

8 What You Value is What You Get

Lost Chapter of Genesis

“So”, God asked Adam, “What is wrong with you?” Adam said he didn’t have anyone to talk to. God said that He was going to make Adam a companion and that it would be a woman. God said, “This person will gather food for you, cook for you, and when you discover clothing she’ll wash it for you. She will always agree with every decision you make. She will bear your children and never ask you to get up in the middle of the night to take care of them. She will not nag you and will always be the first to admit she was wrong when you’ve had a disagreement. She will never have a headache and will freely give you love and passion whenever you need it.”

Adam asked God, “What will a woman like this cost?” God replied, “An arm and a leg.” Then Adam asked, “What can I get for a rib?”

The rest is history

In the previous chapters we have discussed the role of boundaries as protection against bad things and sin. We studied how important it is to prevent bad habits from receiving a permanent presence in your life. We mentioned that compliance and tolerance for evil – as loving as that may appear to be – often enables irresponsibility, as others do not experience the consequences of their behavior. Yet many Christians, particularly women, confuse tolerance and compliance with submission and experience much evil and sin against them, because they believe God requires them to accept this.

Many marriages suffer because of that: one spouse breaks the rules and the other simply tolerates that, hoping that eventually their marriage would improve. But why should it? Why should there be any change if no one speaks up against sinful behavior? Is silence and compliance really a sign of love and submission? Did God actually say that we should tolerate sin and hate those who sin against us? Or wasn’t it the other way around?

Matthew 18:15 tells us to go to our brother who sins against us and to show his sin to him. There is a good chance that we will convince him and win him back, because he might not even be aware how much his behavior affects us. But we are *so* afraid that this might not work out – because in our heart we don’t believe that our brother is willing to change – that we do not trust God’s command and rather let things happen. And as a consequence, *we get what we tolerate* and our relationship suffers more and more.

This should not be so! We must learn to *do* what God tells us to do if we want to experience growth in our relationships. We need to learn to establish and maintain boundaries to be able to live a balanced and fulfilled life.

But there is more to boundaries than just protection against evil. Boundaries also help us to experience the good things in our life that God has prepared for us. How can this be?

The principle is as simple as before. Just as we will get the bad things that we tolerate, so will we see the good things happen that we truly value. *What we value is what we will have.* Why is this so?

If we truly value something, we will not only protect it from being destroyed but also do everything to nurture it. Because it is high on our priority list, we will invest time and energy to make it happen. If we value honesty and love in our relationship, we will actively seek to build it, practice it, and see it grow. If we seek a close relationship with God, we will spend more and more time with him and experience how he transforms us.

But this only works if we put a high value on honesty, love, and a close relationship with God. If these are just wishes that have to compete with many other desires on our priority list, we will put little emphasis on them. Chances are that we won't see them happen.

One of the strongest indicators for what our true values are is persistence. The persistent widow in **Luke 18:1–8** wanted to see justice, so she kept bugging the judge until he finally handled her case. Because she valued justice so highly, she was persistent enough to eventually see it happen. There is a promise for us in this parable.

And will God not bring about justice for his chosen ones who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly (**Luke 18:7–8a**).

God will make sure that we will receive what we need if we are only persistent enough. Does that mean we get everything we want? Of course not, we need to be realistic and understand that some values are beneficial and others are not.

You do not have, because you do not ask God. And when you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with the wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures (**James 4:2b-3**).

There is nothing bad with the treasures of this world. God often gives material blessings and we may use them wisely and enjoy them. But if these things become more important to us than he, God will not give to us what drives us away from him. So the question is – what do we really value? And which of these values are good for our relationships? How do we set the right priorities? A good example can be found in (**Luke 10:38–42**), where Jesus visits the house of Martha and Mary.

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman called Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!

"Martha, Martha", the Lord answered, "you are worried about many things but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken away from her.

How many Martha's do we have in today's churches? We care about many good things but we ignore the ones that are even better. We spend so much time and energy on

preparing for things that are nice, but distract us from the really important issues. We want our homes to be nice, particularly when there are guests, but the preparations wear us out. We work hard to provide for our family, but do not have time for our wife and children. We work for charities and church committees and fail to see the spiritual needs of the people that live around us. What we do is good, but in these cases *the good is the enemy of the better*.

If we pursue good values but ignore those that are even more important, then we will hardly see the latter ones have an impact on our life. We won't see growth because we focus too much on the less important things – they take all our attention and energy away.

What then are good values and bad values when it comes to building relationships? Which values build up, and which ones may actually put a burden on our marriage? What should we magnify and lift up to guide us? And how in the world can we learn to give the more important values highest priority?

There are a few values that the Bible holds in very high esteem, and these values produce great marriages. 1

1. Love of God, based on a personal relationship with God
2. Love of Your Spouse, which includes the desire to spend time together and to serve one another and many other characteristics listed in **1. Corinthians 13**.
3. Compassion and Forgiveness
4. Honesty and Trust
5. Faithfulness
6. Holiness

However, there are many more values that we cannot discuss here. Certainly it is not possible to classify all possible values as either good or bad. Each couple is different from others and has to decide if certain values are beneficial for them or not. What might be good for Barbara and me could be disastrous for your relationship. And some values that are good for your marriage simply wouldn't work in ours.

If you haven't already done so, you may take some time to discuss your values with your spouse. It would be naive to assume that you and your spouse have the same or "the right" ones. You are different individuals with different backgrounds and priorities. You need to talk about what is important to you as individuals. And please be honest – don't just talk about the values that you believe you should have (like the ones we will discuss here). Talk about what is really important for you, because it is the driving force behind everything you do. Your spouse has a right to know that.

Only then you can talk about what is important to as a family. And when both of you have agreed on a common set of family values you may have to discuss whether certain individual values may be obstacles for these family values. Ideally this discussion should have taken place before you married, but I know that many couples, including

Barbara and myself, did not do that. Besides, some values change when we grow older and our circumstances change, so they must be discussed again.

To get a better understanding for the importance of such a discussion, let us take a look at a value that appears to be good but is quite destructive for a relationship. Many people, including Christians, have this value high on their priority list, and they believe it to be the essence of life here on earth. But unfortunately, it works against them and wreaks havoc in their marriage.

What in the world could that be?

8.1 Happiness: The Worst Value Ever

Over the past decades I had the chance to counsel quite a few people with relationship problems. When I reflect on what I heard, one thing stands out the most: complaints about what the other partner did wrong and how much it made them unhappy. Although in some cases the issues were really serious, I often sensed an unwillingness to work on a solution. It seemed easier to blame the other for making their lives miserable – or at least complicated – than putting real efforts into overcoming problems and building a working relationship.

Of course, that is easy to say if I only have to look at the problem from the outside and don't have to deal with it myself. But many relationship problems have in common that the partners – or at least one of them – put a very *high value on being happy* and comfortable. As soon as the other intrudes into their comfort zone by what he or she does or expects – and this is guaranteed to happen – they have a problem. But for them the problem is the outside; they have no part in it. And consequently they do not participate in its solution either, because they expect the other one to change and make them happy again.

These people have a serious misconception. They believe “If I am not happy, something bad must be happening”. They view happiness as the essence of life. Many people, particularly younger and unexperienced ones, believe that happiness is all that counts in a relationship. They want to be happy with their partner – who doesn't want that, they want to make each other happy, and they expect that their partner always makes them happy.

And the latter is exactly the root of their problems. Making happiness one of our top priorities in life is about the worst thing we can do.

But wait a minute – doesn't our constitution grant us the right to pursue happiness? Of course it does. There is nothing bad about pursuing happiness. But that doesn't mean that we have the right to always *be* happy. Actually, *people who always want to be happy and pursue it above all else are some of the most miserable people in the world*. It is just the wrong attitude. The bible nowhere promises that we may enjoy happiness everyday but tells us that we have to accept going through difficult times if we want to follow Jesus (**Matthew 5:11–12, 11:29, 16:24**). Why is this so?

If you always want to be happy, you avoid everything that makes you even temporarily unhappy. In your relationship you will shy away from issues that require you to work on yourself. You won't do the hard character work that is necessary for becoming mature and being content and joyful *in whatever circumstances* you find yourself (**Romans 5:3–5**). And therefore you will seldomly content with what you have, what you do, where and how you live, the church you go to, the spouse you have, etc. There is always something negative that you see. You want to be happy, but you expect the outside to make you happy instead of resting in yourself. In the end it was your strife for happiness that made you so miserable, nothing else.

It is a natural consequence: *people who always want to be happy and pursue it above all else are some of the most miserable people in the world.*

So what is *happiness*? Why are some people happy in their relationships and others aren't? The answer is simple.

Happiness in itself is not bad, but it cannot be the foundation of a good marriage. Instead, it is a *result* of a good marriage. If you haven't figured it out yet, *marriage is work*. A lot of work. Uncomfortable, hard work – because we need to work our way through all kinds of difficulties. Conflicts, fears, rejections, arguments, hurt feelings, and worst of all the disillusionment of your spouse being quite different from what you imagined.

You have to go through the difficult task of accepting imperfections and immaturities in the other person, while at the same time having to help her to overcome them. You have to realize that you yourself have imperfections and immaturities, that your spouse has the right and duty to point them out to you, and that you need to work on overcoming them.

All these things are quite normal and all of them are workable – if you are willing to work through them. Those couples who do that will eventually reach happiness again – a form of happiness that is deeper and better than they ever experienced before.

But those who hit these inevitable walls and have the attitude that the real problem is that their spouse “interferes with their happiness”, are in real trouble. They will rather leave the relationship than undertake efforts to solve the issues. They don't see their unhappiness as a chance to grow, something that helps them reach a deeper relationship because God is about to remove some edges and thorns in their life.

The Bible tells us to accept difficult times with joy – because they are a chance to grow and to reach a new stage in your relationship that is deeper and closer than ever before.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds; because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

(James 1:2–4)

Some people find these verses difficult to accept. What good shall there be in difficulties? Shouldn't we be able to grow closer together and be happy all the time?

Wouldn't I be much better off if I hadn't to go through all these difficulties? If life were easier, if we had no disagreements and no reason for arguments, no pain in our bodies, no financial worries but always plenty – wouldn't we be much happier together? I doubt it, because that requires that *you* have to be perfect. You may believe you are, but you are certainly not. I know people who never honestly apologize to their spouse because they cannot admit that they were behaving wrong – but that is exactly the cause for their problem. Although in an abstract sense they know that they are still sinners, they fail to see the concrete situation where they sin and need to change. A simple analogy might help to show how ridiculous this attitude is.

Imagine you just got your driver's license and a new car. It is fall, rains a lot and you run into trees a few time. Nothing serious, but it causes trouble. Every other week you hit a tree. So you say to yourself "Enough of this. This is a bad car. I hate it. It just keeps running into trees". So you sell your car and buy a new one and hope to be happy from now on.

Sounds absurd, doesn't it. But that is exactly what people do who run away from a marriage once they hit a few too many difficulties. They don't see that they play a major part in that scenario. They believe dumping their spouse and getting a new one will solve their problem and make them happy again. They don't see that it is their own "driving" that they must improve. That they will only find happiness if they learn how to relate to another person. That they must see and acknowledge mistakes and learn to avoid, prevent, and grow out of them.

Many things are better to worry about than happiness. You should worry about the things that eventually *produce* happiness. You're not a child anymore, who wants to eat dessert first. So do not think that being happy *today* is all that matters. This is a self-centered and self-destructive attitude. If happiness is more important to you than growth, happiness will certainly elude you. But if you're willing to do the hard work of growth *now*, no matter how it feels, happiness will find you eventually.

8.2 Value 1: Love of God

What is it that holds a Christian couple together if everything else fails?

Young people often believe that *physical attraction* is the key, so they invest a lot into how they look. While making yourself attractive for your spouse is a sign of respect, our outer appearance is not what keeps us together. Otherwise we would be in deep trouble when we get older (and some people are quite afraid of that), because there will always somebody who looks much better than we do.

What about *love*? Love is an important ingredient and we will talk about it in the next section. When they start dating, most couples think that their love is so strong that it will overcome all obstacles. But after they get married and live close together day by day they realize that their love can fail as well. There are differences, struggles,

arguments – sometimes so strong that their marriage appears to be totally hopeless. There is simply not enough love to hold the two together.

But there is one value that lasts. One that is stronger than all the differences and difficulties. One value that can keep a couple together when everything else has failed. And that is a *deep love for God*.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. (**Matthew 22:37–38**)

When we look at our own marriage relationship we will quickly realize that we simply don't have the strength to keep it together ourselves. We try to overcome problems in our own strength and we fail. At some point, I believe, almost every marriage reaches a stage where neither of the spouses has the energy to address the problems that have accumulated. Sometimes they don't even have the desire to do that anymore. They feel like giving up.

At this point you may not be willing to make any changes in your life for your spouse. But when you truly love God, you are willing to make the changes that *he* wants you to make. And that will not only save your relationship but turn it into something better than ever before – because you finally realize that you need to let God take control of your marriage instead of trying it in your own strength.

Some people believe that loving God with respect to a failing relationship only means that we must not divorce.

"I hate divorce", says the Lord God of Israel (**Malachi 2:16**).

They are no longer two, but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no man separate (**Matthew 19:6**).

This is certainly true. God is against divorce, because he has joined the couple together in a way that cannot be fully separated anymore. *But God does not expect us to stick to a miserable relationship.*

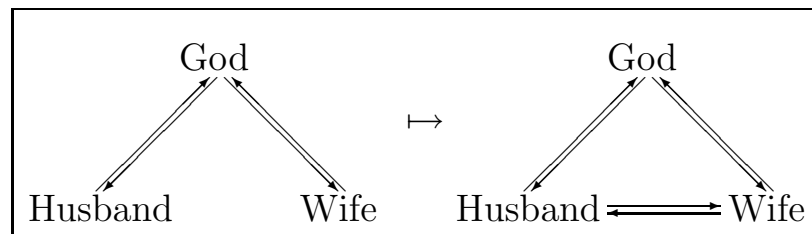
Yes, we shall endure trials and not run away from them (remember James 1:2–4). But instead of sticking to something that is miserable, God wants us to change so that he can turn our relationship into something beautiful. And if we love God, *we will always make the adjustments he requires from us*. We may not do this for anybody else in the world, but we do it for God. As a consequence, we will grow and our relationship will grow with us. That is why our love for God is the most important value we can have.

I know that this is hard to believe, when you're *in* a bad situation. It just doesn't seem to work. But when God wants you to have a great relationship with your spouse, will he not also provide the means to get there?

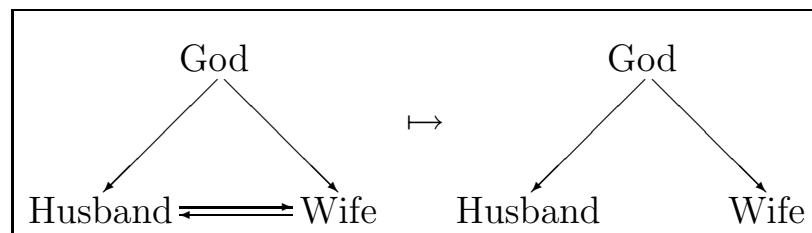
And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But if you are tempted, he will also provide a way out, so that you can stand under it (**1. Corinthians 10:13**).

We have talked about many issues and immaturities that spouses may have to overcome in order to resolve conflicts. You may have to stop criticizing and judging your spouse for what he does wrong in your eyes (**Matthew 7:1,5**). We may have to control your anger (**Ephesians 4:26**) instead of striking back if you're being judged. You may have to learn to endure conflict and work through it instead of running away from it. You may have to learn to take responsibility for your feelings instead of blaming your spouse for them – your spouse is not responsible for your happiness! I am not saying that overcoming troubles in a relationship is easy. It is not easy to realize that *I* have to change, and it is even more difficult to actually do it. But God provides the way to overcome the temptations that always want to lead me the wrong way. I only have to let him do that.

We have to learn that God is in charge of our marriage, not we. If we let him, a troubled relationship between us is always re-established through our bond with him. He empowers us to change; he tells us *how* to change. And the love between us will be the fruit of loving God.



But if we try to be the ones in charge, we'll do it our way and our own limitations will become limitations of our relationship as well. To make the changes we need to make we need someone bigger than ourselves to answer to.



Loving God first, with all our heart, mind, and soul is the key. Lose your life to him and you will gain it.

8.3 Value 2: Love of Your Spouse

Almost equally important for a growing relationship as your love for God is the love for your spouse.

And the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (**Matthew 22:39**)

It is easy to say that we love our wife or our husband. We all believe that we know what that means. But do we really know what love is?

To some people love is romance. To others it is a feeling of being secure in the other. To still others it is being attracted to something that the other possesses such as beauty, strength, achievement, or character. All these forms of love depend on what the other means *to us*, on something in the other person that gratifies *us* in some way. He or she adds to our existence.

This kind of love is certainly an important ingredient of a good relationship, but it is not the one that builds it. What happens when we don't see anymore "what we love" in our spouse. When she changes – does it mean our love will disappear? This is what many young people, particularly Non-Christians, are afraid of, when they think of marriage. What if the basis for our love goes away?

The answer to that is simple. True love, love that really builds a relationship, is something different – something that does not depend on how our partner is but solely on what our attitude towards our spouse is. It is the kind of love that God has for us.

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (**Romans 5:8**).

This form of love has nothing to do with whether the other is gratifying us at the moment. *It is a love that is concerned with the good for the other person.*

The Greek language has a way to distinguish between several kinds of love that many modern languages do not have anymore. They have three different words that cannot be confused with each other: *φιλη* (phile), the brotherly love, a feeling of mutual closeness and trust; *ερος* (eros), the sensual love that has to do with physical attraction and intimate knowledge of the other; and *αγαπη* (agape), the love that reaches out to the other and is concerned with the best of that person.

All three forms of love have something beautiful in them and do belong to a healthy marriage. But the first two depend on who and how the other person is and what she triggers in us, while only the last – agape – is selfless enough to build a relationship. Unfortunately, the English language knows only one word for three very different concepts and we have no clear understanding of what agape-love really means. So what does it mean to love your spouse as yourself? There are three aspects to it.

The first aspect is *Empathy*.

1. *You identify with your spouse so deeply that you feel the effects of your behavior on her.*

When we do things that hurt a relationship, then selfishness is usually at the root. We simply do not think or care about how our behavior affects the other. And so we just do what you think best for ourselves.

But if we learn to see the world through the eyes of our spouse, we will feel the damage we're doing to her. And when we experience the pain that our behavior creates, we may ask ourselves whether we would like to be treated that way and find it easier to change our behavior. *Empathy*, that is identifying with another's experience, is a great help towards a more loving attitude.

Empathy, however, requires that both partners must learn to communicate feelings – and not just reactions to behavior. When your spouse hurts you – can you show what is going on inside you? The fear that his anger creates. The discouragement that her criticism generates. The frustration resulting from his chronic lateness or the worries because of her overspending. We need to honestly show each other what is going on *inside* us – not just the surface (see also Section 8.5). Only then is it possible, that our spouse can feel what he or she is doing to us.

2. *You think first of making your spouse's life better.*

Empathy enables us not only to see the negative consequences of our imperfections and sinful attitudes but also to become proactive and think of what would improve the situation our spouse is in.

If you had been at home alone or just with the kids all day, what would you like from your partner? How about some meaningful conversation? If you had been working hard all day, what would you like from your partner? How about some relief? Wouldn't that be good?

What about the bigger issues in life? How would you feel if you did not get an opportunity to develop your talents – wouldn't you want someone to give you the freedom and resources to do so? How would you feel if you had to work extra hours just to stay out of debt – wouldn't you appreciate if your spouse would spend the money wisely so that you don't have to worry?

Many marital arguments wouldn't have to take place if both partners had this kind of attitude. If each spouse would feel the other's needs as his or her own, they would work as a team to get these needs met. They would be willing to sacrifice to see that happen, and find joy in the happiness and fulfillment of the other.

Again, however, both spouses need to communicate how they feel about things. Your spouse may actually like things that you don't – so putting yourself in his shoes may not always lead to an accurate understanding of the situation. If you get to know each other, you will learn to feel like your spouse feels.

3. *You want the best for your spouse even when she can't see what that is.*

The most difficult aspect of loving your spouse is wanting the best for her even if she doesn't see what that is. What your spouse needs may not always be what she wants. She may need a confrontation to make her aware of sinful behavior. He may need to be put into treatment for an addiction, even if he doesn't like that at all. There may be a need for spiritual growth and you may have to invest energy, time, and attention to bring your spouse closer to God. or your spouse may need a relief from duties, which means you have to shoulder some of her workload or get a job to reduce his burdens. The key concept here is that it has to be done for the *benefit* of the other.

This kind of love may cost you. It may be very difficult for you. But loving your spouse as yourself means that you want it as desperately as you would want it for yourself.

There is more to agape-love than just empathy. True love also comes with a concept of *commitment*, a promise that cannot be broken. God's attitude towards his children is clearly expressed in **Hebrews 13:5**:

Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.

To commit yourself to your spouse means you will not desert her nor leave her, no matter how difficult things get. Leaving is not an option for you. Why is this so important?

If you're not committed to marriage, you are tempted to leave, when difficulties come up. Avoidance is the easier way out – why go through the pain and labor of working through the difficulty? Even if you don't physically, you may leave emotionally and thus forsake your relationship.

But problems in a marriage are usually a sign that both partners need to change and grow. If you leave, you miss an important opportunity. But if you hang in there and go through the necessary changes, you will receive great rewards. The problem is that you don't see that before you actually get there. Your commitment is the only thing that keeps you going.

You may compare a marriage to a marathon run or a strenuous mountain hike. When my wife and I first tried to hike Mt. Elbert in Colorado, we were all excited when we got started. The weather was perfect and the hike wasn't as difficult as we expected. But once we hit 14,000 foot altitude, hiking became increasingly strenuous. We had to inch our way up to the summit and stop every 200 feet. Several times we were ready to give up – why go through the strain and walk on? But we wanted to reach the top, so our commitment kept us going. And it was worth it. The view from the summit was breathtaking. If we had given up half an hour earlier, it would have been much better if we had not started to climb at all.

Marriage problems can also be compared to some deep surgery that one has to go through. Imagine a surgery without commitment – how long would a patient survive who leaves in the middle of a bypass surgery? And what would be his chances if he stays? God sometimes has to perform surgery that saves our relationship – but we must be committed to let him finish.

Commitment also provides a necessary ingredient for growth and that is *security*. Without security, your spouse will always fear that you leave if he doesn't meet your expectations. And this fear will give way to a whole host of problems that prevent growth in your relationship.

Some people believe that too much security takes the excitement out of a marriage. "He doesn't have to make any efforts anymore to keep me", is what they think. Some

even toy with the threat of leaving if their spouses don't satisfy all their wishes. Such an approach may work for a while to get some selfish desires fulfilled, but it will certainly destroy the marriage relationship. If you take away the security, your spouse will never trust you enough to build a deep relationship.

Commitment provides both the need for growth in yourself and the security for your spouse to grow. You want to be together for life, and your commitment helps you to work things out.

Empathy and commitment must be accompanied by a third component: *action*.

Faith by itself, if not accompanied by action, is dead (**James 2:17**).

Love is not just a process that goes on inside you. The love that makes a marriage grow is the love that brings action into a relationship. A love that puts all the above into practice. That is the only way your spouse can see it.

Show me your faith without deeds and I will show you my faith by what I do
(**James 2:18**).

You can talk about your feelings and your love for your spouse all day long. But if it is not accompanied by action your spouse will have a hard time believing you. You also need to show your love by what you do.

Think of the time when you first dated. How hard did you work to express your love. You had hundreds of ideas to show your spouse-to-be how much you appreciated her. Now that the knot has been tied, don't take her for granted. Jesus warns us about letting our love towards God grow cold:

I hold this against you. You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen. Repent, and do the things you first did
(**Revelation 2:4–5a**).

True love doesn't allow itself to grow cold. If it has done so, it is time to rekindle the flame. Take some time just for each other – without children, relatives, and friends – and start dating again. Begin to make plans where you want your marriage to go. And don't waste any thought on why this should be impossible or that your stupid husband will ruin it anyway. Rather think about what it takes to get there and lay out the next step you both should go. Do this regularly. You may have to invest into a babysitter and let go of other things that usually occupy your evenings – your marriage is certainly worth it.

Love is the foundation for marriage: both love for God and love for your spouse. Make love your highest priority in your marriage and it will pay you back much more than you ever thought possible.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.

(**1. Corinthians 13:4–8a**)

None of us is able to live this description of love completely. But we can try and see that love will serve as powerful boundary against all kinds of evil influences on your marriage. It will protect marriage and give you much in return for what you invest in its enduring power.

8.4 Value 3: Compassion and Forgiveness

During our days of courtship, we tend to have an idealized picture of our future spouse. She is the perfect person, not only beautiful in her appearance but also lovely in character. He is so strong and considerate, the man who would do everything to keep you from harm.

But how long did it take you to find out, that even that ideal person is far from perfect? He fails you in areas that are really important to you. She says things to you that really hurt you. And that happens over and over again.

Let's face it. The person that you love the most and have committed your life to is *not* perfect. Your spouse is guaranteed to fail you and hurt you in many ways, some of them quite serious. That is our nature as human beings as the Bible clearly states:

There is no one righteous, not even one (**Psalm 14:3 / Romans 3:10**).

There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins

(**Ecclesiastes 7:20**)

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us (**1. John 1:8**).

Your spouse is no exception from that rule and it hurts even more because she is so close to you and you love her so much. But what can you do when your wife has a weakness, failure, or inability to do something that she should do? What happens when your husband fails you and proves to be much less than you wish him to be?

What can you do?

Ignore the problem, as if it weren't there? Beat him up for his imperfections and nag him every day? We know that this doesn't help your relationship.

The Bible offers us a better solution

Love covers over a multitude of sins (**1. Peter 4:8**)

Nothing can permanently damage a relationship if love is in the picture. There is no hurt that love cannot heal, no failure that is larger than grace. **Love never fails you (1. Corinthians 13:8a)**. But for these miracles to take place you need to have an attitude of compassion and forgiveness.

Forgiveness is the opposite of perfectionism – you give up your demands for your spouse to be perfect. You accept that he is inferior to the standard right now. Right now you may be in a *stronger position* – but you realize that you are not morally superior. Remember that you are not perfect, too. Even God never uses his stronger position to hurt us when we fail him, but always to help, so we should do the same.

Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against each other. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity (**Colossians 3:12b–14**).

How many marriages could be healed if we would wear compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience whenever our spouses fail and hurt us?

“But wait a minute”, some people might say at this point. “Doesn’t that mean I enable his misbehavior? Why should I forgive when he hurts me so much?”

That though is quite human, but also quite wrong. As humans we tend to harden our hearts when we are hurt or offended. Our spouse should know that what he did was wrong, so we punish him until he comes crawling back to us.

Unfortunately, that doesn’t work at all. In fact, our *hardness of heart* is more destructive for our relationship than the failure that we cannot forgive. Failings can be overcome – but hardness of heart is a true relationship killer. Jesus said that that hardness of heart is the only reason why there is divorce at all (**Matthew 19:8**). If our hearts were tender and compassionate, it wouldn’t come to that.

Much more can be said about the importance of forgiveness and what it means for us. From a practical perspective, forgiveness involves a number of issues

1. *An identification with sin and failure.*

You need to have an attitude of humility toward your spouse’s failure. Keep in mind that you constantly fail her as well. Remember **1. John 1:8**: if you believe that you are above sin, you simply deceive yourself. But if you are aware of your own sins, it will be easier for you to have grace for your spouse’s.

2. *An identification with weakness.*

Hardheartedness often comes from a desire to avoid pain. You only see the hurt that your spouse’s weakness causes *you* and try to avoid it. But you do not see the struggles that she is going through nor that she is in desperate need of your help to overcome this weakness.

If you identify with your spouse’s weakness, you will become a partner in the healing and strengthening process and strengthen the bond between the two of you.

3. *A willingness to repent.*

Forgiveness and compassion come from the injured party. She sets you free after you have sinned against her. But without repentance on behalf of the person who failed, closeness and trust is difficult to reestablish.

If you want your relationship to grow closer, you must be willing to admit failure, accept full responsibility for it, and show a true change of heart – you honestly want to change. Without that, your spouse can hardly open himself up to you, because you have not yet shown to be trustworthy again. You don’t have to be

perfect to earn his trust again, but you have to let him see that you are truly going to try.

4. *A willingness to become vulnerable again.*

People who have been hurt severely often built up a wall of protection around themselves in order to make themselves invulnerable. This strategy might have been helpful at some stage in their lives, but it keeps them from having closeness with their spouse.

If your spouse, who has hurt you, is truly repentant and can be trusted, then you must open up and become vulnerable again – although you know that he will hurt you again in some way.

Compassion, tenderheartedness, and forgiveness ensure that imperfect people can experience love and long-lasting relationships. Without these qualities, a distance between the two of you will grow quickly. But if you clothe yourself with them, the bond between you will become stronger and stronger.

8.5 Value 4: Honesty

Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist
(**Ephesians 6:14a**).

Another important value for a close relationship is honesty. We need to know the truth about each other. In a marriage relationship there is no space for lies, not even small ones, because deceptions destroy trust and raises doubts: “Can I really believe what my husband is telling me? Or do I have to check everything he says?” If you’re not truthful about some issues, how can your spouse know that she can trust you in others?

Couples who do not put a high value on honesty deceive each other in many ways. Sometimes spouses lie over small things like spending too much. At other times they lie about serious things, such as affairs. Our human nature tempts us to lie about problems, about things that we are ashamed of, when we are afraid of disappointing our partner, or when we fear that the truth could have negative consequences for us. But anything, no matter how small or how big, can be forgiven and worked through in a relationship.

But deception damages our relationship much more than the things that we lie about. It is the one thing that cannot be worked through because it denies the problem. It makes forgiveness unattainable.

Couples should aim at total honesty. But honesty must be coupled with the other values that we discuss in this chapter (**Ephesians 4:15**). Honesty without love can be brutal and wreck your relationship. Honesty without forgiveness is almost impossible – how can we be honest to a partner who always punishes us and never forgives?

Honesty without a commitment to holiness doesn't leave much space for hope that the problem will not reoccur.

There are some areas that couples find difficult to be honest about.

1. Feelings and desires, likes and dislikes
2. Needs and vulnerabilities
3. Hurts and disappointments
4. Anger and hatred
5. Sins and failure
6. Finances
7. Sex

There are plenty of reasons why we are dishonest in these areas. We may fear being misunderstood and rejected if we talk about feelings and desires. We may have experienced that knowledge about our vulnerabilities has been used against us and do not dare our spouse to be different. We may suppress anger because we believe it is wrong to show anger. We have never learned to be honest about sexual desires and problems because "one does not talk about such things" and our religious upbringing taught us that any form of sexual desire is wrong anyway.

But if we're not honest about these issues, we do not give our spouse the chance to know who we really are. Our spouse has the right to know our soul, our innermost feelings – even the negative ones. That is the level where the most intimate connection takes place. That is the level where we really become close to each other.

I know that most men do not find it easy to share feelings. We do not want to show our dark side or weakness. We want to be the strong and good one – the provider and protector, not the one who needs help. So we swallow disappointments, hide frustration, cover up failures and weaknesses, hoping that this would protect our relationship. But because of such barriers to honesty, intimate knowledge between us and our spouse is ruled out and falsehood takes over. Couples often live out years of falsehood trying to protect and save their relationship, not realizing that by doing so they destroy any chance for a real relationship. This is not how God wants us to live

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body (**Ephesians 4:25**).

It cannot be stressed enough how important it is to share with our spouse our deepest feelings, needs, hurts, desires, failures and whatever else is on our soul. If both partners can feel safe enough in their marriage to be totally vulnerable, then their marriage can return to a state of paradise where there is true intimacy without a need for fig leaves.

In most cases, deception in a marriage takes place because the dishonest spouse tries to protect himself. The fact that fear drives the deception does not excuse it, but

complicates matters. Before spouses can tell the whole truth, they must deal with their fear. Common fears are

1. Fear of real closeness and being known completely
2. Fear of abandonment and loss of love if the spouse really knows them
3. Fear of being judged, controlled, or taken advantage of
4. Fear of being seen as bad or not good enough if some weakness or failure is known
5. Fear of their own desires, needs, and feelings

Dealing with these fears may require you to work out the deeper issues that get in the way. This is a topic by itself that cannot be fully addressed here. But there are certain things you can do to increase honesty in your marriage.

1. *Promise that you will never punish your spouse for being honest.* That doesn't mean that there will be no consequences, but punishment, shame, and condemnation will not be part of them.
2. *Permit each other to question you and check out things.* Do not be offended when your spouse tries to understand some facts that don't add up. That doesn't mean she doesn't trust you – she just needs to understand you fully.
3. *Admonish each other when you see that your spouse is not being honest.* This can be done in a harmless and even funny way, but you need to hold each other to the truth so that deception won't creep in slowly.
4. *Help your spouse in healing the underlying fears of being honest.* If he fears abandonment, show him that you stand by him no matter what he does and says and that you are not going to treat him like whoever abandoned him before.
5. *Take responsibility for your own dishonesty and fears and make a commitment to resolving.* Find a friend besides your spouse who will hold you accountable. Get a friend to help you tell the truth when you are afraid of doing that alone.
6. *Use discernment – some truths are not ready to be dealt with yet.* Your spouse may be too fragile at the time or in special circumstances. To bring up a difficult truth might not be wise right now – but don't use that as an excuse never to tell the truth. Use wisdom to know what your relationship can handle and check out additional resources such as counseling, friends, or healing that may be needed for honesty to work.

If you want to build a strong relationship, make a commitment to each other of total honesty. But remember that honesty must be accompanied by grace, love, and forgiveness to hear and deal with the truth it brings. If you value honesty highly, it will pay you back many times.

8.6 Value 5: Faithfulness

Another thing you do: you flood the LORD's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask "why?". It is because the LORD is acting as a witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. (**Malachi 2:13–14**)

Faithfulness is one of the most misunderstood values in a marriage. Especially in religious circles, our notion of faithfulness is often too shallow. We generally think only of the sexual realm – and believe to be faithful as long as we don't sleep with someone other than our spouse. But even when we are faithful with our bodies, we may not be faithful with our hearts.

So what is faithfulness?

1. *Trust* in each other
2. *Confidence* in each other
3. Being *assured* of each other's character and dependability
(**Deuteronomy 23:21–23**)
4. Allowing each other to be certain of one's *fidelity*
5. *Convincing* each other of one's trustworthiness
6. Being *true* to each other
7. Being *certain* of each other
8. Being *permanent* to each other
9. *Resting* in each other

All these descriptions hint at what faithfulness really is. *A faithful spouse is one who can be trusted, depended upon, and believed in and one in whom you can rest.*

Faithfulness means that your partner can depend on you in all the ways listed above, not just in the physical realm. You can be depended upon to do what you promised and to follow through on what has been entrusted to you. You do your chores faithfully (**Matthew 25:19–21**), you stay within the agreed budget, you pay your bills in time, you come home when you said you will, you make necessary appointments and keep them, you share your life – without fear of reprisal or condemnation, and of course you are sexually faithful as well. Your spouse can be so confident in you that she does not have to worry about anything that she entrusted you with.

Faithfulness, of course, also means that you will not stray from the one you love. An affair begins in your heart.

But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (**Matthew 5:28**)

Faithfulness doesn't mean that you cannot have deep, sustaining, and supportive emotional relationships with other people. Good friends can help you to feel safer, learn to trust more, heal an old emotional wound, and thus eventually get closer to your spouse. Spending a reasonable amount of time away with friends and from your spouse has nothing to do with unfaithfulness,

However, when you take aspects of yourself and intentionally keep them away from your marriage, then you have become unfaithful to your spouse. If you spend more time and energy on a hobby or on maintaining a friendship than on your marriage, if your work or some addiction becomes more important to you than your spouse, if your children have preference over your husband, or your relatives over your wife – then something has come between you and your spouse and makes you disconnect from your relationship. This is what unfaithfulness is about.

Unfaithfulness commonly occurs in a marriage where there is conflict or a need for growth and one partner does not like to deal with the issues. To avoid the conflict – and the spouse – this partner tries to find relief in some “outside” relationship such as other people, work, hobbies, an addiction, or even sicknesses.

Quite often, the unfaithful spouse will justify his unfaithfulness by the other's failures of love. While this may indeed be the case, it is a lame excuse for unfaithfulness. Your unfaithfulness will always be *your* sin, not your spouse's – no matter what she did or did not do to you.

He will never leave you nor forsake you (**Deuteronomy 31:6b**).

If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself

(**2. Timothy 2:13**).

God does not become unfaithful if we do. In the same way our marriage requires us to remain faithful no matter what your spouse does. Do not let your spouse's failures become an excuse for unfaithfulness. Make a commitment to each other that you will not allow anything to come between you two. You will be dependable, trustworthy, and emotionally and sexually faithful.⁵

If you struggle with wanting to take some part of yourself to something or someone other than your spouse, find out why. If it is something that you do together with friends because your spouse has no interest in it, this could be perfectly okay. What is not okay is to let some lust keep your heart away from your spouse and bring it somewhere else.

Be faithful even to the point of death and I will give you the crown of life
(**Revelation 2:10c**).

⁵Few things are more devastating to *all* parties than marital unfaithfulness. If an affair is tempting you, flee while you still can (**1. Corinthians 6:18**) and find a trusted friend to talk you back to your senses. You are close to destroying a lot of people and need to be rescued. See also **Proverbs 2:16–19, 5:3–20, 6:23–25**.

8.7 Value 6: Holiness

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession. (**Deuteronomy 7:6**).

Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness (**2. Peter 3:11**).

Who has saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace (**2. Timothy 1:9**).

For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life (**1. Thessalonians 4:7**).

Holiness – what goes through your mind when you hear this word?

Do you think of romance or having fun? Or does it sound stiff and boring to you, somewhat like the feeling a child has in a very old and majestic church building?

In reality, holiness is something very attractive for marriage. Holiness is one of the essential characteristics of God and therefore one of the essential of life. Holiness has nothing to do with religious formalities or ancient rituals – it is what keeps us close to the God-given reality of life.

Be holy, because I am holy (**Leviticus 11:44b**).

To be holy means to be pure and blameless (**2. Timothy 2:21**). In a marriage that places a high value on holiness, the following would be present

1. *Confession and ownership* of problems in each individual
2. A relentless drive towards growth and development
3. A giving up of everything that gets in the way of *love*
4. Surrender of everything that gets in the way of *truth*
5. *Pure hearts* that do not allow anything toxic to grow

If we make these issues one of our top priorities, we can heal anything that currently burdens our marriage. How great would it be if both marriage partners would strive for holiness. There would be almost no more need for counseling as the marriage would begin to heal itself.

It is important that holiness is seen as a value by itself and not as a means to get something. If you strive for holiness only to make someone look favorably at you, then you will stop all your efforts if you don't get what you want.

This situation often occurs in relationships between a Christian and a Non-Christian. God explicitly warns of such unbalanced relationships, because Christians and Non-Christians have little in common.

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers (**2. Corinthians 6:14**).

Being painfully aware of this, the Christian partner often hopes that the other one will make a profession of faith so that the two can marry. Sometimes she even makes clear that she cannot continue the relationship as long as he is not a Christian.

Now suppose, he doesn't want to lose her. What will be his driving force when he strives for committing his life to Christ? Is it really a desire to get right with God? Is it really full repentance, out of a hunger for righteousness? Or is it just an attempt to keep her?

The only way to find out is to terminate that relationship as God commands it *without* promising that the two will get together again once he is a Christian. He must turn his life over to Christ for his own sake – because he realizes that he is a sinner and needs salvation – not as a means to win her back. Only when he accepts the fact that she may never be his wife even if he does become a Christian, his conversion will really be genuine. He must put his own growth and not other desires first – that is what holiness is about.

Holiness means that you become the kind of person who can produce love and trust. You become whole in God, honest, faithful, and loving. In a marriage, this is anything but stiff or boring – it is a kind of purity and trustworthiness from which the deepest kinds of passion flow.

8.8 Epilogue

Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like (**James 1:22–24**)

There are two kinds of people in the world: those who focus on what they want, always desire it but never attain it; and those who focus on what it takes to *obtain* what they want, do the work, make sacrifices, delay gratification, and ultimately get the rewards of their work.

If you focus on what you want and desire in your marriage and are disappointed and angry that you don't get it, then you will stay exactly there: angry and disappointed. But if you focus on cultivating your marriage, you will reap a huge harvest.

In the same way you should treat the values that we have discussed. Work on them and cultivate them. Stand against anything in yourself – and in your spouse – that would destroy them. Do everything that increases their presence. Your marriage depends on that.

Invest time, money, energy, and other resources to develop the things that truly count: love of God and our spouse, honesty, faithfulness, forgiveness, and holiness. Pursue them with everything you can muster, and they will not fail you in the end.