



NAKED and
UNASHAMED

a guide to the necessary work
of Christian marriage

DR. JERRY ROOT
CLAUDIA ROOT & JEREMY RIOS



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PREFACE

The Purpose of This Book

This book exists because, despite the abundance of magazines, articles, and self-help volumes available, people continue to struggle with marriage.

On the one hand, the cottage industry of wedding planners, consultants, Pinterest pages, and independent bloggers has shaped young hearts to dream and plan for the biggest day of their lives. The day is everything, and they will plan each element with precision, from flowers to cake decorations to party favors. Acting on this crafted desire, couples will spend an enormous amount of time and money preparing for the wedding. Ironically, they will spend little to no time or money in preparation for their marriage itself. The investment into the perfect day is all out of proportion with the investment into life together *after* the day. At times it even seems as if people are more interested in *getting* married than they are in *staying* married. This book exists to help couples prepare for the rest of their life together.

On the other hand, it seems that too few couples comprehend the degree of work required to make a marriage successful. Divorce rates are clear evidence of this, but so also are the many married people who are in dire need of counseling and care, who persist in loneliness and difficulty, feeling ill-equipped to navigate the unforeseen difficulties of marriage. Many people hope one day to get married; few people seem to know what it really means to *be* married. The truth of the matter is that happy marriages rarely just happen. In fact, the majority of the time they will require at least as much energy and preparation as is directed toward the grand celebration on the wedding day. This book exists to coach couples through strategies that will assist them to succeed.

On the wedding day, a bride and groom will make a promise before God and the witness of their friends and family—a promise to have and hold one another, in sickness and health, in wealth or poverty, until death. Sometimes these promises are uttered in a rush of devoted emotion; at the same time sometimes their demands are glibly considered; yet no couple (we trust!) sets out intentionally to fail. While no book can promise perfect success, the best we can do—and this we hope to do—is to offer hope and guidance to couples in preparation for marriage, to couples struggling in marriage, and possibly encouragement to couples thriving in marriage. Marriage, in point of fact, is a living, growing thing, and a resource such as this one hopes simply to provide a plumb to what is bent, a balm to what is broken, and an enrichment to what is thriving.

If marriage is so difficult, and if the risks are so high, then it might be tempting to conclude that it is not worth bothering about. This is unsatisfying, chiefly because we are convinced that marriage—with all its difficulties—remains one of the best hopes for human happiness and fulfillment. A successful marriage is a thing of unprecedented and radiant beauty, and as G. K. Chesterton (a great believer in marriage) said, “If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly.”¹ This book is targeted for any person who wishes, given the liabilities of marriage, to attempt to maximize its benefits and experience the fullness of its joys.

Billy Bray, Welsh preacher and evangelist, hearing once about other people’s trials of faith stood and exclaimed, “Well, friends, I have been taking vinegar and honey, but, praise the Lord, I’ve had the vinegar with a *spoon*, and the honey with a *ladle*.”² Many couples may feel that in marriage they’ve had honey by the teaspoon and vinegar by the ladle. As we said, no book can promise success, and yet the couple that commits to reading together, to learning together, to discussing together, to developing good habits together—that couple will gain a significant advantage in the management and enjoyment of their common life. All marriages ought to begin with the best possible foundation. All existing marriages ought to have the courage to reexamine and correct their foundation as necessary. And, by God’s grace, the honey will outweigh the vinegar beyond measure.

SOME PRELIMINARY GUIDELINES FOR ENGAGED COUPLES

If you are an engaged couple reading this book, then there are six things we would like to say to you at the start.

- 1) It is critical that you devote regular time to the development of your relationship with your future spouse. You must not allow wedding plans to dominate your time together. Set aside time to invest in your marriage, especially if you plan for it to last longer than the wedding day.
- 2) Not only must you dedicate time, but you must commit—mutually—to engaging in the material. Where there are questions or exercises, do them. Where there are conversations to have, have them. If you find yourself incapable of divulging your life to this person through the contents of this book, you might think twice about committing to live with that person for the rest of your life.
- 3) If you are engaging in sex before marriage you are actively short-circuiting the process of intimacy in your relationship. If you are incapable of showing restraint before marriage, what makes you think you will have restraint within marriage? If you are disobeying God's voice before marriage, why do you think you will be able to discern Him properly? Premarital sexual conduct corrupts your capacity to make wise decisions, and your wedding is the biggest decision of your life. Show restraint, and begin your marriage upon a foundation of wisdom.

- 4) If you are living together, you should know that statistically this *increases* your chances for divorce. The commitment that marriage requires of you is not casual, and cohabitation before marriage encourages an attitude of non-commitment between couples. In other words, the bonds you forge by living together before marriage weaken the bonds you are intended to form *within* marriage. If you are living together at the time of reading, make a plan to live apart until your wedding day.

- 5) Unless you wish to conceive children immediately, now is the time to educate yourself with regard to the operations of pregnancy. Different traditions have different beliefs regarding birth control, so make sure you've discussed these issues together, with your clergy as appropriate, and with your physician if necessary. The important thing to remember is that the wedding night is not a good time to be making these kinds of plans, so make sure you've thought ahead.

- 6) Please work through the book in order, because there is an intentional progression to the intimacy discussed here. Furthermore, if you as a couple or an individual are tempted to skip ahead to the chapters on sex (you know who you are!), don't.

CHAPTER 1

The Necessary Work

Grow old along with me!

The best is yet to be.

—Robert Browning

THE FAIRY TALE

A few years ago the world watched enrapt as Prince William and his bride Kate Middleton spoke their vows before the Archbishop of Canterbury. Their story—the prince who falls in love with a common girl—is the very substance of fairy tales. The extravagance of their event—from horses to plate ware—was the stuff of Disney. One friend of mine even woke up at 3:00 AM, got a hat out of her closet, thawed a scone, brewed a cup of tea, and watched the wedding. Why would she do that? Because we love—we crave—fairy tales, and silently we wish that they would be true for us.

It is unlikely that any who read this book will be married by an archbishop, and few will be wed in a venue as magnificent as Westminster Abbey. Princes are rare these days. But on a wedding day, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, a group of families and friends will gather to witness a fairy tale no less marvelous than the one people inconvenienced themselves to see some years ago. On their wedding day a boy and a girl make a promise in the presence of God and witnesses. It is a moment that is, for all involved, a miracle of vast and indescribable proportions. On your wedding day you solemnize the fairy tale that God is working in your lives.

On their wedding day, a bride and groom stand to mark the beginning of their marriage. They are saying, in the presence of God, "I am going to write the story of the rest of my life with you." Nobody there

will know the ending of the story. Nobody can predict the dangers and turns a couple must face. Whether the couple's fairy tale has a happy ending or a sad one is their decision, and their work. And as with all fairy tales, it is the end of the story that gives meaning to the events within them.

As a matter of fact, there is one immutable fact about fairy tales: there are always trials to be gone through—a forest to cross, a wolf to defeat, an enemy to kill. Take the trial—the necessary work—out of the fairy tale and you no longer have a fairy tale. "Once upon a time there was a girl named Little Red Riding Hood who took food to her sick grandmother and came back home for tea." This doesn't make a good fairy tale at all. But the necessary trials of the fairy tale—the forest, the fearsome wolf, the huntsman—are given meaning and significance by its ending. It is only when the story is over, only when we look back, that we call it a good story; never before.

Perhaps some images can assist us to better understand this necessary work. Many people dream about purchasing a house, which they will turn into a home. In anticipation they invest time and energy into thinking about what kind of place they'd like to have someday—maybe they make lists of the kinds of characteristics they'd like it to have, its size, shape, number of rooms, the kinds of memories they'd like to have there. Then they shop together for this dream home. After the search—whether long or short—they finally find the home they want. And they purchase their perfect home and move into it, filling it with their things.

A successful homeowner inherits many responsibilities; there are chores to be done, gardens to be tended, window sashes to be painted, garbage to be taken out, roofs to be repaired, pipes to be plumbed, wiring to be watched over, and an untold number of details to be managed. But imagine with me if, after moving into this dream home, the couple fails to maintain it. Imagine that they never take the time to mow the lawn. After a couple of weeks the neighbors might politely remind them that, in this neighborhood, it's a tradition to cut your grass. Let a few more weeks go by and the neighbors will grow less friendly in their reminders, suggesting to you that if you won't

mow your lawn, would you at least consider harvesting it? Imagine never keeping up on any of the maintenance of the house—if the drains get stopped up and you never clear them; if the wiring frays but you don't repair it; or as the roof deteriorates you don't replace it, but place strategic buckets along the corridors and in the bedrooms. Imagine the yard resembling the set of a Tarzan movie. Imagine the plaster falling off the walls, wallpaper peeling, mold and other fungi growing in the corners and recesses.

What has happened to the dream home? That couple spent so much time making the perfect choice—and now their dream home is a dilapidated remnant.

Consider also the glorious leaves of autumn, especially as they display themselves in the Midwestern and Eastern United States—trees set aflame with burning red, trees with yellow to rival the sun, and all the colors in between as well—oranges, russets, salmon, shrimp, maroons, peach, and auburn. But not long after this glorious display, these same leaves, now simply brown, are scattered everywhere and become a terrible, brown mess. Next time this happens go for a walk together, and pay attention especially for a yard, in the midst of all the others, that has no leaves at all—one that has been raked clean. When you come across that I think you'll find that there's something breathtaking about that sight; what is more, it didn't just *happen*.

Now, consider as well an elderly couple, still in love. Helmut Thielicke, German theologian and pastor, once observed such a couple who, after many years of marriage, still had a light in their eyes for one another. He observed them both carefully, noting the tenderness in their expressions toward one another. This intrigued him, and since he had known the couple for many years he was well aware of the authenticity of their love. It wasn't until he had left their home that he realized a truth: this couple had the marriage they deserved. His mind went to Genesis 2, where Adam declares that Eve is "bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh." Adam might as easily have said, "this is boredom of my boredom, lovelessness of my lovelessness."³ The choice therefore belongs to each couple precisely *what kind* of marriage they are going

to have, and in view of this a man and woman can choose to say to one another, "This is now wonder of my wonder, fascination of my fascination, delight of my delight." What we put into marriage is in a very real way precisely what we get out of it. Maybe you'll encounter such a couple one day—gray hairs and wrinkled hands and paper-thin skin stretched across bony joints; but they are together, and you will note that their affection represents a lifetime of work on their relationship. Their love is also breathtaking. It didn't just *happen*. They *did something* to make their love possible.

The fairy tale home, the fairy tale yard, and the fairy tale marriage—none of these things just happen. And in all three stories, people performed the necessary work that brought meaning to the labor, the trial, the effort involved. We judge a story good by its conclusion, and so also a marriage.

ACKNOWLEDGING THE WORK

The kind and quantity of work necessary to create a successful marriage is deceptive. English gardens, some of which are hundreds of years old, are rightly famous for their beauty, and people travel from around the world to visit them. And yet their beauty is enormously deceptive; what presents itself to the eye appears natural—even spontaneous—when in fact it is attributable to the vigilant attention of the master gardener and his array of tools, fertilizers, schedules, and planning, and especially to his in-depth knowledge of plant life and the seasons. Similarly, great marriages present themselves to the outward eye as images of simplicity and beauty, but behind them lies an ongoing work, as well as an entire toolshed of skills and knowhow. Great marriages, like great gardens, never just happen.

The truth of the matter is that it is somewhat ludicrous to attempt to prepare anyone for marriage. When you learn to ride a bike, your technical knowledge of the assembly, composition, and individual parts of the bicycle—while not unimportant—is irrelevant when it comes to learning balance. In a similar way, marriage itself is the only

true preparation for marriage. And this is one of the key reasons why *commitment* is so terribly important. The work required from you in marriage will exceed what you believe are your personal capacities, and therefore couples make a mutual promise before God that they will stick to one another no matter what. It is this promise, more than anything else, that makes marriages what they are. It is the trellis on which grows the intertwining vine of a couple's life and love.

We see this interaction when the Bible speaks of marital love in the *Song of Solomon*, where the image of a garden plays repeatedly.⁴ The garden in the ancient world was another image of *paradise*—a walled and protected space dedicated to both pleasure and beauty. The biblical author of the Song perceives the cultivated space of a marriage in those same terms—a walled and protected space for husband and wife to enjoy pleasure and beauty. The walls are formed by commitment; the pleasure is grounded in intimacy.

And once again we should note the false commitment promised by sex before marriage. It is fundamentally a transgression because it *transgresses* the boundary of the garden before the right of access has been granted. It deceives the couple because it generates the *illusion* of commitment—by enjoying the benefits of the committed—prior to the *declaration* of commitment. Sexual intimacy has its rightful place within the committed relationship—it is an activity for the garden.

THE ORIGIN AND CALL OF MARRIAGE

Is it not noteworthy that the first marriage, of Adam and Eve, takes place within a garden paradise? Genesis 2:18–25 records their first encounter with one another:

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him." Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a

living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field, but for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. The LORD God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man.

The man said,
"This is now bone of my bones,
And flesh of my flesh;
She shall be called Woman,
Because she was taken out of Man."

For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

God has created the world, and at the end of each day of creation He has declared it "good." Five days are declared good, and on the sixth, looking back over all, He says it is "Very good." But suddenly in Genesis 2 something changes, and we discover that it is "not good" for the man to be alone. The world as God has made it is very good, but it is not complete. Our loneliness is not God's plan for humanity. We are created for relationships.

This, at least in part, is one of the lessons from the naming of the animals. Adam witnesses this lengthy parade of creatures moving past. He sees Mr. and Mrs. Dog, and Mr. and Mrs. Elephant, and Mr. and Mrs. Lion, and he begins to take note that each animal has a counterpart, but not him. Furthermore, Adam discovers in his work that work itself will not satisfy him. The job itself becomes an occasion for longing. It is easy to imagine that some of the animals become especially companionable, such as the dog or the horse. But even they are not *like* him. In this experience Adam's longing is awakened.

Made aware of his loneliness, God puts Adam to sleep, takes Eve from his side, and fashions her into a new creature. When Adam awakens, and sees her for the first time, his first words—the first recorded speech of mankind in the Bible—are poetry. “This is now bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh, she shall be called woman, for she was taken out of man.” In Hebrew the word used for man here is *Isb*, while the word used for woman is *Isbab*. Go ahead and recite those two words aloud right now. Roll them around your tongue and let them fall upon the ear. *Isb. Isbab*. Like me, but different.

Eve, we are told, is created as a “helpmeet” for Adam—not a slave, nor a servant, nor an employee, but a helpmeet. A companion in life and in work. Mike Mason in his book *The Mystery of Marriage* illuminates Eve’s unique role in this story:

The Lord God made woman out of a part of man’s side and closed up the place with flesh, but in marriage He reopens this empty, aching place in man and begins the process of putting woman back again, if not literally in the side, then certainly at it: permanently there, intrusively there, a sudden lifelong resident of a space which until that point the man will have considered to be his own private territory, even his own body. But in marriage he will cleave to the woman, and the woman to him, the way his own flesh cleaves to his own bones.⁵

Marriage is the chosen, but discomfotingly forceful, encounter between a man and a woman. It is in fact the very design of marriage to answer our innate loneliness with a form of profound discomfort. We experience in marriage a closeness that we are designed to undergo, and yet one that we are not adept at accomplishing.

For people unaccustomed to sharing a bed with another human being, the first months of marriage can be quite challenging. Somehow, the number of elbows in the bed seems to increase beyond the simple math of 2+2. When Liesel and Jeremy were first married, not a few months into their marriage Liesel contracted a painful sinus infection. Her upper cheeks and face were swollen and incredibly tender.

Sometime during the night, rolling over in his sleep, Jeremy turned and elbowed her right in the face. Liesel wept, and Jeremy felt horrible—like some kind of abuser!—and apologized profusely. But several months later, when they were far more accustomed to sharing a bed, the same thing happened again. Liesel with a sinus infection, Jeremy rolling in his sleep—bam! Right in the face. Liesel, again, burst into tears, but this time Jeremy announced, “Well, that’s marriage!” And promptly rolled back over and fell asleep.

Intimacy, like elbows in the bed, involves a closeness with which we are simply not familiar. And in fact, more than being unfamiliar with it, the intimacy asked of us in marriage strikes directly at our innermost selfishness. George MacDonald has said that “The one principle of hell is: I am my own.”⁶ The attitude of the unredeemed human heart is one of self-governance, self-determination, and self-preservation. I make all choices for me and for my own ends. But marriages cannot survive when partners live this ethic, and nothing quite like marriage will expose that selfishness in all its ugliness. Marriage, in fact, is very like a mirror in which my spouse reflects back at me all that is ugly about myself—my greed, my pettiness, my foolishness, my anger, my unforgiveness. Marriage in this respect is a school of selfishness.

The mirror operates in a way very like something Paul says in Romans 3:23, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” When we fall in love with our partner, the mirror reflects back to us all the good that we wish we could be. But in the course of commitment we discover what a great distance we must still go if we would truly become that person. In love, we see the glory; in living together, we fall short. Often this falling short creates despair—and I would suggest that a vast number of couples who turn to divorce do so simply because of this disparity. Not liking who they see in the mirror with their spouse, they opt to change spouses. What they fail to acknowledge is that the ugly image they came to despise was their own.

THE CONFLICT OF CLOSENESS

For couples who persist in their commitment, however, the gap between the person we wish we were, and the person we really are, often generates conflict. There are disappointed expectations, impatience with difficulties, and a feeling of being overwhelmed by the amount of work required. Once again, Mike Mason writes helpfully about this area of discomfort:

To put it simply, marriage is a relationship far more engrossing than we want it to be. It always turns out to be more than we bargained for. It is disturbingly intense, disruptively involving, and that is exactly the way it was designed to be. It is supposed to be more, almost, than we can handle. It was meant to be a lifelong encounter that would be much more rigorous and demanding than anything human beings ever could have chosen, dreamed of, desired, or invented on their own. After all, we do not even choose to undergo such far-reaching encounters with our closest and dearest friends. Only marriage urges us into these deep and unknown waters. For that is its very purpose: to get us out beyond our depth, out of the shallows of our own secure egocentricity and into the dangerous and unpredictable depths of a real interpersonal encounter.⁷

In Proverbs we read, "Iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another" (27:17). This is not a description of one smooth object gently sliding across another, but a process of one rough edge grating against another. The pressure of persons in close contact is the sharpening process by which we are made keen for use—by which our innermost persons are refined and made beautiful.

Conflict, then, does not mean you are a failure. When you own and operate a car, changing the oil every 3000 miles will make your car last for a long time. On many models, if the oil is not changed after a certain period of time, a light will appear on the dashboard: we call this an idiot light. When the light goes on, it doesn't mean that the car's owner is an idiot, merely that he or she is on the threshold of becoming one. Ignore

the light, and in time you will become an idiot. Similarly, conflict in marriage simply identifies areas that require maintenance. Conflict doesn't mean you are an idiot—but ignore the conflict, or refuse to attend to the work it asks of you, and in time you will become one.

Good marriages, you see, are never problem-free marriages; instead, a good marriage is one where the partners watch for the warning signals and grow by attending to them. A good marriage is not one where each partner has it all together, perfectly sorted, but one where they are secure enough in God's love for them, and their growing love for one another, that they are not afraid to admit the limits of their capacities. Good marriages create space to be novices, to be awkward, to admit that none of us has very much life skill, that no one is ever ready for marriage, or children, or grows up without regrets. When a couple can operate through their conflicts from the perspective of that kind of security, then the result is always a high and steady growth curve.

We see this again in the words of Robert Browning's poem "Rabbi ben Ezra," the opening line of which romantically invites the listener to "Grow old along with me! / The best is yet to be." Lines 31–32 have the following phrase, "Then welcome each rebuff / that turns earth's smoothness rough." It is easy to make judgments of simplicity; things often appear smooth. But further insight and greater perception, often challenge our initial perceptions. A cue ball to the eye and hand is perfectly smooth. Under a microscope, however, it appears pitted and mountainous. The couple that would take advantage of the opportunity offered by conflict in marriage will permit the new information brought by their spouse to alter their initial perception. Things that on one view appeared smooth on further view become textured. Additionally, a field before being tilled is hard and smooth, but the rebuff of the spade turns its smoothness rough, preparing the soil for fresh fruitfulness. In the same way, the idiot lights of conflict, viewed properly, become opportunities for a harvest of good.

The good news, of course, is that you are never expected to resolve all of these difficulties on your own. When the idiot light signals in your marriage, seek help as soon as the need arises. Wiser people

than you have covered this ground before you; call them to your aid. Consult books. Visit counselors, church groups, pastors, seminars, and conferences. Each of these is a resource—like tools and equipment in your gardening shed—that are available to help you grow, as well as heal, your marriage. Do this quickly because unchecked difficulties will compound over time. To humbly seek help is in itself a process that develops life skill, and the best thing the unskilled can do is to surround themselves with wise counselors until they themselves have grown and matured in wisdom.⁸ The practice of regularly investing time and energy into this work is precisely the necessary work of your marriage.

Above all other books, invest mutually in the Word of God, the Bible. It is the best guidebook for relationships, for humility, and for growth in the knowledge of self. It has at its heart a model for relationships which is unmatched in any other literature. So read it regularly, and acquire guidance from those who know it. Discuss it, pursue it, and memorize it. Let it lead you into the love of Jesus. And if you continue in that love, in the words of C. S. Lewis, “nothing much can go wrong with you.”⁹

FOUR CROSSES

A well-tended house, a raked lawn, and an elderly couple—none of these just happen. And in the same way that there are tools for gardening there are tools for marriage. In addition to humility and the wisdom of counselors, in Christian marriage we have special recourse to the power of God in Christ. In this, we can apply to the help of the cross in four different ways to fend off weeds and increase fruitfulness. The cross, in expressing the high courtesy of heaven toward us, provides the pattern for our own expressions of courtesy to one another.

First, there is the **cross of commitment**. The Scriptures say that “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8b). God, it says, made a choice for us when we weren’t worthy; He committed to us. This in marriage is the daily choice of commitment that you must make *for* your spouse. You must make it—eagerly and regularly. Take seriously

those words of Genesis 2 that the two are becoming “one flesh.” Begin to think of yourselves as a unit. When someone asks one partner to do something, ask your spouse—not for *permission*, but because each of you realizes that your choices affect the other person. In all this, the new litmus test for your friends and acquaintances is whether or not they *support* or *denigrate* your marriage. Do not keep company with people who threaten the unity of your marriage.

Second, there is the **cross of accommodation**. We learn in the Scriptures that Christ came down from heaven and became man; He descended to us—He accommodated us—so that we could come to know Him (John 6:38, among others). In the same way you must accommodate one another. Be patient with each other’s weaknesses. Allow one another the space to learn and grow together. Give permission to each other to be awkward. Accommodation after this pattern will increase your capacity for happiness and fulfillment in marriage. Again, in selfishness we innately strive to put ourselves first; in accommodation, we strive to put another first, and this is at the heart of the Bible’s view of relationships. Accommodation is marked by a desire and willingness on the part of each partner to see and pursue the best for the other, *even in the teeth of all his or her flaws*. This is an investment that keeps the lights of love shining in the eyes of one another.

Third, there is the **cross of self-sacrifice**. When Jesus went to the cross for all mankind, his death not only provided for the forgiveness of sins, it also manifested the high courtesy of Heaven that says, “I offer my life for you.” He was willing to give up his life in order for others to have a relationship with God. Christ gave up his life on a cross so that we could live; He gave everything and became the pattern for all our relationships in the process. You will soon learn that the greatest threat to your marriage is selfishness, the lurking desire to do your own thing, and go your own way. So, each day, consider the needs of your partner. Be attentive to his or her needs, and strive actively to meet them. Jesus said to his disciples, “Greater love has no man than this: that he lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). Therefore I encourage you to remember the example of Christ, who laid down his life for us,

selflessly, so that we could receive the benefits of His Heavenly Father. Show a measure of that great love to each other in bearing the cross of self-sacrifice, and your marriage will thrive for the rest of your lives.

Fourth, and finally, there is the **cross of forgiveness**. Marriage is simply impossible without forgiveness. In the crash of elbows spouses will inevitably wound one another, and progress will demand the will to make things right. The old proverb rings true, that "marriage is the only war in which you sleep with the enemy." You cannot sleep in the same bed with a person for long without practicing forgiveness.

And yet forgiveness is both hard and costly, and costly *because* it is hard. In the act of forgiveness one partner—the wounded, aggrieved partner—willingly cancels his or her suit for damages, personally absorbing the cost of the damages incurred. Forgiving means that the person who wounded me *doesn't* get what he or she deserves. Forgiving means that I personally eat the cost of the other person's wrong—I willingly feel the pain and discomfort of another person's indiscretion. Forgiveness flies in the face of all our concepts of what we, and of what others, deserve.¹⁰

The strength for all forgiveness is derived from Christ, who forgave us first. In Matthew 18 Jesus tells the story of a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants—to make things just. One servant owed an astronomical amount of money, more than could ever be reasonably repaid in his lifetime. The servant begged for mercy, and the king granted it. But after leaving the king's presence, the servant encountered a fellow servant who owed him a small amount of money. That man also asked for mercy, but the servant who had been forgiven a great deal began to choke him, demanding that the man repay him the small amount, and in the end had the man thrown in jail. The king heard about this and summoned the servant to stand in front of him again, declaring to him, "You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?" (Matt. 18:32–33). Then the king ordered this unforgiving servant to be thrown into prison. The meaning of the story is explicit: When God has forgiven

us so much—when God Himself in Christ has paid personally the cost of our wrongs—how can we dare to be petty with one another? When we fail to forgive, it is always a failure to draw upon God's forgiveness toward us.

And yet there are other reasons to forgive, because unforgiveness is relationally crippling. In the words of David Augsburger, unforgiveness is cancerous to our relationships because "Hidden hatred turns trust into suspicion, compassion into caustic criticism, and faith in others in to cold cynicism."¹¹ Forgiveness has the power to break this cycle, and yet to forgive requires a will to suffer. American poet Edna St. Vincent Millay in her baccalaureate hymn, written for her graduation from Vassar in 1917, put it this way: "Lord, let us suffer that we may grow kind."¹² Such a prayer is necessary, because suffering is no guarantee of kindness. Some suffer and grow hard-hearted, calloused and bitter; others become kind and tender even in the midst of terrible suffering and difficulty. What marks the difference whether a person goes one way or the other is the attitude of forgiveness. The failure to forgive when someone hurts us brings an infection to the rest of our attitudes. Our life becomes lived in reaction to our hurts; in unforgiveness we give our hurts authority to govern our life and thoughts. We forfeit our happiness to the one whom we have made the emotional focus of our anger and our unwillingness to forgive. In turn, these infectious seeds of unforgiveness extend to others, generating unkindness, then fixation, then malice, and finally a kind of interior emotional death. In time our attitude extends to all our relationships.

The will to suffer is the will to be human, the will to trust in Christ in the fullness of his humanity. The world is full of angry, bitter people who have not learned to forgive those who have hurt them. Beginning marriage with a commitment to forgive and to be forgiven can be nearly as powerful and liberating as the Cross from which it is modeled. No matter how deep hurts may be, a person willing to forgive can, over time, discover those graces which keep a marriage fresh and vital. Additionally, forgiveness toward those who have hurt us is a creative tool. It allows us to plant new seed in the fallow ground made barren

by old hurts and nurtured bitterness. In marriage there will be ample opportunity for the practice of forgiveness, and those who practice it liberally will keep the lights shining in their eyes for one another. After all, who could refuse love to someone who forgives so freely?

These four crosses are powerful tools for a marriage: the crosses of commitment, of accommodation, of self-sacrifice, and of forgiveness are trellises on which every couple would be wise to grow their marriage.

ASSIGNMENT

Sit down together and discuss marriage for a moment. What, at this point, sounds like the most terrifying aspect of marriage? What, at this point, sounds like the most exciting aspect?