

When Sinners Say  
*“I Do”*



When Sinners Say  
“I Do”

Discovering the Power of the Gospel  
FOR MARRIAGE

DAVE HARVEY



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When Sinners Say “I Do”  
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To Kimm,

For converting all my sounds of woe into  
“hey nonny, nonny”  
Twenty-five years later,  
I still can’t believe you said, “I do!”



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# Acknowledgments

*F*or some gifted souls, writing is a solitary exercise that bubbles forth in seclusion. I marvel at that, because I'm the opposite. John Piper once wrote, "Perseverance in faith is a community project."<sup>1</sup> For me, so is writing.

Let me introduce you to the community of people without whom there simply would be no book. The first round of thanks goes to the immediate neighborhood—those who accepted the editorial mission to make my writing far better than it is. For over two decades, Andy Farmer has proven to be not only a trusted friend, but also a man who takes what I say and helps make it cipherable. Kevin Meath, editor-extraordinaire for Sovereign Grace Ministries at the time of writing, pushed aside a backlog of projects to serve this project. His editing resulted in a serious upgrade. Erin Sutherland, my exceptional secretary, went far beyond the call of duty by loaning her considerable talents to almost every feature of this project. To this neighborhood of colleagues, a simple thanks seems hopelessly insufficient.

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That's the community who helped me. Now I know it is customary to clear these folks of responsibility for deficiencies in the book, but it seems like an unconventional book may warrant a different approach. So if you don't like the book, blame them.

# Foreword

They had come to me for counseling. Now Jeff and Ellie sat across from me on opposite ends of the couch. The air was heavy with tension. They had been married for fifteen years, and had reached a point where they could barely say a civil word to one another. Almost everything they said was an accusation, their words spit out with extreme anger. My heart was sad. I knew there was a time when they had adored one another. I knew that they had once hung onto each other's words and loved each other's company. Though they had once anticipated their marriage with excitement and hope, it was now a place of anger ("I can't believe he/she did this to me!") and regret ("I wish I had never been married!").

Dave Harvey knows exactly what is wrong with this couple. He knows what has brought them from adoration to acrimony and he knows how to get them to where God designed their marriage to be. That is what I think is so practically helpful about the book that you are about to read. It is written by a man who understands. It is not because he is a pastor (although that surely helps), or a good theologian (although this book is rich with theology), or that he understands the destruction

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and restoration of a marriage. No—he understands what is wrong with the marriages of the Jeffs and Ellies of the world because he has been willing to look at himself in the mirror of the Word of God and admit to what he has seen there. It has been said that the best pastor is always the one who is willing to sit under his own teaching.

This book grasps the core drama of every married couple. This drama is no respecter of race, ethnic origin, location, or period of history. It is the one thing that explains the doom and hope of every human relationship. It is the theme that is on every page of this book in some way. What is this drama? It is the drama of sin and grace.

What do all of us do in our marriages in some way? We all tend to deny our sin (while pointing out the sin of the other). By denying our sin, we devalue grace. What is important about this book is that at the level of the hallways and family rooms of everyday life, it is very honest about sin and very hopeful about the amazing resources of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

I can't help but wish that Jeff and Ellie had been able to read this book. I can't help but wish I had been able to read it years ago as well, because again and again I saw myself in it.

This book reminded me once again of some very important things. It reminded me that I am my biggest marital problem (hard to accept, but biblically true). It reminded me, in ways that are very practical, that Jesus is the only solution. It encouraged me to remember that grace makes new beginnings possible. And it challenged me to live like I really believe I can be a tool of God's grace in Luella's life.

It doesn't matter whether you are looking forward to your marriage or have been married for many years. There is one thing I know for sure—your relationship isn't perfect. And because it isn't, as a couple you need to look into the mirror of God's Word once again. This book will help you to do just that.

Paul David Tripp  
April 13, 2007

## 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

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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).

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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

## PREFACE

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."<sup>1</sup> 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!<sup>2</sup>

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*

*M*ulticolored 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.<sup>1</sup>

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!<sup>2</sup>

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.”<sup>3</sup> 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."<sup>4</sup>

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.