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A Practical Guide to Building
a Great Marriage

R.C. SPROUL
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Preface

Love and Marriage—the songwriter says they go together like a horse and carriage. So much hope, so much excitement, so much planning, so much feeling goes into marriage. Marriage, for many, becomes the dream of a lifetime.

So much hate, so much bitterness, so much disappointment, so much anger flows when the dream is shattered and the marriage is viewed as a failure. Does your marriage presently fulfill your former dreams? Are you not yet married but eager to be married? Are you afraid to marry because you’ve seen so few happy marriages?

Much, oh, so much, is at stake in a marriage. Wounds come easily to the married couple, yet the joys can be enormous. Marriage can be a beautiful dream or a monstrous nightmare. My hope is that your marriage will be an adventure, exciting and fulfilling. This book was
written not out of a need for more moralistic discussions on marriage but rather out of a conviction that marriage can be a real delight—an experience that I wouldn’t trade for anything.

This book is designed to be a practical guide for marriage. It is purposefully nontechnical. It will not serve as a detailed manual for problem solving. It is but a general introduction to basic patterns of married life. Questions are given at the end of each chapter to stimulate discussion between husbands and wives or those just approaching marriage. I hope the book will also be helpful for small group studies.

I try in this book to apply basic biblical principles to marriage. If these principles are utterly foreign to you, I hope you will examine them carefully and practically, so that you may discover the wisdom of God.

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One

Communication in Marriage

Undoubtedly the problem of communication in marriage started a long time ago. It would not surprise me to learn that the first man to say, “My wife doesn’t understand me,” was Adam. It all may have started in the primordial garden when Adam asked Eve if she had eaten of the forbidden tree and Eve replied, “Tree? What tree?” The problem was compounded when God discovered their transgression and called Adam aside to interrogate him. For three hours Eve waited in solitude for the decision of her Creator. Anxiety increased by the minute until at last Adam emerged from the summit meeting that would decide human destiny. Breathlessly Eve rushed to her husband and gasped, “What did he say?” Adam shrugged his shoulders and said, “Oh, nothing!” Things have been going downhill ever since.
The subject of communication in marriage is a difficult one, perhaps impossible. Someone has said that to discover the secret of communication, one must undertake the Herculean task of sailing between Scylla and Charybdis, using the sword of Damocles to cut the Gordian knot that it may fit its Procrustean bed! (Whoever said that ought to be shot.) Communication is not always easy. It involves work, pain, sensitivity, patience, and great care. Communicating is often a burdensome task, but it is a task that must be accomplished for a marriage to be complete. When communication falters, the marriage is in trouble. When it fails, the marriage is virtually doomed.

Communication is, above all, a means of knowing. In marriage it means, simply, the knowing of two people. The goal of communication is knowledge—not abstract, theoretical, impersonal knowledge but personal knowledge, the knowledge of intimacy. In biblical categories, the essence of marriage is expressed in the intimacy of knowing and loving.

When the Old Testament writers describe the sex act, the usual term used is a form of the verb “to know.” We read that Adam “knew” his wife and she conceived. Abraham knew his wife, etc. What is the writer trying to convey? The Bible is not trying to suggest that reproduction takes place by the ability to recognize or distinguish one person from another. When we read that Adam “knew” his wife, it means more than that they had been
formally introduced. Nor is the biblical writer just being polite when he uses the term. It would be out of character for an Old Testament writer to avoid candor in favor of euphemism. No, when the Old Testament speaks of sexual union in terms of knowing, it is because knowing, in every sense of the word, is at the heart of marriage. To be known and still be loved is one of the supreme goals of marriage.

Many of us think that if people really knew us they would not like us. Others think that if people knew us well enough to understand us, perhaps they would like us. Most of us probably feel a little of both. We would like to be really known—but there remains the nagging fear that if we are known, we won’t be loved.

Before the fall, Adam and Eve enjoyed their life in Eden, “naked and unashamed.” After the fall they became aware of their nakedness and hid themselves in shame. In their guilt they didn’t want God to see them, so they became fugitives from his gaze. Yet, in an act of astonishing grace, God provided clothes for his embarrassed creatures and covered their nakedness. But the desire for the original state of being naked and unashamed remained with Adam and Eve. They wanted their nakedness and their shame hidden, yet they yearned for a safe place to be naked. They yearned for a place where they could take off their clothes and be known without fear. God provided that place in the institution of marriage. God gave them a place where they
could have “intercourse,” which, of course, is also a synonym for verbal communication.

Communication involves a kind of nakedness. In some situations, nakedness can be very embarrassing. At other times, it can be supremely exhilarating. So it is with communication. When communication is carried on in a proper way in marriage, it yields unspeakable pleasure. When it fails, the result is two people going back into hiding.

The Bible gives us a model of proper communication in marriage in the way God relates to his people. It is no accident that the primary image in the Bible of God’s relationship with his people is marriage. In the Old Testament, Israel is the bride of Yahweh; in the New Testament, the church is the bride of Christ. When God reveals himself and communicates his love to his bride, the bride rejoices. When the bride spurns God’s revelation and seeks other gods, she perishes in her spiritual adultery.

To be known by God is the highest goal of human existence. To know that God knows everything about me and yet loves me is indeed my ultimate consolation. What a comfort to know I cannot pull the wool over God’s eyes—there’s no point in ever trying. The human institution of marriage should mirror that consolation. The more we are able to reveal ourselves to our life partners and still be loved, the more we are able to understand what a relationship with God is all about. The greatest
consolation I have in this world is the knowledge that my wife knows me better than any person on this planet, and—guess what?—she loves me.

Knowledge and Intimacy

In the 1960s our nation experienced what has become known as the sexual revolution. The free speech movement at Berkeley triggered a mass student reaction against traditional values and customs regarding sex. Crusades for free love, sex without marriage, and so on steamrolled across the land. A common protest was that the older generation was full of hypocrites. To them sex was a hush-hush thing, not openly exposed to public scrutiny. The symbol of the older generation was the lock on the bedroom door. When the adolescent of the 1960s discovered that babies don’t come from storks, he looked at the lock on the door and the drawn shades and cried, “Hypocrisy!” What our children call hypocrisy, we call intimacy. We hope our children will learn to understand the difference.

In modern usage the term intimacy suggests merely a sexual relationship. But the word goes deeper than that. In its broader meaning, intimacy indicates a familiar relationship that moves beyond the external and the superficial and penetrates the innermost dimensions of our life. Marriage was designed to be a relationship of intimacy. Total intimacy embraces far more than the sexual
aspect. In fact, there must be a kind of intimacy preceding sexual union if that union is going to be of lasting value. Intercourse with a prostitute is intercourse without intimacy. One can have sex without intimacy. But one cannot have communication in the biblical sense of “knowing” without intimacy.

Communication and Listening

One essential ingredient of communication is listening. It is not a one-way street. Not only must we learn to listen, but also we must learn to listen carefully.

An old illustration tells of three sermons that are preached each Sunday. First is the sermon the people hear; second is the sermon the preacher thinks he gives; and third is the actual sermon given. This discrepancy between what is said and what people hear was brought home to me recently in a lecture situation. After I finished my lecture, I opened the meeting for discussion. Someone immediately asked about a certain word in my lecture. I said I couldn’t remember using that word. Someone else chimed in and said, with certainty, that I had used another word. Immediately the class was divided on the issue. About half of the people said I used one word and the other half argued that I used the other. I meekly suggested that I hadn’t used either of the words in dispute. But after all this arguing I wasn’t too sure. Finally, to resolve the debate, I played back the recording of
that portion of the lecture. To everyone’s consternation, I had used neither of the two words. We all had a lesson in listening.

In marriage, real communication often demands listening between the lines, beyond the words being spoken. For various reasons, we frequently use indirect discourse. Instead of saying what we mean and meaning what we say, we attempt to communicate via hints and innuendo. Then we wonder why nobody understands us.

Some years ago my wife, Vesta, left the house to visit a friend. I said, “Why are you going to Kathy’s?” She replied that she was going to get a home permanent. I asked her for the hundredth time since we’d been married, “Why don’t you go to the hairdresser like everyone else?” She carefully explained that she didn’t need to go to a professional hairdresser because Kathy did a perfectly good job, and she did it free of charge. I couldn’t argue with that, so I dropped the matter. But I was upset. Vesta couldn’t figure out why. Finally, I broke down and told her the real reason I hinted at being displeased with the home permanent routine. I said, “I can’t tell the difference between a professional permanent and a home permanent. That’s not the point. My pride is involved in this. I can afford to pay the hairdresser bill. You make me feel inadequate as a provider.” As soon as I expressed my feelings directly, instead of by hints, I saw how foolish they were. But Vesta didn’t treat them as foolish. She asked, “Why didn’t you ever tell me that?” The point is,
I had been telling her that for years, but I was saying it so obliquely she couldn’t possibly hear it. Reading between the lines is one thing; reading your spouse’s mind is quite another.

I am not seeking to establish an axiom that all wives must always go to professional hairdressers for their permanents or their husbands will feel insecure. Rather the point is twofold. First, we must be careful to avoid discourse that is so vague and indirect that no one could get the point; second, it may be helpful to ask yourself, “Why does my spouse often bring up this issue? What is really being said?”

**Communication and Gift-Giving**

Gift exchange is one great checkpoint for communication in marriage. Hints fly as we seek subtle ways of letting our partners know what we want for Christmas or birthdays. Vesta is the practical type. Christmas would come, and she would present me with a beautifully wrapped package that would bring back the exciting memories of boyhood. I would open the package and find three white shirts. I would say, “Oh, boy! White shirts. Just what I need, honey!” (While I was thinking, “White shirts! I can buy them anytime. I don’t want white shirts. I want golf clubs.”) Being careful to disguise my feelings, I would go on about how great the white shirts were. I was such a good actor that the next year I
would get five white shirts. For years she gave me what I needed, not what I wanted.

I tried hinting to Vesta by giving her extravagant gifts. Throwing caution to the wind, I would run out and buy her an expensive new coat, straining our bank account to the limit. I’d have the coat expertly gift wrapped and present it to her with gusto. She would open the gift and exclaim, “Honey, it’s beautiful, but we can’t afford this. I need a vacuum sweeper.” What happened in this situation is that both of us assumed the other person wanted the kind of gift we wanted. We were projecting our desires on each other. When we finally discussed this matter honestly, I got my golf clubs and she got her sweeper.

The Hide-and-Seek Game

Deception is a serious barrier to communication. Lying obviously destroys credibility and violates trust. But more subtle means of obscuring the truth may also prevent effective communication. When we begin to play hide-and-seek in marriage, the most important context God provides for openness, we are in trouble. The marital game of deception is established on the false premise that “what she [he] doesn’t know, won’t hurt her [him].”

I came home from the golf course one afternoon. Vesta asked me if I had a good time. I recounted the events of the day with delight. Then she asked the
provocative question, “How much money did you spend?” I gave her a proper accounting of green fees, caddy fees, a couple of new golf balls, and then added some money for a lesson from the pro. Vesta exclaimed, “We can’t afford golf lessons!” I meekly surrendered to her feelings and changed the subject. In the weeks that followed, my golf game improved a bit, and I kept thinking, “Two or three more lessons and I will really have this game together.” (Hope springs eternal in the golfer’s breast.) So I went to the pro and had three more lessons. Only this time I didn’t tell Vesta about it and carefully instructed the pro not to send any bills to my house. He smiled in agreement, saying he had to do that for a lot of the guys. Unfortunately, the pro forgot to relay the message to his secretary. Arriving home one day, Vesta met me at the door with a knowing look on her face and the bill in her hand. I was dumbfounded, and then all I could do was stand there and laugh. Sternly she said, “It’s not funny.” I replied, “I know, that’s why I’m laughing!” (I didn’t know what else to do.) She asked, “Why did you deceive me?” I gave her the myth of “I figured what you didn’t know wouldn’t hurt you.” She said, “Well, it does hurt me, and it hurts me even more that you felt you had to hide it from me.” I told her that I didn’t particularly enjoy feeling that I had to hide it from her either. But she was violated by my subterfuge. This experience was painful for both of us because I chose deception over truth.
Communication in Marriage

Communicating Love

Perhaps the question most frequently asked by a wife is, “Do you love me?” Standard replies are often less than helpful. Answers like “Of course” or “I married you, didn’t I?” or, even worse, “Wait until tonight, and I’ll show you” do very little to communicate love. Communicating a desire for sexual gratification is not the same as communicating love. Women are well aware that a man doesn’t have to be in love to be able to enjoy sex. One sage maintained that a woman needs to be told she is loved in 365 different ways every year. The truth of this hyperbole, however, is that women usually notice seemingly small expressions of affection. (And so do men.) Husbands must discover what makes their wives feel loved, and vice versa.

In my house the issue of communicating love usually comes down to apparently insignificant or even irrational things. We have a perennial crisis over lipstick. It seems as if all of my insecurities about my wife’s affection for me are wrapped up in a small tube of lipstick. I know (without hyperbole) that I’ve asked my wife ten thousand times to put on lipstick. Whenever I see her without lipstick, I take it as a personal insult. When the insults become so frustrating that I can’t stand it any longer, I give vent to my exasperation by saying, “When are you going to start wearing lipstick?” The normal reply: “When you start picking up your clothes!”