

When Sinners Say

“I Do”

Discovering the Power of
the Gospel For Marriage

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Preface

You might be curious about a guy who would write a book called *When Sinners Say “I Do.”* My name is Dave and . . . well . . . I’m a sinner. Saying “I do” twenty-five years ago to my beautiful wife not only didn’t solve that problem, it magnified it times ten. Engaged people can sometimes wonder whether “I do” holds a magical power that charms us into selfless and instinctively caring people. It doesn’t. Would I have said, “I do” if I knew what “I do” really meant? Without a doubt. Would the grin in my wedding pictures have been less self-confident and more, how shall I say it, *desperate*? Most assuredly!

What do I mean when I say I’m a sinner? Picture in your mind a guy in sackcloth and ashes, prostrate on the ground, throwing dust on his head in shame.

No, scratch that. Picture this instead.

I used to have a failsafe system for vacuuming my car. Give me fifty cents and four minutes, and you could do surgery on my carpets. The key is mat placement, nimble feet, and doors ajar. Once the machine sprang to life, I would work like a human black hole, sucking everything into the vacuum that wasn’t bolted down. Sure there was a cost—I lost important

papers, checks and even a pet or two—but there are always casualties in the maintenance of an orderly system. It was my way. The only way.

Have you ever been so devoted to your way that it makes you, well . . . stupid?

One day at the car wash, I deposited my two coins and spun quickly to work only to crack my knee on the open door. The blunt force trauma to my knee was so sharp that both of my legs buckled. As I lay moaning, the faint hum of the vacuum cleaner pierced my consciousness reminding me that precious seconds were slipping away. I knew that the “Four-Minute-Autosweeping-System” by Dave could be compromised. Dizzy from pain and clutching my throbbing knee, I stumbled to my feet and threw myself into the car. They still talk about that spectacle at the car wash. Let it be known for the record, though, that I did successfully sweep the entire car in the requisite four minutes. Obviously, I have a pretty ridiculous drive to compete.

Maybe you think a guy who has pastored couples for over twenty-one years should be above that kind of behavior. Read on—it’s worse than you think.

I have control issues. Add to that, I love to be right. That means I tend to see other peoples’ opinions as inferior. I hate being wrong. Also, what people think about me sometimes determines what I do. I worry about problems I can’t even solve. You’ll find out a lot more about my particular package of mixed-up motivations throughout this book. But I can vouch that the more you get to know me, the more you’ll admire my wife.

I found a passage from the Bible that describes the biggest problem for me and the biggest challenge in my marriage. “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do” (Galatians 5:17).

What I love about this passage is not just that it describes my life so well; it's that it was written by somebody who you assume would have solved the sin problems of life. Isn't Paul the one who wrote, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). True, but he's also the guy who confessed, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:24).

The Apostle Paul was wretched? How does that work? Man, he must have been really bad. But what if I told you that a great marriage—a God-glorifying, soul-inspiring, life-enduring union—springs from the conviction that we are sinners just like Paul. Would that intrigue you enough to go to the next chapter? That's where we are headed, if you have the courage to come. Curious?

Let me help you with something that has helped me. To say "I am a sinner" is to stare boldly at a fundamental reality that many people don't even want to glance at. But when we acknowledge that painful reality in our lives, several great things become clear. We find ourselves in good company—the heroes of our faith, from Old Testament times to the present, who experienced the battle with sin on the front lines. We also acknowledge what everybody around us already knows—particularly our spouses. But, by far the greatest benefit of acknowledging our sinfulness is that it makes Christ and his work precious to us. Like Jesus said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:31–32). Only sinners need a Savior.

If you are married, or soon to be married, you are discovering that your marriage is not a romance novel. Marriage is the union of two people who arrive toting the luggage of life. And that luggage always contains sin. Often it gets opened right there on the honeymoon, sometimes it waits for the week after. But the suitcases are always there, sometimes tripping their owners, sometimes popping open unexpectedly and disgorging

forgotten contents. We must not ignore our sin, because it is the very context where the gospel shines brightest.

Which leads me to the point of this book. *When Sinners Say "I Do"* is not a depressing thought. It recognizes that to get to the heart of marriage, we must deal with the heart of sin. A great pastor once said, "Till sin be bitter, Christ will not be sweet."¹ He was getting at a profound truth of the gospel. Until we understand the problem, we will not be able to delight in the solution. Grace is truly amazing because of what we were saved from.

I think there's a powerful application for marriage here: *When sin becomes bitter, marriage becomes sweet.* When the sin we bring to marriage becomes real to us, then the gospel becomes vital and marriage becomes sweet.

Sound scary? Sure it does. But the gospel is good news that solves the problem of bad news. The very sin that you fear seeing is the very reason why Christ died in your place. The gospel translates our fear to worship.

My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought!
My sin, not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more;
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!²

The next life is taken care of, so why not work on making this one even better? Your marriage can be built or rebuilt upon a solid and enduring foundation. But we must start where the gospel starts; there lies the hope for sinners who say "I do."

Chapter One

What Really Matters
in Marriage

Theologians at the Altar

Multicolored beams of light sprinkled the sanctuary as the great doors swung apart. A processional hymn blended into the sweet spring air wafting through open windows. As family and friends rose to their feet, the dark wood of the pews creaked out the sound of tradition, decorum, and propriety.

Trembling imperceptibly and biting her lip for composure, the bride began her wedding march—a walk she had rehearsed in her attic for two decades. Her destination was an eager young man, a bundle of energy in a tuxedo. A smile had hijacked his face and his eyes danced with delight as he beheld his approaching bride.

The officiating minister nodded approvingly as the father of the bride made the ceremonial transfer, placing his daughter's hand in the groom's. "If there be any here," the pastor announced, "who can give a reason why this man and woman should not be joined, speak now or forever hold your peace!" All waited with polite anticipation as the clergyman paused for this obligatory nod to custom. Suddenly an old man's voice pierced the polite silence.

"How do you know?"

He stood near the back, clutching the pew in front of him, piercing eyes aflame with passion. "I mean no disrespect," he appealed, as every last face turned in his direction.

"But how do you know—I mean, really know—that this marriage is going to work?"

His tone was earnest, but not defiant. His outburst may have been startling to the congregation, but it was completely sincere.

Then, with voice and eyes lowered, his final words came slowly and deliberately.

"How . . . how can anyone know?"

Some stared at the man in wonder. Others glared their indignation. And as his unexpected question echoed softly in the rafters, it was as if time froze, while dozens of people silently formulated their answers, each hearing his own voice in his own mind.

They're in love—love can conquer anything, thought the maid of honor.

Compatibility is the key. This marriage is a lock, thought a mutual friend.

The bride and groom's former youth pastor, having known both families for years, said to himself, *It all comes down to parenting. These kids will go the distance because they've come from good families.*

Uncle Bob, the CPA, straightened his tie and chuckled to himself. *Do you have any idea what their stock portfolio*

is going to look like in a few years, buddy? Good financial planning eliminates the single biggest stressor to healthy marriages.

They've read every marriage book out there—what else do they need to know? marveled the best man.

Moving into ceremony-saving mode, the pastor interjected his solution. “Dearly beloved, we are gathered here to dedicate this marriage to God. He will make it work. Let us pray . . .”

Good Question, Great Answer

Imagine if this story were true. What would you think? Who is right? All of them? None of them? What would have gone through your mind in that moment?

More importantly, how would you respond if the old man came and asked you that question about your marriage right now? Maybe for you the question isn't so much, “Will it work?” but something more like, “Can my marriage be all it should be?”

If you're reading this, the question obviously matters to you. Our goals for marriage don't stop at “will it last?” or “will it work?” What people in this most significant of relationships long for is a marriage that will thrive and grow even in hard times. So I'd like to offer an answer that might not have come to mind. It's an answer that reflects the main idea of this entire book.

First, let me say that all the answers from the astonished guests at that imaginary wedding clearly have merit: love, compatibility, strong family history, good planning, knowledge, a shared faith. Each one is a helpful or even critical component to a thriving marriage. You probably can think of other good answers too.

But there is an answer that stands behind all the others, and makes them work together in the best possible way. It's an answer so comprehensive we're going to spend the rest

of this book unpacking some of its implications. It may not sound too earth-shattering at first, but based on Scripture and everything I’ve learned about pastoring in the last twenty-one years, I assure you that this truth can rock your world.

Here it is: *What we believe about God determines the quality of our marriage.*

Stay With Me Here

Let me take a moment to explain. Everybody views life from a perspective—what some call a worldview. Our worldview is shaped by many things: our culture, our gender, our upbringing, our present situation, etc. The most profound thing that shapes anybody’s worldview is their understanding of God. What a person believes about God determines what he or she thinks about how we got here, what our ultimate meaning is, and what happens after we die. So essentially our worldview, our perspective on life, is determined by our perspective on God. And when we talk about theology, all we are talking about is what we think about God. What you truly believe about God and what it means to live for God *is* your theology. In other words, theologians aren’t just really smart old guys in seminaries, or really smart dead guys in cemeteries . . . you’re a theologian too! Listen to a well-known theologian of our day, R. C. Sproul:

No Christian can avoid theology. Every Christian is a theologian. Perhaps not a theologian in the technical or professional sense, but a theologian nevertheless. The issue for Christians is not whether we are going to be theologians but whether we are going to be good theologians or bad ones.¹

What kind of theologian are you? It’s not hard to tell. Whether we realize it or not, our ideas about life, needs, marriage, romance, conflict, and everything else reveal themselves all the time in our words and deeds, inevitably reflecting our view of

God. If you listen closely, theology spills from our lips every day. See if you recognize it in this slice of conversation.

“It really frustrates me when you do that!”

“Yeah, well, whatever! That’s just the way I am—it’s not my fault that it pushes all the wrong buttons for you.”

“You don’t really care about what I need, do you?”

“What *you* need? What about what *I* need? My feelings don’t seem to matter at all in this marriage.”

“Why can’t you trust me?”

A typical word-duel for a married couple? Perhaps. But it’s far more than that. Such simple statements, which every married person might think (even if we don’t always speak them), come from hearts that have adopted certain assumptions about who we are, what we need, what’s really important, and how God figures into it all. In a conversation like this, theology is being backed out of the garage and taken for a spin.

That might not be obvious to you right now but I trust it will become more clear as this book progresses. A good, everyday spouse-theologian can see in this conversation that beliefs about God and self, about problems and relationships, and about right and wrong are being hotly defended and argued. It’s there in the vocabulary . . . “frustrates.” It’s revealed in the reference points . . . “what I need.” And it’s displayed through the underlying assumptions . . . “just the way I am.”

So make no mistake about it. How a husband and wife build their marriage day-by-day and year-by-year is fundamentally shaped by their theology. It governs how you think, what you say, and how you act. Your theology governs your entire life. And it determines how you live in your marriage.

First Things First: Lining Up the Buttons

Have you ever buttoned your shirt wrong . . . you know, so the holes and buttons don’t match up and the shirt looks like it was pasted on by first-graders? (Just a hunch, but this

is probably a guy thing.) It happened to me recently. I got the first button in the wrong hole and kept going until I was sporting a fashion nightmare. Funny thing was, I thought I looked great—maybe I had an extra button at the bottom, but that was obviously a defect in the shirt.

Moments like this put my wife, Kimm, in an awkward position. *Should I fix him again?* she ponders, *or just allow the guys at the office to enjoy it?* This time she was merciful, and I had a properly-buttoned day.

It’s amazing how distorted and disheveled one can look from not getting that first button right. Start off in the wrong place, and there’s no way to correct the problem down the line. Getting the first one right is the key to getting everything else right.

Marriage is like that shirt. If you get the first things right, then the many other “buttons” of marriage—communication, conflict resolution, romance, roles—all start to line up in a way that works together.

The first button in marriage? You got it . . . theology! But what does a “rightly buttoned” theology look like? Let’s look briefly at three of the most important components of a solid, biblical theology of marriage.

The Foundation of Your Marriage—The Bible

To be a good theologian and therefore a good spouse, we must study God as he really is. We must get our understanding and interpretation of God and reality from Scripture. It is in Scripture that God is revealed truly—his character, his activity, his heart, and his glorious, redemptive plan. Most profoundly, in the Bible we encounter God as he has ultimately made himself known in the person of Jesus Christ. Christ is “the truth” (John 14:6). To know him is to know the truth. Truth-based marriages are inherently centered on Christ.

We obviously live in a day when the meaning of marriage is up for grabs. Unfettered from any source of authority, marriage follows culture . . . no matter where culture goes. After a head-banging night of partying, one pop idol got married, then had the marriage annulled in the morning. To her, marriage may have simply seemed like a fun thing to do for a few hours, not too different from an afternoon at the mall or a visit to Starbucks. Just a spontaneous indulgence. No harm done.

This is why the Bible is so important. As God's Word, it fills marriage with eternal and glorious significance. It also speaks as an authority on what a marriage is meant to be. It is both the evaluative standard for marriage and the key to joy in marriage. It's a wonderful, freeing thing to realize that the durability and quality *of* your marriage is not ultimately based on the strength of your commitment *to* your marriage. Rather, it's based on something completely *apart from* your marriage: God's truth; truth we find plain and clear on the pages of Scripture.

I know an engineer with a job way too complicated for me to even begin to understand. Not long ago he told me about a computer program with an operating manual that required the personal explanation of its creator. Engineers from all over the world flew to this inventor for sessions on how to interpret the manual and use the program. The thinking was that he created the program, he wrote the manual, he's the authority . . . let's start there! Makes sense to me.

This makes sense in marriage too. God created the marriage "program," wrote the "operating manual," and is faithful to explain it. He is the one and only reliable and trustworthy authority on the subject of marriage. As its "inventor" (see the first two chapters of Genesis), he knows how it works and how to make it last. Lord over marriage, he has given all we need for life and godliness—and marriage—in his Word.

The Bible is the foundation for a thriving marriage.

The Fountain of Your Marriage—The Gospel

If we want to live with the Bible as the foundation for marriage, let's make sure we're clear on what it's really all about. Here's a quick overview of the Bible's perspective.

Well, let's see . . . in the first two chapters of Genesis we see that God created man and woman to live in dependence on God and for the glory of God. Yet, three chapters into the Bible, they have turned away from God to themselves—sin has entered the picture. As a direct result, they lose the extraordinarily personal relationship they had enjoyed with God—a break that will affect every person who comes after them. Many, *many* pages later, at the very end of the book of Revelation, God has completely restored that personal relationship lost by Adam and Eve and has created a new heavens and new earth for his people.

Let's see—there was a relationship broken by sin in the distant past. Then, because sin has been removed, the relationship is fully restored at some point in the future. Pretty clear pattern there. Now, what happens with the sixty-four books in between? The gospel, that's what happens. God sent his Son as the answer for the sin dilemma, not just to be an example of moral goodness or teach us the way to live, but to take the judgment for sin promised in Genesis 3, so that we might live in restored relationship with God forever.

The gospel is the heart of the Bible. Everything in Scripture is either preparation *for* the gospel, presentation *of* the gospel, or participation *in* the gospel. In the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, the gospel provides an ultimate solution for our sin—for today, for tomorrow, for the day we stand before God, and forever.

There really is no end to the glories of the gospel, which is why we will spend eternity marveling that the Holy God would choose to crush his only Son for the sake of sinful man. The gospel explains our most obvious and basic problem—sin has separated us from God and from each other. Thus we are

objects of God's wrath. A Christian understands the necessity of the cross; our sin was so bad that it required blood, the blood of God, to take it away! Without the cross we are at war with God, and he is at war with us.

The gospel is therefore central to all theological truth, and is the overarching reality that makes sense of all reality. Never make the mistake of thinking that the gospel is only good for evangelism and conversion. *By* the gospel we understand that, although saved, we remain sinners. *Through* the gospel we receive power to resist sin. Accurately understanding and continually applying the gospel is the Christian life.

This also means that the gospel is an endless fountain of God's grace in your marriage. To become a good theologian and to be able to look forward to a lifelong, thriving marriage, you must have a clear understanding of the gospel. Without it, you *cannot* see God, yourself, or your marriage for what they truly are.

The gospel is the fountain of a thriving marriage.

The Focus of Your Marriage—the Glory of God

When we begin to orient our marriages around biblical truth, we see something amazing. Marriage was not just *invented* by God, it *belongs* to God. He has a unique claim over its design, purpose, and goals. It actually exists for him *more* than it exists for you and me and our spouses.

That's right. Marriage is not first about me or my spouse. Obviously, the man and woman are essential, but they are also secondary. God is the most important person in a marriage. Marriage is for our good, but it is first for God's glory.

That may seem odd, surprising, or difficult to accept, but it's a vital truth for every Christian married couple. A church service can inject religious formalities into a wedding, but to make God the authority for marriage is a daily reality.

In my pastoral ministry, I’ve seen the sad fruit of the failure to give to God what is rightly his.

- Young couples running headlong into romance, disregarding the wisdom of those closest to them, trying to use marriage as a way to legitimize uncontrolled desires. They did not see marriage as first being about God.
- Christian married couples cashing in their biblical roles and marital responsibilities in favor of “what works,” even if that means settling for far less than what could be. They did not see marriage as first being about God.
- Most tragic of all, Christian families torn apart by divorce when one or both spouses simply decide that personal need is more important than what God has joined together. They did not see marriage as first being about God.

The Apostle Paul spends much of the fifth chapter of Ephesians talking to married people. Having already outlined in prior chapters what Christ has done for them as individuals, he then calls husbands and wives “to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (Ephesians 4:1). Chapter 5 is filled with specific directives for building marriages that thrive. The most notable thing about Paul’s approach is that *Christ is the reference point for all our actions in marriage.*

Wives are to submit to husbands “as to the Lord” (v. 22). Husbands are to love wives “as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (v. 25). Husbands should nourish and cherish wives, “just as Christ does the church” (v. 29). In each case we see that while the action belongs to us, there is another and greater drama taking place through those actions.

We see that drama again in verse 32, where something glorious and mystifying is taking place. “This mystery is profound,

and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.” Commentator George Knight provides this helpful insight:

Unbeknownst to the people of Moses’ day (it was a “mystery”), marriage was *designed by God* from the beginning to be a picture or parable of the relationship between Christ and the church. Back when God was planning what marriage would be like, He planned it for this great purpose: it would give a beautiful earthly picture of the relationship that would someday come about between Christ and His church. This was not known to people for many generations, and that is why Paul can call it a “mystery.” But now in the New Testament age Paul reveals this mystery, and it is amazing.

This means that when Paul wanted to tell the Ephesians about marriage, he did not just hunt around for a helpful analogy and suddenly think that “Christ and the church” might be a good teaching illustration. No, it was much more fundamental than that: Paul saw that *when God designed the original marriage He already had Christ and the church in mind*. This is one of God’s great purposes in marriage: to picture the relationship between Christ and His redeemed people forever!²

I think that qualifies as profound. Marriage is set within the world—and within your home and mine—as a reminder, a living parable of Christ’s relationship to the church.

The months of preparation, the Big Day, the memorable honeymoon—these are all important, but there’s something more important at stake than a great wedding album. When a man and woman are joined in marriage, a new and lifelong model of the relationship between Christ and his church is launched.

How easy it is to act as if husband and wife are the only relevant parties in a marriage. But marriage is ultimately about God. Moreover, marriage is most amazing not because it brings people joy, or allows for a nurturing environment for children, or because it stabilizes society (even though it does all

those things). Marriage is awesome because God designed it to display his glory.

The focus of a thriving marriage is the glory of God.

Marriage is Street-Level Theology

Okay, so we’ve started to build a clear, accurate, biblical theology of marriage. But if your marriage is anything like mine, you don’t live out your theology in some ivory-tower world of peaceful libraries and deep thoughts. We are street theologians, trying to exercise our faith in a world where couples get angry and doors get slammed.

So with the good news of the gospel in mind—that Christ came into the world to save sinners—I have to ask the dumb question of the week . . . do you still sin? Does your spouse? Let me make it easy for you.

Guys, the radiant woman on whose finger you slipped that wedding ring? . . . *sinner*. Ladies, the man who offered you a vow of perfect faithfulness and lifelong sacrifice? . . . *sinner*. In ceremonies all over the world, every day, without exception, it is sinners who say, “I do.” It is sinners who celebrate their tenth anniversary, their twenty-fifth, and their fiftieth. It is sinners who share a final kiss at a spouse’s deathbed. It is a sinner who wrote this book. And it is sinners who are reading it.

The daily struggle with sin experienced by genuine Christians underscores the fact that while Christ certainly saved us, he does not transform us instantly and completely into non-sinners. That glorious process begins the moment we are converted, and continues throughout our life on earth, but it will only be finished when we leave this fallen world.

That’s why here in the first chapter—and even in the title of this book!—I have tried to emphasize and personalize the reality of sin. God is changing us sinners. That process of change points toward a glorious goal—to become more like

his Son, our Savior. But for us to become more like Christ, we must reckon with the fact that we are sinners; forgiven, yes, but still battling the inward drive to turn away from God to ourselves.

Without such biblical clarity, we have no context for the cross and no ongoing awareness of our need for grace and mercy. Without a robust perspective on sin, the very notion of what it means to know God is profoundly weakened. Cornelius Plantinga noted, “[T]he sober truth is that without full disclosure on sin, the gospel of grace becomes impertinent, unnecessary, and finally uninteresting.”³ Without a “full disclosure on sin,” blind self-confidence will compel us to try to make our marriages work on our own strength. And whatever we try to do in our own strength does not have as its goal the glory of God and does not get its life from the fountain of the gospel.

If your honeymoon is a distant memory and your marriage has lost some of the fire and spark, and if you wonder how you have ended up calling your snookums “Mommy” or “Daddy” (and not just in front of the kids), consider this: What if you abandoned the idea that the problems and weaknesses in your marriage are caused by a lack of information, dedication, or communication? What if you saw your problems as they truly are: caused by a war within your own heart?

If you happen to be reading this book in the glow of a blissful honeymoon, now would be a good time to lean over to your sugarplumhoneykins and whisper softly, “I’m a really big sinner—and I’m yours for life.”

That’s how you do street theology in marriage.

Till sin be bitter, Christ will not be sweet

In this book, I want to convince you that dealing with the sin problem is key to a thriving marriage. When we apply the gospel to our sin, it gives us hope in our personal lives and in

our marriages. Bad news leads to great news. It’s the story of the Bible, and the story of our lives.

The great pastor I mentioned in the preface was Thomas Watson. Remember his words? “Till sin be bitter, Christ will not be sweet.” He means that until we truly understand the problem, we won’t savor the solution. Isn’t that your testimony? Haven’t you seen that the more clearly you comprehend the scope of sin’s awfulness, the more quickly you flee to the Savior, now revealed anew in his glory, holiness, beauty, and power?

Looking first at our own sin as a root cause of the problems in our marriages is not easy, and it certainly doesn’t “come naturally.” The sin that remains in your heart and mine opposes God and his people. It obstructs our joy and our holiness. It eclipses thriving, healthy marriages which are testimonies to God’s goodness and mercy.

But as we begin to build our marriages on the Word of God and on the gospel of Christ’s victory over the power of sin, as we face the sad, painful, undeniable reality of our own remaining sin . . . as we see it for the bitter, hateful thing it is . . . and as we recognize sin’s insidious goals at the core of every relational difficulty we encounter, something wonderful happens. We flee to the gospel as our only remedy.

Then we begin to realize there is new hope for our marriages. A lot of hope. Hope that emerges from the power of the gospel, the very power that raised Christ from the tomb. We get a glimpse of the sweet relationship our marriage can become—a living, thriving union where sins are confessed and forgiven. My friends, when sin becomes bitter, marriage becomes sweet.

Like that old man who interrupted an otherwise lovely wedding, many of us have been saddened by marriages that start sweet but don’t stay that way. Every “I do” comes with a hope that devoted love will endure. But how can we be certain? How do we know that our marriages will not merely

last, but thrive, becoming sweeter and more delightful with the passage of time?

What we're really in pursuit of is a marriage that thrives, that glows ever brighter, that looks and works and feels like what we had hoped for at the beginning—maybe even beyond what we had hoped. To promote enjoyable God-glorifying marriages is why I'm writing this book. I hope that's what you're looking for by reading it.

Where We Go From Here

Twenty-five years ago, in a stairwell at my college, I sang Kimm a song and then asked her to marry me. Anyone who has heard me sing would have bet against her accepting my offer. But she said, "Yes!" Little did I know of the adventure that God had in store.

We now have four kids and a cat. I don't like cats, but I'm wildly in love with Kimm, and because *she* loves cats, I manage to tolerate this one.

Our lives are complicated; "careening" is probably a better word. Our marriage is a rich, sweet chaos. But our journey is sustained, through the grace of God, by a passionate companionship that grows deeper every year. It is a mystery to me, but not to God. It was his idea to exalt his name when sinners say "I do."

Because of the grace of God, and the counsel of the men to whom I am accountable in my local church, and a lot of wonderful teaching, more often than not the buttons in our marriage are lined up reasonably well. It started years ago when we began learning a simple truth about the importance of paying close attention to God's Word. "What comes into our minds when we think about God," said A. W. Tozer, "is the most important thing about us." That's button number one in my book, and it's why I emphasize "seeing God, yourself, and your marriage for what they truly are."⁴

As you come to the end of this first chapter, perhaps you realize you have some buttons out of place. Maybe you are beginning to sense that if your experience of sin is not all that bitter, and your experience of marriage not all that sweet, maybe your theology is not all that it should be.

That’s okay. Stick with me for the rest of this book and I’ll do my best to pass along a lot of wonderful stuff about marriage that I’ve learned from Scripture and from others far wiser than I am. We will see that sin, although deceitful, is at the same time surprisingly predictable. We will probe the glorious mysteries of mercy, grace, and forgiveness, and see how these can become practical, powerful tools in the hands of a good spouse-theologian. We will examine a variety of ways we can help and serve our spouses, from the heat of confrontation to the warmth of sexual intimacy. And we will look ahead to the day when our time on earth grows short, and see what it means to honor God in marriage when our flesh grows weak.

Could it be that you and your beloved are actually sinners? Then this book is for you! And could it be that God already *knows* you are sinners, yet gives you everything you need to build a thriving marriage *anyway*? God is completely, totally, enthusiastically supportive of your every effort to build a strong, God-glorifying marriage. He wants us to delight in marriage. He wants to make it strong, make it stick, and make it sweet.

Come on, let’s find out what it really means to see God, yourself, and your marriage for what they truly are. That’s where it all begins.

Chapter Two

Waking Up With the Worst of Sinners

The News About Who We Really Are

*S*igh . . . I'd done it again. My wife had been running a little behind our intended schedule. Rather than waiting patiently (or maybe actually stepping in to help) I did what I do so well: I pontificated, this time speculating aloud about how many total minutes of our lives she had wasted in delays. My calculations didn't impress her, but the soul-crushing impact of my words was obvious on her face. *Very smooth, Dave, I realized too late, very constructive. A true word in season.*

You'd think a pastor, someone called to think and speak in thoughtful, helpful, biblical ways, would have found something better to say at that moment—or at least something a little less damaging. But despite my arrogant, sinful words, Kimm was

able once again to cover them over with love and patiently help me see what was wrong with them.

While I’m immensely grateful for Kimm’s gracious, forgiving spirit, still the question lingers: *Why aren’t I more loving?* After all, we have been married for more than two decades. I have been in ministry most of that time, I’ve read lots of marriage books, conducted numerous marriage seminars, and I really think Kimm is a gift from God to me. *If I love my wife, why do I find it so easy to treat her like I don’t?*

It happens with the kids also. The other day, one was acting in a way that required what my grandmother used to call “a speakin’ to.” Once again the Great Pontificator opened his trap. Rather than taking this opportunity to care for my child graciously, my words were harsh and critical. Different issue, different person, same problem: I treated someone I love as if I had no love at all.

Guys, you know the kind of thing I’m talking about. You’ve planned a romantic evening, complete with her favorite restaurant. But then she says something, or you say something, or the waiter says something, and in the space of about two minutes a whole different kind of memory is created. (“Honey, remember the night we had that really expensive conflict?”)

Or how about this? Rather than watching the football game on your day off, you decide to do the repair project she’s been asking you to finish. Five frustrating hours later you put the tools away, and look to your wife for some expression of appreciation for your personal sacrifice. She glances at your work and says, “I wish you would have asked me before you did it that way.” Cue the pyrotechnics.

Ladies, he tells you he’ll be home by 9:00 p.m. and walks in at 10:45. “Sorry, hon, the meeting ran over.” No notification, no phone call, no *real* apology, and no consideration for your worry. A moment earlier you’d been imagining how you were going to manage supporting your family as a widow. Now, with visions of him sleeping in the car for a week, you’re not

quite sure what's about to come out of your mouth, but it probably won't be good.

Paul's Confession and Ours

It's the underside of marriage, the reality of living with someone day in and day out in a fallen world. But what does it reveal? What does it indicate when I see my rottenness? Has the enemy singled me out for exclusive attention? Maybe I'm a threat to his kingdom, like Frodo to the powers of Mordor or Luke Skywalker to the Evil Empire. That doesn't excuse the fact that I know what's right, yet often choose to do something else instead.

Well, guess what? If sin is a persistent problem for us, we're in pretty good company. As bad as we can be, the Apostle Paul seems to think he's even worse. Maybe we can learn something from him.

Paul wrote to Timothy, "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost" (1 Timothy 1:15). Pretty stark, isn't it? Not a lot of wiggle room there. Paul leads off by calling this a "saying [that] is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance." That's the ancient equivalent of putting the little exclamation mark on an email you send—this is of high priority!

His "saying" has two parts. "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners . . ." This catapults us to the heart of the glorious gospel, and prepares us for part two: ". . . of whom I am the foremost." Now what are we supposed to do with that? How can the Apostle to the Gentiles—the original theologian of the Christian faith—honestly say this? To whom is he comparing himself? And what standard is he applying?

These are important questions. We dare not dismiss Paul's statement as a passing exaggeration or an empty exercise in

false humility. This is the Word of God, and a profound point is being made here.

First, it's clear that Paul is *not* trying to objectively compare himself to every other human being, because most of them he had never met! This tells us that his focus is not primarily outward. It's inward. He's also not suggesting that his moral character is bankrupt or his spiritual maturity is zero. He is simply talking about what goes on in his own heart.

He is saying, in effect, “Look, I know my sin. And what I've seen in my own heart is darker and more awful; it's more proud, selfish, and self-exalting; and it's more consistently and regularly in rebellion against God than anything I have glimpsed in the heart of anyone else. As far as I can see, the biggest sinner I know is me.”

Paul was a student of his heart. He paid attention to the desires and impulses that churned within. And I don't think it's a stretch to say that he knew he was capable—given the right circumstances—of the worst of sins and the vilest of motives. Paul was a realist. He wanted to see God and himself *truly*. No hiding behind a facade of pleasantness or religiosity for him. As Henry Scougal comments on this verse, “None can think more meanly of [Paul] than he doth of himself.”¹

Now let's look at the very next verse. “But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life” (1 Timothy 1:16).

With the passing of each day, two things grew larger for Paul: his sinfulness in light of the holiness of God, and God's mercy in the face of his sin. Knowing both God and himself accurately was not at all discouraging or depressing. Rather, it deepened his gratitude for the vastness of God's mercy in redeeming him, and the patience of Christ in continuing to love and identify with him in his daily struggle against sin.

Paul's confession to Timothy above presents us with a stunning example of moral honesty and theological maturity: Paul's

acute, even painful awareness of his own sinfulness caused him to magnify the glory of the Savior!

The Biblical Reality of Joyful Wretches

This profound awareness of innate sinfulness is not some obscure theological point or an example of religious fervor gone to seed. A great awareness of one's sinfulness often stands side by side with great joy and confidence in God. The same Paul who could call himself the foremost of sinners could exult two verses later, "To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen" (1 Timothy 1:17).

It is a theme that also resonates through the Psalms. In Psalm 40 we see rejoicing in the Lord and lamentation over sin side by side.

As for you, O Lord, you will not restrain
your mercy from me;
your steadfast love and your faithfulness will
ever preserve me!
For evils have encompassed me
beyond number;
my iniquities have overtaken me,
and I cannot see;
they are more than the hairs of my head;
my heart fails me.

What's going on here? Is this some kind of bipolar spirituality at work? By no means! It is the joy of salvation breaking through, despite life in a fallen world and a heart still fighting against sin. It is reality as seen through biblical truth.

This reality is very different from what we're usually up to our necks in—that slick, shiny, false reality of an affluent, comfort-driven society obsessed with self-esteem. Instead,

this reality sends us to the Savior, who brings God’s holiness and mercy together in the cross. The great nineteenth century preacher, Charles Spurgeon, was another man who saw this reality in all its Christ-centered glory.

Too many think lightly of sin, and therefore think lightly of the Savior. He who has stood before his God, convicted and condemned, with the rope about his neck, is the man to weep for joy when he is pardoned, to hate the evil which has been forgiven him, and to live to the honour of the Redeemer by whose blood he has been cleansed.²

Remember what Jesus said of the woman caught in adultery? “Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little” (Luke 7:47). If like Paul (and David and Spurgeon . . .) I recognize the enormity of my sin, seeing myself as the worst of sinners, then I understand I have been forgiven *much*. That’s when biblical reality begins to make sense. I start to see God as he truly is. His vastness becomes bigger than my problems. His goodness comes to me even though I’m not good. And his wisdom and power are visible in the perfect ways he works to transform me from the inside out.

So this sin—my sin and yours—is supremely ugly. It is vile. It is wicked. But at the same time it is the backdrop to a larger drama. We may be works in progress who are painfully prone to sin, yet we can be joyful works, for—thanks be to God—we have been redeemed by grace through the death and resurrection of Christ. Our Savior has come to rescue us from the penalty of sin and grant us an abundant life by his Spirit.

As two people in marriage embrace this view of reality, and live in accordance with it, their lives and marriage begin to look more and more like the picture God wants to display to a lost world. Until sin be bitter, marriage may not be sweet.

Rob, Sally, and the Rest of Us

Rob and Sally have been Christians for a long time. Like many couples, they have each adopted certain assumptions about how the other should behave, and they each feel they have certain needs that they think the other should meet. And although they attend church and live conscientious Christian lives, Rob and Sally are experiencing serious marital conflict. What they don't see is that their fights are grounded in wrong views of reality, so meaningful solutions always seem to escape them.

Here are just a couple of examples. Rob says he needs respect, but all he seems to get are Sally's critical comments each evening when he comes home from work. Sally says she needs Rob to reach out to her and provide a greater sense of security in their marriage, but all she seems to get is Rob's passivity day after day. There is really nothing wrong with these particular desires. The problems emerge when, several times a week, they rehearse each other's failures, reiterate their demands for change, and repeat (with slight variations) the kind of hurtful remarks they've been tossing back and forth for months. Curiously—and tragically—Rob and Sally both feel vindicated by many of the marriage books they've read, books which feed their sense of justice denied and seem to legitimize the needs they feel so deeply.

As a friend witnessing the gradual erosion of Rob and Sally's marriage, how would you try to help? Sure, they need a listening ear that tries to understand them both. But their greatest need is in their theology. They must recognize that some of the expectations they hold for one another—and the underlying perspectives from which these expectations emerge—are unbiblical. Certainly their accusations, harsh words, and selfishly demanding attitudes are riddled with sin. As a couple, they need help aligning themselves with Scripture—with God's view of reality.

Rob and Sally’s root problem is revealed in the fact that Paul’s saying in 1 Timothy 1:15 is not yet “trustworthy” to them. The sincere recognition and honest ownership of their own individual sinfulness does not have “full acceptance.” Like many married believers, Rob and Sally have melted down Paul’s trustworthy saying and recast it into an unbiblical mold: “Christ Jesus came into the world to . . . meet my needs, *of which I have the most!*”

In short, Rob and Sally lack understanding of how the gospel really works; they are far from alone. John MacArthur laments the widespread loss of biblical reality among believers:

Christians are rapidly losing sight of sin as the root of all human woes. And many Christians are explicitly denying that their own sin can be the cause of their personal anguish. More and more are attempting to explain the human dilemma in wholly unbiblical terms: temperament, addiction, dysfunctional families, the child within, codependency, and a host of other irresponsible escape mechanisms promoted by secular psychology.

The potential impact of such a drift is frightening. Remove the reality of sin, and you take away the possibility of repentance. Abolish the doctrine of human depravity and you void the divine plan of salvation. Erase the notion of personal guilt and you eliminate the need for a Savior.³

This ongoing need for the Savior is exactly what professing Christians must hang on to. The cross makes a stunning statement about husbands and wives: we are sinners and our only hope is grace. Without a clear awareness of sin, we will evaluate our conflicts outside of the biblical story—the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross—thus eliminating any basis for true understanding, true reconciliation, or true change. Without the gospel of our crucified and risen Savior our marriages slide toward the superficial. We begin to make limp justifications

for our sinful behavior, and our marriage conflicts end, at best, in uneasy, partial, negotiated settlements.

But once I find 1 Timothy 1:15–16 trustworthy—once I can embrace it with full acceptance—once I know that I am indeed the worst of sinners, then my spouse is no longer my biggest problem: *I am*. And when I find myself walking in the shoes of the worst of sinners, I will make every effort to grant my spouse the same lavish grace that God has granted me.

The Worst Thing About Sin

By this time you may be saying to yourself, *This guy thinks about sin way too much! The worst of sinners? Man, take a chill pill and unplug the moral meter. What's the big deal?*

The big deal is that my sin is not first against me or my marriage. All sin is first against God. And that changes everything.

Look at it this way. My status as “husband” says something important about me: It says I have a wife. In identifying me it points to the reality of another—my wife. It also indicates who I am *not*, for if I am a husband, I’m obviously not single.

Now recall that the Bible has a specific way of describing human beings—as sinners (Psalm 51:5, Romans 3:23; 5:12). We are all in that category together. It’s hardly an exclusive club. To accept the designation of “sinner” is to acknowledge who I am *in relation to God*. It also says who I am not: I am not a neutral actor. By my very nature (which is sinful), I am an offense to God’s very nature (which is perfectly holy).

So the term “sinner,” when used in Scripture, clearly implies there is one (*at least* one) who is sinned against. When I speak a critical, unkind word to Kimm in front of our children, my sin is to some degree against the children. Obviously, it is to a much stronger degree against Kimm. What I need to see, however, is that this sin is most strongly, and therefore primarily, against God! And *that* is something it has in common

with every other sin that has ever been or ever will be committed. Every sin, however small or great its apparent impact on people, violates the purity of the perfectly just and holy God. Sin is always aimed first and foremost at God (Deuteronomy 9:16, 1 Samuel 15:24, Psalm 51:4). Jerry Bridges brings it smack into the family room when he writes,

Sin is wrong, not because of what it does to me, or my spouse, or child, or neighbor, but because it is an act of rebellion against the infinitely holy and majestic God.⁴

Several years ago I became aware of a subtle, destructive habit. Whenever I sensed I had sinned against Kimm I would go to her, confess, and seek to resolve the situation. Looks pretty good when I put it that way, doesn't it? But I came to realize that my goal was far from noble. I wanted a quick and efficient restoration of our relationship so I could stop feeling bad and get on with “more important things.” In other words, the confession was basically a tool I was employing for my own sake. No wonder, then, that I was often left with a shallow, haunting feeling that I now believe was the kind prompting of the Holy Spirit.

After a time of prayer, I recognized that God had been surprisingly forgotten in my words of apology to Kimm. I saw that I had been almost completely unconcerned with the fact that my sin had been first against God, and that I stood guilty before his infinite holiness. I had regarded my sins as errors, or at worst, as “little sins” that required little consideration of my heart. My real goal was simply a kind of marital damage control, not an honest accounting before my Heavenly Father. But by God's grace I began to see, as J. I. Packer says so well, “There can be no small sins against a great God.”⁵

As biblical reality started to sink in, amazing things happened. I began to experience true sorrow for my “little sins.” My awareness of God and his mercy grew. In my marriage I began to notice the very real but less obvious sins I was regularly committing

against Kimm—sins we had become “comfortable with” but they, nevertheless, were slowly eroding our relationship. I began to recognize situations where I might be tempted to sin against her, and I started to learn how to battle those temptations. My confessions, as well as our conversations about the problems in our marriage, began to have a rich and satisfying depth. These conversations were not always easy, but definitely helpful to our relationship. I had come to see God, myself, and my marriage a little more clearly.

Worst of Sinners—Best of Worlds!

So here is my conclusion: I am a better husband and father, and a happier man, when I recognize myself as the worst of sinners. That status just seems more obvious to me with the passing of each week. But then again, you’re the worst of sinners too. So is your spouse. At least it’s not lonely here at the bottom.

Do you fear that you’ll be too hard on yourself? If so, just remember that to Paul, his “worst of sinners” view was a sign of clear-eyed self-assessment and a robust awareness of the holiness of God. Remember also who we are in Christ *despite* our sin: we are treasured children of the Father, who loved us enough to send his only Son to suffer the punishment for our sins, even those sins we have yet to commit. And remember that God is at work in you, conforming you into a genuine, from the inside out, example of Christ. A sober assessment of our sinful condition doesn’t hinder that work, it celebrates it!

The question that used to boggle my mind, “*If I love my wife, why do I find it so easy to treat her like I don’t?*” has a universal answer. We are all the worst of sinners, so anything we do that *isn’t* sin is simply the grace of God at work. In the next chapter we’ll discuss how to employ that grace to fight the battle that comes from being both the worst of sinners and a child of God. But we shouldn’t end this chapter without

appreciating the hidden gift that comes as we see ourselves as the worst of sinners.

It is humility—a pride-crushing, vision-clearing humility. “There are two things that are suited to humble the soul of men,” John Owen wrote, “a due consideration of God, and then of ourselves. Of God, in his greatness, glory, holiness, power, majesty, and authority; of ourselves, in our mean, abject, and sinful condition.”⁶

The road of humility is open to all husbands and wives who are willing to give “a due consideration” to who they truly are, in and of themselves, before a holy God. I want to walk that road. I know you do too, or you wouldn’t be reading this book. In these first two chapters you’ve confronted some uncomfortable truths. I hope you are sensing the promise that God holds out to those who acknowledge their sinfulness with humility. There’s nothing quite like being a forgiven sinner, grateful to the living God for life, breath, salvation, and every other provision. It’s really the only perspective from which you can begin to see God, yourself, and your marriage in true reality.

But hold on. In the next chapter we’ll be taking a closer look at these things; this journey is about to get even more exciting.