

How to Improve Your Marriage

Five Foundational Truths For Every Couple

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She was sitting in my office crying with her face buried in her hands and he was staring at the floor not knowing what to say. It was their first session of premarital counseling. Denise and John had been referred to me by a couple in the church. When asked if they were Christians, she said “yes,” and he said “no.” I then asked if they were living together, and that’s when she broke down. The Spirit of God had been convicting her for some time about their lifestyle. When I asked about it, the conviction and guilt poured over Denise in a flood of embarrassment and shame. Denise was being convicted about living with her fiancé. At the same time God had been working on John regarding his own personal relationship with the Lord. After some discussion, I asked John if he wanted to receive Jesus Christ as the Lord of his life. He did. I then suggested one of them move out of the house and that they reserve any physical intimacy for the wedding day. They did. From that day on, both Denise and John began to apply what the Bible teaches about marriage. They are now both highly involved servants in the church and a great testimony that God’s way is the best way.

Maybe your marriage didn’t start off like that, but all married couples need to know the foundational principles of a strong and healthy marriage. There are different levels of intimacy in marriage. Some married couples can be described as the *romance couple*. They love being with each other. They like each other. They are growing, dreaming, and enjoying life together. They are connected, and “oneness” describes their relationship. Others can fall into the category described as the *routine couple*. There is more fizzle than sizzle. They are stable but no sparks. If you were to ask this couple about their marriage, they would say, “It’s okay, but not great. Things could be worse.” Still others can be described as the *roommate couple*. They exist under the same roof but don’t share their life with each other much. They may sleep in the same house, use the same kitchen, go to the same church, raise the same children, watch television together but they don’t share their hearts, dreams, pains or worries with each other. They are becoming more and more like strangers. Lastly is the *rigor mortis couple*. It’s all over, but the death certificate has not been issued. From a distance they

may seem alive, but inwardly their marriage is dead. They may live in the same home, but they are emotionally, mentally, and physically separated. Somewhere along the way they stopped caring, trying, and hoping. Each person has his or her own reason for staying in the marriage, but those on the outside wonder what the motivation is.

No matter where you are in your marriage, you can maintain an energy of excitement in your home or even experience a resurrection of love in your heart for your spouse. I believe if you will commit yourself to apply the following five Biblical principles of marriage to your relationship, you will experience the rewards that only come from a marriage built on God's Word.

Christ: He must be the Lord over your marriage

The first principle deals with the person of Jesus Christ. He must be the Lord over your marriage and the leader of your home. Notice what God's Word says to the husband: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her" (Eph. 5:25, NIV). The example the husband is to follow in loving his wife is Jesus Christ. Then the wife is told, "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior" (Eph. 5:22-23, NIV). The example of how the wife is to relate to her husband is based on her relationship with the Lord. The implication is both of them have an understanding of how Jesus relates to the church and the church to the Lord. The husband understands the love Christ has for the church because he knows and understands that Jesus died on the cross for the church. The wife understands the headship of Christ over the church of which He is the Savior. In order to know and understand that and apply divine principles from Christ's example, they must know Christ on an intimate level. They must have a relationship with Him.

If you want to have a marriage that God blesses, it starts with your relationship with Jesus Christ: submitting everything you are and everything you have to Him. How do you do that? You admit that you are a sinner. You are not perfect, and you cannot save yourself. You ask Jesus Christ to forgive you for your sins and to help you turn away from your sin. You accept His Lordship and leadership over your life. When that happens, He gives you His Spirit on the inside to help you be the person He created you to be, and as a result, you become more like the spouse God wants you to be. Before God can control your marriage, God must control you. The most important day of your

marriage is not the day you said, “I do” to each other, but the day you said, “I do” to Jesus Christ and received Him as your Savior.

No matter who you are or how long you have been married, God should always be first in your life. God doesn't want your relationship with your spouse to be first. He doesn't want your relationship with your kids to be first. He wants your relationship with Him to be first. This is the foundational truth that rock solid marriages are built upon. The energy, strength, and joy your marriage needs will come from your life being plugged into the One who can give it. No marriage can reach its fullest potential until both the husband and wife are rightly related to God as well as to each other.

As Christians we are told, “If we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another” (1 John 1:7, NIV). What is true generally for the body of Christ is also true specifically for couples. If you are pursuing your relationship with God and want to be a person of God while your spouse is pursuing his or her relationship with God and wants to be a person of God, then you have the spiritual dynamic of divine attraction that no seminar, no book, and no message can accomplish.

I am not saying that if you are a non-Christian couple or if you are a Christian married to a non-believer that you cannot have a good marriage. What I am saying is that a Christ-centered marriage can add a whole new dimension to the relationship. A Christ-less relationship is like a black and white twelve inch television while a Christ-centered relationship is like a color high definition large screen television. Both are receiving a picture, but one is lacking the richness and fullness of a relationship which Christ offers.

Gary Smalley describes this as “The 220 Principle.”¹ This principle refers to allowing Christ, and Christ alone, to charge us spiritually because God designed our internal batteries to be wired to His 220 current, not the 110 current of other people or things. If you were to try to plug a clothes dryer that needs a 220 electrical current into a 110 current, you would not get enough power to get the job done. In order for you and your marriage to work properly, you need to be plugged into God. In Galatians 2:20 (God's 220 current for life) we find the real source for lasting fulfillment: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me” (NIV). When Jesus Christ is your Lord and He begins to live through you, your marriage is able to receive what He wants it to have.

When we place God first in our lives, happiness is no longer our goal. God is. When He is first, all the things I need and all the things my marriage needs can be met through Him. Matthew 6:33 tells us clearly, “But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (NIV). When God has first place in your life, your deepest needs will be met. Because God loves you and possesses the wisdom, love, peace, and joy you need, He alone can charge your battery to full.

It is in a relationship with God that you find meaning, purpose, significance, completeness, inner power, peace, joy, and belonging. In short, there is no dream, need, or aspiration that you will ever have that He can't meet. When you are rightly connected with God, He is able to work in you and through you for the empowering of your marriage. When you are connected to God through Christ, you have everything you need to be the kind of spouse you need to be and to do what you need to do: “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness” (2 Peter 1:3, NIV).

Commitment: You must dedicate yourself to your spouse

The second key principle deals with commitment. You must dedicate yourself to your spouse. God's Word says, “Make sure you do not break your promise to be faithful to your mate” (Malachi 2:16, GN). God calls every wife and every husband to faithfulness and commitment to their spouse. However, many people do not understand what commitment is. A simple definition describes commitment as being willing to be unhappy for a while until you can work things out. Every marriage will have difficult days: days of disagreement, days of misunderstandings, days of miscommunication, days of selfishness, and days of pain. It is during those days, you need commitment. There will be times when you cannot stand the sight of your spouse, but it doesn't mean you stop being committed to them. It's like the guy who celebrated his 25th wedding anniversary. He stood up in front of all his family and friends and said, “I would like to thank my wife for 15 great years of marriage!”

Committed couples understand strong marriages take work. Good marriages do not just happen. They must be worked on. It takes effort, time, and commitment. It doesn't take a lot of commitment to build a shack, but it does take a lot of commitment to build a mansion. What kind of marriage do you want: a shack marriage

or a mansion marriage? When a young couple enters into marriage, they are committing about 50 years to that individual. They should seriously think about it! It is important to think twice before entering a room with no exits.

Over the years I have performed many weddings, and every one of them had a “forever” atmosphere. The bride and groom have gone through premarital counseling, and they can’t wait to begin this journey together as husband and wife. For the wedding, they have brought in aunt Suzy who will sing a “forever” song. As the pastor, I will make comments about the permanence of marriage. Then the couple will exchange rings as a demonstration of their never-ending love for each other. The ceremony will end with their vows that include statements such as, “In sickness and in health, for better or worse, till death do us part.” Every couple is hoping and expecting their marriage to go the distance and last a lifetime.

However, the reality is that nearly half of all marriages will not make it, and of the ones that do make it, only a few of them will make it well. Many marriages survive, but it seems to me, and probably to you, that very few of them thrive. They end up as the “roommate” or the “rigor mortis” couple.

If you were to ask most couples how they would like their marriage to be described in their later years, they would want to be described as “that older couple who take walks in the park and hold hands, who sit beside each other, and still laugh together.” They want to be the couple that celebrates their fiftieth wedding anniversary and is an example of love, laughter, and long-term commitment. No couple can get there without dedication and perseverance. It is the one trait that all successful couples must have.

Committed couples eliminate the threat of divorce. For them divorce is not an option. If you allow the idea of divorce to make its home in the back of your mind, one day it will move to the front of your mind. At whatever point you think your marriage is inconvenient enough and/or bad enough, you will begin to seriously consider divorce. When times are tough and everything in your mind and heart is saying, “I’m not going to take this anymore!” you will leave. You will leave not with the commitment to work on your marriage from a distance, but you will *leave*.

If you want a great marriage, you have to lock the escape hatch, and throw away the key. You must take your vows seriously: “Til death do us part. I made a promise to my spouse and to God. I am going to keep it.”

When you make a commitment, it also means that you don't use the threat of divorce when you are angry. When you are mad, you don't hint that you are leaving, and you don't use scare tactics/words. Those are off limits: hitting below the emotional belt. No matter how angry you are at that person, you do not bring up the issue of divorce because it's not even an issue. That's what commitment means.

Whether or not your marriage will work is about the size of your commitment, regardless of the size of your problem.

Too many couples are impatient with their marriages. They do not want to live "happily ever after." They want to live "happily right now" or else! One young wife sitting in a marriage counselor's office said, "When I got married I was looking for an ideal. I married an ordeal and I now want a new deal!" Many couples view selecting a mate in the same way as selecting a car: Buy what you want now, and when you are ready for a new one, you can trade it in for a newer model.

Some couples don't understand the meaning of commitment. Norman Wright describes "commitment" when he writes, "The word 'commitment' is a verb and means, 'to do or to perform.' It is a binding pledge or promise. It is a private pledge you also make public. It is a pledge carried out to completion, running over any roadblocks. It is a total giving of oneself to another person. Yes, it is risky, but it makes life fulfilling."² Whereas, courtship is a process of selecting the one you are going to commit yourself to, the marriage ceremony is a public act of that commitment. Each day you should renew your commitment to your spouse.

Committed couples endure the storms and tragedies of life together. Couples will face all kinds of problems, but commitment is what gets couples through them. I am wonderfully amazed at the faithfulness of couples who have stayed the course despite a wide array of problems, such as:

- Chronic illness
- Financial problems
- Runaway child
- Physical handicaps
- Death of a child
- Job loss and extended unemployment
- A spouse who doubts God

- Conflict with extended family
- Addictions (sexual, substance)
- Depression
- Infertility
- Miscarriage
- Blended families
- Countless other tragedies and difficulties

While unfortunate circumstances, poor choices, and even the devil himself could have driven these couples apart, they stayed together and followed God's plan for their marriages. Sadly, we also know countless other couples whose marriages have crumbled under the same pressures.

Like most couples, you face pressures from life's many inconvenient, tragic, or evil circumstances. Sometimes a variety of pressures pile up on you all at once. Sometimes tragedy hits with the sudden force of a wrecking ball. Other times the same nagging pressure can hover like a dark cloud over you for months or even years. It's not a matter of *if* your marriage will face pressure, it's just a question of *when*.

How can you make sure your marriage will weather the storms? What will prevent your relationship from crumbling under the weight of pain, problems, and tragedy?

If you want to divorce-proof your marriage against the storms and struggles of life, if you want a deeper bond and a richer friendship with your spouse, you need what Gary and Barbara Rosberg describe as *persevering love*. They describe it as "the kind of love that triumphs over the trials and grows stronger when you are most vulnerable."³ Persevering love doesn't just hang on through calamity by its fingernails; it grabs on with a tight grip and refuses to let go. It's the kind of love described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:7: "Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance." Persevering love cements husbands and wives into lifelong friends.

Communication: You must talk with your spouse

A third principle to consider is communication. You must talk with your spouse. Every wise couple knows that “Reliable communication permits progress” (Proverbs 13:17, LB). For your marriage to develop, grow, and make progress, both of you have to make sure you are giving your spouse reliable information by saying what you mean and meaning what you say. Avoid the communication games. Don’t make your spouse guess what you are thinking or feeling. Don’t express something that is not true. If you are not angry, do not pretend you are. If you are not okay with something, don’t act as if you are. Don’t blame your spouse for not understanding how you feel when you have not given him or her dependable information.

Another truth wise couples know is “the tongue has the power of life and death” (Proverbs 13:17, NIV). What you say to your spouse and how you say it has the power to either damage or build up your marriage. The way you talk or don’t talk to your spouse can create or drain the energy in your marriage. You need to become a good communicator with your spouse. Get rid of negative and sarcastic statements. Speak with compassion, humility, gentleness, and encouragement. Let what you say and how you say it bring life into your family and not death. Your words can bring energy into the home or take it away.

The Five Levels of Communication

There are five levels of communication that every couple should experience.⁴ A balanced couple will enjoy each level.

The first level of communication is the *friendly level*. People do this kind of talking all day long. It is full of clichés about the weather, sports, clothes, and so forth – mostly just small talk we engage in to be courteous or to pass the time of day with someone. Sometimes we are interested in the subject and the person, but mostly we are just being polite.

The second level is the *factual level*. On this level we are simply reporting facts with no real personal involvement – almost like a television newscaster. The friendly level gets your feet into the ocean of communication while the factual level gets you waist deep. The first two levels are safe levels. They require very little thinking or listening skills. There is also no emotional exchange.

The third level is the *fellowship level*. Here we talk about our ideas, judgments, and philosophies. On this level of communication we begin to risk a little bit because someone may reject our ideas, judgments, or philosophies, and we may retreat as a result. This level also includes discussing individual opinions, concerns, and expectations, including personal goals, dreams, and desires. Now you're finally getting into the depths, and your initial reaction, as when scuba diving, is most likely fear. Your oxygen is dissipating, and your ears are feeling the pressure. You are completely submerged in the ocean of communication; your head is beneath the waves.

Most people can learn to dive down ten feet, pick up a seashell or two, and then retreat to the surface. However, to reap the treasures in your relationships, you must learn to stay in the depths of communication. As in diving, you must have the skills to give you the confidence to stay at this level – and also to go deeper. Nobody in his right mind begins scuba diving without training, but couples all over the world begin relationships without even the slightest guidance, which is why they often remain at the shallowest levels of intimacy.

The fourth level is the *feeling level*. Not only do we talk about our ideas, judgments, and philosophies but we begin to open up and say how we really feel about these ideas and judgments. As a couple, you find yourself talking about your fears, worries, hopes, and joys. Many people go no further in their communication. At this level, you help each other feel safe to share your deepest emotions. You each know that you will both do your very best to listen and value what the other is sharing. Each of you can accept the other as unique and special: a creation with an individual history, personality, and family background.

The fifth level is the *freedom level*. This is the level we need to reach with our mates. Here we are completely open in sharing our dreams, fears, and ideas, and we feel completely free in doing so because we have no fear of rejection. This is the deepest level of love and marital satisfaction. You've been together long enough and you feel safe enough to share your deepest needs with one another.

Guidelines to Help in Communication

How can you, as a couple, experience the deeper levels of communication? Just as a scuba diver has to learn some skills before diving, couples must learn some basic communication skills before going to the deeper levels of intimacy. The following are

some practical guidelines that will help you experience the wonderful world of deep communication with your spouse. I will use the acronym COMMUNICATE to introduce you to them.

Contact. Pay attention to your spouse. Learn to know when she needs you to hold her hand, give her a hug, or a gentle touch on the shoulder. Most couples consistently underestimate the power of touch. They undersell it, undervalue it, and under use it, yet touch has the power to calm, reassure, transfer courage, and stabilize a situation spinning out of control. When you touch your mate lovingly, you push back the threatening shadows of bitterness, loneliness, and insecurity. A loving touch at the right time can immediately drain anger from a situation. A gentle touch says, “You are valuable to me.”

Open. Practice open communication. Be transparent. Don’t give your spouse the cold shoulder or the silent treatment. That will immediately send them back to the surface or into shallower waters of communication. They will be reluctant to come back down later, when you really need them to. When you withdraw or avoid your spouse, you create an even greater problem by causing them to feel ignored, cut off, or abandoned. Your partner will feel as if you are trying to punish them. This often escalates and places the relationship at a greater risk. It is true that a cooling-off period can help you gain perspective and help you get your emotions back under control, but it needs to be done in such a way that the other person doesn’t perceive it as withdrawal, isolation, or avoidance.

Merit. Even though your partner’s perceptions are different from yours, they can still have merit or value. You will never see everything exactly the same way because you come from different families and different ways of life. Different does not mean “wrong” or “bad”; it just means “different.” Sometimes you may have to agree to disagree. You may have to say, “Well, I guess we really see that different.” It’s all right not to agree. There is nothing wrong with your marriage if you don’t see eye to eye on everything. In fact, it would be unusual if you did. Good communication develops when you value and take the time to understand your differences. When you respect the perceptions of your spouse, you are saying, “Who you are and what you think is

important to me.” Couples who value one another will grow through teaching and learning from each other. Those who do not value the other’s perceptions are saying, “You have nothing to teach me; my way is always right.” Poor communication is frequently the result of our trying to prove our “rightness.” Ask yourself if you would rather be right or be happy. Sometimes you cannot have both. If you are not interested in hearing your spouse’s point of view, you simply don’t value what he or she thinks and feels.

Model. Every spouse wants their spouse to listen better. One of the best ways to help your spouse do this is to become a better communicator yourself. Become the example of listening and communicating that you want your spouse to be. If you want him to not interrupt you, then don’t interrupt him. If you don’t want her to raise her voice, then you don’t raise your voice. Model for your spouse what you don’t want them to do when you are talking.

Undivided attention. Concentrate on what your spouse is saying. Pay attention. If you have to turn off the radio, mute the television, or go to another room, do so. In order to experience deeper levels of communication, you will have to give your spouse your complete attention. Do not interrupt them when they are talking. When you interrupt your spouse, it causes them to feel as if you don’t care, aren’t listening, or you only want to speak your mind. If you are prone to interrupting, you will need to work very diligently to repeat what your partner said before you share. You might need to be reminded that you will get a chance but must wait until the other person has finished sharing his or her thoughts and feelings.

Need. One of the basic needs of the heart is to be heard. Your spouse needs to talk to you, whether it’s about the weather, clothes, ideas, expectations, worries, fears, joys, or failures. Your spouse desires to communicate with you on all five levels. He/she wants to be heard and to be understood by you. The reason your spouse may raise his voice, talk more slowly, repeat things over and over, or speak more quickly is because he believes he is not being heard at a deeper level and is trying to communicate something important to you. Try your best to understand what he/she is saying: listen for what they *really* mean. Learn to listen between the lines.

Interact. Make sure you don't dominate the conversation. Let your spouse share their thoughts, opinions, feelings, and concerns. Only your spouse can communicate what they are thinking and feeling. Don't tell them what they should and should not be feeling. In the same way, be aware of your own thoughts and feelings, and be responsible for communicating those to your partner. No one can speak for you, except you! Use "I" messages: "I feel sad because," "I think we need to take this approach because," "I am really hurting right now," "Let me tell you how I see this situation," and "This is how I feel." Communication gets cloudy when you begin to tell your spouse what he thinks and feels or how she *should* think and feel. Interact by making sure you are sharing your thoughts and feelings but allowing them to do the same.

Clarity. Don't make your spouse guess what you mean. If you feel like you are having to guess what your spouse is thinking then ask questions for clarifications. Some examples are, "What did you mean when you said...?" "Can you give me an example of...?" or "Here's what I heard you say; is this correct?" Be aware that listening for clarity can be painful. It takes concentration, selflessness, and humility to be a great listener. But I am convinced, if you put forth the effort, it will be rewarded with a degree of intimacy that cannot be experienced without this type of communication. This skill will help you lead your relationship into levels four and five of communication.

Avoid. Stay away from negative words or phrases. Don't call your spouse names or ask sarcastic questions. Couples usually digress to the use of demeaning words once they have become frustrated, hurt, or angry. Belittling and labeling words such as *stupid*, *insensitive*, *selfish*, *moron*, *idiot*, *lazy*, *hard-headed*, and *stubborn* are usually said to our partners to get back at them for hurting us. These words will cause the relationship to ascend to the shallower waters of communication and will seldom lead to getting back on track with the original problem.

Time. Take the time to talk. If you are too busy to enjoy each other's company and discuss each other's day and lives, then simply put, you are too busy. Eliminate some

things. Don't over commit yourself or your family. Spend less time watching television or less time on the computer. Find things you can do together that allows you opportunity to spend some uninterrupted time sharing your thoughts, plans, and heart.

Encouragement. Be the most encouraging and positive spouse you can be. Learn to talk to your spouse, even during an argument, with words that build up. Proverbs 16:21 says, "A mature person is known for his understanding. The more pleasant his words, the more persuasive he is" (GN). You are never persuasive when you are abrasive. It takes maturity to talk with pleasant words when your feelings are not pleasant. Even at the end of a heated discussion where both of you took some major hits, where feelings were hurt and egos bruised, you need to conclude the conversation by encouraging your spouse by reaffirming three things. Reaffirm your commitment to the marriage by saying, "I want you to know that even though I feel angry, I am committed to you." Reaffirm your love for your spouse by saying, "Even though we disagree, I love you." Reaffirm your thankfulness for them by saying, "I know this won't be our last argument, and we will disagree again, but I want you to know I'm thankful that you are in my life and that God gave me you." It's amazing how powerful and effective encouragement is in a relationship: "A word of encouragement does wonders" (Proverbs 12:25, LB).

Consideration: You must treat your spouse with respect

A fourth principle that will improve your marriage deals with consideration. You must treat your spouse with respect. God's Word instructs both the husband and wife to show respect to each other: "Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and *treat them with respect*" (1 Peter 3:7, emphasis added) and "The wife must *respect* her husband" (Ephesians 5:33, emphasis added). Respect means to place a high value on someone or something. To give your spouse respect means you have decided to treat them as someone important in your life. To respect someone is to give them honor and see them with an eye of distinction. To honor someone is to give them preference over others by attaching high value to them. God wants you to respect your spouse and to place a high value on them.

Respect is a gift. I can already hear someone asking, “What? You want me to respect him – that creep who plays golf all day Saturday, watches sports on Sunday, ignores me in the evening, and at night snores like a buzz saw?” Or “You expect me to put her on an honor pedestal? She spends half her life watching television, typing on face book, and then nags me for not taking out the trash or helping with the children. Why should I honor her?” What your spouse does or does not do has nothing to do with you giving them respect. Respect is not earned, from your perspective. It is a gift you give. Sure, it would be easier if they were to try to earn your respect, but whether they do or not has no bearing on you giving it. Even if they don’t want your respect you are to give it. It’s not a matter of your mate’s deserving respect but of your own integrity. God commands you to generally honor everyone, including your spouse: “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves” (Romans 12:10, NIV).

Respect is a decision. It is the simple choice to place high value, worth, and importance on another person to view him or her as a priceless gift and grant that person a position in your life worthy of great respect. Respect is a gift we choose to give to others. It isn’t purchased by their actions or contingent upon our emotions. You are choosing to give them distinction whether or not they like it, want it, or deserve it. You give honor to your spouse merely because that person is alive and breathing, not because he or she has done something to deserve it. You just do it; it’s a decision you make. You will either choose to obey what God says about respecting your spouse or disobey (1 Peter 3:7; Ephesians 5:33). You will either trust God on this or not.

Respect is an action. Respect is a verb. It is something to be heard and seen. There’s a story about a husband who was known to be a man of few words. His wife longed for a little romantic conversation, but it never came. One evening when he was engrossed in his newspaper, she asked, “Steve, do you still love me?” He replied, “I said I did when we were at our wedding, didn’t I? If anything ever changes, I’ll let you know.” In the same way, Steve may respect his wife in his mind and heart. He may think positive thoughts about her and really like her, but until he communicates that respect through some kind of action, there will be no reward or benefit from the respect. His wife will simply go on wondering if her husband values or cherishes her.

One way to show respect is to become a student of your spouse. You can honor your mate by being attentive to his or her preferences. Do you know your husband’s favorite food? What is your wife’s favorite way to spend time with you? What does he

love to do on vacation? What does she like to do to relax? Tragically, many couples cannot answer even the basic questions about their spouse's tastes and interests. To help themselves with this, some couples have created their own instruction manual for each other. They write out each other's favorite things: food, restaurant, activities, movies, etc. Those include things like their spouse's hot buttons and pet peeves. Whether you write them down or not is not important, but you need to know them, so you can honor your spouse by cooking what he likes or by avoiding the things that irritate her. Make the honor fit the person. Make your mate feel like the most valued and important person on the face of the earth.

Another way to honor your spouse is to make a list of their positive qualities. Write them out. For some reason when you write things out, it makes them feel more real. Everyone has great qualities worth mentioning on paper. Consider your spouse's personality traits, appearance, thinking patterns, gender difference, faith, values, character, parenting skills, concerns, opinions, work ethic, and life goals. Create the longest list you can by including every positive, precious, worthy, upbeat, godly, amazing, startling, and outstanding quality that you see. Personalize your list with real details you admire – not just her beauty, but the glow she has when she smiles. Not just his hard work, but how faithful he is to provide for the family and to take care of the house. Let your mate see your list and even exchange lists occasionally. That's honor.

Dr. Gary and Barbara Rosberg give several suggestions on how to demonstrate honor in marriage from both the husband and wife perspective.⁵

For husbands, some of their suggestions were:

- Ask her how you can help her, or dive in and help without being asked. It sounds like this: "Where do you need more of my help?" In a word: "initiate!"
- Never humiliate her. If she does something embarrassing in front of others, don't make it worse. Regardless of the details or even if she's at fault, just don't do it.
- Share with others how important she is to you. Keep pictures of her in your wallet and on your desk. Talk about her to your friends and coworkers. Let her overhear you bragging about her – it does wonders for the relationship!

- Support her in front of the children. Whether or not you agree with a decision she makes, back her up, then discuss your differences later in private. Tell the kids how much you love their mom and how much you appreciate all her gifts.
- Remember special dates! Obviously, her birthday and your anniversary are key. But you should also commemorate dates such as the anniversary of the death of a parent or another loved one. Send her a note and comfort her on those days.
- Never compare her to other women. This includes your mother, previous girlfriends, women friends, or coworkers. Don't even compare her to other women in a positive way.

For the wives, some of their suggestions include:

- Say please and thank you.
- Lift a burden. Ask him, "If I could take something off your to-do list today, what could I do for you?"
- Allow him to be himself. Don't assume that your husband is going to think, feel, or behave as you do or as "the ideal husband" does. He will make mistakes. Allow him that freedom.
- Appreciate his hard work. Thank him for working hard for you and your family. Let him know that you notice and admire his work.
- Compliment his efforts to be sensitive. If he makes special attempts to understand, listen, or comfort you, let him know how meaningful they are to you. Be specific about what you particularly like.
- Affirm your husband's maleness by showing interest in his hobbies. If he participates in sports, be there to cheer him on.

To not show respect and consideration toward your spouse reveals the foolishness in your heart. God tells us, “The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere” (James 3:17, NIV). One of the characteristics of a wise spouse and a marriage built on God’s wisdom is consideration. Wise couples are mindful of their spouse’s feelings. A mistake that many people make is thinking their spouse has to feel the same way about things as they do. They think their spouse should feel the same way about money, church, music, food, and hobbies as they do. They often subconsciously think, “If he is not as interested in this or doesn’t see the value of this the way I do then there is something wrong with him.” You begin to think his feelings or thoughts are invalid, illogical, or irrational simply because they do not line up with yours. As a result you minimize your spouse’s feelings by saying disrespectful or inconsideration statements.

Compromise: You must learn to share your life

Another foundational truth deals with compromise. You must learn to share your life as a couple. You must learn to be teammates. Many couples approach decisions or difficulties as opponents rather than teammates. They jockey for position trying to outsmart and out argue each other. One trying to prove their point, while the other trying to prove theirs.

All couples have to make many decisions throughout their lives. Some issues are easy to make: what will be for dinner, the color of a wall, who handles the remote control, or what to watch on television. Others require more careful consideration because they involve weighty issues like career choices, where to live, which church to attend, when to have children, major investments, who pays the bills, whether to buy or rent, and how much debt to take on.

As you both face significant choices, it’s important to have a method of decision making that allows you to remain in harmony. Even more important, however, you need a system that will allow you to work effectively together as teammates. You don’t want a tug-of-war match against each other; you want to be pulling on the same side of the rope.

As Jesus explained, power struggles are destructive because “Any kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and a house divided against itself will fall” (Luke 11:17, NIV). Any time a couple squares off against each other, the outcome is already assured. They become divided, and their unity melts away.

To combat disunity and act as a team, I strongly suggest you learn how to find win-win solutions. In marriage, there is no such thing as a win-lose because you are both on the same team. As a team, you either win together or you lose together. There is no other option. Understanding this truth can change your marriage. Although many couples believe they are on the same team, they often don’t act like it. So many times when attempting to make a decision, they abandon the team and become adversaries. When that happens and one team member loses, every member of that team loses.

I would suggest you develop a No-Losers Policy. Basically, this is the mind-set that says, *members of a team win together or they lose together; therefore, in a marriage relationship, I can’t win unless my spouse also wins*. This means that it is unacceptable for either one of you to walk away from any interaction feeling as if one of you has lost. You both need to feel good about whatever solution you dream up.

Philippians 2:3 says, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.” Pay attention to the next statement of that verse, “Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also the interests of others” (NIV). There it is! God’s Word describes a win-win, in plain and simple language. When related to marriage this verse encourages you to look not only to your own interests (win) but also to the interest of your spouse (win). That means that to make the idea work in your relationship, you must come up with a different definition of winning. If winning is about getting your own way, then you’ll never be a successful team. The key is to redefine winning as “finding a solution that both of you feel good about.”

Dr. Greg Smalley and his wife Erin give seven ways to help create win-win solutions.⁶ The first way is to reaffirm your No-Losers Policy. Remind each other that you are on the same team. This creates a positive environment that improves how you treat each other. Couples relax when they actively search for a solution that both people feel great about. Why? The worry simply dissipates and is replaced by feelings of safety because neither of you has to worry about protecting your own agenda. You no longer feel anxious that your feelings won’t be considered. Secondly, try to find the win nugget for each person. What does each need from this decision to sense a win?

Third, seek the Lord's opinion. Pray together about this. The best part about praying together as a couple is it instantly helps restore unity. Fourth, brainstorm possible solutions. Here is where you generate all possible solutions. The best advice here is to get creative and refrain from judging or critiquing the ideas generated. Both of you should be allowed to share your ideas freely. Fifth, pick a solution. Evaluate the possible solutions and choose one that you both feel great about. If you feel you need more input then take some time, do research, and get advice. Sixth, try it out. In the end, it doesn't matter who came up with the idea; the only important thing is that both of you consider it a win. Seventh, reexamine the solution. Sometimes, trying out a win-win solution, you will discover that your solution doesn't feel quite like you thought it would. If the solution begins to feel like a loss to one of you, then your team is starting to lose. If this happens to you, don't worry about it. Just repeat the seven steps and rework your solution. Remember, your goal is to make sure that your team stays on the successful side of things and that both people feel great about the solution.

You Make the First Step

After reading the above, you need to make a decision, not your spouse, but you. Somebody has to take the first step or maybe the first several steps. You can improve your marriage today by allowing God to improve you. Make a decision today to follow Christ more closely, to dedicate yourself to serving your spouse, to talk to and listen to your spouse's heart, to consider ways to treat them with respect in order to help them feel valuable, to learn how to compromise and not always have to have your own way.

All these ideas are not going to happen overnight. God knows which one you need to focus on. Seek His face, and let Him show you and guide you to the one you and your marriage need the most right now.

¹Smalley, Gary. *I Promise: How 5 Commitments Determine the Destiny of Your Marriage*. Thomas Nelson Publisher; Nashville, TN. 2006, pp. 116-119.

²Wright, H. Norman. *Now That You're Engaged: The Keys to Building a Strong, Lasting Relationship*. Regal Books; Ventura, CA. 2005, p8.

³Rosberg, Gary and Barbara. *Divorce-Proof Your Marriage*. Tyndale House Publishers; Wheaton, IL. 2002, p158.

⁴Gary Smalley describes the five levels of communication as the five levels of intimate communication: speaking in clinches, sharing facts, sharing opinions, sharing feelings, and sharing needs. For a greater explanation and understand the dynamics these levels can have on a relationship I would recommend his book, *Secrets to Lasting Love: Uncovering the Keys to Life-Long Intimacy*.

⁵Roseberg, Dr. Gary and Barbara. *Divorce-Proof Your Marriage: Six Secrets to a Forever Marriage*; Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.; Wheaton, Illinois. 2002, pages 126-129.

⁶Smalley, Dr. Greg and Erin Smalley. *Before You Plan Your Wedding, Plan Your Marriage*. Howard Books Publishing, New York; 2008. Pages 209-219.