

**NO
MERE
MORTALS**

*Marriage for People
Who Will Live Forever*

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INTRODUCTION

So you are married. Congratulations. Cheers! Well done.

Maybe you just got married and you're wanting to make sure the cement dries and the foundation is plumb. Or, maybe you've been married for many years now and you're looking for some retooling, a refresher, a little brush-up on what this whole marriage thing is. Or maybe your marriage is in trouble and you're looking for help. Or maybe you aren't quite married yet—you're just engaged and looking to start off your new life together on the right path. No matter which of these you are, this book begins with our only hope for a Christian marriage: Jesus Christ. Then it walks through some of

the most important principles for building or rebuilding a strong foundation and walking together with your spouse in the Lord.

If you aren't even engaged yet, feel free to read this book, but just be prepared for the fact that I'm not covering a whole bunch of stuff about dating and courtship and how to know if he's the one or she's the one and how to maneuver through the various relationship minefields. This book assumes that you put a ring on it—or at the very least that you've made up your mind and agreed to take the plunge.

True confessions: the basic shape of this book has grown out of many years of premarital counseling. The material here has been significantly expanded for the entire marriage gambit, but if my language occasionally slips into premarital counseling mode, now you know why. I also need to note that I have had the great honor of ministering in close proximity to Pastor Douglas Wilson for many years, marinating in his books and sermons and Bible studies. I have tried to note when I'm sure I'm repeating something he has said, but anyone who is familiar with his work will recognize his pervasive influence in what follows. And if you haven't read his family books, I cannot recommend them to you strongly enough, especially *Reforming Marriage* and *Federal Husband*.

So whether you have been married for a while, or just got married, or even just got engaged, I hope what follows is a helpful summary of some of the most basic biblical principles for Christian marriage, applied to our modern day. We will begin this book with a couple

of topical chapters, and then work through a number of verses from Ephesians 5 and 1 Peter 3 before closing with a few more topical chapters. That's the basic structure, but before we get down to brass tacks, let me sketch you something of a biblical picture of marriage.

In recent decades, we have essentially reduced marriage to a permanent roommate situation with sexual benefits. Our assumptions about the purpose and mission of the family make the biblical commands seem obtuse or oppressive. As my friend Pastor Chris Wiley points out, when it comes to discussing the leadership of the man and the submission of the woman, it can sound like the Bible is insisting that the man controls the TV remote—since for many people, what they're going to watch seems like the biggest decision that needs to be made in the home.

But the biblical picture of the family is something far more glorious, far more dangerous—something more like a nuclear reactor. If moderns balk at the Old Testament's death penalty for adultery (Lev. 20:10) or the death penalty for a rebellious son (Deut. 21:18-21), this is not because we are highly evolved and enlightened moderns, but rather because we have such a low view of marriage and family. The Bible has such severe penalties for the destruction of a home because of the resulting destructive fallout. The Bible says that God hates divorce because of how it covers one's garment with violence (Mal. 2:16), and we nod naively, still thinking that the Old Testament penalties seem sort of harsh and barbaric. Barbaric? For the last fifty years, the sexual revolution has championed everything from pornography to homosexuality to even the

beginnings of full-blown pederasty, and the price for that perversion party has been the blood of over sixty million babies and counting. And we think God was kind of harsh and barbaric? No, we are the harsh and barbaric ones.

Even the most ardent defender of Second Amendment rights has to have had second thoughts on the question of whether every private citizen ought to have access to nukes. I mean, the usual claim is that the citizenry ought to have the means to resist tyrannical governments. And, well, if the government has nukes, shouldn't the citizens? But those stakes are extremely high, and an accident would have far-reaching consequences. And suddenly, the most dyed-in-the-wool libertarian wonders if there ought to be at least a little barbed wire around that catastrophe waiting to happen. Bring this back to the family: God has placed His image in man, and every human being bears the imprint of the eternal, infinite, sovereign God. There is nothing in all the world quite so powerful as people. And therefore, the place where people are *made* is basically a nuclear reactor, and the stakes are much higher than we realize. We are making people who will live forever, people with souls that will grow into the greatest horrors or most glorious beings.¹ And those people will go on to build and invent and create and love and fight and dance and make more people. We are in the process of setting off reactions that will do great good or great harm.

The good news of the gospel is that the All-Powerful, All-Sufficient God has come into this world in the person of His Son in order to set off another nuclear reaction, a

1. See C.S. Lewis's *The Weight of Glory* (New York: Macmillan: 1980), 18-19.

CHAPTER 1

MARRY IN THE LORD

WHAT is your testimony?

Tell the story of how you came to know Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. If you grew up in a Christian family or in the Church, tell that story. Were there particular moments in your life growing up where you have experienced God's grace in your life? Where you came to understand more fully what it meant to be a child of God? Were there particular seasons of growth or repentance or doubt or rebellion? If you grew up outside the faith, tell how the Lord drew you to Himself.

Go ahead, I'll wait. Take turns. Tell your story out loud.

After sharing your testimonies, take turns answering one more question: If someone asked you *why* you are a Christian, what would you say? How would you

summarize the good news of Jesus in one or two sentences? What does it mean that you are a follower of Jesus?

Read 1 Corinthians 15:1–10. Notice the final couple of verses where Paul summarizes his testimony: “Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me” (1 Cor. 15:8–10, *ESV*).

Whether you have known Jesus all of your life or only more recently experienced the grace of God, His grace is never in vain. It’s never impotent or weak or futile. His grace is powerful. Sometimes His grace can seem more amazing to us—like when God saves someone like Paul on his way to Damascus breathing threats against the followers of Jesus, absolutely convinced that they are enemies of God, and then BAM! God knocks them down and radically changes them. Maybe you or someone you know was in high-handed rebellion, addicted to drugs or alcohol, sexually promiscuous, suicidal, or just full of plain old vanilla devil-pride, and God saved them. Those are glorious stories, glorious testimonies of God’s grace.

But there are no boring stories of grace. When God grips us as young children and preserves us from some of the most ugly manifestations of sin in the world, that too is God’s amazing grace. With true and humble gratitude may we say we have a “boring testimony”—in the sense that we’ve never gone through a period of prolonged rebellion,

joined a biker gang, robbed a bank, or partied like pagans. Because of our parents' faithfulness and God's grace, our testimony can seem gloriously boring. And thank God for those testimonies.

But properly speaking, God's grace is never actually boring, never truly mundane, never weak. It's always high octane. This is because nobody deserves God's grace, and while God's grace is truly, wonderfully free, salvation is not free. Your salvation, and my salvation, was terribly expensive. Christ purchased us with His precious blood. "You are not your own, for you were bought with a price" (1 Cor. 6:19–20, *ESV*). No one comes to God with a minor debt or with a little sin problem. Everyone is dead in Adam, each a lifeless corpse, enslaved to sin and death and Satan—whether you were three years old or thirteen years old or thirty years old. Every one of us owed a debt we could never pay. Every one of us had a *just* death sentence hanging over our heads. And every one of us was redeemed by the precious blood of Jesus: "you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot" (1 Pet. 1:18–19, *ESV*).

No testimony should be boring because every testimony is about the most precious, most valuable thing in all the world: our Jesus, our Savior, our Redeemer, and His blood that washes us clean and grants us the gift of everlasting life.

So let me challenge you: if you aren't used to telling your testimony, or if you gave a glib, two-sentence

testimony (e.g., “My parents were Christians, and I grew up in the Church and that’s about it”), stop here and try again. Think back on your life. Where have you experienced God’s grace? Have you witnessed answered prayer? Have you seen Him at work in reconciling broken relationships? Have you known His forgiveness? You *should* be able to tell stories of these things. And if you really can’t talk about God’s grace in your life, let me challenge you to seriously consider whether you really *are* a Christian.

It’s not enough to have Christian parents. It’s not enough to have been baptized. It’s not enough to grow up in the Church. Do you know Christ? Do you know that the Holy Spirit dwells in you? One can be a Christian outwardly, formally, but not a true Christian inwardly (cf. Rom. 2:28–29). The Jews *did* have Abraham as their covenantal father, and they had the genealogical paperwork to prove it. But they actually had the devil as their real father (Jn. 8:44). Paul writes to the Corinthians, people he addresses as “sanctified in Christ Jesus,” and says, “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!” (2 Cor. 13:5, ESV).

A true Christian has not only been baptized on the outside and professed faith outwardly, but a true Christian has also had his heart washed clean by the blood of Christ and has been born again by the renewal of the Holy Spirit (Heb. 10:22, Tit. 3:5). This doesn’t mean that you need to have seen a miraculous vision or spoken in

tongues or had some kind dramatic emotional experience. But there should be fruit in your life—the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23, ESV). Do you see evidence of the Spirit’s work in your life—convicting you of sin, conforming you to the image of Christ, causing you to grow in love for God and your neighbor more and more as the months and years go by?

This is actually an enormously important point to make at the beginning of a book about marriage, because the Bible is incredibly clear that Christians are only to marry other Christians, true believers in Christ. “You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly” (Deut. 7:3–4, ESV). And Paul makes a similar point in the New Covenant: “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?” (2 Cor. 6:14, ESV). And likewise, while a Christian should seek to preserve a marriage that already exists with a non-believer, if the non-believer departs, the Christian is not under bondage. In this case, or when a spouse dies, a Christian may remarry, but “only in the Lord” (1 Cor. 7:39).

In the early Church, one of the slanders the pagans spread about the Christians was that they practiced incest—intermarrying between brothers and sisters. Of course this was not true at all, but the slander grew out

of the Christian commitment to only marrying other Christians. Going all the way back to the Song of Songs, even Solomon referred to his spouse as his “sister” (Song 4:9–12, 5:1). If you would not marry an unbeliever, why would you date or court an unbeliever? If you would not marry an unbeliever, why would you flirt with an unbeliever? Why would you keep up an overly friendly familiarity with an unbeliever if he or she is not even an option? Christians should be known for their commitment to marry only in the Lord, only in the family of God. I know I said this was a book for married people, not a book for people courting or dating, but I couldn’t help myself. Some things just need saying.

A little further on this track before we move on ... maybe you’re thinking this has all gotten pretty deep and introspective. “Shouldn’t we just take a compatibility test or something?” Well, actually, that is sort of what we’re doing. The very first item on the list for compatibility for Christians is salvation in Christ. Non-Christians certainly can get married, and they really are married, since marriage is not just a thing for Christians. It’s a creational institution for the good of all humans and human society. But Christians are commanded to marry “in the Lord” because when a man or woman comes to know Jesus, so much of who they are is affected, changed, and transformed. Our priorities are completely different. What motivates us is different. We have a new set of desires and goals, and in Jesus, we have been given a very specific *mission*. There are so many good things that are different about a man and a woman: different family backgrounds,

different customs, different cultures, different tastes, interests, hobbies, and preferences, not to mention the wonderful sexual differences between a man and a woman. To try to fit a man and a woman together who have a different reason for living, a different fundamental motivation for what they do—this is a recipe for disaster, disappointment, and heartbreak. And there is no shortage of marital train wrecks documenting this sad reality.

Yes, you might have collected stamps or loved skiing or been a pretty good singer before you were a Christian, but even those skills or gifts or hobbies are reoriented to Christ when you become a Christian. Before, they may have been distractions, idols, covers for insecurity, but in Jesus they become gifts to enjoy, gifts to share, and somehow, we pray, they become part of our sacrifice of praise, spiritual acts of worship to our Creator and Savior. And if this is true for hobbies and pastimes, how much more so does it affect our vocational, educational, and familial aspirations and dreams? How do you decide which job to take? How do you organize your finances? Do you value children? Are you committed to fruitfulness in the marriage bed? Do you share a biblical understanding of the role of husband and wife? Do you share standards of fidelity and purity? Is it ever acceptable to view pornography? How will you discipline your children? How will you educate them? Will your boys and girls be raised differently according to their biological sex? Why? Does it matter?

In order to begin answering these questions, you must have a *standard*, a rule for life. This is why it is of the

CHAPTER 2

RIGHTLY ORDERED LOVE LIFE

WE began with your testimony and your life in Christ because this is the most significant thing about you. It goes all the way to your core. It is more significant than the family you were born into. It is more significant than your past sins and mistakes (thank God!). And it orients your goals, priorities, standards, and mission for the future.

In other words, even though marriage certainly is one of the most significant moments and decisions of your life (and it really is!), being found in Christ, being born again, belonging to Him is *more* important, *more* significant.

On your wedding day, tons about you changes. It's true. A woman takes her husband's name. A man

becomes responsible before God for his wife. You have to learn to live together. What you have taken for granted about many things in life, like how to fold socks or how to organize the pantry or when to get up in the morning or how to prioritize your budget—some or all of that changed. The day before your wedding, you were a single man or a single woman, and the day after your wedding, you were a husband or a wife. You had become one flesh. You had formed a new family. You changed, and many things in your life changed. Like kids for example. They will change (or already have changed) you even more.

But here's the thing: despite the massive, monumental changes that occurred (or will occur) after your wedding, there is something even more massive, even more fundamental that will *never* change. On the day *before* your wedding, you were a son or daughter of the King, beloved of God, purchased by the blood of Jesus, secure in His firm grasp forever. And the day *after* your wedding, you were still that blood-bought child of God, saved for eternity. That identity can never change, shift, or be affected in the slightest.

And this is so important. You need to understand this deep in your bones, because many marital problems arise from misunderstanding this. People say that their wife or husband “completes” them. They say they are lost without their spouse. They say there was a hole in their heart without them. And there is a sense in which that is true. I get that. Love is like that. And I thank God for it. But there is another sense in which those sentiments are actually all wrong. There's a sense in which those sentiments

can be pure idolatry. In other words, if you are placing all your hopes on marriage, if you think that being Mr. Husband or Mrs. Wife or finding Mr. or Mrs. “Right” is going to “complete” you and fulfill all your deepest longings and desires, I’ve got news for you.

I don’t mean to be the pessimist or the anti-romantic. I love my wife, and I can’t imagine life without her. But knowing Jesus Christ means that my identity is rooted first and foremost in *Him*. In fact, Jesus says that we cannot follow Him rightly unless we are willing to give up our dearest loves: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple” (Lk. 14:26–27, *ESV*).

Another way to say this is that you will be the very best husband you can be or the very best wife you can be when you love Jesus *more* than your spouse. If you love your spouse second-best, you love him or her in the best possible way.

But if you get this wrong, if you put your husband or your wife or even your hopes in being a husband or wife or father or mother above your love for Christ, you are asking of that human relationship what it is incapable of giving. This is what idols always are. They are finite, created things that we are trying to trick infinite grace out of. We are trying to find in them what God offers to us in Himself. We are immortals, made for infinite joy and glory. And the only place we can find that is in the infinite God Himself.

CHAPTER 3

TAKING OUT THE GARBAGE

TO center us once again: We began with our identities in Christ because it is the most important thing. It defines us. It makes us who we are and everything else follows from that. What we will be forever is what we are growing into today.

We start with our identities in Christ because it immediately teaches us how to relate to others, and, in this instance, how to relate to our spouse. Sin messes with everything, but one of the most obvious places is in relationships. Sin destroys. Sin disfigures. Sin tears things apart. Sin complicates. Sin distorts. We didn't even need to note that here—if you're reading this book, you already know it. In fact, when you told your testimony, you might have talked about some of the areas where sin

has broken things in your life and in your family. Apart from Christ, marriage really seems like the dumbest thing in the world. Why in the world is it a good idea for a sinful, selfish man and a sinful, selfish woman to make promises to love one another with Christian love in front of a bunch of their family and friends? Why would any sane people do this?

In fact, in some ways, our modern cultural aversion to marriage actually has some sanity mixed in with all the confusions. In so far as our culture has turned away from Jesus and the way He made the world, there may be at least a little bit of sanity in the conclusion that marriage is for the birds. Why do that to yourself? Why shoot yourself in the foot? Sinners break stuff. Sinners ruin things. Why bother with all that expensive stuff when chances are good we're going to blow it all up? Unfortunately for our culture, though, as it turns out, marriage is actually quite a bit like gravity. It's woven into the fabric of creation. So even unbelieving pagans are better off embracing marriage and family than not.

But apart from the redeeming grace of God, the unbelieving reluctance surrounding marriage has a point. But what if God really changes sinners? What if, by the grace of God, a man can slowly begin to learn how to love a woman like Christ loves the Church and gave Himself for her? What if, by the grace of God, a woman really can begin to learn how to respect a man, to submit to him as the Church does to Christ? And what if there's blessing for those people and their descendants, by the grace of God, to a thousand generations? What if it's not crazy?

Well, it's not. It's not crazy at all. Okay, well it *is* crazy and it *isn't* crazy all at the same time.

But here's the point: in Christ you have been loved with an everlasting love, and you have been forgiven by the blood of Christ. In Christ, you have been given the resources you need to love others *into eternity*, not least of which includes the man you've agreed to let sleep next to you for the rest of your life. In Christ, you have been given the resources you need to forgive others *into eternity*, not least of which includes the woman you've asked to sleep next to you for the rest of your life.

In Luke 7, a sinful woman shows up and begins anointing the feet of Jesus with her tears and precious oil while He's at dinner with a Pharisee. The Pharisee is fairly sure that this proves that Jesus is not a prophet, but Jesus, knowing the Pharisee's thoughts, replies that this woman has shown Him real love. "Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little" (Lk. 7:47, NKJV).

In other words, getting married is crazy if all you have to draw on is good intentions and high hopes. Good luck with that. But if you have met Jesus, you have come into an inheritance that is mind-blowing. If there's forgiveness there *for you* for the rest of your life, and if there's love there for you into eternity, then there's forgiveness for her, there's love for him. In your own strength, you do not have what it takes to love a woman the way God intends for you to love her. You do not have what it takes to forgive him the way he will need to be forgiven. But in Christ, you have been forgiven much, and therefore in

CHAPTER 4

COVENANT ASYMMETRY

HAVING established that there is a wonderful and glorious dignity found in being created in the image of God, and, furthermore, a wonderful and glorious equality found in our inheritance in the gospel—that we are immortals who will grow into Christ-like glory together for all of eternity, we turn to the differences between men and women, male and female, and in particular, the different roles God gives to a husband and wife. But as we do so, do not lose sight of the main point: these differences are still aimed at that eternal glory; they are not merely decorations for that immortality, they are actually essential components for growing into that glory.

So, to begin with, I would like to break several laws in various states and countries by stating simply: men and women are different.

G.K. Chesterton says in his poem *Comparisons* that people are the kind of fools that, as soon as someone starts describing the differing glories of the sun and the moon, a minute later will start claiming that one is better than the other. But difference does not imply lesser value. This is like claiming that hammers are better than tea cups, or earrings are better than screwdrivers. The fact that things are different is a gift and an opportunity, and only a fool would think that one thing is best for everything. Everything depends on what it is that you are trying to do. Men and women are different kinds of people that are good at many things in common and also have distinguishing gifts and abilities. Women, for example, are the kinds of human beings that can make other human beings *inside of themselves*. And men are the kinds of human beings that think it is fun to launch other men into outer space. And obviously, one of those is *way* cooler.

Heh, that's a joke, people.

So the Bible teaches that there is a wonderful and foundational equality that men and women share in the image of God and redemption, and at the same time, there is an asymmetry or inequality to their respective glories. And this is wonderful. God made both men and women in His image, but that image of God is not manifested in the exact same ways in male and female—the image of God is not revealed in the exact same *shape*. And this is part of what God created and saw and declared *very*

good (Gen. 1:31). And therefore, we should agree with God. It's not just kind of good, it's very good.

“But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God ... he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man” (1 Cor. 11:3, 7). Paul goes on to explain that both men and women need each other and are not independent of one another, but nevertheless this natural order and the respective, mutually-dependent glories are displayed even in how nature teaches men and women to wear their hair differently (1 Cor. 11:14–15). Likewise, this creational asymmetry has implications for the Church. Paul writes, “But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression” (1 Tim. 2:12–14). In these places and elsewhere, Scripture makes it clear that there are natural and God-ordained differences between men and women.

We will unpack this asymmetry more as we go along, but needless to say, we live in a world that is terribly confused about what it means to be a man or a woman. This is driven by a fundamental hatred of the One whose image they bear, but it is impossible for the hatred of the Maker to be disconnected from all that He has made. And it turns out that hierarchy, asymmetry, difference, and inequality are wound through the entire created order. Not only is God the head of Christ and man the head of woman, so too this same order and hierarchy can be