

CRAZY
LITTLE THING
CALLED
MARRIAGE



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ON THE FAMILY

MARRIAGE

Crazy
Little Thing
Called
Marriage

12 Secrets
for a Lifelong
Romance

DR. GREG & ERIN SMALLEY

FOREWORD BY GARY CHAPMAN



TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC.
CAROL STREAM, ILLINOIS

Crazy Little Thing Called Marriage

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A Focus on the Family book published by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188

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Editors: Larry K. Weeden and Lizabeth Duckworth
Cover design by Faceout Studio, Tim Green

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data can be found at www.loc.gov.

Printed in the United States of America

21 20 19 18 17 16 15
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*In memory of the late S. Truett Cathy
and his bride of sixty-seven years, Jeannette
McNeil Cathy. A marriage well done.*



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Foreword

Every married person naturally wants a thriving marriage. Every spouse wants peace and harmony in the home. Every reasonable husband wants to feel he's meeting his wife's needs. And every good wife wants to feel the same toward her husband.

That's why the habits we form in marriage are so important. As we look at a situation, especially if we're unhappy or there's open conflict, what are our first thoughts? What assumptions do we make about our spouse's motives? What words flow from our mouths, perhaps before we've even considered what we ought to say?

Sadly, it's all too easy to get off track. The train can jump the rails before we realize what has happened. How well I remember a time when that occurred in my own marriage! Though I've told the story before, it bears repeating here.

My wife, Karolyn, and I were having a typically hectic weekday morning, getting the kids ready for school and me ready to go to work. Searching frantically, I asked her, "Karolyn, where is my briefcase?"

"I don't know," she answered.

I take my briefcase home every night, and I leave it in the same place. Since it wasn't there now, she had to have moved it.

"Come on, Karolyn," I said, raising the volume. "I'm in a hurry! Where is my briefcase? I put it right in there by the dresser last night, and it's gone. Where did you put it?"

The reply came back—also at higher volume—"Gary, I don't know where your briefcase is!"

We went back and forth like this a couple of more times, each time a little louder. I was getting really upset. Of course she had moved my briefcase, but for whatever reason she couldn't or wouldn't say where. Didn't she understand how much I needed it and how big a hurry I was in? Didn't she care how frustrated I was becoming?

Burning with anger, I sped the kids out the door, into the car, and off to school. I cooled down enough to speak calmly to them about their schoolwork. But after they were on their way into the building, I immediately went back to full-burn anger with Karolyn for losing my case.

For the entire drive to my office, my thoughts steamed along like this: *How could I have married such a scatterbrain? My briefcase is important. In fact, I can't operate without it. What am I going to do today?*

You can see all the assumptions I was making, right? And from them I had drawn conclusions, none of them complimentary to the love of my life. But her unwillingness to help was driving me crazy.

As ideas and emotions like these churned in my mind and my stomach, I parked the car and stomped into the office. And what did I see the moment I set foot through the door? My briefcase, of course, exactly where I had set it down the night before.

I'm happy to report the story gets better from there. All that building anger instantly drained from my mind and body. In its place sprang up embarrassment, chagrin, and a desire to make things right. How could I have entertained such thoughts about Karolyn? How could I have said such words to her, and in such a tone of voice?

Being human, I briefly wondered if I could somehow explain away my unkind and unloving words and behavior. But no, there was only one acceptable course of action. First, I prayed and asked God to forgive me. I thanked Him for the Cross and the assurance that my sins have, indeed, been paid for. My conscience clear toward Him, I then asked for the grace and strength to do the next thing necessary.

I picked up the phone, called Karolyn, told her what she already knew, made my apology, and asked for *her* forgiveness.

And how did she respond? “I thought you’d call!”

Clearly, some of my habits relative to our marriage still needed work. But she also knew that one of my better habits was and is a shared commitment not to let disputes fester and anger to take hold. She understood I would soon realize my mistake, admit my fault, and take steps to set things right between us.

Like any other good habits, however, healthy habits in marriage develop only when you’re intentional about them and put consistent effort into growing them in place of bad habits. Our human nature tends toward laziness and self-centeredness—neither of which produces strong relationships, let alone a thriving marriage.

That’s why I’m so excited to recommend to you the book you now hold in your hands, *Crazy Little Thing Called Marriage*. Greg and Erin Smalley have looked carefully at the best research about how to have a great marriage. In addition, they’ve drawn on their own extensive experience in helping to heal marriages that had stood on the brink of collapse.

From this research and experience, they have identified twelve traits, or “romance secrets,” of a thriving marriage.

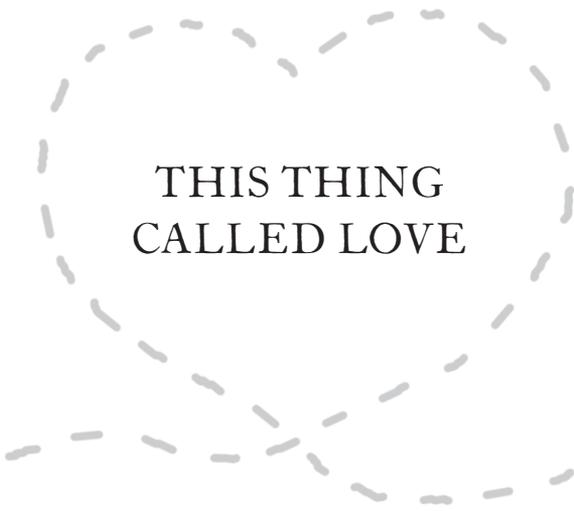
They've seen that if you learn these traits and grow these habits of thought and action, you, too, can have a great marriage.

At the very heart of what makes marriage work is “this thing called love.” God loved us when we were very unlovely. When we respond to His love and receive what Christ did for us, His love begins to flow through us. But it flows only as we maintain a close relationship with Him. As I said before, by nature we are not lovers but self-centered and selfish. Two consistently selfish people will never have a healthy marriage. Two lovers, on the other hand, will experience all that God had in mind when He created us male and female.

So enjoy reading this book. Learn the twelve habits that allow you to cooperate with God in keeping love alive in your marriage. The practical ideas the Smalleys share will encourage and equip those couples who want to experience a thriving marriage.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gary Chapman". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long, sweeping underline.

PhD, author of *The Five Love Languages*



THIS THING CALLED LOVE

*Three things will last forever—faith, hope,
and love—and the greatest of these is love.*

—1 Corinthians 13:13, NLT

Not long ago, my fifteen-year-old son, Garrison, held up a VHS tape he'd found in the closet. "My history teacher showed us pictures of these the other day," he joked. "I didn't know that any had survived."

This comment resulted in the idea to digitize. The decades-old tape was of a wedding ceremony, specifically the nuptials of one love-struck Gregory Thomas Smalley to the beautiful Erin Christine Murphy. Since we hadn't owned a VCR player for many years, I decided it was time to convert it to a DVD.

In many ways it felt like yesterday—watching Erin, escorted by her parents, walk down the aisle to my waiting hand. In other ways, our wedding felt like a lifetime ago. I don't mean

that as in “the ol’ ball and chain,” because I love my wife and our marriage. But it was strange to see my twenty-three-year-old self. I was barely shaving, and yet there I stood, pledging life-changing vows.

I, Greg, take you, Erin, to be my wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until death do us part.

And that’s when I noticed something remarkable. I replayed the scene several times to make sure I’d heard it correctly. I smiled at the realization that everything I’ve learned about marriage in the past twenty-four years—both as a husband and as a psychologist—could be summed up in two simple words. And yet I’d failed to grasp their significance when I’d said them.

What are these life-changing words? *To love.*

I’m sure you’re thinking, *Love? That’s it—that’s your big revelation about the secret for a great marriage? I want my money back!*

But hold on—I know that you recognize the importance of love. In fact, a recent Pew Research Center survey showed that 88 percent of Americans cited love as a “very important” reason to get married, ahead of lifelong commitment (81 percent) and companionship (76 percent).¹ But I’m not talking about love, the noun. My moment of

Eighty-eight percent of Americans cited love as a “very important” reason to get married.

revelation was hearing my very own lips vow “to love” Erin.

This short phrase is the secret of a thriving marriage and the foundation of everything that you’ll learn within the pages of this book.

And the twelve secrets to lifelong romance, based on biblical concepts of how “to love,” will rock your marriage boat because the culture has been broadcasting love lies.

Society’s views on love and marriage are not only false, but they can also severely harm or handicap your relationship. The toxic parts of unbiblical ideas about love are often rooted deep in the heart. Maxims such as, “Your spouse will ‘complete’ you,” sound great as a headline, but over time false ideas result in emotional pain and relationship strain.

Let me tell you a story to show what I mean.

TEAM SMALLEY

Erin and I developed this material together, working side by side as marriage partners and counselors. It represents ideas that have been forming for two decades during the presentation of more than two hundred marriage workshops together.

For the sake of readability, the bulk of the material is written from my perspective. Erin will add her feminine angle whenever she has a particular encouragement for women (or whenever I, being encumbered by my masculinity, can’t effectively articulate the fairer sex’s viewpoint).

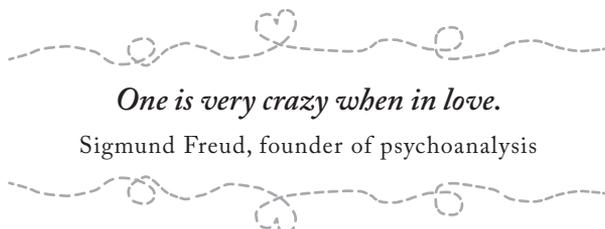
LOVE’S FINE PRINT

I’ll never forget a special phone call I made to Erin during our engagement. I was euphoric about a fortuitous turn of events.

After she answered the phone, I asked her to sit down and brace herself, then I proudly announced that I had received official notification in the mail that *I had won the big sweepstakes!* Yes, indeed, Erin was preparing to marry a *very* rich man. I was

in the running for a new car, a free luxury trip, or even one million dollars!

At first Erin was speechless. I thought this would truly be any bride's dream come true: entering marriage with no financial worries. So it was no wonder the glorious news had stunned her into silence. A minute later I didn't understand when she actually laughed out loud while I went on and on about how we would spend the money and what I was going to buy her.



To make a long and embarrassing story short, I had fallen for a scam. (Today Erin says that when she was in nursing school, she'd had conversations that were eerily similar—with the patients in the hospital's psychiatric ward.)

Indeed these marketers had done a great job presenting their pitch. I wasn't able to distinguish between reality and the hope of financial independence. The "winner" notification sounded legitimate with all the right legal jargon. The stationery looked so authentic—the envelope even had a wax seal!

I felt humiliated. Not only had I believed I was a millionaire, I had also told my entire family and bragged to many of my graduate school friends.

In one day I learned that without reading and understanding the fine print, I could easily end up sounding like a fool.

When it comes to marriage, we are being scammed as well. However, it's not by some crook peddling a bogus sweepstakes;

it's by the culture that we live in. We are being sold ideas about marriage that contain "fine print," which sets up couples—even couples who have been married ten years or longer—to fail.

THE LOVE LIES

See if you recognize some of these popular marriage scams:

Marriage is easy when you find "the one."

Conflict is a sign of a troubled relationship.

Romance and passion will always be alive in a good marriage.

Your spouse should automatically know what you need.

Marriage is about being happy.

Spouses will naturally grow closer as time goes by.

Love is self-sustaining.

Oneness is about losing your identity.

Differences are the problem in most marriages.

As wonderful as they sound, these faulty beliefs create unrealistic expectations that in general undermine your marriage relationship. But I want to focus on one myth in particular. In my opinion, it's the most destructive. This concept is best summed up by French novelist George Sand writing to future daughter-in-law Lina Calamatta about marriage: "There is only one happiness in this life, to love and be loved."²

As I have already pointed out, this quote contains a kernel of truth. It is good "to love." The distorted mush is the "be loved" part. Happiness is not dependent on finding someone to love you. The popular notion that we *need* to be loved by our spouse, or anyone for that matter, is intellectual swill.

The truth is that I don't *need* Erin to love me.

I know this sounds counterintuitive and crazy—because we’ve all probably been bombarded with this cultural lie through magazine articles, movie scripts, and music lyrics. One song recorded by country music artist Wynonna Judd offers this advice, “You got to find somebody to love you / Someone to be there for you night and day.”³

The Bible, however, doesn’t say that you need to find someone to love you.

Let that sink in. *You don’t need to find someone to love you.*

There’s nothing in Scripture that says this. Not. One. Verse.

You don’t need your spouse to love you, but you do need love. *You need God’s love.*

God *is* love (1 John 4:8), and His love is perfect, everlasting,

WHEN A MARRIAGE IS UNSAFE

The scope of this book is not intended to address a marriage broken down by physical violence, sexual exploitation, or psychological abuse. Do you think you are in an emotionally hurtful or a violence-filled relationship? Do you believe your spouse is emotionally unstable and could harm you or him/herself? If so, one or both of you could be in danger. If you are in a life-threatening situation, dial 911. For non-immediate help, we invite you to call 1-800-A-Family (1-800-232-6459) between 6 a.m. and 8 p.m. Mountain Time. It may take as long as forty-eight hours for a qualified, licensed counselor to return your call, so please leave a message with your contact information.

Focus on the Family counselors can support you as you take action to ensure your safety and the safety of your loved ones. You will also find assistance in locating Christian resources in your area for ongoing care.

unconditional, sacrificial, steadfast, faithful, genuine, and active. Your need to be loved has been completely met by God.

The culture doesn't acknowledge that a personal, loving God exists. So it sells you this lie, and it's a whopper:

If you fail to find your “soul mate,” then a massive “love hole” will remain in your heart, and you will spend the rest of your meaningless life weeping and gnashing your teeth until you find someone else who will give you the love that you so crave.

THE LOVE TRUTH

Here's a summary of the love truth found in Scripture:

You don't have a “love hole” in your heart. God is the source of love. Your need to be loved has already been 100 percent satisfied by your heavenly Father.

Your spouse will never be “the source” of love in your life. This is God's exclusive role—and He is a jealous lover! We are constantly reminded of God's possessive love throughout the Bible: “I have loved you with an everlasting love” (Jeremiah 31:3, *ESV*). The apostle Paul called us “dearly loved children” (Ephesians 5:1) and John wrote, “Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:11, *ESV*). The word *beloved* means “much loved.” The Creator of the universe loves you completely!

So, our first and most important job in marriage is to open our hearts to God's unlimited love. This is why the greatest

commandment begins with an instruction to love God: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30).

When you put God first, He promises to meet all your needs. “Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need” (Matthew 6:33, NLT). God alone can fill you to the full.

Nothing on this earth compares to being loved by Him (Ephesians 3:16-21).

THEN WHY MARRIAGE?

God designed marriage to start with His love. The Lord created you to depend completely upon Him—heart, soul, mind, and strength. He fills you up in ways that nothing else can. You will never find ultimate satisfaction except in a vital, dynamic relationship with God.

That being said, God’s design for us includes community—both a blood community and a faith community. Marriage is God’s plan for individuals and also for community. God gave us marriage as a gift, but that gift does not supersede our primary relationship, which is with Him as our Source of life and love.

TO LOVE . . .

Once you are able to receive God’s love, as a married person you have a job to do. Freed from the bonds of trying to get your spouse to love you, you are now able to love fully. Instead of spending time, effort, and energy on looking inward, your job is to look outward and love your spouse.

Erase the cultural scams and myths about matrimony from your mind and heart; this is the real job your heavenly Father has given you: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (John 13:34).

Your marriage destiny is to love your spouse.

TEST YOUR LOVE!

On a date in high school, I gauged my virility by gripping the handle of a vintage arcade game called the Love Tester. The feedback would be in the form of a light bulb glowing next to an adjective score. Top scores on the machine respectively were “UNCONTROLLABLE,” “HOT STUFF,” and “PASSIONATE.” The lowest three were “HARMLESS,” “CLAMMY,” and “POOR FISH, TRY AGAIN,” with the latter ranking swimming at the bottom of the pool.

If I got an embarrassing score, I would drop another quarter into the Love Tester slot and grip the metal handle again until I at least ranked a middle score of “WILD.” I’m sure those games made millions off of vain young people like me.

Knowing that no one wants to be labeled a poor fish, Focus on the Family has commissioned a marriage assessment that will help you identify your relationship strengths *and* weaknesses based on the twelve topics in this book. (We guarantee it’s more accurate than the Love Tester.) If you as a couple use this online tool, you’ll have a better understanding of which areas in your marriage could use more attention. Plus you’ll have access to other resources to help tune up your marriage.

Focus on the Family wants to ensure you are uncontrollably in love with your spouse. No clammy marriages allowed!

Visit www.CrazyLittleThingCalledMarriage.com to take the *free* assessment and receive a customized report.

THE LOOK OF LOVE

So, what does loving your spouse truly look like?

Let me illustrate the answer to this question. I recently was editing video curriculum that featured twenty of the best Christian marriage experts. They were offering advice for engaged couples.* We didn't script or tell the experts what to say, and we received some powerful biblical counsel.

As I watched all the experts—one right after the other—I was amazed at a particular theme that was repeated by the presenters: sacrifice. It's as if they all had read John 15:13 as their morning devotion: "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" (ESV).

Sacrifice is what love looks like. It's giving up something you value (your time, money, comfort, or desires) for the sake of someone else whom you consider to have a greater value.⁴

It's relatively easy for me as an adult to serve someone—to help out or assist. I usually do that cheerfully. But it's a whole different story when serving someone costs me something.

I admit sacrificing for Erin can be a struggle. But I don't regret or resent it. In fact, the act of sacrificing now is one way I grow closer to God.

The culture says that sacrifice is a loss. In a biblical reckoning, sacrifice in marriage is a win-win situation.

That's what's so crazy about biblical marriage. There are twelve secrets—crazy countercultural secrets—that stem from Scriptures that, once embraced, will fill your marriage with intimacy, trust, and romance.

Let's look at "Romance Secret #1: True Love Commits."

*This amazing resource is the *Ready to Wed* DVD curriculum published by Focus on the Family/Tyndale, 2015.



ROMANCE SECRET #1

TRUE LOVE
COMMITTS

*There be three things which are too wonderful for me,
yea, four which I know not: The way of an eagle in the
air; the way of a serpent upon a rock; the way of a ship in
the midst of the sea; and the way of a man with a maid.*

Proverbs 30:18-19, KJV

Hidden behind the 1990s matrimonial bling, as recorded in our wedding DVD, was a second life-changing concept.

There we stood, dressed in almost regal finery. She wore the customary white dress accented by a beaded headband with tulle exploding from the back. I wore a light-gray tux and a naively eager smile on my lips.

After vowing with solemnity and sincerity, the thought of till-death-do-us-part dedication was overtaken by the whirlwind celebrations. The toasts were made, the cake was cut, the garter tossed, and concern about commitment was cast aside with it.

The way I saw it back then, I'd found a girl and gotten married. I checked that off my life's to-do list and set my mind on other goals. Sure I knew I would have to buy an anniversary gift—diamonds are the fifth anniversary gift or are they the tenth?—and I figured I'd be in trouble with Erin if I didn't think of something romantic for Valentine's Day. But those two events were once a year with clearly defined parameters. Selfishly I knew that if I played my cards right and made Erin happy on those celebratory days, I'd probably be happy too, wink wink.

I'm ashamed to admit it, but I thought of marriage maintenance as something simple and routine, like setting the clocks an hour ahead or swapping out fresh batteries in the smoke detectors. The promise to cherish my wife was relegated to a couple of dates on the calendar.

I was soon going to reap the unhappy consequences of my ignorance and my cavalier approach to matrimonial commitment.

HURRICANE O

Fast-forward two weeks. Apparently Erin and I had spent more effort preparing for the perfect day instead of for the perfect relationship. While our wedding went off without a hitch, the “honeymoon was over” even before the honeymoon was over.

The “honeymoon was over” even before the honeymoon was over.

The setting? Hawaii. The problem? Definitely Erin. Or so I thought at the time. Here's how it happened . . .

On the last day of our trip, we wanted to visit a tropical waterfall. You know the one on the travel agency posters: the white foaming water cutting through

gray granite towers and splashing into a pristine blue pool circumscribed by lush foliage bursting with the blooms of large, red flowers. I'd mapped out a route, and we happily hiked to the spot.

After arriving I stripped to my swim trunks and jumped straight into the refreshing water, waiting for my lovely bride to join me. This was going to be a swim to remember.



*It is just as crazy not to be crazy about Christ
as it is to be crazy about anything else.*

Peter Kreeft, *Jesus-Shock*



I motioned with outstretched arms and an irresistibly inviting look in my eyes.

But Erin stood on the bank, fully clothed, and, for some inexplicable reason, *resisting*.

“Come on in,” I beckoned.

She shook her head and simply pointed to a sign that read, “NO SWIMMING.”

The emotional weather changed as fast as a tropical storm. Hurricane O moved in—O for Our First Big Fight.

The next few minutes were spent arguing, and after I finally realized that she wasn't going to move, I shouted, “You just ruined the honeymoon!”

Then I watched as she slipped into the jungle growth and disappeared.

The majestic setting seemed to mock me. Externally my world was perfect. Internally it was falling apart. (We'll hear

Erin's side of the story in "Romance Secret #4: True Love Fights for Peace." Stay tuned for how we learned the secret of not only reconciling arguments like this one, but also growing closer as a couple through the process.)

Somehow we smoothed over the spat during a luau, silently agreeing to avoid the topic. But over the next few months, waves of tension washed over us. The tide would pull them away before we could resolve them. We argued about in-laws, chores, and money. The stress of our jobs and my graduate school schedule seemed as if they would drown us.

I wondered, *What went wrong? Did I choose the wrong person?*

This marriage thing was supposed to be easy. After all, I was the son of Gary Smalley, relationship expert and marriage guru. Surely I knew how to reach out in love and recapture Erin's heart. But instead of coming up with ideas to calm the emotional storms, my efforts at communication blew things further out of control.

This man and this maid, who had been so in love, were now completely miserable.

A "ROCKY" START

Erin and I suffered from the devastation of Hurricane O and the following storms. Many days I felt as if our marriage foundation was washing away.

But it held fast.

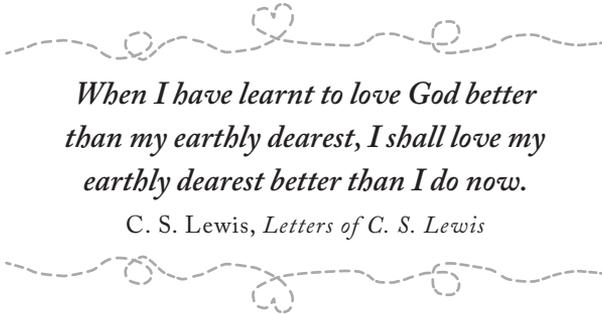
Why? Because we'd had a "rocky" start.

And in the context of the Bible, that's a good thing!

Erin and I had one of the essential ingredients for a strong relationship. We'd built our marriage house on rock, as de-

scribed in Jesus' parable. (See Matthew 7.) God's power held us together.

Before we became engaged, Erin and I had, as individuals, committed our lives to serving God and following His teachings in the Bible.



I had been intentionally pursuing my faith since high school. When we got married, I was in seminary, burning the midnight oil studying systematic theology. Erin had made a commitment to intentional spiritual growth during college. As a couple, we were deciding whether to attend a Catholic or Evangelical church, but at least we knew that spiritual accord was essential. That commitment to God sustained us (and still does) during our stormy times.

THY TREASURE—THY HEART

I love the word *wholehearted*. Erin and I have used it to title several of our marriage books. Wholehearted means “marked by complete earnest commitment.”¹ Complete, earnest: these are the words I want defining my commitment to Erin.

A wholehearted commitment to marriage starts by recognizing its incredible value. Matthew 6:21 says, “For where your

treasure is, there your heart will be also” (ESV). Commitment—fully and earnestly investing your whole heart—flows out of what you treasure. In other words, you will only invest in what you esteem. And the more committed you are to it, the more you’ll invest.

Have you ever thought about what you like about your marriage or why Hebrews 13:4 says, “Marriage should be honored by all”? It’s because you must regard your marriage with great respect.

Even though we had difficulties, Erin and I still valued some things. Here’s the list as it was then:

- Having fun and laughing together
- Going on mission trips together
- Having someone to celebrate with
- Having sex
- Being with a best friend
- Being part of a team

What do you love about your marriage? Treasuring and honoring your marriage is vital, but it’s not sufficient for a lifelong marriage. At some point a husband and wife need to decide to stay married for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part.

A WIDOW’S VOW

One scripture that’s often quoted during marriage ceremonies reflects this commitment to God in a powerful way. It’s from the Old Testament story of Ruth.

At first glance, the passage might not seem like strong marriage material; however, a Moabite widow’s initial commitment

to God and His people later defines one of the great love stories in the Bible. Ruth makes a simple, yet profound, vow to her mother-in-law, a displaced Israelite named Naomi. The formative foundation of that love rests on Ruth's pledge to follow the Lord. As we'll see, a commitment to honor God is the first step toward developing a marriage that can sustain lifelong passion.

The tension of Ruth's story develops upon the death of her husband, Mahlon, who provided financially for her and for Naomi while they lived in Moab. After Mahlon's death, Naomi decides to return to her homeland, Bethlehem. She forbids Ruth from coming with her and encourages her to find a new husband from among the Moabites. The story picks up in Ruth 1:16 (ESV):

A commitment to honor God is the first step toward developing a marriage that can sustain lifelong passion.

Ruth said [to Naomi], "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God."

Ruth makes this promise, in essence, pledging her life to serve the living God.

SNUFF OUT YOUR CANDLE

Ruth clearly takes the first step in preparing for marriage by committing her life to the God of the Israelites. Next, she vows to leave her life with the Moabites behind. She denounces her

former polytheistic religion, her homeland, and her emotional and financial ties to blood kin. Ruth never once looks back, vowing to serve God and Naomi until she dies.

Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you. (v. 17, ESV)

Ruth shows her commitment to God and His people is unto death—as is the marriage covenant.

But there are two kinds of death. One takes place before physical death: dying to self. There are only two passages in the Bible that tell us to do something “daily.” One is to “encourage one another daily” (Hebrews 3:13); the other is “take up [your] cross daily” (Luke 9:23). Taking up our crosses refers to how Christ made the ultimate sacrifice—His life. Likewise I am to lay down my life—my selfish desires—and sacrificially serve my wife.



*We knew we were loved, we knew the Lord
was head of our house, we knew where
the lines were drawn, we were safe.*

Elisabeth Elliot, *Love Has a Price Tag*



“Dying to self” daily is a key to not only the Christian life but also to lifelong love and romance with your spouse. Part of that “death” means leaving your past life as a single adult and creating a new culture based on the union of one man and

one woman. A second essential aspect of marital success is that individuals must leave their past life behind and commit to a future with their spouse.

On our wedding day, Erin and I likewise vowed to leave our single lives behind and form a new bond, one life as couple. We chose to symbolize this aspect of marriage by using a unity candle at our wedding.

FLAMING LOVE

The unity candle tradition works like this: At the beginning of the wedding, two lit candles sit on the altar; the candles represent the lives of the couple before marriage. Holding long candle lighters with a bell-shaped cone at the end, the man and woman each touch the wicks of the candle lighters to the flame of the first candle. Next they snuff out the first candles with the cones. Finally, in unison, they light a third candle, which symbolizes their unity.

Did you notice something powerful in that short ceremony? It's the "dying to self" symbolism. The original two candles—representing separate lives—are snuffed in order to show a commitment to the one new life the couple is beginning together.

TRICK CANDLES

Unfortunately, the circumstances surrounding my married life didn't parallel the unity tradition. In my soul I had one of those trick candles that relights, because the desires of my former life kept right on smoldering.

I knew that I should "leave" my old life and "cleave" only to my wife as the King James version of Genesis commands a man

to do. But under pressure in the first months of our marriage, I was double-minded. Memories of my independent, Greg-only priorities would warm my thoughts causing me to want to rekindle my single (translated: self-centered) way of life.

I wanted to spend money on CDs and Erin wanted to pay bills. I wanted to play basketball five days a week or watch television till the wee hours of the morning. Erin had other plans for me, such as washing dishes. I thought living as a caveman was fine; I had no desire to buy into her Martha Stewart standards.

As I struggled with the difficult realities of marriage, I let discontent weigh down my soul.

Erin struggled in the quicksand even more than I did. Depression and anxiety threatened to suffocate her. At that time in my life, immaturity and pride kept me from taking responsibility for our problems, and so Erin sought counseling alone.

We were stuck, anchored at the island of self-pity, each of us surreptitiously longing for the shores of singlehood.

LESSONS FROM *THE ART OF WAR*

Ironically, concepts revealed in the ancient book *The Art of War* helped us make peace. I finally realized that marriage is a lifelong battle against selfishness, a strong adversary capable of giving our love mortal wounds. I had yet to commit myself fully to the fight for our marriage.

I found inspirational principles for that fight in an unusual source.

Notes from a Chinese General

If you're in a battle, you need to seek counsel. The words are from Chinese philosopher-general Sun Tzu directing those who

want to protect and advance their countries in the essential art of war. He noted in the sixth century BC:

[War] is a matter of life and death, a road either to safety or to ruin. Hence it is a subject of inquiry which can on no account be neglected.²

If you replace the word *war* with *marriage*, the message is profound for couples, perhaps even more so than for generals. I wanted a successful marriage. No, that's not exactly right. I wanted a fun, adventurous, passionate, all-consuming desire for Erin to dominate my thoughts and define my priorities. And I wanted her to feel the same way about me and our marriage. But we were nowhere close to winning the battle because we were neglecting something that threatened the life of our marriage. We were headed toward ruin, not safety. We needed to learn an important lesson about waging the war against self-centeredness.

Ditch the Idea of Divorce

In those early days, the D-word was unspoken, but the menace of it permeated our arguments. Our verbal battles would escalate to the point where I'd try to put words into Erin's mouth, such as "Are you saying I should leave?" or "Why would you want to stay with me?" Neither of us wanted separation, but our inability to resolve our fights played out in melodrama. The one-liners were lead anchors of dissatisfaction, cleverly packed away in our emotional baggage. Until we threw the idea of divorce overboard, we couldn't sail away from our problems.

Mentioning divorce showed that we weren't taking God's

warning in Matthew 19:6 seriously: “No one should separate what God has joined together” (NIRV).

When divorce isn't an option, commitment forces a couple to work through problems. The idea of living out my marriage in misery frightened me. I could choose to either run away or work to resolve the problems. Because I was committed to God and His values (see Malachi 2:16), I gave up the option of divorce. I had only one course of action: I chose to fight for Erin's love even if it killed me.

When divorce isn't an option, commitment forces a couple to work through problems.

Burn the Boats

The idea to sabotage a retreat option and stick to the war no matter the cost is another concept described in *The Art of War*:*

Burn your baggage and impedimenta, throw away your stores and provisions, choke up the wells, destroy your cooking-stoves, and make it plain to your men that they cannot survive, but must fight to the death.³

When your army has crossed the border, you should burn the boats and bridges, in order to make it clear to everybody that you have no hankering after home.⁴

In any battle, the option of retreat or “hankering after home” must be eliminated. But even more drastic than burning a land

*If you recently read this story in *Ready to Wed* (Tyndale/Focus on the Family, 2015), I apologize for the repetition, but it's the best example I know to convey this important concept.

bridge is destroying your means to cross an ocean. I call this the “burn the boats” marriage mentality. It’s the ultimate show of commitment.

You may be wondering which commanders acted upon this extreme advice. Legends say that a Berber named Taric the One-Eyed burned his army’s boats after landing along the coast of Spain in 711.⁵ The tactic was described in the Roman myth of Aeneas when the goddess Juno tried to keep the Trojans in Sicily.⁶ Another legend tells of Alexander the Great burning his ships after landing to conquer Persia circa 334 BC.⁷ But by far my favorite “burn the boats” story features the politically incorrect Hernán Cortés. (His ideals were atrocious, but his methods were courageous.)

Imagine you’re a Spanish soldier, arriving on a mysterious foreign coast and facing the Aztec warriors, ferocious men wearing wood helmets and dressed as jaguars.⁸ The leader of the Aztecs, Montezuma II, has rebuffed countless armies. And then Cortés orders you to light the ships’ sails on fire! As the fire blazes bright and hot, you realize you must fight to the death. There’s no turning back. Your survival is now dependent on your ability to defeat the Aztecs.⁹

Likewise, if spouses perceive that conquering marriage issues is the only option, their choices are focused on improving the odds of marriage survival. Spouses choose wisely when they know that their life destinies are fused to another person’s well-being. They talk about their feelings, even if it’s painful, instead of pretending “everything is fine.” They refuse to dwell on the negatives when their spouse ruffles their emotional feathers. They let “love and faithfulness never leave” them (Proverbs 3:3), even if their spouse has an illness or life-changing accident. “Burning the boats” means a spouse has promised to stick out the battle, not just today but forever.

After we caught on to the “burn the boats” way of thinking, divorce wasn’t an option for Erin and me. We never even joke about it or allude to leaving.

COMMITMENT ROMANCE SECRET

So, Greg, you’re probably asking, what’s the secret to better romance you promised if I commit unconditionally to my marriage?

Research shows a marriage commitment yields a more satisfying relationship on all levels.¹⁰ Guys, women respond when they know you’ll “die to self” for them.

Research shows a marriage commitment yields a more satisfying relationship on all levels.

Trust and security shore up a woman’s heart, and she’ll be more likely to bond emotionally.¹¹

Ladies, men hesitate to invest unless they know there’s a payoff. Let your husband know you’ll support him and your marriage no matter what. One researcher concluded that “a man tends to give most completely to a woman once he has decided, *She is my future.*”¹²

Our Future

In 1992, Jason Heinrich was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer. Fear and pain entered his six-year-old perspective.

The malignant cells destroyed his right femur, and the bone was removed. When he was twelve, a surgeon offered a choice: adjust to life with crutches, or try an experimental orthopedic procedure that had, so far, never been done in the United States. The new implant was cutting-edge and would fit the needs of a young person like Jason.

The cure was extensive—spanning more than seven years. The treatments were excruciating—his leg was maimed by an accidental instrument failure. The ordeal was exhausting—the emotional and physical toll on Jason’s mind and body left him old beyond his years.

But by high school, Jason had allowed God to replace his fear and dread of hospitals with a compelling goal: to become a perfusionist to help other people with life-threatening conditions. Today, with a degree in biochemistry and a job as a patient care technician, he’s anticipating an interview to enter a Perfusion Technology Master’s program in the Midwest.

Likewise, Erin and I wanted God to replace our relationship pain with something positive. That’s why we decided to commit to marriage ministry as a couple, to redeem our relationship—to fight the cancer of selfishness—in order to help others. We set sail on a new adventure together, and we’ve never once looked back.



If you would like ideas for date nights based on the theme of this chapter, visit crazylittlethingcalledmarriage.com. You’ll also find thought-provoking questions for couples and small groups.

In “Romance Secret #2,” you’ll discover that commitment is also the key to spiritual intimacy.

