

God's Plan for Happy Marriage



God's Plan for Happy Marriage

By Roderick C. Meredith

*There really are keys and time-tested principles
that can help produce truly happy marriages.*

*Our success in marriage depends upon our
willingness to use these keys in our own lives.*

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Preface

Scores of women have told me, with tears in their eyes, “My husband just won’t talk to me! He is distant. He won’t share things with me anymore. Even though we share the same house and the same food, I feel so *alone* most of the time!”

The breakdown of marriage and family in Western societies is by now legendary. The statistics are terrible, but would be much worse were it not for the millions of couples choosing to live together *without* the benefit of marriage. Since there is no marriage, neither is there a recorded divorce if these couples break up—which they do even more quickly than those who bother to get married.

In 1981, the annual divorce rate in the United States reached its peak at 5.3 per 1,000 people—meaning that one of every 189 Americans got a divorce in that year. More recently, the Centers for Disease Control found that the annual divorce rate in 2012 had dropped to 3.4, compared to a marriage rate of 6.8 per thousand. This means that in a year when one in 147 Americans entered into a marriage, one in 294 ended a marriage. For every two marriages, there was a divorce.

In 2014, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that, among Americans 15 and older, ten percent were divorced. That amounted to more than 25 million men and women. And even though overall divorce rates have declined in the last few years, a shocking new phenomenon has been identified—“gray divorces” in which senior citizens abandon decades-long marriages. In 2014, the divorce rate for Americans aged 55–64 was 70 percent higher than the overall rate for all adults.

And then there are the millions who, *previously divorced*, have since remarried. Tens of millions of Americans have at one time or another gone through the trauma of divorce, and other tens of millions have been deeply hurt by divorce—children, close relatives, friends, and associates. It is sad to say, but divorce is “as American as apple pie.”

What Does God Say?

But what does *God* have to say about divorce and about the real *meaning* and *purpose* of marriage? This is vital to understand, for history shows us that *any* nation whose society allows or causes its families to come apart soon begins to disintegrate. Most historians note that “the breakdown of the family” was one of the symptoms, if not *causes*, of the fall of the Roman Empire—and we read countless articles describing how young people in fatherless homes tend to turn to drugs, illicit sex, and crime *far more* than do those raised in stable families.

Census data from 2010 revealed that the number of American children living in single-parent homes has almost doubled since 1960. About one third of American children—roughly 15 million—are growing up in a fatherless household. Another five million have no mother present in their lives.

No wonder we see so many acts of seemingly random violence carried out by lonely, aimless, directionless young people. Lacking strong authority figures and the security of a loving and complete family, millions turn to crime, hedonism, or despair. We have produced a self-absorbed “Me Generation” and a morally adrift “Generation X.” What will come next in our youth-obsessed society? In a dual prophecy that certainly refers, in type, to our day, the prophet Isaiah was inspired to write, “I will give children to be their princes, and babes shall rule over them. The people will be oppressed, every one by another and every one by his neighbor; the child will be insolent toward the elder, and the base toward the honorable” (Isaiah 3:4–5).

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul describes that “in the last days perilous times will come: for men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form

of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!” (2 Timothy 3:1–5). People who are unthankful, unholy, unforgiving, and disobedient to parents are *very unlikely* to have strong, stable, loving marriages.

What we all need, then, are keys to building *God*-centered marriages and principles as to how *He* would have us live together joyously as husbands and wives. The following are just such godly principles gleaned from six decades of pastoral and family counseling, much reading and studying, and more than 50 years of happy marriage.

Chapter I

Build a God-Centered Marriage

“**U**nless the LORD builds the house, they labor in vain who build it” (Psalm 127:1). Many of you reading this may need to go back and prove again to yourselves the *reality* of God, for we certainly did *not* just “happen.” Our human minds were obviously created by something greater than ourselves. The pervasive *laws* all around us—such as the laws of gravity, inertia, and thermodynamics—all demand a great *Lawgiver*. The magnificent designs of our human bodies, and of the plants, animals, and heavenly bodies, all demand a great *Designer*. The inspired prophecies of the Bible, which *have been* and now *are being* fulfilled, all demand the reality of a personal God who sits at the controls of the universe and actually *intervenes* in His creation—a God who is working out a supreme *purpose* here on earth.

As you come to know that very real God, you will increasingly understand that He really does know what is best for you and for every area of your life, *certainly including your marriage*, for *He* is the One who *created* us male and female. He is the One who created our bodies and minds and who *specifically designed* the differences between us and even the different ways men and women think and view the world around them.

The Great *Creator* made man and woman for one another. He certainly knows—better than *all* the psychologists and marriage counselors put together—how our bodies and minds work and how we can best relate to one another in marriage. The Holy Bible tells us that “the

LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being” (Genesis 2:7). A little later we read that “the LORD God said, ‘It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him’” (v. 18).

Man alone is *not* complete. Adam felt that incompleteness and utter loneliness. He had *no one* of his kind to talk to or to share things with. He *had no one* to love and to cherish, to have and to hold—*no one* with whom, to the depths of his being, he could feel that he really belonged.

Our Heavenly Father understood this.

So God put Adam to sleep and *literally* took one of Adam’s ribs and made it into a woman. Of course, God *could* have done it another way. But He chose to show both male and female that we ultimately belong together, so God took something from Adam’s side, near Adam’s heart, and made Eve. “And Adam said: ‘This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman [translated from the Hebrew *Ishshah*], because she was taken out of Man [translated from the Hebrew *Ish*]’” (v. 23).

And so, God made a “helper” comparable to Adam (v. 20)—one to whom he could truly relate and share his thoughts, his plans, his hopes, and his dreams.

God’s Purpose in Marriage

It is vital that we understand from the very beginning that man and woman were *created* by God. They were to share life together in love. Yet the woman was made to be a “helper” to the man. She was made *from* man and—despite all the pronouncements of the modern “experts”—a woman can find her greatest joy and fulfillment in relating to, helping, supplementing, and assisting her husband in their life together, in bearing children, and in managing a household.

A very real Satan, the devil, is doing all he can to *obliterate* this concept from the minds of young people today. Through many psychologists and marriage counselors, through much of the media, and even through the educational system, Satan is busily attacking God’s plan for the family. He is vigorously pumping out the concept that mankind was *not* created by a real God. He wants us to believe that we just “happened” to evolve, that there is no supreme *purpose* for our lives, and that men and women are *not* essentially different in many ways so it *does not make any difference* as to the roles they play and which one is the *leader* in the family.

Now Satan has even begun to influence certain segments of our society to accept the idea that a “family” need *not* consist of a husband and wife. It may be two or more people of the same sex just “living-together.” However, *if* you believe the Bible, notice what Jesus said about marriage: “Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate” (Matthew 19:4–6). Jesus puts God squarely in the picture. He shows that God did create the first woman for the first man. He then caused them to come together as man and wife, to become “one flesh” in this God-ordained relationship. God intends all marriages to follow this example.

Jesus explained that only because of the “hardness” of their hearts did God permit a husband and wife to divorce—and that was only for sexual immorality. Jesus clearly referred to the Genesis “creation story” as a *fact*. Jesus acknowledged that God made us male and female (v. 4). Again, Jesus said, regarding marriage, that “what *God* has joined together, let *not* man separate” (v. 6). If this profound realization—that it is *God* who ordained marriage—is at the very heart of *your* marriage, you will have an infinitely better chance at success.

The Husband's Responsibility

Certainly a man ought not to marry a woman unless he really and truly loves her. Yet, sorrowfully, we must acknowledge that millions of men have never learned the meaning of the word “love.” Because of shallow movies and wrong examples, they have all too often learned to confuse “love” with lust. They seem to think that a base, animal sexual desire to “get” satisfaction from another person of the opposite sex constitutes love.

Nothing could be further from the truth, for true love involves a giving—a sharing of plans, hopes, and dreams between two people who want to build an entire life together until death does them part. If they are not able to talk things over, smile into each other's eyes, share little joys and intimacies, and stick together when the big trials come, their love is lost indeed.

The Apostle Paul commanded, “Husbands, love your wives and do not be bitter toward them” (Colossians 3:19). Some husbands do allow themselves quickly to become “bitter” because their wives do not mea-

sure up to an angelic idol of perfection envisioned in their own human imaginations.

But a wife was never intended to be an idol. She was never designed to be perfect in this life any more than her husband was. She was not intended to be a perfect housekeeper, mother, companion, and Hollywood sex goddess all wrapped up in one individual.

Rather, she was designed and created—by the Maker of us all—to be a sweetheart, help, and inspiration to a man who would share himself with her; go over his plans, hopes, and dreams with her; give her encouragement and guidance; and lead, *not drive*, their home in an attitude of confidence and love.

All too often, especially in our modern world, men seem to think that it is up to the “little woman” to talk about spiritual things and get the children interested in matters concerning God and the Church. This is not true, and any man who fails his God-given responsibility in this is simply selling out his own birthright, for God intended the man, if he will act on his responsibilities and opportunities, to be the spiritual leader in the home.

Notice this inspired scriptural statement: “But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God” (1 Corinthians 11:3).

Every man alive has the opportunity to be the direct representative of God over his own home—in teaching, instructing, leading, and inspiring his wife and children to learn and obey the words of the Holy Bible and to worship and serve the God who made them. Most wives and children will instantly and gladly respond if given half a chance. Men need to realize this. They must set a dynamic example of dedication to their Creator, study of His word, prayer to God at mealtimes, and family prayer as well as private prayer on one’s knees in the bedroom, closet, or other private place.

The man should set an example of self-discipline in the fear of God. He should show that he is man enough—strong enough—to conquer his lusts and control his appetites. By conquering his smoking habit, by controlling his drinking and other appetites, by restraining his emotions and directing them in the right channels, by controlling and guiding his tongue according to the law of kindness, he can set an example that will never be forgotten by his sons and daughters as they grow up. And this example will certainly command the respect, admiration, and love of any sensitive, wise woman.

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So *if* you will truly study the Bible to see what it says about marriage, and if you will strive—with God's help—to follow the biblical teachings, principles, and examples in *your marriage*, you will be blessed indeed. If a newly married couple would get down on their knees and *sincerely* beseech God to lead and guide in their marriage, and then *study* His inspired word and *follow it*, they would have a kind of “heaven on earth,” at least as far as their marriage was concerned.

As much as this may surprise some who are not familiar with God's ways, this is a *fact*. I have seen these principles work in this way in my own marriage and in the marriages of many, many others who trusted in God. *To the degree* that we follow this teaching, it *works*.

It behooves every one of us to make *God* the very *center* of our marriage. Wholeheartedly seek to find His will in every aspect of your marriage—*and then follow it*.

Chapter 2

Commitment and Trust

One of the traditional marriage ceremonies includes the expression, “till death do us part.” Although many young people today disdain this notion, it is absolutely *vital* that every marriage be built on this understanding. As we have seen, it is *God* who ordained marriage. It is Jesus Christ who said, “Therefore what *God* has joined together, let not man separate” (Matthew 19:6). Although modern psychologists, counselors, and even many professing Christian ministers seem anxious to provide married people with all kinds of “escape hatches,” God does not. Yes, “sexual immorality” (*porneia* in the Greek) is a God-acknowledged ground for divorce. But it is *God’s expressed will* that marriage be a *lifelong commitment*.

Notice this key passage in God’s revelation to mankind:

And this is the second thing you do; you cover the altar of the LORD with tears, with weeping and crying; so He does not regard the offering anymore, nor receive it with goodwill from your hands. Yet you say, “For what reason?” Because the LORD has been witness between you and the wife of your youth, with whom you have dealt treacherously; yet she is your companion and your wife by covenant. But did He not make them one, having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly offspring. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth. “For the LORD God of Israel says that He hates divorce, for it covers one’s garment with

violence,” says the LORD of hosts. “Therefore take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously” (Malachi 2:13–16).

In the above verses, God speaks of marriage being a “covenant” relationship. He shows that one of the purposes of marriage is to produce “godly offspring.” Obviously, a stable and loving relationship is necessary in order to provide this. Three times in this passage, God speaks of one behaving “treacherously” and breaking up a marriage.

Among other things, marriage is a “test.” It is a test to see how *loyal* you will be to God’s instruction regarding marriage and to your mate with whom you share this sanctified relationship. How much will you “give” of yourself to this other human being? How much will you be patient, kind, and humble in order to make it work? Additionally, God says that He “hates” divorce (v. 16). God does not hate divorced people, but He despises the selfishness, the lust, the vanity, the self-centeredness, and the “treachery” that is nearly always present when marriage is ruptured by divorce.

The powerful, God-inspired teaching of the Apostle Paul must be taken into account in every marriage: “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her” (Ephesians 5:22–25). These verses clearly show that marriage is a *type* of the relationship between Christ and the Church. The relationship is one of *total* submission to one another and to the will of God. It is to be a *lasting* relationship—lasting “till death do us part.” It is to picture the love, the total out-flowing concern, and the resulting *trust* and *stability* that exists between Christ and His true Church.

Successful Marriage Requires Effort

To have this kind of *God*-ordained relationship in *your* marriage, you must both work at it. You will need to put the thought and energy into building your marriage that a top scientist might expend on an important new invention. Truly happy and successful couples *never* take their marriages for granted. Truly Christian couples regularly pray about their marriages. They *study* the Bible and other sources to improve

their marriages. And they make a mutual *commitment to make their marriages last*—“till death do us part.”

All of this builds within their marriage a sense of trust and stability. Indeed, as the author of Proverbs wrote, “Who can find a virtuous wife? For her worth is far above rubies. The heart of her husband safely *trusts* her; so he will have no lack of gain. She does him good and not evil all the days of her life” (Proverbs 31:10–12). What a beautiful picture of loving service and commitment on the part of a godly wife. Such a wife ought to be deeply appreciated and treasured.

A man with a truly loving wife should certainly respond in kind by “laying down his life” for his mate—loving her, honoring her, protecting her, providing for her, and *servicing* her in every way he can. And *any* decent husband should never, ever, *ever* let his mind or his emotions get involved romantically with another woman. Jesus Christ calls this kind of lustful thinking adultery: “But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:28).

If acted upon, such a *treacherous deed* will not only devastate his wife and probably wreck their marriage, it will bring about a depth of sorrow and agony—let alone *anger*—to the husband of the other woman.

The One who made us male and female tells us, “Whoever commits adultery with a woman lacks understanding; he who does so destroys his own soul” (Proverbs 6:32). The original Hebrew is sometimes translated “lacks heart” instead of “lacks understanding,” for such ill-conceived, rotten, totally selfish behavior will virtually “tear the heart” out of a loving husband who finds that he has been defrauded and dishonored in this way. Certainly, the same thing happens to a wife who finds herself defrauded, for the deep feelings of love and trust, of hearth and home, of deep commitment and security are suddenly *shattered*. No wonder this passage continues, “For jealousy is a husband’s fury; therefore he will not spare in the day of vengeance. He will accept no recompense, nor will he be appeased though you give many gifts” (vv. 34–35).

All of us who are married, or who may in the future be married, should make a *profound commitment to honor* our marriage vows in every way. We should study God’s word on this subject, pray daily regarding our marriage and our family, *thank God regularly* if we have a loving and faithful mate, and do all within our power—with God’s help—to build a deep sense of love, of trust, and of stability within our marriage.

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“Live joyfully with the wife whom you love all the days of your vain life which He has given you under the sun, all your days of vanity; for that is your portion in life, and in the labor which you perform under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 9:9). In this physical life there is no greater blessing than this kind of sanctified relationship.

Chapter 3

Heartfelt Communication

As stated earlier, scores of women have cried out to me in despair, “My husband just won’t talk to me!” Often, at least one of the partners *thinks* that he or she communicates. But the other partner, normally the woman, knows that they do not and feels alone and frustrated. She senses that she and her husband are simply coexisting in the same house. They do not necessarily fight and hurt each other physically or even verbally, but there is not the openness, the closeness, the total sharing of two lives—the love—that there should be.

One article on the subject quoted a woman discussing her ten-year marriage who said, “It’s heartbreaking. Before I was married, I used to go out to restaurants and just by looking around the room I could tell who was married and who wasn’t. Either the married couples were eating in dead silence, or the woman was gabbing away while the man ate and pretended she wasn’t there. I swore that this would never happen to me—but it has” (*The Good News*, October 1967).

Why such cases as the above? Why do husbands and wives, of all people, fail to communicate more fully with one another?

Loving means sharing. Every husband worthy of the name ought to cultivate the habit of talking over his plans and hopes with his wife, sharing with her many of his innermost thoughts and desires—not just the negative ones—and making her feel deeply “a part” of him. This very attitude and approach means more to a woman than most men can even realize. Yet *very few* husbands share their lives in this way with their mates.

Why?

Newlyweds often work hard at learning and adjusting to each other's attitudes and preferences. They take pleasure in exchanging opinions on almost everything.

After a few months, however, the opinions are all exchanged, the attitudes seemingly understood, and the interest and excitement of "getting to know you" is over.

As the marriage continues and children come along, the wife's interest and talk is increasingly about her children and a myriad of domestic details that usually hold little or no interest for her husband. The couple often take for granted each other's attitudes on certain topics rather than bothering to discuss them.

Most husbands care to hear only good news about their children, and are either irritated or bored if the wife confides in them the detailed problems involved in rearing their family. Wives usually miss their husbands most when the children are small. Having no adult in the house to talk to all day, such wives feel an urgent necessity to talk with their spouses at night. But many husbands retreat behind their papers or quietly turn on the television rather than endure what they feel is a boring "rehash" of household frustrations.

A man needs to treat his wife as a "sweetheart." He needs to cultivate and build an atmosphere of love, romance, and intimacy in their home—kissing his wife when he returns from work, holding her hand as they are taking walks, and embracing her often throughout the day with free and lavish affection.

True love certainly involves deep and abiding respect. A man ought to be grateful and thankful that the woman who is his wife has decided to cleave to him above all others unto death. He ought to appreciate that fact—and the many, many good qualities of help, patience, and service that practically every wife possesses. He ought to encourage and bring out the best in her—not constantly harp and carp away at her in belittling criticism that only causes her, in most cases, to degenerate and respond in kind.

A man ought to respect the fact that his wife is an adult human being made in the image of God. He needs to realize that, someday—according to the awesome plan of our great God—she is intended to become a glorified spirit being ruling with Christ over this earth, even managing angels (1 Corinthians 6:3).

With this kind of understanding and respect, every truly Christian husband should *share* his thoughts, his plans, and his *life* with the lovely

human being he has chosen to be his life partner. “My wife is my best friend,” should *not* be merely a cliché. It should be a *reality*. A mate who is a real friend helps us build our self-esteem, encourages us through the hard times, and keeps us from being lonely. Couples who can discuss honestly whatever is important to *them—including their own relationship*—are happier and much more likely to have a lasting marriage. Even though there is a perceived risk in self-disclosure, getting the problems out in the open is much better than allowing festering hurts and misunderstandings to grow.

Communicate in a Positive Way

Remember that “listening” to your mate’s innermost hurts and concerns does *not* automatically call for your “judgment” or for your advice. Often it is better just to be someone to talk to. Then, over time, your mate will usually solicit your advice or comment—but let that be done on *their* initiative, not yours. Of course, you need to show love and concern. You need to be willing to *take time* to really “listen” to your mate—showing *genuine interest* in what your sweetheart is saying and is going through. In this process, learn to ask questions and draw your mate out so you can more fully understand the situation: “Tell me more.” “I see.... Do I understand that this is what you are saying?” “I hadn’t realized that. Please help me understand more completely so I can share your concern,” and similar words of loving concern.

Never, *never* take advantage of your mate’s openness or self-disclosure. Then he or she will close up like a clam in the future. Regard the verbal intimacies you share in marriage as a sacred trust—to be kept confidential just between the two of you and never to be used as a “club” to gain advantage in a later argument or any other situation.

Praising and encouraging your mate is vital. Be sure your praise is sincere and usually specific. Praising your wife for lovingly preparing a special meal, praising your husband for usually getting up first and warming up the home—these are examples of the kind of thoughtfulness and encouraging remarks that can inspire your mate and build love and appreciation within your marriage. In fact, think about that word, *appreciation*. I can never forget the constant expressions of thankfulness and appreciation uttered by my own mother. It made *all* of us in the family love and appreciate her more—and I am sure it contributed a great deal to the happiness and stability of my parents’ long and happy marriage.

Remember that, in marriage especially, you should try to keep communication *positive*. For one partner to be constantly “picking at” or criticizing the other is not the kind of communication we are talking about. This type of negative harping is destructive to a marriage and should be avoided at all costs. A man is absolutely *stupid* to be continually haranguing and correcting his wife. How can she respond to him as a loving sweetheart when she is regularly “put down” and corrected by her husband? And the Bible makes it very plain that a wife is equally wrong if she is continually complaining, griping, or haranguing her husband. “Better to dwell in a corner of a house-top, than in a house shared with a contentious woman” (Proverbs 21:9).

Again, the loving, positive flow of communication, information, and sharing of plans and dreams between a husband and wife is the very essence of a happy marriage. *Think about it*—even God “shares” His hopes and plans with us puny mortal beings. “No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you” (John 15:15). If the living Jesus Christ was concerned enough to share “all things” with us that He heard from God the Father, how much more should we be willing to open up and share our thoughts and dreams with our own mates?

Work and Dream Together

In your walks, talks, laughter, and tears, go back *together* and relive the thoughts of a young boy who sat on a hillside, looking at the sky and dreaming of the future. Discuss and analyze those dreams lovingly and understandingly with one another. Then work and pray together to make them come true.

In like manner, relive the hopes and aspirations of a young girl who often walked alone at sunset across her father’s land—dreaming of a husband and home of her own someday, of children, security, warmth, laughter, and joy. Be sure you work *together* to make *her* dreams come true.

Learn to *respond* to one another—openly and lovingly. Have no improper secrets. Bear no grudges. This is your only life, your only mate, your only love. Learn to think and feel in unison, solving all your problems *together* as a team. The mutual encouragement and stimulation you will feel, along with the added warmth and love you will experience, will add an extra dimension of understanding, purpose, and joy to your life that cannot be obtained in any other way. Truly, “it is not good that man should be alone” (Genesis 2:18).

Chapter 4

Marriage Means Giving

More than any human being ever has, Jesus Christ exemplified the love of God. He did it in many, many different ways, but one of the greatest and most obvious ways is that He gave *His life* willingly and poured out His shed blood in order to be our Savior.

As we have seen, the relationship between Christ and the true Church pictures the relationship between husband and wife. After a lifetime of giving and serving, at the end of His human life, Jesus Christ gave Himself for the Church. So all husbands are instructed, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and *gave* Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself” (Ephesians 5:25–28).

Normally, each of us just naturally thinks about his own needs. We take care of our own desires. We cater to what pleases us. But since God has made us “one flesh” in marriage, we need to learn to *think that way*—to constantly consider the needs and desires of our mate and how to take care of our “other half.” This involves thinking, planning, and self-discipline. It involves the *giving* of oneself to another human being. *That is what marriage is all about.*

One of the most meaningful sayings of Jesus Christ is found not in the gospels, but in a statement of the Apostle Paul recorded in the book

of Acts: "I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, 'It is more blessed to *give* than to receive'" (Acts 20:35). In marriage, especially, it really is more "blessed" to *give*, for in most cases, "the more you give, the more you get." As you genuinely try to encourage, to serve, and to *give*, you will find that your mate will tend to reciprocate. You will *both* be giving. You will *both* be serving. You will both be pleased and even delighted at the warmth and appreciation this virtuous cycle creates in your marriage.

Each husband must carefully *think through* how he can increase his wife's joy and fulfillment of life. Perhaps he can help her with the dishes and the housework at times. Most likely he should do virtually all of the heavy-lifting chores around the home. Perhaps he can encourage her to get more sleep, more exercise, more recreation, or a change of pace. If the family can afford it, maybe he can take her out to dinner once or twice a week, or on occasional weekend "honeymoon" trips to get her away from the normal routine and work. Surely he can try to enrich his wife's life and his own by taking her to symphony concerts, art museums, educational lectures, and other uplifting places. Whatever may be appropriate in each individual situation, all of these things and more are ways a husband may "give" to his wife.

In turn, a wife should often think about how she can enrich her husband's happiness and his physical, emotional, and intellectual life. Perhaps she can prepare his favorite meals more often. She may want to encourage him to get more exercise and sleep, and to take care of himself so he will be around longer. Perhaps she can take a nap in the afternoon or after work, or take a quick shower and change clothes so she will look and feel alert and pretty each evening, like she did when they were courting. She can encourage him to share his opinions about current events or about spiritual subjects. In whatever ways, she can respond generously to his affection and try to make him feel "ten feet tall"—and extremely grateful to have married such a loving wife.

You may have heard that a marriage is supposed to be a 50–50 proposition—"You go half-way, and your spouse goes half-way." But *who* determines what constitutes the half-way point, if the two of you disagree? True love, by contrast, means giving *without expecting anything in return*—giving 100 percent—and being willing to go above and beyond what you think is "expected" of you.

Christ talked about this principle of going the extra mile when He said, “And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two” (Matthew 5:41). Yes, even if you do not humanly feel like it, *go the extra mile* and give to your spouse. God will add what you lack. Ask Him to help you give more affection, love, and respect to your spouse, and in time you will be blessed with the rewards and benefits of an improved marriage.

So think about ways you can give to your mate. Little gifts or words of appreciation make a big difference. An unexpected hug or kiss, requiring little effort on your part, may be a *treasured* gift in the eyes of your spouse. A simple question such as “How was your day?” may be a welcome gift of attention to your spouse, providing a chance to share private thoughts and feelings.

I know a busy couple who nevertheless make time to show each other their mutual love and concern. One evening, while the wife was serving dinner, she asked her husband, “Is there anything else you need?” The husband smiled and said, “I need your love.” She smiled. He pushed back the chair. She sat on her husband’s lap, and they hugged and kissed. That kind of spontaneity, that *eagerness* to give to one another, helps to generate an atmosphere of love and peace.

It is not always romantic and it is not always idealistic, but night and day, year after year, a happy couple will strive to “give” of themselves to each other. Each will try to help his or her mate achieve the full human potential God intends, in every possible way—for we do not “get” a happy marriage unless we learn to *give* a happy marriage.

Chapter 5

Learn to Forgive

Another absolute imperative in a truly happy marriage is the willingness to *forgive*. When two people share their entire lives, when they are together much of each day and night, there is bound to be friction occasionally—we are, after all, only human—and by far the best way to solve this real problem is *God's* way.

To sulk, to brood, to conjure up evil thoughts about your mate or attribute to your mate wrong motives, is totally senseless. It only breeds more trouble, more discontent, and possibly even divorce. Certainly, as we have said, you need to *talk about* your hurts and misunderstandings. Try to really *listen* to your mate's point of view—*not* just sit there and think about what you are going to say next. Do *not* just think about how you are going to get back at them or “get even.”

Get even?

Get even with *whom*? If you fully grasp and accept the fact that you and your mate are “one flesh” and *bound together by God for life*, then you would be trying to “get even” with *yourself*. You would simply be hurting yourself. You would, in effect, be “counter-attacking” yourself.

So if after a family argument or hearty discussion with your mate about some hurt—real or imagined—you still feel upset or angry with your mate, what should you do? Again, you simply need to do what God says you always need to do in such situations—*forgive the other person*.

“But it was really *their fault*,” we find ourselves saying. “And besides, they haven't even apologized to me, so how can I forgive them?”

Through heartfelt prayer and God's guidance, you can learn to forgive all kinds of people for all kinds of real or imagined wrongs they have inflicted on you; that other driver "cutting you off" at the freeway exit, the child next door playing his rock music way too loud into the night, or the neighbor lady gossiping about you.

Speaking of actions far, far worse than any of these, the One who is our ultimate Example, Jesus Christ, said, "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do*" (Luke 23:34).

All of us must come to realize that most people do not "mean" to hurt us. They do not "mean" to do evil. They are simply human. They blurt out hurtful words or take harmful actions without thinking through what they are really doing. And, so often, it hurts.

But the One who gave His life for us reveals that "if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:14–15). If, then, we are to forgive every person in this way, *how much more should we forgive our precious mate who has now become our own flesh and bone?*

What if your husband *keeps on* tracking in dirt from the yard or grease from the garage? What if your wife *keeps on* burning the toast once or twice a week?

Learn to approach your mate constructively and talk it over, of course. But *if* some of these human foibles persist, even for years, *just keep right on forgiving*. After all, would you rather scrape your burnt toast once in a while or live *alone*, do your own cooking, and have no one to talk to or cuddle with on cold, wintry nights? Never forget what Jesus commanded: "Then Peter came to Him and said, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven'" (Matthew 18:21–22).

The Spirit of Forgiveness

We all need to regularly *ask God in prayer* to give us the "spirit of forgiveness." Some people seem to have a terribly hard time forgiving others. It is almost as though they "enjoy" carrying hurts and grudges around with them for years.

Remember, your anger toward other human beings usually does not hurt *them* at all. In fact, they may not even be aware of it. But *it*

does hurt you. It does make you grumpy, miserable, and often hard to live with. Professionals have found that these negative emotions often contribute to ulcers, stomach upsets, high blood pressure, stroke, or even heart attack. Your negative emotions can literally *kill* you.

Again, ask your heavenly Father to help you get completely over this tendency and learn to love and to forgive all people—*especially* your own mate. Try to change your pattern of thinking so that you don't get hurt so easily. Remember that God is called "the Father of mercies" (2 Corinthians 1:3). As you realize your *own* need to be forgiven again and again, ask God to help you forgive others.

The Apostle Peter was inspired to instruct all men to "honor" their wives "as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered" (1 Peter 3:7). Peter then proceeds to give instructions that apply to our entire Christian lives—but *especially to our marriages*: "Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous; not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing. For 'He who would love life and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips from speaking deceit. Let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it'" (vv. 8–11).

We all need to view marriage as a kind of "workshop" to teach us *how* to give, *how* to share, and *how* to forgive others on a continuing basis. As we study the above verses carefully, it becomes obvious that God wants us to learn to treat our mates with special kindness and courtesy. Yet, in most marriages, each partner quickly learns to take the other for granted, so each mate tends to let down and to speak disrespectfully and bluntly to the other. Each partner may forget how easy it is to hurt the other by thoughtless words and actions. Each may forget how vitally important it is in marriage to "seek *peace* and pursue it."

Think about it. Think about how hard it probably is for your mate to put up with all of the acts of personal selfishness and the idiosyncrasies that *you (and all of us)* have. If the situation were reversed, would you want to put up with *you*?

None of us can be joyful if we carry hurts and grudges around with us—*especially toward our mates*. So, with God's help, learn to completely *forgive* your mate on a daily basis and move forward together to build a genuinely close and loving relationship.

Chapter 6

Build Your Family Kingdom

Building a happy marriage should also include the idea of building a “family kingdom.” An old saying goes, “A man’s home is his castle.” This analogy should apply to his entire family, where he is the *king*, his wife the beloved *queen*, and his children the royal princes and princesses who need *training* to fulfill their future responsibilities. So the parents enthusiastically work *together* to ensure that these future leaders are carefully nurtured, guided, disciplined, and trained for the important roles they must play in years to come.

The intelligent and joyous blending of these two concepts in marriage—the open and loving union of the bodies, hearts, and minds of the married couple, and the creation of the vital “family kingdom”—can and should produce an opportunity and an atmosphere where men and women can find complete fulfillment. This fulfillment is pictured in the psalms: “Blessed is every one who fears the LORD, who walks in His ways.... Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the very heart of your house, your children like olive plants all around your table” (Psalm 128:1, 3).

Once you fully grasp these concepts relating to the meaning and purpose of marriage, why not set about building your marriage and your home around them? Instead of the husband and wife being bored and disinterested in sharing each other’s thoughts, both should be vitally interested in the miniature “family kingdom” that, *together*, they are energetically building. There should be a purposeful common interest in teaching and improving their home and their financial position, as well as in planning for the future—*their* future. In a truly happy mar-

riage, it is not “my house,” “my car,” or even “my paycheck.” Rather, the attitude *should* be “*our* house, *our* income, *our* future.”

Build Your “Castle” Together

The mutual attitude should constantly be forward-looking and planning for improvements in your “castle,” your home. The wife’s feelings, and her understanding and expertise in home decorating, landscaping, appliances, etc., should always be taken into account. Every major purchase, such as a home or car, should be a *family project*—affording the opportunity and benefit of a sharing experience between husband and wife.

Nothing to talk about?

No, *everything* to talk about and share. That is the correct answer.

Without being silly or unrealistic about it, husbands and wives should think of themselves as “partners” in a great adventure—in building a career, a business, a *life together*. They should talk over details regarding their mutual allies—their friends, business associates, and relatives. With both husband and wife entering wholly into the discussion, they should plan their mutual strategy and discuss in detail what each can contribute to bring their goals in life closer to reality.

Then there are the children. What an area of discussion, planning, mutual problem solving, and heartfelt sharing of hopes and dreams they provide. Setting family goals together regularly can indeed produce a very meaningful “togetherness.” If both husband and wife are working, they may wish to have detailed discussions about how to set aside enough money so that after a few years the wife can stop working and they can have children. Later, they both need to *discuss together* how they can financially and otherwise plan for the time when the husband or wife—or both of them—may have to retire. *How* can they afford to do this? *Where* can they move to reduce expenses? *What kind* of lifestyle will give both of them the fulfillment they need as these events unfold? Can they develop a home-based business where they can continue to earn at least a modest income even after one or both of them retire?

If husband and wife think of themselves as a “team,” their marriage can mean so much more. They will each be contributing on a regular basis to the “family kingdom.” They will each be giving, building, and sharing the great adventure of *life together* in a special way.

Chapter 7

Romance Is Vital

We are discussing “romance” last of all. Though it is the catalyst that draws young couples together, it often makes them forget the importance of the other aspects of marriage—many of which we have just discussed.

However, we must be certain *not* to leave “romance” out of the picture, for no matter how long two people have been married, no matter how “old” they seem to be, the deep human need for romantic love and affection is still there in most individuals. The desire to kiss and to cuddle, “to have and to hold,” is almost as basic in many people as breathing in and breathing out.

And there is *nothing* wrong with that.

The great God, who made us male and female, specifically designed our sexual parts. He made males and females attractive to one another. He created within us the feelings and emotions that lead to sexual expression. What was God’s first recorded command to Adam and Eve? “Then God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it’” (Genesis 1:28).

Note that in granting our first parents the gift of sex and human reproduction, God “blessed” them. If rightly used within the confines of marriage, sex is indeed a blessing. In a physical sense it brings about the complete union of the hearts, minds, emotions, and bodies of two human beings who love each other so deeply they have committed themselves to each other for *life*. As we have seen, their coming together pictures the total union which will someday

be achieved between Christ and the true Church of God (Ephesians 5:22–25).

This sanctified union of man and woman in marriage is so important that God devoted one of the Ten Commandments to protecting it. Our Creator commanded, “You shall *not* commit adultery” (Exodus 20:14). And Jesus Christ enlarged or magnified this command, making it all the more binding: “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:27–28).

However, if sex is used in marriage as a reaffirmation of love, of trust, of the spirit of *giving* of each mate to the other—then it is a beautiful and sacred thing in the sight of God. And, frankly, it should *not* be cheapened and made to seem coarse and common by its constant display, as in modern films, television, and other media. This only serves to drag down into the gutter what *God* intended to be the supreme physical expression of married *love*—picturing Christ and the Church.

As I hope we can all see, Satan is “devilishly” clever in the way he can degrade and cheapen some of God’s blessings by inciting the *misuse* of something. And by deceiving millions of people into misusing the gift of sex, Satan is able to tear down the God-given *basis* for all decent society—the home and the family. *That is exactly what is happening to most of Western society at this time.* On the other hand, God wants young married couples to love each other to the full. His inspired revelation tells us that “Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge” (Hebrews 13:4).

Again, the Bible instructs us, “Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice with the wife of your youth. As a loving deer and a graceful doe, let her breasts satisfy you at all times; and always be enraptured with her love. For why should you, my son, be enraptured by an immoral woman, and be embraced in the arms of a seductress?” (Proverbs 5:18–20).

When a young couple first start courting, they usually spend a *lot* of time in romantic activities. They will take long walks under the moonlight. They will eat out at romantic cafés, perhaps go dancing, hold hands, laugh together, and try to fully understand and appreciate this other person whom they are considering as a life-partner. They will nearly always be clean, neat, well-groomed, and perhaps wearing a fine perfume or cologne. In every way, they will “put their best foot forward.”

But after marriage and the honeymoon period, most couples begin to let down. The husband may not bathe properly before coming to bed. The wife may let her hair look like a mop or wear dowdy dresses around her husband. She may forget to bathe, or perhaps to put on a pretty dress and look special to him when he comes home from work. Nowadays, with so many wives in the work force, this is even harder for a woman to do.

However, *both* husband and wife must try to “keep the fires burning” in their romance. They should try to do all they can to continue to show each other the special attentions and courtesies they did when they were courting and when they were first married. A loving husband will kiss his wife goodbye in the morning, give her a special hug and kiss when he returns from work, thank her and kiss her again “for dessert” after the evening meal. Perhaps he will help her put away the dishes, sneak up and hug her while she is standing by the sink, etc. Each mate should try to lavish affection and appreciation on the other. Then, the “finale” will come very easily and naturally, for the two mates will have been “loving” each other *all day long*—and, in a physical way, it will make their marriage a joyous and beautiful thing.

Give a great deal of thought and attention to this absolutely *vital* aspect of your marriage. Do not let *anything* get in the way of building this kind of loving, romantic atmosphere in your home. Do not let “job worries” interfere. Do not let concerns over the children, over keeping the house in “perfect” condition, or over *anything* stop you from building within your home and marriage the special romance and *joy* that your Creator intended.

Husbands, *do not* be fussy, grumpy, or demanding toward your wife. Love and encourage her and cause her to *want to respond* to your constant affections and kindness. Try to “give” yourself to your mate in every way you can and make her life full and joyous.

Wives, put forth the time and effort to be your husband’s “sweet-heart.” Return his affection and try to inspire and encourage him in every way you can. Within God’s laws, try in every way to make him feel happy and fulfilled. Smile at him, “kid” with him, kiss him back passionately, and make him glad that he married *you*.

In all of these ways, and more, each of you should learn to genuinely love and to cherish your mate. Get down on your knees in prayer and ask *God* to help you be the loving mate you ought to be. And give

God's Plan for Happy Marriage

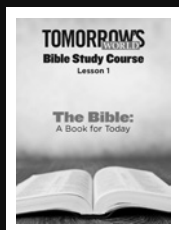
Him grateful *thanks* for providing you with a lifelong partner, lover, friend, and companion with whom you can fully share the blessings of this physical existence.

Ask God to help you put to use *all* of the above keys to a *joyous* marriage. Then, in spite of the trials and tests that come to all of us, you will have someone who is truly special to encourage you and help you along the way. And, in this God-ordained union we call marriage, you will be learning in a remarkable way how to obey the second great commandment from our Creator: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39).

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