotionally unacceptable. The bottom line – you are both prone to conclude that there isn’t a problem worth solving in your marriage and therefore you’ll do very little to change the trajectory of your relationship.

The challenge is that the definition of “good” changes over the course of the many years of marriage. “Good” in the first year or two of a marriage may mean:

- We’re having a great time together
- We never fight
- We can’t wait to be together every day

After 10 years of marriage, the definition may have shifted to mean:

- We do things together sometimes
- We only fight once a week (or so)
- We still enjoy being together...at times

And, at the risk of demoralizing the newlywed readers, the 25-year ‘good’ marriage may mean:

- We are living mostly independent lives under the same roof
- We fight far too often if we are together too much
- We don’t share intimacy much (but nobody else we know at our age is either!)

You get the picture – you can easily rationalize the erosion of what used to be a great relationship to make ourselves, and those around

us, believe that we are normal and our marriage challenges are natural and acceptable. It sounds reasonable but it is not God's design for your marriage.

God wants you and I to have abundant lives (*I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly* (Jn 10:10)) and abundant marriages. Nothing else glorifies God more. The more willing we are to invest the time and energy to develop an abundant marriage, the more likely we are to experience a key element of a married Christian's abundant life. They go together, but abundant doesn't mean easy. It also doesn't mean you and your spouse will always be happy and conflict-free.

What constitutes an abundant marriage? Here are a few attributes that represent a good yardstick to determine if your marriage could be described in these ways:

Honest, transparent communications

The average married couple communicates on a variety of topics in the course of a given day, week, or month. What's going on with the kids; the latest work-related events; the news of the day; etc. The sobering statistic I read recently is that the average married couple spends approximately 27 minutes per week in actual, in-depth conversations that matter to each of you personally. That is a meager four minutes per day!

Do you remember when you initially started dating your wife? The two of you likely had no trouble talking about a myriad of topics, some important and many relatively mundane, for hours on end. You couldn't wait to talk again and when you did, one or both of you would struggle to hang up the phone when it was time to do other things, not the least of which was to go to sleep at night. Where did that desire to talk and connect evaporate over the course of your marriage?

An abundant marriage renews that desire to communicate in a transparent, personal way that too few married couples enjoy today. Part of your lack of enthusiasm for a renewed marriage might be your predisposition that, "if you knew my wife you wouldn't even want her to know you fully!" I don't mean 'that' woman. I mean the woman who loves and accepts you for exactly who you are and doesn't react in that way – mostly because you are the husband God created you to be. It may be hard to imagine that woman, but stay with me!

Love is a verb, not a noun or just an emotion

Once the infatuation that newlyweds experience fades, loving your spouse becomes less of a feeling and more of a conscious choice. We go from being “in love” (as a noun) with our spouse to “loving” our spouse (as a verb) – even if they aren’t acting all that lovable. We are called to illustrate Christ and love our spouse, in sickness and in health and for better or for worse, because we have a covenant to do so.

When we’re committed to loving each other in this way, it fosters trust, commitment, and selflessness that doesn’t exist when love is conditional. It enables us to love our spouse even when we may feel she is not deserving. Over time, loving her unconditionally isn’t even hard in an abundant marriage. Does that seem unfathomable today?

In essence, the more you make love a verb, the more you make love! Speaking of which...

Affection and intimacy

When we get marriage right, in God’s design, affection and intimacy between the two of you become consistent and not circumstantial. It may be among the biggest complaints of married men and women. The men’s common perspective is, “We don’t have enough sex/intimacy.” Many women’s view is, “He’s relentless in his desire for sex.”

And there lies both the challenge and the opportunity. God designed sex with a purpose and it wasn’t just for procreation. Intimacy is “glue” that binds an abundantly married couple together like few other things can...’til death do us part. It is the natural by-product of a husband caring for his wife’s spirit.

Children are nurtured and ‘launched’

Men and women can sometimes come from different planets in child-rearing. Husbands love to ‘launch’ our children successfully into life to fly on their own while our wives are naturally more nurturing and want to be sure our children are well cared for, even if it takes a bit longer for us to help them get there.

Despite these common differences, a healthy, abundant marriage in God’s design is one where children have the best possible chance to not only survive but thrive in their adult life and to develop a personal relationship with Jesus Christ in that process.

Both spouses are growing in their relationship with God

Our ability to serve each other is markedly better when our fixation is not purely on the relationship with our spouse but more importantly on our relationship with Jesus. As Tim Keller said in his book called, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*,

...if you love anything in this world more than God, you will crush that object under the weight of your expectations, and it will eventually break your heart. For example, if your spouse and his or her love of you is more important to you than God's love, then you will get far too angry and despondent when your spouse fails to give you the support and affection you need...Only if God's love is the most important thing to you will you have the freedom to love your spouse well.

When we get this right and take the steps that God desires for us to be more Christ-like, our ability to love our wives is exponentially better than it would be otherwise. Paul says it well, *...and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me* (Gal 2:20). Who is better equipped to love your wife than Jesus Himself, who lives in and through you?

There it is – the best elements I can fathom to describe an abundant marriage. Jesus wants us to have life abundantly and He designed your marriage to be an important part of that abundant life.

God's Design for Men and Marriage

I can't pretend to know all of God's grand design for different institutions and relationships when He created our world and each of us. Some are obvious – like His design for the church on earth to allow His followers to love, care for, and build each other up while also sharing the gift of our faith in the broader community of non-believers.

When it comes to marriage though, His purpose always seemed practically simple: to allow the world to procreate and flourish; to provide parental leadership in a family structure that enables children to thrive and become functioning adults; and of course, the utilitarian purpose – that two are better than one and we naturally complement each other in our strengths, skills, etc. What else could there possibly be to marriage? Understanding the answer to this question will profoundly impact you and your marriage.

The Bible ought to provide the best clarity on the answer. While countless verses apply to marriage, there are a couple of verses that help us fundamentally understand God's purpose and design:

- He intended for ... *a man [to] leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh* (Gen 2:24). One man and one woman will come together in one intimate union.
- That for those called to marriage, we're better together than we are separately: ...*a cord of three strands is not quickly broken* (Ecc 4:12). When you read the balance of this passage it's easy to surmise that the man, woman, and God are a simple representation of the cord of three strands that are not quickly broken in the otherwise challenging world that we occupy.

It is also clear that God designed a unique role and responsibility for men in a Christ-centered marriage. His brilliant design places unique responsibilities on the husband in a marriage done His way and it helps to clarify what the concept of 'spiritual leadership' really means by reviewing three relevant verses:

- *Husbands love your wives just as Christ loved the church...* (Eph 5:25). This is not the challenge he issued to both spouses. It was specifically aimed at husbands and the onus is on us to unpack what it means to love her as Christ loved the church. This notion of being the spiritual leader makes the husband responsible for the health and condition of our marriage. In essence, a husband must be willing to lay down his life for his wife – as Christ literally did for us on Calvary.
- *Husbands, be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect...so that nothing will hinder your prayers* (1Peter 3:7). God connects the dots between our ability to live with our wives in a loving and understanding way with the effectiveness of our prayers. Do you ever feel as though God is not hearing your prayers? You might actually be right – especially if we don't fully understand and embrace the unique responsibility He grants us in our marriage.
- *Do nothing out of selfish ambition...consider others better than yourselves...* (Phil 2: 3-4). While this verse is a message for all our relationships, most of us struggle less with treating others (including utter strangers) better than ourselves than we do in treating our wives in this way. How illogical is that? Taken to an even greater degree of application – most husbands would literally risk their lives and jump in front of an approaching car to save their wives and yet struggle mightily to admit that she's right and we're wrong in a small dispute. Or to seek her counsel when making an important decision. Am I the only guilty husband on these issues? I am suspicious that God intended this verse to be especially applied to how we, as husbands, relate to our wives.

Ken Nair outlines a powerful concept in his book, *Discovering the Mind of a Woman*, that God has given husbands a profound influence over their wives' emotional well-being. That influence can either be used for good or for bad purposes. When we are *considerate as we live with our wives*, she is designed by God to respond in a loving and respectful way. And when we don't do so, she is more likely to respond less lovingly and less respectfully; often in a way that can be instructive for us as husbands. In essence, our wives are the mirror God holds up, for our benefit, to provide a clear image of how we are doing (or not doing) in becoming more Christ-like.

Why would God design our wives in this way vs. any other person in our lives? Mostly because we wear a mask with nearly every other person with whom we have contact. We have become experts at behaving well with other relationships and we're not around these people enough for them to see our unmasked selves. God knows you can't fake it with the one woman with whom you spend most of your adult life and share a bed with every night. This is precisely why marriage matters so much in God's design.

If God's ultimate desire for us men is to sanctify us and to make us more Christ-like in our life on earth, it's perfectly logical that He would use the central, vulnerable, and relentlessly transparent marriage relationship as the primary mechanism to highlight our progress (or lack thereof). When we understand and embrace this concept, it changes everything about marriage. It becomes less about the utilitarian and practical benefits of marriage and far more about the spiritual purpose and power of our Christian marriages.

It is the reason marriage is so sacred in God's economy. If God desires us to grow in Him and wants His Spirit to live in us, marriage is the single most important relationship He designed for that purpose. As I heard one speaker recently explain, "Marriage is the rushing stream God uses to shape us – like a stone is shaped over many years in a stream."

Pause on that thought for a moment. In all the years we are fortunate enough to live here on earth, God has purposed your marriage as a primary vehicle to draw us closer to Him by enabling us to become more Christ-like...if we let Him.

You are likely reading these principles with some angst because the strategic nature of God's design for marriage can be daunting. You may even be formulating your immediate objections to these concepts in your own self-defense. Let's deal proactively with the most common objections husbands tend to raise when these principles are introduced:

- "Why is this stuff always my fault? Don't we share responsibility for our problems?" This may be the most common objection because the world tells us that marriage is a union of equals – equal rights and equal responsibilities. And yet, being **responsible** for the condition of your marriage is not the same as being **at fault** for the problems. This is not about placing blame; it's about accepting responsibility. Part of our sanctification and growth

comes from embracing this awesome and daunting role.

- “If all I do is give in and compromise, my wife will take advantage of the situation.” I have also heard it said this way, “If I give her an inch, she’ll take a mile.” The problem with this objection is what I call the Dr. Phil (McGraw) question, “How’s that working for you?” Someone must take the leadership role to make your marriage the abundant, God-honoring relationship it is designed to be. If not you, then who? What is spiritual leadership if not this?
- “We’ve tried everything and you just don’t know my wife. This is an exercise in futility!” You may be right and it might be a chronic challenge. More likely, your assessment is not correct and your view of God’s sovereignty and what He is capable of doing in your life and in your marriage is pretty feeble. The evidence I have witnessed is that when a Christ-following man understands his unique role as a husband and steps up committed to making his wife feel loved, as though by Jesus Himself, God designed her in such a way that she will be drastically impacted by her husband’s heart and his Christ-like actions.

I had always assumed that for a marriage to improve, it would require that both spouses agree that they have problems worth addressing and then jointly agree to solicit the help of a marriage counselor or workshop intensive to help. The likelihood that two married people will agree and confess that they have problems, much less agree to work to address the issues, is relatively small. Why? Because doing so exposes our vulnerabilities and is a painful stake in our prideful nature. More specifically:

- We must admit to ourselves and to each other that our marriage isn’t perfect and requires some time and energy to improve.
- We must admit that the problem doesn’t solely rest with our spouse – which is hard for us prideful men.
- And arguably the toughest part of this: we might even have to allow other people to become aware that we have work to do in our marriage.

These are the impediments that prevent far too many couples from taking ANY steps towards a more abundant marriage. The result: the “current

state" (stuck where we are in mediocrity or worse) prevails most of the time. And that is precisely the reason I'm hopeful that you'll take the time to continue reading.

Men, equipped with the will of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, have the ability to transform their marriages when they fully understand God's strategic design for marriage and their role as husbands. In the next section, we'll review six God-ordained principles that will lead you to experience an abundance in your marriage and in your life in Christ.

Six Guiding Principles:

The first of these principles is simple: **husbands (and all men) are called, as followers of Jesus, to be Christ-like.** Some call it sanctification; others wear a bracelet that gets to the notion by asking, “What would Jesus do?”

The Bible reinforces the concept distinctly:

- *Whoever says he abides in Him ought to walk in the same way in which He walked* (1 John 2:6)
- *He must increase, but I must decrease* (John 3:30)
- *For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son...* (Rom 8:29)

Who wouldn’t want to become more Christ-like? Particularly when you consider Jesus himself and the attributes he displayed in the 3 years of his adult ministry here on earth:

- His identity was entirely as the son of God and not in impressing others - it’s where His peace and purpose were derived.
- He loved purely, not conditionally - He even loved those who betrayed and scourged him.
- He recognized that love is not fair or equitable - consider the parable of the talents where workers labored in the fields for equal, generous pay with unequal workloads.
- He was the model of patience – taking time to help his followers to understand His Father’s will.
- He was the epitome of grace-filled – providing unmerited favor to Peter, Lazarus, and even the thief on the cross.
- He didn’t waiver from the truth but was also quick to forgive – like the woman at the well who lived a disreputable lifestyle
- He believed in the capabilities of others – exhorting Peter when he

walked on the water, “*take courage and come to me.*”

- He was obedient and strong when facing temptation – especially with Satan in the desert.
- He was selfless – He literally ‘took a bullet’ for us at Calvary.
- He was filled with the spirit and in alignment with God the Father – he truly had an audience of one.
- He was also content in his circumstances – and they were often less-than-stellar circumstances.
- And yet, he was fully human like us – walked as we do, talked as we do, needed rest as we do, and challenged as we are!

Considering these attributes, I have a long way to go in my journey to Christ-likeness! What about you?

Taking even small steps in this Christ-like direction allows us to grow closer to God. It is also evidence that He is increasingly in control of our lives. In essence, it brings to life the concept of Christ living in and through us (Gal 2:20) and allows us to experience the fruit that we are promised as He increases and we decrease - *love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control* (Gal 5:22-23). What's not to like about these attributes? And yet, it is easier said than done for most.

The second principle is a game changer because saying you want to be Christ-like and actually finding ways to mature in that way are two very different things. Most of us aspire to Christ-likeness but struggle to find ways to do so. Does it happen in our work environment? Through our neighborhood relationships? With our old college buddies? During our prayer time?

Here is the sobering answer and our second guiding principle:

God designed our marriage (for those of us who are married) as the most important earthly relationship to allow us to know how close (or far) we are in our journey to Christ-likeness.

Think about it: what other relationship in our life, other than our wife, gives us an accurate picture of how well we love and serve others? Your

friends tell you what they know you want to hear that will make you feel good. Your work associates will generally say what is politically correct. Your family and extended family will love you and support you, but they are not purposeful about giving you honest, unfiltered feedback.

Your wife, on the other hand, is likely the best measure of how Christ-like you are because she may be the only person in your life who knows the whole truth about you. It's too easy to fool the rest of the world with the masks we wear in life. Devonie knows the best of me and unfortunately, she knows the worst of my habits. She knows how good my heart can be and she also knows my sinful nature better than anyone else in my life. You can fool most people most of the time but it is impossible to fool your wife because we're so buck-naked in marriage (figuratively and literally).

I recently read that Bill Bright, the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, made a habit of interviewing prospective candidates to join his ministry by bringing both the husband and the wife to the interview. He would then proceed to only talk to the candidate's wife during the interview. His premise – he could learn more about the character and qualities of the candidate by speaking with his wife. How well would you do in that interview? In essence, Bright had concluded that if a candidate can't love and serve his wife, the person to whom he is committed for life and for better or worse, what confidence should he have that the candidate would minister to others in a genuine, Christ-like way?

God designed marriage as the primary relationship that allows a married man to get a clear reflection of how Christ-like he is towards the woman with whom he has a covenant commitment for the balance of his life here on earth. If you recognize and accept this truth, your wife represents the mirror God will use to show you your progress – whether you like this principle or not! For the Christian man who aspires to grow genuinely closer to God, your marriage is THAT strategic and purpose-filled. Allow that to marinate in your mind as we highlight the next principle that should serve as an encouragement to many.

The third principle is simple and liberating – a Christian man has the ability to transform his marriage, even if his wife is not apparent in her desire to invest in transforming the marriage. This was a breakthrough in my paradigm because I had always assumed that a couple had to make a joint commitment to really make a difference. Armed with the benefit of walking with hundreds of married men over many years and most prominently with my own marriage journey, I am convinced that God's design for marriage and our role in it allows us to have a profound impact

on our wives and on the relationship based on the only thing we can control in the first place – ourselves. The real key to this principle though, is the fourth principle.

The fourth principle posits that **the reason a man can have an impact on the marriage relationship is that God designed our wives to profoundly respond to our ability to be Christ-like in loving, serving, and supporting them.** When we struggle to be Christ-like towards her, her response (God's 'mirror' to show us how we're doing) will reflect such. On the other hand, when we get it right, she will reflect that in significant, often striking ways.

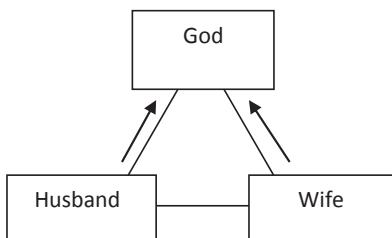
Ken Nair asked a great question in the "Discovering" book about annoying habits or attributes of your wife: "Have they gotten better or worse since you first met her?" His point is that if her habits have become more annoying over the years, this is often a reflection of how well we are doing in our Christ-like love and leadership. "Wait a minute," you may be saying, "Are you saying I am to blame for my wife's habits and/or dysfunctions?" Not exactly, but that leads to our fifth principle.

The fifth principle is compelling and sobering at the same time: **I, as the husband, am responsible for the health and condition of my marriage.** Pause and think about that statement. How does that reconcile with the notion that marriage is a 50/50 proposition? Or, that we are jointly and severally (not to mention equally) responsible for everything in our marriage – good and bad?

I have read many books and listened to more sermons than I care to admit from respected pastors about the concept of spiritual leadership and what that really means. Here is a simple way to make this concept come to life that is clear, compelling, and convicting: you may not be to **blame** for the state of your marriage today, but as the spiritual leader, God has chartered us to be **responsible** for the health of our marriage relationship. And the best, most effective way we can step up to this role is by investing the time and energy to create a more abundant marriage by being the Christ-like servant-leader that God calls us to be in Ephesians 5.

Finally, and most importantly, principle number six applies to our relationship focus. **If our primary focus is on drawing closer to God, we will automatically be drawn closer to our wife in the process.** In the illustration below, when you and your wife move diagonally along the

lines pointing toward God, what invariably happens to the proximity of the two boxes you each occupy? They come closer together – naturally, not because we force them together. On the other hand, if our sole focus is on drawing a closer relationship with our wife (the horizontal lines connecting the bottom two boxes below), you will struggle to achieve closeness with either. In God's design, the more effective (and less-traveled) road is for a husband (as the spiritual leader) to focus on THE primary relationship as a follower of Jesus – our relationship with Him.



Matthew reinforces this concept well – *Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these other things* (like an abundant marriage) *will be added unto you* (Mt 6:33 - my emphasis in parentheses).

This may be best summarized by Gary Thomas the author of, *Sacred Marriage*, when he said, “A great marriage doesn’t come from knowing each other better, it comes from knowing God.”

These principles are not intuitive and are often at odds with what our culture tells us about marriage. In fact, for the non-Christian, they would be written off as nonsense. But for the Christian man who genuinely desires to grow in Christ and truly embraces the power of the gospel, these marriage principles change everything we thought we knew about God’s purpose in our marriage and have the potential to be the catalyst for transforming your marriage (and you).

The Husband's Nature

We men are not easy to corral. We're independent-minded; self-oriented; resentful when we don't get our way; generally blind to our own faults (and acutely attuned to our wife's faults); and hyper-sensitive to anyone trying to run our lives. Other than these nuance issues, we are pretty easy to get along with.

We also have some strong pre-dispositions about women and marriage. Ken Nair does a great job of capturing 4 major prejudices that are prevalent in husbands, most of which are at least partially influenced by today's culture:

- That women are impossible to understand – they are so complicated that we don't even endeavor to try to understand them
- That women are the real problem in marriage relationships – because they often react in unpredictable and emotional ways to circumstances and our behavior
- That women are somewhat inferior – which may be the bias the feminist groups have fought for five-plus decades to overcome
- That men are supposed to be the “boss” in the marriage relationship (which is not exactly what God had in mind when he designated our role as spiritual leaders)

Your first reaction may be to dismiss these as not applicable to you. My first-hand evidence in working with married men is that we are more guilty than you may think. You can read Nair's book to understand these biases in more depth and I will accept that all men are not equally guilty. Our parent's relationship, the culture itself, and the degree of pride we have strike me as the biggest determinants of the degree to which we are individually guilty.

Husbands can also be downright clueless about the state of our marriage. I have read several research studies that ask men and women (in the same marriage) to rate their marriage on a scale of 1 to 10 ("10" being exceptional and "1" being in serious distress for example). The husband

will often rate their marriage as an 8 or 9 (remember the rationalized view men often hold, “Our marriage is as good as the other marriages I see”). Their wives, on the other hand, often rate their marriage as a 3 or 4. It doesn’t even seem possible that these two people could be married to each other and living in the same house!

This phenomenon may help explain why so many 25+ year marriages fail. When your wife has finally had enough and declares her intent to leave or file for divorce (and women initiate the divorce in 80% of the cases in the U.S.), the man stands in stunned silence wondering, “What are you talking about? Our marriage is just fine!” The brutal reality is that most men don’t really understand the serious trajectory of their marriage today. Do you?

My intent is not to demoralize you into doing something drastic in the next two weeks to course-correct. It did not take two weeks to get to where you are and it takes more than a fortnight of time and effort to transform your marriage. But when we are honest about the health of our marriages and better understand God’s strategic design, everything can change...for the better.

God Designed Your Wife to Respond to Your Christ-likeness

The responsibility we bear as husbands can seem at the least unfair and sometimes daunting. But encouragement about God's ability to help you transform your marriage comes from the fourth of our guiding principles: God designed your wife to profoundly respond to the degree to which we love and serve her in a Christ-like way.

There are two sides to this coin. If we, as husbands, are gruff, dismissive, uncommunicative, etc., then God designed your wife to respond in ways that you will not be particularly enthralled about. It may manifest itself in her preoccupation with the children; in you getting the 'silent treatment'; in her unwillingness to be intimate; or in a myriad of other ways. Like it or not, our wives are deeply impacted (both physically and emotionally) by the treatment they get from us daily and her response is at least partially a reflection of our Christ-likeness.

On the other side of the coin (and the good news), our wives are also profoundly impacted by our progress in loving her in a Christ-like way. As we get better at really communicating with our wives or becoming less dismissive, she will be profoundly and positively impacted. When you open your heart to her and connect in a way that genuinely matters to her, God made her in a way that she is far more likely to show you respect and share the intimacy that you deeply cherish. It works both ways.

Have you ever been surprised by the reaction of your wife to something you did or said that seemed misconstrued compared to your intent? I used to get very frustrated with Devonie when she would ask me about people I saw in a day – in meetings, at lunch, or wherever I was that given day. I felt like I was being interrogated and mistrusted and that caused me to want to share less. She would become even more concerned because of my inclination to share less, not more. It became a vicious cycle!

In retrospect, I had it all wrong. I've since learned that women tend to ask penetrating questions to connect in a relationship. Even though she did not feel as though she was confronting me by asking these questions, I felt confronted. As my defenses came down over time and I became less critical of her intent, my reaction to her questions changed drastically.

And when *my* reaction and interpretation became less defensive and more understanding (i.e. more Christ-like), the vicious cycle was broken.

When your wife does or says something that makes you feel irritated or challenged, resist the temptation of interpreting her words as a personal challenge or, worse yet, immediately overreacting. I am learning instead to ask a simple question of God: “Lord, how are you using Devonie’s penetrating (and reasonable) questions to make me more Christ-like?” When my paradigm changed on the intent of her questions, I went from an immediate disdain to gratitude that God would use these questions in a purposeful way. In a counter-intuitive way, her questions became a blessing and my ability to respond properly (and with respect) made her less concerned about asking these same questions. The cycle gets reversed because that is the way God designed her to respond to our progress toward Christ-likeness.

One final dimension to this concept - in the same way that it has taken years, or even decades for us to impact our wives the way we have (for better or for worse), don’t expect that when we begin to call on the Holy Spirit to make us more Christ-like that your wife will instantaneously respond positively. I commonly hear, “I have been trying to change and get better but all I hear back from her is a skeptical, “I’m sure this is just a temporary improvement”.”

You can expect that her heart and spirit will be guarded for some time (maybe as long as it took to get to this point). Be patient and aim to become Christ-like no matter how long it takes – it is the only thing you can control anyway. Allow God to do His work in your wife – on His time and in His way.

The metaphor introduced previously is an easy way to visualize God’s design for your relationship with your wife – she is the mirror He uses to reflect our progress in becoming the man (not just the husband) we are called to become. If you want to know how you are doing on the journey – look objectively at her spirit, her attitude, and her demeanor and you’ll have a reasonable sense of progress - or lack thereof. Interestingly, there are people who know our wives well (i.e., they know if her spirit is wounded or healthy) who already know how we are doing in our journey towards Christ-likeness, even if they’ve never met us personally.

Purpose and Priorities

‘Purpose’ is the ‘context’ in our life and it tends to fuel our motivations which in turn dictate our priorities. I have written on this topic previously, specifically related to making career choices in, *A Better Way to Make a Living...and a Life* which was published in 2008. Your purpose and priorities matter just as much in your marriage and they are often overlooked or neglected.

My favorite example of the importance of purpose: I am willing to eat green vegetables for one reason and one reason only - because they serve the purpose of making me healthier than I would be otherwise. Exercise is another simple example. Everyone knows the purpose of daily exercise: so that we can enjoy dessert (for me, it is ice cream)! If I don’t make exercise a priority, I lose the luxury of eating what I most love. You get the picture.

Rick Warren’s book *The Purpose Driven Life* is evidence that purpose matters to many of us because it is one of the all-time best-selling books in this country with more than 30 million copies in circulation. “Why am I here?” is the age-old question that most humans ponder regularly. For Christians, the question may be slightly different: “What is God’s purpose for my life?” Without an answer to these questions, we have a void in our spirit – some call it the God hole. Warren contends that the ultimate purpose we have as Christians is to glorify God in all that we do. Do you share his view or do you have another? Do you even ponder the question?

When we are either unclear about our purpose or, worse yet, view our purpose from an earthly, “what’s in it for me” perspective, we will be driven by motivations largely focused on satisfying our innately self-oriented desires. For example, if our life purpose is as simple as, “have fun, make a reasonable amount of money, raise a good family, retire at 60 years old, and treat other people reasonably well,” our orientation is living “of” the world vs. living “in” the world. This is a different orientation than Jesus called His followers to embrace.

It is why the Bible is so clear about the difficult tension between having wealth and ‘stuff’ here on earth vs. laying up treasures in heaven. Jesus even goes so far as to say it is easier for a camel to pass through the

eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. It does not mean wealth, in and of itself, is bad; it's more a warning that when wealth becomes our central purpose and priority, the likelihood of becoming corrupted is dangerously high.

In the same way, purpose matters profoundly in our lives, it also matters in our marriages. If your view of the purpose of marriage is all about equality, fairness, raising children, sharing the workload, and the other practical benefits it provides, then marriage has a mostly utilitarian purpose. In essence, there are good, logical, and practical reasons to be married and two people are better together than they would otherwise be alone.

On the other hand, you could view marriage from God's sacred perspective where marriage serves a broader, more strategic, spiritual purpose. Warren delivered a speech a few years ago to a forum focused on marriage in today's culture called Humanum. He concluded the talk with a scriptural view of the purpose of marriage from God's perspective (including the verses he referenced for each):

1. To eliminate loneliness (Gen 2:18)
2. As an expression of intimacy (Gen 2:24)
3. To multiply and procreate (Gen 1:28)
4. For the protection and development of children (Eph 6:4)
5. To perfect our character – and make us holy (1Cor 7:14)
6. To reflect Christ's life (Eph 4)

God created marriage and intends for an abundant marriage to glorify Him because it is the ultimate personification of the gospel itself – including confession, repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, and surrender. It is His masterful design for sacrificially serving and loving your wife unconditionally.

It is also God's sacred relationship to help make you, as a husband, more Christ-like. At the risk of being repetitive, there is no other relationship in our lives that requires the vulnerability, humility, self-sacrifice, repentance, forgiveness, and unconditional love that personifies what being Christ-like is all about. And it is this purpose that fuels a truly abundant marriage.

So...what is your view of God's purpose for your marriage – utilitarian or sacred? Your answer will profoundly impact the trajectory of your marriage. And once you determine your answer, it is much easier to align your marriage's purpose with your priorities and your time. The simplest example I recall is when Devonie and I started having children in 1982 when she was pregnant with our oldest daughter, Kelly. I can remember contemplating how different life was about to become for both of us. And since I am prone to ask strategic questions about life, I started to wrestle with what changes were needed in my life. A life that had lots of competing priorities like a new marriage, a new job at IBM, a passion for golf, among others.

If one of my primary callings in life was to grow a strong marriage and raise a family with healthy, self-sufficient children who would ultimately learn to love Jesus, I had to make some hard choices amongst competing life priorities. I recall telling Devonie at that time that I had decided to take a 25-year hiatus from golf while our kids were being raised. That didn't mean I was never going to play but it did mean that I likely wouldn't play more than 3 or 4 times a year. In the context of what really matters, I did not want the game I grew up loving to compromise my new life purpose and priorities.

It is a simple example and not all that impressive, but you could apply similar logic to many other priorities in your life that aren't bad, in and of themselves, but that serve to compete with God's broader purpose for our lives and our marriage. When our perspective and our choices become more spiritually-centered and less self-indulgent, God smiles.

Let me offer another personal, self-indicting perspective to reinforce the point. For many years I was preoccupied with money. I was all about saving for the future and making sure we were "secure" for retirement (sounds like the rich fool in Luke's Gospel, yes?). Twenty-plus years ago I read a book by Russ Crosson called, *A Life Well Spent: the eternal rewards of investing yourself and your money in your family*. Crosson's book changed my perspective on spending and generosity entirely by helping me to better recognize and categorize the nature of what he calls the "eternal" investments I was making at that time in the context of my purpose as a husband and father.

For example, I used to cringe at spending \$1000 on a family vacation for spring break to a beach destination in Florida because of the cost. I remember thinking it was an excessive expense and poor financial stewardship. What changed was my "purpose" filter because I began to recognize that this expense was not a decrement to our savings account,

it was an ‘eternal’ investment that allowed Devonie and I to invest the time, energy, and wisdom into our children during that week together that was much more valuable than the money we spent. God provides us with these types of resources to make precisely these types of ‘eternal’ investments in those we love - for His purposes.

Marriage is full of competing priorities that regularly force us to make decisions about our time and our talents. When we understand and embrace the power of purpose, especially God’s purpose for our marriage, our perspective changes. It changes our self-orientation; it changes our priorities; and it changes our hearts because what matters from God’s eternal perspective begins to matter exceedingly. John and Stasi Eldredge said it well in their marriage-related book, *Love and War*: “Your happiness awaits your realignment to the purposes of God.”

Are you starting to see God’s bigger purpose for our marriages? For those husbands who may be reading this book and feeling as though they got cheated in the marriage game with a wife they expected to be more perfect than she has ended up being - is it possible that God could use what feels like chronic marital challenges more purposefully than you imagined? Consider a few strategic questions and perspectives related to our purpose and priorities in God’s marriage design:

- Do you have clarity on God’s purpose for you? Maybe it is not about your happiness or your prosperity but more about your sanctification. Your wife can not be responsible for making you happy anyway – it’s too big a burden for any human. Jesus challenges us in Luke 9: *And He said to all, if anyone would come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.* (Lk 9:23-24) This selfless surrender may be the hardest part of our calling as Christians.
- For most men, if your wife had an accident and became a paraplegic or was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s, you would gladly and patiently deal with the burden. You would still become weary in the caregiving, but society would judge that what you are doing is noble and grace-filled. But when it comes to what we perceive as chronic marriage-related issues, we have little patience because it doesn’t feel ‘fair’ to us that we have the burden of an imperfect wife. Is it possible that God gives us these circumstances to help us grow both personally and spiritually? Author and Pastor, Dr. Tim Keller says it this way, “If you knew

what God knows, you'd give yourself exactly what He has given you."

- If we are really honest, aren't we a large part of the brokenness and imperfection in our marriage? Looking for the splinter in her eye without taking the plank out of our own is incomplete at best. When we are inclined to judge it comes right back at us in God's economy: *Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.* (Mt 7:1-2)
- We are also called to forgive, no matter the cost in God's purposeful realm. *Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."* (Mt 18: 21-22) If you are clinging to self-rationalized resentment in your marriage, try forgiveness as an alternative. It is a lot less work and better for your mind, your spirit, and your marriage.
- And finally, whatever your circumstances – in your marriage or otherwise, we are promised in scripture that God will use them for His good and holy purpose. (Rom 8:28) Take God at His word and believe that He has you exactly where you belong in your marriage and His purposes will prevail.

I hear men lament regularly, "I want to grow closer to God and truly know Him and His will for me." Guys, God can use many ways to reach us, including through supernatural means if He chooses to do so. But the most obvious vehicle He uses to reach us, to develop our character, and to draw us closer to Him is through the gift of your relationship with your wife. Marriage is that sacred when we recognize God's purpose in it.

It's Not Just About Trying Harder: The Power of the Holy Spirit

...the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace (Rom 8:6)

It is easy to think that the key to getting this whole marriage thing right relies on our ability to grit our teeth and flat-out resolve that we are going to be more patient, more understanding, and more loving to our wives and marriage bliss will naturally follow. Not so fast...

Think back for a minute to some of the positive changes that have occurred in your life in the past decade or two. Have you become more patient than you were previously? Have you become more consistent in having quiet time with Jesus – perhaps even to the point where your day can not start on the right foot if you don't have that time in prayer and/or reflection? Or maybe you suffered from an addiction at some point in the past that has stopped being a dominant issue in your life? Did these positive changes occur because of your hard work and determination or was there something else less obvious at work, perhaps even supernatural?

One small, personal example for me – in the first 25 years of my life I don't ever remember reading a book (besides school textbooks of course) and spent no time reading the Bible. If it wasn't written in the Sports section of the Los Angeles Times or Sports Illustrated magazine, I wasn't interested. Even as a career-oriented professional at IBM in the 1980s, my interest in reading was pretty limited, occasionally relenting to read a business-related book by Tom Peters or Jim Collins. I was just not a reader.

I don't know exactly when it all changed because it wasn't immediate, but I now have a voracious appetite for reading, and the interest is almost entirely centered on learning more about the Bible and spiritually-related topics that allow me to wrestle with purpose, priorities, and related life-application issues. In retrospect, it certainly did not happen because I willed it to be so. No, this change in me, from the inside out, was God's intervention. Only the power of Christ's Spirit, which we inherit when we put our trust in Him, lives in and through us to equip us in these ways.

In the same way, you can close your eyes, clench your teeth, and try to

become a more loving, more patient, and more Christ-like husband to your wife but the power is not entirely yours. Paul outlines his struggle and journey in his letter to the Romans,

For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. (Rom 7: 18-20)

He goes on to explain why we struggle, depending on how we are “governed” in chapter 8,

Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God. (Rom 8: 5-8).

And finally, Paul goes on to explain where the real power to change is derived,

You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you. Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation—but it is not to the flesh, to live according to it. For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live. (Rom 8: 9-13)

You may think you have the strength and willpower to be the loving, Christ-like husband that God has called you to be. But even for the husband

who follows Jesus, our personal strength and resolve are most often not enough. Instead, when we acknowledge our sin nature, surrender in humility, and empty ourselves to the point where Christ can truly live in us, we are strengthened by God in our weakness. And when we allow Him to live in and through us, His spirit changes us – from the inside.

If we desire to be Christ-like, why wouldn't we allow God to equip us to be so? After all, *I can do everything through him who gives me strength* (Phil 4:13). Said differently: I can do nothing without Him, including transforming my life and my marriage.

When we are connected as the branch to God's "vine," He gives us strength, particularly when we're doing His will. His will involves us understanding and fulfilling our role in God's design for a husband in an abundant marriage. Don't walk this journey alone – He is in you! We just have to be honest and 'empty' enough to allow Him to do His work.

22 Practical Strategies God Can Use to Transform You (and Your Marriage)

I've spent the last two decades investing time and energy to better understand God's design for marriage with a selfish objective to strengthen my own marriage. Through that process, I have a growing desire to experience marriage and to be the husband that approaches God's design for what 'right' looks like.

In typical type 'A' fashion, I have endeavored to read more marriage-related books than I care to admit and viewed countless sermons and marriage conference presentations from some of the most respected authors and pastors who are marriage experts done God's way. All the while doing my best, albeit poorly at times, to put into practice what I am learning. I am a 44-year marriage "practitioner" who brings the scars of experience to the table – nothing more, or less.

The practical strategies outlined in the balance of this book have been derived from what I have learned in this process and from the experience of hundreds of other men who have allowed me to walk with them either individually or in small group workshops we have conducted for many years called, *Men: Marriage Matters*. (www.menyourmarriagematters.com)

Think of what follows as one man's view of what can make the difference between a mediocre marriage and an abundant marriage in God's design. I pray that God will use some (or all) of these insights for your benefit, and perhaps more importantly, for your wife's benefit.

The average husband, even one who struggles in his marriage, is too often not likely to spend the time finding proactive ways to address their marriage challenges. They are even less likely to seek professional help to make things better. It may be our apathy, our pride, or perhaps it is what Stephen Covey called the "tyranny of the urgent" that tends to dominate our lives.

It is for precisely these reasons that these strategies have been compiled

- to share with you the most impactful and practical ideas I have found from some of the wisest experts on the topic of marriage. Any one idea or concept will not transform your marriage. Only God has that power. But when a man understands God's design for marriage, and his sacred role as a husband in it, positive change will occur. It is these practical strategies that I pray God will use to allow you, with His Spirit, to experience transformation in you and in your marriage.

1. You'll make no progress without intentionality

When you want to improve your golf game you have to seriously commit to practice. Most of us hackers also need to engage a golf instructor to help identify our bad habits and swing flaws. When you want to improve your organization/team at work, you spend dedicated time and effort to assess the situation, identify performance gaps, and develop the plans and strategies that can help you exceed your objectives. And when you feel as though God has become more distant in your life, you have likely learned that it won't be tangibly improved unless you proactively make time on your calendar for study, journaling, and prayer that allows you to reconnect with your heavenly Father.

Why, then, do so many of us men take a laissez-faire approach to our marriage? Is it because we are afraid to admit that there is a problem? Or because we don't even recognize how badly our marriage relationship has deteriorated over the years until we're at risk of losing it? Or, is it because we have a 'relative' view when it comes to our marriage – "My marriage may not be perfect, but it's at least as good as the other couples we know." Perhaps the biggest reason you haven't made this a priority in your life is that you don't have a clear sense of how much better your marriage relationship could be and you're resigned that, "This is as good as it gets."

God has a different view. Do you remember how much you could not wait to see her when you were dating? Do you remember how comfortable you were with her before the fury of life and raising kids came along? Do you have any appreciation for how much better the remaining years of your marriage could be if you made it the priority it deserves to be? Do you realize how much your relationship 'fractures' are going to be exposed and turned into chasms in the remainder of your marriage if you take an apathetic or resigned approach to the whole topic? The choice is yours of course – invest now, or not. You will reap what you sow either way.

The opposite of love in marriage is not hate; it's apathy. And the most insidious ailment in marriage today is apathy. Apathy is pretending everything is just fine and then rationalizing that my marriage is "ok" because at least we are still together. This apathy becomes obvious when a man decides not to proactively invest in the health of his marriage for reasons including:

- "I'm too busy now, I'll get to that later"
- "You don't know my wife...she'll never change anyway"
- "We don't have any problems that other couples don't experience too"

These attitudes will lead to an erosion of the marriage relationship that occurs slowly but surely over many years. It is the man who leans on these excuses whose wife comes to him after 25 years of marriage - when their kids are grown or at least away at college, and announces to her husband that she has had enough and is filing for divorce. And the reaction of the apathetic husband: "I didn't even realize there was a problem!" It is the precise reason that there is a divorce epidemic among couples married 25 years or more.

Don't allow yourself to be surprised - God has endowed you with the responsibility for the health of your marriage and apathy is dangerous and leads to predictable ends – mediocrity at best and divorce at worst.

2. When pride comes, then comes disgrace

Of the proverbial seven deadly sins, 'pride' may be the most dangerous and insidious. A simple definition for the Christ-follower: pride is excessive belief in one's own abilities that interferes with the individual's recognition of the grace of God. It has been called the sin from which all others arise – which is why it's so dangerous.

Pride is not always obvious and manifests itself in so many married men's attitudes that can be counter-productive to a healthy marriage relationship. Pride's prevalence (and the corresponding lack of humility) is the reason the Bible has so much to say on the topic with no fewer than 50 verses in the Old and New Testaments. Here are a few of the most notable:

- *When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom* (Prov 11:2).
- *Before his downfall a man's heart is proud, but humility comes before honor* (Prov 18:12).
- *Humility and the fear of the LORD bring wealth and honor and life* (Prov 22:4).
- *Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him...* (Prov 26:12).
- *For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted* (Mt 23:12).
- *Jesus called the Twelve and said, “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all”* (Mk 9:35).

How much more obvious could God make the dangers of pride than in these verses? If our aspiration, and God's desire, is for us to become more Christ-like, pride may be THE primary stumbling block standing in our way to achieving this end. Pride is why we don't want to 'give in' while arguing; it's why we don't like being challenged by our wives; it's why we don't include them in decisions; It's why we don't like to admit we were wrong; it's the countless times in a day that we are dismissive towards our wives – not listening, not acknowledging, or perhaps for you it's the silent treatment. And the list goes on and on and on...

Why is genuine humility so elusive to most of us? Because it requires us to surrender. We are so used to being in control and doing things for ourselves that the notion of giving up that control is more frightening than walking to the edge of a cliff. True humility requires us to be 'empty' from an earthly perspective and to be "filled" with the power of Christ's spirit. Galatians 2:20 says, *I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me.* We are called to be less, so that Christ can be more, and our self-reliant human nature innately resists this call.

We are called as husbands to think of our wives as better and more important than ourselves. Easy to say, but how hard is that to genuinely apply? It means your priorities and desires become secondary, not primary. It means your 'happiness' is not the goal; but your righteousness, in God's eyes, is.

Humility is what Jesus came here to show us, first-hand. He did so with the ultimate sacrifice – he gave up His life for us. Most of us would take a bullet for our wives...literally! And yet, we struggle mightily to treat her with love, kindness, and patience on a day-to-day basis. Paul captures the contrast well,

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others (especially our wives) better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross. (Phil 2:3-8 - Parenthetical addition is mine)

I pray that any husband committed to transforming his marriage will embrace Jesus' example and learn to 'die to self' daily so that we may love and serve our wives extraordinarily.

3. Your wife can make the first move...but it almost never works

In the first part of this book, we covered God's masterful design for marriage that equips women to dramatically respond to their husbands being more Christ-like towards them. And it begs the question, does it work both ways? In other words, if a woman were to step up and be more giving, more loving, and more Christ-like, would her husband respond in the same, dramatic ways?

You may think it would be worth the experiment but the short answer is, 'no.' Foremost among the reasons is that God created men and women uniquely, and a man is generally not designed to respond in this way. Perhaps it is our overactive pride that prevents us from admitting there is a problem in the first place. Maybe it is our innate desire to lead. Or, it might be our stubbornness that prevents us from responding effectively when our wife tries to lead us to a better place in our marriage.

Regardless of the impediment, men are given a unique, God-ordained charter in the marriage to take responsibility for the well-being and strength of the relationship. Most men have never been introduced to this aspect of our spiritual leadership charter and it is both energizing and

intimidating to realize that we have this assignment.

Emerson Eggerichs offered a great perspective in his book, *Love and Respect* when addressing the question of who, between two married people, ought to be the one who takes the first step in reconciling after an argument or spat. His answer is profound: "Perhaps the more mature of the two of you." Men – do you get his point?

4. Forgiveness and Repentance

At the risk of stating the obvious, we are all fallible humans who are by nature self-interested. And it is your self-orientation that's often the reason we hurt and offend others, not the least of which is your wife. The simple prescription: don't do anything that hurts your wife and you won't need forgiveness. Far easier said than done. Instead, let's accept the reality that we're going to cause hurt to our spouse – like it or not!

When we sin in any way, we create a separation in our relationship with God. We create the same type of separation with our wives when we hurt or sin against them. I heard one pastor say, "Behind every bad marriage is unrepentant sin." I'm not sure it's absolutely true but it's pretty close.

This is why marriage, done right, is the personification of the gospel. We're going to sin against each other – no doubt. In the same way, we are promised forgiveness because of the grace provided by the sacrifice of Jesus' death on the cross, we have this same grace available to us in a strong marriage – especially for the repentant heart.

There are three key components that allow us to experience the healing power of the gospel: confessed sin, true repentance, and forgiveness. Similarly, the same three components apply in our marriage and are nothing short of restorative when we get it right.

Confessed sin

Whether it is our thought life, our anger, our impatience, or any other sins of commission or omission, we're all sinners and in desperate need of a Savior. When we don't confess our sins, we miss the restorative power of the gospel and remain separated from God. It is the very reason Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf is so powerful and restorative.

In the same way, when we have unconfessed sin against our wife, we're separated both physically and spiritually. Two verses highlight God's perspective on confession that provides us great hope in return for a true

self-examination of our heart and our behavior:

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1John 1:9).

Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much (James 5:16).

How honest are you about the sins you have committed against your wife and, therefore, against God's will? Confession is difficult, but it is also liberating for the Christ-follower because it's in this process that pride loses its grip, humility becomes comfortable, and healing can begin.

Repentance

Confession may be the hardest part of this equation but repentance is the component that allows the marriage relationship to heal. When your wife genuinely senses that you recognize you have sinned against her and that you are both deeply sorry and genuinely committed to stopping the behavior, God designed her heart to soften.

Our wives often struggle to forgive us because they don't always believe there is true repentance. And when they have experienced our ways for many years, I suppose they can't be faulted. Even when our heart becomes right and we are genuinely repentant, the typical response from your wife may be, "I've heard you say you're sorry before and it's always been a temporary improvement." Sound familiar?

Here is the hope for all of us: when the Holy Spirit is in us, and is motivating us to change from within, the fruit of His Spirit is manifested and we become new and 'born again' as a new man. It is not temporary. The only thing standing in our way to transformation is not allowing our old 'self' to die.

When you are honest and genuinely repentant with your wife, there are few things more endearing and powerful to her than a husband who is humble enough to admit that he has made mistakes, even serious mistakes, and who acknowledges the hurt he has caused and is committed to doing better. There is a distinct difference between a husband saying, "I'm sorry" (which is most often received skeptically by our spouse because we say it as though we are mostly sorry that she was offended) and saying, "I was wrong" (which communicates a deeper

sense of contrition and ownership for the offense).

Do you ever feel as though God isn't hearing your prayers? These two verses may give you both a sense of hope and a hint of the problem that a lack of repentance can create:

For Godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted... (2 Cor 7:10a)

Husbands, be considerate as you live with your wives...so that nothing will hinder your prayers (1Peter 3:7).

Forgiveness

I know you can't control your wife's willingness to truly forgive when you've done some things that have caused her hurt. I also recognize that our wives can have very long memories – it is an amazing gift they have in life. And yet, when her heart is convinced that we are sincere in our confession and repentance, God designed her to respond in amazing ways.

And there's a profound hope in all of this: forgiveness in a marriage reawakens affections you both thought were dead. Are you convinced that the romance and affection you and your wife once cherished are irretrievable? They can be renewed, perhaps better than ever, if we apply the power of the gospel – confessed sin, genuine repentance, and forgiveness to our marriage.

One of Tim Keller's great insights applies here, "Record keeping is death in a marriage." He is right – and it works both ways. We obviously want our wives to forgive us when we fail in some way but we also must be willing to reflect upon what God may be teaching us through her shortcomings.:

Make a new commitment to assume the best intentions of your wife as opposed to thinking the worst. Better yet, grant her forgiveness before you even feel it. The grace you provide to her will in turn be provided to you. It is the way God designed her. Shower her with a liberal dose of grace because life is too short to withhold forgiveness. Allowing your marriage to be the personification of the gospel to others may be among the greatest ways we can be 'salt and light' in today's world.

5. Communications

Communicating effectively matters in our marriages because it matters A LOT to our wives. When women are asked what would have the most profound impact on improving their marriage relationship, they most often pick improved communications at the top of the list. I know that sounds ominous to the average, less-communicative husband reading this book, but it is important that we understand and deal with the reality of their feedback.

Quantity of communications is one challenging aspect but not the most important. Quality of communications matters even more. That means respectful, two-way dialogue between the two of you on things that matter to both of you.

How well does your wife really know your heart? Does she know your biggest concerns? Does she know the hurts and scars from your past? Does she know your dreams? Or, your frustrations about not being able to fulfill those dreams?

Do you know those same things about her? Do you ever ask her about her dreams and aspirations and really listen for the answers? Do you know her disappointments – in your marriage or otherwise? Do you solicit her advice when it comes to business or financial decisions that are important in your life?

Generally, men do not do well in answering these questions because heart-felt communication is not our strength. We can talk endlessly about business, sports, politics, and cultural issues, but we can be feeble when it comes to ‘feelings.’

On the other hand, communication and heart-based emotions tend to be the lifeblood of our wives. This is evidenced in a study conducted by the University of Maryland’s College of Medicine that found women, on average, speak about 20,000 words per day while men speak only 7,000. Is it obvious that God made our wives uniquely?

Perhaps more striking (and troubling), the average married couple has very little “quality” conversation in any given day. One study suggested that the average married couple experiences as few as 4 minutes per day of quality conversation between spouses, beyond dialogue on day-to-day tasks and transactional conversations. If women are thirsty for communication and men are not as adept, is it any wonder that this

represents a real gap in many marriages today?

Effective communication may be the key to enabling you to experience a renewal in your marriage that allows you and your wife to genuinely know each other again; or perhaps for the first time ever. You will not likely become an overnight conversationalist, but there are some practical strategies and attitudes that can be transformational:

Assume the best of intentions, not the worst

When Devonie asks me a question or makes a statement that puts me on the defensive, I tend to quickly try to determine the hidden agenda or purpose behind her statement – and my mind is a dangerous thing most days. The reason is that my natural ‘self’ too often assumes the worst of intentions. Here is a simple example:

She says: “Why didn’t you go to the hardware store before you went to pick up the kids?”

My mind plays out multiple intentions on her part:

- Why is she micro-managing my day?
- I can do things in any order I choose – I was a grown man the last time I checked.
- Why does she even care what order I made the two stops?

Sounds like the epitome of maturity – yes? But it is the mind games our sin nature tends to play that are less than helpful. Her actual intention: She is simply curious about why I decided to stop at one place before the other – that’s it!

I could provide 5,000 scenarios like the one above that resonate with prideful, self-sufficient men like me. There is something about our pride and about our sin nature’s way of thinking that makes us naturally over-analyze our wife’s intentions and too often assume the worst of intentions on her part. The problem with this inclination is that we create unnecessary friction between the two of us and nothing productive comes of the friction; unless we think we can declare personal “victory” by somehow proving that we are right and she is wrong. The alternative: assume her intentions are pure and noble (or at least not accusatory

and convicting). You will feel less threatened, have fewer conflicts, and experience significantly more marital harmony, and she will feel less dismissed or, worse yet, attacked.

Bestselling author Marcus Buckingham put it this way in his research on marriage, “The happiest couples have a very unrealistic (unrealistically good!) view of their spouse and they endeavor to find the most generous explanation for their spouse’s behavior and then believe it.” Sounds suspiciously like grace.

Women confront to connect

This is a counter-intuitive concept to most men because men confront to confront (or at least to accomplish an objective). It is the reason we immediately become defensive when our wives confront us, even when they do so gently. We have dealt with confrontation on the playground as kids, in the locker room in high school, and in the office or at work as adults.

When your wife brings up an issue that feels confrontational, she isn’t necessarily intending to start a battle. She may well be trying to find a way to connect with you in the best way she knows how - directly. Once again, we are assuming the best in her intentions vs. assuming the worst.

Changing your reaction to her sometimes-challenging questions may require you to ask a few simple, less-than-natural questions: How does her question provide me an opportunity to be more Christ-like? Can it help me become more patient? Is this an opportunity to improve my ability to share more openly with her? Or, is this an opportunity to treat her respectfully and not dismissively?

When you change your interpretation of her intent in these types of interactions; before long, her challenging questions become less threatening and represent daily opportunities for God to sanctify you. Over time, you will also see a dramatic change in the way your wife responds and confronts you – because God designed her in precisely that way.

The 5 Love Languages

Gary Chapman wrote a highly acclaimed book called, *The 5 Love Languages* that puts substance and structure to what enables married men and women to better understand what makes each of us feel loved.

He explains that spouses tend to employ the love languages that they most appreciate personally. But we would be more effective by expressing love in a way that our spouse most values – which is their love language. He identifies the 5 “languages” as follows:

- Words of affirmation – those who feel loved when they are encouraged and affirmed
- Acts of service – people who feel most loved when their spouse does something considerate for them
- Physical touch – the larger number of people who feel most loved when holding hands, getting a hug, or being physically intimate
- Quality time – those who feel loved when their spouse simply spends time with them in virtually any setting
- Gifts – those who appreciate small (or large) gifts as genuine evidence of their spouse’s love and affection

While virtually every married person has more than one love language, we generally have one or two primary languages. When we learn how to respond to our wife’s primary love languages it most effectively communicates to her that she is loved. When we don’t understand what makes her feel loved, we may be doing what you have intended to show her love but will likely miss the mark entirely in her eyes.

A simple example: if you cherish other people affirming you – with compliments for example – and that is what makes you feel loved and appreciated, you will tend to make that your focus with your wife. You will excel at telling her that she is a great wife, mother, or cook. But if her love language is quality time and you are prone to work excessively and travel weekly, you can deliver all the words of affirmation you want and she will not feel adequately loved.

Chapman’s premise is simple and powerful: find ways to better communicate in a ‘language’ that our spouse understands and appreciates. You and your wife will benefit from reading the book, taking the assessment tests to determine your respective love languages, and then enjoying the fruit of that small investment of time and energy.

Transparency and vulnerability

One study I came across recently asked men how many people are in their lives with whom they could be fully honest and transparent (including

their wives). The stunning answer: the average was greater than zero and less than one! Men tend towards independence vs. interdependence. That is not to say we don't have friends and people with whom we enjoy spending time. But in terms of having people with whom we can be fully open – sharing our hopes, fears, or even helping to keep us accountable – we have almost none.

It is one of the reasons wives can get so demoralized in the communication aspect of the marriage. They often perceive that their husband doesn't share his feelings or his emotions and rarely lets her into his 'world.' As a result, they feel as though the relationship is largely centered on the utilitarian aspects of life – where the kids need to be transported, whether there is enough money in the checkbook, and who's going to vacuum the living room next. Necessary topics for sure, but not what our wives desperately desire – the ability to talk about things that really matter in our marriage and in our lives.

There is a compelling TED talk in the “best of” category called ‘The Power of Vulnerability’ by Dr. Brene Brown where she outlines in 20 minutes her research that explains that transparency and vulnerability are among the most endearing qualities in a person and these traits are more central to deepening relationships than nearly any other. Here is the link: [Dr. Brene Brown's Ted Talk](#)

I can hear your objections from here as you are saying, “I’m just not built that way!” Or, “The soft, touchy/feely stuff just isn’t my thing.” And yet, it may be the “touchy/feely” side of things that will do more to reconnect you and your wife than just about anything else you could fathom. Does she know your hopes and dreams? Do you know hers? You might be surprised by the power of letting her into your world and experience how integral this is to the strength and health of your marriage in God’s design.

Learn to fight fair

As much as we would like to believe that fighting doesn’t happen in great marriages, it’s inevitable in virtually all relationships. When you put two people together in a long-term union with different backgrounds, different perspectives, and different personalities, you can expect disagreements.

Fighting fair, though, is a choice you both make. Fighting in the wrong way does not just leave scratches in the relationship, it leaves scars in one or both of you. It may seem as though a nasty argument ‘goes away’ over time. The shrapnel of the words and actions that come from conflicts

can often sting in your spouse's mind for years, and depending on the severity, forever.

So, what's 'fair' in a fight?

First, you must understand your respective fighting styles. Are you a confronter or an avoider? If you're an avoider (like I tend to be) – the last thing you want to have is a spontaneous combustion fight at the spur of the moment because you'd prefer to go away for a while to process your emotions and prevent an over-reaction. The confronter wants to take on the issue directly - the sooner, the better. The better you understand each other's default 'style,' the easier it is to develop strategies to resolve the conflict.

Second, when disagreements arise, seek first to understand your spouse's perspective instead of always seeking first to be understood. So often our disputes occur because of misunderstandings, not because of one spouse's mal-intent. One way to help in this regard is to use empathetic listening to be sure we are actually hearing our spouse's perspective before we react in an emotional way. "What I hear you saying is..." without a challenging attitude, is a great way to determine if you are hearing what she is feeling and trying to communicate long before you react to what you thought you heard.

Finally, fighting fair is largely about being respectful of your bride - no matter the circumstances or the argument. She is the person God blessed you to love for the rest of your life and neither of you can afford to damage the pillars of this sacred relationship. Spend less time and energy focused on how your spouse needs to change and especially avoid the tendency to be dismissive towards your spouse. Instead, spend more time focused on how you can change the one person you can change – you! Let God do the rest.

There is a bit of wisdom I am fond of related to arguing with your wife: you can either be right, or you can be happy. Believe it! Is it THAT important that you win an argument or prove that you are right and she is wrong? That is our pride in action! Choose to be gracious and humble enough to admit that you are not always right and you're more likely to achieve happiness in the long run.

The bottom line remains the same...respond in a Christ-like way.

Marriage staff meetings

When Devonie and I spent 13 weeks in the marriage workshop at our church we learned about a simple concept called 'The Marriage Staff Meeting'. Staff meetings were not a foreign concept to me because they were a regular part of my business roles for 20+ years by this time in my career. In business, these meetings were focused on establishing priorities, gaining alignment on key decisions, developing strategies, resolving conflicts, communicating our organization's intent, and even celebrating our progress and accomplishments. You would struggle to run an effective business or organization without them.

And yet, when it comes to marriage and family, very few couples would even consider the notion of having staff meetings. Admittedly, our first marriage staff meetings were uncomfortable and awkward. But when we proactively scheduled an hour that allowed us to do all the same things a business leadership team would do – discuss issues, gain alignment, decide on strategies, celebrate progress, and pray together – we connected on the things that really mattered in a forum that was calm and productive because the discussion did not erupt from a previous disagreement or tension. We found these meetings to be both useful and rewarding. They also allowed us to proactively avoid conflicts.

Without getting overly prescriptive about the format, here is a general sense of what we found helpful:

- Prayer
- Each spouse comes prepared to discuss a few key topics:
 - The best thing(s) that have happened in our marriage life over the past week
 - The most challenging things that have happened recently (or have bothered us)
 - Current priorities that require attention – and what can we do to help address them
 - Any other topics worthy of discussion including confessions, apologies, and affirmations

- And, “How can I help you?” (note the orientation – it is all about them, not you)

The staff meeting concept was particularly important when our children were at home because the flurry of life’s activities can get so pervasive that we are left with little time to discuss things that matter. If you employ this strategy, tell your children that this time is uninterrupted and they will someday tell you how impressed they were that you took the time to invest in your marriage in this way.

6. Sex and Intimacy

In today’s culture, sex has become distorted at least partially because it is portrayed as a ‘normal’ part of relationships for married and unmarried people alike. It is also distorted by the common attitudes of men and women in our secular world.

I often hear married men jokingly (and depressingly) say that sex is infrequent in their marriage and they have become resigned that, “It’s as good (and frequent) as it’s going to get.” They rationalize their reality by thinking, “At least it’s no worse than the other men I know who are married.” Women, on the other hand, often lose some of their desire for sex as they become busy with children, their work, and a myriad of other life priorities. They compare notes with their friends and can easily resign themselves to the fact that sex is going to be far less frequent as we age and it is not only ok but it’s also normal. The problem with both sides of this equation is that this married couple loses not only the physical closeness of a strong intimacy in marriage; they also lose the corresponding spiritual intimacy.

Based on my personal experience and conversations with countless men, sex is critically important to your marriage. Intimacy is not a ‘nice to have,’ it’s far closer to a key success factor for an abundant marriage. God perfectly designed marriage. He also designed intimacy in a marriage to be the ultimate union of the married couple as two become one. And the pleasure is not purely physical; it is as much spiritual when it is done within God’s design for marriage.

As one friend said to me recently, “When my wife and I are connected and intimate, I am walking 5 feet off the ground (figuratively of course) often for days following.” That could not happen with a purely physical act. I’ll argue that one key element of staying in love is to make love. Do not

become resigned that you and your wife are past the point of enjoying intimacy – you will both lose the benefit of this spiritual ‘glue’ that God designed to bind your relationship.

Sex is one of God’s masterpiece designs. He intended to join a man and woman in marriage and did so while providing often differing sex drives. Generally, (not always) men have a stronger sex drive than women, biologically speaking. I often ask the men in the marriage workshops to consider God’s alternatives here – he could have made both genders with a relatively low sex drive and it would drastically compromise the procreation aspect of His design for marriage (and the world). Alternatively, He could have designed both spouses with more equal, relatively strong sex drives and I would guess either little else would be accomplished in this world among married couples or there would be considerably more infidelity in our world.

Or, as He chose to do, God designed us with unequal sex drives that help to domesticate the average man. Because our desire and drive for sex tend to be strong, a man learns that to satisfy his God-given desire requires that he love his wife and serve her in a way that she in turn has a desire for intimacy with him. Your wife has also likely learned that intimacy with her can be an unparalleled source of satisfaction for you. Think for a minute about the brilliance of God’s design – He uses a man’s sex drive to help groom our character, behavior, and attitudes toward our wife.

One major challenge in today’s culture that erodes the power of intimacy in marriage is the availability and prevalence of pornography. Men will often justify their use of pornography as innocent or as a victimless sin. It is not. When a man (or a woman for that matter) is regularly viewing pornography, there is no shortage of victims.

The man himself will suffer the consequence of a tangible separation from God because of this sin (remember Jesus saying that even if we look at a woman with lust in our heart it is like committing adultery). His wife is a victim because she can never satisfy her husband’s growing and insatiable appetite for more, increasingly intense, and even perverted sexual stimulation. Even the children of this marriage are victims; perhaps years later when they find out that their parents are pursuing a divorce because of ‘irreconcilable differences.’ Your interest in pornography is anything but a victimless offense. When intimacy is infrequent and a low priority in a marriage, these types of temptations are drastically more attractive and far too easy to experience. A couple doing marriage God’s way must

help each other to remove these and other sexual temptations and that requires honesty, transparency, and a large dose of grace and forgiveness.

If you believe, as I do, that sex and intimacy are a critical and strategic part of creating and sustaining an abundant, God-ordained marriage, there is one major way you can foster the relationship environment where intimacy is desirable and prevalent – by being more Christ-like. Remember, God will use your wife to help you recognize your progress towards becoming more Christ-like as you learn to be more sensitive to her needs, to listen better, to serve her first, to understand her dreams and aspirations, and all the other dimensions we've explored thus far in this book. The most encouraging news for you: as you make progress, her desire for you both physically and emotionally will grow. It is God's design – and it is a gift that I pray you'll embrace.

7. Staying married is about burning the ships

Even if you are not a history buff you may have heard the story of the famous explorer Hernando Cortez. Cortez was the great Spanish explorer who burned his entire fleet upon reaching the destination of his mission in present-day Veracruz, Mexico. He burned them so that when the going got tough in the upcoming battle, his men would have no means of retreat. It was do, or die trying. There was no going back, only pressing on.

There is a great parallel in marriage. If a couple goes into the marriage thinking, "This will be great for as long as it lasts," it is not likely to last because the relationship is conditional. They are only committed for as long as the marriage is still working well. And when it isn't working, there are alternatives available so that we can both be happy - which is the ultimate goal...right?

Wrong! The question, "Did I marry the right person?" has no relevance in a covenant relationship.

So, Cortez had it right. The only way to ensure that you and your wife don't prematurely look for the next-best alternative to being together when the going gets tough - financially, sexually, in parenting, or any other dimension you can fathom - is to burn the ships and jointly agree that exiting this marriage is not an option.

When you eliminate other choices and are fully committed, you will both

be determined to invest your time and energy to make the best of your marriage. When you have no choice, you learn to compromise. When you have no choice and believe that a man and a woman are *“no longer two, but one (and that) what God has joined together, let man not separate (Mk 10:8-9)*, you will approach every situation, every conflict, and every opportunity in a very different light. One that is fully committed and that honors God in the process.

Burn the ships and commit, from the beginning and relentlessly, to love your wife ‘till death do you part.

8. Joy is found when you stop expecting your spouse to make you happy

We tend to be narcissistic in life. Translated: “It’s all about me.” And it naturally carries over to our married life. We know what we like and what we want and if we get these things, then our life (and marriage) is fine. When a man, or worse yet, both spouses go into marriage with this mentality, the result is two people with different agendas, goals, and expectations about nearly everything. It’s akin to two kayak teammates pulling the oars in opposite directions – the result is a spinning boat, going nowhere!

I remember a sermon at our church several years ago when the Pastor challenged the congregation at the end of the first week’s message with a homework assignment. He asked us to go home and return the following Sunday with a list of the key expectations we have of our spouse in marriage. It is an interesting exercise that I’d encourage you to pause for a few minutes to ponder yourself. What do you expect of your wife? To earn a minimum level of income? To prepare dinner for the family? To make love often? What else?

We returned the next week, with our carefully thought-out list that seemed reasonable from each of our perspectives. The Pastor then explained that in a healthy marriage, we should have no expectations of our spouse. What??? Aren’t there some minimal things we should expect – share chores? Spend responsibly? You know, just a small set of reasonable expectations? No, no, and no.

We can certainly have desires in our hearts, but as soon as we have expectations (as though we deserve these things) we are setting ourselves up for disappointment and setting our wife up for failure, at

least in our judgment. Can you see the not-so-subtle difference between our desires and our expectations? As soon as we translate our desires into expectations, the danger begins – for you and your spouse. Think about the words – “I **expect** this of you” – sounds demanding, doesn’t it?

Instead of leaning on expectations, focus on becoming the best husband you can be – in loving and serving her. Leave the rest to God in equipping both of you to love and respond to each other. The less you expect, the less likely you are to be disappointed anyway.

Marriage can certainly bring us joy in our lives but fallible humans are generally prone to disappoint each other. And when a man counts on his wife to bring him joy, or worse yet, places her and their relationship on too high a pedestal, we are setting ourselves up for disappointment and discouragement.

God, our sovereign Creator, wants our identity to be secure in Him. He desires to be the ultimate relationship in our lives and if we, *seek first the kingdom of God, and all His righteousness, then all these other things will be provided.* (Mt 6:33) This includes an abundant relationship with your wife.

Think for a moment about the mirror analogy I shared previously – your wife is the mirror that helps you get a full-length reflection of how we are doing on our path towards Christ-likeness. This analogy is not intended to mean that she should be the source of your happiness (or lack thereof). The real source of our joy as Christians rests in our identity in Christ, where it belongs.

Tim Keller said it well, “If you pursue happiness without righteousness, you’ll get neither. But if you pursue righteousness, you’ll get both.” If we are looking to our spouse or our marriage for our happiness in life, we are destined for disappointment. If, on the other hand, we pursue alignment with God’s purpose for our marriage and our sanctification (our journey to becoming more Christ-like) and see that God intends to use our wife as a strategic part of that journey – we are more likely to achieve both sanctification and happiness.

9. The couple that prays together, stays together

In his series entitled, *The Role of the Man in the Family*, David McLaughlin discusses the divorce rates in our country and contends that the reported divorce rate among couples that pray together is about one in ten thousand. Even if it is overstated a thousand-fold, it is an impressive statistic. Prayer is so profound in a Christian marriage because it is the epitome of intimacy. But this intimacy is also the reason praying together is often uncomfortable and even more unusual.

Most men reject the suggestion of praying with their spouse and here are two of the most common excuses: “I know it sounds so simple but my wife and I just don’t feel comfortable praying together.” Or, “Prayer is more of a private thing for us.”

Whatever the excuse, prayer is a central part of our relationship with God and if it can help divorce-proof your marriage and draw you both closer to God in the process, why wouldn’t we be intentional about making it a priority?

Devonie and I have periods where we pray together and then we will fall out of our good prayer habits. There is no doubt that we are better connected and spend far more time talking about things that matter in our lives when we do find the time, energy, and courage to pray together. If God desires to be the ultimate, intimate relationship in both of our lives – why wouldn’t we include Him in our prayer lives together?

10. Loving others at the expense of your wife

Husbands who are Pastors can be at a disadvantage in marriage. They are paid, professional caretakers. Their job is to care for their church members and that takes time and emotional energy to do well. The challenge comes at the end of each day when their physical and emotional reservoir runs dry by the time they arrive home to their wife and family who also crave their time and attention.

The rest of us face a similar challenge. We spend most of our waking

hours accomplishing important work tasks, helping our employees or colleagues, or even helping our neighbor with a project at their house and we come home exhausted from the day's tasks, many of which are focused on serving others.

I know what you're thinking, "But Jesus implored us to love our neighbor as ourselves." And, you are right... to an extent. Among all your earthly relationships, there is one, highest priority relationship you are entrusted with – and that is with your wife. She is an integral part of God's strategy and design in marriage to draw us to Himself by making us more Christ-like.

All people are not created equal in your life. God desires us to love and sacrifice for our wives in a unique and committed way and He knows that when we get that right, our ability to relate well to every other person in our life is substantially better. Loving others is not enough; we are called to love her extraordinarily. She is the one person in the world we are called to lay down our life to serve!

11. We'd give up our life for our wife, but won't take her advice

Do you see the contradiction here? Most of us would literally step in front of a fast-advancing bus to save her life but when it comes to seeking her input in deciding whether to invest in a business opportunity or how to best handle a work-related situation, we would rather go it alone. It is nonsensical and helps to explain why our wives get the sense that they are not valued, much less cherished.

If we are chivalrous enough to offer our lives for her protection and well-being, how much easier is it to share with her what we are struggling with in our lives? Why is it difficult and uncomfortable to solicit her feedback on how we are doing relating to our kids or other family members? Why, of all things, is it so hard to ask her directly whether we are treating her in a way that makes her feel loved?

Is it our pride? Is it the intimidating notion that we are expected to know the answers to these questions already? Or, are we just not prepared to

hear and handle the truth, assuming we are safe enough to invite her to tell us the truth?

God designed your wife's role as a strategic asset and partner in your life and calls you to treat her accordingly. If you owned your own business and had a partner in that business, you would be very careful to consult that partner on every key decision or strategy that you are contemplating – am I right? And you are not even sharing a bed with that partner! Why, in your marriage, wouldn't you treat your wife with even more regard and respect than that business partner?

When you make her an important part of all aspects of your life, she will sense her importance to you and she will respond accordingly. God designed her in this way.

12. Does your enthusiasm for your wife match your dog's?

Credit for this concept goes to Sonny Newton, a Souly Business Men's Retreat colleague (www.soulybusiness.org) and retired Chick-fil-A executive who is notable for contrasting a husband's reaction when their wife comes home to the response of their dog.

The dog's ears perk up while the car approaches the house (it is as though they can recognize the sound of her tires on the road from a mile away). When the garage door opens the dog will sprint with reckless abandon to the back door in exuberant anticipation of her arrival. They stay frozen, almost desperate, at the back door until she enters, at which point they go into full tail-wagging mode as an obvious display of pure, unadulterated joy and love for her.

We, on the other hand, might muster the energy to say, "Hey" when they come in the door and the most chivalrous among us may even ask if they need help carrying something (hoping the answer is no so that we don't miss the next play in the football game we're watching).

Is the contrast obvious enough? We expect our wives to feel loved and cherished, yet our dog puts us to shame every time she walks in the back door. What small, painless adjustment could you make to give her a

genuine sense that you are half as glad to see her as Fido?

13. Marriage as the training ground for life

Life teaches us a lot of lessons as we grow up – how to be polite and what happens if we are not; how to get along with others; how to be a good winner and even more importantly, how to be a good loser; and countless others both small and profound. When we embrace the notion that God has a more strategic design and purpose for marriage, there is no better training ground for life than our marriage.

Is there any better training for self-sacrifice than in a marriage? Can you imagine another relationship that will humble you more than your spouse can – mostly because she sees us at our best and our worst – sometimes in the same conversation? And what about learning to serve others and to think of others as better than ourselves?

Marriage itself is that important to us as Christ's followers. Once we've been seasoned, shaped, and sanctified by the marriage journey, we naturally become better equipped to parent our children; we're bound to be more self-aware and effective in the workplace as an employee or a leader; and we're enabled to love those we come in contact with in any environment because we've learned to be more sensitive, less self-centered, and more spirit-filled to be the 'hands and feet' of Christ in everyday life.

Embrace a bigger, more strategic view of the value and purpose of your marriage. It is the reason it's so sacred. Even if it does challenge your patience at times, thank God for the gift of your marriage that is uniquely purposed to make us more Christ-like in every aspect of our lives.

14. Are you dating your wife?

Seriously, are you dating your wife? Do you remember the time before your wedding day when you were? You were likely pursuing her to win her affection. It is one of the great aspects of God's design for the man's role and goal in the pursuit: to win her affection we must show her we know how to love and care for her and it often serves to domesticate us in the process.

Then we get married, declare victory, and ultimately settle into the

'married' mode when the pursuit is no longer necessary because we feel like we have won the prize we set out to win. How anti-climactic is that?

The business equivalent of this sequence would be for a company to pursue a new client for 12-24 months in the hopes of winning their business and then, once they have decided to award you the business, you stop serving them to the degree you did during the buying/selling process. You might keep their business for a few years but eventually, you will lose the relationship, their loyalty, and their commitment to you will invariably erode. And there is no doubt you will regret the result.

Maybe there is a better approach in business and in our marriage! Persistently ask yourself: Am I still pursuing my wife? Does she feel pursued or have we fallen into a comfortable routine? Do you take her out on a date every week like you did before you were married? Do you occasionally go away for a weekend, just the two of you?

An abundant marriage relationship needs romanticism like a race car needs fuel. Without it, the race is over. With it, the spouse feels appreciated, respected, and alive in the relationship. God's instruction manual for marriage (the Bible) suggests that we are to love others as we love ourselves. How much more does God intend for us to love and cherish our most important earthly relationship than 'others?' Start dating your wife again so that you can re-create the spark that launched your relationship so well in the first place. Having children around is an unacceptable excuse for not doing so!

15. Marriages without margin will struggle

Having taught time management workshops in business environments over many years, I can assure you that 'margin' matters in our lives. My favorite book on this topic was written by Richard Swenson and called, *Margin: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives*. Swenson is a medical doctor who witnessed first-hand, through his medical practice, the deleterious effects of a lack of margin on our physical and mental well-being. He equates a lack of margin in life to the challenge of reading a book with no margin (or white space) on the edges of the paper. Try it on your e-reader sometime – you will find that it's unnerving to read a page of a book that has no white space.

In the same way, your marriage requires margin to be healthy and sustainable. Margin comes in many forms. Financial margin allows you to have a little extra money each month to have some breathing room to deal with an unplanned expense or crisis. Time-related margin allows you to have some extra, unscheduled time on your calendars to relax and enjoy downtime as a couple that is not already committed to work or your children's activities. In essence, margin is what allows you both to stay connected in an otherwise frenzied life.

Do you feel over-committed or worse yet, out of control? Are you, 'living the dream' but find yourselves dying on the inside?

Among the most important resolutions any married couple should embrace to have a dose, or better yet, a healthy serving of sanity in their life is to learn to just say, "No." It is easy to fall into the temptation of being over-committed, too busy, and fully exhausted. Overcoming these traps relies on you jointly determining what activities are in alignment with your individual and marriage/family priorities and making these priorities the guideposts for where and how you commit your time. God did not plan for us to be perpetually over-extended. Proactively decide what you and your family will stop doing to recapture the margin on your calendar, your bank account, and especially in your marriage.

16. Don't do life alone

God did not design us, individually or as a married couple, to do life alone. From the beginning of His church in Acts, there were communities of people who did life together – caring about each other, loving each other, and even holding each other accountable when needed.

Endeavor to find and nurture deep relationships with two to three married couples that you both respect, who are at a similar stage of life, are geographically proximate (to make it easier to spend time together) and who are also faith-aligned with you. These relationships allow you to have a sounding board, provide genuine honesty and accountability, and enable you to seek wise counsel that will serve you well in the inevitable challenging phases of your married life.

17. This trip requires some unpacking

Your life before marriage has a profound impact on your marriage relationship. Virtually every person reading this can think of dimensions of your upbringing, or that of your wife, that have substantially impacted your marriage.

It may be the way your parents or your in-laws fought incessantly; maybe you experienced divorce at an early age and felt abandoned in the process; or your wife may have been physically or emotionally abused in some way while growing up. Regardless of your specifics, we are all influenced and impacted by our childhood and we bring this past and corresponding dysfunction into our marriage, whether we like it or not.

I am not a psychologist and I have neither the talent nor the training to attempt to address these issues in this brief book. What I have learned in my studies is that your past (and her past) is not insignificant and most often cannot be ignored. They represent the key building blocks of your personality, behaviors, triggers, and fears that have helped to form each of you – for better and for worse.

If you react in a certain way during conflicts with your wife, it could very well be the same way you saw your father react thirty years ago when you were a child. If your wife struggles with intimacy, she may have experienced some type of trauma in her past that has contributed to her struggle.

Without attempting to itemize every conceivable family-of-origin challenge, I recommend that you take the time and effort, with the help of a Christian counselor as needed, to better understand your respective pasts to help you both learn to deal more effectively with the challenges that may be stumbling blocks in your marriage today. It could unlock your ability to know how to love your wife in a Christ-like way.

18. Five feet for five minutes

Regi Campbell gets full credit for this concept that he integrates as part of the Radical Mentoring program (www.radicalmentoring.com) that I became involved with a few years back. The program equips men to

mentor younger generations of men in a variety of life-relevant topics including marriage, finances, spiritual life, etc.

One of the exercises that Regi challenges participants to embrace is called, “Five feet for five minutes.” The basic premise is that when you walk through the door at the end of every workday, instead of going to change your clothes or sitting down to catch up on emails, go directly to where your wife is and spend the first five minutes visiting with her. Ask her about her day; comment on how she looks that day; tell her what happened in your day; or whatever else you can do to help her understand that she is your priority for these five minutes, despite your exhausting day that included dozens of competing priorities.

I know what you are thinking, “That would be near-impossible!” And trust me, it is hard to do well and will bring great suspicion on her part, at least initially. Mostly, and sadly, because she has never seen you this attentive to her in all the years you have been married. While it is not an easy habit to form, there are few better things you could do that visibly demonstrate the priority she represents in your life.

19. Managing money together

Money is a big deal in marriage and it is not because you don’t have enough or because one of you is a spender and one is a saver. In the Marriage Matters men’s groups we’ve been conducting for many years, money is often a lightning-rod issue because too many men don’t treat their wives as true partners when it comes to money. I have been amazed at the number of husbands who make key financial decisions or significant investments without consulting their wives or making them an integral part of the process.

Even though you may rationalize that your wife just doesn’t understand money-related issues as well as you do, what she may lack in financial acumen she often more than makes up for in being more intuitive than many husbands tend to be. I can think of three marriages I have been introduced to in the recent past where the husband decided to make investments in a business against his wife’s advice and subsequently lost the investment entirely. Can you imagine a more damaging impact on a relationship that God designed to be based on trust and collaboration?

This book will not sufficiently address, in this limited space, all the key dimensions that deserve to be addressed on the topic of money in marriage. I will leave that task to an accomplished author like Dave Ramsey (*Total Money Makeover*) who brings both common sense and a Bible-centric view to this important topic. In the meantime, because money is such a central reason that marriages struggle, allow me to at least provide a few perspectives on giving, spending, and saving that are important for husbands to understand from a practical and Christ-centered perspective:

- Giving – We can debate the ideal dollar amount or percent-of-income giving that is appropriate but I will leave that to you and God to determine what's right for you and your family. I do know that God is delighted when we are generous with the money He has provided for our stewardship. Money has the potential to control us like few other 'idols' can. It is why the Bible has so much to say about money – including, *"it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God"* (Mk 10:25). For most, generously giving is the best way to break the power that money can wield and is potentially one of the true joys a couple can experience together.
- Spending – Wise couples gain alignment on spending habits, particularly if one of you is a spender and the other is a saver. Lack of alignment on spending has destroyed many marriages. On the other hand, when couples get this right, not only does the bank account become easier to manage, but everything else in the marriage becomes easier and less pressure-filled. Over-spending is not just a practical issue for your marriage, it is a spiritual issue because it reflects what is important in your lives. As the spiritual leader of your family, you have the daunting responsibility to ensure your marriage is healthy in money-related matters and it won't improve by simply imposing spending edicts on your wife. There are some great church-based resources and programs (including Dave Ramsey's Financial Peace University) that can equip you both to work through money-management disciplines with a small group of other couples.

- Saving – Our wives value a sense of security more than just about anything in their marriage. And their sense of security is multi-dimensional:
 - Relationship security – her confidence that you are dedicated to her and to your marriage forever.
 - Safety-related security – that she is physically safe in her living environment.
 - Financial security – her confidence that you have the resources to put food on the table and a shelter over the family's heads, both now and in the future.

When married men become unemployed, particularly for an extended period, it is this financial insecurity that often causes the marriage relationship to become extraordinarily strained. It is not something you can always avoid but a sound savings strategy can help mitigate this insecurity. Do you have a proactive saving strategy? Or, a set of goals for your retirement? If not, create one, with your wife, that addresses all aspects of giving, spending, and saving.

20. Marriage and raising kids

This is a broader topic than I can address thoroughly in this book but as the father of three grown daughters, I can personally attest that it is the combination of trial and error, collaboration, and the grace of God that allows parents like us to celebrate victory at this stage of our empty-nest life today - although with 8 grandchildren so far, it doesn't always feel like an 'empty' nest.

Here are some of the key principles that Devonie and I found had a significant impact on our marriage and how we raised our children:

- Stay in alignment with your wife on parenting decisions. Kids can become very adept at playing one parent against the other - because it works. Lack of alignment can undermine one or both of you as effective parents and will eventually drive a wedge between the two of you. Example - when your adolescent daughter has an argument with your wife and asks you to "set

“Mom straight,” just remember that Mom is always right, even if she’s not (I think you know what I mean). Supporting her will help your daughter recognize the respect and value you place in your wife and help your daughter respect her authority as well.

- Be firm and disciplined in parenting. Few things will put more stress and strain on a marriage than children, at almost any age, who are disrespectful or misbehave. Your children will not admit to this until they are fully grown but you actually take pressure off of them when you give them reasonable boundaries. It is as if they have someone (their terrible, horrible, no-good parents of course) to blame for not being able to do something that their friends may be allowed to do.
- Even while raising your children, your wife is still your first, most important priority. My favorite story in this regard was about a father who was with his toddler son at a playground as his wife watched on a nearby park bench. Another mother was nearby and said to the man playing with his son, admiringly, “He must be the apple of your eye.” The father, without hesitation, smiled and said, “No, she’s the apple of my eye” as he pointed to his wife on the park bench. Now there is an example of the love and admiration we are called to provide to our wives!
- As busy as a married couple invariably becomes, it is important to take time away, by yourselves, to invest in each other. It can be as simple as weekly dates or even weekends away periodically. Not only is this a great investment for your marriage, but it also sends an indelible message to your children by modeling a great marriage for them. There is no better gift, or inheritance, you can give to your children than the example of a devoted husband and an abundant marriage lived out daily by their parents.
- Teenage kids will test you both. When our kids were young, parenting seemed physically exhausting. When they became adolescents and teenagers it became far more mentally and emotionally exhausting. If you don’t have a strong marriage coming into this stage of parenting, small fractures in your relationship can become a chasm. Invest in your marriage before

you face this challenging stage of child-rearing.

- And finally, remember our role as parents. It is not to keep them home forever or to keep them in our care. Women tend to be more nurturing and often have a slightly different perspective, but as a father, I believe we have three primary charters related to our children's development:
 - Love them unconditionally – and by doing so give them a glimpse of how God loves them based on how well their earthly father models this unconditional love.
 - Equip them to become self-sustaining, productive adults – which allows them to live independently, make good decisions, and thrive in their careers, relationships, etc.
 - And, most importantly, help them find a life-giving relationship with Jesus Christ. One that enables them to experience the peace and joy we all long to experience and that also equips them to share their faith with others that God may put in their path.

It is a simple set of principles – may God give you the strength and the grace he granted us.

21. Empty nest stage

This phase of your married life can sneak up on even the most discerning couple. You will go through the first 25+ years of marriage full-steam-ahead focused on advancing your career, raising the kids, and 'living the dream.' You will then wake up at some point and realize that you and your wife are about to have a lot of alone time together and you'll be faced with the reality that you need to figure out what to do with the rest of your lives – individually and together.

What interests do you share? How have you grown together or apart over the years? How do you stay connected? Do you really know how your wife feels about the years you have been together thus far? Are there scars (or shrapnel) either of you have from the past that have not healed or, worse yet, have never been addressed? You will want to know the answers to these questions as you transition to the post-kid phase of

your marriage.

Devonie and I are part of a couple's small group through our church and it has been a great experience. Mostly because the other couples are a special group of people but also because we're all at or near the same stage of life – married for 25+ years, our kids already or nearly adults, and we're all having to struggle with the unique challenges that come with approaching the 'empty nest' stage of life. A stage that is both awesome and intimidating all at the same time.

Our group recently dedicated a few weeks to study and discuss the empty nest stage challenges and opportunities. Here is how the empty nest struggle was captured in the form of a question that was posed by a reader to Focus on the Family magazine recently:

"Now that our kids are gone, what can we do to revitalize our relationship? I thought our marriage was healthy and vibrant - that is, until the last of our three children left home. I realize now that it was the kids who brought life into the house, and that so much of our marriage was centered around them and their activities. Without them, my husband and I are lost. I have too much time on my hands. The two of us have nothing in common, and my husband is spending more time at work and with his buddies so that he doesn't have to deal with our issues. What should I do?"

Sound familiar? If it does, now's the time to prepare. Here are some questions that could be useful for you both to discuss as you approach this phase of life:

General Topics

1. What can we do now to better plan/prepare for the empty nest stage?
2. How can I find a place to contribute my time and talents (and maybe even my treasure) and add value to an organization/ministry?
3. How do we balance staying busy and productive and yet still have margin in our lives?
4. How do we deal with the realities and implications of getting older, including:

- a. Are we still relevant to the younger generations in work and in our church?
- b. What about the physical implications of aging – the aches and pains, mental acuity, etc.?
- c. What about male and female aging issues – Menopause and LowT?
- d. How can we stay young both physically and mentally?

5. How can I be sure that my life really matters, even as I get older?

Marriage Related Topics

1. How do we find hobbies, interests, etc., that we can do together for years to come?
2. Should we take the time and effort to look back at some of the hurts and scars in the previous years of our marriage so that we can thrive in our relationship going forward?
3. What are the keys to understanding and supporting each other well in this stage?
4. What can we learn from our parents – both what they did well and not so well?
5. Couples who have done this well seem to be very intentional - what should we consider doing to be more intentional?

I think you get the idea and you may even think of a dozen more topics that are worthwhile for any middle-aged couple to contemplate. Devonie and I have already been at this stage for nearly two decades and can offer a few guiding principles that represent our “lessons learned” that I pray will be helpful to you:

- Find common interests that you both share. These may involve travel, sports, books, cultural activities, or even volunteer/ministry opportunities. The more interests you share, the more joy you will likely find in being together.
- Set goals - together and as individuals. These goals can be related to your family, finances, giving, work, and your personal growth. A

business cannot survive without goals; why wouldn't a couple benefit from the same?

- Be proactive – if you wait until this stage arrives it will be dramatically more challenging than it will be if you plan ahead
- Make your spouse your most important earthly priority in life. You both spent two to three decades making your children a key priority. Now is the time to reinvest in your marriage relationship and create a God-honoring, abundant relationship. It could be the best, most fulfilling stage of your marriage. It is also the very best gift you could give to your children and your grandchildren – to model marriage in a way they will not often see elsewhere.
- And yet, don't look to your spouse to make you happy. If we are looking to our spouse or our marriage for our happiness in life, we are destined for disappointment. If, on the other hand, we pursue alignment with God's purpose for our marriage and our sanctification, we are far more likely to achieve both sanctification and happiness.
- Don't retire! Too much idle time is not healthy for anyone and the idle mind is a dangerous thing. We are designed by God to be 'on-purpose' with whatever we choose to pursue – for an income or as a volunteer. Your joy in the empty nest stage relies on it.
- And finally, be an exceptional grandparent. By this stage of life, you have the benefit of age, experience, and wisdom with an advanced degree from the 'school of hard knocks.' Use the luxury of your time availability and your advanced degree in wisdom for the benefit of the next generation or any other people whom God may put in your path.

22. For those aspiring to marriage

When Devonie and I met in college we were in love but not particularly mature in our understanding of how God fit into our relationship or our marriage. Thankfully, God was faithful, *to make all things work together for good for those who love him and are called according to His purpose* (Rom 8:28), which is the only way I can explain being more in love with Devonie after more than four decades of marriage than I have ever

experienced previously.

We have not only learned through our own journey, but have also had the opportunity to spend several years working with many engaged-to-be-married couples at our church to help them prepare for their marriage in a thoughtful, Bible-centric way. The ‘lessons learned’ below are specifically intended for those of you reading this book who are not yet married or are approaching marriage and want to be sure that you get it right.

- Rose-colored glasses – unmarried couples, although full of love, rarely have a realistic perspective on the trials and tribulations that marriage always entails. There is no easy way to shatter these glasses for the young couple except to help them understand that their marriage will hit tough spots and work to equip them to deal with the likely challenges. The more realistic our expectations, the more manageable the future challenges.
- Family of origin issues – when you marry, you marry your spouse’s entire family. I don’t mean that literally of course but it is truer than most imagine. Your future spouse’s ‘normal’ is different than yours and they will assume your ‘normal’ is nothing short of bizarre. You will be marrying and inheriting their dysfunctional mother/father/sibling relationships and these family-of-origin challenges are usually bigger and more important than most couples predict. Go in with wide eyes and reasonable expectations.
- Living together before marrying – more than 50% of couples in this country today live together before they marry, mostly because the culture tells them that it is not only normal but that it is actually the ‘smart’ thing to do. And yet, empirical research proves that co-habiting increases the likelihood of divorce because the couple tends to be less committed to the permanence of the relationship. My short advice is the same that I have provided to each of my three daughters – avoid living together before marriage at all costs!
- Communication struggles – I have included a previous section on this topic for all marriages but engaged couples often cannot

fathom the inevitable communication-related challenges that are common in marriage, particularly as you move beyond the honeymoon stage. If a couple can't productively learn to share openly, manage conflict, and compromise on their differences, the relationship will inevitably hit a proverbial wall. It takes time and effort to get this right.

- God at the center of your marriage – many of the couples we worked with were in their 20s and 30s and they often hold the view that their love can overcome all challenges. They worry less about God being a central part of their relationship and would often discount the importance of being 'equally yoked.' Devonie and I struggled with this (see "Our Story") early on and we have relationship scars to show for it. Married couples that don't share a common faith will eventually face a significant challenge in marriage because our faith is so integral to the decisions we make about finances, priorities, raising children, and virtually anything else that matters.

What Constitutes Success?

If you accept my challenge to transform your marriage, starting with yourself, you will likely start this journey with higher expectations and less patience than ideal. You will assume that because you are committed to making progress in your journey towards Christ-likeness and becoming the husband that God designed you to be, your wife will (or should) immediately respond in ways that make the marriage more harmonious. But there are no quick fixes. It took years for the two of you to get where you are today and you cannot expect it to take mere days or weeks to reverse history. You will know I am right when you hear your wife comment, “Ok, I agree he is trying harder but we’ll see how long this lasts.”

God may use our entire lifetime to make us as Christ-like as He purposed us to be in an abundant marriage. Don’t lose faith because faith and hope are what you can best rely on for motivation to persist in your desire to serve your wife in the way God designed.

I wrote a book a few years ago on the topic of healthy, Christ-centered mindsets that allow us to live an abundant life of peace, joy, and purpose ([Amazon: Three Truths & Seven Mindsets](#)). My work with marriages has taught me that there is a short list of healthy marriage-related mindsets that most would benefit from embracing. Here are a few simple examples:

- Let’s assume the best of intentions of our spouse, not the worst
- Let’s Forgive...quickly! Perhaps even make it a contest in your marriage to forgive more quickly than your spouse
- Let’s choose to be happily incompatible; not unhappily incompatible.
- Let’s just decide that our love for each other is a verb (and unconditional), not a feeling.

I think you get the idea. If you adopt these marital mindsets, or others that you decide to add to the list, you’d experience far more peace and joy in your marriage, and in your life.

How do we know when we are approaching success in this marriage journey? Since I am still a work-in-process, I don’t have all of the answers but you’ll eventually experience the difference in small and sometimes significant ways. Maybe you will experience the ability to communicate

better with each other; or less fighting day-to-day; it may even translate to sharing better and enjoying more frequent intimacy.

Over the long term and in the more strategic dimensions, I pray that your investment of time, energy, and prayer will allow God to help you experience a truly abundant marriage that lasts a lifetime. With God at the center – guiding our thoughts and actions that allow both of you to grow in your relationship with Jesus, not just with each other. A marriage that bears fruit in the form of children who become healthy, productive, and faith-filled adults.

One that is kind, not angry; that is caring, not jealous; that is trusting; not skeptical; that is respectful and nurturing, not vindictive; that is self-less, not selfish; that is forgiving, not one that keeps score; and a marriage that is filled with a sense of peace and joy. A marriage that models and motivates other couples to transform and that inspires unmarried people to find the right person with whom they can share their life and love. And finally, a marriage that makes the non-believer marvel at the gift you and your wife have in Christ that they desire to experience first-hand – to the Glory of God.

Helpful Resources

There are countless resources available on the topic of marriage from every conceivable dimension; I've listed below the ones that I have found most useful in my journey that I trust will bless yours:

- *Discovering the Mind of a Woman – Understanding God's design for men in marriage*, Ken Nair – a book for Christian men specifically
- *Love and Respect*, Dr. Emerson Eggerichs – for couples who get caught in the “Crazy Cycle” of marriage
- *The 5 Love Languages*, Gary Chapman – for learning to communicate in a way she will cherish
- *Sacred Marriage*, Gary Thomas – to help both men and women understand God's broader purpose for marriage
- *Sheet Music*, Kevin Leman – transparent and helpful book on sex and intimacy in the Christian marriage
- *Margin - Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives*, Dr Richard Swenson – a physician's perspective on how our lack of 'white space' in our lives can lead to struggles in marriage and in life
- *The Meaning of Marriage*, Timothy and Kathy Keller – practical and bible-centered marriage truths for Christian couples
- *You and Me Forever: Marriage in Light of Eternity*, Francis and Lisa Chan - practical and bible-centered marriage truths for Christian couples
- *Saving Your Marriage Before it Starts*, Les and Leslie Parrott - for unmarried or engaged couples
- *Total Money Makeover*, Dave Ramsey – for those couples that struggle with the impact financial stress and debt has on our marriages

- *Marriage: 6 Gospel Commitments Every Couple Needs to Make*, Paul David Tripp – this is an updated version of Tripp's best-selling book, *What Did You Expect?*
- Christ Quest Ministries – This organization is founded by Ken and Nancy Nair and provides discipleship and training resources - <http://www.lifepartnerschristianministries.com/>