

CONTENTS

Foreword	9
Preface	11
Introduction: Ten Principles for a Successful Marriage	13
1. Thou Shalt Be Selfless	17
2. Thou Shalt Have No Strings Attached	39
3. Thou Shalt Continually Communicate	61
4. Thou Shalt Make Conflict Thy Ally	85
5. Thou Shalt Avoid the Quicksand of Materialism	107
6. Thou Shalt Flee Sexual Temptation—Online and Otherwise	121
7. Thou Shalt Forgive Thy Mate—490 Times and More	143
8. Thou Shalt Romance the Home	163
9. Thou Shalt Begin Again and Again	181
10. Thou Shalt Build a Winning Team	199
A Final Word	215
Acknowledgments	217
Suggested Reading	218
Notes	219

COMMANDMENT

1

THOU SHALT BE SELFLESS

Over my many years as pastor, I've "been to the altar" more times than I can count. Many of the ceremonies have left me with lasting memories—some touching, some humorous. But in the middle of all the smiles, laughter, and tears of joy that accompany most weddings, something very serious takes place.

When I perform a wedding, I am asking the couple to promise—before God, family, friends, and me—that they will love and cherish each other. I ask them to pledge to honor and sustain each other in sickness and in health, in poverty and in wealth. I instruct them to put the other's needs and desires before their own and anyone else's, except God's.

These solemn promises make up the wedding vows. So far, every bride and groom standing before me has responded with a heartfelt "I do!" But sometimes I wonder if they understand fully what they are promising as they exchange their vows. When I ask the couple to make these promises, I am in reality challenging both partners to embrace ten biblical principles that, if applied, will help their marriage not only to survive but thrive. The task will involve commitment, work, plus a lot of give-and-take, but they (and you) truly can have a marriage that sizzles!

That's the kind of marriage God wants us to have. After all, marriage is His idea. He has a divine purpose and plan for the relationship between a husband and wife. And like all of His plans, it is perfect.

GOD'S PERFECT PLAN

God performed the very first marriage ceremony—a beautiful garden wedding on a perfect day with a perfect man marrying a perfect woman. Adam and Eve had it all.

Just imagine. Adam could truly say to Eve, “You’re the only girl in the world for me!” And he would never hear from Eve those haunting words, “Let me tell you about the guy I could have married.”

This first couple enjoyed the perfect love relationship, the kind God intended for a husband and wife to share for a lifetime. Adam and Eve lived for some time in sinless perfection, enjoying a pristine garden where God visited them and walked with them in the cool of the evening. Not even a hint of sin or imperfection marred the picture. The Bible tells us that Adam and Eve walked around the garden naked but felt no shame or embarrassment (Genesis 2:25). And their nakedness went beyond the merely physical; they remained totally transparent with each other and with God.

God had promised this first couple great blessings and had given them the run of the garden . . . with just one condition. “This whole garden is yours,” God told Adam, “and you can eat the fruit from any tree or plant—that is, all except one. I have placed one tree in the middle of the garden from which you are not to eat. If you do eat from this tree, you will gain the knowledge of good and evil—and you’re not equipped to handle the weight of that knowledge. If you eat of that tree, you will die” (Genesis 2:16–17, paraphrase).

GOD'S PERFECT PLAN DISRUPTED

Adam and Eve both knew the consequences of disobedience. They realized that God had forbidden them to eat from this single tree. But the devil, using language filled with deception and selfishness, enticed Eve.

“Indeed, has God said, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden’? . . . You surely will not surely die!” the serpent hissed. “For God knows that [when] you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:1, 4–5).

You know the rest of the story. Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden tree, and with their disobedience a divine curse fell on all humanity, resulting in the ultimate tragedy of human history. On that day sin and selfishness permanently stained our existence. At that moment, we lost the perfect fellowship with God that He intended for us to share with Him. At that very instant, every human relationship we would enter, including marriage, shriveled under a divine curse.

HISTORY'S FIRST MARITAL BATTLE

This tragic chain of events set off the first selfishness-induced marital battle in history. When God confronted Adam about his sin, the man responded by blaming his wife: “Lord, it’s not my fault. It’s hers!” He used different words, but he intended exactly that accusation. The Bible reports that he told God, “The woman *you* put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it” (v. 12, NIV, emphasis added). When God turned to Eve to hear her side of the story, she did no better. She blamed her surroundings and her circumstances: “God, I can’t be held responsible for this. The serpent deceived me. Blame *him* for this!” (Genesis 3:12)

The whole sordid scene provides a vivid and ugly picture of selfishness in action. It reveals two people giving in to temptation, sinning against God and against each other, then covering for themselves—all in an attempt to avoid accepting the blame and consequences for their sin. The husband blamed the wife and God, while the wife blamed her circumstances.

Sound familiar?

As a consequence, the beautiful marriage relationship that God had designed as a perfect union to benefit both the man and the woman, and to glorify Himself, collapsed into a bitter exchange of accusations and recriminations.

Things have never been the same since.

Current research shows that people are even more unashamedly into themselves than ever before.

THE NUMBER ONE PROBLEM IN MARRIAGE

Our first commandment deals with the number one problem in marriage, a setback that cropped up in the garden with Adam and Eve. Since then we've seen it continue all the way to the twenty-first century. What is it?

Selfishness!

Current research demonstrates that today, people are even more unashamedly into themselves than ever before. Millennials constantly place themselves at the center of self-created digital stages. A Pew Research poll found that 55 percent have posted a “selfie” on a social media site.¹ For example, I know a young woman who was speeding. As she was pulled over, she took a “selfie” video and tweeted it out to her followers. She also got a ticket for texting and driving, since she was delayed in handing over her license so she could digitally post her reaction to the cop. I cannot make this stuff up! Selfies may not be the primary problem in marriages, but the root of the selfie is an obsession with self. This is called selfishness and remains the number one problem in your marriage and in mine.

We all suffer from the sin of selfishness. It lies at the heart of nearly every marital problem. My close friend Gary Thomas says this in his book *Sacred Marriage*:

Any situation that calls me to confront my selfishness has enormous spiritual value, and I slowly began to understand that the real purpose of marriage may not be happiness as much as it is holiness.²

I could not agree more with Gary. And that's why our first commandment of marriage states: Thou shalt be selfless.

That's about as simple and blunt as I can get. Still, I'm convinced that if every couple walking the aisle took seriously this single principle, a welcome oasis of marital bliss would spread across this nation. Divorce lawyers would have to take a number at the unemployment office. I'm beginning to think I should incorporate these exact words into the marriage ceremony: “Thou shalt be completely selfless.”

This first commandment calls us to do in marriage what the apostle Paul instructs all of us to do: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves” (Philippians 2:3 NIV). Sounds easy, doesn’t it? But our number one problem, selfishness, makes it tough.

Perhaps we can take some positive steps toward incorporating this commandment into our marriages if we look at the problem of selfishness as a disease.

THE DISEASE

We are born with the disease. If you are around a newborn baby for any length of time, it becomes obvious. Babies can work themselves into a fit of rage if their needs are not promptly met. Maturing into a precious toddler does little to control the disease. Come between a two year old and anything he wants and you can test the theory. Psychologists say that this stage is called egocentricity. The short definition used by psychologists is “me-ness.” The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines egocentricity this way: “Limited in outlook or concern to one’s own activities or needs; being self-centered or selfish.”³

This disease theory comes from Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget’s theory about cognitive child development. Cognitively, young children are simply not able to see the world from another person’s perspective. The theory can be tested by holding a teddy bear in front of a young child. With the bear facing him, the toddler sees eyes, nose, and mouth. If asked to describe what *you* are seeing he will describe the eyes, nose, and mouth. Showing him what you actually saw—the backside and tail—will do nothing to change his opinion. Hold the teddy bear facing him again, and ask him what he thinks you are looking at, and he will again describe exactly what *he* is seeing.⁴ Albert Einstein complimented Piaget’s theory by exclaiming, “Piaget’s discovery is so simple only a genius could have thought of it.”⁵

Theoretically, we grow out of egocentricity and enter another stage of development. However, I have counseled hundreds of married couples who seem to relive their egocentricity stage on a daily basis. Consequently, I believe

it is more than a development stage. It is, in fact, a disease of the heart.

SYMPTOMS OF SELFISHNESS

If you're not sure about this disease, look for the symptoms. Most illnesses reveal visible, physical symptoms. Selfishness is no different. Its symptoms are as obvious as those of chicken pox!

Do a little self-diagnosis as you consider each of the symptoms listed below. Ask yourself, "To what degree has this symptom of selfishness infected me?" The four symptoms are: immaturity, time choices, insensitivity, and stubbornness.

Immaturity

Jo Beth and I dated for more than six years before we married. In hindsight, I believe that whatever we felt for each other on the day we married had more in common with puppy love than with genuine, mature love. We had to start growing up.

Fifty-five years later, the process continues!

While Jesus tells us to be *childlike*, immature people remain *childish*.

What do I mean by puppy love? Puppy love is an immature form of the love dynamic that binds two people together. When we are in puppy love, we want to be with a person because of how he or she makes us feel. In puppy love, our emotional and physical needs take a central place in the relationship. We

push aside anyone who doesn't satisfy and gratify our needs.

Many of us start with puppy love. Nothing wrong with that; it can be fun and enjoyable. But unless puppy love grows into mature love, the marriage will struggle and may not survive the trying times. And if you build your marital relationship on puppy love, you'll end up living a dog's life!

Consider the contrasts between puppy love and mature love in the following chart.

PUPPY LOVE VERSUS MATURE LOVE

PUPPY LOVE	MATURE LOVE
Focuses on receiving	Seeks to give to the other person
Impatient, self-centered	Patient in spite of the other's flaws
Tends to outbursts of anger	Responds gently and appropriately to irritants
Self-protective, because it insists on meeting its needs above all	Transparent and vulnerable

The answer to the problem of puppy love is maturity—and that means living, as Paul put it in Ephesians 5:15, with “wisdom” toward each other. We are to live and conduct our marriages as mature men and women in Christ. Unfortunately, however, far too many of us never grow beyond immaturity in either our married or our spiritual lives. While Jesus tells us to be *childlike*, immature people remain *childish*.

Sociologists and psychologists agree that America suffers a crisis of fatherhood partly because so many men never grow beyond adolescence. Their bodies age, but their minds still think like immature kids.

Men (and women too) experiment constantly with new ways to satisfy their desires. But even the most immature can acquire wisdom as they study and embrace God's principles.

Jo Beth and I had a lot of growing up to do when we married. Though we are now grandparents, we are still growing as individuals and in our relationship. And I can honestly say that growing and maturing together has yielded a life even more exciting and rewarding than those early days of puppy love!

How Do You Spend Your Time?

The apostle Paul tells us to redeem our time (Ephesians 5:16 KJV). Literally, we are to buy up all the opportunities time can bring us.

I enjoy playing golf. So whenever I get the opportunity, I visit a nearby course to play or at least hit some practice balls. I've become casually acquainted with a man who seems to be hitting golf balls at the practice range every time I show up. Unless by some great coincidence he just happens to arrive at the

course when I'm there, he apparently spends a great deal of time golfing. It seems as though he is already there whenever I arrive and is still there when I leave. He must hit hundreds of balls every day.

I can't help but wonder: How does this man spend his time? Does he have a neglected wife and kids at home, waiting for their husband and father to return from the golf course?

One man recently told me, "I struggle with selfishness in my marriage in the area of leisure time. I grew up loving sports, and would spend hours watching it on television. During the first several years of my marriage, I noticed that many of my evenings were spent not with my wife but with ESPN."

Because this young man did not want to be selfish, he made a tough choice. He decided to get rid of cable—and he called it one of the best decisions he ever made for his marriage! How much time could we men gain to spend quality time with our wives if only we would turn off the television? I have to confess, I can channel surf with the best of them, especially when it comes to sports and news networks. But I'm convinced, men, that if we'll just turn off the TV, we will have the opportunity to gain more joy in increased intimacy with our wives.

It's easy to spend our time on our careers, our hobbies, our avocations, and other self-gratifying activities—all at the expense of our marriages. I can't begin to tell you the number of people I've known whose marriages have suffered because one or both partners became too busy to make time for their relationship. The husband and wife seemed to inhabit different worlds. They lived together, yet never took the time for each other. The best that either could hope for from the other was leftovers. Think about the leftovers that are in your refrigerator right now. How eager are you to enjoy them? Leftover food rarely makes a first-rate meal, and leftover time rarely creates a fulfilling relationship.

Insensitivity

"If I had known he was so insensitive and unfeeling, I never would have married him!" I've heard this complaint from unhappy wives more times than I care to count. I sympathize with the feelings that spark such harsh words. They often come from a frustrated wife who feels unappreciated, who believes that

her husband doesn't care about her needs or what she's thinking or feeling.

Insensitivity kills a marriage and can destroy any kind of relationship. It's hard to live with, work with, or associate with an insensitive person. No one wants to spend time with someone who doesn't listen or give any consideration to the feelings or thoughts of others.

In Ephesians 5:17, Paul provides a model of what sensitivity looks like: "Do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is." Two contrasting words take the spotlight in this verse: *foolish* and *understand*. This verse tells us that foolishness follows a lack of understanding.

Understanding depends upon sensitivity. We need it in our relationship with the Lord and with other people, especially our spouse. Sensitivity means seeking to understand the other person's thoughts, feelings, and needs.

Let's take a look at this kind of sensitivity in action. Mark and Laurie have been married almost ten years. Mark owns a small business, selling sporting goods. The business provides him great personal fulfillment and a healthy family income. Long before she met Mark, Laurie discovered her love for oil painting. Through the years she developed her passion into a profitable sideline business.

But then three kids came along in four years. As the diapers and high chairs multiplied, Laurie's time for painting faded. The couple had always planned for Mark to be the breadwinner, allowing Laurie her desire to be a homemaker. But this busy mom gradually discovered that her love for painting provided a welcome creative outlet that helped to balance her day. Her overwhelming household duties, however, soon gave her fewer and fewer opportunities to paint.

Mark sensed Laurie's need to express her artistic gift and after giving the situation much thought, he decided to cut back on his number of clients in order to help his wife pursue her artistic career. Laurie now has access to a small gallery that provides her with refreshing breaks from her routine.

And Mark? He takes care of the children and household chores every Tuesday, Thursday morning, and Saturday afternoon. Through his sensitivity to his wife's needs and his choice to act selflessly, Mark discovered a cherished part of his life. Had he decided to turn a blind eye to his wife's needs, he would have

denied both his wife and himself an enormous amount of happiness.

Ask yourself a couple of questions. As a wife, are you sensitive to your husband when he's in the middle of a pressure-packed time at the office? As a husband, are you sensitive to your wife when she's struggling with her boss, a major deadline, or with the children? Are you sensitive to each other during those times when you just don't feel like yourselves?

Insensitivity is a classic symptom of selfishness. It causes us to live foolishly—and our marriages suffer.

Stubbornness

It seems only fitting that one symptom of selfishness is stubbornness, also known as pigheadedness. And nowhere do we see stubbornness in marriage more clearly than in the area of submission. Paul uncovers this problem in Ephesians 5:22, when he writes that wives are to submit to their husbands as they would to the Lord.

Some husbands believe this verse puts them in charge, and no matter what conflict or disagreement arises, what they say goes. Only one problem: That's not what this verse means!

Right before the apostle says that wives should submit to their husbands, he states that all Christians should submit to one another, motivated by reverence for Christ. We are all to lay aside the stubbornness that characterizes our fallen natures and consider the needs of others. Sometimes, this includes husbands submitting to their wives.

A few years ago, Clint and Elizabeth began a practice that revolutionized their marriage. They began to ask each other: "What says, 'I love you' to you?" They committed to act on the answers they heard and thus found the key to mutual submission.

They stumbled onto this practice early in their marriage. Elizabeth had long assumed that, more than anything else, Clint wanted a clean house when he came home from work. So every afternoon before he arrived home, she would rush through the house like a whirlwind, cleaning everything in sight. She would always greet Clint and follow him into the house, waiting for his praise for her immaculate housework—but it never came. Understandably, she

began to resent Clint's lack of appreciation and diagnosed him as suffering from an acute case of selfishness.

One day she'd had enough. With fire in her eyes, she confronted Clint. As they talked, Elizabeth discovered that Clint really didn't care if the house was clean when he got home. He just wanted to know what was for dinner! The meal didn't even have to be ready; they could be ordering pizza, for all he cared. What said, "I love you" to Clint was not a clean house but a happy wife with dinner plans.

What a revelation (and relief) to Elizabeth! From that day on, Clint and Elizabeth began asking the question, "What says, 'I love you' to you?"

No better or more harmonious marriages exist than those in which both partners submit to each other as they would to the Lord. This doesn't mean disagreements and conflicts never erupt. It does mean, however, that ultimate peace reigns in the marriage because both the husband and the wife consciously choose to put the other first in all decision-making.

DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT OF SELFISHNESS

It's time to look in the mirror. Do you suffer from selfishness? Do you see yourself in one or more of the symptoms just described: immaturity, insensitivity, or stubbornness? Do you tend to misuse your time or give it to your personal activities or interests, leaving your mate the leftovers? If you answered yes to any of these questions, then you test positive for selfishness.

The truth is, most of us do.

Selfishness has made many marriages so sick that the relationship needs an intensive care unit. Their union has all the characteristics of anemia. They've lost the passion, fun, and effectiveness for God they once had together. They feel bored and unfilled in the marriage and even numb toward each other.

In one sense, that's not all bad news. If you recognize such problems in your marriage, you've already taken a giant step toward making positive changes. It

When two people don't work on goals important to both, usually the goals of one become dominant.

will take hard work and perseverance, but you can overcome chronic selfishness.

To help you do that, I recommend that you treat the selfishness with a dose of PEP. PEP includes three ingredients: priorities, expectations, and patterns.

Priorities

Get on the same page. That's the first ingredient in treating selfishness. Many marriages go for decades without so much as a word spoken about individual and mutual priorities. When two people don't work toward goals important to both, selfishness easily comes into play. And usually the goals of one become dominant.

The key to getting on the same page? Set your priorities together. Take the time to write down your personal list of priorities in such areas as friendships, work, church, money, vacation, and children. Once you've each made your list, compare them. See where they overlap and where they differ. Then sit down and work out the differences. Remember, if the goal is to get on the same page, it requires mutual give-and-take.

Would you like a fun and effective way to do this? Then consider going on a personal retreat, just you and your mate. You don't have to go far away or spend a lot of money. Just take a couple of days and go somewhere special to the two of you where you can work through your priorities. And spend some time enjoying each other.

Expectations

Our dog, Sonny, had a tick problem. Have you ever observed one of those little suckers? And that's exactly what they are—ticks survive by sucking the blood out of their host animal. Well, let me tell you, Sonny was a great host! He wore special collars and got dipped to kill the little parasites, but somehow ticks would still attach themselves to Sonny and have a feast. Their feeding frenzies caused them to swell to several times their normal size. Many a tick lived a full life by feeding off of our Sonny.

What do Sonny's ticks have to do with marriage? Every couple that comes to the altar brings their own set of expectations. Whenever I stand before a bride and groom, I have the uncanny ability to read their minds. As I watch

them look into each other's eyes, I know what both of them are thinking: This person is going to meet all my needs.

That's when the trouble begins.

I call this a tick-on-the-dog relationship. Problem is, in far too many marriages, you have two ticks and no dog. Neither partner's legitimate needs get met, as each tries to feed off the other.

Certainly it's normal to have some expectations of your mate and marriage. That's part of the "I do" promise. It's vital, however, that every couple clearly communicate their expectations. That's why the second ingredient of our treatment for selfishness is defining expectations.

Most of us go about this all wrong. We survey the marriages we know anything about and reach a general conclusion: This is what a good marriage must be like. I might look at the relationship between my mother and father or observe other couples I've known, read about, or seen on television and from this information try to determine what a marriage ought to look like. This deeply flawed method of understanding expectations in marriage can lead to disappointment, even disaster.

We build healthy marriages when we sit down with our spouse and define our needs and goals as a team. We say, "This is what we want our marriage to be like." In other words, we get our expectations together. "This is what we expect out of marriage. These are our goals for our relationship."

Try doing this on the personal marriage retreat I suggested earlier. Get away with your mate and think and talk through your expectations and goals. If you'll do this, you'll less likely focus on yourself and more likely focus on meeting the needs of your spouse. And you'll be well on your way to getting over selfishness.

Patterns

The final ingredient in PEP involves getting your lifestyle patterns together. When two people marry, they bring into the relationship different ways of dealing with life. Every home is unique, and we bring those unique lifestyle patterns

When two people marry, they bring into the relationship different ways of dealing with life.

with us to the altar. Some of these patterns may need to be broken, while others embraced.

Suppose a husband comes from a family that showed its affection much more than did his wife's. Or perhaps the members of his family are frugal while his wife's spend readily.

Take time with your mate to get your lifestyle patterns together. How will you make decisions? How will you resolve conflict? How will you handle money? How will you discipline your children?

Jo Beth and I grew up together. When we married, we already knew each other pretty well. Still, we came from different families and lifestyle patterns. We had to establish our own lifestyle patterns when we married. You must do the same if you're going to rid your marriage of the chronic disease of selfishness.

THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

How do we know when we're on the road to recovery from selfishness? How do we know when we're cured?

Love. Love is the answer.

Let's clarify that word—one that suffers from overuse in our society. We love everything from people, to pets, to pastimes, to pizza. The word has become shallow and has lost much of its rich depth of meaning. It's been watered down. So if love brings health back into our marriages—and assures us that our selfishness is under control—let's take a moment to restore value to the meaning of love. There's no better place to find the true meaning of love than in the Bible. God is love, and in His Word He has given us clear instructions about life, including love and marriage.

The New Testament contains an array of Greek terms that we translate with the single word love. Each of these Greek words describes a unique kind of love, or a different depth or aspect of love. Since America's word *love* lacks depth of meaning, let's spend some time looking at these biblical loves. Let's consider what we could call *feelings love*, *friendship love*, and *forever love*.

When your marriage contains all three of these loves, you'll know that you're cured of selfishness and on your way to a dynamic marriage.

Feelings Love

I clearly remember how I felt when I first fell in love with Jo Beth—my heart beating as if I'd just run a four-minute mile and my stomach churning like a whole colony of butterflies had moved in. She was like a magnet to me. I felt drawn to her all the time. I felt as lovesick as the man described by the anonymous poet:

I climbed up the door
 And shut the stairs;
 I said my shoes and took off my prayers.
 I shut off the bed and climbed into the light.
 And all because—
She kissed me good night!

I can identify with the poor guy in this poem. He had a bad case of what I call *feelings love*, or romantic love. The Greek term for this type of love is *eros*, the kind of erotic love that gets top billing in romance novels and movies.

By the way, erotic love is not bad; after all, it was God's idea. Read the Song of Solomon and you'll see how God meant erotic or feelings love to function within marriage.

This type of love involves chemistry between a husband and wife—an exciting mixture of passion, physical attraction, affection, and sexuality. Romantic love is a wonderful gift from God to be shared between a man and woman committed to each other in marriage. It's not only an enjoyable part of marriage, it's a vital part.

Ask any marriage counselor to name the question most asked by husbands and wives, and he'll probably say something like, "How can I restore the passion and excitement to my life and to my marriage?" When people say the romance or the spark has gone from their marriages, the problem is the fading of feelings love.

Certainly it's not easy to maintain passion and excitement in marriage. But torches can be relit. You can restore romantic love to your marriage. You can indeed have a marriage that sizzles. How? Let me give you some practical steps to help you restore the feelings to your relationship.

- Give attention to your relationship. I always advise couples to keep dating each other. Husbands need to court their wives with the same dedication they needed to win their love. Wives should make their husbands feel as special as a knight in shining armor.
- Activate your will. Even if you don't feel the same emotions you once did, activate your will to do the things you naturally did back in those days of passionate, romantic love. Imagine your life as a train. Your will is the locomotive and your emotions are the caboose. Once the locomotive starts moving on the tracks, the caboose follows. So don't concentrate on feelings. Feelings are important, but healthy emotions can't be generated by feelings alone. Commit to actions that benefit your mate, and then watch as the feelings rekindle.
- Stay on the tracks. Consider the following tracks laid out in Scripture. The first obligation we have as husband and wife is obvious: Love your mate as a cherished husband or wife (Ephesians 5:25; Titus 2:4). The Bible instructs both husbands and wives to love each other. Unfortunately, some people have trouble with that mandate. So the second level of our track may be a bit easier for them: Love your mate as a fellow believer (1 Peter 3:8). If you still don't think you can fill this bill, then do your best to comply with the third biblical level: Love your mate as a neighbor (Matthew 22:39). If this still feels like too tall of an order, Jesus has one last directive for you: Love your mate as an enemy (Matthew 5:44). The Lord teaches us to love our enemies. If you can't love your mate at least as much as you love your enemies, then you probably have some problems that go beyond the marital realm. Your first order of business is to make sure of your relationship with the Lord, because without that, no amount of relationship seminars or how-to books will help your marital troubles.

Let's move on to the next kind of love necessary to ward off selfishness. There is much more to marriage than romantic love. While I grant that this is a vital, fun, and enjoyable stage, your marriage will suffer if you have only one-

third of the love it needs. More than one marriage has failed because a couple neglected to move beyond feelings love.

Friendship Love

The following announcement appeared in a church bulletin: “Darius Jones and Jessica Brown were united in holy matrimony Saturday evening at 7:00 p.m. in the sanctuary. So ends a friendship that began in elementary school.”⁶ I hope that Darius and Jessica continued their friendship, despite the gloomy declaration!

The Greek word for “friendship love” is *philia*. Hence Philadelphia is called the city of brotherly love. *Philia* refers to affection and bonding between two individuals. *Eros*, or feelings love, results in a person falling madly or blindly in love, as if something irresistible in the other person pulls the smitten lover into the relationship. But *philia*, friendship love, carries the idea of choice—an act of the will.

The best marriages in the world are those in which the partners not only fall in love but choose each other as best friends. Think for a moment about the best friend

you ever had. Remember how you could tell this person anything without fear of judgment or rejection? You felt safe to share your secret thoughts, deepest feelings, and innermost desires.

In such a marriage, the husband and wife can honestly say they married their best friend. Such couples have so much in common that they enjoy each other’s company, even apart from marriage’s sexual aspect.

Physical attraction is what initially grabs the attention of a man and woman for each other. The couples who count each other as best friends consciously choose such a relationship. One influential author says it this way:

Noel and I, in obedience to Jesus Christ, have pursued as passionately as we could the deepest, most lasting joys possible. All too imperfectly, all too half-heartedly at times, we have staked our own joy in the joy of each other. And we can testify together: for those who marry, this

I’ve often said marriage is friendship that catches fire.

is the path to the heart's desire. . . . As each pursues joy in the joy of the other and fulfills a God-ordained role, the mystery of marriage as a parable of Christ and the church becomes manifest for His great glory and for our great joy.⁷

I've often said that marriage is friendship that catches fire. If your marriage includes feelings love and friendship love, rejoice; it's on the mend from selfishness.

Forever Love

Feelings and friendship love are both based, at least to some degree, on mutual enjoyment, satisfaction, and fulfillment. I've found much happiness in the romantic and friendship love Jo Beth and I share, and I trust she has found the same thing. But forever love cares so much for another that he or she gives with no expectation of return.

In its purest form, forever love has been demonstrated by God. He has poured out this unconditional love in sending His Son, Jesus Christ. We cannot deserve it and we can give nothing in return that equals it.

The Greek word for such love is *agape*. The term is so rare that it doesn't appear much in Greek literature outside the Bible. It's as if the word had been created and reserved solely to express God's love for us.

In marriage, this type of love endures the ups and downs of feelings love and the highs and lows of friendship love. This is the love that transcends romantic feelings and surges of devotion. It is not based on feelings but on an enduring commitment. *Eros* love is a matter of the body; *philia* has to do with the soul; but *agape* is an issue of the spirit.

Many couples try to make it with a one-third, or at best, a two-thirds marriage. Many have a physical relationship only and when the fire dies, the marriage ends. Others have the physical and the friendship, but the day comes when the friendship sours and the marriage terminates.

But husbands and wives who enjoy a three-thirds marriage have a whole relationship. No matter what happens at the other levels, *agape* love sustains the marriage and gives it depth and vitality.

The Bible provides a classic description of *agape* love through the following words and phrases (adapted from 1 Corinthians 13:4–7):

Patient
Kind
Not jealous
Not boastful and arrogant
Does not behave inappropriately
Does not seek its own interests primarily
Does not hold grudges
Does not rejoice in wrong but in truth
Carries all burdens
Not cynical and distrusting
Hopes in all situations
Endures everything that comes against it

From time to time, I see how I'm doing in each of these characteristics of *agape* love. I ask myself if I'm patient, kind, jealous, boastful, or arrogant to Jo Beth—you get the picture. I encourage you to give yourself the same test regarding your spouse or loved one. If you're honest, you will discover areas in which you, like I, need to improve.

Feelings love makes marriage exciting. Friendship love brings fun and interest to the relationship. But these loves wax and wane, surge and retreat. *Agape* love, however, remains constant and makes the marriage secure. It takes forever love to crowd out our self-centeredness and to restore the passion and friendship that cures selfishness. And only God can give us this kind of love.

WELL WORTH THE EFFORT

Evangelist Billy Graham lost his beloved wife of sixty-four years, Ruth, in 2007. Over the decades their marriage was admired and observed by millions. In an interview following Ruth's death, her husband said this:

I am so grateful to the Lord that He gave me Ruth, and especially for these last few years we've had in the mountains together. We've rekindled the romance of our youth, and my love for her continued to grow deeper every day. I will miss her terribly, and look forward even more to the day I can join her in Heaven.⁸

I am struck by the impact of his words. The great evangelist seemed to declare that he and his wife shared all three kinds of love. They rekindled their *eros* love—the love of their youth. He mentioned being together in the mountains, which conjured feelings of being tucked away together, and enjoying each other's company. That is *philia* love. Lastly, the *agape* love allowed love to continue to grow and to deepen. Remember, *agape* love has to do with spirit. Billy professed a spiritual yearning to rejoin her one day in heaven. Selfishness has no place in this description. Billy and Ruth Graham seem to have experienced our first marriage commandment in action. They illustrate how this commandment provides the foundation for a happy, successful marriage, until death parted them.

While marriage isn't always easy, it's always worth the effort. In fact, outside of a relationship with Jesus Christ, marriage is the most sacred and most fabulous relationship God offers. When a man and woman learn how to put aside their own selfishness and give each other top priority, then their marriage can fill up with passion, satisfaction, and power.

REFLECTING ON YOUR RELATIONSHIP

1. In what specific areas of your relationship with your spouse (or loved one) do you find yourself behaving or thinking selfishly?
2. What specific symptoms of selfishness can you identify in yourself?
3. What kinds of expectations do you have for your marriage and spouse? How can you begin communicating those expectations to him or her?
4. Take the love test of 1 Corinthians 13. Ask yourself if you're patient, kind, boastful, etc., to your spouse. In what areas do you need to improve?