

YOUR  
MARRIAGE  
TODAY  
...AND TOMORROW

MAKING YOUR RELATIONSHIP MATTER NOW  
AND FOR GENERATIONS TO COME

CRAWFORD & KAREN  
LORITTS

**FOREWORD BY GARY CHAPMAN**

#1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The 5 Love Languages*®

# The Habits That Transform a Marriage

**Crawford:** *Every night before my mother went to bed she would get on her knees and pray—out loud—for her family and other needs on her heart. It is difficult to put in words the impact this has had on me. Growing up, there were a number of times I was on the verge of making some wrong choices, and the picture of Mom on her knees crying out to God for me would stop me in my tracks. Her humble, quiet strength came from this consistent habit of turning to God for His intervention and wisdom. Seeing mom consistently and unashamedly pray served as a powerful motivation for me and my two sisters to cultivate this life-transforming habit.*

*It's sort of funny. Mom never said a lot about praying, she just did it consistently. In much the same way, when our kids were growing up, we had family devotions. I don't recall telling our children to do the same with their families. But it's interesting that they do. The lesson: consistently model the right stuff.*

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**K**aren and I can annoy each other. We've been married for so long we know what buttons to push—and what buttons never to push. But sometimes we annoy each


other just because of some stubborn habit. A few of these habits are so ingrained in us that we have learned to not only live with them but in a weird way they have become endearing. It's sort of part of what makes Karen "Karen" and Crawford "Crawford."

Habits. We all have them. Some good, some bad, some just irritating. Dr. Gary Chapman, author of *The 5 Love Languages*, has written about how his wife, Karolyn, does not close drawers. A small thing, but annoying to her husband in the early years of their marriage! But in time he learned it was just easier to close the drawer rather than have a silly argument.

We all have habits that are "second nature"—showering, taking the same route to work every day. We all have habits we need to get rid of. And we all need to cultivate good habits.<sup>1</sup> So the challenge is identifying the good habits and then disciplining ourselves to consistently practice them so that over time they become an essential, natural part of our lives and behavior.

But some habits cannot be broken simply by the force of our will. These habits are anchored in the stubborn, debilitating nature of sin. Try as we might, no amount of effort on our part is going to release their grip on us. Even the strong, resilient apostle Paul had to confess, "For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Rom.

7:15). The context of this confession is Paul's testimony concerning his ongoing struggle with sin. He couldn't get rid of that which was ingrained in him—sin and disobedience. It affected his behavior. It's the same with us.



**Some habits  
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1. Braco Pobric, "What Are Habits?," The Positive Psychology People, <http://www.thepositivepsychologypeople.com/habits-to-happiness/>.

## Three Life-Giving Habits

Karen and I want to identify and underscore three enduring habits that each couple together must press into and make “second nature” in order for our marriages to reflect God’s purpose and mission for this and future generations. The habits we want to highlight are those that are anchored in our character and our relationship with the Lord. That’s not to say that stuff like consistently picking up after yourself, paying your bills on time, or keeping your mouth closed when you eat are not good habits to practice. But we want to focus on those habits that give enduring life to the marriage.

These foundational habits are not developed solely by the force of our will. We are sinners. We have sinned and we have been sinned against. Thus, some of our habits, actions, and responses have been shaped and informed by sin. So much so that, as Paul says, we do not understand our own actions. The solution to our sin is the gospel, the good news of Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection (1 Cor. 15:3–4). Christ’s death on the cross not only paid the penalty for our sin but has broken the power of sin’s control over us (Eph. 2:1–10). What’s more, the moment we turn to Christ and place our faith in Him, we receive forgiveness, and the Holy Spirit comes to permanently take up residence in our lives (Eph. 1:13–14).

This is the reason why the apostle Paul’s story doesn’t end with the confession of his struggle with sin (Rom. 7:15). But in Romans chapter 8, he celebrates his forgiveness through the work of Christ and that, yes, indeed, he can overcome his sinful habits through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:1–17).

We have had the joy and privilege of being exposed to many

“until-death-do-us-part” marriages. These are couples that have been married for fifty years or more. What we have witnessed and learned from them is that thriving, successful marriages are built on humility and dependence. These couples were aware of their inadequacies and imperfections. They needed God’s help. They learned to bring their sinful habit patterns to the Lord and asked Him to show them the foundational habit patterns that breathe supernatural, transformative life into their marriage and then to give them the power, through His Spirit, to develop and exercise these habits.

Caution: developing and nurturing these habits takes commitment and work. The story of hope and growth is not simply the product of clear thinking or some “secret” insight that brought us to a glorious tipping point. But because we love each other and we want our relationship to tell the truth about God, and our marriage to reflect His plan and purposes, we step toward the challenge and embrace the pain.

So what are the baseline, repetitive, consistent, transformative behaviors (habits) exhibited by couples that are committed to developing a godly marriage that will affect and impact their moment in history as well as future generations?

***First, we consistently pursue Christlikeness individually and as a couple.***

This is both a goal and a habit. The first thing every morning, Karen can be found sitting at the kitchen table with her open Bible and her prayer journal. This is not just some ritual that she goes through. She is nurturing and feeding her soul. She is listening to the Lord as He speaks to her heart through His Word, listening

to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. She is talking to the Lord in prayer about the challenges she is facing, the needs of our family, the cares and concerns of others. And I know she is praying for me. She is deepening her relationship with the Lord. This habit, this commitment, has marked her life. It has created in her a delightful longing to live in God's presence and to center her life and all that concerns her around the one she loves the most, Jesus.

I, too, have a similar routine. Many years ago, I made a commitment to the Lord that before I spoke to anyone else, I would speak to Him in prayer. Every morning I spend time reading His Word and, most mornings, capturing in my prayer journal what I sense the Lord is saying to me. I pray for those who are hurting, have needs, and are facing challenges. And I pray for Karen. How I treasure these daily appointments with the Lord. The more time we spend with Him, the more we want to be with Him and to be like Him. Jesus becomes the joy and passion of our lives.

Our children have all commented that seeing us nurture and pursue this habit has had a profound impact on them. No, Karen and I didn't do this *primarily* to make an impression on our children. We walked toward our relationship with the Lord because we are convinced that apart from Him we can do nothing. In so doing, we have tasted the incredible joy and power that comes when we bask in His presence. We have experienced Him stepping into the challenges we have faced in our marriage and raising our children. This active dependence on Him has been "caught" by our children. It brings tender, joy-filled tears to our eyes as we witness our children building their marriages and families around the pursuit of Christlikeness. Jesus is the life and message of marriage and family.

As Karen and I have grown in our walk and relationship with Christ, He has placed in our hearts a “holy impatience” (or at least we hope it is!) with complacency or an incremental approach to our journey toward Christlikeness. I suppose some of this has to do with where we are at this stage in our lives. You could say we have more road behind us than we do in front of us. But life is uncertain. And ultimately the only thing—the only One—worth pursuing and giving ourselves to is Jesus.

But what does looking like Jesus, well, look like? Galatians 5:22–23 lists the fruit of the Spirit. These nine characteristics are also a composite portrait of Christlikeness: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.” Once again, as we develop this glorious habit of pursuing Christlikeness, these nine characteristics (and more) become an ever-increasing reality.

When He is first, His work in our lives becomes evident. He changes us and removes the sinful irritants in our lives. It’s not so much that we grow into a better version of ourselves; we start looking more and more like Jesus. Karen and I often comment that as we have gotten older, we look more like our parents. In fact, the other day I picked up a picture of my father and could not believe how much I look like him. But this analogy breaks down. Looking like our parents is genetic. Looking like Jesus is intentional.


Perhaps you’re in a marriage where, frankly, pursuing Christlikeness is not at the top of the list. Other things or relationships are more important. Your affections have been captured by someone or something else. You are Christians and good people. By most measurements, you have a good marriage. But consistently



pursuing Christ has, honestly, become more of an erratic hobby than a habit. And if you were completely honest, you don't really see this as something you ought to throw yourself into right now. You conclude that you'll get there one day, but for now "God knows and understands where we are."

Keep in mind, however, that the more we put off changing, the more difficult it is to change. In fact, we become resistant to the very thing we know that we need. We grow accustomed to self-reliance and we have become at home with accommodating less than what we know God has for us and wants us to be and pursue.

And besides, consider what your children and those close to you are missing. What lasting, eternal weight are you modeling before them and placing in their hands? Who and what is going to give them hope, stability, and lasting joy and satisfaction? No, we need to do a lot more than just tell them what matters most. They need to see, taste, and feel the delightful effects of the habitual, focused pursuit of Christlikeness through those God has assigned to give shape to their lives and commission their future.



**We can become resistant to the very thing we know that we need.**

### ***Second, we consistently focus on character and integrity.***

Character and integrity are the building blocks of trust and confidence. But—they don't come naturally to us.

Back to the beginning. After God brings Eve to Adam and establishes the vision and nature of marriage (Gen. 2:24), we read this wonderful, compelling description of the first couple's innocence and transparency: "And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed" (v. 25). They weren't guilty or em-



barrassed because, frankly, they had nothing to hide. They were both a clear, clean picture window that each could look out of and peer into without obstruction. When they looked at each other they saw everything there was to see.

But this didn't last long. Satan deceived them. They disobeyed God, and sin entered their reality and into the world. Guilt, shame, and hiding has been our default mode ever since.

Yes, when we trust Christ as Savior and Lord He forgives us of our sin and makes us His child. But He doesn't remove our ability to sin or the inclination to sin. We have to cultivate an appetite for obedience, for consistently doing the right, godly thing. Again, character and integrity are not givens. They must be developed.

And in marriage, we bring who we are, and who we are not, to the relationship. We should never stop working on developing wholeness and transparency in the marriage. More than anything else, we want it to be said that we are worthy of each other's trust.

Some years ago, Karen and I were speaking at a marriage conference. During a break, a man approached me and said that his wife doesn't trust him. He told me that he had been involved in a long-term affair that he had relatively recently ended. He had repented of his adultery, and he and his wife were working on repairing the damage to their marriage. But he was frustrated. He couldn't seem to understand how his wife could say that she forgave him but didn't trust him.

I pointed out what I suspect he already knew. Forgiveness and trust are not the same thing. I told him that she shouldn't give him the gift of trust just yet. He had broken his marriage vows and for months lied to her and betrayed her trust and confidence. Now he had to intentionally demonstrate over time that he was willing

to do whatever it took to recapture her heart and confidence.

Character and integrity represent the fiber and fabric of a marriage. There is nothing to build the marriage on, let alone to place in the hands of the next generation, if there is the collapse of character. But it is fragile. If we're not vigilant, sin and neglect will ambush us and wash away the trust and confidence that's taken years, a lifetime, to build. We have to be consciously aware that we are stewards of this trust and confidence. It is a treasured gift. Thus, we are working on this trust, preserving it, not taking it for granted. It is a *habit*.

Character and integrity are interrelated. Integrity means to be whole or undivided. It is the idea of not just affirming clear guiding principles and values, but living in light of them. Further, it is behavior that is consistent with the promises and commitments that we make. We do what we say we are and what we value. If we make a promise, we keep it.

Psalms 15 paints an inviting picture of what integrity looks like:

O LORD, who shall sojourn in your tent?

Who shall dwell on your holy hill?

He who walks blamelessly and does what is right

and speaks truth in his heart;

who does not slander with his tongue

and does no evil to his neighbor,

nor takes up a reproach against his friend;

in whose eyes a vile person is despised,

**More than anything,  
we want it to be  
said that we are  
worthy of each  
other's trust.**

but who honors those who fear the LORD;  
who swears to his own hurt and does not change;  
who does not put out his money at interest  
and does not take a bribe against the innocent.  
He who does these things shall never be moved.

Now to be sure, no one this side of heaven is a perfect picture of integrity. We are all flawed, fallen human beings. But neither should this reality serve as an excuse or justification for erratic, inconsistent behavior and a failure to keep our commitments and promises. We must press into closing the gap between what we say and how we behave. After all, the gift of trust is an expression of confidence, and confidence is earned through observed consistency.


My parents believed this. Honesty and integrity were core values to Crawford and Sylvia Loritts. What a great blessing and gift this was to my sisters and me! (In fact, I wrote a book in tribute to my dad. The title of the book is *Never Walk Away: Lessons on Integrity from a Father Who Lived It*.) This sounds remarkable . . . but it's true. Our parents never made a promise or commitment to us that they did not keep. There were occasions that something beyond their control came up and they had to fulfill the commitment later. But they didn't just forget about it. They did what they said they would do.

This created an environment of trust and stability. What's more, my parents trusted each other, and as kids we saw this and felt it. This gave us the gift of security. I remember glancing at my father during our wedding ceremony and thinking, "By God's grace I'm going to fulfill my vows and commitment to Karen the way you did for Mom."

For twenty-seven years Karen and I served on the staff of Cru, a large, worldwide ministry committed to sharing the hope of the gospel with every person in the world. During those early years I traveled a lot, speaking on college campuses across the country. I was away from Karen and the kids sometimes for several weeks at a time. When I checked into a hotel or motel, the first thing I did was to take a picture out of my briefcase and put it on the mirror. That picture would be the last thing I looked at when I left the room and the first thing I looked at when I returned. The message was, “Crawford, you’re one decision away from stupid. These are the most important people in the world—don’t do anything to hurt them or to violate the gift of their trust and confidence.” I was reminded that I had to keep my promise to them.

So you can imagine how deeply moved Karen and I were as we listened to our oldest son, Bryan, a few years ago when he said to an audience that “my parents never made a promise to me or my siblings that they did not keep.” No, we were not and are not perfect, but Karen and I have taken seriously the commitment to develop the *habit* of integrity.

Character is the composite picture of our choices, decisions, and how we have responded to life and its challenges. It’s kind of like when we say that an older house has a lot of “character.” I think what we mean is that the house sort of tells the story of the life that has been lived inside its walls. We, too, tell the story of the choices and decisions we have made. I heard a friend say, “When we are born, we look like our parents. When we die, we look like our decisions.”



**I heard a friend say, “When we are born, we look like our parents. When we die, we look like our decisions.”**

Again, integrity and character are related. Fundamentally, if we are dishonest and ignore or disregard our commitments and responsibilities, we will have poor or weak character. Dishonesty and irresponsibility become embedded in who and what we have become. Over time we will look like what we have or have not done and not necessarily what we have said. This indeed is the real stuff of credibility and legacy.

Marriage models not only what God wants to do in every generation but also places on display what our children and the next generation should become. In this regard, marriage is incarnational. Our character has to match what we say we believe and value. We keep a close watch over our decisions and behavior to make sure they are telling the truth about where we are headed and in line with the noble vision of what God has called us to be. It is our heart's desire that our lives are far more eloquent than our words. There is simply too much at stake.

Strong, compelling marriages are the product of strong, compelling character. It is not just that these couples have mastered the “how-tos” of a good relationship. They pay attention to what's underneath the hood. They've made the conscious commitment that, by God's grace, they will not let anything in their character be a stumbling block to each other and their children. They are committed to making things right.

***Third, we consistently face the reality of our humanity with a willingness to forgive.***

But what do we do when we mess up, when we have made poor choices and even betrayed the confidence and trust of our marriage partner? There is grace and mercy with our great God.

Karen and I know couples that have made painful, heartbreaking choices. Some have committed adultery. In another case, the marriage was shaken because it was discovered that the husband was embezzling funds from his job. And so on, all the poor choices and bad decisions we fallen humans make. But thankfully, in many of these cases God brought repentance and reconciliation. When these spouses turned to the Lord, not only did they find forgiveness, but they also received God's enabling power to repair and rebuild their character.

Failure doesn't have to be a life sentence. Consider David, who committed murder and adultery (2 Sam. 11). When he repented, God put him back together and wonderfully restored him (2 Sam. 12:1-14; Ps. 51). And God will do the same for all of us if we turn to Him. He will put us back on track. However, there are sometimes unintended consequences when we sin, and the road back may be steeper than we anticipated.


Most couples when they get married underestimate their sinfulness. I know this was our case. You may have heard the old line, "Love is blind but marriage is an eye-opener." There's more truth to that than we might care to admit. I didn't realize the depths of my selfishness until Karen and I got married. And it wasn't just me. Karen began to see more clearly some of her own "stuff" that she needed to deal with as well.

Contrary to our romantic vision and idealism, we don't marry a deity or an angel. Neither do we marry a vision of what that person can be or what we think we can make them—that's a losing proposition. We marry who that person *is*.

Does that mean we never change? No. Karen and I, in many ways, are completely different people than we were when we got

married. God has used our marriage and our love and commitment to each other to encourage us to grow and to change. By definition growth means change. Further, a commitment to be married means a commitment to change. If there is no growth toward the Lord and toward each other, there is no true intimacy—and that means change.

Here's what I mean when I say that we "marry who that person is." It means that only fallen people get married. We carry in us the stain of sin. And the closer we get to each other, the more we see the sin, failures, and shortcomings.



**A commitment to be married means a commitment to change.**

When I was in high school, I had the privilege of singing in a choir at the iconic Carnegie Hall in New York City. The lights were turned up during the rehearsal and I was a bit surprised at how "imperfect"

and unimpressive the stage area was. But from the audience, with just the right lighting, it was inviting, even spectacular. When we get married, the lights are turned up. We discover things that we hadn't fully recognized before. Frankly, some of these things are offensive and irritating. We are confronted with the stain of sin.

So what do we do? Go down the path of trying to fix the other person? That tends not to end well. Depending on the personality and disposition, we encounter either direct, obvious resistance or passive-aggressive behavior. As we have pointed out, there's stuff in us that we can't get rid of on our own. That's the nature of sin. In fact, we can sincerely pour ourselves into doing better and trying harder but still not get anywhere. Further, change is frustrated when we come across to our spouse as if we are the model and



standard in the area with which they are struggling. Remember, *both* of us are sinners and have stuff that we struggle to overcome. We need a Savior. Karen is not Crawford's Savior. Crawford is not Karen's Savior. Jesus is our Savior. We have been forgiven and we need forgiveness. We need to lovingly come alongside each other and encourage our marriage partner to tap into our life-giving, loving Savior for His grace and help to be what only He can make us.

The way we do this is through humility, and by practicing the habit of giving and receiving forgiveness. The Bible says in Ephesians 4:32, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." This verse drips with grace. Notice the sweet, compelling words: "kind," "tenderhearted," "forgiving." This indeed should form our attitude and demeanor toward each other as couples and underlie the atmosphere we create in the relationship and in the home.

It is within this relational context that we address irritating habits and offenses. What's more, although the word *humility* is not used in this verse, the *attitude* of humility is clear. We are to forgive "as God in Christ forgave you." Because we are mindful that God has forgiven us through the unimaginable sacrifice of His Son, we can and must graciously forgive others.

When God forgives us, what does He do? *He releases the offense and chooses not to relate to us based on the offense.* When we forgive, we too are choosing to release the offense and not allow the offense to be a barrier in the relationship. One of the ways that we know that we have forgiven someone is that we don't remind them of what they did to hurt or offend us. If we can't resist the urge to bring the matter up, then it is a pretty clear indication that we have not forgiven the person. We've not let it go. Certainly, forgiveness is

not always easy. But if we choose not to forgive, we are building a wall that will serve as a permanent barrier to intimacy and we are solidifying anger, bitterness, and resentment.

Forgiveness is the gift of grace. We offend God and hurt His heart, but rather than assigning us to permanent punishment, He reaches out to us, and through His amazing love, He pours out His kindness over us. We can do the same as we extend—or

accept—the gift, and experience this sweet, uncontaminated, unconditional love.

**Karen and I stopped pretending that we are more than we really are and less needy than the other person.**

We don't perform for it. We can't bargain for it. It doesn't come with a price tag. It is a gift. I can't put into words the tenderness and sweetness that washes over me when I know I've done something to offend Karen and she turns to me and says, "Sweetheart,

I forgive you." Karen feels the same when I express my forgiveness for something that she has done.

The habit of giving and receiving forgiveness is liberating. A grace-filled home creates an inviting atmosphere for wholesome, authentic change. It has a way of flushing out hypocrisy and protecting us from the heart erosion that comes from pride-based performance. In the name of being a good example, sometimes I think we unintentionally step into hypocrisy. We deny or minimize our weaknesses and failures. The problem is everyone in the house knows that we're not everything that we are projecting to be. Wouldn't it be much better to acknowledge our imperfections and need for help and forgiveness? Again, Karen and I are more motivated to change because we stopped pretending that we are

more than we really are and somehow less needy than the other person.

Finally, this models to our children and grandchildren that we are always forgiven sinners, and it is God's amazing grace that gets us to where we need to be.

So to sum up, the consistent pursuit of Christlikeness, the consistent cultivation of character and integrity, and giving and receiving the gift of forgiveness are foundational habits that bring richness, trust, and intimacy to the marriage. Now let's look at some other gifts our spouse needs from us.

### **To think about . . .**

Crawford shares how he and Karen "stopped pretending that we are more than we really are and somehow less needy than the other person." Have you seen this "pretending" in your marriage? How have you dealt (or not dealt) with it?

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