

## WORSHIP, WORK, AND GRACE

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So what is it that produces a marriage of unity, understanding, and love? This kind of marriage is the result of a lifelong commitment to daily marital work and deep trust in God's transforming grace. What produces a commitment to work and trust in grace? There is only one thing, and one thing alone, that can form in you this commitment to *toil* and *trust*. It is worship.

Think of the commitments that make for a wonderful, God-honoring marriage, the commitments that form the content of this book. What does it take to deal *honestly with your sin, weakness, and failure*? Toil and trust. What does it take to *make growth and change your daily agenda*? Toil and trust. What does it take to *build a relationship of love*? Toil and trust. What does it take to *deal with your differences and appreciation and grace*? Toil and trust. And what does it take to *work to protect your marriage*? Toil and trust. It is a lifelong lifestyle of joyful marital work and living together as you really believe in God's grace, which really does give you everything you need to do the work he has called you to as husband and wife. But what propels you to give yourself to the daily labor of a good marriage and a practical belief that God will not call you to work that he does not enable you to do? Worship. This and this alone is the foundations of a marriage of unity, understanding, and love.

Luella and I will leave tomorrow to go away for the weekend to celebrate our anniversary. It may sound cheesy to some, but I am married to one of my heroes. Luella is my confidant, my adviser, my mentor, and my dearest friend. I am constantly amazed at her courage and perseverance. I marvel at her natural love for people and the many ways she instinctively ministers to others. I have a deep appreciation for how she lives each day with purpose and cares about what really matters. I have been struck again and again by how she never stops thinking and how she thinks by implication. I love how she loves the Lord and thinks about his will in everything she does. I am so grateful that I have lived with a person with such stability and maturity.

As much as I love, appreciate, and respect Luella, I do recognize that she is not perfect (although she is much closer than I am). Yes, she is a woman of character, but sin still lives inside her as it does in me. The battle still rages for control of our hearts in those small moments where every marriage lives. We long for our life together to be loving, peaceful, unified, and productive. Our number-one desire is that God would look into our marriage and be pleased. But we don't always live with him in view. There are times we want our own way. There are times when we step outside his boundaries. There are times when we let the differences between us that God has created become the occasion for conflicts. There are times when we still find it difficult to listen, forgive, serve, or give. There are times when self-focus still gets in the way of love. There are times when we fail to overlook a minor offense or turn a little thing into a big thing. There are times when we allow ourselves to be too busy, and our relationship suffers.

We have a wonderful relationship. It is a long-term friendship and a long-term romance. I can honestly say I love Luella more, as I head out on this anniversary weekend, than I ever have. But we cannot, and we must not, quit working on our relationship. We cannot act as if we have arrived. We cannot rest on our laurels and coast our way through our marriage. We cannot retire from the good things we have been called to do as a husband and a wife. Sin still lives inside us with all its self-focused, antisocial instincts. We have to keep watching, examining, listening, thinking, confessing, forgiving, and persevering. We still have to work to keep God in constant view. We still have to have conversations we wish weren't necessary. We still have to say, "I am sorry," "I forgive you." We still have to hold tightly to our commitment to what is right no matter what. We still have to remind ourselves of grace, give each other grace, and rest in grace.

We have a wonderful marriage, but there is work to be done every day. And as we do this work, we still have to remind ourselves of God's presence, promises, and provisions. He is in us, he is with us, and he is for us, but his work in our hearts is not yet complete. Until it is, each day of our marriage must be a day of willing toil

and trust, and we will live that way only if each day is also a day of worship. Worship is the foundation of a marriage that is not only good, but good for the long run. Good marriages are built vertically before they are built horizontally. Troubled marriages are repaired vertically before they are ever repaired horizontally.

When it comes to marriage struggles, worship is the problem and worship is the cure. Let me remind you again what this means. It is only when God is in his rightful place that other things will be in their rightful place. It is only when I love God above all else that I will love Luella as I love myself. If love for God is not the practical driving force of my life, love of self will be. If God's kingdom is not my reason for doing what I'm doing in my marriage, my kingdom will be. If I am not resting in God's control, I will look to take control. If I don't think that I am dependent on his grace, I probably won't give Luella grace. If I forget the call of his will, my responses will be directed by what I want, how I want it, where I want it, and when I want it.

This tendency in all of us to worship ourselves, which is the antisocial impulse that is so destructive to marriage, is only ever defeated when it is replaced by willing, active, and consistent worship of God. I will repeat my confession: my problem has never been that I have not loved Luella enough; no, my problem has always been that I have not loved God enough, and because I have not loved God enough, I have not loved Luella as I should.

This is the bottom line: the war for our marriages is a war of worship. The fundamental problem of every marriage is misplaced worship. The cure for every marriage is renewed worship of God. Does it sound too simple? Well, it is and it isn't. Although this principle is true of every marriage, the war and the cure look different for every couple, because the way the war plays out and the way the cure heals is different for each of us. It is different for each couple due to how God has hardwired us, who he placed us near, and where he has chosen for us to live. Yet, despite our differences, we all suffer from the same problem, and look to the same cure.

Perhaps you're thinking, "Paul, this doesn't sound very romantic." My intention here is not to disrespect romance. I love romance. On the vast continuum of what defines maleness, I am way over on the romantic end. I do think intimacy and romance are important ingredients in healthy marriage, but as this book has argued, a good marriage doesn't grow out of the soil of romance. No, the soil in which a good marriage grows is the soil of worship, and the fruit that a good marriage produces is the fruit of sweet, long-term, and mutually satisfying romance. Worship really is the soil of a wonderful marriage. Permit me to explain one final time.

### **Your Marriage and Worship**

When I got married, there was no real or necessary connection in my mind between worship and marriage. I thought that those two words, worship and marriage, existed in two separate domains of my life. But they don't. I now understand that our lives aren't divided neatly into spiritual and secular or vertical and horizontal. They aren't divided into neat categories, like "things that have to do with worshipping God," and "things that have to do with everything else."

Because God not only lays claim to the formal religious dimension of your life but to everything else as well, your relationship with God will shape your relationship with everything else, including your marriage. Life and worship are never separate. Whether you recognize it or not, you worship your way through every day. The question is, "What is it that you are worshipping?" Let me make concrete connections for you between vertical worship (love for God) and horizontal love (love for your spouse) as a way of summarizing the content of this book and to give you one more tool for assessing your thoughts, desires, and response in your marriage.

When your life is shaped by the worship of God, you live with his plans and purposes in view. When you live with God in view, your fundamental perspective on marriage changes. Rather than approaching marriage with your self-oriented marriage dream, you will instead ask "What has God designed my marriage to be and to do? This shift in perspective will radically alter the way you relate

to your husband or wife. Now, rather than working to get your spouse to participate in, or even to deliver, your dream and judging him accordingly, you now want to humbly work with him to build a marriage that is a practical, everyday-life expression of God's will. Rather than seeking to make sure that your will is done in your marriage and working to get your spouse to serve your plan, you find joy in God's will.

Let me put this in the terms we have been using in this book. I am convinced that many marriages, between people who name themselves as believers, have almost nothing to do with God at all, and this is where the trouble actually begins. Perhaps the couple has had a little premarital counseling, and perhaps they recited Christian vows before their pastor and the people of their church, but the Christian part of the marriage often ends there. If you take time to do a little examination, you will soon discover that it is not a joyful, disciplined, and daily pursuit of the kingdom of God that shapes the marriage. No, these are two people, who, although they probably don't know it, are in full pursuit of their own little kingdoms of one, and there is evidence already that these kingdoms are beginning to collide. If you marry propelled by the dreams of the kingdom of self, you will say that you love the other person, but what you will actually be doing is working to manipulate that person somehow or some way into the service of your kingdom. If you are able to do this, and they acquiesce, you will be happy and glad that you are married. If they resist, you will be disappointed and dissatisfied and wonder if you made a terrible mistake.

Worshiping God in your marriage blows this away. When together you are worshiping God and seeking his kingdom, you quit trying to make sure that your kingdom comes and your will is done. You quit manipulating, demanding, and working to co-opt your spouse into the service of your kingdom. You quit examining your spouse and your marriage through the lens of your wants, needs, and feelings. When you worship God, demand gives way to service, entitlement gives way to gratitude, and dissatisfaction gives way to joy, because selfishness has given way to a daily love for God and your spouse. Worship radically changes your expectations of and the way you relate to your spouse.

I am very aware that my anger in the early days of my marriage was rooted in worship. Anger wasn't the core of my problems. No, it was a symptom of a greater problem. I wanted to be sovereign over my life and my marriage, and I was angry that Luella always seemed to be in my way. I had a plan for my life and for hers, and I just wanted her to get on my train and ride. I was a pastor and counselor, yet I was blind to the fact that God's kingdom had little to do with what went on inside the door of my own home. Luella was hurt and confused because she would do what seemed to be best, but I would be upset because what she thought was best did not agree with what I had determined was best. No, I wasn't a man of abusive and malevolent intentions. If you had asked me, I would have told you that I adored Luella, but I had functionally replaced God in my marriage, and because I had, we were heading for disaster.

You see, the hope for our marriage was not to be found in my attending some anger management classes. I didn't need anger management so much as I needed worship realignment. It was only when God was in his rightful place that things began to change at street level in the Tripp marriage. As I said before, my problem wasn't that I didn't love Luella enough. No, my problem was that I didn't love God enough, and because I didn't love God enough, I didn't love Luella as I should.

If you are not worshiping God in your marriage, somehow, somehow you will insert yourself into his position. You will work to be Lord over your marriage. You will work to make sure your kingdom comes and your will is done, and you will evaluate and respond to your spouse depending on her willingness to serve your kingdom purposes. Only the functional worship of God is sturdy enough to break your allegiance to self and turn you into a person who really does find joy in loving another. Whose will sets the agenda for your marriage?

When your life is shaped by the worship of God, you live thankfully. When you really do begin to examine yourself in the mirror of God's Word and see how undeserving you are, you are hit with how great, patient, kind, gentle, and forgiving God's love is.

In your heart of hearts you know that you have no right to expect or demand good things in your life and in your marriage. You know that you cannot stand before God and say, "Because of who I am and because of what I have done, I deserve a marriage of unity, understanding and love." When you exam yourself in light of God's character and his Word, it is hard to hold onto the belief that you are righteous and deserving. When you stand in the shadow of God's glory, you are filled with a sense of how weak, failing, undeserving, and unworthy you really are.

Here is the point: it is only worship of God that can destroy your worship of yourself. It is only when you are worshiping God that you are able to look at yourself with humility and accuracy, and it is only when you look at yourself accurately that you quit being demanding and start being truly thankful. When you are at the center of your world, you are still being deceived by the delusion of your own righteousness and worthiness. It seems right to expect and demand good things, because you are convinced you deserve them.

Worship of God puts us in our place. It teaches us that every good thing in our lives is an undeserved gift from the hand of one who is the definition of love and grace. Worship turns demanding husbands and wives into thankful husbands and wives. Worship turns entitled spouses into grateful spouses. Worship turns disappointed husbands and wives into joyful celebrants.

So, because you are beginning to live thankfully, your vertical thankfulness produces horizontal appreciation. Instead of being demanding and dissatisfied, you look for any opportunity that comes your way to express appreciation. Instead of being critical and judgmental, you are impressed with the fact that you don't deserve any of the good things that you have experienced in your marriage. These have come your way not because you are good but because God is, and he blesses you with his gracious love, even on the days when you have done little to deserve it. Worshiping God for his goodness, grace, and love is the soil in which thankfulness and appreciation for your spouse will grow. Would your husband or wife describe you as consistently thankful and relationally appreciative?

When your life is shaped by the worship of God, you don't shrink your world down to the size of your wants; needs, and feelings. Marriages in conflict tend to be shrunken marriages. What does this mean? It means that they are tense and disappointing, because even though the husband and wife do not know it, they have shrunk the hopes and dreams for their marriage to the size of their individual wants, needs, and feelings. The wife looks at their relationship through the lens of her little kingdom of one, with its self-focused catalog of wants, needs, and feeling, while the husband does the same. They are in conflict because their kingdoms are constantly colliding.

Marriages like this will not become places of peace by giving the husband or wife conflict resolution skills. No, they need change at a deeper level than that. In the early days of my marriage when I struggled so with anger, that anger was actually the symptom of a deeper problem. I knew exactly what I wanted my marriage to be. I knew exactly how I wanted Luella to think, act, and respond. I knew exactly what would make me satisfied and content. I had shrunk my hopes and dreams for my marriage to the small size of my own wants, needs, and feelings.

Now, you may have looked at me and thought, "This man needs anger management classes." But that is not what I needed. I didn't so much need anger management as I needed worship realignment. When it came to the day-by-day realities of my marriage, God was out of the picture. Sure, I was a believer, but I was in hot pursuit of my own kingdom, and I was judging my wife based on her willingness to participate in my kingdom purposes. In my frustration I failed to recognize that my problem was me. I failed to recognize that God didn't pour his love on me in order to make my little kingdom work but to welcome me to a much bigger and better kingdom.

It is only when a husband and wife are in love with the same King and live in practical pursuit of the same kingdom that they have any hope of functional unity, understanding, and love. My anger revealed that my problem wasn't, first, that I didn't love Luella enough. No, my problem was that I didn't love God in such a way that would constantly keep his presence and the call of his

kingdom in view. So, I inserted myself into the center of the world and made it all about what I wanted, what I felt, and what I thought I needed, and in so doing, I threw any hope of real unity out the window.

Thankfully, God rescued me from me, and Luella and I began to care more about the will of the King than we did about building our own little self-focused kingdom. Are there places in your marriage where reactions, and responses are still shaped by little more than you want, feel, and tell yourself you need?

When your life is shaped by the worship of God, you don't try to do his job. There are many exhausted, frustrated, and discouraged husbands and wives out there, because they are trying to do God's job. You see it doesn't take too long in marriage to be confronted with the reality that you have married a less than perfect person. It doesn't take very long to realize that you have married a person in need of growth and change. It is what you do with this realization that is so important.

There are husbands and wives who take it upon themselves to do God's job and try to turn their spouse into the person he or she needs to be. Now, of course, they don't know that this is what they are doing, but they do it nonetheless. They begin to buy into the delusion that by the tone and volume of their voice, the power of their arguments, the infliction of guilt, the threat of what may happen, or some other human tool, they will be able to change the person they married. But the opposite is actually true. You and I have no ability whatsoever to change our spouse. And when we try, we tend to permit ourselves to be judgmental, critical, and condemning. We tend to focus on the negative instead of the positive. We tend to be more skilled at uncovering what is wrong than we are at encouraging what is right. As we do all this, we get more and more frustrated and discouraged, and the person we are working on feels disrespected and unloved, and the changes that take place are more negative than they are of positive personal growth.

When you live in your marriage with a constant God awareness, you tend to be more willing and able to

accept your limits. You are comforted by the knowledge that not only is he present with you and your spouse, but he is also more committed to changing you both in the places where that is needed than you will ever be. He never grows tired, he never feels like giving up, and he will never turn his back on you. You can rest, even when change is clearly needed, because you know that you are not alone. God is with you, and he is willing and able to do the things in your marriage that you are unable to do yourselves. Are there places in the life of your husband or wife where you are still attempting to do God's job?

When your life is shaped by the worship of God, you want to give to others the same grace you have received. The more you live aware of God's power, wisdom, holiness, faithfulness, and love, the more you will live humbly aware of how deeply needy you really are. It is when you are living in the light of God's glory that you get the most accurate sense of who you are, and an accurate sense of self will always lead you to affirm how desperate your need of grace really is. This accurate sense of self then spills over to the way you view your life and the way you view others. Rather than looking at the good things in your life and saying, "Look what I have achieved for myself," you look at these good things and say, "Look at the many evidences in my life of the fact that God has been with me and has blessed me with his grace." Looking at life this way changes the way you look at others. When you affirm how you have been the daily recipient of God's patience, kindness, forgiveness, and love, there will tend to be a natural tenderness and patience in your responses to your husband or wife.

When you forget who you are, when you forget your need of grace, it is very easy to be critical, condemning, harsh, and judgmental with your spouse. It is easy to allow yourself to be too quick to speak critically and too ready to give room to the self-righteous, I-am-better-than-you anger that is so destructive to a marriage. Many couples, in forgetting who God is and therefore forgetting who they are, which results in criticism and unforgiveness, begin to keep a record of wrongs against one another. Although they probably don't know it, this record of wrongs gets dragged into the next moment,

and it colors the way they see and hear one another. It becomes increasingly hard for them to look at one another with appreciation and respect. More and more their view of their marriage is: “Look what I have had to deal with because I am married to you.” Anger becomes more of a theme in their marriage than forgiveness, and criticism more frequent than appreciation.

The best defense against all this is to keep God in your eyes at all times. It is when we are looking at ourselves in the light of God’s glory that we see, with accuracy, how needy we are, and we will look for ways to give our husband or wife the same grace that we so desperately need. People who love best are those deeply appreciative of the way they have been loved. People who forgive most faithfully and willingly are those who know they are in desperate need of daily forgiveness. The most patient are those who recognize that every day they are blessed with God’s patience and kindness. When you are actively worshiping God for his grace, it makes it hard for you to not give grace to your husband or wife. Does an accurate sense of your own need encourage you to respond with grace to the needs, weaknesses, and failures of your husband or wife?

When your life is shaped by the worship of God, people and things are in their right place. Human beings always look to something to give them identity, meaning and purpose, and an inner sense of well-being. We were created to get these things vertically, in relationship to and in the worship of God. But when we forget who we are as creatures and children of God, we shop for identity somewhere else. I have written before that identity amnesia always leads to identity replacement. Here’s what this means: what we were designed to get vertically from a God who never changes or fails, we try to get horizontally from people, places, and things.

Maybe you’re thinking, “Paul, I get what you’re saying, but I’m not sure what it has to do with marriage.” Let me recall some examples. John doesn’t know it, but his work has become the place where he gets his identity. It is the place where he feels alive, successful, and complete. The position, power, success, and respect he has achieved at work are what give him that inner sense of “all is well”

that gets him up in the morning. So John is spending more and more time at work, looking to achieve more of that success that gives him his sense of self. Because of this, John is spending less and less time with his wife. In fact, when John drives away from his job and toward his home, he is driving away from what is important to him and gives him value. This means that when he enters his house each night, he doesn’t enter excited to be there and engaged in what goes on. No, John punches out from life as he drives home, and all he wants to do there is chill out and rest up for his next day at work.

John doesn’t know it, but work has become his replacement messiah, and because it has, it has sucked the life out of his enthusiasm for and commitment to his marriage. His wife has come to understand that she lives outside the circle of what gives John value. Their marriage is more characterized by distance and distraction than by unity, understanding, and love.

Mary is not aware that it happened, but somewhere along the way she began to attach her identity and sense of well-being to the beauty of her home. In ways that shape her relationship to Bill, her husband, and to her three children. Mary has turned her home into a museum to her domestic dexterity. She cannot stand to have the house messy, disordered, or unclean in any way. She has a specific set of rules for how the people she lives with are to behave in every room. Bill and the children are constantly walking on eggshells and getting themselves into trouble because they have somehow, somehow broken one of Mary’s domestic commandments. What Mary actually wants is for her home to look like no one lives in it.

Mary does not know it, and would probably be offended to hear me say it, but she really does love the order and beauty of her home more than she loves Bill. No longer is he the active object of her affection; no, Bill has been reduced to either a tool of domestic order or an obstacle in the way of it. In ways she is not aware of, Mary personalizes all the stains, dusts, and messiness. Bill has heard her say again and again, “If you really loved and respected me, you would help me keep some order around here.”

Mary is seeking to get identity from where it was never meant to be found, and it is damaging her marriage. Bill doesn't like to be home, because he feels that he is always in trouble, and Bill doesn't enjoy being with Mary, because she is constantly critical and dissatisfied, John and Mary are identity amnesiacs, and their search for identity is sucking the life out of their marriages. It will be only when John and Mary are worshiping God for his presence, power, and daily provision that their hearts will rest and they will be free from looking for identity and rest elsewhere and able to give themselves to love as they have been loved. Does inner rest and peace of heart free you to give yourself to your marriage in daily acts of love and service?

When your life is shaped by the worship of God, you celebrate his work in your spouse. When you look at your husband or wife, are you a celebrant or a critic? Now, I don't mean that, in blind love, you should swindle yourself into thinking you have married a perfect person, because you haven't. There is a way in which it is very important that you be aware of the places where your spouse needs to change and grow, because God has called you to be one of his tool of personal transformation in the life of your husband or wife. But having said all that, the fact is that you should not be able to look at your spouse without seeing God's hand. He has been and is there as creator and savior.

Worshiping God as creator in your marriage means that when you look at your husband or wife, when you consider your spouse's personality and gifts, and when you think about how differently he or she is hardwired from you, you will celebrate the glory of God as creator, expressed in who he designed your spouse to be. This should cause you to celebrate your spouse and the way in which your perspective has been broadened and your life enhanced by the marriage, and it will protect you from ever wanting to clone your spouse into your image.

Worshiping God as Savior means that you will look for and affirm the good things that he enables your husband or wife to be and do. It also means that you will not seek to be a better messiah than the Messiah, trying to do

what he alone can do—change a person from the inside out. Do you celebrate God's work in your spouse by communicating appreciation and respect?

When your life is shaped by the worship of God, you don't live in fear. When you worship God, you are aware of his presence, power, and promises. Because God is in your thoughts, you will tend to remember that you are never alone. As you remember that you are not alone, you will not panic when you face things in your marriage that are bigger than the size of your character, maturity, wisdom, and strength. You will know that the potential for your marriage to become what God designed it to be is not carried by you and your spouse. No, God is with you, in you, and for you. He will give you the grace to do what he calls you to do.

Sometimes he will give you the grace of courage, when you otherwise would have been afraid. Sometimes he will give you the grace of wisdom, when otherwise you wouldn't have known what to do. Sometimes he will give you the grace of patience, when otherwise you would find it very hard to wait. Sometimes he will give you the grace of forgiveness, when otherwise you would have been bitter and despondent. Sometimes he will give you the grace of strength, when otherwise you wouldn't have the power to carry on. Sometimes he will give you the grace of hope, when otherwise discouragement would have paralyzed you. Worship reminds you of God's presence, and as it does, you are protected from giving way to fear.

Why was David able to walk into that valley to face the mighty warrior Goliath? How did Gideon get the courage to lead three hundred men against a great army? What made Samuel able to speak so strongly and clearly and with such courage? What gave Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego the ability to say no to the king, even if it meant being thrown into a furnace of fire? Why was Peter able to stand before the religious leaders of his day and refuse to be silenced? The answer to these questions is the same. They were all able to do what they did because they recognized they were not alone; they were deeply aware that God was with them, so they measured their

potential accordingly. It was not “little them” against a huge obstacle. No, it was a huge God against a puny problem. Worship of God in your marriage will always protect you against fear and mobilize you to do things that, in fear, you would have shied away from. Does the knowledge that God is with you give you courage in places where fear would otherwise set the agenda?

### **Worship and Work**

You may already have anticipated what I am going to say next. Worship is much, much more than a set of feelings and a theological outline. Worship is a lifestyle. It is a way of thinking about and responding to everything that is in your life. Worship is believing that God exists, that he is with you in your marriage, and that what he calls you to do is worth doing. Worship and work go hand-in-hand. If you believe that God is wise and true, then you will take seriously what he says, and you will willingly do the things he says are good and right to do. You will not do them once, but you will do them again and again, day after day. Because you trust God, you are willing to give yourself to the toil of a good marriage. A marriage of unity, understanding, and love takes a daily commitment to work.

Perhaps one of the principal sins of a bad marriage is the sin of laziness. Being committed to the hard work that makes a marriage beautiful means you will:

- Be willing to lose sleep so an important conversation can be completed.
- Listen and consider when you have communicated a concern.
- Care about your spouse’s true needs and gladly work to meet them.
- Work to communicate with your spouse in a way that is patient and kind.
- Look for concrete ways to support and encourage your spouse.
- Do the daily work of forgiveness and reconciliation so that your spouse can live in peace.
- Deal with your marital differences in a way that communicates appreciation and respect.
- Make time to enjoy your physical intimacy and friendship. Look for ways to help your spouse bear the

burden of the responsibilities that he or she carries.

- Partner with your spouse in the daily work of maintaining your physical surroundings.
- Never stop pursuing your spouse romantically.
- Not let the sun go down on a moment of hurt, misunderstanding, or anger.
- Look for ways to encourage and develop your spiritual communion.
- Daily commit to overlooking minor offenses.
- Studiously avoid conflict over things that are unimportant.
- Speak in a way that gives your spouse grace.
- Encourage and support your spouse in areas of interest that you do not share.
- Be willing to make the sacrifices necessary to keep your marriage a priority.
- Daily search for verbal and nonverbal ways to communicate your love.
- Do not leave a conversation until you have reached unity and understanding.
- Never demand of your spouse what you are unwilling to give.
- Continually remind your spouse that he or she is not alone in the marriage.
- Do things you wouldn’t normally do simply because they make your spouse happy.
- Fight the busyness that would get in the way of giving your marriage attention.
- Be willing to sacrifice personal activities and leisure for the sake of your marriage.
- Work so your spouse has the downtime, rest, and retreat he or she needs.
- Work to build relationships of love and respect with your family.
- Do not stop working until your marriage is all God intended it to be.

Here is the point: real love for God will always result in a willingness to invest yourself in acts of concrete love for your neighbor. What does this mean for your marriage? It means that a good marriage will be a good marriage because the people in that marriage are committed to the daily labors that make the marriage good. What has this book been about? It has been a detailed description

of the daily work of love that must be done with commitment and joy when a flawed person is married to a flawed person and they are living in a fallen world. Your marriage won't just magically become a relationship of unity, understanding, and love. You must work to develop those things. Your marriage won't magically grow to be more loving, understanding, and unified. You will have to work so that those things become deep and strong. And these things won't be maintained magically. You will have to commit to making sure that busyness and selfishness don't drive them away.

There will be moments when you are hurt, angry, exhausted, or discouraged, moments when you will be tempted to abandon the good work that God calls you to do that builds and maintains a beautiful marriage. There will be moments when you won't feel like loving your husband or wife. There will be moments when the issues you face will seem too complicated or too big. There will be moments when it seems that nothing you are doing is making any difference whatsoever. There will be moments when you want to withdraw from your spouse rather than move toward him or her. There will be moments when you will want to strike back and hurt the other in the way that he or she has hurt you. There will be moments when you will want to go your own way. There will be moments when you'd rather scream and yell than listen and encourage. There will be moments when it will seem that you are caring more and working harder. There will be moments when vengeance looks more attractive than forgiveness. There will be moments when you just don't feel like doing the work that every good marriage demands.

It is in these hard moments the hard work of love and weak and immature marriage begin to become mature and good. It is in these moments that you need to get up, get active, and fight for your marriage. It is in these moments that you must determine that you will not allow hurt, anger, exhaustion, laziness, or hopelessness to destroy your marriage. It is in these moments that you must take seriously your calling as a husband or wife and stand together and do the labors of love that God has called you to do.

### **Driven to Grace**

Perhaps, as you have been reading, you have been thinking, "This seems hard, I don't know if I have what it takes to live this way." Or maybe you have wondered how in the world you can do what this book calls you to do as a husband or wife in the middle of the busyness of your schedule and the catalog of responsibilities you carry. Maybe, as you've been reading, you have been thinking, "It seems exhausting just to maintain the status quo let alone working to make my marriage better!" Maybe the street-level call of this book to daily self-sacrificing love has left you a bit hopeless and discouraged. Or maybe you have had to face the fact that you simply do not have inside you the love that a good marriage requires. Perhaps after reading the list of the labors of love in this chapter you feel despondent and discouraged. Maybe this book has given you a lens on your marriage, and, sadly, you have realized that things are worse than you thought. Perhaps you are feeling the standard is too high and the work too hard.

Maybe all this has revealed how selfish your heart really is and left you feeling weak and unable. Well, I am about to say something that will surprise you. If this has been your response, then you are in a very good place. Let me remind you that this is one of the uncomfortable gifts that God is working to give you in your marriage. He has designed marriage to expose the neediness of your heart and, in so doing, to bring you to the end of yourself. Why does God do this? He does it because he knows that it is only when you abandon your own wisdom, strength, and righteousness that you will begin to get excited about his grace.

What is the hope of your marriage? This may seem strange to read at this point in the book, but it must be said: the hope of your marriage is not all the principles, insights, and perspectives found in this book. No, the hope of your marriage can be captured in one glorious, powerful, and transforming word—grace. God's grace guarantees that you, in your struggle, will never be alone. God's grace assures you that when you have blown it, there is forgiveness to be found. Grace means that there is strength available when you are weak. Grace assures

you that there is wisdom for the moments when you do not know what to do. Grace gives you hope when there seems little to be found. Grace enables you to get up and move forward when inside you want to quit or run away. Grace reminds you again and again that you are not alone.

You see, God knows that this side of heaven there are ways in which we all are weak and unable. There are ways we all fall below his standards. So he has given us the only thing that will rescue, restore, and mobilize us. He has given us himself! In his grace he invades our marriages. He comes with power we don't possess, wisdom unnatural to us, and love beyond anything we have ever known. He is willing to let you see how weak you actually are so that you will begin to seek what you can find only in him. What you should be afraid of in your marriage is not your weakness; being needy is a good place to be. No, what you should be afraid of are your delusions of arrival and strength. When you think you have arrived, and when you are convinced you are strong, you don't reach out for the incredible resources of grace that God freely offers, which will give you what you need to live in a marriage of unity, understanding, and love.

So, in your marriage, God will find ways to drive you to the end of yourself so that you will put your hope and strength in him. Your moments of weakness are not the bad moments of accident or bad luck. No, moments of weakness are there because of divine intention. They are the delivery system of glorious forgiving, empowering, and motivating grace. God is using them to rescue you from you and to make you a person who, in marriage, really is committed to love as you have been loved.

Jack and Shannon were exhausted and discouraged because they had no hope; nothing they did made things better. They felt helpless and alone with no place to turn. Jack knew that he shouldn't be so angry, but he was. Shannon knew she shouldn't be bitter and judgmental, but she didn't know how to deal with her disappointment. There were moments of peace, but those memories were increasingly infrequent and fleeting. The distance and tension between them seemed to grow every day. Their home was no longer a refuge to either one.

One morning Shannon looked out the kitchen window and saw her neighbor working in his yard, and for a brief moment she wondered what it would be like to be married to him. Maybe another man would love her and not demand so much. Jack felt that he was on the edge of throwing in the towel. He just didn't know how long he could go on. He wondered, if they were to work on their marriage, what would they work on? There didn't seem to be much left worth saving. The problems seemed too big, too bad, and too lengthy to ever go away.

Yet they both knew that this was far from the way things were meant to be. Shannon didn't hate Jack; she just felt it was impossible to live with him. Jack didn't hate Shannon; he just didn't like her very much.

As they sat in front of me, I knew they were in a very hard but very good place. Jack and Shannon thought their marriage would be easy. They seemed to have a natural affection for one another, and their courtship had been comfortable and without conflict. They had wondered why other couples talked about how marriage took so much commitment and work. Jack and Shannon really did get married with feelings of arrival. They thought they had something unique and special between them that would make their marriage different. As a result, they developed laziness habits. They allowed themselves to get busy and distracted. They never worked to develop a good-marriage work ethic. In their laziness and busyness, they gave room for misunderstanding and disunity to grow. Sure, at first it was only little moments of disagreement and irritation, but these moments grew in size and frequency. Meanwhile, they both got busier and more discouraged.

Rather than doing the hard work of dealing with their problems, Jack and Shannon developed the skill of working around their problems. But as their problems grew, it became impossible for the work around them anymore. Their marriage was no longer peaceful and enjoyable. Their home was no longer a place of rest and retreat. So they sat in front of me, exhausted and discouraged. But I knew that it was the exhaustion and discouragement of grace. I knew that God had not turned

his back on them but was with them, in them, and for them. And I knew that God had their attention in fresh and new ways.

I didn't start by laying on them all the insights and principles in this book. I knew that that would leave them even more overwhelmed. No for the first few weeks we met together, I did only one thing: I worked to help them see Jesus. I knew that when they began to see and trust his presence, promises, power, and faithfulness, they would begin to think that maybe they could hope to experience what marriage was designed to be, and they would be willing to do the hard work that would get them there. I knew that they would live with the assurance that God would always give them what they need in order to do what he called them to do.

A long time later I was at a wedding reception with Luella, and to my surprise Shannon and Jack walked up to our table. I hadn't seen them for years. They walked hand-in-hand with smiles on their faces. Shannon greeted me and said, "We were excited when we realized you would be here, because we wanted to share with you what God has done in our marriage. We don't live anymore with the delusion that our marriage will automatically be beautiful somehow. We know that because we are sinners, and we have to work on our marriage every day. But because we love God and one another more than we ever have, we don't mind the work. How did you put it, Paul? 'A good marriage is a good marriage because the people in that marriage work to make it good.' Well, thank you for teaching us to be willing to work and for showing us that God will strengthen us as we do."

It really is true—a marriage of unity, understanding, and love is not rooted in romance. It is rooted in worship. It is when we love God more than we love ourselves and when we quit building our own little kingdom and start seeking his that we will love our spouse. When we really do love our husband or wife, we will be willing to do the hard work that such love requires. When we do the hard work that love requires, we will begin to celebrate the love of God that is with us in our moment of greatest need. When we are daily aware that we are being loved,

we will be excited about loving our husband or wife in the same way. And when our spouse is being treated with daily love, respect, and appreciation, he or she will be encouraged to love us in return.

Do you want this kind of marriage? If so, worship God above anything else. Do the hard work of love to which he has called you. And trust that he is with you with transforming grace in his hands. You can have a marriage of unity, understanding, and love. By his grace you really can!

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"Chapter 17, Worship, Work, and Grace." *What Did You Expect?: Redeeming the Realities of Marriage*, by Paul David Tripp and Brandon Hill, Crossway, 2015, pp. 274–287.