



# marriage matters manual

STUDY GUIDE WITH LEADER'S NOTES

WINSTON T. SMITH

MARRIAGE MATTERS  
MANUAL

*Extraordinary Change  
through Ordinary Moments*

Winston T. Smith

Curriculum Development: Michael Breece

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Study Guide with Leader's Notes

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*Marriage Matters Manual:  
Extraordinary Change through Ordinary Moments  
Study Guide with Leader's Notes*

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## *Acknowledgments*

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# *Introduction*

One of the important principles of *Marriage Matters* is that it is important to learn by doing. Of course, good information is indispensable to learning and *Marriage Matters* provides many important truths and principles that will help your marriage change through ordinary moments. But information alone isn't enough. If your marriage is going to grow you've actually got to put those truths and principles into practice. You might think of it like learning to drive. A book can tell you how to turn the ignition, put the car in gear, and explain the rules of the road, but you won't really know how to drive until you've actually gotten behind the wheel and driven. The *Marriage Matters Manual* is an opportunity for you to put what you learn in the book into practice, so that you grow in your ability to love well rather than just gaining more information about marriage.

This manual is carefully structured to promote an open and constructive exploration of the principles set forth in the book in a variety of ways. Each unit begins with a summary of key ideas contained in the unit and directs you to the relevant chapters of *Marriage Matters* that should be read in preparation for each unit. Once you have read the relevant portions of *Marriage Matters*, you and your spouse can then begin the unit as part of a small group study, marriage enrichment program, or even with the help of a marriage counselor or mentor. Throughout the unit you will be led through an exploration of each key idea by discussing what you've read, completing thought-provoking exercises, examining true-to-life vignettes, and studying relevant Bible passages. Finally, each unit ends by providing you with an exercise that will help you grow

in your individual relationship with God, and a second exercise that will help you build your relationship with your spouse.

However, there is one critical ingredient that you will not find in *Marriage Matters* or in this manual which you must bring to this study: you must be more interested in learning how God would like to change you than in learning how to change your spouse. That can be hard to do, but if you're willing to prayerfully make that commitment, you can be certain that positive things will follow.

Here are some ways you can keep that commitment throughout the course:

- Focus on applying what you learn about your marriage to yourself. Make it your goal to learn to be a better spouse and allow God to work in your spouse's heart to see the things he or she needs to see.
- If in the course of this study conflicts occur between you and your spouse that can't be resolved, please ask a wise friend, pastor, counselor, or another couple whom you respect to meet with you and help you think through the issue together.
- Don't share your spouse's sins, perceived faults, or failures with the group. Be careful not to share incidents that put your spouse in a bad light or personal things that would be embarrassing to you or your spouse.
- Do share ways that you feel God is asking you to change and ask others to join you in praying for those things.

It is my hope and prayer that through the use of this study you will not only grow closer to your spouse, but to Christ himself, the one whose love our marriages are intended to reflect.

## *Introduction to Marital Change*

KEY PASSAGE: 1 JOHN 4:7–12

### KEY IDEAS:

1. We are prone to handle the ordinary moments of marriage on our own as if God were uninterested in the things that trouble us.
2. God is love, and when you find it hard to love, you need him all the more. A lack of love means you should not just look more closely at your marriage, but at yourself and at God. If you have any hope of having more love in your marriage, it's going to mean having more of God in your marriage.
3. Grace is another way of talking about God's love. It's more than a helping hand—it's God's love given to rescue us though we don't deserve it and have no hope of rescuing ourselves.
4. A relationship with God by his grace will always result in love expressed as grace toward our spouses even when it hurts.
5. Problems loving your spouse are only a symptom of a deeper problem: a lack of love for God and not grasping God's love for you expressed in the free gift of Jesus Christ.



## TO PREPARE FOR THIS SESSION:

In *Marriage Matters* read Chapters 1 and 2 (pages 3–23), Chapter 16 (pages 239–251), and the first few pages in Chapter 17 (pages 253–259).

### Lesson 1

#### OPENING ACTIVITY

**Key Idea:** We are prone to handle the ordinary moments of marriage on our own as if God were uninterested in the things that trouble us.

- *List some ordinary irritations and problems of marriage.*
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- *Discuss what makes these things seem so ordinary.*

#### GOD AND LOVE

**Key Idea:** God is love, and when you find it hard to love, you need him all the more. A lack of love means you should not just look more closely at your marriage, but at yourself and at God. If you have any hope of having more love in your marriage, it's going to mean having more of God in your marriage.

The ordinary irritations and problems in marriage are often love problems—we don't feel loved or we are finding it hard to show

love. The key passage, 1 John 4:7–12, defines love for us, so it is vitally important to the problems we face in our marriages.

Read 1 John 4:7–12 and discuss the questions that follow.

<sup>7</sup>Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup>Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. <sup>9</sup>This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup>This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. <sup>11</sup>Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. <sup>12</sup>No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

1. *What does this passage teach about God?*

2. *How does God show his love to us?*

3. *What does this passage teach about love?*

4. *Why are we to show love to one another?*

5. *What are some ways to apply these truths to marriage?*

## LOVE AND GRACE

**Key Idea:** Grace is another way of talking about God's love. It's more than a helping hand—it is God's love given to rescue us though we don't deserve it and have no hope of rescuing ourselves.

Read through this section and answer the questions below.

All that we have to learn about love in the passage from 1 John can be summed up in one word: grace. All of the ways that God has loved us through Jesus are expressions of grace. Grace basically means unearned or undeserved favor. God doesn't love us because we've earned it. In fact, because of our sin we deserve his rejection and judgment. When we first enter into relationship with God, we must acknowledge our inability to rescue ourselves from the brokenness and rebellion of sin and accept his love as an undeserved gift in Jesus. That's why, as John writes, Jesus came to be an "atoning sacrifice for our sins." He both earned God's favor and suffered our punishment for us. Now God's love is given to us when we place our trust in Jesus. It is an unearned gift.

Even so, Christians often have a narrow understanding of grace. We understand that we are saved by God's grace. But then we live our lives as if it is our duty to earn God's approval by trying our hardest to do what God requires of us, to live good lives, to be "good people." But the Bible says that we need God's unearned power and love all the time. Read the following description of two different views of God's grace:

Two seventeenth-century theologians were debating on the nature of grace. One said that grace is like one parent guiding a toddler across the room to the other parent, who has an apple for the child. The nearby parent watches the youngster; if he almost falls, this parent will hold him for a moment so that he can still cross the room under his own power. But the other theologian had a different view. For him grace comes to us only in the discovery of our total helplessness. In his concept, we are like a caterpillar in a ring of fire. Deliverance can only come from above.\*

If we are toddlers being steadied by a loving parent as needed, then grace is little more than a helping hand, but we are still largely

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\* Rose Marie Miller, *From Fear to Freedom: Living as Sons and Daughters of God* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1994), 4–5.



3. *What causes you to sometimes ignore God and try to do life on your own?*

## GRACE AND MARRIAGE

**Key Idea: A relationship with God by his grace will always result in love expressed as grace toward our spouses even when it hurts.**

Read the following account of one ordinary moment in my marriage.

I could feel my blood pressure rising. With every passing moment I was getting more and more angry. It was 2:30. My son's baseball practice was at 3:00, my daughter had a birthday party at 4:00, and I had to lead a Bible study at 5:00. What's more, my wife was not answering her cell phone. I'd been calling her every few minutes since 1:00, and now it was almost 2:30. She should have been home long ago. She knew what was on the schedule, and she'd assured me she'd be home on time. How was I going to prepare my Bible study with all this taxiing to do? Did she not care that I was juggling this all by myself?

My anger mounted as I pictured her chatting with friends, while her cell phone, set to vibrate, hummed away unnoticed in her handbag. I resigned myself to plan B: all three kids would come to baseball practice, and the girls would play in an empty part of the field, while I sat in the van and worked on the Bible study. There would be



distractions. I would want to watch practice, and the girls would need to be watched. They would get bored and start asking for things. It was not ideal, but it would have to do.

I barked orders at the kids to get ready to go. There were a hundred questions: “Where’s Mommy?” “Why do we have to go to baseball practice?” “Am I going to miss my party?” “Where are my shoes?” “Can we stop at the store and get a snack?” Every question was a frustrating reminder that I shouldn’t have to be dealing with this.

Just then the phone rang, “Win, have you been trying to call me?”

“Yeeeeees,” I replied, injecting as much sarcasm as possible into that one word. “I have to get Gresham to practice and Charlotte to her birthday party, and I’m not prepared for Bible study. Why haven’t you answered your phone?”

“I didn’t hear it ringing in my bag. I’m so sorry. I’ll be home in a few minutes. I just couldn’t get away as soon as I thought I could.”

Instead of waiting for Kim to return and let her deliver our son to practice, I loaded the kids into the car and took them myself. When I returned home, fifteen minutes later, Kim was there wondering why I hadn’t waited for her.

She retreated to a safe distance. I sat alone staring at the kitchen table. I was more than just annoyed; I was fuming. Beneath the anger I also felt embarrassed and ashamed. Part of me felt justified in my anger, while another part of me wondered why I’d gotten so worked up. Irritation would be understandable, but anger?

My response was out of proportion, and I knew it. I soon realized that part of my frustration stemmed from the fact that this feeling was familiar, even ordinary. How often have I been angry with Kim because I felt that she hasn’t stopped to think about me? And how often have I had the same pouty reaction and witnessed the same destructive result? I was tired of reliving this moment, tired of having the same old argument and getting the same old result.







## BUILDING YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH EACH OTHER

**As a couple** read the following passage and discuss the questions that follow.

<sup>16</sup>Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?”

<sup>17</sup>“Why do you ask me about what is good?” Jesus replied. “There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments.”

<sup>18</sup>“Which ones?” the man inquired.

Jesus replied, “Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, <sup>19</sup>honor your father and mother’, and ‘love your neighbor as yourself.”

<sup>20</sup>“All these I have kept,” the young man said. “What do I still lack?”

<sup>21</sup>Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

<sup>22</sup>When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth. (Matthew 19:16–22)

1. *Was the young man wrong to ask Jesus about what is good? What point do you think Jesus was trying to make with his answer?*





5. *What can we deduce about the young man's true interest based on his final response to Jesus' answers?*

### SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT:

We know that God cares about our “spiritual” life—our prayers, church attendance, and Bible reading—but our marriages don't really seem to fall into this category. The command, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” reminds us that every human interaction, every marital interaction, is a spiritual matter. Think about it: your spouse is your most immediate neighbor. The way you treat your spouse, then, reveals how seriously you take God's command and God himself. “Love your neighbor” is a command from God. Your obedience or disobedience is a window into your relationship with him. Problems loving your spouse are only a symptom of the true problem: whether or not you love God.

1. *Take turns describing one or two ordinary events in your marriage and how you handled them.*

