

Six Keys to Protecting and Strengthening Marriages

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Abstract

While almost every Christian marriage begins with great hope and joy, many end in divorce. Other marriages endure but fall significantly short of the biblical ideal of growing personal intimacy. After forty years of counseling, I have identified six issues that are crucial to preserving and strengthening Christian marriages and present them below. The gospel offers hope that couples who have drifted apart can enjoy renewed joy and fulfillment in their marriages to the glory of God.

Keywords

Marriage, reconciliation, affirmation, lies, laziness, adultery, lust, grace, communication, hope

Introduction

There has been a great deal of concern among evangelical Christians about the attacks on the family in our culture. Same-sex marriage has been legalized. Heterosexual marriage is on the decline. Traditional marriage roles are denigrated and abandoned. Perhaps of greater concern, however, is the state of marriage among professing Christians. Cohabitation apart from marriage is accepted and practiced by an increasing percentage of evangelicals.¹

¹ Julian Menasce Horowitz, Nikki Graf, and Gretchen Livingston, “2. Public Views of Marriage and Cohabitation,” Pew Research Center, November 6, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/11/06/public-views-of-marriage-and-cohabitation/>.

Divorce,² spousal abuse, and infidelity are far too common among those who profess to follow Christ. The church seems to be conforming to the world (Rom 12:2). What the statistics do not reveal is that too many Christian couples remain legally married, but they lack the relational and physical closeness God designed. They are miserable. In the past, I have likened such marriages to an individual who has a cold or a mild case of the flu that never goes away. A more contemporary illustration is that some marriages seem to have relational long Covid.

I have been married for over forty-three years and have been engaged in pastoral and biblical counseling for approximately forty of those years. Most of my recent marriage counseling has been with my wife, Caroline, as my valued and gifted cocounselor. When miserable couples come to us, I sometimes try to imagine what their relationship must have been like in the early phases of courtship and honeymoon. I have thought of asking them to bring a wedding photo just to try to connect with better days and then encouraging them to work with us toward a renewal of a marriage that has wilted.

Several years ago, I was invited to speak at a biblical counseling conference, where I was asked to share the most important lessons we have learned over our years of marriage counseling. After much thought and prayer, I came up with six. Furthermore, I was able to alliterate for only the second or third time in my life with six L's. Three are positive encouragements, and three are negative warnings.

1. The Lord must come first.
2. Laziness will cause your marriage to deteriorate.
3. Lies are like a deadly cancer to your relationship.
4. Lust can destroy your marriage.
5. Lift one another up with affirmation.
6. Love, not law, will keep your marriage strong.

1. The Lord Must Come First

We have found that there is a correlation between the lack of a vibrant personal walk with the Lord and a failing marriage. Often, when a couple whose marriage is troubled comes to see us, we will ask each of them how their personal walk with the Lord is going. Almost always, they will confess that

² Terry Goodrich, "Evangelicals Have Higher-than-average Divorce Rates, According to a Report Compiled by Baylor for the Council on Contemporary Families," Baylor University, February 5, 2014, <https://www.baylor.edu/mediacommunications/news.php?action=story&story=137892>.

their personal time in the word and prayer has suffered in recent months. Often, one or both are pulling away from the church. We explain that during this crucial time, it is vital that they make their relationship with God the most important thing in their lives, even more than their marriage.

Rebuilding a marriage is difficult. Jesus declares, “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5 ESV). If we are to bear fruit, including that of a God-honoring marriage, we must cling to Christ with a sense of humble dependence on him. Hopelessness can be overcome as we realize that through Christ we can again bear good fruit in our marriages. We must not be ruled by our embittered feelings, but rather submit our desires to his word: “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths” (Prov 3:5–6; see also 14:12) and “Your will be done” (Matt 6:10b). We must look to gain our strength, not primarily from our spouses but from God. One of the major causes of marital problems is expecting one’s spouse to meet needs that only the Lord can meet.

Jeremiah 17:5–6 warns that those who put their ultimate trust in people will dry up like a bush in the desert during a drought. Jeremiah continues in verses 7–8 to explain that the answer to your neediness is not to hope that there will be sufficient “rain” from other people (including your spouse) to sustain you. Rather you must put your ultimate trust in the Lord. Then you will be like the tree planted by a stream that can thrive even in a time of drought (e.g., when your spouse is not meeting your needs or “raining” on you). This is not to say that marriage partners should be unconcerned about meeting one another’s needs. Marriage is meant, in a sense, to complete us (Gen 2:18), but because of the fall, our spouses will sometimes fall short. Satan may tempt you to believe that there is no hope for the marriage unless the other person changes. But if you are abiding in the Lord, like the vine in the branch or the tree in the river, you can endure when your spouse is not there for you. God may use you to rescue and rejuvenate your marriage.³

You build your connection to the Lord as you regularly feed yourself by reading and meditation upon Scripture. Peter gives you this encouragement: “Like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation” (1 Pet 2:2). As a tiny baby’s life is sustained by regularly being nourished by their mother’s milk, you need God’s word to strengthen you—especially when life is hard. Along with spending time in

³ I realize that there are some situations, such as abuse or infidelity, in which one spouse cannot save the marriage alone.

God's word, your soul requires regular seasons of prayer. The reality that your marriage may be in trouble along with your knowledge of your inability to solve the problems in your own strength should daily drive you to your knees in humble dependence with the hope that the Lord will answer in ways beyond what you could imagine (Eph 3:20–21). Ideally, the husband and wife will regularly pray together, confessing their sins and pleading with God to renew their love for him and for each other.

In addition to taking advantage of the private means of grace, it is also vital for a couple to be committed to a sound church. It is common for one or both parties in a struggling marriage to neglect drawing near to God in public worship (Heb 10:25). Church attendance is not merely an obligation. It is a privilege and a blessing, as God speaks to us and strengthens us through the public means of grace, including the reading and proclamation of his word, prayer, and the sacraments. In addition, the informal fellowship among believers should stimulate one another toward godliness (Heb 10:24). Another reason to be committed members of a sound church is the benefit of pastoral oversight and counsel from gifted church leaders who shepherd the flock of God (1 Pet 5:2). I remember one man whose marriage had gone through much turmoil saying to me, "We do not know what we would have done if this church had not been here for us." We know of cases in which the faithful disciplinary ministry of a local church has been used by God to restore a wayward spouse and rescue a failing marriage. In other cases, what is most needed is not marriage counseling as much as discipleship in the basics.

II. Laziness Will Cause Your Marriage to Deteriorate

A few years ago, I had the privilege of performing our nephew's wedding. It was only after the wedding that I realized that perhaps I was the first person in two thousand years of church history to choose this particular passage for a wedding homily.

I passed by the field of the sluggard and by the vineyard of the man lacking sense, and behold it was completely overgrown with thistles; its surface was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down. When I saw, I reflected upon it; I looked and received instruction. "A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, then your poverty will come as a robber and your want like an armed man."
(Prov 24:30–34)

I view this picture of the sluggard's field as a kind of parable of many marriages. Since moving to North Carolina several years ago we have enjoyed driving through the countryside. On one side of the road is a beautiful

field with neatly planted rows of crops awaiting harvest, perhaps with a painted red barn in the background. On the opposite side of the road is a field that is overgrown with weeds and thorns, even as the rows from crops planted in past years remain visible through the undergrowth. If a barn is still standing, it is teetering, and the paint is gray and peeling. Years ago, the two fields were probably identical in appearance. The owner of the ruined field did not set out to destroy his property. He just did nothing and allowed the second law of thermodynamics to take over. Little by little, his formerly beautiful field was overgrown. Many marriages resemble the sluggard's field. There was no physical abuse or sexual adultery. There may not even be open conflict. Instead, these relationships are gradually being overrun and choked out by neglect.

Courting and engaged couples typically spend every possible hour together. When they are separated by distance, they talk every day on FaceTime. They cannot get enough of each other. Sometimes, after marriage, they become so busy with career, hobbies, and children (especially their activities and sports) that they take their relationship with each other for granted and neglect each other. It is often the wife who senses that something is wrong, only to have her husband say that she is worried over nothing. "We are just in a busy season. Soon things will return to normal." But there is a new normal in which their marriage is drying up. A different issue for some couples is not that they are never around each other but that they are not present with each other when they occupy the same room. Television, video games, and social media keep people apart. How often do you see a couple in a restaurant where each is looking at their phone and no productive conversation is taking place? Marriages can die of inattention.

To keep your marriage from becoming the sluggard's field, you need to consistently pull the weeds and plant the flowers. Pulling the weeds refers to the importance of quickly resolving conflicts, not letting the sun go down on your anger and thus giving the devil an opportunity (Eph 4:26–27). Small conflicts, like small weeds, can become large if ignored over time. Ken Sande's book *The Peacemaker*⁴ teaches these biblical principles of conflict resolution:

1. Glorifying God should be our chief aim in relationships (2 Cor 5:9).
2. Getting the log out of our own eye should come first (Matt 7:3–5).
3. Gently restore others when they are in the wrong (Gal 6:1–2).
4. Go and be reconciled, which includes forgiving others (Eph 4:31–32).

⁴ Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991). For counselees who are not readers, we assign the audio series, "Biblical Peacemaking" on www.ibcd.org.

While conflict resolution is important, it is not all that is needed. Merely pulling the weeds without putting anything in their place will just leave room for more weeds to grow in the future. Planting flowers refers to positively pursuing the joy, blessing, and intimacy that God intended in marriage. After you are married, it is even more important that you invest in relational and romantic closeness. Caroline and I have sought to establish habits, such as spending time together every day catching up and ensuring the relationship is healthy, having a more extended time (date night) at least twice a month, and getting away together on a special trip at least once a year. These habits are more important (and more difficult to follow) when you have children in the home. God designed physical intimacy as a means of expressing and enhancing our marriage bonds, so this should not be neglected (Gen 2:24; 1 Cor 7:3–5). Spending time together praying, discussing Scripture, and serving God together also binds us together.

Couples whose marriages have suffered through neglect may benefit greatly from marriage counseling with a godly couple.

Sadly, we have counseled many ministry couples whose marriages were brought to the brink by laziness. It is easy for the husband to assume that because he is doing the Lord's work, his family should understand his lack of engagement. The wife may feel guilty about saying anything about the deterioration of their relationship because she does not want to be seen as a high-maintenance wife who keeps her husband from ministry. We have seen cases in which a wife has become deeply embittered after years of seeing her husband rushing to meet the needs of everyone but her. Several years ago, a young pastor and his wife were referred to us because of a deeply troubled marriage that called into question whether he was still biblically qualified for the ministry (1 Tim 3:1–7). She was angry and bitter. He was harsh and distant. Early in the first session, I read the passage from Proverbs about the sluggard's field. Immediately, the pastor exclaimed, "*That describes our marriage!*" As we continued, I suggested that they each were deeply hurt, feeling rejected and cast aside by the other, and they both yearned to be loved by their spouses. Both were thankful (and surprised) to learn that their partner was absolutely committed to the marriage and that they each yearned to be loved by the other. Both repented of their sins against God and each other. Over time they developed new habits of biblical conflict resolution (pulling the weeds in marriage) and investing time and effort in pursuing marital intimacy (planting the flowers). By God's grace, their marriage was renewed.

III. *Lies Are Like a Deadly Cancer to Your Relationship*

Nothing is more important in marriage than mutual trust, and nothing is more destructive to marriage than falsehood. Marriage begins with the making of a covenant in which each party makes important promises before God and witnesses. We typically call adultery infidelity or unfaithfulness because sexual sin is the breaking of a covenant promise. I have often heard the victim of marital infidelity say, “I probably can forgive the sex, but I do not know if I can forget the lies or if I can ever trust this person again.”

Paul illustrates the importance of honesty in close relationships: “Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth each one of you with his neighbor, for we are members of one another” (Eph 4:25). While the immediate context refers to the need for believers to trust one another in the church, marriage is an even more intimate relationship, as husband and wife are “one flesh” (Gen 2:24). Let me develop Paul’s illustration: It would be terrifying if I could not trust certain body parts while I was jogging. For example, if my eyes deceived me by saying that the light is green and the coast is clear when the light is red and cars are speeding by, or if every few hundred steps my leg were to erupt in sharp pain and cause me to fall, I would quit running for exercise. In the same way, it would be unbearable if you could not trust the person with whom you are yoked for life—your “other half.”

Why do people lie? Typically, they lie for selfish reasons. They may lie to gain something from another person—for example, someone may misrepresent the mechanical condition of a car they wish to sell. Others may lie just to maintain peace. A husband may promise that he will take care of a household task to get his wife off his back, even though he has no plan to carry out his commitment. Perhaps the most common reason for lying is to avoid painful consequences. I have counseled men who were going to casinos or strip clubs during times when their wives thought they were working. When I have insisted that such men confess their sins to their wives and seek forgiveness, I have heard the objection that it would hurt her too much if he were to tell her. My reply is that their sin was what causes the hurt, and the confession would make it possible for the process of healing to begin. I know a man who covered up adultery for several years until it was finally exposed. “Be sure your sin will find you out” (Num 32:23b). He thought he was protecting his wife from the pain of knowing. Instead, her suffering was compounded because she had to try to forgive the fact that he had lived a lie, deceiving her for years.

Lying also involves withholding the truth from someone who has the right to know (as in the cases above). Another example would be if one

spouse were to spend a large amount of money without telling the other. Until the truth is told, that spouse is, in a sense, living a lie.

Lying also includes the failure to keep a commitment; the righteous man “swears to his own hurt and does not change” (Ps 15:4c). This principle would apply to the husband who promises to do a chore around the house but does not keep his word on a timely basis. Lying even includes misleading through exaggeration or spin. Another example of how some spouses do violence to the truth is when they misuse words such as “always” or “never” during an argument.

Just as people who are drunk are sometimes portrayed in films as comic figures, many habitual liars try to make a joke out of their deceptions. Some people are so accustomed to lying that I tell them that they need to learn to speak the truth as a new language as citizens of God’s kingdom the same way an immigrant would need to learn the language of his new home country. This fits the context of Ephesians 4:25, as it reminds us that we have in a sense been delivered from our old life to a new life in union with Christ. The former liar must learn to be slow and careful in his speech (Jas 1:19) as he learns to trust God that it is better to tell the truth, even if it may seem that he could avoid trouble through falsehood.

Another way to promote truth in marriage is to make it safe for one’s spouse to reveal their sins and failures. A wife whose husband had been struggling with porn discovered that the accountability software on his computer had been uninstalled. He denied having any knowledge of how this might have happened. If he did it, which is extremely likely, it would have been better for him to have confessed his failure to his wife while also seeking additional accountability from church leadership. In another case, a wife got a very expensive traffic ticket. She could have been tempted to try to pay it without her husband’s knowledge. Instead, she told him as soon as she saw him, and thankfully, his (my) response was kind and understanding. The gospel both gives us a new truth-telling nature (Eph 4:25) and a new gracious spirit (Eph 4:31–32), even when the truth hurts.

IV. Lust Can Destroy a Marriage

If laziness is like allowing the weeds to grow and lying is like a cancer, lust can be like a bomb going off in a marriage. Our concern to help couples preserve the purity of their marriages is heightened by the number of adultery cases in which we have counseled, including several involving pastors and other ministry leaders. Few Christians plan to have an affair, yet because we are vulnerable, Scripture admonishes us, “Therefore let him

who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall” (1 Cor 10:12)—in other words, if you believe that you are not capable of sexual sin, you may be in grave danger.

There is also a positive side to fighting against sexual temptation. We often quote the first part of 2 Timothy 2:22, “Flee youthful lusts” without giving adequate attention to the rest of the verse, “pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, with those who call upon the Lord from a pure heart.” While it is important to put off sinful desires, it is also vital that we pursue and put on that which is good. This corresponds to the teaching of wisdom in the book of Proverbs, which contains extensive warnings against sexual sin (the strange woman of Proverbs 5:1–23; 6:24–35; 7:1–27), while also extolling the pursuit of godly wisdom (portrayed metaphorically as Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 1:20–33; 4:5–9; 9:1–6) in the fear of the Lord as the best protection against sexual sin; God’s wisdom will guard you from disastrous immorality and will bring blessing and satisfaction to your soul (Prov 2:16–21). While having a fulfilling sexual relationship with your spouse may help you avoid lust (Prov 5:15–19), not every person enjoys such a happy and fulfilling marriage. You cannot blame your spouse or your lack of a spouse for sexual sin (1 Cor 10:13; Gal 5:16). Wisdom will guard you even when you do not enjoy an ideal marriage.

We have seen common patterns that lead to marital infidelity. First, one or both partners are not pursuing the Lord and his wisdom for their ultimate joy and fulfillment. This strips away their spiritual armor and makes them vulnerable to the evil one’s onslaught (Eph 6:10–17). This spiritual malaise is then compounded by the deterioration of the marriage relationship due to laziness or conflict. We have observed that the most common cause of adultery has not so much been sexual desire as feeling rejected by one’s spouse. We hear, “He treats me like I am stupid. No matter how hard I try to please him it is never enough,” or “He is always so busy with his work or his sports or his video games that he does not pay any attention to me.” This makes her vulnerable to the seducer who flatters and thus spreads a net for her feet (Prov 29:5). Women often fall into sinful relationships with men who pay attention to them, saying that they are smart and attractive. Men are vulnerable to women who treat them with honor and respect.

The path to adultery is often like this: A man and a woman notice each other at the gym, or when each takes their child to soccer practice. We have even seen adultery begin at a church activity or a shared ministry. They have no conscious intention of falling into the sin that will later wreak havoc on many lives. They engage in conversation and find that they enjoy each other’s company. He feels disappointed when she is not there, or she times

her visits to the gym when she knows he will be working out. They might start texting each other while hiding their communications from their spouses. They feel comfortable and alive in each other's company. At some point, a barrier is crossed. Their hands touch. She squeezes and he squeezes back. Or he confesses that he is attracted to her, expecting that she will be repulsed, but instead she acknowledges similar feelings. Sin is deceitful (Heb 3:13; Jer 17:9). They slide into their affair trying to tell themselves that it is temporary or that no one else needs to know or get hurt by what they are doing. Yet when they are discovered, or when one of them is overwhelmed by guilt and confesses to their spouse, they will reap a harvest of suffering that will affect many—spouse, children, extended family, church, and friends (Gal 6:7). Ultimately, they, like King David, will face hard consequences (Ps 32:3–4; Prov 5:20–23; 6:26–35; 7:22–27). Yet there is hope after adultery. We have seen several marriages restored as God has granted repentance and grace to a couple.⁵ However, it is much better to avoid disaster than to recover from it.

Worldly wisdom states that you can safely enjoy intimate friendships with those of the opposite sex. They often imply that when a friendship becomes sexual, it was “meant to be” as people followed their hearts. In recent years, many evangelicals have criticized the Billy Graham rule as being overly restrictive to male-female friendships among Christians. Knowing the moral dangers faced by those in the ministry, Graham and his team members each committed to not spending time alone with a woman other than his wife to avoid temptation or even the appearance of compromise. Later, Vice President Mike Pence was criticized for having a similar safeguard, which some claimed kept women from having equal opportunities for advancement. While we recognize that men and women can enjoy appropriate friendships, we have seen enough cases of moral failure that we are convinced that caution is appropriate. Scripture warns us to stay far away from temptation: “Keep your way far from her and do not go near the door of her house” (Prov 5:8).

Even secular research has shown that being emotionally vulnerable with someone of the opposite sex often leads to romantic attraction. In her *New York Times* article “To Fall in Love with Anyone, Do This,” Mandy Len Catron examines a study by psychologist Arthur Aron that suggests that total strangers can accelerate the intimacy between them by asking each

⁵ Jim Newheiser, “Bringing Healing to Marriages Broken by Sexual Sin,” *IBCD*, 2020, <https://ibcd.org/bringing-healing-to-marriages-broken-by-sexual-sin/> (audio); Jim Newheiser, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017), 245–53.

other a specific series of personal questions.⁶ Catron and Aron have merely noticed what many have realized for centuries. Proximity coupled with personal intimacy often leads to romantic and sexual attraction between men and women: actors may fall in love on a movie set, or a military leader and an author may fall in love while working together on his autobiography.

We believe that couples should agree upon guidelines for propriety and safety. Some of Caroline's and my guidelines include no time alone and no private personal interactions (such as texting) with a member of the opposite sex.⁷ If you need to pour your heart out to someone, find a mature same-sex believer. We also avoid any appearance of flirtation, and we are careful about touching and hugging.

We realize that external rules alone will not keep your marriage safe from infidelity. It is most important to guard your heart (Prov 4:23), from which sexual sin comes (Mark 7:20–23). Inward lusts and fantasies (especially pornography) are sinful in and of themselves (Matt 5:27–28). They can also lead to deadlier sins. Evil desires when conceived must be aborted or they may lead to sinful acts and death (Jas 1:14–15; Col 3:5).

We also believe that it is vital for couples to actively pursue both personal and sexual intimacy within their marriages. We should not blame the innocent spouse when their partner commits adultery, supposing that if only she had been a better lover this would not have happened. Rather, if only he had been walking in the Spirit, he would not have given in to fleshly desires (Gal 5:16–24). However, the Bible does explicitly teach that a sexually fulfilling marriage is a safeguard against sexual sin (Prov 5:15–20; 1 Cor 7:3–5). We also believe that personal intimacy, including conflict resolution (pulling the weeds) and building friendship (planting flowers), is the prerequisite to long-term sexual fulfillment in marriage.

V. Lift One Another Up with Affirmation

Several years ago, when a friend gave me Sam Crabtree's book *Practicing Affirmation*,⁸ I was a bit suspicious. I am a Calvinist who believes in total depravity, and I am a biblical counselor who rejects psychobabble about

⁶ Daniel Jones, "The 36 Question That Lead to Love," *New York Times*, January 9, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/09/style/no-37-big-wedding-or-small.html>; Mandy Len Catron, "Modern Love: To Fall in Love with Anyone Do This," *New York Times*, January 11, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/11/style/modern-love-to-fall-in-love-with-anyone-do-this.html>.

⁷ We are not absolutely rigid about this rule. For example, if we have an opposite-sex houseguest who needs a ride, our spouse can agree that an exception can be made.

⁸ Sam Crabtree, *Practicing Affirmation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011).

self-esteem being the key to personal fulfillment. But as I read Crabtree's book and later heard him speak, I realized that he makes a strong biblical case for appropriately affirming the good work of God in one another—or, as Crabtree puts it, “giving God-centered praise to those who are not God.”

There are many cases in Scripture in which those who are faithful and obedient are praised (Num 12:3; Job 2:3; Ps 89:20; Heb 11). When Paul writes his epistles, he ordinarily finds something to affirm about the recipients (Col 1:3–8; 1 Thess 1:2–10), including the Corinthians, even if he will be bringing correction later (1 Cor 1:4–8). In Jesus's letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor in Revelation 2 and 3, he usually begins by praising a church for its faithfulness before he addresses concerns that they must address.⁹ Perhaps the most relevant passage for spousal affirmation is Proverbs 31:28–29 “Her children rise up and bless her; Her husband also and he praises her, saying: ‘Many daughters have done nobly, But you excel them all.’”

Crabtree points out that most romantic relationships begin with a great deal of affirmation. Just the fact that this other person is so attracted to you that they want to marry you is very encouraging! He then observes that as time goes by, there is often more correction and less affirmation.¹⁰ They become more vocal about where their expectations are not being met and less appreciative of their spouse's finer qualities and better deeds. Many of us have seen couples who constantly quarrel over every little thing (Prov 20:3; 25:24; 29:22). It is no surprise that such marriages can grow cold. Some men manage by exception. If his wife and children do what is expected, he says nothing, but when their performance does not meet expectations, he is quick to correct. This attitude can lead to other temptations, as we discussed in the previous section. A wife who believes that she can never satisfy her husband's demands may be more vulnerable to a man who affirms her.

Crabtree asserts that affirmation is like making a deposit into the relationship account, and criticism is like making a withdrawal. Crabtree suggests that it takes several affirmations to counterbalance one correction.¹¹ Just as a bank no longer honors your checks when your account is overdrawn, others stop listening to you when the bank of relationship is significantly overdrawn.

Most of us have seen people on the beach using metal detectors to try to find coins and jewelry in the sand. I encourage my counselees to become affirmation detectors, searching for what can be legitimately praised in one another. I sometimes ask a counselee, “What would you think if someone

⁹ I would express caution about an approach to personal correction that begins with affirmation just so one can get to the criticism that was really the main agenda.

¹⁰ Crabtree, *Practicing Affirmation*, 42–44.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 44–48, 52.

could grow one blade of grass on the moon?” You could compare it to a rainforest on earth, and it is not much. But even one blade of grass on the moon would be amazing. Some of us may have to search carefully for that one blade of grass that we can sincerely affirm. For some of us (and I include myself), for whom criticism and correction come more naturally, this takes a radical change of thinking. Sometimes I have given the assignment for each spouse to find two things about the other person that they can affirm each day. And then to keep doing this for the rest of their lives together.

One might ask, “But if my spouse and children are not believers, can I still affirm them?” Crabtree answers yes.¹² We can still acknowledge the common grace good done by unbelievers as God restrains their sin and produces a kind of civic righteousness. Unsaved family members can still be honest, respectful, and hardworking. We know that this is only by God’s (common) grace, and we pray that one day they will know his redeeming grace. Perhaps the Lord will use your affirmation to draw them to himself.

Affirmation can be very powerful. I have interrupted a couple during an argument and asked each of them to say three things they appreciated about the other. The temperature in the room changed immediately. She said, “I did not know you thought that about me.” “Sweetness of speech increases persuasiveness” (Prov 16:21b).

Affirmation glorifies God for his good work in others. We could even say that to fail to affirm is to rob God of his glory.

VI. Love, Not Law, Will Keep Your Marriage Strong

Most human relationships, including many marriages, operate based on the principle of law. If you are kind to me and meet my expectations, I will be kind to you. If I do not like what you say, I will pull away from you and give you the silent treatment. If you do the chores, I will have sex with you. If you do not pay enough attention to me in conversation, I will not offer you any physical affection. If you mistreat me, I will find a way to retaliate and get revenge. To the natural man, this approach seems both just and reasonable. Law-based marriage leads to strife, anger, bitterness, separation, and sometimes divorce. I had one professing Christian husband in a very troubled marriage who incessantly talked about reciprocity in marriage. He was absolutely determined to give his wife whatever he decided that she deserved based upon her treatment of him. Sadly, she could not meet his expectations, and the marriage was on the path to dissolution. Thankfully,

¹² Ibid., 121.

this is not how God has treated us: “He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to his mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5). Many marriages struggle or even fail because of what we call a gospel disconnect.¹³ We want God to treat us according to grace, but we, like the unmerciful servant (Matt 18:21–35) treat others according to law.

Both the Old and New Testaments portray the Lord’s relationship with us, his people, as a marriage (Isa 54:5; Eph 5:32). God deals with us according to grace. He does not treat us as our sins deserve (Ps 103:10). God’s gracious love should move us to love one another. “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:10–11). Later, John writes, “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). You must first know God’s love for you in Christ before you can reflect that love to your spouse. The best thing you can do to help your marriage is to better understand the love of Christ for you. Paul, after spending almost three chapters describing how God has loved us from eternity and at great cost, prays that his readers would be spiritually strengthened so they can comprehend the dimensions of Christ’s love for them (Eph 3:14–21). This love serves as the basis for the practical exhortations in Ephesians 4–6, including admonitions to forgive and love one another in marriage. We often assign Paul’s prayer to our counselees. If they will only know and appreciate Christ’s love for them, God will do more than they could have imagined in their lives.

The key for a husband to successfully fulfill Paul’s exhortation to love his wife (Eph 5:25) is not merely to employ techniques such as forcing himself to help around the house and buy her flowers every now and then. The husband who is failing to love his wife well has lost sight of Christ’s gracious love for him. The husband who so knows Christ’s love can treat his wife well even though she sometimes may not have earned it.

Dave Harvey’s book *When Sinners Say “I Do”*¹⁴ is one of our favorite resources to give to couples in struggling marriages. He says that a key to being gracious to your spouse is to humbly realize that because you are the “chief of sinners” (1 Tim 1:15), you are in no position to judge (Jas 4:11–12).¹⁵ Furthermore, you are married to a sinner, so you should not be shocked

¹³ We have observed that if some spouses had the same unconditional love for each other that they do for their children (“Nothing will ever stop me from loving you”), their marriages would be much stronger.

¹⁴ Dave Harvey, *When Sinners Say “I Do”* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd, 2007).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 33–44.

when they (also) sin. You should see their sin as an opportunity to show mercy and help them (Gals 6:1–2), rather than punish them.¹⁶ Try to lead them toward repentance the same way God helped you: “The kindness of God leads you to repentance” (Rom 2:4).

Consistently showing such love is not easy. Paul warns, “For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please” (Gal 5:17). Paul Tripp writes, “The big battles in marriage are not the ones you fight with your spouse. No, the big battles are the ones being fought in your heart.”¹⁷ We should never say that our partner made us sin—“You made me angry.” Paul encourages us this way: “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh” (Gal 5:16). Your spouse may tempt or provoke you, but they cannot cause you to sin—“enmities, strife ... outbursts of anger, disputes” (Gal 5:20). You can bear the fruit of the Spirit, including love, patience, and kindness, even when it is hard (Gal 5:22–23).

Conclusion

The most important key to having a successful marriage is the gospel. The deeper your experience of God’s love for you in Christ, the more you will be motivated to show gracious, sacrificial love to your spouse. My prayer for myself is that I will become a man of grace, especially in my marriage. My hope is that when my wife thinks about how I treat her, she would, at least in some measure, think, “That is how Christ loves me.”

Be encouraged that God is working in your marriage. Many of us approach marriage with the goal that our needs will be met and our spouse will make us happy. God’s goal for you is that you become more like Jesus (Col 1:28). Marriage, in addition to being a great source of joy and blessing, is also an important means by which God sanctifies us. Sometimes our failures and our struggles are how he teaches us about his love and conforms us to Christ.

Finally, a word for the single reader. One day you may be married, in which case these principles can be a blessing to you and your spouse. Also, as you consider what the Bible says about marriage, you can appreciate the perfect sacrificial love of Christ and how you are to gladly submit to him. Finally, you can apply these principles as you live in community with family members and the believers in your church.

¹⁶ Ibid., 77–96.

¹⁷ Paul Tripp, *Marriage: 6 Gospel Commitments Every Couple Needs to Make* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 141.

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