

SAMPLE CHAPTER  
NOT FOR RESALE

# *Marriage*



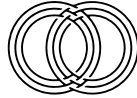
6 GOSPEL

COMMITMENTS EVERY  
COUPLE NEEDS TO MAKE

PAUL DAVID TRIPP

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**6 GOSPEL  
COMMITMENTS EVERY  
COUPLE NEEDS TO MAKE**

**PAUL DAVID TRIPP**

**■ ■ CROSSWAY®**  
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

*Marriage: 6 Gospel Commitments Every Couple Needs to Make*

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*There aren't many couples who are graced by  
having such fine examples go before them.  
Thanks, Tedd and Margy, for giving us a living  
example of how to live in marriage God's way.*



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## Preface to the 2021 Edition

THEY WERE CONFUSED AND AFRAID, facing the unthinkable. Their rabbi, the Messiah, was leaving them. They weren't even close to having a coherent theology of his life and death, let alone any expectation of the victorious resurrection that would follow. They had forsaken everything to follow him, heard him teaching with authority, seen him rule creation in power, and watched him heal the sick with the might of the Creator. What would life be without him? So Jesus spent some of his last hours intimately, personally, and lovingly preparing them. At the center of his preparation were promises that they would cling to in the days, weeks, months, years, and generations to come.

I have thought about one of those promises again and again. In fact, if I didn't believe that this promise was not just for those anxious disciples on the eve of the Lord's death but is for me as well, I couldn't do what I now do. I get up every morning and try my best to take the most glorious body of truth ever revealed and apply it to the situations, relationships, and locations of our daily lives. I know I have little wisdom of my own. I understand that any practically applied wisdom I put down on the page flows from the gospel of Jesus Christ. And I am deeply aware that the gospel is a bottomless well of redeeming, life-altering wisdom. No matter how deep I dig or how many years I dig, I will never reach its bottom.

My job is to continue to learn, approaching my life and work with the hunger and humility of a student. I must never boast that I've learned enough, know enough, or am a gospel graduate. In my fear that I would not get it right and in my understanding that there is so

much more that I need to know, I cling every day of my life to this tender, loving promise made by the world's best rabbi before he became the final sacrificial lamb: "These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (John 14:25–26).

My confidence in writing is not first in my degrees or my decades of ministry experience, but in my helper teacher, the Holy Spirit. Every day I take my seat in his classroom, with heart and mind tuned to him. Every day I ask him to help me see more clearly and understand more deeply. And I am required to confess that I am a work in progress and that today I can see and write things which I didn't see and couldn't communicate ten years ago.

You may wonder what all of this has to do with this new edition of my book on marriage. I am both thankful and excited to say that this new edition is so much more than a marketing ploy to find more audience for an old book. No, it really is the result of my growth in understanding my own material because there is a helper who is still patiently teaching me. It is now apparent to me that this book is not primarily about what the first title, *What Did You Expect? Redeeming the Realities of Marriage*, seemed to communicate that it was about—that is, misguided or failed marriage expectations. No, this book is about six marriage commitments that result from looking at marriage through the lens of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This new edition brings these commitments to the forefront:

Commitment 1: We will give ourselves to a regular lifestyle of confession and forgiveness.

Commitment 2: We will make growth and change our daily agenda.

Commitment 3: We will work together to build a sturdy bond of trust.

Commitment 4: We will commit to building a relationship of love.

Commitment 5: We will deal with our differences with appreciation and grace.

Commitment 6: We will work to protect our marriage.

If there is a contribution this book makes to the daily struggles of marriage, it is found in these commitments. But there is more. After writing *What Did You Expect?*, I wrote a book called *Sex in a Broken World: How Christ Redeems What Sin Distorts*, because everywhere I looked, it seemed that our culture had gone sexually insane. Over the years, it has become clear that this sexual insanity has a hugely destructive impact on even Christian marriages. So we've adapted a chapter from that book and included it here because it provides a gospel perspective on sex. We have also added a chapter with the most frequently asked marriage questions that came to us in the years since *What Did You Expect?* and my best gospel-informed answers. I love how these questions force me to think even more deeply and more practically about how the gospel gives us fresh ways of thinking about and responding to everyday marriage issues. I also love how these questions help us apply the gospel commitments in the book to the specific struggles of our marriages. So make sure you take the time to read, consider, and apply this additional material.

I am very aware of the beauty of the life that I have been blessed with. I know it is only possible because of grace. I am thankful that the Helper Teacher hasn't given up on me. He is still with me, teaching me, giving me eyes to see, the mind to understand, and the humility of heart to receive with joy what he has taught. I am thankful that I continue to learn how the gospel offers our marriages new avenues of help, change, and hope. So, I am grateful for this new edition of my marriage book and for the patient grace it represents. My prayer is that you will be too.

Paul David Tripp  
September 16, 2020

**COMMITMENT 1**

*We will give ourselves to a regular  
lifestyle of confession and forgiveness.*

**COMMITMENT 2**

*We will make growth and  
change our daily agenda.*

**COMMITMENT 3**

*We will work together to  
build a sturdy bond of trust.*

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*We will commit to building  
a relationship of love.*

**COMMITMENT 5**

*We will deal with our differences  
with appreciation and grace.*

**COMMITMENT 6**

*We will work to protect our marriage.*

## Day by Day

I'LL NEVER FORGET THE MOMENT. It was 1974, and Luella and I were on the first mezzanine level of the Forrest Theatre in Philadelphia. It was a packed house at the end of the play *Godspell*. It was no longer a theater audience. It was a celebration, a party. The reprise was being sung and played over and over. The air was filled with magic. The scene was electric. The doors were open, but no one was interested in leaving. The story of the gospel had, for a moment, transported us to another place. People grabbed the hands of people they didn't know and would probably never see again. We danced and hugged and laughed. We were all taken beyond our fears and our self-interest. We were celebrating a victory that many of us didn't really understand. We had seen Wisdom come to earth and transform fools into heroes.

In that once-in-a-lifetime moment we all sang the same song. We sang it over and over. No one in that room wanted that song to stop. The musicians smiled as they cranked it up even more. They knew they may not ever experience that again. It was as though they had a sense that they hadn't made this happen either. Perhaps for the first time they understood what the production they had been part of for many months was all about.

We thought we had the best seats in the house. We could look down and see exuberance like we hadn't seen before and probably wouldn't see again until eternity. As Luella and I glanced at one another, we knew

we didn't need to say what we were thinking. We knew the other knew. Then, suddenly, my mind became freshly aware of the words we were singing, words that all humanity was meant to sing. Tears began to fill my eyes. "This is what we were made for, this is what the gospel is about, and this is what grace alone is able to do," I thought, as I mouthed the words with the crowd, which had become my for-the-moment family:

Day by day  
 Day by day  
 Oh Dear Lord  
 Three things I pray  
 To see thee more clearly  
 Love thee more dearly  
 Follow thee more nearly  
 Day by day.

I don't think it would be possible to have a more appropriate mission statement for a marriage. I am deeply convinced from Scripture, my own experience, and the stories of others that you fix a marriage vertically before you ever fix it horizontally. Before you can really gain significant ground in your relationship with your spouse, ground where real, lasting change takes place, you have to be willing to accept and deal with what God says about you, your spouse, your world, and God himself, his purpose, and his grace. These things aren't just the focus of super-spiritual people who want marriage plus a whole lot of spirituality. No, dealing with these things in a way that forms a day-by-day lifestyle is the foundation of a marriage that is what God designed it to be and does what God intended it to do. You cannot avoid dealing with these things any more than you can avoid removing trees from the wooded lot where your new home is going to be located.

What we so joyously sang that night was much more than a song, although most of the crowd didn't know it. It is rather a radical para-

dig for a way of living that fills every day with honesty and hope. The things that the lyrics call you to are not one-time decisions; they are meant to be daily commitments that become regular ways of living. When the commitments and actions that follow are applied to marriage, something very simple but quite revolutionary happens, and once it does, you will never want to go back again!

### **Brick by Brick**

I performed the marriage, so I got the call. It is almost always made by the wife, and she is calling because she has actually been forced to face what, somewhere in the recesses of her mind, she knew to be true—she and her husband are sinners. The call is usually made a few days or weeks after the honeymoon. On the honeymoon the self-orientation of sin is overshadowed by exotic cuisine and gorgeous sites, but when the couple returns to real, everyday life, minus these distractions, they are forced to face who they really are and what their marriage is actually about.

I have always thought of this moment of reality recognition as a very positive thing, although the caller rarely does. Usually the wife is in a panic; she thinks she has made a mistake, she thinks their love is over, and she imagines she is going to live a life of loveless torment. But at this moment I think she is about to experience the good stuff that only honest marriage can experience. She is about to be taken beyond herself, and in being taken beyond herself she will abandon her dream, and in abandoning her dream she will pick up a better dream, and in picking up a better dream she will commit herself to a set of daily habits that will not only heal her marriage but make it something better than she ever conceived of. The problem is that none of this is what she expected.

Sara called me at 6:30 a.m. the day after the ceremony. I picked up the phone to these two words: “It’s over!” I knew it wasn’t over. In fact, I was happy that she was making the call so soon. I thought Sara and Ben were the smart kids in the class. They had gotten to the end

of themselves quickly and were doing something very wise—reaching out for help. I was delighted to help, and I knew that the journey we were about to take together would change them and their marriage.

Here is what I have told couples again and again. It is what I have endeavored to live in my own marriage as well. *The reconciliation of a marriage must be a lifestyle, not just the response you have when things go bad.* Consider why this must be the case. If you are a sinner married to a sinner—and you are—then it is very dangerous and potentially destructive to allow yourself to coast as a couple. You simply will not live a day together where no act of thoughtlessness, self-interest, anger, arrogance, self-righteousness, bitterness, or disloyalty will rear its ugly head. Often it will be benign and low-level, but it will still be there.

Now, I want to introduce you to a theme that will come up again and again in this book: *if you are going to have a marriage that lives in unity, understanding, and love, you must have a little-moment approach to your marriage.* All this does is recognize the nature of the life God has designed for us. In his wisdom, God has crafted a life for us that does not careen from huge, consequential moment to huge, consequential moment. In fact, if you examine your life, you will see that you have actually had few of those moments. You can probably name only two or three life-changing situations you have lived through. We are all the same; the character and quality of our life is forged in little moments. Every day we lay little bricks on the foundation of what our life will be. The bricks of words said, the bricks of actions taken, the bricks of little decisions, the bricks of little thoughts, and the bricks of small-moment desires all work together to form the functional edifice that is your marriage. So, you have to view yourself as a marital mason. You are daily on the job adding another layer of bricks that will determine the shape of your marriage for days, weeks, and years to come.

Perhaps this is precisely the problem. It is the problem of perception. We just don't tend to live life this way. We tend to fall into quasi-thoughtless routines and instinctive ways of doing things that

are less self-conscious than they need to be. And we tend to back away from the significance of these little moments because they *are* little moments. You see, the opposite is true: little moments are significant because they are little moments. These are the moments that make up our lives. These are the moments that set up our future. These are the moments that shape our relationships. We must have a “day-by-day” approach to everything in our lives, and if we do, we will choose our bricks carefully and place them strategically.

Things don't go bad in a marriage in an instant. The character of a marriage is not formed in one grand moment. Things in a marriage go bad progressively. Things become sweet and beautiful progressively. The development and deepening of the love in a marriage happens by things that are done daily; this is also true with the sad deterioration of a marriage. The problem is that we simply don't pay attention, and because of this we allow ourselves to think, desire, say, and do things that we shouldn't.

Let me play out this life of little-moment inattention for you. You squeeze and crinkle the toothpaste tube even though you know it bothers your spouse. You complain about the dirty dishes instead of putting them in the dishwasher. You fight for your own way in little things, rather than seeing them as an opportunity to serve. You allow yourself to go to bed irritated after a little disagreement. Day after day you leave for work without a moment of tenderness between you. You fight for your view of beauty rather than making your home a visual expression of the tastes of both of you. You allow yourself to do little rude things you would never have done in courtship. You quit asking for forgiveness in the little moments of wrong. You complain about how the other does little things, when it really doesn't make any difference. You make little decisions without consultation.

You quit investing in the friendship intimacy of your marriage. You fight for your own way rather than for unity in little moments of disagreement. You complain about the other's foibles and weaknesses.

You fail to seize those openings to encourage. You quit searching for little avenues for expressing love. You begin to keep a record of little wrongs. You allow yourself to be irritated by what you once appreciated. You quit making sure that every day is punctuated with tenderness before sleep takes you away. You quit regularly expressing appreciation and respect. You allow your physical eyes and the eyes of your heart to wander. You swallow little hurts that you would have once discussed. You begin to turn little requests into regular demands. You quit taking care of yourself. You become willing to live with more silence and distance than you would have when you were approaching marriage. You quit working in those little moments to make your marriage better, and you begin to succumb to what is.

Why do we quit paying attention? Because it is hard work to care, it is hard work to discipline ourselves to be careful, and it is hard work to always be thinking of the other person. Now, be prepared to have your feelings hurt: you and I tend to want the other to work hard because that will make our lives easier, but we don't really want to have to sign in for the hard work ourselves. Oh, I'm not done! I think there is an epidemic of marital laziness among us. We want to be able to coast and have things not only stay the same but get better. And I am absolutely persuaded that laziness is rooted in the self-centeredness of sin. We have already examined the antisocial danger of this thing inside us that the Bible calls sin. We have already considered that it turns us in on ourselves, but it does something else. It reduces us to marital passivity. We want the good things to come to us without the hard work of laying the daily bricks that will result in the good things. And we are often more focused on what the other is failing to do and more focused on waiting for him to get his act together than we are on our own commitment to doing whatever is daily necessary to make our marriages what God intended them to be.

You can have a good marriage, but you must understand that a good marriage is not a mysterious gift. No, it is, rather, a set of commitments that forges itself into a moment-by-moment lifestyle.

## Reconciliation as a Lifestyle: What Does This Mean?

There is a very interesting passage in 2 Corinthians that provides a model for what this day-by-day lifestyle looks like.

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (5:14–21 NIV)

This passage is a call to a particular way of thinking about and living in our relationship to God. What it calls us to in our relationship with God is a wonderful model for our relationship with one another in marriage. This is always true. The first great commandment always defines the second great commandment.

Paul understands that we have been reconciled to God by an act of his grace. He knew that there is no way for us to earn God's love or deserve his favor but, having said that, he was also quick to remind us that reconciliation to God is both an event and a process. Notice the words of verse 20: "We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God." Who is the "you" that Paul is addressing? (The "you" is not in the original, although it is surely implied.) The "you" is the Corinthian church. Now, maybe you're thinking, "Paul, if these people are believers,

haven't they already been reconciled to God?" The answer is yes and no. Yes, they have been reconciled to God in the advent sense of God's acceptance of them in Christ. But there is another reconciliation that is still going on. To the degree that we continue to live for ourselves (v. 15), to that degree we still need to be reconciled to God. Since, in some way, we live for ourselves every day, we need to be reconciled daily to God in confession and repentance. What a perfect model this is for our marriages!

Yes, you've already made that one-time decision to live in love with one another, but you don't always live as if you have. To the degree that you daily, in some way, continue to live for yourself, to that degree you daily need to be reconciled to God and to one another. You don't just coast along, hoping somehow, someday to avoid the bad stuff. No, you live with *reconciliation intentionality*. You live with humble hearts and eyes wide open. You are ready to listen and willing to hear. You examine and consider. You take on habits of reconciliation that become the daily lifestyle of your marriage. And you make those habits a regular part of your daily routine.

Sadly, I think there are few couples who actually live this way. How many couples do you know who say that their relationship is the best it has ever been and that it is getting better all the time? How many couples say that they are now experiencing a deeper level of unity, understanding, and love than they have ever known? How many couples say that their spouse is their deepest, closest, and most precious friend? These things are not like a romantic cloud that you happen to wander into. No, they are the rich, relational blessing of living the way God, who created marriage, intended us to live. They are not relational luxuries for the romantically inclined. No, they are the essentials of a truly healthy and happy marriage, one that not only makes you smile but makes God smile as well.

### **Marital Reconciliation as a Way of Thinking**

I remember that as a young pastor (just a few years ago!) my brother Tedd said that 95 percent of what couples need to know, understand,

and do is clearly written in the Bibles that they say they hold dear. When he said it, I thought it was a huge exaggeration by a frustrated pastor who just happened to be my brother, but I have come to see the accuracy and insight in what he said. There is no collection of wisdom principles more stunningly insightful than what can be found in the pages of Scripture. Of course this would be true, since the book was written by the hands of men who were guided to write what they wrote by the one who created everything about which they wrote. It is only the Creator who could have such a powerfully insightful and practically transformational origin-to-destiny perspective as the one found in the Bible. Only he is able to have a perspective not limited by time and space and the bias of sin. Only he is able to speak from the vantage point of creation intention. Who could possibly know more about the world he created and the people he designed?

God's Word really does open up to us the mysteries of the universe. It really does make us wiser than we could possibly ever be without it. Yet, having said all this, it is important to reflect on how sad it is that we don't take more advantage of the wisdom God has given us. It is sad that we don't think his thoughts after him. It is sad that we don't require ourselves to look at life always through the lens of his wisdom. It is sad that we swindle ourselves into thinking that we are wiser than we are. It is sad that we aren't more irritated by our foolishness and more motivated to seek his wisdom.

Why have I reminded you of all this? Because the marriage reconciliation lifestyle, which is the focus of this book, is rooted in three essential wisdom perspectives that together must become the mentality of a healthy marriage. Let me lay these out for you.

1) *You must live in your marriage with a harvest mentality.* Paul captures this mentality with these very familiar words: "Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap" (Gal. 6:7). If you are ever going to live with daily awareness of little-moment needs that propel you to live with habits of reconciliation, you have

to carry this mentality around with you. You have to buy into the principle of consequences. Here it is: there is an organic relationship between the seeds you plant and the fruit you harvest. In the physical world you will never plant peach pits and get apples. If you plant peach pits and get apples, run fast and run long, because something has happened to the universe! In the same way, there will be organic consistency between the seeds of words and actions that you plant in your marriage and the harvest of a certain quality of relationship that you will experience as you live with one another. Every day you harvest relational plants that have come from the seeds of words and actions that you previously planted. And every day you plant seeds of words and actions that you will one day harvest. Most of the seeds you plant will be small, but one thousand small seeds that grow up into trees will result in an environment-changing forest.

2) *You must live in your marriage with an investment mentality.* We are all treasure hunters. We all live to gain, maintain, keep, and enjoy things that are valuable to us. Our behavior in any given situation of life is our attempt to get what is valuable to us out of that situation. There are things in your life that you have assigned importance to, and once you have, you are no longer willing to live without them. (These principles are laid out in Matt. 6:19–33.) Everyone does it. We live to possess and experience the things upon which we have set our hearts. We are always living for some kind of treasure.

Every treasure you set your heart on and actively seek will give you some kind of return. An argumentative moment is an investment in the treasure of being right, and from it you will get some kind of relational return. If you aggressively argue your spouse into a corner, it is not likely that the return on that investment will be her appreciation for you and a desire to have one of those conversations again! If you invest in the treasure of willing service, you will experience the return of appreciation, respect, and a greater friendship intimacy in your marriage. If it is more valuable to have your house immaculately clean than it is

for your partner to be comfortable, then you will live with the return of that in the quality of your relationship.

Investment is inescapable; you do it every day, and you are seldom able to escape the return on the investments you have made. Ask yourself, “What are the things that are valuable to me right now, the things I work to experience every day and am unwilling to live without? And how is the return on those investments shaping my marriage?”

3) *You must live in your marriage with a grace mentality.* When I got married, I didn’t understand grace. I had a principle-istic view of Scripture that caused me to bring a law economy into my marriage. The central focus of the Bible is not a set of practical-life principles. No, the central theme of the Bible is a person, Christ. If all you and I had needed was a knowledge and understanding of a certain set of God-revealed principles for living, Jesus would not have needed to come. I think there are many Christians living in Christless marriages. Without knowing what they have done, they have constructed a *law-based* rather than a *grace-based* marriage, and because of this, they are asking the law to do what only grace can accomplish.

The problem with this is that we are not just people in need of wisdom; we are also people in need of rescue, and the thing that we need to be rescued from is *us*. Our fundamental problem is not ignorance of what is right. Our problem is selfishness of heart that causes us to care more about what we want than about what is right. The laws, principles, and perspectives of Scripture provide the best standard ever for our marriages to quest for. They can reveal our wrongs and failures, but they have no capacity whatsoever to deliver us from them. For that we need the daily grace that only Jesus can give us.

So, we must not simply hold one another to the high relational standards of God’s Word, but we must also daily offer the same grace that we have been given to one another so that we may be tools of grace in the lives of one another. Our confidence is not in the ability we have to keep God’s law but rather in the life-giving and heart-transforming

grace of the one who has drawn us to himself and has the power to draw us to one another. When we live with this confidence, we look at the difficulties of marriage not so much as hassles to be endured but as opportunities to enter into an even deeper experience of the rescuing, transforming, forgiving, empowering grace of the one who died for us and is always with us.

Three mentalities—each an essential building block of a reconciliation lifestyle, each requiring the honesty of personal humility, and each encouraging us to be reconciled to one another and to God again and again, and again.

### **Daily Commitments of a Reconciliation Lifestyle**

You can have a marriage that is mutually satisfying while being honoring to God. You really can! Accepting who you are, resting in who God is, and living as he calls you to live will produce a harvest that is far better than the small-vision dreams that you are able to come up with on your own.

Here are the daily commitments that become the daily habits of the kind of marriage that God's design intended and his grace can make possible.

1) *We will give ourselves to a regular lifestyle of confession and forgiveness.* We will come clean and deal honestly with our sin, weakness, and failure. There is only one way that a marriage grows. There is only one way that a marriage changes. There is only one way for your marriage to be what God designed and has enabled it to be. What is this one way? Confession and forgiveness. It is only when we commit ourselves to daily patterns of humble confession, coupled with the willingness to quickly and completely forgive, that a marriage can exceed our limited expectations.

These two things always need to be held together. Regular patterns of forgiveness give us the courage to continue to confess, and regular patterns of confession allow us to experience the joy of the restoration of forgiveness. Why is this so hard for us? Why is this not a regular pattern in every marriage? What will this actually look like in the business of daily living?

2) *We will make growth and change our agenda.* We will pull weeds. You would tend to think that dissatisfaction is the enemy of marriage, but, in fact, the opposite is true. As sinners, we have the perverse ability to be all too easily satisfied. We tend to be willing to live with a human second-best that falls tragically short of God's wise and beautiful plan. We tend to settle for marital détente instead of striving for real love. We tend to be satisfied with low-grade bitterness and disappointment rather than working toward a pattern of real confession and forgiveness. We tend to settle for a relationship that is all about negotiating rights instead of one that loves to give and to serve.

What does it look like to commit to daily change? How do you go about identifying weeds of wrong that need to be uprooted? How do you know for sure what needs to be planted in their place? How can you work to make dissatisfaction a good thing, something that actually deepens your love and the functional quality of your marriage? How do you keep from being stuck in patterns that fall way short of God's plan and fail to rely on the resources of God's grace?

3) *We will work together to build a sturdy bond of trust.* Trusting and entrusting, we will build a strong foundation. We simply cannot have a healthy, God-honoring, mutually satisfying marriage without trust. In a fallen world, trust is the fine china of a relationship. It is beautiful when it is there, but it is surely delicate and breakable. When trust is broken, it can be very hard to repair. It is trust that allows a husband and wife to face all the internal and external threats to their unity, love, and understanding. It is trust that allows couples to weather the differences and discouragements that every marriage faces. It is trust that allows couples to talk with honesty and hope about the most personal and difficult things.

There are two sides to trust. First, you must do everything you can to prove yourself trustworthy. Second, you must make the decision to entrust yourself into your spouse's care. What does it look like to engender a marriage where trust thrives? What does it look like to rebuild trust

when it has been shattered? What are the characteristics of a relationship where trust is the glue?

4) *We will commit to building a relationship of love.* We will incarnate Christ's love. I sit in the balcony of my church on Sunday mornings and look down on the crowd, and I wonder how many of the couples are living in loveless marriages. You may be shocked at this, but I am convinced there are many marriages devoid of real love. Yes, there may be some respect and appreciation, and, yes, the couples may have learned how to avoid daily battles. They may enjoy doing things with one another every once in awhile, but the practical and personal sacrifices that define love are simply not there.

These couples do not respond with mercy and grace in the face of one another's weakness and failure. They don't willingly sacrifice their agenda and their comfort for the good of the other. They don't look for ways to help and encourage. They don't jump in and help the other bear the burdens of life in this fallen world. What does real love in marriage look like? What are the daily sacrifices that love makes? What does it mean to respond to your spouse with mercy? What does it mean practically to be willing to lay down your life for another person? What are the characteristics of a loving marriage?

5) *We will deal with our differences with appreciation and grace.* Celebrating the Creator, we will face our differences with hope. God places lilies next to rocks. He places trees next to streams. He causes bright sun to follow a dark night. He made the muscles of a lion and the delicacy of the wing of a hummingbird. One way God establishes beauty is by putting things that are different next to each other. Isn't this exactly what God does in marriage? He puts very different people next to each other. This is how he establishes the beauty of a marriage. The moon would not be so striking if it hung in a white sky; in the same way, the striking beauty of a marriage is when two very different people learn to celebrate and benefit from their differences and to be protected from their weaknesses by being sheltered by the other's strength.

6) *We will work to protect our marriage.* Watching and praying, we will work to protect our relationship. There are few things more dangerous to a marriage than the feeling of “arrival.” When a couple loses a healthy sense of need, patterns of laziness and inattention grow. No longer does the couple carry around the sense of the enormity of the task they have undertaken. No longer do they live with a shared sense of need for God’s help and protection. No longer are they looking down the road for potential difficulties that may threaten their union. No longer is their marriage protected by humble prayer.

Every marriage requires divine intervention. Every marriage needs divine wisdom. Every couple will be pushed beyond the limits of their character. Every couple will need strength beyond what they have. No husband and wife can do what they were designed to do in marriage without assistance. One of the beautiful things that marriage is meant to do is drive each of us away from habits of self-reliance into patterns of dependency on God. What does it mean to have “watch and pray” patterns in your marriage? How should a couple measure their potential? How do we recognize signs of impending marriage danger? What role does prayer play in a healthy marriage?

These are the six commitments of a healthy marriage, and with practice they become daily habits. These define how you admit your daily need and make reconciliation the moment-by-moment lifestyle of your relationship. There are few things sweeter and more beautiful than a long-term marriage of unity, understanding, and love. There are few things more deeply discouraging and personally hurtful than a marriage of distance, coldness, and conflict. There are few things sadder than couples who settle for survival, or choose to coast, or stay together but have essentially given up on one another.

### **A Better Way**

It doesn’t happen very often, but this was one of those occasions. I cried as I listened to their story. The tension in the room was unbelievable. It

was impossible for Chad and Mary to speak to and about one another without anger. Sitting far across the couch from Chad, Mary never did stop crying. She was hurt, but she carried in the file cabinet of her mind a detailed record of wrongs that only deepened her pain. Chad was clearly a man who had had enough. The amazing thing was that there had been no unfaithfulness, there had been no angry violence between them, and there had been no decisive moments of disagreement. Chad and Mary had simply quit working on their marriage. They had quit paying attention. They had none of the habits that this book will consider. This marriage of discouragement and acrimony was formed in a thousand little, mundane, almost unnoticeable moments.

Neither one wanted to be married anymore. They both dreaded getting up in the morning and facing another day. They both pointed their fingers and maintained their self-serving list of offenses. There was a time when they had adored one another, but that time seemed like ancient history. There was no peace now, let alone affection. But I was not without hope, because Chad and Mary had finally made a good choice. They had reached out for help. I knew God cared, and I knew he would never turn a deaf ear to their cries for help. Sure, there was a long way to go, but we would go it together and experience the fresh start that God has made possible in his Son, the Lord Jesus.

What about you? Maybe you haven't gotten to the place of Mary and Chad, but perhaps in your heart you know that things in your marriage are not what they should be. You know that you have settled for less instead of working for more. You know that in little moments things are said and done that do not draw you together nor deepen your love. You know there are places where you are disappointed. You know there are times when you wish things could be better. You know there are ways in which you feel stuck. You're not sure how change can take place, but you wish it would.

I invite you to sit down with me, as Chad and Mary did. Let me hold in front of your marriage the most accurate mirror ever made—the

Bible. Let me help you see with new eyes and hear with new ears. Let me invite you to open your heart and humbly reach out your hands for help. Let me encourage you not to be satisfied but to be needy and hungry. I don't know for sure what you expected your marriage to be, but I can tell you for sure that whatever it now is, it can be better. God welcomes us all to a lifestyle of reconciling grace, where problems are faced and change really does take place and where we no longer repeat the same mistakes again and again. Sit down. Take time. God is with you, and he has something better.

*We have left undone those things which we ought to have done;  
and we have done those things which we ought not to have done.*

BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER

*Since nothing we intend is ever faultless, and nothing  
we attempt ever without error, and nothing we achieve  
without some measure of finitude and fallibility we  
call humanness, we are saved by forgiveness.*

DAVID AUGSBURGER

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**COMMITMENT 1**

*We will give ourselves to a regular  
lifestyle of confession and forgiveness.*

**COMMITMENT 2**

*We will make growth and  
change our daily agenda.*

**COMMITMENT 3**

*We will work together to  
build a sturdy bond of trust.*

**COMMITMENT 4**

*We will commit to building  
a relationship of love.*

**COMMITMENT 5**

*We will deal with our differences  
with appreciation and grace.*

**COMMITMENT 6**

*We will work to protect our marriage.*

## Coming Clean: Confession

THEY JUST NEVER CAME CLEAN. Oh, they were skilled at pointing the finger. They were good at leveling charges. They were good at self-serving excuses. They were good at keeping lists of wrongs. They didn't know it, but they were quite skilled at the habits of acrimony and division. It made sense that by the time they got to me, they were hopeless. You simply can't continually rehearse in your heart all someone's perceived wrongs against you and grow in affection toward him or her. You can't argue to yourself daily that the person you live with is the chief cause of the wrongs that you do, and want to move close to them. You can't carry with you the detailed evidence of what you have suffered at the other's hands and have hope for your future together. But this is what they did.

In a moment, which I have talked about many times, they revealed the basic lifestyle of their marriage, although they did not know they were doing it. I had prayed with them at the beginning of the first time we got together, and I was trying to find a way into talking about the tough things we needed to discuss. I don't think that either one of them had much hope that I could say or do much that would actually help them, but I launched in anyway. I asked them each to tell me what they thought was wrong with their relationship. It was a moment I will never forget. There was no moment of hesitation or consideration. The

second the words were out of my mouth, both spoke and said just one word—each other's name!

At that point I was out of a job, because there were no seekers in the room. He was there only in a desperate attempt to get his wife fixed, and she was there only in a desperate attempt to get her husband fixed. Their eyes were firmly focused on one another, and they were completely persuaded that their biggest marital difficulty was next to them on the couch. There was little self-awareness. There was almost no commitment to self-examination. It would have been so encouraging to hear one of them say, "I know I'm not perfect, but . . ." They didn't even go that far, which explains why they were both stuck and hopeless. They were convinced that they had made the mistake of marrying a messed-up person; they were convinced that the other had made them do things they would not otherwise have done; and they were convinced that they had no power to make the other change, although they had tried. As I sat with them, I was reminded once again that hopelessness is a way of seeing, not a state of being.

I have wondered many times since how many marriages are somehow, someway, stuck in this same cycle. Perhaps the cycle of blame is more subtle, and maybe the hopelessness has not set in, but the system is in place. The couple is stuck in a cycle of repeating the same things over and over again. They repeat the same misunderstandings. They rehearse and re-rehearse the same arguments. They repeat the same wrongs. Again and again things are not resolved. Night after night they go to bed with nothing reconciled; they awake with memories of another bad moment, and they march toward the next time when the cycle will be repeated. It all becomes predictable and discouraging. They hate the cycle. They wish things were what they once were. Their minds swing between nostalgia and disappointment. They want things to be different, but they don't seem to know how to break free, and they don't seem willing to do the one thing that makes change possible—confess.

They tell themselves they will do better. They promise they will spend more time together. They promise they will pray together for a moment before they start their day. They decide to spend more time together outside the house. They promise they will talk more. But it is not long before all the promises fade away. It is not long before they are in the same place again. All their commitments to change have been subverted by the one thing they seem unwilling to do: take the focus off the other and put it on themselves. Here is the point: *no change takes place in a marriage that does not begin with confession.*

Confession is the doorway to growth and change in your relationship. It is essential. It is fundamental. Without it you are relegated to a cycle of repeated and deepening patterns of misunderstanding, wrong, and conflict. With it, the future is bright and hopeful, no matter how big the issues that you are now facing.

### **The Grace of Confession**

1) *It is a grace to know right from wrong.* Change is all about measuring yourself against a standard, being dissatisfied with where you are because you see that you have fallen short of the standard, and seeking the grace to close the gap from where you are to where you need to be. James likened the Word of God to a mirror (James 1:22–25) into which we can look and see ourselves as we actually are. It is impossible to overstate how important this is. Accurate diagnosis always precedes effective cure. You only know that the board is too short because you can place it against a measuring instrument. You only know that the temperature in your house is too hot because you have a measuring instrument in your house (called a thermostat). You only know that your tires have enough air because you can use a gauge that measures their exact air pressure. The Bible is God's ultimate measuring instrument. It is meant to function in each of our lives as a spiritual tape measure. We can place ourselves and our marriages next to it and see if we measure up to God's standard. God's Word is one of his sweetest

gifts of grace, and open eyes to see it clearly and an open heart to receive it willingly are sure signs of God's grace.

2) *It is a grace to understand the concept of indwelling sin.* One of the most tempting fallacies for us—and for every human being in this fallen world—is to believe that our greatest problems exist outside us rather than inside us. It's easy to fall into thinking this way, because we have a lot of material to work with. We do live in a broken world where things don't operate as was intended. Every day is filled with difficulties and obstacles of some kind. We live with flawed people, and our lives will be complicated by their brokenness. Despite this, the Bible calls us to humbly confess that the greatest, deepest, most abiding problem each of us faces is inside, not outside, of us. The Bible names that problem—sin. Because sin is self-focused and self-serving, it is antisocial and destructive to our relationships. Here's where this goes: it requires each of us to say that our greatest marital problem exists inside us, not outside us.

You know that you have been gifted with grace when you are able to say, "My greatest marital problem is me." It is so easy to point the finger. It is so easy to blame. It is a blessing to acknowledge that you carry around in yourself your own personal Judas who will betray you again and again (see Romans 7), and it is comforting to know that you are not alone in your struggle with sin.

3) *It is a grace to have a properly functioning conscience.* Many marriages travel a one-way road in the wrong direction. It is the direction of a hardened heart. Let me explain. In courtship we are very concerned with winning the other person, so we work to be loving, kind, serving, respectful, giving, forgiving, and patient. We would never think of doing anything unkind or rude. We are always thinking of the other, what he or she feels, desires, and needs. We find delight in making the other happy. We look for ways of expressing our love. But after the ceremony, the marriage often turns and begins to move in another direction. Maybe it's because we now have the other person and don't need to win him or her anymore. Maybe it's because we begin to take

the relationship God has given us for granted. Whatever the reason, we begin to let down our guard. We quit being so solicitous. Selfishness begins to replace service. In small ways at first, we allow ourselves to do and say things that we would have never thought of doing and saying in courtship. We become progressively less giving, less patient, and less forgiving. We begin to look out for ourselves more than we do for the other. Maybe it's something as small as expecting the other to clean up our mess or (yes, I'm about to say it) passing gas in bed. But these are not little things; they are signs of something happening that is destructive and dangerous. At first, when we do these rude and selfish things our conscience bothers us, but it won't be long before our heart gets hard and our conscience doesn't bother us anymore.

It's like the homeless guy on the street. You look at him and wonder how he can possibly live with himself being so dirty. You wonder why he is not afraid of mistreatment or embarrassed at his condition. You can rest assured that he once felt those things, but in his struggle to survive he has become hardened. It just doesn't bother him anymore. Many marriages travel a similar road. It is the sad highway of a progressively hardening heart. I have been shocked at the way couples treat one another with no apparent twinge of conscience or embarrassment as they sit with me seeking help. It is a perverse ability that all sinners have—to become progressively comfortable with things that should shock, grieve, and embarrass us.

It is a sign of God's grace when our consciences are sensitive and our hearts are grieved, not at what the other person is doing, but at what we have become. That sensitivity is the doorway to real and lasting change. Change always begins with being dissatisfied, and personal dissatisfaction always begins with a conscience that is sensitive to wrong. Out of this comes a desire for change and a restlessness that causes us to reach out for the help, from God and others, that change requires.

4) *It is only grace that protects us from self-righteousness.* This is the other side of the coin. It is important to understand the dynamic that

operates so subtly, yet so destructively, in our relationships. Because we all suffer from some degree of personal spiritual blindness—that is, we do not see ourselves with accuracy—and because we tend to see the weaknesses and failures of our spouse with greater accuracy, we begin to think of ourselves as more righteous than our husband or wife. When we do this, and in some way we all do, it makes it hard for us to think we are part of the problem in our marriage, and it makes it difficult to embrace the loving criticism and correction of the other person. This means that it is not only blindness that prevents us from change but assessments of personal righteousness as well. If we are convinced that we are righteous, we desire neither change nor the help that can make it happen.

First John 1:8 says, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” The deception of personal righteousness is a huge wall in the way of marital change. Here’s how it works: the husband views himself as righteous and views his wife as a sinner in need of help, and the wife views herself as righteous and views her husband as a sinner in need of help. So, neither feels the need for personal change while being quite upset that the other sees no need for personal change. Each becomes more dissatisfied, impatient, and bitter, while the condition of the marriage worsens. But there is hope! Grace decimates self-righteousness. Grace opens our eyes and softens our hearts. Grace deepens our sense of need. Grace faces us with our poverty and weakness. Grace causes us to run after help and welcomes us with open arms when we come. When a husband and wife quit arguing about who is the more righteous and begin to be grieved over their respective sin, you can know for sure that grace has visited their marriage.

5) *It is a grace to see ourselves with accuracy.* To see ourselves with accuracy is the opposite of self-righteousness. I have been amazed to watch an angry husband angrily declare that he is not angry! I have been surprised to see a controlling husband and wife control a conversation in order to work to convince me that they are not controlling. I have

watched a bitter spouse bitterly refuse the thought that she might be bitter. I have listened to self-righteous men and women self-righteously declare that they are not self-righteous. I have heard selfish people selfishly demand that they not be viewed as selfish. In each instance they would listen to what I had to say and then lay out for me the evidence that my assessment was wrong. It was not just that they were refusing to look at themselves (although that was also true). It was that, when they looked at themselves, they simply didn't see what I saw.

Here's what happens as a result. Because a husband is convinced that he is righteous and his wife is not righteous, he doesn't feel the need to look at or examine himself. That leaves him with only one conclusion, that the problems in the marriage are his wife's fault. So he watches her all the more hyper-vigilantly, and because she is less than a perfect person, he collects more and more "evidence" to support his view of the marriage struggles. Each day makes him more convinced that his wife is the one who needs to change, not him. Rather than being grieved at the weakness and selfishness of his own heart, he finds it harder and harder to deal with hers. He struggles to be patient with her and secretly wishes that she could be more like him. This posture is dangerous to any relationship but devastating to the health of a marriage.

Many married people are like the Pharisee in the temple who thanked God that he was not like the other sinners around him. They need the grace of an accurate self-assessment. Few things prevent change in a marriage more than a distorted sense of self. Few things are more needed than eyes to see ourselves with clarity and accuracy.

6) *It is a grace to be willing to listen and consider criticism and rebuke.* It is hard to see ourselves with clarity and hard to accept what we see when we do. It is so easy to be defensive. All of us carry inside ourselves an inner lawyer who is easily activated and quickly rises to our defense. We've all been in one of those moments when someone is pointing out some wrong in us, and although we are not speaking aloud, we have already begun a silent defense of ourselves against what they are

saying. As they are pointing to evidence of a need for change, we are marshaling evidence that we are not, in fact, the person they contend we are. It takes grace to be ready to listen and willing to hear. It takes grace to quiet our mind, to focus our attention, and to settle our heart so that we can actually receive the help that God is offering us in that moment of unexpected confrontation.

Even the words we use for this kind of conversation carry with them negative connotations. Words like *rebuke*, *criticism*, *exhortation*, and *confrontation* tend not to paint a picture of situations we enjoy, yet these words point to something that is essential to a healthy marriage. It is something I have discussed in earlier writings. Healthy relationships have two essential character qualities. First is the *humility of approachability*. When both people step out from behind protective walls and open up to the perspectives and help of others, each individual—and their relationship—will be given an opportunity to grow and change. The second quality is equally important. In fact, these two qualities cannot live without one another. The second is the *courage of loving honesty*. Not only do we defend ourselves from the opinion of others, but we avoid uncomfortable moments by failing to say what needs to be said. In the fear of disagreement, tension, and rejection, we choose to be silent about things that, if addressed in love, could be used to bring new insight to one another and a fresh start to the relationship.

Only when our confidence is in the Lord, that is, in his constant help and forgiveness, are we able to step out into the light, unafraid of what we may be asked to face. When we really do believe that his grace has already covered anything we may have to confess and given us power for every change to which we may need to commit, we will not be afraid of living in marriages that are open and honest.

7) *It is a grace not to be paralyzed by regret.* I am persuaded that fear of regret is something that keeps us from facing things in ourselves that we need to face. Confession not only calls us to look at ourselves in the present, but it also calls us to access the past. If you are a husband

who has been married for seven years and are now beginning to face the fact that you are an angry man, then you have to also be willing to look at the harvest that your anger has produced over those years. If you are a bitter wife who, in bitterness, has withdrawn into a protective shell, then you have to face not only your present state of withdrawal but how that bitterness has impacted the people around you during your withdrawal. It's hard enough to consider our present weakness and failure. It is even harder to consider the fruit that that weakness and failure have produced over the years. So, rather than giving in to the temptation to run and hide, we need to run to where help can be found.

Perhaps the brightest, most wonderful commitment of the Redeemer is captured in these words from Revelation 21:5: "Behold, I am making all things new." *New* is the operative word for what God is seeking to do in you and in your marriage. You are not stuck. You are not committed to the mistakes of the past. You are not cursed to pay forever for your errors. God's work is in the work of renewal. He sent his Son to earth in order to make real and lasting change possible. God has made fresh starts and new beginnings possible. Reconciliation can take place. Restoration really does happen. What was broken can be healed. The weeds of the old way can die, and flowers of a new, better way can grow in their place. God will not call us to face our harvest without giving us what we need to face it, and he will not call us to plant new seeds of a better way without giving us the wisdom and strength to do it. As we face regret, we bask in forgiveness and then turn to live in a new way, embracing the power that is ours as children of God.

8) *It is a grace to know that we can face our wrongs because Christ has carried our guilt and shame.* This point picks up on themes from above, but needs its own attention. It is telling to observe that the first two things Adam and Eve did after disobeying God was to cover themselves and to hide. For the very first time, they experienced shame and guilt. They feared discovery and judgment, and although they worked to shift the blame to someone else, they were playing a fool's game. The

blame-shifting did not quiet their hearts. It did not bring them peace. What they had done brought shame upon them and guilt in relation to God. It is important to understand that the shame and guilt were not just psychological or emotional experiences; they were real, and they had to be dealt with.

Dealing with our guilt and shame is what the whole Bible is about. It is about redemption, that is, the paying of a debt of guilt and shame that needed to be paid. That payment was made on the cross. Jesus took our shame, hanging in public, numbered with the criminals. He took our guilt by taking our sin on himself and paying the price for it—death. He did this even though he had no reason for either shame or guilt, because he was a perfect man. He did not do these things for himself; every action in the whole process was substitutionary. It was done for us. Why? So guilt and shame would not hold us; so that in the courage of celebratory faith we would quit hiding, quit excusing, quit blaming, and quit rising to our own defense. So that we could be unafraid of saying, “You are right, I was wrong, and I need your forgiveness.” So that we could say, “I know I blew it last night, but I am committed to doing better.” So that we could say to one another, “I need your help. I don’t always see myself accurately. If you see something wrong in me, I welcome you to help me see it as well.” So that we could look at our marriages and not declare that they are perfect but celebrate the fact that, over the years, we have taken many important steps closer to what God has called us to be and has designed our marriages to become.

You see, confession shouldn’t be this scary thing we do our best to avoid; and sin, weakness, and failure should not be the constant elephant in the room that husbands and wives know is there but cannot talk about. Confession should be seen as a wonderful gift that every marriage needs. It should be liberating. It should be freeing. It should not be seen as a moment of personal loss but as an opportunity for personal and relational gain. Our confession should be propelled by deep appreciation and gratitude toward God, who has made it possible

for us not to be afraid any longer of being exposed. Because of what Jesus has done for us, we do not have to hide or excuse our wrongs. We are freed from posing as if we are perfect, when in our heart of hearts we know we are not. We have been liberated from having to deny our difficulties. We can stare problems in the face with hope and courage, because Christ has made real, lasting, personal, and relational change possible. Fresh beginnings and new starts really do happen, and they can be ours! Is your marriage benefiting from the freedom of confession?

### The Daily Habits of a Confession Lifestyle

So, what does it look like to take the grace of confession seriously, to get the elephant out of the room and make honest admission of wrong the regular habit of a marriage? Well, here are the daily habits of a confession lifestyle.

1) *We will be lovingly honest.* Confession requires honesty. It requires a willingness to approach the other when he or she has acted or spoken in a way that God says is wrong. We must be committed to deal with such issues in a way that is driven by Christlike love. This means that before we can speak to the other's heart issues, we first need to deal with the hurt, anger, and bitterness of our own heart. Remember, truth not spoken in love ceases to be helpful because the message gets twisted and distorted by other human emotions and agendas. When we approach our spouse, we are seeking to help her see what God wants her to see. Remember, we cannot confess to that which we do not see.

2) *We will be humble when exposed.* Humility, when we are approached by the other, means willingness to consider. It means quieting that background noise of our inner defense system. It means remembering that we have not yet arrived, that we are still sinners in need of daily grace, and that at this moment we are being loved by our Redeemer. Humility means the willingness to look in the mirror of God's Word and being glad that whatever we see there has already been covered by the blood of Jesus.

3) *We will not excuse.* It is such a typical impulse for us all: someone points out a wrong and we are immediately filled with an alternative view that places us in a very different light. Refusal to excuse means resisting the urge to build arguments for our righteousness. It means refusing to turn the tables on the other, making sure he or she knows that we are not the only sinner in the room.

4) *We will be quick to admit wrongs.* There are few things that contribute more to the health of a marriage than the commitment to keep short accounts. We refuse to pout. We refuse to live in the silence of hurt, anger, and vengeance. When we have done wrong, we will be quick to seek forgiveness and reconciliation. If we have been wronged, we will be quick to approach the other and lovingly help him to see what he has said and done. We will make our approach in a spirit of forgiveness and hope. We will refuse to let the “sun go down on [our] anger” (Eph. 4:26).

Now, when you commit to doing this, you begin to experience the beauty of a relationship that has no reason to keep a record of wrongs and has no closets filled with the emotional baggage of yesteryear. So, whereas you used to wait days to talk about wrongs in your marriage, you now move quickly to resolve issues, because you have experienced the beauty of the forgiveness, reconciliation, and tender love that a confession lifestyle produces.

5) *We will listen and examine.* Each of us has to work to quiet our emotions and the self-righteous tendencies of our hearts. When approached, we all need to require ourselves to hear clearly and to think carefully. This means working to understand and consider. It means taking the light that is handed to us by the words of the other and shining it on ourselves, being willing to see things about ourselves that we have never seen before. Change is not only about admitting wrong; it is about progressively growing in self-knowledge. It is about developing a greater and greater grasp of the themes of strength and weakness in our marriage. It is about being ready, willing, and waiting

to learn new things about ourselves and our marriage that will lead to lasting growth and change.

6) *We will greet confession with encouragement.* Few things crush a confession lifestyle more quickly than judgment. It is a tendency in every sinner to want the person who has hurt us to hurt in the way that we have been hurt. We want the other to feel the sting as well. Nothing encourages the courage of confession more than grace. If God were only a judge, nobody would confess anything to him. It is his goodness that leads us to repentance. His love draws us. His grace encourages us. His patience gives us hope. So we run to him, not away from him. When we greet the confession with the same grace that we have been given by the Lord, we give the other courage and hope to confess all the more.

7) *We will be patient, persevering, and gentle in the face of wrong.* The fact of the matter is that change is most often a process and seldom an event. Change happens chaotically. It comes unannounced, in fits and starts. We don't wake up and say, "Hey, I think I'll create all kinds of change today." Change is pushed upon us by a persevering Redeemer, who will not walk away from the work he has begun in both husband and wife. He will put the need of change before us in the most inopportune moments. He will not submit to our schedule or agenda for our day. He has not promised that change will be enjoyable each time or a comfortable process over the long haul. He has promised to stay near us, giving us everything we need, and he has guaranteed that we will be more than we ever thought we could be. (He will not cease working until we are like Jesus. Now, how's that for a goal!) So, he calls us to be patient. He calls us to be willing to wait. He calls us to continue when continuing is hard, and as we are continuing, to look for any way we can to incarnate his transforming love.

8) *We will not return to the past.* Sadly, many marriages are held hostage by the past. Every current discussion of wrong gets kidnapped by the failures and hurts of the past. Without really realizing it, couples fall into a hopeless and discouraging pattern of having the same

conversation over and over again. Eventually they reach the point where they simply do not want to talk to one another anymore; it's just too painful. The conversations don't move toward resolution; each conversation is just a reminder of how bad things are and of how long they have been that way.

So, we establish a pattern of short accounts where a daily cycle of confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation settles issues, alleviating any need to address them again. And we will resist, in moments of hurt and anger, resurrecting what has already been resolved.

9) *We will put our hope in Christ.* Confession is all about hope. First, confession unavoidably leads us to give up hoping in ourselves. It calls us to abandon our trust in our own wisdom, righteousness, and strength. It welcomes us to admit how weak, selfish, needy, fickle, and rebellious we actually are. It faces us with the reality that we are still people in deep and daily need of rescue. Yes, we have grown, but sin still lives within us, diverting our desires and distorting our actions. So, we lay down the hope that we had in ourselves, and we take up a new, brighter hope. This hope is at the cross of Jesus Christ. He came to earth and lived the perfect life that we could not live. He became the perfect sacrificial lamb, taking our sins on himself, satisfying the Father's wrath and purchasing our forgiveness. He suffered the rejection of his Father so that we would be accepted. He walked out of his tomb, defeating death and making the hope of eternal life a reality. What does this have to do with marriage?

Everything!

When the shadow of the cross hangs over our marriage, we live and relate differently. We are no longer afraid to look at ourselves. We are no longer surprised by our sin. We no longer have to work to present ourselves as righteous. We say good-bye to finger-pointing and self-excusing. We abandon our record of wrongs. We settle issues quickly. And we do all these things because we know that everything we need to confess has already been forgiven, and what is needed for every new

step we will take has already been supplied. We can live in the liberating light of humility and honesty, a needy and tender sinner living with a needy and tender sinner, no longer defensive and no longer afraid, together growing nearer to one another as we grow to be more like him.

Now, who wouldn't want a marriage like that?

## THE GOSPEL, YOUR MARRIAGE, AND SEX (BONUS CHAPTER EXCERPT)

In a world that has gone sexually insane, we have to do better. We have to quit being silent. We have to help marriages connect the transforming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ to sex and to sexual sin and struggle. The silence must be broken. Biblical hope must be given. Wives need to be called out of hiding. Husbands need to believe and act as if change really is possible. More marriages need to experience the forgiveness, freedom, hope, and courage of the gospel.

That's what this chapter is about. It's meant to look at marriage, sex, and sexual struggle through the hope-stimulating lens of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let's jump in.

1) *You don't have to be ashamed that you're a sexual being.*

We have to start here. The cross teaches us that sex is not a problem; it is a gift. Jesus didn't suffer and die to free you from sex but to free you from sexual sin. You must never give way to cursing your sexuality, because the same one who wisely created your sexuality came to be your Savior. He didn't come to fill you with guilt because you are sexual but to free you from your bondage to and guilt from sexual sin. Your sexuality points to his glory as Creator and to the amazing creature you are. It is something that the cross allows you to celebrate, because it is the grace of the cross that gives you the power to keep sex in its proper place in your heart and in your marriage.

Your problem and mine is not primarily that we are sexual beings; it's primarily that we tend to love the creation more than the Creator so that we use God's good gifts in ways they were not created to be used. Sexual sin and struggle are not first a matter of what we do with our body but a matter of what we do with our heart. The great Puritan teacher and preacher Richard Sibbes wrote powerfully in *The Tender Heart* of this struggle:

Again, if you will preserve tenderness of heart, take heed of spiritual drunkenness; that is, that you be not drunk with the immoderate use of created things; of setting your love too much upon outward things. For what says the prophet, “Wine and women take away the heart” (Hosea 4:11); that is, the immoderate use of any earthly things takes away the spiritual sense; for the more sensible the soul is of outward things, the less it is of spiritual. For as the outward takes away the inward heat, so the love of one thing abates the love of another. The setting of too much love on earthly things takes away the sense of better things, and hardens the heart. When the heart is filled with the pleasures and profits of this life, it is not sensible of any judgment that hangs over the head; as in the old world, they ate and drank, they married and gave in marriage, they bought and sold, while the flood came upon them and swept all away (Matthew 24:17). When a man sets his love upon created things, the very strength of his soul is lost. . . . Talk of religion to a carnal man, whose senses are lost with the love of earthly things, he has no ear for that; his sense is quite lost, he has no relish or [savor] for anything good. Talk to a covetous man, that has his soul set upon the things of this life, he has no relish of anything else; his heart is already so hardened to get honour or wealth. Though it be to the ruin of others, that he cares not how hard it has become. Therefore we are bidden to take heed that our hearts be not overcome with drunkenness and the cares of this life, for those will make a man insensible of spiritual things (Luke 21:43).

Applying to sex what Sibbes says about the heart highlights what is important. The struggle for sexual purity is not so much a struggle with sex but with the proneness of our hearts to wander, that is, with the tendency of every sinner to look for fulfillment of heart where it cannot be found. As long as you are looking for life in the creation, you won't be seeking it in the Creator. Sex is a good and beautiful thing, but desire for this good thing becomes a bad and dangerous thing when it

becomes a heart-controlling thing. The idolatry of the sinful heart is the problem. So when you ask sex to satisfy you, you have to go back again and again because the satisfaction of sex is powerful but frighteningly short-lived. Remember that asking the creation to be your savior always ends in addiction of some kind.

You don't have to be ashamed of your sexuality, but you must guard your heart as you live out your sexuality in marriage.

2) *You don't have to deny that you're a sinner.*

So much of what propels personal and cultural sexual insanity is active, regular, long-term self-denial. Self-righteousness is simply insane itself, but it's there in all of us. The grace of the cross of Jesus Christ means we don't have to deny reality anymore. We don't have to work to make ourselves and others think we are righteous. We don't have to recast what we have done to make it look better. We don't have to work to make acceptable to our conscience what God says is wrong. We don't have to argue that we are okay when we are not okay. Grace means we do not have to be afraid of what will be uncovered or exposed about us, because whatever is revealed has already been fully covered by the blood of Jesus.

This means that you don't have to deny your struggle for sexual purity. You don't have to act as if you're pure if you're not pure. You don't have to lie to yourself, your spouse, or others. You don't have to work to make lust look like something less than lust. You don't have to tell yourself that your sex life is okay when it is not okay in the eyes of God. Honesty is possible because grace is available. Facing the depth of your sexual struggle is possible because you do not face that struggle alone; your Savior is ever with you. You and I must remember that self-denial is never a doorway to personal change. The grace of Jesus Christ welcomes you to live in the courage of honesty, knowing that there is grace for every dark and dangerous thing that will be exposed. The way you deal with your struggle for sexual purity changes when

you embrace the fact that grace means you don't have to deny your struggle anymore.

But there is one more point to be made here. The Bible never presents sexual sin as being of a different nature than other sins. Sexual sin may have different social and interpersonal consequences, but it is sin, no more no less. In Romans 1 sexual sin is listed along with envy, gossip, and deceit, even with something as mundane as disobedience to parents. That is why this is important. If you begin to think that sexual sin is sin of a different kind or nature, it is logical then to wonder if the same biblical promises, hopes, and provisions apply to it.

I sat with a woman who had struggled for years with same-sex attraction, while she said to me in tears, "No one treated me as if I was just a sinner. I thought my sin was different, and what worked for others wouldn't work for me. It is wonderful to say that all sexual sin is sin—sin for which Christ died." Sexual sin sits inside the circle of the rescuing, forgiving, transforming, and delivering grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a deceitful, lying enemy who would work to convince you that the provisions of the cross can't help you because sexual sin is different. In our struggle for sexual purity, each of us must reject that lie.

### *3) You don't have to deny the fallenness of the world around you.*

You don't have to act as if life is easy and your struggles are few. You don't have to act as though you live a life free from sexual temptation now that you are married. You can admit that troubling temptation leaves you weary and sometimes confused. You can cry out for help when you are tired, distressed, or have lost the fight once again. It is right at moments to be angry at what the world around you has become. It is right to be sad that things around you are as broken as they are. You should hate the fact that sex seems to infect almost everything you encounter. You must face the fact that this right-here, right-now world will never be the paradise that your heart longs for. Paradise is coming, but this is not it.

You should be sad that the purity of your heart is always under assault by the seductive voices of evil all around. You should be angry that the sanctity and purity of your marriage must be protected because your marriage is located in a world where temptation is everywhere. It should not be okay for you. You should not grow comfortable with the sorry state of things. You should be angry that God's beautiful gift of sexuality has been so deluded and distorted. You should hate the fact that we have gone sexually crazy. And you should groan and mourn before your Savior, who hears and cares.

The words of Romans 8 are helpful to read, as Paul connects the gospel of Jesus Christ to being honest about the brokenness of the surrounding world:

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God. And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who

have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

“For your sake we face death all day long;  
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (vv. 18–39 NIV)

Paul argues here that because you have been blessed with the unshakable love of the Lord Jesus Christ, you can face the sexual struggles of life and marriage with honesty and hope. Biblical faith never requires you to deny reality. Honesty about struggles within and temptations without is necessary if you are going to live in sexual purity with God and with your spouse.

## INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY GUIDE

### Chapter 4: Day by Day

1. List three specific ways a marriage that is “fixed vertically”—in other words, properly focused on God—looks different from a marriage that is not.
2. What is one habit you are already doing each day to build up your marriage? Brainstorm with your spouse one habit you could add to help each of you feel loved.
3. Identify a current habit that is tearing down your marriage. What new patterns or system of accountability could you put in place to correct the problem?
4. Tripp presented many examples of “little moments” and acts of inattention that can slowly destroy a marriage. Which one or two convicted you? Use this opportunity to practice lifestyle reconciliation with your spouse as you confess ways you are being inattentive to him or her.
5. Reread the six commitments of a healthy marriage. Which one are you doing a good job cultivating and putting into daily practice? Which one needs some work? Think of some practical changes you’d like to make this week to recommit to a healthy marriage.

### Chapter 5: Coming Clean

1. Tripp asserts that “hopelessness is a way of seeing, not a state of being.” What do you think this statement means, and how does it apply to marriage?
2. Do you believe that your greatest marital problem is your own sin? What would it take to get you to the point where you see that this is true?
3. What is one thoughtless or careless thing you do now that you would never have thought of doing before you were married? How is this affecting your spouse and your marriage? If you can’t answer that

question, ask your spouse and be ready to listen with a humble spirit and without defending yourself.

4. Does your marriage exhibit the two essential qualities: the *humility of approachability* and the *courage of loving honesty*? When was the last time you and your spouse had a conversation that displayed these characteristics? How can you cultivate them?
5. Review the nine daily habits of a confession lifestyle at the end of the chapter. Which one is most difficult for you? What is one step you will take this week to cultivate that grace of confession in your life?