

**Taking the
DEADLOCK
Out of Wedlock**

OR, HOW TO LIVE WITH AN ORNERY SPOUSE

Robert J. Wieland

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Preface

Since there are no perfect people in the world, there are no perfect marriages. Anyone who claims he has never been tempted to think that his spouse was ornery (difficult to deal with) is either falsifying or is living in a dream world. Most people are honest enough to admit that at one time or another they have been ornery.

Sometimes what appears to be orneriness in a spouse is simply that mysterious element of maleness or femaleness that seems to lead so inevitably to misunderstandings. A sincere effort to understand how the opposite sex thinks usually makes this kind of “ornerness” evaporate.

When the moving parts of a machine are in close contact, friction is unavoidable, unless oil is present to lubricate the gears. A marriage without a healthy sense of humor can quickly get red hot.

One couple that came to me for counseling seemed to have enough roadblocks and booby traps to wreck a dozen marriages. Yet these partners could throw back their heads and laugh at themselves. This was a decade ago—and I’m happy to report they are still together and to all appearances reasonably happy.

There are, however, irritations for which the oil of humor seems unable to help. In such marriages the happiness quotient is greatly diminished or entirely absent. Yet God has some healing “good news,” which in many cases, if not all, will bring relief.

We’re not concerned here with things *to do* to make a marriage more happy. Good advice is seldom helpful when we’re plagued with emotional paralysis. Our concern therefore is what *to believe*. What is helpful is good news.

No matter how hopeless the situation may appear to be, what we want to say at any given point the communication line between the Savior and you is always *Good News*.

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Abby's Hopeless Marriage

It isn't hard to find advice on how to get rid of an ornery spouse—one with whom it is hard to get along. Books on the technique of divorce abound everywhere. However, our little voyage of discovery is setting sail with a different port in view: How one can find happiness in a marriage where one feels his or her spouse is less than satisfactory, in fact, downright ornery. We begin with a fascinating case history of a woman trapped in a marriage probably worse than any you have known or heard about.

Abby was intelligent and beautiful. For some reason, she married Al, a cantankerous, ill-mannered boor who turned out to be extremely ornery. Many a woman would have walked out on him. Yet, she found her niche in history by holding on.

If a prince charming had visited Abby's village, she doubtless would have become a princess. But none came along, and it seems that her parents encouraged her to go with Al. He probably turned no lights on for her, but she could have consoled herself with the thought that he was steady and solid. At least, he knew how to make money. Perhaps mom and dad encouraged her to believe that she could either change him or learn to love him. She shouldn't pass him up. He was the scion of a prominent family, destined to wealth and influence. With her warm, winsome ways, Abby would impart to his lordly ranch a touch of grace. She finally said Yes to him.

Soon after the wedding, Abby began crying herself to sleep. If someone had told her she had terminal cancer, she could have hardly felt more devastated than realizing that she was bound for life to someone who was a perfect fool when it came to human relations. Neighbors and the hired hands got so they avoided him whenever possible.

To make matters worse, Al took to drinking, and Abby learned that no problem can be so bad but what alcohol can make it worse. The hired help could leave, but Abby felt chained in a marital dungeon "till death do us part." Sometime she half wished that death would come her way.

Covering for Al's boorish ways developed in Abby qualities of grace and diplomacy. She learned how to pour oil on the troubled waters Al had roiled up. The irritating grain of sand produced in her soul the legendary pearl. She developed a fantastic expertise in managing men who had trouble managing themselves. This eventually led to a new chapter in her life.

Abby got hold of a secret truth. Committed to the idea that "they [two] shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24), Abby began to understand that "they" being "one" meant that she and Al couldn't be separated, and that her eventual happiness depended on believing it. She began looking on Al's faults as "our" faults. It may seem small comfort to some discouraged person reading this book, but the fact is that she became more talented and beautiful in the process of enduring disappointment.

Abby remained faithful to Al, believing that God in His own good time and way would transmute her pain into happiness. To the end of her marriage, she kept her conscience clear, holding the ranch together, winning the love of the hired help and the neighbors, and in the process carving out for herself a special niche of distinction in female history.

Al's drinking problem finally did him in. After sobering up from a binge he fell into a fit of depression that turned into despair and ended in death. Everybody for miles around

believed that the Lord had simply called time on the old curmudgeon. And, believe it or not, when Abby was free, a prince did show up who married her. Her story is one of the best authenticated case histories on record. You can check the details in 1 Samuel 25:2-42.

We read there that “Nabal ... was harsh and evil in his dealings,” but “Abigail ... was intelligent and beautiful in appearance” (verse 3, NASB). God took the trouble to delineate her story as an encouragement to millions of people since.

David, Israel’s rightful heir to the throne, happened on the scene. In an unpleasant encounter, Nabal rubbed him the wrong way and David in a rare fit of anger decided to avenge the insult with violence. But for Abigail’s intervention, David’s rash act would have haunted his royal conscience for the rest of his life and could have ruined his reputation as a fair and compassionate ruler. Abby’s well-developed skills in diplomacy and exquisitely tactful finesse saved David from himself. Her hastily composed but eloquent speech pointedly reminded him that his rashness could be the undoing of his royal honor. Never has a woman averted tragedy so skillfully.

Unlovable as Nabal was, Abigail was protective of her unworthy husband. She assumed his guilt: “On me alone ... be the blame.” “Please forgive the transgression of your maidservant” (verses 24, 28). She implied that Nabal’s faults were hers as well as his, for were not the two “one flesh”? For all time to come, Abigail demonstrated the oneness implicit in marriage!

Abby’s plea that her husband’s life be spared is patently sincere, so much so that it proved effective. While all this was going on, Nabal was getting high in a wild drinking spree. Abby waited until he sobered up and then told him how close he had come to disaster. The record says, “His heart died within him so that he became as a stone. About ten days later, the Lord struck Nabal and he died” (verses 37, 38).

In due time, when she was free, David married Abigail (see verse 42). The king-to-be not only loved her; he felt she would help him manage his own weaknesses.

Nabal was not merely ornery; he was obviously impossible. Yet God had a solution to that marriage problem. Abigail’s unhappy marriage should encourage us to believe that there can be hope for happiness even in such “impossible” situations. If so, there must be much more hope for those many situations that are difficult rather than hopelessly impossible.

The story of Abigail reveals that God Himself undertakes to help the unlucky spouse who is getting the bad end of a bargain. He or she can find happiness in fidelity, through unexpected ways. God never went to sleep on Abigail, nor did He abandon her. To Him who sees when the sparrow falls, Abigail and her unhappy marriage were important. Her story became immortalized for all ages and even for eternity to come.

It is naïve to expect that we will never have to taste pain imposed by less-than-perfect situations outside of us. What is important is to know that inner sense of well-being, of a clear conscience, of peace with God and the assurance that He is proud of you for what you are where you are. All this Abigail knew, and it was the secret of her charm and impressive beauty when she comes onto the Bible stage.

Abigail can become the patron saint of the Federation of Unlucky Spouses, whether wives or husbands. Maybe someone will pick up this book who feels that he or she is caught in a bind as hopeless as Abigail’s. To realize that the Lord notices and cares about it is itself no little comfort!

It is good to realize that you and your situation are important to the Lord and that He is concerned for your marital happiness. We must find out what He is doing about it! His solution to the problem may not be as simple as zapping a difficult spouse (though you may have secretly wished for that). There may be a much happier solution to the problem than eliminating either the spouse or the marriage. *What should be eliminated is the irritant that is causing the problem.*

How to do that is what we want to discover.

It's No Joke

The media frequently publish reports showing that roughly half of American marriages end up in divorce. Another proportion separate without divorce; and a third group become “psychologically” divorced while trying to exist under the same roof. Happiness actually is rare.

Millions of helpless children are the flotsam and jetsam washed up by the tide after these marriages have foundered. Each of these kids bereft of a natural parent will almost inevitably have problems succeeding in his own marriage. The record states that the present generation of children from broken homes is a social time bomb waiting to explode.

When love dies and divorce follows, the result is too often the most wrenching bitterness that humans can experience.

It is phenomenal how people can change! Watching them as they court, you'd think they are the sweetest couple you ever saw. Both families and friends rejoice at the “perfect” match. Then something mysteriously dries up by the root. Neither spouse can put a finger on what has caused the difference.

Somehow a serpent lurked under the flowers in this Garden of Eden. Each spouse became difficult, rubbing the other like sandpaper. Conversation grew strained, words became tart and sometimes cruel. Embraces became difficult. One or the other started coming home late. Anniversaries were forgotten, in-laws neglected or shunned. Wild winds of passion blew like sandstorms in arguments and quarrels. Being together was no longer fun. Each began to dread coming home to face the other. In such a strained atmosphere, every innocent word or act took on a sinister hue, and accusations and counter-accusations flew. By this time sour love began to curdle into bitter animosity and jealousy. At last the marital voyage passes the point of no return, and divorce looms as the only way to terminate the mutual misery.

The aftermath of the wreckage can be worse than the original storm. No one wins except the lawyers. Whether the problem is dividing up the property, alimony payments, child support, custody of the children, or visiting privileges, courts are forced to wrestle with the wreckage for years to come.

There are indeed cases where all else fails and divorce or separation becomes the only solution. The New Testament recognizes that such situations exist (see Matthew 19:3-12; 1 Corinthians 7:10-15). But in some, yes many, cases there is a better solution: it's learning to live with an ornery spouse and learning how to make an unhappy marriage become a happy one.

Barbara Russell Chesser in a *Reader's Digest* article says that in a study of 60 divorced couples, researchers found years afterward “many unresolved issues.” But this isn't all. Part of the trauma comes from thinking that the breakup will solve problems only to find that frequently they become worse after divorce. Studies show that proportionally, second marriages more often end in divorce than first ones.

There are few marriages where no trace of orneriness ever intrudes. Human beings are imperfect and are bound to rub each other the wrong way at least sometimes. A

divorce is a violent tearing asunder, but it always begins with the faintest little crack. Alfred (Lord) Tennyson had the idea:

It is the little rift within the lute,
That by and by will make the music mute,
And ever widening slowly silence all.

The little rift within the lovers' lute,
Or little pitted speck in garner'd fruit,
That rotting inward slowly moulders all.
—Tennyson, "*Merlin and Vivien*"

Little "rifts" in lutes can be repaired. You don't throw a cracked million-dollar Stradivarius violin away; you send it to the expert luthier, for you can't replace such instruments. Start thinking how your marriage is even more priceless.

There is a Master Repairman who loves to heal the rift within the lute. Wise marriage counselors are His servants; but He is the true source of their wisdom. The first step is believing that this Master Repairman is both willing and capable of undertaking your case. Our great Repairer of "rifts within the lute" of marriage would love to do something infinitely more valuable than repairing a music box.

Perhaps the first problem to resolve is that the Master does not upbraid us for getting ourselves into the troubles we know we deserve. Guilt for one's own contributions to marital discord often looms so large in our conscience that we hesitate to believe God can or will do anything for us. The devil has a way of making us think we deserve the misery that comes our way. Let our first lesson be this confidence in Him: "If any of you falls short in wisdom, he should ask God for it and it will be given him, for God is a generous giver who neither refuses nor reproaches anyone. But he must ask in faith, without a doubt in his mind; for the doubter is like a heaving sea ruffled by the wind" (James 1:5, 6 NEB). Yes, we are looking for Good News to believe. Begin by believing the grace of God—His kindness and generosity in forgiving us and saving us from the evil that we deserve. Stop blaming yourself or your spouse or your in-laws, and start *accepting that forgiveness*. Nothing heals so sweetly as does His forgiveness.

We might get all kinds of good advice, but we are unable to put any of it into practice if we are paralyzed by the idea that God reproaches us for our past mistakes. But His Word has this tremendous good news for the one who sincerely seeks help.

The Technique of Repairing a Cracked Marriage

This essay is less concerned with good things to *do* to save a marriage than with good things to *believe*. Emotional energy is nonexistent unless first of all one discovers good news to believe about the problem. Believing right things soon leads to doing right things. And then problems begin melting away. The reason is that believing the genuine truth of Good News activates secret, dried-up springs of motivation buried within the human soul.

Here are five truths solid as the granite hills, each of them an item of good news about your marriage. You will not be burdened with duties to perform that are beyond your strength. You may however need strength *to believe* that the good news is true, because mankind's favorite obsession is believing bad news.

1. God is more concerned than you are that your marriage become a happy one.

(a) He invented marriage. If marriage proves too difficult for human beings, its failure naturally reflects on the wisdom and reputation of its Inventor. Some people troubled about marital problems asked Jesus for advice. He answered, "A man will leave his father and mother and unite with his wife, and the two will become one.' So they are no longer two, but one. Man must not separate, then, what *God has joined together*" (Matthew 19:4-6, GNB). The point is that you have Someone working twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week to ensure that your marriage is a happy one. Don't resist what He is doing.

(b) Each marriage is as important to God as if it were the only one on earth. "Not one sparrow falls to the ground without your Father's consent. ... You are worth much more than many sparrows!" (Matthew 10:29-31, GNB). So, when God says "you are worth" so much, He includes you and your marriage!

When a marriage begins to crack, we feel desperately alone. It's good news to realize that Someone cares, for once you recognize this fact, the problem ceases to be yours. It becomes *His problem too* and you can stop asking: "What am I going to do now?" and you can begin asking, "Lord, how can I cooperate with You while You solve this problem?"

2. Ornery spouses can become un-ornery.

Often all God needs to make a marriage happy is for just one spouse to be willing to cooperate with Him in making certain changes. The changes will have to be His work, for, when it comes to solving problems like this, the Bible recognizes that we are "without strength" (see Romans 5:6). It boils down to our *letting* the Lord heal the marriage. This is not a "laissez faire" cop-out. There is something for you to do, but that something is not an impossible work; it is a truth you must *believe*.

If there is one ornery spouse in the picture, God already has one perverse will to deal with. If you add to the problem by choosing also to be perverse, He is stymied. Even Heaven can't save a marriage if *both* partners are unwilling to let God save it. But

if one spouse chooses to cooperate, that's all God needs in order to be free to go to work.

The Bible recognizes that human beings can thwart God's good news for them if they persist in rejecting His grace. The Savior has given back to all of us the freedom of choice. But it offers encouragement to believe that one marriage partner can be the instrument whereby God changes the other for the better. It says that "the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his [believing] wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband" (1 Corinthians 7:14, NIV).

That word *sanctified* means to put into a positive relationship with God because of the believing spouse's cooperation with Him. In other words, the spouse who needs to be changed is influenced by the one who is in touch with God. But now another problem comes to light.

In the intimate relationships of marriage, we get to know one another without pretense or veneer. Your spouse knows whether or not you are genuinely unselfish. We cannot help showing how selfish we *can* be, apart from the grace of God. So, when your spouse sees evidence of God's Spirit working in you, he or she will be far more likely to be receptive to the impressions of the Holy Spirit than otherwise. That's one way God "sanctifies" the unbelieving spouse.

God's favorite method of revealing Himself is not through lightning strikes and earthquakes, but by transforming ornery people. As the warm sun melts a block of ice, so this kind of love frequently succeeds in melting an icy heart of unbelief. As Paul puts it, "How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?" (verse 16, NIV).

3. *Perhaps wrong attitudes on you part have provoked your spouse into becoming unpleasant (or ornery).*

The change God can bring about is good news, especially if you are the one who has been at least partly at fault, for this is something you can correct with God's help. Your transformation can be God's means of saving your spouse. To be saved means to be changed from being "alienated from the life of God because of ... ignorance" to being reconciled to Him (Ephesians 4:18, RSV).

This could be especially true in a marriage where only one partner is a professing Christian and is the one who exhibits ornery behavior. Such behavior nullifies the "Christian's" profession and makes it appear that God is impotent to save people from themselves. Nothing can make ordinary human beings more ornery than believing such bad news. If you have been a stumbling block in this regard, maybe you need look no further to find the cause of your marital unhappiness. What a person believes about God determines what kind of person he or she is. This is because of an unerring Bible principle—the principle of righteousness by faith. It's really as simple as two and two equaling four.

Good news is the communication of a message of truth concerning what Christ has done and is doing to save us. It centers in His sacrifice of Himself on the cross. It's not only the pie-in-the-sky salvation beyond death; it means peace, happiness, reconciliation, transformation of heart here and now. To see and appreciate this is what the Bible calls faith; and such faith works to effect righteousness in the heart of the believer.

It ends the great emotional energy drain, for faith energizes: “faith ... works through love” (Galatians 5:6, GNB). (The Greek word for “work” is *energeo*, from which we derive our word *energize*.) This is how guilt, fear, alienation, and suspicion are melted away from the heart.

Let’s say it again: all these wonderful things we are supposed to do are impossible for us to do unless we believe what Christ has done for us and is doing for us. Believing bad news paralyzes you; believing Gospel good news energizes you.

An unbelieving spouse who does not see this good news demonstrated in the life of his or her marriage partner is deprived of the most effective means God can use in making the unbeliever “un-ornery.” On the other hand, the unbelieving spouse who daily witnesses this “good news” will have a hard time resisting it. Hard to believe? Well, it’s true.

4. *If there is hope for you, there is hope for your spouse, because God made the two of you one.*

The devil specializes in telling married couples they are “mismatched.” When two people marry, they may indeed be “mismatched,” but God intends them to *become* increasingly suited to each other; and they will increasingly become one, if they do not frustrate God’s plan for them. His word is, “The two will become one” (Matthew 19:5, GNB). Not, the two ought to become one, or the two *should* be one, or it would be nice *if* the two could become one; no, “*the two will become one.*” In other words, God’s plan is to make people who think they are mismatched (the devil has tempted them to think so) become happily matched. This is what His grace accomplishes. But this only happens if they allow God to work out His plan in them—in other words, stop resisting Him.

If what we have said thus far is true, then as surely as one spouse can become un-ornery by the grace of the Savior, so surely is it possible for the other partner to become so. The same God who made the one, made the other and intends that the two be “one.” Of course, He will never force anyone’s will, so one can resist His grace to the bitter end.

5. *Say Yes to that impulse to do or say something nice to your spouse.*

Believing right things is the foundation on which doing right things rests. But, how does one get the will and energy to do what is right? The answer is, by faith. Faith is not true faith unless it “works through love” (Galatians 5:6, GNB). Faith will prompt one to do or say something helpful—such as complimenting your spouse with words of sincere appreciation, buying him or her an unexpected gift, giving your spouse an impromptu hug, putting yourself out to do some unselfish deed that you have stubbornly resisted doing. There are a million ways faith can energize you to do what was previously “impossible.”

That blessed prompting is actually the work of the Holy Spirit. Do you see it? God is already working to save your marriage! *Do it! Say it!* God makes it possible for you to be different from what you have been. That’s His job—being a Savior, and prompting you.

If your loving deed or word is repulsed, do not respond cynically. Such a response could ruin everything and put in question the motive behind your kind word or deed. Expect that your genuineness will be tested, and don’t get discouraged when it is. Phony goodness seldom works, but genuine goodness has a good chance of succeeding. Genuine goodness has no way of demonstrating its genuineness except as it is tested. Tests and trials met in the right spirit increase your chances of success. If

you see this precious insight, unexpected setbacks will no longer upset you (see 2 Peter 1:5-7).

“Do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who treat you spitefully. ... Treat others as you would like them to treat you. ... Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate” (Luke 6:28-36, NEB).

Does this work? Indeed it does! The idea on which God’s government rests is that light is stronger than darkness, love is stronger than hatred, good is stronger than evil, and grace is stronger than sin. Thus God’s grace is powerful enough to resolve the greatest marital problem—if it is allowed to accomplish its purpose.

How to Love When You Can't Love

“He’s killed all the love I ever had for him! I feel dead when I’m around him.”

“I don’t have any more feeling for her. I just can’t love her anymore.”

Sad words such as these have an air of finality about them that sounds as if there is no point in writing this chapter. If something is dead, it just doesn’t normally come back to life.

But can something dead be revived?

The ancient Greeks and Romans thought of sexual love as a god who shot arrows of passion and thereby “slew” victims who could not help falling in love. From the first century B.C. onwards, the Romans depicted Cupid in paintings and statues, making his “invincible” conquests. If you were shot by one of his arrows, you couldn’t help yourself.

We moderns still tend to think the same way. Falling in love is viewed as being as irresistible as catching a cold. The Greek counterpart to the Cupid was Eros, son of the goddess Venus. In Hellenism, sexual love was a god; how could a mere mortal oppose a divine fiat?

The same idea pervades Muslim thinking. Extreme modesty is required of Muslim women because it is assumed that the sight of a woman’s form or partially unclothed body will excite uncontrollable passion in a man, which will in turn be irresistible to the woman. It is almost inconceivable that a man and woman thrown together alone will not have sex. As in ancient Greece or Rome, sexual passion is divine. If Cupid shoots you, it is futile to resist. One’s choice or will has no place in such “love.”

The corollary is that, as you have no control in falling in love, neither do you have any control over your falling out of love. That’s the other side of Cupid’s coin. And that’s the secret principle behind marital breakups. But is Cupid’s “love” the dictator-master of our souls so that we are slaves to do its bidding, to love or not to love?

The Bible idea of love is quite different. The Bible represents love as a principle. It can be willed or controlled according as the Holy Spirit of God enlightens the one who believes in the Savior. Cupid may shoot his arrow in an attempt to get one infatuated with illicit love, one that is a path to ruin, but the Bible teaches that we *can* say “No” to such impulses. Cupid may also shoot his arrow after you are married and make you think you are hopelessly in love with someone who is not your husband or wife. Pagans think such an infatuation is of divine origin, and therefore is reason enough to break up a marriage. But the true Christian realizes that he or she can choose to deny this invitation to infidelity and overcome it by divine power.

Says the inspired apostle: “The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness” (Titus 2:11-14, NIV).

Is this a miserable way to live, always saying “No” to temptation? No, it’s the only happy way to live. You are not called upon to grit your teeth and force yourself

unwillingly to say “No” to temptations to illicit love. Not at all. The Bible says that the grace of God (divine enabling power) “*teaches us* to say ‘No’” to temptation. We are not abject slaves to passion. In Christ we are free men and women with the God-given power of choice to let Him control our emotions and infatuations. If we can say “No” to an illicit love, we have gained a victory over the temptation. You can’t imagine how happy you will be to find yourself delivered from a trap that would in the end have been nothing but the “pits” for you.

If it is possible to say “No” to an illicit love, is it not also possible to say “Yes” to a love that you know is right and proper, your God-given duty to nurture, but which you don’t feel like at the moment?

God is not like Cupid. When you vow to love, honor, and cherish your spouse-to-be until death do you part, God wills that you love that marriage partner, and be happy doing so. It must be recognized, of course, that your spouse may not carry out his or her end of the bargain, but this does not excuse you from carrying out your part. Were this not true, God’s plan concerning marriage would be on the skids.

Now, we can rephrase the question this way: Is it possible to love an ornery spouse whom you feel you cannot love?

Practically all modern languages have but one word for love; however, the Greek language used in the New Testament had three main words for it: *eros*, *philos*, and *agape*. *Eros* was the Greek equivalent of Cupid, the god of passion, the “love” which depended on the beauty or goodness of its object. This is the standard equipment with which all of us are born. The ancient pagans assumed that *eros* was divine; for it was a mysterious emotion that seemed to sweep like a river in floodtide over all human obstacles. *Philos* is a lower level of love, more akin to affection, such as love of music or art.

The apostles never said that god is *eros*. John says that God is *agape* (see 1 John 4:8). This kind of love is a principle, not a passion. It is free and sovereign, not dependent on the goodness or beauty of its object. Therefore it can love bad people—even ugly ones. “Scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die [this would be the highest form of *eros*]. But God demonstrates His own love [*agape*] toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ... For ... when were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son” (Romans 5:7-10).

Whereas *eros* and *philos* love are dependent on the value of their object, *agape* is love that creates value in its object. You don’t have to clean yourself up first before you can know God accepts you. His love recreates you, makes you as precious as the divine Gift that was given for your redemption.

Eros love instinctively wants to possess. In contrast, *agape* is a love that gives rather than takes or expects. Thus our human love seeks pleasure for its own sake; whereas *agape* wants to give pleasure to others. Human love seeks a reward; *agape* is willing to relinquish reward.

Agape is a love that we humans cannot generate on our own. It is foreign to our planet and must be imported. This breathtaking love is the supreme revelation of the character of God as displayed in Christ: “Love [*agape*] is of God; and everyone who loves [with *agape*] is born of God and knows God. He who does not love [with *agape*] does not know God, for God is love [*agape*]. ... In this is love [*agape*], not that we loved

God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ... If we love one another [with *agape*], God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us” (1 John 4:7-12).

If a marriage is based only on *eros* love, it is captive to the whims of Cupid’s capricious ways. At his command you fall out of love as readily as you fell in love. But the *agape* love that Christ gives stabilizes our human love. We read that *agape* never fails (see 1 Corinthians 13:8), but the shipwrecks that litter our marital shores grimly testify that our human love does fail.

God wants your marriage to be happy. *Agape* can be infused into your conjugal love, to make it greater than it is. When the Lord commands, “Husbands, love your wives” (Colossians 3:19), the word used is the verb form of *agape*. A wife’s love must also be enriched by the same heavenly love. All this may seem impossible to us, unless we humbly face reality.

We must let the gift be imported from above. The apostle admonishes, “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you. Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love [*agape*], as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us” (Ephesians 4:32; 5:1, 2). The how is in that phrase, “as Christ also has loved us.” To appreciate His love means that we see that we would be in our graves if He had not died for us. We owe even our physical life to His sacrifice for us, whether or not we understand it or believe it. All are infinitely and eternally in debt to a Savior; even the sun shines and the showers fall by virtue of His sacrifice. Every loaf of bread is stamped with that cross, and every water spring reflects it. This is the lesson taught by the Lord’s Supper.

Now things begin to happen. When we sense even a little our own weaknesses and orneriness, how we have experienced that grace “even as God in Christ forgave” us, we immediately find it infinitely easier to “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another.” Like a desert spring that has gone dry but begins anew to gush forth its refreshing waters after a season of rain, so tender emotions that have dried up to dust deep in some mysterious chamber of the darkened heart begin to flow again. What we once thought forever impossible looms as a reality. The command to love one’s spouse may appear as impossible as moving Mount Everest, but when one sees how Christ has loved us, the miracle can happen. And yes, it does happen many times.

Agape is a love that is in harmony with God’s will for us and His law. We can will to love [*agape*] “in Christ” by His grace. This is because everything that is God’s will is possible. Many a “dead” marriage can live again when we plug into that ultimate Source of genuine love which comes with built-in happiness and peace of heart.

But can *agape* love reactivate a dead sexual love and solve its mysterious problems? Can the chemistry be reactivated?

The Miracle of Recreating Sexual Love

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians encourages a rich sex experience within marriage. Paul did *not* say, "It is good for a man not to touch a woman"! The Corinthians wrote it in a letter to *him* (see 1 Corinthians 7:1). Rather, he firmly advocates that husband and wife enjoy each other's bodies, but with the principle of unselfish *agape* enriching and ennobling the experience.

In verses 3-5 he says, "The husband must give the wife what is due to her, and the wife equally must give the husband his due. The wife cannot claim her body as her own; it is her husband's. Equally, the husband cannot claim his body as his own; it is his wife's. Do not deny yourselves to one another" (NEB).

Sex is God's gracious gift to a married couple whom he desires to make "forever one." Sexual union is an intimation of the happiness which is the prelude to lifelong happiness.

The flame of love is so fragile that it can easily be quenched by the mistakes of marriage partners. Guilt can paralyze us, as can the corrosion of jealousy and resentment. Sexual love can be like Humpty Dumpty. Once broken, all the king's horses and all the king's men can't put it back together again. So it seems; but here is where the Lord's grace can do what seems impossible.

There is one situation in which it is even difficult for God's grace to avail to mend a broken marital relationship, and that is what Jesus called "fornication" (*porneia*) in Matthew 19:9. This is a legitimate ground, although not a command, for dissolving a marital union, because it mysteriously destroys the foundation of confidence on which such a sexual union in love has to rest.

The barriers to renewal of physical love are often emotional, pharmaceutical ads notwithstanding. God is the "Wonderful, Counselor" (Isaiah 9:6) who notices when a sparrow falls and takes infinite care in doing what no one else can do putting Humpty Dumpty back together again. "I would have lost heart, unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait on the Lord; be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart" (Psalm 27:13, 14).

He who notices the fall of a bird is also concerned that His believer's sex life be happy. Some seem to have the old Dark Ages idea that sex is intrinsically shameful, that God turns His back on it. He who invented all the delightful intricacies of sex also provides healing. *But His healing lies in contrition.*

Pride and self-righteousness can kill the tender plant of love as surely as an icy blast of a freezing wind can kill spring flowers. "Terribly-sinful *you* have been unfaithful; righteous *I* am innocent! *You* deserve hell; *I* deserve heaven." These sentiments, said out loud or expressed in demeanor, are unjustified, for "all have sinned" (Romans 3:23).

The true record of our sins is not our own conscious memory, but the record in heaven, where with X-ray vision the dark, unconscious evils deep within are exposed to view. The books of heaven record the sins that we *would* commit—given the chance. God is concerned about our hidden motives. A so-called "innocent" spouse who *would*

have been unfaithful had he or she been tempted is not “innocent” in God’s sight. *Both* need the grace of forgiveness. And until *both* can sense this, the healing that God is ready to give cannot take place.

Loving an unlovable spouse may appear to be impossible. But *agape*-love may illuminate with hope a situation that has otherwise appeared dead. There is creative power in the word of God. He created the world out of nothing, for He “calls those things which do not exist as though they did” (Romans 4:17). Can He not do the same for a “dead” marriage? Of course He can.

Jesus met a paralyzed man by the pool of Bethesda. The sufferer had been a withered wreck for 38 years. “When Jesus saw him lying there, and knew that he already had been in that condition a long time, He said to him, ‘Do you want to be made well?’” (John 5:6). The man hardly dared to say “Yes.” His response was like ours when we find it almost impossible to believe good news. I can almost imagine him sobbing at this point: “Sir, I have no man to help me. Others get blessings, but I—.”

Then “Jesus said to him ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk’” (verse 8). The paralytic could have argued how impossible this would be. But he chose to *believe* the good news. Like Abraham, “who, contrary to hope, in hope [he] believed” (Romans 4:18) and thus showed himself a true child of Abraham. “And immediately the man was made well, took up his bed, and walked” (verse 9).

The Bible records an example of gynecological healing—Abraham and Sarah. Both for a time became bitter against God because of apparently unanswered prayers. Sarah blamed God for keeping her from getting pregnant (Genesis 16:2). But the story goes on to tell of how God gave her some good news that, when she chose to believe it, set her free from her bitterness; it also made Abraham happy. Two hearts were melted; and something happened that everybody for miles around had concluded was impossible: Sarah became pregnant with Isaac. The New Testament contributes this bit of an insight: it was heart-melting “faith” on her part that made the impossible miracle possible (Hebrews 11:11).

We have spoken in delicate language about a delicate problem. But the One who created the delicateness of a fragile rose petal can create in you and in your spouse something beautiful, beyond your wildest dreams. When He does, give glory to Him, and remember that the happiness you discover is something you don’t deserve. It is something purchased for you by the sacrifice of Christ upon His cross. Yes, the gift includes happy, lifelong sexual love.

Five Truths That Can Save a Marriage

We have all heard the story of the ship's captain who carefully piloted his vessel through dangerous waters by steering it exactly by his compass. Yet his vessel hit the rocks and sank. At the inquest, the ship's compass was salvaged and carefully examined. It was found that someone, while cleaning the wooden case, had carelessly left a tiny fragment of a steel knife lodged in a crack. This had deflected the needle just enough to cause the great ship to stray from its course and strike the rocks.

Many a marriage has been wrecked because one of both partners believed something which deflected the marital compass. Beliefs can be decisive. Truth can save, and error can ruin. One's marital voyage is important enough to make certain that every idea lodged in one's mind is verified by an authoritative standard of truth—the Word of God.

An article in a *Reader's Digest* proclaimed, "Five Myths that Can Wreck a Marriage." The principal point was that wrong ideas one *believes* can wreck a marriage.

The corollary of this axiom is wonderfully and more importantly valid: *truths* that one believes can change a marriage and make it happy. If believing falsehoods can damage a marriage, believing inspired truths will certainly tend to restore its happiness. This is the Bible principle of righteousness by faith, the most profound insight into how human nature functions that has ever dawned on the world.

Paganism says your salvation depends on the things you do. Some supposedly Christian groups have failed to comprehend that genius idea of the New Testament—that salvation depends on believing what is true. (*Good works follow faith.*)

A marriage partner who has never seriously looked for good things in his or her spouse may divorce him or her and never realize that beneath what appears to be a rough exterior is a potential gold mine. Is it possible that an ornery spouse can turn out to be a treasure? One fairy tale tells of a princess who reluctantly kissed an ugly frog, only to discover a handsome captive prince within the hideous creature. The story is imaginary, of course, but the principle it enunciates may not be. Can an *agape* kiss turn a "frog" of a spouse into a princess or prince? Read on.

The following truths that can save a troubled marriage are derived from a source that is unimpeachable—the Bible. It may sound simplistic to say that they work, but they do if they are carried out in faith and looking to God for guidance.

1. *God invented marriage in the beginning, and He still joins two people to become one whenever we let Him lead.*

Satan tries to break up marriages because he hates anything God is involved in. The Lord brought Eve to Adam, and Jesus drew a lesson from this: "What God has joined together, let not man separate" (Matthew 19:6). As surely as night follows day, we can expect that Satan will try to put them asunder because he hates whatever God has done. It's very simple: If "God has joined" two people together you can be sure Satan will try to pull them apart. But the whole point of the Bible is that Christ has conquered Satan, "paralyzed" him (see Hebrews 2:14); "destroy" is paralyze in the original. If we

can believe that God has joined us in our marriage, and that He is stronger than the devil, a thousand difficulties may be solved at once.

“But my spouse and I are ‘unequally yoked together’—the very thing God says shouldn’t be! (See 2 Corinthians 6:14.) How could God have anything to do with joining us together?”

Are you *really* sure that you are “unequally yoked”? “How do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?” (1 Corinthians 7:16). What appears to you to be an unbeliever may turn out to be a beautiful child of God, just as an ugly caterpillar may turn out to be a gorgeous butterfly. If one’s unbelieving spouse ever does become a believer, it means that in His foreknowledge God has counted him or her to be such all along, for the Bible says that He “calls those things which do not exist as though they did” (Romans 4:17).

The sooner one’s faith stands on God’s side, the sooner He may be able to work effectively. Whether such good news applies to your marriage, only He can tell you and whisper to you as you kneel alone before Him in faith and contrition. He will! *Just listen.*

Don’t forget that God sometimes sends us choice gifts in unattractive wrappings. Jesus, for instance, was born in a cow-pen with the chickens and the goats. Take a second look at the “gift” you may be thinking of throwing away. There might be a treasure in it.

“But I am divorced and now remarried! Which marriage am I to believe God joined together?” The true answer may be, both. Mistakes in the past do not deprive us of God’s mercy and guidance. Now the Lord says, “Go and sin no more” (John 8:11). “God may well have overlooked bygone periods when men did not know him; but now he calls on all men everywhere to reform their lives” (Acts 17:31, NAB). Don’t compound one mistake by making two. If you’ve broken one person’s heart, don’t break another’s.

“Houses and riches are an inheritance from fathers, but a prudent wife is from the Lord” (Proverbs 19:14). That’s the same kind heavenly Father who notices when a sparrow falls to the ground. He has a kind hand in one’s marriage, for Jesus says we are worth more than “many sparrows” (Matthew 10:31).

God promised to bless your marriage in spite of Satan’s efforts to break it up, if you will let Him. Such blessings are the real ground on which hope can be built; and if hope is possible, all kinds of difficulties can be solved.

2. *Your spouse may be a jewel in the rough, only waiting the touch of the Master.*

When the true love of Christ operates in a person, he or she is inevitably transformed. Paul lists a catalog of people who were typical of the Corinthians: “Thieves, ... drunkards, ... slanderers, ... swindlers,” and some “guilty of adultery or of homosexual perversion” (1 Corinthians 6:9, 10, NEB). Then he adds, “Such were some of you. But you have been through the purifying waters; ... justified through the name of the Lord Jesus” (verse 11). The “good news” that Paul proclaimed worked! It is no less effective now. In many cases, all that a troubled marriage needs is that genuine good news. The best one to give it is the believing spouse.

3. *Often unpleasant personalities are such because of a secret irritant, an unresolved personal problem that has embittered them.*

Usually the root is a failure to understand that God has been a Friend instead of a divine Enemy. What makes people ornery is feeling that God is against them (very

common to us mortals!). This is why Paul pleads, "In Christ's name, we *implore you*, be reconciled to God!" (2 Corinthians 5:20, NEB). Many an unhappy person has begun to sing when that heart-reconciliation takes place at the deepest levels. Even disappointments of the dark past can be seen in a new and more realistic perspective when the light of God's love illuminates those tragic mysteries. Bad news metamorphoses into Good News.

4. God has ordained that certain advantages be built into every marriage, but they are often neglected or misunderstood.

(a) Praying together every day cements two hearts together as nothing else can do. In our modern world of double jobs and careers, overtime, TV, and frenetic amusements, this simple custom has all but died out, and with it has died out a lot of marital happiness.

One of the cardinal principles of the successful Alcoholics Anonymous program is the acknowledgement before God and one's peers that "I can't control my drinking; I need the help of a Higher Power." You can form within your own four walls your own local chapter of Troubled Spouses Anonymous. In marriages that leave God out, there is a spiritual dimension lacking. Those who resist this truth frequently reap the fruit of their unbelief in tragic but unnecessary heartache.

When husband or wife can honestly admit to the other, "This is beyond us; let us invite the Lord to come in and bless our unhappy home," they are *beginning* to get out of the woods.

The Lord is a divine Gentleman; He will not push His way into your home uninvited. When the two disciples were walking to Emmaus one evening, the resurrected Jesus joined them on the way, incognito. When they reached their home, they rather casually invited Him to come in and stay with them. He made as if He must go on. Not until they "constrained Him, saying, 'Abide with us,'" did He "stay with them" (Luke 24:28, 29).

This little incident throws a flood of light on God's relationships with us. Indeed, *He wants* to come in and bless our homes with His happy presence as a Guest, but *He must be invited*. That's what daily kneeling together in prayer is all about. No matter how awkward you may feel about doing it, *do it*, and believe the truth: He accepts every sincere invitation, and never bawls you out because you have waited so long to begin.

Christian families do not partake of daily food until they have invited the Unseen Guest to each meal and thanked Him for what they have. Statistics are not available, but I venture to say that it is extremely rare that a couple split up who humbly seek God together daily. They may still have perplexities and irritating problems, but they know a new inner strength, and they can cope. If hell doesn't become heaven, marriage becomes a prelude thereto.

(b) When parents divorce, the children are usually the worst losers. If parents reflected on the fact that their children are the product of their union, they might think twice before wanting out.

When a marriage breaks up, the child often feels that he is somehow to blame. Depending on his age, he realizes that he is the product of his parents, and he reasons, "If the marriage that brought me into this world is a failure, perhaps I too am a failure. Here's nothin' goin' nowhere." He can even feel a sense of unfairness that he is doomed to live, while the love which produced him is doomed to die. This is one reason why many children of divorced parents have a low sense of self-esteem. It is easier to

adjust emotionally to the physical death of a parent than to the death of a marital oneness responsible for their very existence.

The realization that a child in a happy home is more likely to develop into a well-adjusted, happy person is a strong incentive for parents to work toward furnishing their children a happy home. The rewards are incalculable.

(c) It sometimes happens that a hard-to-please spouse becomes manageable when the other spouse voluntarily surrenders in a conflict. Jesus gave some counsel on what might appear to be an entirely different subject, but which is uncannily appropriate in today's milieu of marital discord and divorce courts: "Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge" (Matthew 5:25).

It may sound strange to suggest that a spouse is an "adversary," but that is what many are. In such a situation you can see it is possible to win an argument and lose a marriage.

Although the Bible says, "Wives, submit to your own husbands," it adds immediately, "as to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:22). "The husband is head of the wife" only in the sense that "Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body" (verse 23). There is gentleness and humility in Christ, for He says, "I am gentle and lowly in heart" (Matthew 11:29). This may be a difficult lesson for many men to learn, but they will discover that, if they put it in practice, a wife will find it much easier to "submit," yet welcome his husbandly headship.

A wife can cut a thousand Gordian knots of tense bitterness by giving in on a matter that does not involve a moral principle, even if she knows she is right and her husband is wrong. Some men only learn the hard way—by making a mistake. If this turns out to be the case, she will show superlative wisdom if she holds her tongue and refuses to say, "I told you so!"

5. When like a flower facing the morning sun you face the Lord Jesus Christ, you automatically stop centering your attention on your own happiness. You find yourself turning your marriage into a ministry of love to others.

Many a marriage is miserably unhappy simply because it is a selfish union. The love that brings happiness to a married couple is a love that wants to make other people happy. When you serve together in some regular ministry to needy people, you discover the highest element of joy that a marriage can produce. You put yourselves out in lifting others' burdens, and then you will very likely find your own burden become lighter.

Simply put, you'll end up taking the deadlock out of wedlock.