



Whether you're in your first or 51st year, you can grow in your marriage. Dr. Chapman shares stories and insights inspired by decades of counseling couples. Full of wisdom and practical advice, this book is for all couples who desire a joy-filled marriage marked by understanding, humor, and love.

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# Where It Begins



# The Heart of Marriage

**BEFORE I GOT MARRIED**, I dreamed about how happy I would be when Karolyn and I were at last enjoying life together as husband and wife. I had visions of all the wonderful things my wife would do for me—sausage and eggs together in the morning; candlelight dinners at night; holding hands all day long; and sex every night. I assumed she had the same visions.

However, after marriage I found out that my wife did not do mornings. So much for the sausage and eggs. She anticipated that I would take her out to romantic restaurants for dinner, not as a prelude to sex, but simply because I loved her. I expressed my disappointment with her, and she expressed her disappointment with me. We succeeded in being miserable.

I have discovered over the past decades as a marriage counselor that thousands of other couples have experienced the same disappointment and frustration that we went through. Our marriage did not turn around overnight, but it did turn around. And so can yours.

## WHAT HAPPENED?

For me, the journey began with an academic exercise and ended with spiritual renewal. I was a graduate student in seminary studying to be a pastor and saying to God, “This is not going to work. There is no way I can be this miserable in my marriage and preach hope to people.” The thought occurred to me, “What if I did an in-depth study of the teachings of Jesus and then sought to apply them to my marriage?” In retrospect, it was one of the most profound thoughts I’ve ever had.

Since I had completed twenty-seven academic hours studying the Greek language, I decided to explore the teachings of Jesus in the original language of the New Testament. What I learned could have been discovered in a simple reading of any English translation.

His life and teachings focused on sacrificial service to others. Peter said of Him, “Jesus . . . went around doing good” (Acts 10:38). Jesus once said about Himself, “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve” (Matthew 20:28).

It is a theme that all truly great men and women of the past have affirmed: Life’s greatest meaning is found not in getting, but in giving.

I must admit that in the early years of my marriage, my focus had been on what my wife should be doing for me. Since she did not live up to my expectations, I blamed her for our poor marriage. In my studies, I encountered another teaching of Jesus, “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?” (Matthew 7:3). It hit me like a ton of bricks because I knew that my approach to our marriage had been accusing and blaming her instead of asking, “Where am I failing in my marriage?”

In desperation I said to God, “I don’t know what else to do. I’ve done everything I know to make this marriage work. I don’t know where to go from here.” When I was willing to pray, “Lord, please show me where I am failing in my marriage,” God answered my prayer immediately.

As soon as I prayed that prayer there came to my mind a visual image of Jesus on His knees washing the feet of His disciples, and I heard God say to me, “That’s the problem in your marriage. You do not have the attitude of Christ toward your wife.” Those words struck deeply in my heart because I remembered the words of Jesus when He had finished washing the feet of His followers:

“Do you understand what I have done for you?” he asked them. “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.” (John 13:12–17)

I don’t know how you respond to that, but at the time I was reading those verses the idea of washing feet did not appeal to me. In fact, I couldn’t think of anything I’d rather not do. It finally dawned on me that what Jesus was teaching was the attitude of service. I realized that I had gone about my marriage in exactly the

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opposite way. I had made demands of my wife. I expected her to make me happy. I realized that I was a totally secular man parading as a minister. In my desperation I cried out, “Oh God, please give me the attitude of Christ.” It’s the greatest prayer I’ve ever prayed regarding my marriage because God changed my attitude.

God answered that prayer. It was a spiritual renewal for me. God gave me a sincere desire to serve my wife. When I began to ask the question, “What can I do to help you?” my wife was fully willing to give me an answer. She taught me how I could serve her in meaningful ways. A second question I learned to ask was, “How can I make your life easier?” and later, “How can I be a better husband to you?” Her answers to those three questions gave me the information I needed to express the attitude of Christ toward her.

Our marriage did not turn around overnight, but within three months my wife began to ask me those three questions. We both came to learn “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35), which is another of the teachings of Jesus. Romantic feelings were reborn. We were no longer enemies preaching at each other; we had become allies who were sensitive to each other’s desires. We had discovered the royal road of “serving others.” In a covenant marriage husbands and wives are both winners. In all the early years of our marriage, we were both losers. I shot her and she shot me. We both went away wounded and resented each other. However, when I truly applied Jesus’ teachings and allowed God to change my attitude to the attitude of Christ and began to look for ways I could serve my wife, the emotional climate of our marriage began to change dramatically. I genuinely believe my wife has accomplished much more in life because I have been there as her chief cheerleader and encourager. I know for certain that I would never have accomplished what I have accomplished



with my life had she not been there to encourage and support me in my efforts.

When one looks at the characteristics of a Christlike marriage it does seem “otherworldly.” It is unnatural in the sense that we are all self-centered, so to expect us to focus on the well-being of someone else is totally abnormal. I, for one, am fully willing to admit that apart from the work of Christ and the ministry of the Holy Spirit in my life, I am, in fact, self-centered and will never overcome that malady. Yet, in Christ I have a new nature, and that nature motivates me to look out for the interests of others. In fact, that is the clear challenge to husbands in Ephesians 5:25 when we are asked not only to love our wives but are given the illustration of Christ who “loved the church and gave himself up for her.” His model is clearly the example for us. There is no question that this is God’s expectation. Therefore, as Christians, we must not accept the cultural norm as our standard. We must recognize that in Christ we have the ability to transcend the strong pull of selfishness and self-centered living, and to give ourselves to our spouses.

Some would raise the honest question: Can you really love someone who has hurt you deeply? My answer is that the steadfast love of God is available to every Christian. “God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us” (Romans 5:5). The Christian has an advantage. The non-Christian is left to whatever positive regard they can stir up in their own heart. The Christian has the ability to receive the love of God, and to dispense it to others. We can be God’s channel for loving our spouse.

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## A Simple Guide for a Better Marriage

I dream of a day when thousands of Christian husbands and wives will allow God to give them the attitude of Christ, and thus discover the key to enjoying the blessings of a thriving marriage.

### THINK ABOUT IT—DISCUSS IT—APPLY IT

1. *To what extent do you have the attitude of Christ toward your spouse?*
2. *Be brave and ask your spouse how closely you emulate Christ's steadfast love.*
3. *What can you do today to demonstrate love to your spouse?*

# The Foundation of Marriage

NOW, I AM CERTAINLY AWARE that there are times when we are angry at our spouse, annoyed, disillusioned, or just feeling rather flat. And I have had numerous individuals come into my office and say, “I just don’t want to be married anymore.” I am always empathetic with those who make that declaration. When marriage doesn’t turn out to be the loving, kind, supportive relationship of which you’ve dreamed, the desire to resign is common.

While I understand the emotions that bring one to that conclusion, the reality is, once you are married, you will never be able to escape the reality that you were married. The experiences, memories, and the scars of a painful marriage will be yours forever. The person you married continues to live in the world; and you will likely have some kind of relationship with them in the future. If you have children, that relationship will be more constant. If not, it may be more distant, but it is never removed. You have a spouse

from whom you are divorced, but you are not unmarried. As all who have experienced it will acknowledge, divorce has its own set of struggles, pain, disappointments, frustrations, and is often accompanied with feelings of hurt, anger, and the desire for revenge.

If selfless service to your spouse is the heart of marriage, the foundation of the marriage is the idea of a covenant. Let me explain. While much of Western culture views marriage as a contract, the Christian views marriage as a covenant. Although the concept of covenant is seen throughout the Bible, we do not often use the word covenant in our conversation. Most of us have little understanding of the word. When we think of marriage, we usually do so in terms of a contract rather than a covenant. In reality, the two words are quite different.

Ours is a contract-oriented world. We understand contracts and often hear people say, "Get it in writing," meaning, "Get a legal contract signed." With a contract you can be more certain that the person or company will live up to their claims.

Many Christian couples have brought this contract mentality into their marriages. They busy themselves with making informal contracts and trying to force each other into living up to them. Unfortunately, this kind of marriage stimulates resentment, hurt, and anger and eventually leads some couples to divorce. Let's explore this contract mentality.

A contract is an agreement between two or more parties signifying that one will do something and the other will do something. For example, the bank agrees to allow me to drive a car if I will make the monthly payments. If I break my part of the contract, the bank has the legal right to repossess my car. Our society is built upon contracts. You enter into rental contracts, sales contracts, and service contracts. Legally, marriage is a contract with certain rights

and responsibilities. In a legal marriage, if one party does not live up to the contracts, then legal actions force them to do so, or to end the marriage with an equitable settlement. A society could not exist without laws regulating marriage relationships. So in this sense, marriage is a contract. However, for a Christian, marriage is more than this.

Contracts are important. Most married couples have made numerous informal contracts with each other through the years: “If you will get the children to bed, I will clean up the kitchen.” “If you will wash the windows on the outside, I will wash them on the inside.” “If you will vacuum and dust, I will mow the grass and trim the shrubs.” There is nothing wrong with making such contracts. In fact, such agreements are a part of any couple’s life. These agreements help us get things done using our different abilities and interests to our mutual benefit.

There are four general characteristics of contracts:

**1. Contracts are most often made for a limited period of time.** Although most marriage ceremonies involve the phrase “as long as we both shall live,” or “till death do us part,” many couples give a contractual interpretation to these covenantal words. What they are really saying is, “We are committed to each other so long as this relationship is mutually beneficial for us.”

**2. Contracts most often deal with specific actions.** Most informal contracts made within the marriage also deal with specific actions. “If you will keep the kids tonight while I go shopping, I will watch them tomorrow while you play softball.” Such informal agreements can be a positive way of living out a covenant marriage.

**3. Contracts are based on an “If . . . then . . .” mentality.** Though I would not have admitted it at the time, I must confess that this is the mentality with which I entered marriage. I was

willing to make Carolyn happy if she would make me happy. She didn't and I didn't. Therefore, our struggle was deep, fierce, and painful in the first several years of our marriage. In counseling couples through the years, I have discovered that Carolyn and I were not alone in our contractual mentality.

**4. Contracts are motivated by the desire to get something we want.** Many of our conversations in marriage are motivated to get something. "If I mow the grass this afternoon, would you have time to iron my blue shirt tonight?" I'm trying to strike a deal that will get me an ironed shirt.

The problem arises when we come to view our marriage only as a contract or as a series of contracts. When this happens, we have become totally secular in our thinking and have abandoned the biblical view of marriage. The Bible views marriage ultimately as a covenant.

A covenant, like a contract, is an agreement made between two or more persons, but the nature of the agreement is quite different. The biblical pattern reveals five characteristics of covenants.

**1. Covenants are initiated for the benefit of the other person.** Ruth's covenant with her mother-in-law, Naomi, grew out of her desire to take care of her mother-in-law (Ruth 1:16–17). God's covenant with Noah was for the benefit of Noah's descendants (Genesis 9:11–13). Many of us can honestly say that we entered marriage motivated by the deep desire to benefit the person we were about to marry. Our intention was to make them happy. However, as in my own marriage, when my needs were not met, I quickly reverted to a contract mentality and forgot about my covenant responsibility.

**2. In covenant relationships people make unconditional promises.** God's covenant with Noah and Ruth's covenant with Naomi were both unconditional. Thus, covenant marriages are

characterized by unconditional promises. In traditional wedding vows, the covenant we make with each other is couched in covenant language: “To love, honor, and keep her in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others, keep thou only unto her so long as you both shall live.”

**3. Covenant relationships are based on steadfast love.** The Old Testament word *hesed* and the New Testament word *agape* capture the biblical picture of love. Sometimes the word *hesed* is translated “covenant.” Most often, however, it is translated “loving kindness” (see Lamentations 3:22–23). As Christians, we find great security in knowing that God is a loving God, and that His love is not fickle. We do not have to wonder what God’s attitude will be toward us tomorrow. We know that it will be the same as it is today. His love never ceases.

Steadfast love refuses to focus on the negative aspects of one’s spouse. All of us discover certain things about our spouse that we perceive as negative. We don’t deny them. On the contrary, we discuss them, especially if there is the potential for change. Yet, steadfast love refuses to dwell on these negative aspects. The violation of this principle has destroyed many marriages.

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**Steadfast love  
is a choice.**

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When the husband or wife chooses to express steadfast love toward their spouse, positive feelings are generated. The more you express affirmation and appreciation for the positive traits in your spouse, the stronger their positive feelings will become toward you. On the other hand, the more you focus on their failures and frailties, the more negative their feelings will become toward you.

Steadfast love is a choice. That’s why Paul commanded husbands to love their wives (Ephesians 5:25) and challenged wives

to learn to love their husbands (Titus 2:4). We choose our attitudes toward our spouse. The attitude of steadfast love is the single most important factor in a covenant marriage. Few things are more edifying to a married person than the steadfast love of their spouse. That deep inner sense that we are loved by our spouse, and that their attitude toward us is positive, goes a long way in building self-esteem and helping us accomplish our potential for God and for doing good in the world.

#### **4 . Covenant relationships view commitments as permanent.**

“Till death do us part” or “So long as we both shall live,” common statements in marriage ceremonies, are statements of covenant. This is not a contract for the next five years or until we find a “justifiable reason” to end the marriage. Christian marriage is a commitment to permanence.

Some may raise the question, “Should a Christian stay in a marriage that is destructive simply because the Bible holds up the ideal of a permanent, monogamous relationship?” Such a question is easy to answer from an ivory tower, but it is more difficult to answer in the throes of daily pain. Unquestionably, the biblical ideal is one man and one woman married to each other for life. As Christians, we must not lower this ideal. Does this mean, however, that a wife is to remain in marriage in which she is physically abused every weekend by a drunken husband? The answer is no, she should separate to maintain her safety. The reality is covenant relationships require confrontation and forgiveness, if there is repentance. Such a separation is an act of love. She might say, “I love you too much to stay here and do nothing. I am not abandoning you. If you will get treatment, I will be willing to go with you for counseling.”

This standard can only be attained if we practice the fifth characteristic of covenants.



**5. Covenant relationships require confrontation and forgiveness.** Trace God's covenants with His people and you will find that God's people often fail to live up to their covenant commitments to God. God confronts because He cares, and He always stands ready to forgive.

These two responses—confrontation and forgiveness—are essential in a covenant marriage. Confrontation means holding the other person responsible for their actions. Forgiveness is a godly response to repentance. Forgiving means relinquishing bitterness and retribution and being willing to continue a loving, growing relationship, if that is possible.

God's response to man's failure has always been confrontation and a willingness to forgive. Our failure does not cause God to withdraw His covenant. Rather, God makes provision for our failure. This does not mean that failure is treated lightly by God. The cross of Christ is forever God's statement of the costliness of forgiveness. Still, a covenant relationship with God would be impossible if God did not make provision for man's failure. In human relationships it is no different. None of us is perfect. We will sometimes fail one another. We will fail to live up to the covenants we have made with each other. Such failure need not destroy the covenant, but it does call for confrontation and forgiveness.

Ignoring the failures of your spouse is not the road to marital growth. "Grin and bear it" is not the language of covenant marriage. A person committed to a covenant marriage says, "I love you too much to remain silent when I see you breaking our covenant. What you are doing hurts me deeply, but I am willing to forgive you. Can't we please renew our covenant?"

The spirit of forgiveness is fully as important as the willingness to confront. Some individuals will find it difficult to forgive.

They are often the kind of people who are hard on themselves and, therefore, hard on others. Because they require a lot of themselves, they also require much of others. These people need to understand that forgiveness is a part of all covenant marriage relationships. They also need to understand that forgiveness is not a feeling, but rather a choice. Forgiveness is the choice to no longer hold that failure against you. You have confessed it, and I will lift the penalty and treat you as though you had not failed. This is the forgiveness God gives us when we repent and accept Christ's sacrifice for our sins. It is the forgiveness that we are able to give others because we have been forgiven. (See the section "Apologies and Forgiveness" for more insights on forgiveness.)

There will be failures in every marriage. Although our covenants with each other have been seriously made, we will sometimes fail to live up to those covenant commitments. A good marriage is not destroyed by some failures, but a good marriage will be destroyed if we are not willing to admit our failures and renew our covenant.

Covenant marriage is God's plan. There may be contracts within the framework of our covenant marriage, but for the Christian, marriage is a covenant. God's best in marriage will never be accomplished without God's power. That is why our individual relationships with Christ are so important in marriage—having daily devotional times with God in which we are listening to His voice through the Scriptures, and responding to Him, seeking to let His Spirit give us the attitude of Christ toward our spouse, in which we are in fact seeking each other's well-being. Christians have outside help, and with that divine power, we have the ability to reach God's ideal. A functional covenant marriage is the best setting in which to rear our children, and it also brings great glory to God, which is the ultimate goal for every Christian.

I am so grateful that in the early years of our marriage, I did not let my desire to resign control my behavior. I remember specifically asking God to give me the attitude of Christ toward my wife and He changed my heart. Our marriage was reborn and the thought of resigning has never crossed my mind again. I am a firm believer that unconditional love is the most powerful force in the world for good.

**THINK ABOUT IT—DISCUSS IT—APPLY IT**

- 1. Have you ever thought that you married the wrong person? What have you learned from this chapter that counters that notion?*
- 2. How has this chapter's explanation of covenant changed the way you view your marriage?*
- 3. Discuss with your spouse your understanding of covenant marriage and how love and forgiveness reflect God's covenant relationship with His people.*
- 4. Are you more committed to your spouse's happiness or your own? What changes can you make to bring your priorities in alignment with God's?*
- 5. Have loving confrontations and willing expressions of forgiveness been characteristic of your marriage? How can you improve in these areas?*

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