

ROB GREEN

TYING THE KNOT



A PREMARITAL GUIDE
TO A
STRONG & LASTING MARRIAGE

“This book is a marvelous balance of sound theology and wise practical counsel for couples preparing for marriage. Rob Green writes as one who has faithfully shepherded men and women through this delightful process for many years. You will not only fall deeper in love with each other, but deeper in love with Jesus.”

Steve Viars, Senior Pastor, Faith Church, Lafayette, IN

“Rob Green has given us a practical, biblical, *and* Jesus-focused premarital book to use with couples preparing for marriage. If marriage according to Ephesians 5:32 is really designed to put the love of Jesus and his bride (the church) on display, then it stands to reason that we should be talking about Jesus from the very beginning with couples who are preparing for marriage. Rob addresses all the critical areas that need to be covered but does it in a way that keeps coming back to Jesus. For years we’ve adapted existing material and always felt like something was missing. It wasn’t something; it was *Someone*, and *Tying the Knot* puts that Someone back where he’s supposed to be—at the center of marriage. There’s no better way to help a couple get started right in marriage than to help them see Jesus at the center of it all.”

Brad Bigney, Pastor, Grace Fellowship Church, Florence, KY;
ACBC certified counselor; conference speaker; author of *Gospel Treason*

“Even if you never got farther than chapter 1 (“Jesus Must Be the Center of Your Life”) in *Tying the Knot*, this book would be well worth reading. But if you continue reading, you’ll find treasure piled upon treasure. This book will strengthen not only those just starting out in marriage, but also those who have been married for decades. Read it and be encouraged.”

Amy Baker, Ministry Resource Director, Faith Church, Lafayette, IN; author of *Picture Perfect*

“As you anticipate your wedding, one of life’s biggest events, there’s no greater gift than a wise friend to help guide you along the pathway of preparation and decision-making. Rob Green serves as your friend on this journey, assisting you to build a foundation for a strong and lasting marriage. In addition to his useful teaching, the practical exercises per chapter, and mentor appendix prove invaluable.”

Kevin Carson, Pastor, Sonrise Baptist Church, Ozark, MO;
Professor, Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary,
Springfield, MO

“Tying the Knot offers a compelling vision of how Jesus must be central to your life and marriage. Such a vision gives hope, brings relief, and most important, stirs your affections for Christ. Rob, a seasoned husband and pastor, applies timeless gospel truths to matters of the heart while offering practical biblical guidance for those approaching their wedding day and for those married for years. I wholeheartedly recommend *Tying the Knot*.”

Robert K. Cheong, Pastor of Care, Sojourn Community Church,
Louisville, KY

“Rob has masterfully woven together three crucial elements for marriage and marriage preparation. *Tying the Knot* is solidly biblical, immensely practical, and unapologetically Christ-centered. Christian couples, pastors, and lay leaders will be well served in making this book one of their go-to resources for marriage preparation, and the church will be well served by this book for generations to come.”

Jack Delk, Pastor for Counseling – North Campus, Bethlehem
Baptist Church, Minneapolis, MN

“No one on earth truly knows what you will face in marriage—not in the details at least. Endless are the possible joys and pains, the trials and circumstances, the sins and graces, the shifts and surprises, the people who will come and go. Everything will change. Preparing for this is a serious task. Rob Green offers a kind of preparation for marriage that does not center upon the ever-shifting circumstances of life, but upon the Lord Jesus Christ and upon his everlasting Word. *Tying the Knot* labors to orient you around the Person who will be there, who knows what will come, who is faithful and mighty, and who will give you manifold wisdom for the endless possibilities of marriage.”

John Henderson, Associate Pastor, Del Ray Baptist, Alexandria, VA

“One of the most neglected areas of counseling in the life of the church has to be premarital counseling. Often seen as a perfunctory hurdle to jump through, premarital counseling can quickly become stale and mechanical. Rob Green has provided the church an excellent new resource for premarital counseling that is biblically-saturated, Christ-centered, and clearly written. From the discussion questions at the end of each chapter to the guide for mentors in the back, this book is a perfect blend of theology for real life.”

Jonathan Holmes, Pastor of Counseling, Parkside Church, author
of *The Company We Keep*

“I would have loved to read this book with my wife while we were engaged. So practical, so wise. Engaged couples, listen carefully to Rob Green.”

Andy Naselli, Assistant Professor of New Testament and Biblical Theology, Bethlehem College & Seminary, Minneapolis, MN

“Rob Green has provided us with a wonderful new gospel-centered resource to help engaged couples prepare for marriage. This book repeatedly emphasizes that marriage is founded upon God’s love for us in Christ and is filled with personal examples and practical illustrations that come from years of faithful biblical counseling. One of the best qualities of *Tying the Knot* is its brevity. Rob covers the most important issues succinctly so that a busy engaged couple should have sufficient time to complete this study and the homework assignments in the months leading up to marriage. Another unique feature is that Rob has gone to extra effort (including an appendix) to make it easy for a mentor couple to work through this material with an engaged couple. I am sure that the Lord will use this book to bless many and I look forward to using it with many couples in the future.”

Jim Newheiser, Executive Director, The Institute for Biblical Counseling and Discipleship (ICBD)

“Premarital counseling is needed now more than ever in our culture. The scourge of unhappy marriages and so-easy divorce has led many to believe that marriage is an institution that is no longer workable. *Tying the Knot* is a hope-filled, theologically sound, ‘you can do marriage God’s way and here’s how’ manual. Green’s careful unpacking of key Scriptures coupled with practical application assignments makes this book a winner. It is intended as a premarital counseling manual, but it would also be helpful for small group study or a sermon-series primer. Get it and use it!”

Randy Patten, Founder, TEAM Focus Ministries; former Director of Training and Advancement, The Association of Certified Biblical Counselors

“There has long been a need for a solid premarital counseling curriculum that roots everything in Scripture, is realistic about the joys and challenges of marriage, and most importantly makes Christ central to everything. Rob Green’s *Tying the Knot* accomplishes this, and offers much, much more.”

Deepak Reju, Pastor of Biblical Counseling and Family Ministry, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, DC; author of *The Pastor and Counseling* and *On Guard*; President of the Board, Biblical Counseling Coalition

“Companies have start-up manuals that they require you to read and follow when beginning a new job. Yet when it comes to starting one of the most important human relationships—marriage—many do not seek or even know to seek guidance and preparation from above for what is ahead. Rob has contributed a tremendous resource for the caring of souls in the church where new marriage engagements are concerned. *Tying the Knot* is Christ-centered, biblically-based, and easy to comprehend. This book comprehensively addresses the key issues in beginning and growing a marriage and would be invaluable for anyone embarking on their marital journey. I highly recommend this to pastors, counselors, young couples, and even as a refresher for married couples.”

Stuart W. Scott, Professor of Biblical Counseling, The Master’s College

“Dr. Rob Green’s succinct and timely resource, *Tying the Knot*, helps couples strengthen their relationships with each other and with Christ as they work with a mentor to align their goals for the future with the biblical wisdom found in God’s Word. The well-planned discussion questions in each chapter, the outline of the book, and the very helpful ‘Just for the Mentors’ section are but three of the great aspects of this book that will be much appreciated by pastors and all those who conduct premarital counseling.”

Mark E. Shaw, Pastor and Executive Director, Vision of Hope;
author of *The Heart of Addiction* and *Addiction-Proof Parenting*

“In all the pressures and expectations of planning for marriage, it is easy for a Christian couple to lose direction by focusing on the demands of the immediate. Rob Green has written a wonderful tool that will take a couples through essential elements of building a Christ-centered relationship. What he describes in this book is invaluable for marriages that desire to not just survive but thrive with a proper Christ focus.”

John D. Street, Chair, MABC Graduate Program, The Master’s College & Seminary; President, Association of Certified Biblical Counselors

“How does God minister his grace through you to another one of his children in marriage? In a culture of self, where can one get guidance for a Savior-focused marriage? In *Tying The Knot*, Rob Green provides a biblical, Christ-centered, practical, hope-filled tool to assist individuals in

learning how to partner with Christ to become instruments of his grace to their spouses.”

A. Charles Ware, President of Crossroads Bible College; coauthor of *Just Don't Marry One* and *Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling*

“Marital love, problem solving, roles and expectations, communication, finances, community, intimacy—all the issues that every marriage faces—can be addressed with self as the center or with Jesus as the center. Whether you’re a pastor, counselor, marriage mentor, premarital couple, or married couple, use *Tying the Knot* to join marriages to the cross. From now on, this is *the* book I will recommend for premarital and marital counseling.”

Bob Kelleman, Author of *Gospel-Centered Counseling* and *Gospel Conversations*

“*Tying the Knot* is a great book for those considering marriage. The topics are highly relevant and the homework will help any counselor or couple to put these crucial lessons into practice. I gladly recommend this book to anyone involved in premarital counseling.”

Garrett Higbee, Executive Director of Biblical Soul Care, Harvest Bible Chapel and of the Biblical Counseling Coalition

“*Tying the Knot* shows the connection between having an amazing Savior and things like communication or budgets. Where it can be easy to fall into mechanistic teaching, Rob Green draws the line from Christ’s obedience and provision to our lives. I appreciated his focus on the community of Christ and its importance in marriage. I recommend this book to anyone who is doing premarital counseling.”

Elyse Fitzpatrick, Author of *Counsel from the Cross*

“Dr. Green has provided a resource I didn’t know I needed so badly. Green understands two things particularly well: the dynamics of how real people relate and how those dynamics reveal their constant need for Jesus Christ. The practical exercises that flow from these insights will make it easy on counselors helping couples to prepare for marriage.”

Jeremy Pierre, Associate Professor of Biblical Counseling & Dean of Students, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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A Premarital Guide to a Strong and Lasting Marriage

Rob Green



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TO MY DEAR WIFE, STEPHANIE,

*of twenty-two years. Thank you for entering the adventure
of marriage with me. Jesus explains in Mark 12 that marriage
is not for heaven; it is for now. This means that the joys God
has designed for marriage help us to live for Jesus
in both the blessings, like Yosemite,
and the challenges, like the loss of the child we never met,
of life in a beautiful, broken, twisted world.
Thank you for the joyful adventures so far.
I am looking forward to the ones still to come.*

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Acknowledgments

MY THANKS GOES to Faith Church, Lafayette, Indiana, whose training in counseling has greatly shaped the way I think about my own life and the lives of others. My service at Faith provides many opportunities to counsel married people and those planning to marry in the near future. That training and experience have shaped much of what is written here.

Introduction

CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR upcoming marriage! As someone who has counseled many engaged couples—and a married man myself—I am very glad that you have chosen this book to help you prepare for the wonderful experience of marriage. The engagement period is an exciting but busy time; there's always something new to talk about and something new to plan. That's why I'm encouraged that you have chosen to invest time and energy in material that can help you to have a Christ-centered marriage. As you study this book—and more importantly, the Bible—you will prepare yourself to have a strong and lasting marriage.

This book is for couples who want premarital counseling that is Christ-centered. Why is this important? First, it's important because God designed marriage. Marriage was his idea. He designed marriage to be one man and one woman who leave their parents and build a new life together. Therefore, all the blessings associated with this institution are based on his instructions. Second, it's important because in Ephesians 5:31–32, Paul described marriage as a reflection of the relationship between Christ and his church. This has tremendous implications for the way we should approach marriage. I could not be more encouraged that you want your marriage to reflect the love Jesus has for his church. It is my prayer that this book will help you move toward Christlikeness and marital oneness.

I'm conscious that readers of this book will come from many different backgrounds. They may be at different places spiritually as they begin this book. What about you? Perhaps you were raised in the church since you were a baby and you've been pretty steady as a Christian all your life. Or perhaps you grew up in the church but you've had your struggles in your relationship with God. You may be someone who came to Christ after many years of living for other things, some of which you deeply regret. Or Christianity may be very new to you, and you largely have your fiancé(e) to thank for it. As you think about marriage, God can meet you where you are, no matter where that is, if you are willing to listen. If your heart is open to him and to his Word, he can take you from where you are to where you need to be, with him and with your future spouse. For that to happen, you may need to set aside some assumptions you've always had about marriage. Let me begin by encouraging you to avoid two extremes when thinking about married life.

Two Extremes

The first extreme is the belief that marriage has to be hard and difficult, with an inevitably miserable transition period. I firmly believe that God gave us the gift of marriage as one of the joys of life on earth. We don't need to enter it thinking that it will be anything other than wonderful. So please disregard those who act as if marriage is a tremendous burden, leading to struggle upon struggle. Yes, some marriages struggle, but God intends any struggles you have to show you where you need Jesus's work in your heart. He will show you how to rely on him for the love, strength, and wisdom you need to love your spouse well. God designed marriage as a blessing and, though we still struggle as sinners, we have access to God's grace in Jesus. That makes all the difference as we learn to live in the intimate relationship of marriage.

The second extreme to avoid is the belief that marriage will be wonderful without any effort. As one of my friends once told me, he thought the formula to a great marriage was really simple: Just “don’t have sex before you are married, marry a Christian, and everything will be great.” Certainly, the Bible encourages believers to only marry believers and to abstain from sex before marriage, but those things alone do not guarantee a wonderful marriage! They are not the sum total of the Christian life. We need to remember that Jesus taught us to be continuously dependent on him, because as sinners we need to be. He said, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). This misguided assumption, like the first one, results in many disappointments and frustrations if we hold onto it.

A more biblical approach is to recognize that God has given us marriage to enjoy. He created it for our pleasure, and he created it to give us a glimpse of his covenant love for us. But marriage also takes a commitment—a commitment to sacrifice for the benefit of someone else for the glory of God. It means living all of the ten thousand little moments of your life as if the glory of God and the preeminence of Jesus were at stake. If that sounds intimidating, it should! It is meant to take us where God always wants us to go—to Christ, in humble reliance on his power and promises to transform us into the people he redeemed us to be.

Goals for This Study

First, I want to help you establish a marriage that brings pleasure to Christ and to you. Therefore, this resource talks very little about the marriage ceremony. The ceremony is important, but I am far more interested in the lifetime of marriage that comes afterward. I often remind couples that I care a little about their wedding day, but I care a lot about the fifty (or more!) years that follow. So the

focus of this book will be on how to build a life together with Jesus at the center.

Second, I believe that the best way to work through this material is with a pastor or a spiritually mature friend—a mentor. There is plenty that you can learn on your own, but many of us (myself included) are slow to identify areas where we struggle. We are even slower to do something about them without some form of personal encouragement and exhortation. It's much easier to pretend that those struggles don't exist—or at least aren't a big deal. But if you are willing to work with a mentor, it's much more likely that he will help you see your areas of blindness. Those realizations can be a bit painful or embarrassing at first, but they are for your good in the long run. So I hope that you'll allow this material to be more than something on your to-do list. Make it a first step in a journey of God-honoring change.

Third, this material is relevant whether you are twenty-one years old, about to be married for the first time, or whether you are fifty with three children, planning another wedding. It has something to offer if you've been widowed after a happy marriage or divorced after a tragic betrayal. It offers hope to a new believer with few good role models just as it does to someone from a stable Christian home. So let me encourage you to be teachable through this process. In each case there are lessons to be learned to make a new relationship work well. I want to help you learn whatever you need to learn for a lifetime of marriage.

Are you ready to begin? The eight chapters in this book describe eight areas that are crucial to establishing a marriage that honors Christ, resulting in great joy for both of you. Each chapter concludes with questions you will first answer yourself. Then you will compare and discuss your answers with your future spouse. Later, you will share them with the person who is mentoring you.

Before Your First Session

Before your first meeting with your mentor, you and your fiancé(e) should gather four things to help your mentor serve you effectively. I recommend doing this before you begin the first chapter.

1. Parental support

At our church we ask engaged couples, especially those being married for the first time, whether they have parental support for their marriage. There are a few reasons why we ask about this. First, we believe it is wise and helpful to have people who care about you, love you, and want the best for you to encourage your marriage. There is value in receiving input from those who care most about us.

A second reason is derived from Ephesians 6:2–3, which explains that everyone has the responsibility to honor their parents. In most cases, there will be parental contact after the wedding; gaining their support now helps to reinforce the relationships. Parental involvement and support lay a foundation for a family culture that communicates, cares, loves, and seeks to bless one another. You will see the benefits during the wedding planning and also in the years to come.

However, you may be in a situation where you cannot get parental support. Your parents may have died. Your parents may not be involved in your life, or you may have parents who reject Jesus and want their children to reject him as well. There are any number of possible scenarios here. If you are in such a situation, I offer two suggestions. First, please speak with your mentor, the person meeting with you and your fiancé(e) as you go through this book. Your mentor will help you think about your particular circumstances to determine the most godly approach. Second, consider asking

someone you love and trust in your church family to serve in that role for you. Such individuals certainly do not carry the same level of authority as parents, but they can be a huge blessing to you, especially in an area of your life where there is hurt and pain. I have seen several young women develop relationships with a family in the church who served as unofficial “surrogate parents” as potential boyfriends came to call. For the young woman, this relationship provided protection from young men who lacked good intentions, and it also supported and encouraged her when a man of godly character came along. If you are older, friends, adult children, or small group leaders can serve in this role for you. The point is that all of us, regardless of age, are helped in our preparation for marriage (one of life’s most important decisions) by having family and friends give their support.

2. Physical standards of conduct

Most, if not all, couples want to get married because they enjoy being together. They are physically attracted to each other, and being around the other person makes them happy. This is as it should be. In fact, we ought to seriously question why a couple would want to marry if sexual attraction was not present. But it is easy to move from enjoying one another to enjoying one another *too much*, especially since our culture tells us that premarital sex is essential to find out if you are compatible.

I have ministered to many newlywed couples and seen the damage that going too far physically has done to the relationship. It sets patterns of selfishness and pleasure-seeking (in the wrong ways at the wrong time) that are often hard to break. Those selfish issues rear their ugly heads in the form of significant conflict weeks, and sometimes days, after the ceremony.

For that reason, I ask all couples (even older ones) to write up their standards for the physical contact they will have during their engagement. Granted, the document does not remove temptation

or control the heart. But standards are tools that can help couples live in a way that they will not be ashamed to discuss later. A friend once told me how difficult it had been for him to tell the woman he wanted to marry that he had been engaged before—and sexually active during that time. With tears he confessed that he wished he had waited for her. After all, sometimes engagements do not last.

3. Testimonies of conversion to Christ

The third thing you need is a written testimony of how you came to trust in Christ as your Savior and Lord. How did the Lord draw you to himself? Were you in a church for years when suddenly it “clicked”? Were you invited to a Vacation Bible School, a Bible study, or an Easter service? Did you have lots of questions and, slowly but surely, the Lord put someone in your life to answer them?

This exercise has many benefits. First, it helps you focus on the incomparable gift of eternal life that God offers us. We should never stop being awestruck that Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of God, would die on a cross for our benefit. Second, writing out your testimony sets the stage for our first lesson about putting Jesus at the center of your life and marriage. This concept will be emphasized again and again so that you become convinced that if you get the “Jesus part” right, everything else can work. But if Jesus is not the center of your life and your marriage, your foundation is gone and you are in danger. Third, as amazing as this seems, some couples preparing for marriage have never heard the conversion story of their future spouse. Reading each other’s testimonies will encourage you; you may even learn something about your fiancé(e) that you did not know before!

4. Two paragraphs on why you want to marry your fiancé(e)

When I mentor engaged couples, I find it interesting to hear why they want to be married. What is it about her that encourages

you to choose her for life? Of all the men in the universe (like three billion of them!), why him? Two paragraphs explaining your answer will clarify your thoughts and offer insights for your mentor.

I realize that these four tasks will be very simple for some, but very challenging for others. If you are a new Christian just learning about the Bible, or emerging from a difficult past, I want you to know that this book was written with you in mind just as much as it was written for someone who grew up in the church. The journey this book leads you through is not a journey about perfection. It is a journey about growth, one step at a time. Your mentor will help you each step of the way. Even if you take a few extra weeks to cover certain topics, please do not get discouraged. Even if there are times when you feel inadequate or like a failure, remember that it is our inadequacies and our failures that Jesus came to redeem. Take heart and have courage! I have never seen a couple work through this material and regret it. Each one found things of value and grew along the way. Yes, a few felt like quitting from time to time but, as they stuck with it, they valued the experience and the lessons they learned all the more.

Once you've gathered these four pieces of information (or at least done your best), it's time to begin the first lesson. Have a great time studying and learning together! The format of this study is very simple. Begin by reading the chapter. At the end of each chapter are a series of questions that you should first complete on your own. When each of you have finished, meet with your fiancé(e) to talk about your answers. Your mentor will also go over certain questions and concepts with you to guide and encourage you as you move toward marriage. May God bless you and keep you both!

Chapter 1

Jesus Must Be the Center of Your Life

And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”
(Matthew 22:37–40)

JESUS EXPLAINS THAT the greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind. The three terms of “heart,” “soul,” and “mind” are very similar in meaning. They each refer to the command center of your life. Jesus uses the three terms together for emphasis. The Lord wants you to love him with everything you have. There can be no compartment of your life or area of your heart that is off limits to him. One of the most important preparations for a Christ-centered marriage is to remember that your affections belong first to Christ. You must love him with all that you have and are.

The second commandment is similar: Love your neighbor as yourself. This is not a call to love yourself—the Bible assumes that you will do that just fine! The concern is whether you will transfer this same concern to others. You know firsthand how easy it is to love yourself and to develop friendships with people who like what

you like. But it's oh, so much harder to do so with people who are not like you. While you have likely concluded that you and your fiancé(e) have much in common, I can promise you that it is amazing how much you will learn about loving each other in the days ahead.

This passage from Matthew's Gospel identifies our top priorities. In one sense, Jesus says that if you really understand these two commands, you understand the entire Old Testament! (That is one amazing version of *CliffsNotes*!) In two simple yet profound commands, Jesus explains his priority system. Take the next few moments and let that sink in, especially the first command. *Your most important task in life is to love the Lord with everything you have.*

Engaged couples are often quick to talk about their love for each other. Surely, the two of you are reading this book because you have deep affection for each other. You have enjoyed many wonderful times together and are eagerly looking to take your relationship to the next level. In fact, during this time of your life, you often find yourself thinking about your future spouse, what you will do on your honeymoon, what your life will be like, and similar thoughts. However, one mistake that engaged couples make is to think that their relationship is the most important one of all. When they believe their most important relationship is their own, they make decisions based on that priority. You might even be tempted to attend a small group, Sunday school class, or Bible study simply to arrange for some premarital counseling. This is a dangerous line of thinking. If you treat your church, your pastors, or your friends as if *you* are the center of the universe, this will feed your selfishness, a selfishness that will be unleashed on your spouse (and others) in the days and weeks to come.

Please notice that Jesus says in Matthew 22 that the order of the commands is really important. Each of you was designed by God to love him *first*. When you function according to your

purpose, you function at maximum capacity. But when Jesus is not at the center, you become like a pair of pliers trying to embed a nail in a piece of wood. You might be successful with enough time and determination, but a hammer would have been so much better! But when you love the Lord first, you function as you are designed to, and the results are amazing. You will not only experience a joyous relationship with the God of heaven and earth, but you will also be in a perfect position to enjoy all that God has designed marriage to be.

Motivations to Love the Lord with All Your Heart, Soul, and Mind

Motivation 1: Jesus died for you

It is possible to read the Bible without making much practical application to your life. However, that's not how God wants you to read his Word. Take, for example, Matthew 26–28, the story of Christ's crucifixion. You could read it much like you might read an account of the Holocaust. You might experience deep sadness as you read about the innocent dying. You might experience shock and disgust at the brutality leveled by a group of human beings on another. You might experience anger as you reflect on an individual's desire for absolute power. But it is possible to read about the Holocaust without it changing your life personally. And it is possible to do the same thing with the story of Jesus. The Lord, however, wants you to read the story differently.

He wants you to see his love for you. Peter betrays him three times and leaves to cry in shame. But Peter is the one Jesus comes to, restoring their relationship and calling him to serve him (see John 21). The kind of love Jesus had for Peter is also on display in Jesus's ministry to one of the thieves crucified with him. After the man confesses his faith in Jesus as Savior, Jesus promises, "Today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). That kind of love

is offered to us too. Paul reminds us in Romans 5:8 that while we were sinners, Christ died for us. In other words, Jesus did not die for us because we were his loyal, faithful followers; he died while we were rebels, his enemies. The cross was bloody, gory, and shameful, a symbol of brutality and the worst of human experience. Yet the cross is beautiful because it was a place of grace, compassion, and salvation because of God's love for us.

The Lord's love for you is so deep that Jesus took upon himself the wrath of God that you deserved because of your sin. Matthew 27:46 is one of the most amazing passages in the Bible and one of my favorites. It says that Jesus cried out to God, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus said that so that you would never have to—ever.

Motivation for living as a Christian does not come from trying to appease a God who wants to make life difficult for you. It comes when you remember the message of the cross, when you remember that Jesus died so that you might live. It comes when you remember that Jesus paid the debt he did not owe because you owed a debt you could not pay.

The death of Jesus should motivate you to thankfulness and love. In fact, it should motivate you to love him with all your heart, soul, and mind.

Motivation 2: Jesus gave you a new identity

The Scriptures teach that when a person trusts in Christ as Savior, he or she is given an entirely new identity. Words and phrases like "new" and "born again" are frequently used to describe the New Testament Christian. But the theme of identity is actually much more comprehensive. You might think of the gospel the way newly engaged women think about their diamond ring. It is fun to watch them suddenly use their left hand for all sorts of tasks that previously would have been done with their right hand or not done at all. Clearly, they want to show off their new "rock"! Not only do

they show it off, they also carefully investigate the way the light affects it from multiple angles. They buy cleaning kits to keep their diamond in sparkling condition.

In many ways, the gospel is like that diamond. To appreciate its glory, you have to investigate it from all sides; each side contributes to the overall brilliance of the whole. From one direction, we see redemption—how in one moment God rescued us from sin by paying the penalty our sins deserved, which is death. Fans of Narnia see this when Aslan dies so that Edmund the traitor might go free. A slight change in perspective moves our focus to adoption. Yet another turn in our consideration of the gospel highlights our freedom in Christ—freedom from the tyranny of sin’s penalty and power in our lives. With each successive “turn” of the gospel message, we see another aspect of its brilliance.

When these themes are brought together, the new identity Jesus gives is much more brilliant than any diamond. Here is a picture of that identity:

- You are redeemed from the slave market of sin (Galatians 3:13);
- You are adopted into God’s family, no longer a spiritual orphan (Galatians 4:7);
- You are God’s friend instead of his enemy (John 15:13–14);
- You are reconciled to God instead of separated from him (2 Corinthians 5:18);
- You are free instead of bound to the power and penalty of sin (Romans 6:12–19);
- You are prayed for instead of ignored (Romans 8:34);
- You are in God’s presence, no longer alone (Hebrews 13:5);
- You are loved by God instead of alienated (Romans 8:35–39);
- You are regenerated, alive instead of dead (Ephesians 2:1–4);
- You are rescued from God’s wrath over sin rather than receiving it (1 Thessalonians 1:10).

The identity Jesus gave us is not intended to make us proud, but to make us humble. It is not intended to make us think about ourselves, but to make us thankful for all that Jesus has done for us. It is not to draw attention to us, but to reflect praise and glory to Jesus. In fact, this new identity is what leads and calls us to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, and mind.

Motivation 3: Jesus provides all the spiritual resources you need to love, serve, and give

One passage that has become quite dear to me is Romans 8:31–35. It not only helps me in my marriage, it helps me in my life.

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? (Romans 8:31–35)

A brief examination of this text can help explain the third motivation. I draw three statements out of this passage.

1. *You need nothing.* Verses 31–32 explain that if God was willing to give you his Son, he will be willing to give you all the spiritual resources you need as a believer. Did you notice the rhetorical question, “How will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” He will, of course he will! He already gave you his most prized possession. The “hard part” was giving his Son; the easy part is

providing all other spiritual resources. What a promise! This brings healing to the hurting soul. If you have a rough background, this is an incredible promise. The Lord says that your prior sin or struggle does not stand in the way of his love or his promises. This should encourage you, give you hope, and empower you to live in a whole new way. You are not bound to your past or to the way in which you were raised.

This truth also helps us when we need to battle selfishness. For example, when I return home from a day at the office, I don't need my wife to give to me. I don't need my children to serve me. In fact, I don't need anything! Jesus has already provided everything I need. My "love tank," so to speak, is full of the love that comes from the Lord. It is a love that satisfies, protects, secures, and comforts. This allows me as a Christian husband to love with the love given to me by the Lord.

Think about what happens if your love tank is not full from the Lord. What happens if you really don't believe that the Lord is providing all the necessary resources? I suggest that you would demand love from your spouse. It may start out subtly, or war may immediately break out with nuclear weapons. Either way, you will discover that you expect your spouse to make you happy. You expect your spouse to give you what you want in the marriage. In my own life and in counseling, I have noticed that the love we demand from others is not satisfying. It demands more and more and more.

What I love so much about these verses is that they teach me that I have everything I need already. This is freeing. No more demanding. No more manipulating. No more clamoring after what I need. After all, I need nothing that Jesus has not already given me. And neither do you.

2. *Jesus's opinion is the one that matters.* Verses 33–34 are just as profound as verses 31–32. This section focuses on the one who can justify and the one who can condemn. Let's face it—some questions

are more important than others! In this case, Jesus is answering the ones that are most important. Your boss's opinion may count a lot when it comes to the quality of your work. Your spouse's opinions about the way you treat her are important to your relationship. But when it comes to matters of justification and condemnation, Jesus gets to talk and everyone else gets to be quiet. This is particularly important because there will always be people who put you down. There will always be people who make you feel worthless. But in the end, they all get to be quiet and the one who condemns and justifies gets to speak. What Jesus says matters! Thankfully, he is the one who died for us and the one who has given us our new identity.

It would be nice if your spouse never said a mean thing to you as long as you live. But you know that there will be (or have been) moments when you struggle as a couple. So expect some grief, disappointment, and frustration in your marriage. When those moments come, remind yourself that Jesus's word is most important. And he can use those struggles to help you both trust him more and become more like him.

This point is also true as you think about your past experiences. There may be people in your life who knew you when you were living a wild and crazy life. They may ridicule your faith or tell you that you are nothing. But once again Jesus's promises bring healing to the hurting soul. You are not bound by their words or their opinions. Jesus's opinion is the one that really matters.

3. *You are secure.* Verse 35 emphasizes the reality of security. Notice that in the text there is not a "who" or a "what" that can ever separate you from the love of God in Christ. This is such a wonderful assurance! It tells you that you have security. Personally, I long for security at work, in my marriage, and in all my relationships. But sometimes those human relationships do not seem very secure. In a heated argument, one person can say something that threatens security ("I wish I had not married you!"). In other cases, a spouse

does something that threatens security (e.g., gets caught looking at pornography). But in your relationship with Jesus there is complete security. The Old Testament often speaks of God being our rock, our fortress, our salvation, and our strong deliverer. Romans 8 makes it clear that Jesus is our rock and our stability even when other relationships seem anything but stable.

This passage reminds you that the Lord has poured out his love for you. Jesus died for you. Jesus has given you a new identity. Jesus has provided ongoing resources for every day of your life. So rather than demand love from your spouse, you are free to give it. You will find that when you recognize the Lord's satisfying, comforting, and protecting love, you will find joy and peace. Ironically, you will also discover more joy, encouragement, and happiness in your marriage. To top it off, you will learn to love the Lord with all your heart, mind, and strength.

Motivation 4: Jesus is your spouse's only hero

I want to be important to my wife. I want her to see me as a knight in shining armor (even if I don't live up to it). I want her to think of me as her man, but I am also painfully aware that no matter how nice I have been to her, no matter how caring, no matter how loving, I can never save her soul. Thus my love and care, while meaningful, is not the ultimate love and care my wife receives. Over time I have grown to love this truth. I do not have to be Stephanie's savior; I am free to be her husband. This takes so much pressure off me! In fact, in those moments when something happens that I (or anyone for that matter) cannot fix, she can run to her hero Jesus—and I can go too. Jesus makes her happy. He comforts her. He encourages her soul. These same comments work for Stephanie as well. When I encounter a challenging issue in life, she does not have to fix it. She can love me and point me to Jesus.

The fact that Jesus is your spouse's only hero is yet one more reason to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and

mind. You see, your love for your fiancé(e) will be directly related to your love for Jesus. When Jesus is at the center of your life, he will be your rock, your fortress, and your strong deliverer. This will mean, among other things, that your future spouse will not have to serve in that role. I can be, and must be, a Christian husband to my wife, but I can never be her savior or her hero. That is a title reserved for Jesus alone.

Loving the Lord First Is Central to a Marriage That Accurately Represents Christ and the Church

Reason 1: Marital happiness or marital struggle often can be summarized in the word “worship.”

The counseling center at Faith Church in Lafayette, Indiana (where I serve as a pastor) has existed since 1978. In those years of counseling, there have been lots of marriage cases. All of those couples started out much like you and your fiancé(e). There were two people who believed they loved each other, enjoyed spending time together, and fostered dreams together. But at some point, things changed for our counselees. They were no longer living in marital bliss. Instead, there was heartache, pain, and deep struggle. As we met with them, some would blame the state of their marriage on poor communication, some would talk about problem-solving challenges, others would talk about pornography, an emotional affair, a physical affair, or a challenge with a child. The couples were convinced that these issues were the real problem. If only they had a few tools or tips, things would be much better!

While our counselees were correct that there were problems with communication, pornography, or problem solving, there are also much deeper concerns. Jesus taught that what comes out in our words and actions is always based on what is already on the inside, in our hearts.

“For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.”
(Matthew 15:19)

Behind the struggles with poor communication, problem solving, or understanding the roles of husband and wife, there were struggles because of poor worship. Remember that we were designed to worship God and love him most. If he is not the focus of our worship, then something else will be. Idolatry did not work out so well for the nation of Israel and it will not work out well for us either. You will find that worship is the underlying heart issue, while poor communication, problem solving, porn, or children are natural by-products of a heart worshiping something other than the Lord Jesus.

You were designed to worship the Lord. When you, as a couple or as an individual, worship something other than the Lord, the field of discord is prepared. Jesus must be the center of your life and the center of your relationship.

Reason 2: When you love Jesus, you will be most prepared to love your spouse.

In John 15:11, Jesus reminds his disciples that his love for them would result in their joy being complete. In verse 18 he explains that his love will help the disciples love others even when they are hated. In John 15, Jesus has been explaining the importance of abiding or remaining in him. He was helping his disciples understand that, to carry out their purpose, they had to receive the nourishment found in the vine. When the Christian is nourished by the love of Christ, he or she is capable of loving others, even when the context is unpleasant.

Engaged couples do not tend to think this way. You, like many others, may have experienced a relatively problem-free engagement.

The thought of looking at one another with disdain is foreign to you. However, if you are removed from the life-giving nourishment of Christ the Vine, it will not be long before criticism and conflict follow. Loving others, including your spouse, will be much easier when you love the Lord first.

Reason 3: To be a Christian spouse, you must first be a faithful Christian.

This sounds logical, but many miss the significance of this point. I sometimes hear men and women speak about their boyfriends or girlfriends as “he/she is Christian” as if there were no other questions to ask. But there is a big difference between a person who *says* he is a Christian and a person with a proven track record of putting Christ first in his life. There is an interesting progression in Ephesians 4–6. In chapter 4 there is an emphasis on each Christian growing as a faithful person. In chapter 5 there is an emphasis on learning to be a faithful partner, and at the beginning of chapter 6 there is a focus on being a faithful parent. I believe that this progression is intentional. Some try to mix up the order and it simply does not work. One says he wants to be a faithful Christian husband, but he has not yet learned what it means to be a faithful Christian—to be committed to Christ and dependent on him for the strength to walk in his ways. As we will see in future chapters, husbands and wives have responsibilities to each other that they do not have to anyone else. Those responsibilities are much more intense and require much more sacrifice. It will be easy to offer excuses as to why you should not fulfill them. But when someone talks this way, he or she is expressing a fundamental problem with his or her heart. Before a person can be a faithful Christian partner, he or she must first be a faithful Christian individual. The Bible is clear: Love God first, then love your neighbor as yourself. Your closest neighbor is your spouse.

Putting Christ at the center of your life is not primarily a focus on your marriage. It is first a commitment to live as a biblical Christian.

Conclusion

Jesus must be the center of your life. You are called to love Jesus with all your heart, soul, and mind. He must have first place in your heart, even above your fiancé(e), if your marriage is to glorify God and exemplify Christ's relationship with the church. As you prepare for a strong and lasting marriage, the first step is to ensure that your walk with Christ is strong enough to enjoy the blessings of covenant marriage and endure its challenges. Step one is about being a Christian. Only then can you be a Christian husband or Christian wife.

Homework Discussion Questions

Complete the following questions on your own and then share your answers with your fiancé(e). Later, discuss your answers and your conversation as a couple with your mentor.

Your mentor will help you understand the purpose of each question, but let me explain one assignment that I ask you to do in every chapter: place a passage of Scripture on an index card and review it daily. Many believers, both new and old, struggle to know passages of the Bible. They know *about* the Bible, but they do not know many passages directly. The goal of this assignment is for each of you to have a set of eight to ten index cards with crucial passages that can serve you well your entire life. This assignment is not busy work. It is an assignment that has changed my life and the lives of many couples I have counseled.

Let me encourage you to think deeply about these questions. Shallow answers will hurt you and your future spouse more than anyone else. Deeper, more honest answers may lead to some uncomfortable moments, but that is okay. These real-life discussions will help you prepare and learn as a couple.

1. Are there areas of your life that you have not yet given over to the Lord, the one who loves you more than anyone? If so, identify them and explain why they have been hard to relinquish.
2. On a scale of 1–10, how would you rate your personal, daily walk with Jesus? What evidence could you give to justify your rating (e.g., “I regularly read the Word,” “I serve weekly in children’s ministry,” “I have no secret sins,” and “I actively pursue relationships in the church that encourage me to have Jesus as the center of my life”)?
3. On a scale of 1–10, how would you rate your fiancé(e)’s personal, daily walk with Jesus? What evidence justifies your rating? (If the way you rate your future spouse is substantially different from the way he or she rates him- or herself—and vice versa—please discuss it as a couple and then with your mentor.)
4. As you read this chapter, what three statements had the most impact on you? Be prepared to discuss this as a couple and with your mentor.
5. Skim this chapter again and choose the Bible passage that is most significant to you. Put it on an index card and review it daily until your appointment with your mentor.
6. Give at least one example from the last week or so when you were frustrated in your relationship with your fiancé(e). How did thinking about the gospel and what Jesus did for you help you to respond with grace, love, and compassion? If it didn’t help, why do you think it didn’t?

7. As a response to this chapter's call to make Jesus the center of your life, list two action steps you need to begin right away. Possibilities include personal devotions, dedicated prayer time, service in your local church, more faithful giving, etc.
8. Spend at least five minutes daily praying for yourself and your fiancé(e), that Jesus would truly be the center of your lives.

Advanced Homework

Here are two homework possibilities that you as a couple may find encouraging and beneficial.

1. Read John 15:1–16 each day for five days in a row. Make at least three thoughtful comments about the importance of putting Jesus in the center of your life.
2. Read *A Gospel Primer for Christians* by Milton Vincent (Bemidji, MN: Focus Publishing, 2008). There is a short devotional version that may be helpful. If you have the full-length book, write three observations about the importance of the gospel in your everyday life on a notecard to carry with you and review at least twice a day for a week. This will help you keep a Christ-centered perspective on your life.