

Praise for *From Me to We*

“This book will unpack the nuts and bolts of matrimony and give you tools to last the life of your marriage.”

—Dr. Kevin Leman, *New York Times* Bestselling Author of *Sheet Music*
and *Have a New Husband by Friday*

“Lucille Williams writes about marriage with refreshing honesty and candor. You will find her direct approach in addressing the difficulties of marriage to be challenging, and you will find her positive tone to be encouraging. I may have a shelf full of marriage books, but Lucille’s vulnerable transparency, biblical clarity, and practical counsel makes *From Me to We* a book I will recommend not only to engaged couples but to couples who have been married for years.”

—Kyle Idleman, Teaching Pastor at Southeast Christian Church,
and Author of *Not a Fan* and *The End of Me*

“Are you approaching the altar? If you’re an engaged couple looking for a how-to guide that is both very helpful and very funny, this is the book for you! Although Lu doesn’t shy away from the tough conversations, she handles them in a way that is engaging and personal—and wise. This is a great read for a great start to a great marriage.”

—Shaunti Feldhahn, Bestselling Author of *For Women Only* and *For Men Only*

“In an age where the meaning of marriage has been lost, we need a book like *From Me to We*. Thankfully, Lucille Williams reminds us that marriage is not a contract to be negotiated, but rather it is a covenant to be honored. I know you will find this book helpful as you think of what a marriage could and should look like!”

—Caleb Kaltenbach, Lead Pastor of Discovery Church and Author of *Messy Grace*

“Far too many engaged couples focus all their time and energy on the wedding day, when for the long-term benefit of their marriage relationship a good dose of premarital education could make the long-term difference of a loving relationship. I can’t think of a better person in the world to help you get ready for your marriage than Lucille Williams. She is authentic, vulnerable, practical, and fun. I love the matter-of-fact, practical way she writes, and her advice is the best. Invest in the success of your marriage before it begins.”

—Jim Burns, PhD, President of HomeWord and
Author of *Getting Ready for Marriage* and *Creating an Intimate Marriage*

“I have known Mike and Lucille for a long time, and the words shared and expressed in this book should be taken to heart. Lucille unpacks the ‘what you are getting into’ when you get married as well as the ‘why.’ With an authentic and relevant voice, Lucille unpacks practical advice for couples getting ready to embark on a lifetime of commitment and connection. Every couple setting out on their marital journey must read this book.”

—Craig Jutila, President of Empowered Living, Inc.
and Author of *From Hectic to Healthy* and *Faith and the Modern Family*

“There have been scores of books written on marriage, but to me, very few speak so loudly as Lucille Williams’ book, *From Me to We*. Lucille’s willingness to share about her own marriage journey with her husband of more than thirty years, as well as their path from non-belief to new life in Christ, will guide and inspire any couple to drink deeply from God’s blessing that is the union of marriage. God is so good, and so is *From Me to We*.”

—Frank Sontag, Christian Radio Host of “The Frank Sontag Show,” 99.5 KKLA-FM,
and Author of *Light the Way Home*

“Everyone goes into marriage wanting to live happily ever after—but not everyone receives the actual tools for a successful marriage. A wise person will seek out advice from couples who have been happily married for a long time and will take godly counsel to heart. In her latest book, *From Me to We*, Lucille Williams is your personal premarital mentor! I have known and served with Lucille and her husband, Mike, for many years. There is no better person to give honest, no-holds-barred wisdom for a Christ-honoring and joyful marriage. Lucille covers every possible topic, from communication and sex to money and in-laws. Read this book and set your marriage up for a lifetime of love and laughter!”

—Dudley Rutherford, Senior Pastor of Shepherd Church in Los Angeles, CA,
and Author of *Walls Fall Down*

“I grew up in a family where marriage seemed to be a breeze. No fighting, no quarrels, not even a disagreement between my mother and father. That upbringing left me thinking the woman who married me was going to be the luckiest bride ever, because of everything I knew about marriage. Well, that all changed on the second day of our honeymoon when my wife and I both found ourselves saying, ‘What were we thinking?’ In that instant we realized quickly how much we had to learn about marriage. In her latest book, *From Me to We*, Lucille Williams covers a wide range of topics that will help couples avoid a great deal of frustration and disappointment as they explore the journey to becoming one. From the first chapter you will fall in love with her humor, passion, and burden for every couple embarking on the journey of becoming one.”

—Tim Winters, Executive Pastor of Shepherd Church

“I’ve been married to an amazing woman for almost 30 years. I love her more today than I did the day we were married. But truth be told, I wish *From Me to We* had been available when we were preparing for marriage. Lucille Williams has written a beautiful guide that I believe will help many understand what a Christ-honoring covenant marriage is supposed to look like. Convicting and straightforward, Lucille does what many writers refuse to do. She tells the truth. I love her honest and compelling approach, and I plan to make *From Me to We* required reading for every couple that asks me to marry them. I loved this book, and I know you’ll love it, too.”

—Drew Sherman, Lead Pastor of Compass Christian Church, Dallas/Fort Worth, Texas

“Thriving marriages require more than high hopes and big dreams—staying in love requires a plan. Successful marriages don’t just happen. . .they require intentional, positive steps in the right direction. Lucille Williams provides straight talk mixed with easy-to-do actions and dishes it out with humor and practical wisdom. *From Me to We* will set you up with the tools you need to love each other for the long haul.”

—Doug Fields, Executive Director of the HomeWord Center for Youth & Family
and Author of 50+ books, including *Married People: Helping Churches Help Marriages*,
7 Ways To Be Her Hero: the one your wife has been waiting for, and *Getting Ready for Marriage*

from
me
to
we

A Premarital Guide for the Bride- and Groom-to-Be

Lucille Williams

SHILOH RUN  **PRESS**

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Me, me, me, me, me! We live in a culture consumed with self. No one is faulting you; it's the world we live in today. But your world is about to change, becoming more vibrant and beautiful, where two become one. Are you ready to create your fairy tale, your true-life blockbuster adventure film? One ingredient is critically essential: you must swap your "me" thinking for "we" thinking. Are you ready? . . .

My goal with this book is to guide you on your way with the start of a happy, healthy marriage. So put on your swim cap, 'cause we're divin' in!

Chapter One

Why Do People Keep Telling Us Marriage Is Hard?

People will tell you marriage is hard. Why? *Because it is!* But you get to decide how content you will be.

I will tell you marriage is not for the faint of heart. If you're ready to be hurt beyond anything you've ever experienced, then you may be ready. Just maybe. If you're ready to have your prayer life ignited, you may be ready. If you're ready to pack everything up—all of your friends, all of your family, all of your dreams—and repack with someone else, throwing your dirty laundry and theirs in one big heap, you may be ready.

Ready or not, many jump into “marital paradise.” And then many jump back out again. How many people do you know who are divorced? How many of those weddings did you attend? Did you see it coming? Probably not. They probably didn't either. For many, marriage is not a paradise at all.

But for the fortunate among us, marriage creates a personal two-person paradise. Do you think this happens randomly? It does not. And you can have it, too. That *could* be you. Many men and women are extremely happy in their marriage. It *can* happen for you, too. Look around. Do you see any happily married couples? What makes them stand out among the rest?

Too Young and Stupid to Get Married

I got engaged at eighteen. Yes, I was very young. And my prince? He seemed old to me at the time. Mike was twenty. A year later we said “I do.” (Actually, we said “I will.” The minister who performed our wedding told us to repeat “I will,” and if I hadn’t been overcome with emotion I might have screamed, “No, no, no! I want to say ‘I do,’ It’s ‘I do,’ not ‘I will!’” I have always felt cheated I didn’t get to say “I do,” since I had dreamed of doing so since I was a little girl.) Two weeks after my nineteenth birthday, I was a married woman. We had all the answers and cruised away into marital bliss.

And if you believed my last sentence, then you’ve watched too many chick flicks.

Let’s get real! The only cruising we did in the beginning years of our marriage was on our honeymoon when we took an *actual* cruise.

Yes, we were young, which made the wedding and honeymoon all the more exhilarating and adventurous. I can recall thinking my life was like a fairy tale after the wedding was over. Everything was in place.

Sure, our wedding day had quite a few bumps—from my dad’s tux not fitting to my future mother-in-law yelling at me while I was putting on my wedding dress.

Oh, and then there was the “little” fight Mike and I had the morning of our wedding when we vowed *not to get married*.

He was with his family, I was with mine, and we decided to talk on the phone. There was yelling and stress with my family and friction with his, and the anxious bride and groom decided we needed to talk. Instead of whispering

sweet nothings to each other over the phone, we got into a fight, which escalated to screaming. And yes, there was a lot of name calling, too. And maybe some swearing. Yeah, not my finest hour. But you should know we weren't Christians then.

"He's a *JERK!*" I screamed to my brother-in-law. "I'm not going to marry him! Did you hear what he called me?" I can't remember exactly what my soon-to-be brother-in-law said, but somehow he got us talking again.

And the wedding was back on.

Our road to marital delight was a rocky one, for sure. We dated, got engaged, and married all without the help of knowing Jesus as Savior. It would have made the whole process immeasurably better had we been Christians, but we weren't. We were two young kids trying to figure it all out.

After over thirty-four years and raising three kids together, we are going stronger than ever. And did I mention my husband is a pastor? Yes, the young lady with the potty mouth became a pastor's wife. Miracles happen.

Why Get Married Anyway?

First, I want to address the question: Why are you getting married? Stop and think for a minute.

Are you envisioning long walks on the beach, pancake breakfasts, chatting while making dinner together, and long nights of unbridled passion? If so, yes, you are normal. How do I know this? Because God made us for connectedness, and He created marriage—never forget that. The Bible states,

“Then the LORD God, said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him’” (Genesis 2:18). God created the marriage union. “For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed” (Genesis 2:24–25).

The covenant you are about to enter is a holy union. Holy and designed by God. You are making a vow for life. Not just until you don’t feel like being married anymore. A promise *for life*. Take a look at 1 Corinthians 7:39: “A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.” As long as your spouse is alive, you’re bound to him or her. Are you ready to make such a heavy commitment? Yes, there could be circumstances out of your control, which could break your covenant with God and your spouse, such as abuse, abandonment, and/or adultery, but saying yes to marriage is entering into a holy contract. One God never intended to be broken. Have you thought about that?

Most likely, you’re eager to get this “party” started. Stay with me. Answering the *why* is important. A healthy marriage begins *before* the wedding day. The better your start out of the marriage gate, the more harmony you will have and the better your marriage (and sex life!) will be.

During my honeymoon, I felt like I was living a fairy tale. We had decided on a Caribbean cruise. Everything was simply perfect. The beautiful ocean with bright sunny days and romantic nights. Food was endless and elegant, the ports

were adventurous—we were enjoying our Caribbean paradise, and each other, more and more each day. If this was what marriage was like, I was all in! We overflowed with food and fun, eating like we were royalty. To be honest, *stuffed* would be more accurate; we *stuffed* ourselves with delectable food and fun.

Then the last night of our cruise jolted me back to reality. The day before the cruise ended and the ship docked, we had handed over most of our luggage. We packed everything except the clothes we were wearing and turned over our bags to the ship's crew. That night we ate to excess, as usual. We were seated at a big oval-shaped booth and were eating, laughing, and enjoying the company of three other couples. Mike and I were in the center, unable to get out from either side.

We were having an extremely good time until. . . *it happened*. Suddenly, my husband put his head back and began to vomit. As in barf, puke, heave, hurl! It was spewing out like a volcano, all over him and me!

Fairy tale over.

Silence. Everyone at the table sat in stunned silence. We excused ourselves and went to our tiny cabin room. But now we had a huge dilemma. The clothes we had on, now covered in vomit, were the only clothes we had. Everything else had been packed and taken away.

This is the part of the story where my resourceful wifey skills enter the scene. When one is covered in vomit and has a sick husband, one has to think fast. Turning into a female MacGyver, I was able to get some laundry detergent from one of the workers on the ship, and I washed our clothes in

the tiny sink. In the tiny bathroom. In our tiny cabin room.

Being MacGyver wasn't adventurous at all.

As I washed the clothes in the sink, I recall looking down at the dirty, barf-covered clothes, and thinking, *This is marriage*. As young and naive as I was, I was right about that realization. Sometimes marriage is washing vomit out of clothes. Sometimes it's staying when everything inside of you wants to leave. Sometimes it's scrubbing all the stains out until you can't see them anymore. Sometimes it's patching up your broken heart. . .again.

If you want a strong marriage—one that honors God—you not only wrestle your own messes; you wrestle with your spouse's messes, too. You pull double duty! "This is marriage." He hurled. I cleaned it up. It "landed" on both of us.

But listen to the magic moment. *Don't miss this!* When you put your spouse before yourself, times when you're cleaning up barf are worth every ounce of angst in exchange for the countless magical days and magnificent experiences. The more you jump in and take on challenges together, even the puky ones, that's when God is glorified the most and also when you'll find your marriage the most satisfying. It's then you'll have the best shot at finding happiness.

The upside of marriage will exceed your most exquisite dreams. God is the master at cleaning up others' messes. Jesus gave up *everything* for us, and it's when we imitate Jesus that we find the greatest joy. Especially in marriage.

Which brings us back to that oh-so-critical question: *Why* are you getting married? The most important question you need to ask yourself is: Are you ready to serve this person

for the rest of your life? That's right, *SERVE!* Puke and all? Think about that for a minute, and let it sink in.

If you are entering into this marriage because of what you will *get*, believe me, you will be gravely disappointed. (Again with the puke.) But, on the other hand, if you are entering into it for what you can *give*, then—aha!—you are starting to get it.

Marriage is about giving. Giving unselfishly. If you've been told that marriage is fifty-fifty, think again. Going into marriage with a fifty-fifty mindset will set you on a course for a doomsday disaster.

Do me a favor and just look at the divorce rate. Want to talk about a fifty-fifty split? Go sit in on a *Him vs. Her* divorce court case and you'll witness two once-madly-in-love people with their lawyers, standing before a judge fighting over money, the house, and splitting the kids. You may have already experienced this yourself and are now vowing to never do it again.

I once went to court in support of a friend who was getting a divorce, and I was overwhelmed with indescribable sadness. I sat in the courtroom with tears in my eyes and my heart in my stomach, watching my dear friend and her husband fight it out through their lawyers. She was on one side and he was on the other, both miserable with discontent and angst-filled about the impending outcome. The lawyers spoke for them, and it felt like a fight no one could ever win. And all this before a judge who, I might add, didn't know either of them or their children. All I've got to say is: Case closed.

Never settle for fifty-fifty. You've got to give it your *all*.

The Marriage Manual

God will do beyond our highest hopes and fantasy dreams if we allow Him to, if we submit to the marriage He describes in the Bible. “Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen” (Ephesians 3:20–21). When we follow what God says about marriage, He will work miracles in our relationships. God created marriage, and the Bible contains the manual for a happy, thriving marriage. It’s up to you to follow it or not.

First things first, you need to examine your hearts according to 2 Corinthians 6:14: “Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?” Is your betrothed a believer? Does he or she love the Lord? How about you? Are you committed to Jesus Christ as Lord? If one of you is a Christian and the other is not, I urge you to call it off. You’d be signing up for a whole lot of hurt and problems.

Men, look at Ephesians 5:28: “So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself.” Men, are you ready to make a commitment such as this?

Ready, ladies? Are you ready to hop on his train? Consider Ephesians 5:22: “Wives, *be subject* to your own husbands, as to the Lord” (emphasis added). How are you both going to work out that verse as a couple? Anyone fighting yet?

If either of you is pointing fingers, point one back at

yourself. Happy marriages are the ones where couples look at themselves and work at being the best spouse they can be. You can't change your partner, but you can change *you*. If you think you're going to change him or her after you get married, change your direction and march back home. Decide today you will love your beloved with all of your being and focus on his or her God-given assets and not faults.

If you've determined not to be another divorce statistic, know that the beginning of your marriage and the physical, emotional, and spiritual relationship with your spouse is the start of something wonderful, something incredibly magnificent. It's like when you first became a Christian. You weren't sure what was ahead, but you knew it would be something great. Beyond what words could describe. Whatever happens, you will tackle it as a team.

Exposed

...Which brings me to the topic I know you're already thinking about. In fact, you've probably skimmed over chapter nine already. That's good! Briefly, you are about to embark on a journey as husband and wife and as most cherished friends, but you are embarking on a sexual excursion as well. Sex can be one of the best parts of your marriage journey, one that will get better and better with each individual voyage. Some cruises will be smooth sailing, some windy, others stormy, some really rocky, and some will blow you away! Welcome them all and embrace each one.

There will be days when one of you will not feel like

“sailing”; what are you going to do then?

Entering into a marriage covenant is saying you are willing to give yourself to this person emotionally, spiritually, *and* physically. If you’re not prepared to have an ongoing, active sexual relationship with your future husband or wife, think twice about getting married. I’m not kidding. If you don’t plan on making your sexual relationship a priority, consider remaining friends. Eat ice cream together and watch a fireworks show.

Strong marriages have strong “fireworks” of their own. If you’re not willing to work in this area and all areas of intimacy (emotional and spiritual), then you’re being grossly unfair to the man or woman you claim to adore. (Remind yourself of this ten years and multiple kids down the road!)

You are about to commit to a *forever* union that will not only seal you together as one but will chisel you into a masterpiece for God. Marriage will chip away the rough edges. Your faults and shortcomings will be just as exposed as your bodies. Every selfish part of you, every ounce of pride, every negative word or deed will become evident. The worst parts of you will spill out all over the one you vowed to love forever. (Think puke on a cruise ship.) You either have to put your selfish desires to death, or your selfishness will put your marriage to death.

His mistakes become *your* mistakes. This also means *her* ugly parts will spill on *you*. How are you going to respond when your spouse barks at you or, worse, yells at you? How are you going to respond when he or she seems to hurt your feelings on purpose? How are you going to handle feelings of rejection

because your spouse doesn't feel like talking or having sex?

I know you're thinking, *Oh, not us! We get along great! We are soul mates! We totally love each other! We can't wait to begin our sex life!*

Those are the exact words of almost every couple who has pranced down the aisle. Many who are no longer together. Many who now say, "We just don't love each other anymore. My spouse changed. We grew apart. I wasn't happy."

But here's a secret all successful married couples know: Marriage isn't about you. It's not about you being happy or your spouse being happy. Yes, extreme joy and happiness can be a by-product of marriage—that's the way God designed it. In order to obtain the kind of marriage that honors God, you must fight against your innate selfish nature. When everything inside of you screams *I need to take care of ME and look out for ME*. You have to exchange *ME* thinking for *WE* thinking. You need to bury self-centered thinking and think in terms of what is best for your relationship and new family.

When you honor your spouse, you honor God. Your marriage can be a tool God can use to point people to *Him* when you have a God-centered marriage. It is through giving in marriage that you will get the greatest joy. Marriage at its best is two people loving each other selflessly. When loving unconditionally and selflessly can be mastered, your union can feel like heaven. It can blow your mind. It can feel like you're living a dream. The key to this begins with allowing God to mold you.

Right now, putting the other first feels easy because you're both putting your best forward. Reading this book indicates

you desire to continue in your quest to always be the best wife/husband you can. At this point in your journey, the more prepared you are, the better. There are so many books on this subject because it is so vitally important. You can't be overprepared. Soak it all in. And then, after you're married, don't ever stop learning.

Never Forget Your Courtship

Your wedding day will be a very abnormal day. Nothing in life will be quite like it. In the morning, you wake up a single person, and by the end of the day you will be a husband or a wife.

One of the biggest tips I can give you at this point is to tell you to *remember your courtship*. Even after the wedding bells have quieted, remember how you always looked good for him. Remember how you brought her flowers and opened doors for her. Make a mental note of how you treat each other—journal your courtship even. The way you treat your spouse-to-be now, continue doing so from your wedding day on. Each day, try to treat each other better than the day before. When you stop treating him or her as well as you do now, that will be the start of the downfall of your marriage.

Do you want to feel madly in love *throughout* your marriage. . . just like you feel today? This is the secret ingredient: Always treat your spouse as you do today or even better. Even when you don't feel like it! Take out the trash for her when you see it overflowing. Make him his favorite dessert, just because. Or better yet, *be* his favorite dessert. Let her

know if you'll be coming home late. What seem like small kindnesses will grow your marriage stronger and stronger.

For example, I fall in love with my husband over and over. Do you want to know why? There are many big things he does for me, but truthfully, it's the "small things" that cause me to fall in love with him *all over again*.

As I write this, I'm thinking back to yesterday. I was in my office typing away and had left our bed half-made. After washing the sheets, I got distracted and never finished making our bed. Walking through our bedroom, I noticed my husband had finished my undone bed project. Tears welled up in my eyes as I saw his kind act of love. My next move was to go and thank him. It was no big deal to him, but for me, I fell in love with him *all over again*.

Never stop showing acts of love and kindness. Never stop rescuing her. Never stop being his cheerleader. Never stop looking for ways to lift her up. Never stop complimenting him.

When my husband and I first got married, we didn't understand the concept of putting the other first. We were both looking out for "me." As you can imagine, *we* fought almost constantly. The more we tried to get *all we wanted*, the worse our marriage became. It wasn't until we both became Christians—five years into our marriage—that we began building a marriage we could honor God with.

When you learn to clean up vomit with a servant's heart, life will be better than you ever imagined possible. It's time to put "we" before "me."

Discussion Questions

- Have people been telling you that marriage is hard? If so, how do you feel about this?
- Why do you want to get married? What feelings come up when you hear that question? Discuss what your dreams and desires for marriage are.
- If you had a marriage like your parents, would that be good or bad? Why? (See chapter eight for more on this.)
- What will serving your spouse look like to you? Is the idea of *giving* to the other person instead of *getting* a new concept for you?
- Do you think of marriage as fifty-fifty? Where might you be tempted to fall into this trap?
- What constitutes an act of kindness to you? What makes you feel loved?
- Look for married couples you would like to emulate. Discuss what you see in their marriage that seems desirable to you. Take the discussion to another level and make appointments to ask these couples questions about why they seem so happy together.

Chapter Two

Don't Make It about the Ceremony

The invitations to the wedding were all addressed and stuffed in the pretty envelopes, tucked in with the fancy writing and elegant decor.

“Ummm, Monica, did you notice the misspelled word?” Our only daughter was to be married in less than two months and *Mom* had to open her big mouth! In my own defense—it wasn't just *any* misspelled word—it was our last name. On the first line of all 120 stylish wedding invitations, *Williams* was spelled W-i-l-l-a-m-s. It read: *Mike and Lucille Williams request the honor. . .*

It just sort of slipped out. I should have said nothing. But of course, I couldn't do that. In all of my years after taking the name Williams, I had never seen it misspelled. My maiden name had been misspelled plenty. *Recenello*. Say that ten times! Or even once. I welcomed my new name and loved that people knew how to say it and spell it. That is. . .up until my daughter's wedding invitations were all done and ready to be mailed.

My daughter said, “Oh well, that's not what matters most anyway. No one will care.” Actually, *NO*, that is *NOT* how it went at all!

Here's the truth: She screamed, "NOOOOOO!" and dramatically dropped her head into her hands and cried inconsolably for thirty minutes. I felt terrible. Her groom did everything he knew to try and comfort her. Yeah, I should have kept my mouth shut!

But do you want to know something? I was the only one who noticed. All the invitations went out, and not one person said a single word about it. I waited for the fun-hearted jokes, but no one seemed to notice, or care about the massacre of our last name. Later I even asked a few friends, and not one person recognized our name slaughtering. How about that?

Now our Williams debacle is just a funny story to tell around a campfire. At the end of the walk down the aisle, it didn't make one bit of difference!

The Preparations Can Make You Crazy

I am well aware of the fact that weddings take a lot of planning and arranging. And someone has to do all the work. Are you working together?

Ladies, some men love to be involved in the process, while others would rather focus on the honeymoon. Whichever man you have, be thankful for him. This is an exercise in being grateful for the man he is.

Men, does she need help? After all, it is your wedding, too. Find ways to assist her.

Weddings are a group effort, and working as a team will help set the foundation for your married life together.

You are forming a *Forever Team*. The most important team you'll ever belong to. Learn how to be a good team player. What does a good team player look like? A good team player gives their best effort. He communicates when he's feeling overwhelmed and needing a break. She understands when her teammate has differing opinions and desires, realizing her "Top Ten Critical Tasks" list may not make it on his.

Men and women are very different, and now is the time to recognize the vast difference. You will not always approach situations in the same manner; get used to this. God has designed boys and girls uniquely diverse.

Wander over to a playground. Watch how the boys play compared with how the girls play. The boys are loud and running. The girls are probably sitting down with another little girl talking or moving along in a *togetherness* group. He is still the little boy who wants to run. She still wants to talk and connect and feel like part of a group. He wants to connect, too, but he'll connect differently. He may or may not care about what color the dresses are, but he cares about you and wants you to be happy. Have you ever noticed it seems to be the little boys who run back to Mom? "Mommy, did you see me jump?" "Mommy, watch me swing!" "Mommy, look how fast I can run!" For a little boy, part of the fun and allure of a playground is to show off his *skills*. Boys—men—have a deep desire to connect; they just do it in their own way. Ladies, never forget this. He is not like you. He will prepare for the wedding vastly different than you will.

My husband had only one request regarding our wedding day. He didn't want me to wear a veil over my face when I walked down the aisle. Easy enough, right? You would think so, but for me it was one of the most agonizing decisions I made during my wedding planning process.

I'll tell you why. My mother was extremely invested in the idea of my wearing a veil *over* my face. Extremely. For some reason it mattered to her greatly. Perhaps she, too, had thought about this special day when her daughter would be married and *did exactly as she had* and walked down the aisle with a veiled face. She brought it up numerous times and petitioned for a veil-covered face, even though my betrothed had requested the opposite.

I was stuck in a huge quandary. I sincerely wanted to make my mom happy, but I also wanted to do what my future husband had asked, especially since this was his only request. What do you think I did? What would you do? Maybe I should have pulled the veil forward and cut a big hole for my face. Debatably, that would have been a compromise. Yet, this situation was not a time for compromise. It was a time to set a pace for my future marriage.

I did not wear the veil over my face. But you need to know—being a people pleaser, wanting to keep *everyone* happy—it wasn't easy at all.

As I walked down the aisle it was a symbol to Mike, the love of my life, my protector and covering: "I'm on your team. You are my number one. Now and forever."

The wedding day needs to be about showing each other and the world that you have become a team of two.

Strengthening Your Union

During your courtship, begin taking the steps to shout to the world, “We are a dynamic duo!” You will not be able to keep everyone happy. Each challenge stands as an opportunity to act as a unified front. With every decision, consider your future spouse and how it will make him feel. Consider her feelings while making choices about your first night together as husband and wife.

Talk through all of your wedding decisions. Listen for feelings. How? Always approach each conversation trying to understand where the other person is coming from and why they feel as they do. This simple step will prevent many arguments. Ask yourself, “How would I feel if I were in his/her shoes?” Understand the situation from their point of view. Ask questions to understand, not to contest. Then listen. *Listen*. Listen to understand. Now is a good time to exercise the advice in James 1:19, “. . . everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger.”

Uniting Two Families

Be mindful how family members can unintentionally make hurtful comments.

When my oldest son was in college and driving distance away, I’d visit him usually once a week. I would leave early in the morning and drive through two hours of traffic in order to spend the day with him. I loved and cherished the days we got to spend together. (Yes, I’m guilty of being *that* kind of mom!) During the time he was engaged and living in another state, I traveled to visit him. I so desperately wanted to re-create

a mother-son college-day reunion. Finally, when his day off arrived, he informed me his fiancée would be joining us.

Without thinking, I foolishly said, “But I thought it was going to be just you and me.”

My son was quick to respond, “Mom, suck it up! She is going to be my wife. She’s coming with us.”

Instantly, I apologized and wished I could roll up the words like a vacuum hose and put them back.

I immediately felt ashamed for saying what I did. Think about it: I was about to get a new daughter, and she wanted to spend time with me. What a precious gem of a young lady. And so true to who she remains to this day. Jenny has been one of the greatest blessings in my life and the *greatest* blessing in my son’s life. It was quite unwise and careless of me to say what I did. It’s on my list of top ten stupid things I’ve ever said.

You need to understand this process can create quite an adjustment for your parents. Especially moms of sons. I’m not exactly sure why, but throughout my years it has proven to be true. Could it be because it’s a “little boy’s” last giant step away from Mom? Give your mom time to get used to the new dynamics. Ladies, don’t take offense when your future mother-in-law spouts off reckless ramblings. Even the best of us have said really stupid stuff!

Do you have a close relationship with your mom? This is a good thing, but Mom absolutely needs to move to number two. What does this look like? Consider your future wife first in everything. Her feelings need to come before Mom’s feelings. Don’t tell Mom anything your fiancée wouldn’t want said.

Is it time to start setting some boundaries with your mother? Is it time to begin to let everyone know that your future wife is your number one?

Ladies, how close are you to Dad? My daughter was, and still is, extremely close to her dad. On Monica's wedding day, as she and her dad approached "the handoff," they waited for the cue from the wedding coordinator for the bride to begin her descent down the white carpet. The wedding processional had already traveled down the aisle, and all eyes were looking for the bride. They got the awaited signal to go.

Mike asked, "Are you ready?"

She firmly said, "No!"

"Okay, we'll wait here." Mike says he would have walked her as far away as she wanted if she had requested.

He prayed for her.

Monica waited a couple of seconds and took a few deep breaths. "Okay, I'm ready."

She was very nervous. Not about marrying Kyle. . . she was sure about that from the beginning of their courtship. She was nervous about being the center of attention. Her dad completely understood this. Her dad completely understood *her*.

"The handoff" signifies a change. You go from Dad to your husband. You now go to your husband first. You think of him above all others. What he thinks matters more than what Dad thinks. Every time Monica goes to her dad for advice, the first words out of my husband's mouth are "What does Kyle think?" If you're used to going to Dad for advice and comfort, begin to transfer your requisitions to your future husband. This does not mean you stop going to your dad for

wise counsel; it means you decide *together* when to go to Dad. You never want your husband to feel second to your dad.

And ladies, you want to avoid statements such as, “My mom and I think. . .” No, no, no. In his mind he’s thinking, *Now I have to deal with her and her mom?* Never give him the idea you and your mom are a united front opposing him. How would that make him feel?

This is what your relationship lineup looks like after marriage: God, spouse. . .then, numbers three and four can fluctuate depending on your season of life—i.e., children or ailing parents. But even after number three gets filled in with babies, your spouse remains your top human relationship.

Again, consider how the Bible instructs us in Ephesians 5:31: “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and shall be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” In no other human relationship does God instruct us to *cleave*. Let’s look at the definition of the word according to Dictionary.com: to adhere closely; stick; cling; to remain faithful.

In other words, stuck like glue! After you say “I do,” you are stuck like glue. Does the notion of being “stuck like glue” to another sound appealing to you? The wedding process will give you a very real glimpse into what your life together will be like. If this process is *all about me*, you are setting a foundation of selfishness for your marriage.

The Perfect Day

Is your goal to achieve *The Perfect Day*?

As you scuffle through to “your perfect day,” consider

what the cost will be along the way with such a purpose in mind. Did you damage relationships in the process? Did you damage your most important relationship? If you turn into a Bridezilla or a Groomzilla, basically what you're saying is your wedding is all about *you*.

Girls, especially, are taught from a very young age: "This day is all about you." It is not. Not!

One bride had her wedding dress ruined during the alteration process. That will put a glitch in your magical day! After her dream dress had been damaged, she had no choice but to settle on a dress she could find in time. It wasn't her first choice, but she didn't allow a dress to deter her from the delight of marrying the love of her life.

Jamie, busy with graduate school, purchased her perfect wedding dress from a bridal show. Since the dress needed to be cleaned, she found a dry cleaner with a good reputation for cleaning wedding dresses. A week before her wedding, Jamie's mom picked up the dress for her. Jamie was home studying when her mom called her.

"Sweetheart, I have some bad news."

"Okay, what is it? Just tell me, Mom."

"Well. . .umm. . .your dress is ruined."

"Define *ruined*."

"Well. . .it looks to be a smoky gray, and the lace is damaged, and it looks like it shrunk."

"Okay, well, let me finish studying and we can deal with this later."

Jamie didn't freak out! Listening to her tell the story, I expected some kind of explosion, but she remained oddly calm

during her dress crisis. She ended up finding the same dress from a private seller across the country, and they shipped it to her just in time. And the smoky gray dress, Jamie used that one for wedding pictures *in* the ocean. Her wedding was on the beach, and jumping into the water for pictures was a natural thing to do when you had an extra *damaged* dress.

Gentlemen, preparations can get stressful for you as well, so talk with your soon-to-be bride about any concerns or anxiety, and keep focused on building a foundation to begin your life as husband and wife.

Think in terms of your *whole life*. Not just *one day*!

Your wedding day begins your journey as husband and wife. How do you want to begin this journey? Striving to achieve one perfect day? It's much better to springboard from a foundation of grace, teamwork, trust, and togetherness.

A great marriage is about two people yielding to each other. The wedding day, and preparations, can look the same. Start your family centered around love, respect, and honor.

We think the pictures and the cake and the colors and the venue and the food and the dress and the invitations. . . *and. . .and. . .and. . .*are critically important. Straight up, if you asked me to show you my wedding pictures, it would take me a while to find my wedding album. I can't even remember what we ate at our wedding reception or what the cake looked like. I can't remember what our invitations said or what color they were. I can't remember who our photographer was or if I even liked him.

I do remember the color of the bridesmaids' dresses because it was my mom's choice and the same color she had

at her wedding. And you know what, I'm glad it made her happy. Because today I couldn't care less what color my bridal party wore. And I didn't care much on the day of my wedding either.

I can also remember the color the groomsmen wore. I remember because I thought it was strange. They wore white. My husband and his best man thought it was cool. And more importantly, I remember how they beamed with pride as they told me the color—or *non-color*—they had chosen. They were very happy. I thought choosing white was weird. Okay. Who cares? It doesn't make one bit of difference today.

I'm not at all saying these things don't have a place. I understand your wedding day debuts as a big deal, but don't give nonessentials top billing. Only your beloved can hold that place. And the way you treat each other through this process matters. The foundation you establish will reach into the next ten years. . .thirty years. . .fifty years. . .and maybe even more.

Let me share with you what did matter most on our wedding day: it mattered that we honored each other and were a united front.

When the minister said we could kiss, we didn't make out in front of my grandmother. *Why does the kiss matter?* Keeping the kiss classy shows respect for each other and family. A pastor once told me that while he was officiating a wedding and announced, "You may kiss the bride," the couple went at it like two cows French kissing. This pastor felt *uncomfortable*, to say the least.

Slobbering can be saved for later. Go ahead and slobber,

drool, devour, ingest each other—later, behind closed doors. Grandma doesn't want to see that.

We stuck together—like glue—at our reception. *It's only one day. . . . Why does sticking together matter?* At a wedding my husband officiated I noticed the groom seemed to spend more time with his mother than his new bride during the fancy reception, at a fancy hotel. Yikes! Everything seemed fancy except the bride and groom's connection. Your wedding day begins your life as a couple, a family. Pay more attention to your spouse than anyone else. Begin by putting your number one *as number one*.

We didn't smear cake all over each other. *The cake? Really?* Yes! Watching cake fly and be smeared all over might be fun, but how does this establish confidence and trust? Ladies, show respect for your man. Guys, when the crowd screams for you to throw cake at her, don't do it! This is the first test on trust. Pass it.

Allow me to break this down for you. Your relationship and how you treat your future spouse is what's most important. Establishing "us" over "I." "We" comes before "me."

"Our wedding went perfectly." I have never heard those words. Ever. Have you? If anyone out there can say that, please contact me.

You can't have the perfect day. *Stuff* happens.

You *can* have a better day. Exceedingly better. You can have a day that will set you up for success in your marriage. Rather than focusing on one day, focus on the rest of your life. Isn't a marriage filled with contentment, mutual respect, and honor for God a more noble goal? Look toward the

long-range objective. When you become other-centered, and long-term focused, little disturbances along the way will fall into their proper place. As challenges arise, tackle each as opportunities to be united as a couple.

Mistakes, debacles, mishaps—which turn into funny stories—will make your marriage stronger. Look at each other and say, “Another funny story to tell later; we are getting stronger.” As you embark on many years together, focus on trust, honor, respect, and loving each other. Challenges, struggles, and faux pas will strengthen your relationship and cement you together. Like glue.

Discussion Questions

- Have you been striving toward a goal of “The Perfect Day”? Do you think this goal is realistic?
- What does a successful wedding look like to you? Discuss what your desires are for this big day.
- What does the phrase “stuck like glue” mean to you? How does that make you feel?
- How do you expect to feel the day after your wedding day? Discuss your answer.
- Who is doing most of the work regarding the preparation and planning of your wedding? Are you both happy with this arrangement? Do you need to include him more? Do you need to step up and help her more?
- Do you think this process will make your relationship stronger? What needs to happen for you both to stay unified during this process?

Chapter Three

Forgiveness

As a child, I grew up in a home with a dad who told me there was no God. I can remember conversations about the nonexistence of God as early as I learned how to form words.

Dad made it very clear: “When you’re dead, you’re dead. You didn’t know anything before you got here, and you won’t know anything after you leave here.”

As you can imagine, this message was hard to process as a child. Most nights all I could think about was *I’m going to be dead someday. Dead for many, many, many years.* It was frightening. My little heart raced.

I grew up believing my dad wholeheartedly. I accepted his proposal that there was no God and adjusted to the gnawing feeling of utter emptiness. I had no hope. No purpose. Bad decisions didn’t seem to have consequences. Nothing seemed to matter. And yet, there was a deep desire in my heart that was unquenchable. I rectified my yearnings with the assumption that when I got married—and really felt acceptance and love, along with a home and career—the empty space would be filled. Disappointingly, after marriage my heart ached even more. Any hope I had was shattered.

The emptiness multiplied as the years added up. Five years

into my marriage, the world I had created around me was broken. I hated my marriage. I hated my life. I hated myself. There was no forgiveness in my heart for others or myself. Beginning the process of a search for something more, I began reading the Bible along with books about Jesus.

Pondering the obscure notion of even a slender possibility of Dad being wrong about God, I asked him a question one day.

“Dad, I know you don’t believe in God, but what do you believe about Jesus?”

What he said blew my mind. I remember it like it was yesterday even though it was over twenty-five years ago. “Jesus was here; that’s historical fact.”

“What? You believe Jesus was here? What do you believe about Him?”

“He got down off the cross and went to China.” Dad believed Jesus was some sort of biblical-day magician.

Come again? I could hardly believe what I was hearing. For me, to believe that Jesus Christ was the Son of God and died for us made a million times more sense than He was an ancient-day David Copperfield. Shortly after, I received God’s forgiveness, recognized Jesus Christ as Lord of my life, and accepted Him into my life.

Like only God can orchestrate, Mike and I became Christians a day apart from each other. A young pastor and his wife moved into our condominium complex and befriended us. I had a desire to attend church but wouldn’t go without my husband. At first Mike was adamantly opposed to the idea. I told God it had to be both of us; I wouldn’t

go without my husband. And so, I waited. Until one day our friend Dave wanted to date one of my friends. Knowing she was a Christian, I informed Dave she would only date him if he went to church. (I understand now that it's not about going to church but having a relationship with the God of the universe, but at the time I thought all Dave had to do was go to church.) Dave was reluctant, but Mike said, "If you go, I'll go." However, when Sunday morning rolled around, Dave backed out. Having already committed to going to church, Mike and I went. I'll have you know he was *not* happy about it though, complaining all the way there. On that particular day we did not have a good church experience, and after arriving home, Mike suggested we try the church our young pastor friends attended. We ended up going on a regular basis.

Separately, God began to work in each of our hearts. Until one day I was at the gym and decided I wanted to follow Jesus Christ. I knew He was real, that He lived a sinless life, died for me, and that I needed to accept His free gift of eternal life. When I arrived home, alone, I got down on my knees and asked Jesus to come into my life and be the boss, the Master, my Savior. I told no one. Not even my husband. Two weeks later I was talking on the phone with my sister proclaiming I had made a decision to follow Jesus, prompting her to do the same. Mike interjected that he had, too. I told my sister, "And Mike has, too." After getting off the phone, Mike and I looked at each other. "You?" "Yes." "You?" "Yes." "When?" It was a day apart from each other two weeks earlier. God. Is. Good. From the

moment I decided to follow Jesus, I've felt forgiven, loved, and accepted. The moment I gave my life over to the One who created and loved me, my life has been changed and redefined. Shame no longer seized me; fear of death turned into joy for living eternally with my heavenly Father. My life took on a whole new meaning.

The Bible tells us “that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation” (Romans 10:9–10).

After I met the God of all forgiveness and love, my whole world changed. I changed. Forgiving others became easy after accepting how I had been forgiven.

Have you felt God's love and forgiveness? It's never too late to receive God's mercy and confess Jesus Christ as Lord. In order to have the best marriage you can possibly have, taking the step of accepting Jesus, receiving forgiveness, and proclaiming Him as Lord will offer you the optimum platform for a thriving, loving, and fulfilling marriage.

Setting the Stage for a Thriving Marriage

Never forget that forgiveness started with God, the Creator and sustainer of life, who created all things. *All things*. Including forgiveness. He first forgave us.

When it comes to forgiveness, there is no better place to begin than the Bible. Let's take a look at what Jesus said after He answered Peter's question about forgiveness and instructed

us to forgive “seventy times seven” times (Matthew 18:22):

“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.’ And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay back what you owe.’ So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you.’ But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. Then summoning him, his lord said to him, ‘You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?’ And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay

all that was owed him. My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.”

—MATTHEW 18:23–35

Mark the above passage in your Bible. Read it often throughout your marriage, especially when your feelings have been hurt. Don't underestimate the influence hurt feelings can have. You *will* get your feelings hurt; count on it. Be prepared. The best way to ward off an attack is to be ready. *Wow, slow down. You're making this sound like war!* Trust me, after your feelings have been hurt, it will feel like war.

“A happy marriage is the union of two forgivers.”

—RUTH BELL GRAHAM

Many people look at forgiveness as something we do for the other person. While this does help others along their forgiveness journey, the main reason we need to forgive others is for ourselves. As we just read, the unforgiving person was handed over to the torturers. *He* was the one being tortured. When we fail to release another for hurting us, *we* torture ourselves. Did you catch that? When you harbor bitterness in your heart, you willingly put yourself in your own created prison. Self-punishment is a very cruel form of torture. Don't do it. And don't do it to your marriage. It's like putting “we” in prison.

When you refuse to forgive, it puts your marriage in

prison. Putting *WE* before *ME* includes a heart free from bitterness and grudges toward each other and others. Bitterness spews out in many nasty ways. In order to have the best marriage, the one God intends for you, you *must* clear your heart of all resentment and anger toward those who have hurt you—starting with your future spouse. You want to begin your marriage with a clean slate. A clean heart.

There will be plenty of hurt feelings as your years together build up; you want a heart free from resentment on the day you say “I do.” I know it’s hard to believe now how years together can increase hurt feelings. Right now you’re filled with elated emotions as you enter your new life as a couple. The stark truth is the deeper you love, the deeper the possibility for wounds.

The first time I felt deeply hurt by my then–new husband, I felt like our marriage was over and my world was coming to an end. Sounds a bit dramatic, huh? Tell that to my young heart! At the time it didn’t feel dramatic at all. My world was ending! I felt confused and filled with deep despair. I didn’t know what to do with the hurt, and I didn’t know how to fix it, either. Which brings me to the purpose of this chapter: how to prevent built-up resentment in your marriage, and what to do when you’ve been hurt or when you’ve caused hurt.

“Only the brave know how to forgive. A coward never forgives. It’s not in his nature.”

—ROBERT MULLER

For some of you, just by reading this, it cuts open scars and brings up deep-seated wounds from your past. You may have been abused, suffered a huge loss, or gone through severe trauma. Forgiveness may seem like a mountain too monstrous to climb. Give yourself time to warm up. Stretch your legs, buy new hiking boots, and then begin to climb that mountain—when you're ready. But don't ignore it. This mountain of hurt will divide you and your future spouse if you neglect to tackle it.

I have a close friend, Mary (not her real name; most names have been changed throughout this book), who, after twenty years of marriage and three children, called me from a locked room in her home.

“Lucille, I've locked myself in the spare room in our house. I've been drinking, and Larry said if I get drunk like this again, he's leaving me.”

I am happy to report Mary joined AA, got a sponsor, and has been sober for over three years. But all of the hurts and buried anger and resentment came to a head one night after Mary locked herself in a room. She was forced to face it or lose everything she held dear. I am so proud of her for being brave enough to embrace the painful road of recovery.

Mary had some deep hurts she had never addressed, and it spewed out as a drinking problem. When we get together and share what's happening in our lives, there's a phrase she repeats to me often. As we talk through struggles, disappointments, and the normal challenges of life, I'll hear it over and over. Mary says, “I can't have resentment. I'm not allowed.” She keeps her heart clear of bitterness and

resentment. Toward *anyone*. I've done my best to adopt this motto as well.

To understand this mantra more fully, I decided to sit in a room with those who know how to forgive. In fact, their future success depends on it. I went to an Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meeting. It was my first time, and I attended with Mary, who regularly decrees, "I'm not allowed to have resentment." In a room full of expert forgivers I felt like an imposter and feared being rejected by this open, women-only, AA group.

To my delight, I was welcomed and embraced there more than any other group meeting I have ever attended. They were the definition of loving and accepting. I sincerely felt loved and accepted for just being me. And the only two words I uttered were "Hello" and "Lu." When each woman spoke, she focused on what she had done wrong and how she could fully forgive those who had hurt or offended her; and she expressed love and support for everyone in the room. I wanted to jump up and scream, "YES! YES! YES!" But I stuck with "Hello" and "Lu."

No resentment allowed.

Decide right now there will be no resentment allowed in your marriage. Make a pact today establishing an overriding peace treaty with a decree of NO RESENTMENT ALLOWED. This starts with a decision to always forgive, *before* you have an offense to forgive. Be secure in knowing you will be forgiven and that you will offer forgiveness to your spouse.

When we are loved and accepted for who we are, and forgiven unconditionally, we are free to be the best version

of ourselves. Your marriage will take on the best version of marriage possible.

Even after over thirty-four years of marriage, forgiveness remains at the forefront of our marriage. Do you have any idea how difficult it might be to write about marriage and forgiveness when you've recently "had words" or been hurt by your spouse? I have to fix it. And fast!

Very recently, Mike and I were hurrying to leave for church. Yes, church! When I finished getting ready and walked into the kitchen, he was cleaning the dishes. What I should have said was, "Thank you for getting those dishes done." But I didn't. Instead, I asked him for assistance with something I needed. (Now, a smarter woman would have left him alone to finish!) Well, as you can imagine, he barked.

I'm sure he felt unappreciated—but *I wasn't looking at the situation from his view*—all I could think about was how I was feeling at the "offense" I had endured. Being very sensitive (and, guys, most women are!), it hurt my feelings. It hurt my feelings a lot.

On the ride to church I talked about how I felt. It went like this: "It really hurt my feelings when you barked at me. Perhaps I picked a bad time, but I didn't deserve the way you talked to me. I feel sad and I want to withdraw." At the end I added, "You're not on my top ten favorite people list right now." I know, I know, I could have left my last comment out. For some reason, I felt really wounded by our unfriendly kitchen exchange and I needed him to know.

After expressing how I felt and hearing how he felt, I was

able to clear my heart of resentment and fill it back up with love for him. Whether or not we apologized, even though we *both* did, didn't matter. Listening to his viewpoint, I was able to fully grasp how discounted and unappreciated he felt, and getting my feelings out paved the way to a heart free of bitterness.

When I think of all the times my husband has forgiven me, it becomes easier to forgive him. If you're going to keep a record, don't keep a record of times you've had to forgive your spouse. Keep a record of how many times your spouse has forgiven you.

Which brings me to a time I had to ask my husband for his forgiveness. I had breached a confidence Mike trusted me with—one of the worst things you can do as a pastor's wife. I thought it would help a hurting friend, and I made a huge misjudgment call. Certain of the repercussions of my misstep, I knew I needed to come clean with my husband. I decided I was going to drive to Mike's office, confess the trust I had broken, and ask for his forgiveness. I knew he would forgive me, but I was still scared. And I fully expected him to be mad at me. He had every right to be.

As I was getting ready, I sobbed, completely distraught by my own actions. Suddenly the phone rang. It was Mike. My plan was to answer, hide my distress, finish getting ready, and head out to talk with him in person. I don't hide things well. He detected "hidden" panic in my voice. When he asked me what was wrong, I broke down with gasping cries. I told him what I had done and asked for his forgiveness. What he said soothed me like aloe to a burn. He said, "Honey, I forgive

you. It's okay; we'll get through this together.”

How in the world can I ever be mad at a man who forgives like that?

If you want a marriage with unconditional love, acceptance, and forgiveness, you must offer unconditional love, acceptance, and forgiveness. Forgiving an offense does not mean you condone wrongdoing. It means you will not hold it against the other person. What I did was still wrong, but he didn't retaliate or treat me any differently because of it.

I can honestly say I have not made the same mistake again in breaching a confidence. Mike's forgiveness, understanding, and trust paved the way for me to be a better person. His love freed me to be a new and improved version of me. Which makes for a better version of *WE*.

Resentment can creep in and take a foothold, even in the best of marriages. Brad, happily married for fifteen years with two girls and his first boy on the way, talked with me about this very subject. He told me he had mild bitterness in his heart toward his wife. It had been building up over many years, and he'd never addressed it nor felt like he could address it, especially now because of his wife's pregnancy. “It's built up little by little, and now I have resentment in my heart toward her. I don't know what to do with it. I know it's hurting our marriage.”

First, I think Brad was being prudent in waiting for the right opportunity to talk with his wife. Rushing into serious conversations can be damaging. Choosing the right time to talk can be just as important as having the conversation.

An example of this principle is Queen Esther in the

Bible. When Esther learned of Haman, a trusted adviser to her husband, King Ahasuerus, having a plan of annihilating her people, the Jews, the first thing she did was to go to God.

One would think Esther would immediately run to her husband and tell him of Haman's plot. She did not. She fasted and prayed.

You might then think as soon as Esther was done praying, she would run to her husband and request he do something about the devious schemes of Haman. But she didn't.

Instead Esther invited the king and Haman to a banquet she prepared. She displayed love, honor, and respect. While they were eating and drinking, the king asked Esther what her request was. Esther requested the king and Haman return the next day for another banquet. She showed her husband *double* honor and respect. You can read the full story in the book of Esther, chapters 3–7.

After the second banquet, the king asked yet again what was Esther's request. Listen to the beautiful way she asked: "Then Queen Esther replied, 'If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me as my petition, and my people as my request'" (Esther 7:3).

Esther showed love, honor, and the utmost respect while addressing her husband. Doesn't your beloved deserve the same when you address serious or hurtful issues?

Remember the example of Queen Esther when attempting difficult discussions. Pray first. Display honor. Show respect. Love throughout.

Sometimes when you talk to God first, before going to your spouse with a concern or offense, you can work it out with you and God. Oftentimes, as for me, Mike has done nothing at all, and I'm the one who needs to make an adjustment. Always try to work it through first.

Any time you begin to feel discontentment looming in your heart, it's time for a discussion. But when you get to that point, always proceed like Queen Esther. Timing can be everything. And show love and respect in the process. Taking your spouse off your top ten favorite people list would not be advised.

What do you do if you can't have a discussion with the person who has hurt you?

When we learn how to forgive difficult people, we become more like Jesus.

A very effective tool in releasing hurts and anger is writing the person a letter. One which you will never give to the "offender." The letter would only be for the purpose of you getting over the hurt and letting out your pent-up emotions.

Begin by writing all the things you want to say. The mean and nasty stuff. Then, move on to how they have hurt you. Next, write what you'd like to hear from them in response. After writing what you'd like to hear from this person, you'll most likely move on to understanding how they may have felt. Write whatever you want. You make the rules.

When you're done, delete. If handwritten, burn it or rip it up. The letter is for your eyes only. You don't want him/her

to find it and be hurt; it's only for the purpose of you getting over your hurt.

Most of the time after doing this, you can release the person and clear out any bitterness in your heart. This can also be an exercise to prepare you for the upcoming conversation you'll have with the person. This formula can work with anyone. I've used it often and it always helps me. Writing a letter is a helpful tool to release any stored grudges.

I was able to share this tool with Brad. He later told me how, at first, writing out his feelings seemed odd. In spite of this, he decided to give it a try and began journaling his pent-up feelings. As he did this he was able to release most of the resentment he had built up toward his wife. When it came time for the consequent discussion, it was a much easier interaction.

Let It Go

There was a time at church when a mom of a little girl in our children's ministry overreacted to something and unloaded all of her frustration out on me.

Her words were vicious and cutting, and to make matters worse, when I tried to talk in order to apologize, she put her hand in my face and proclaimed, "I'm not done!"

Finally, she paused, and I was able to apologize. You would have thought this would have calmed her down, but it didn't. She went right back into her unkind words directed right at me. Sadly, she ended up walking away angry.

The next week at church I looked up during worship,

and who do you think I saw on the worship team singing and raising her hand? Yes, *her!* The angry mom! Instead of worshipping, my mind raced to the week before. Focusing on God and praise became difficult for me. *How could she be on the worship team? I need to report her or something.* Funny how when we've been hurt, we turn into the spiritual police!

In the weeks to follow, every time I saw her onstage during church, worship became a challenge. I decided that every time I saw her, whether onstage or not, I would pray for her. It wasn't easy to do at first, but I stuck with it. Over time, noticing her singing or walking around church didn't spark negativity in me, and I grew to genuinely like her. Now I see her as another broken person, just like me, who needs healing and prayer.

I've overreacted to situations before and had to go back and apologize. We all have bad days.

Don't Give Satan a Foothold

Allowing resentment to creep in will give Satan a foothold in your relationship, attacking the core of your vulnerability and trust. Resentment causes us to focus on *ME*. Satan wants you to focus on "me" and destroy "we." A lack of forgiveness will slowly erode trust and build resentment. A lack of trust will affect your sex life.

Gentlemen, do I have your attention now?

Trust is the foundation of a solid bond between husband and wife. If you don't forgive, it's hard to trust you. If you

don't ask for forgiveness, why should anyone trust you?

When two forgivers come together, that's when the magic happens.

The Basics of Forgiveness:

Accept God's forgiveness.—Forgiveness begins with God. Accept Jesus Christ and be fully forgiven.

Extend forgiveness to others.—Don't hold on to offenses. Release anger and hurt.

Ask for forgiveness.—If you've been the offender, apologize and ask for forgiveness. And by the way, saying, "If I have done _____," or "But you did _____," is not asking for forgiveness. Adding "if" or "but" to an apology diminishes your appeal and oftentimes wipes it out. Instead say, "I'm sorry I have hurt you by [name the offense]. Please forgive me."

Don't allow resentment to build up.—At the first twinge of a grudge, address it. Don't ignore discontentment in your heart. Deal with it. Fast! There is something about talking about how we feel that allows us to let it go. Don't hold it in. Talk about your feelings in a kind and respectful manner. When angst builds up, we risk dumping on those we love the most as we relieve the pressure.

Have the difficult conversations. Talking through challenges—with love and respect—will enhance your relationship *and* your sex life.

Do Whatever It Takes

Are you willing to do whatever it takes to keep your marriage free from resentment and bitterness? You can do it. You just need to decide you will always choose forgiveness. At the end of a long offense-filled day, forgiveness is a choice.

Discussion Questions

- What does forgiveness look like to you?
- Do you ever confuse condoning an offense with forgiving an offense?
- Are you holding on to any bitterness in your heart?
- Do you believe forgiveness is a choice? Why or why not?
- Do you have any wounds from your past you need to find healing for? Consider talking to a pastor or counselor.
- Can you make a pact today to have a resentment-free marriage? Discuss why or why not.
- Is it hard for you to forgive?
- Did you grow up in a home filled with unconditional love and forgiveness? Discuss your feelings about your answer.

