

# *The Love Challenge*

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## **Is there a “Marriage Secret?”**

Yes! The question is, do you want to know the key of having a great fulfilling and happy marriage? How to go and grow through times of trouble and be better for it? How to really and truly love? Well, God’s Word does indeed give us the how... Here are my experiences, research and practice of, “how to build a great marriage.”

## **Leading your heart—not letting your heart lead you!**

*The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? Jeremiah 17:9*

The world tells us that to be in love and have that perfect marriage; we have to follow our heart. Is this true? Does this work? Is it biblical? Are we to really follow our heart? Does what the heart wants really what is best? Is there something we can do to help our heart be content and not be led into what is false or into dysfunction?

God doesn’t not just dare us to love He tells us to! So how is your marriage? Is it working for you? Are you working for it? What if your marriage is not going according to plan? What if you feel you and your spouse are drifting apart or are already distant or feel it is all hopeless? What if you feel you have tried with all of your might, yet you are still frustrated or overwhelmed? Is there something we can do to repair and extend our marriages to be better than they were before—even on their best days?

From what I have seen from research and experienced in doing marriage counseling, we are in trouble. Our families are being torn apart as if we were in a war, and each one of us were a faction, reeling in our hurt and expelling out our anger. Many people are very unhappy and disillusioned, living a pathetic life instead of a triumphant life because they are miserable in their marriage. People in my church and even people in my family are in this trouble—perhaps in yours too. This article and challenge are not about how to find your love or what to look for in a potential spouse; our series on dating and courting addresses that. Rather, this is about what we do when we are married to one with whom we click with our not, or one we hate and with whom we feel we made a mistake.

The dating and courtship is over; you are married now. You need to find a way to live in it, make it work, even thrive with joy. Even when you made wrong choices, or you feel you did when you did not, God can use you to work it out for the best. You can have a “love dare” that will allow you to rebuild, rehab, and improve—take what God has given and use His tools for relationship bliss! This challenge also assumes you are not in an abusive relationship and that both people are mentally and physically healthy and able to relate. If this is not you, you need professional help from a licensed Christian counselor or pastor before undertaking this challenge.

### **The World’s Theme is Fake and Fickle**

*Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them. John 17:25-26*

The world and its entertainments, poems, TV, movies, romance novels, and maybe even your parents have all told you to “follow your heart.” There is truth in that, but also a big problem. The heart is evil according to the Bible; it seeks what is not best and wants what it can’t have. It longs for a person or thing to smooth and sooth it, but what it usually desires only brings about hopelessness, dysfunction, and strife. The Bible tells us, *He who trusts in himself* (meaning following one’s own heart) *is a fool, but he who walks in wisdom is kept safe.* Proverbs 28:26. Because it is corrupted with sin and therefore is false and misleading, it is indecisive, unpredictable, inconsistent, shallow, and filled with ever-changing desires that lead us in multiple wrong directions and blind us to what is best and more fulfilling. So, how can this lead us in the right direction (Psalm 37:4; Prov. 23:7; 27:19; Matt. 15:19)?

### **God’s Theme is Genuine and Stable**

*A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. John 13:34-35*

This passage should be known to you or me, but its practice may be new. The distinguishing characteristic of Christ's followers is that we are deeply and eternally loved. The application to this is that our standard of love must be Christ's love for us (John 3:16, chaps 14-15).

### **Love confirms the authenticity of Jesus!**

*Whoever loves much, does much!* How much God so loved you...how much He so loves your spouse...how much He so loves your marriage...how much He so loves your family! When you love much, you will do so much more in your life and in others' lives as well.

## **Love confirms the authenticity of Jesus' followers!**

Who God is and what He is like has been and continues to be a resounding question for the ages of humanity. Philosophers and theologians have pondered this for many ages since we were created. And we can know for sure who He is, what He is like, and how He expresses Himself to us. God's love is who He is. And His Love confirms the authenticity of us as His followers, because it is an attribute He calls us to emulate. Our primary objective for this emulation is the one whom we married!

As my mother and stepfather were fighting with each other, Francis Schaeffer offered them this adage: "It is natural to love those who love us, but it is supernatural to love those who hate us."

Then he told this story that still, thirty years later, resounds in me. It is a true story that happened during World War II. Hitler issued a friendly request in the late 30s that all Christian groups are to cooperate and communicate together. By 1940, it became a formal command that all religious groups (meaning all Christian denominations even though Lutheran was dominant in Germany, must unite and cooperate. This sounds good on the outside, but was done so that he could control them. Half complied and half refused. Those who complied with the order did not have their properties seized or "disappear," while those who did not comply, faced these ruthless persecutions. In every church that resisted, many people died in concentration camps as families were torn apart. When Hitler was dead and the Allies liberated Germany, feelings of deep bitterness seeped in and ran deep between these churches factions, both those who were complacent and those who resisted. Families were still being torn apart after the war was over because of the tensions and strife that were brought into each one's home.

Something had to be done as the American-occupying Army and its chaplains and soldiers had to intervene on many occasions. They finally decided that the circumstances did not honor God or the mission of the Church and caused irreparable harm to many families whose loyalties were divided between these two church factions. They realized they needed healing and somehow to forgive; but how? How could this tremendous hurt be cured? So, leaders from each faction convened for a retreat to pray. For a week, each person spent time in prayer, examining Christ's commands, confronting their own hearts in the light of Scripture and seeking guidance from the Holy Spirit.

Then, a miracle occurred; they forgave one another and came back together in a real, cooperative unity.

My uncle asked my parents, *What did you learn from this?* My stepfather made a cynical remark and my mom ran into the other room. Later, at a quiet and awkward dinner he said, *"these people faced more hurt and toil than any marriage could ever face today. As they sought God and confessed their resentment and bitterness to one another, then they were able to yield to His control and heal their churches and families. This is the same with you; the Holy Spirit can fashion a spirit of unity amongst you too. Love must fill your hearts and dissolve your hatred; you must lead your heart to love and not let your heart lead you away."* (Francis Schaeffer, cir 1978)

When love prevails in the midst of marriage, especially in times of strife and disagreement, it presents to God and each other a willingness to heal. Pursuing love in the midst of one's toil is the irrefutable mark of a true follower of Jesus Christ!

## **Why God Made Marriage**

Marriage is good and was instituted by God even before the *Fall*. It is how we are designed to be and live. Marriage is also a gift, where we can, in a mutually loving relationship, share our precious life experiences. He created this institution for our enjoyment and benefit. Marriage is also the union of two flawed, imperfect people who have been hurt by the sins of this world can prepare for the hope of the next world. We can exercise our relational aspect of needing to be with another, of being relational and not alone. It is where we can live effectually with hope and feel and know and practice real, effectual love. We can apply the love and forgiveness Christ gave us. This will allow us to do more, each being a helpmate to the other while growing in maturity and raising good and healthy children who love God and life—all becoming a precious family that is the anchor of community and civilization.

What marriage is not designed to do (that we sometimes force it to do) is be a place for loneliness, worry, and strife. We take what was to be good and turn it into a warzone to practice not love, forgiveness, or our growth in maturity, but rather hone our weapons of pride, arrogance, condescension, and contempt, or just withdraw, staying angry and bitter. Then, we fashion these ideals on our children and expect them to have better lives and marriages when all they learn is how *not* to do it.

## **The Heart of Marriage**

God wants our marriages to be centers of His redemptive work, lived and played out to bring unity and security. A marriage is two people coming together in a sinful world to form an intimate, communal community—a family. The family, starting with two, and may expand, can be a platform for character development where the issues of life and faith with a life partner who has our best interest in mind are wrestled. It is an area where we help each other work out faults and hurts, and trust and build upon our relationship with God and each other. Family is the safe harbor where we are honest and help each other grow, leaving behind our self-centered nature and embracing another person. It helps us teach one another, grow in our love, overcome obstacles, and celebrate victories. This is how we learn to love, grow in that love, even fail in that love, then pick it up continuing to communicate and commune with one another and with our Lord and Savior together.

God knows this will be difficult, but He knows it is doable, achievable, and even pleasant. He knows that we each think differently and are wired differently; in fact, many times we are in opposition. We grow up in different places with different experiences, and we come together with our bags of desires, expectations, burdens, fears, faults, hurts, and expectation for joy. We soon collide into each other's faults and our expectations crash into our spouse's expectations where we are dented with our disappointments because we missed God's signposts of love and His precepts on how to make this work. Yet He is there; Christ is saying and staying while He seeks to help us do it right. Our pride and refusal to make it work are what stand in the way.

## **What God wants for our Marriage**

*'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."* Mark 12:30-31

Christ our Lord wants two people who do not always see everything the same and who are wired differently to come together to show each other the love that Christ displayed and taught us. We can do this and we can make it work with the key of knowing and applying real, effectual love. Marriage is the place for us to relinquish our pride and love, to forgive and to flourish. We will be hurt and disappointed, stepped on and humiliated, yet we must persevere in our love even when it does not make sense or if we feel that our spouse does not deserve our love or effort or does not appreciate or notice it. Love is not a mere feeling or a matter of the heart, although love is accompanied by feelings and heart. Love is the coal-tender (the train car that is behind the steam locomotive that carries the fuel) that the locomotive must lead with the will and mind; it must persevere and preserve. If we just let our hearts lead

us, we will fail. It would just be a fuel car and a match and no engine to pull it in the right direction. Our marriage will blow up and fail because *the heart wants what the heart wants* and what it wants is just gas and a match, not always good or beneficial for us.

## **The Problem of Marriage**

*'Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.'* Lev. 19:18

The basic problem is we are flawed people who have been so hurt in life by one another we sometimes can't see what we are to do with that hurt. So, we become hurting people who in turn hurt those who are close to us and love us. We can hurt ourselves by overeating, or we can drink alcohol, or we can seek medication or some substance or person to sooth us, or we can fight and hurt back with more force than what we received, or we can leave behind what God has made and seek something more or better. The problem is that all this does is make things worse, because there is nothing better. We need to see that our pride is in the way and our heart is going in the wrong direction; it is evil and we must let it go. We also need to see our need to be loved and to allow ourselves to be loved. We need to see that our spouse is not our enemy; he/she needs to be loved, and loved no matter what. We have to see beyond the hurt to push forward; this takes effort and courage.

## **The Challenge of Marriage**

*My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. This is my command: Love each other.* John 15:12-17

Christ's love was expressed not only in words but also in His sacrificial death. We may not have to sacrifice ourselves literally for our spouse, but we have to see that real love is sacrificial. Simply and profoundly put, we are to love! We may see our marriage as dry or dysfunctional or stuck—and maybe it is. We tried to change our spouse and realized that would never work. They, in turn, tried to change us and we did not want to be changed. We tried to manipulate, to woo, to hide, and/or to attack and all led to discontent. We wanted contentment. We are frustrated, confused, and disillusioned and that

glee we had as an engaged or newly married couple has dissipated and all we have not is despair or divorce. But, there is hope! You can have love if you are willing to love and be loved!

The challenge we have is that it may be our instinct or inclination to give up and move on, but what we give up is what God made as His best for us. We have to desire to make it work no matter how we feel or what we can see. We have to want to be in a good marriage to have a good marriage. We can't allow our pettiness to overwhelm and consume us and it all comes down to what I said in the beginning: *we have to lead our heart and not be led by it!* Look up and see our Savior. Allow Him to be your lead to your will and heart. This is the essential aspect to growth, to be willing to grow to be willing to work it out, seek forgiveness and reconciliation as Christ did with your very soul. We must pursue our spouse with real love—not pettiness and retribution. No matter what we have been through, we can turn this around.

The question is, do you love and value Christ as Lord? If so, you are on the right track and more than halfway there. Now you need to take His love and let it infuse you so it can come out of you. You need to have a desire to grow in your faith and knowledge to lead your heart effectively. Consider this: if we do not get a grasp on grace and how Christ loves us, we will only see problems and then regress in distress. We have to take our nuptials seriously, be willing to work for it just as a soldier is willing to die for his or her country. Are you willing to live for your Lord and your spouse? We can be committed to solve our problems. If not, we will fail our marriage and disappoint our Lord and Savior!

### **Marriage must be the place where Real Love is Practiced**

As I stated in the beginning, most people do not know what love or the heart are all about. *Heart*, in biblical language, means the inner will where one's desires and conflicts reside. It is also associated with peace in our hearts that makes peace with others and peace in the family and church that influences the world. Our heart is what controls and rules us most of the time. Yet, as Christians, we are to be directed by God's principles, His character, and the Holy Spirit's leading, and apply these to ourselves and relationships—especially with our spouse. Being led by the Word of God will enable us to be filled with the Spirit of God; they go together. One cannot be effective in life, ministry, or marriage without both.

You cannot say the Spirit fills you by being emotionally ecstatic or erratic while you ignore God's Word and hurt your spouse. It is not the heart that gives us hope, reason, purpose, meaning, and motivation; our Lord does that though His Word that we cultivate, and the growth in our mindsets that

influence our attitudes, outlooks, and actions in life and in family. This will either fill our lives with hope or despair, joy or discontent, gratitude or ingratitude, contentment or dissatisfaction, all dependent upon our willingness to lead our hearts right. A real Christian is willing to be controlled and filled by Christ and not by apprehension, selfishness, turmoil, damaged past, or uncertainty (Acts 2:4; 4:8, 31; 6:3; Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 5:8-6:9, Col. 3:19-4:1).

## **Love Confirms the Authenticity of Marriage!**

Gratitude promotes peace and secures a content heart whereas sin and turmoil become cancerous and adversely affect others around us (Psalm 32; 51; Col. 2:2, 3:15-17).

By the same token, most people (even most Christians) do not know what love really is. We may know 1 Corinthians 13 and may even have memorized it, but may I dare you to ask yourself, *do you practice it?* Do you know what those words mean? Do you know what love really is? Do you know that what love is not is as important as what love is? Most of us have this all backwards. We think we know the answers, but in fact, we do not. We may not know that Love is more of an act of our will than it is a feeling. That love is a choice.

Yes, it comes as a feeling, but feelings are fleeting, thus why Hollywood marriages only last a few months, and why most marriages today barely go beyond five years. Do you know that love is not about what you want or desire? Rather, it seeks what the other person needs. Did you know that real love takes us beyond ourselves and into the other person? When you fully understand what love is and dedicate yourselves to practice it, then you will have a thriving and content marriage. It may take time, but it will unfold because you are unfolding what God has for you and placing His principles in play. You have to be willing to not just guard your heart to listen to it; you must lead it to the right wellbeing and prosperity and that is with the one God has brought you.

## **What do I do?**

*I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. I am*

*saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord. 1 Corinthians 7:32-35*

1 Corinthians 7:32-35, gives us a picture of the magnitude and value of relationships with love in action, both in preparing for marriage and within marriage. We need to see life as an adventure, with no time to waste. The central focus, paying close attention to verse 35, is not being distracted by things that are false and misleading to us; rather, we are to focus on Christ, and allow Him to provide us the motivation for leading our heart to what brings godly living. His precepts must reign in us so our attention is on the right track. If not, those myths and *cares* of the world—including the myths of love—will overtake us, and bring us down into the world of bad decisions, leading to bad relationships and producing bad living.

Learn about real love; understand that Christianity is about growth. It starts with profession and conversion, and keeps building into maturity. The process of Sanctification comes into play here. We need to ask ourselves, *am I willing to reduce myself down to merely "ME," as, who I am in Christ?* Are you determined enough to strip yourself of all that you are in the world, in your career, ministry, and your church, including what your friends and spouse think of you and what you think of yourself? Are you willing and determined to hand over your true self, your simple, naked self to God? Once you are, then He can begin to do a greater work in you, and in others through you. Christ will immediately sanctify you completely, and your life will be free of what would distract you from His character and precepts. You can be determined and persistent toward glorifying God, and Christ as your Lord (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24)!

You can start by surrendering to Him in prayer (Galatians 2:20-21; Philippians 1:6; 3:10), *Lord, show me what sanctification means; help me live, as my life is yours.* He will show you! Sanctification means being made one with Jesus. Sanctification is not something Jesus puts in you; it is He, Himself, in us (2 Corinthians 1:39). The understanding of Sanctification will allow you to lead your heart, to be discerning of yourself, and realize that no mere person can fulfill you! No ideal guy or gal will make you complete or fill a hole that only Christ can fill! No friend can take the place of God.

To completely change the black, dirty oil of our minds with the new, golden anointing oil of His love, we have to surrender ourselves to Christ. When we become a Christian, the Spirit transforms us completely, all that we are, all that we do, our will, our plans, and our opportunities (2 Corinthians 3:18). However, this cannot happen unless we give our selfish heart and will over to His (Galatians 2:20-21)! The incentive for us to surrender to Christ is that His way is better than ours! This will directly translate into who we are,

and how we are in all of our relationships. This means you can seek what is best for your spouse and marriage and be willing to work on both that relationship and on yourself.

Remember, most of the ideas people have about the heart and love are artificial and insincere. We must be prepared to recognize the real fruits over the artificial ones. If not, when we think we have found love, we will only have lust and insincerity. These artificial fruits will turn into hate and indifference. When this happens, we will not be even close to expressing any kind of love, in any form. Do not let this happen to you and your marriage. Do not let yourself, or the ones you love, succumb to the myths of love and the leading of the heart that only produces false expectations, and leads into the dark, forbearing path of despair! Songs and movies are nice entertainment; but, they are not the reality of life. Remember, love is a choice. It is your choice to succeed or fail. Are you willing to succeed, knowing that so many countless millions of friendships end and marriages fail? Being willing and able to work to understand yourself, love, and God's precepts will motivate you, and provide commitment to build your house of love. Being willing to make your spouse feel he or she is the priority and is special will make that home content, too.

**If you are willing to live out the art of loving, then, you will keep your marriage alive and even thrive!**

*And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature. Romans 13:11-14*

**Questions to Ponder**

1. How do you react to certain situations with your spouse? How should you? How would your spouse like you to react? How would Christ want you to react?
2. Read these two passages again in different translations (1 Corinthians 13:1-8; 1 John 4: 7-12)

- a. Discuss your thoughts on this each key words and aspect of love.
  - b. Give a positive example.
  - c. Give a negative example.
  - d. How is this type of love working in you?
  - e. Why is this love not working in you?
  - f. What blocks this love from being exhibited in you?
  - g. What would it take to get this love working in you?
  - h. What are you willing to do about it?
3. Read Psalm 86 slowly and carefully. Then, read it again in prayer, and then read it as a prayer.
  - a. Now try this with your spouse and ask each other *how is this like us?*
  - b. Go verse by verse asking *how is this like us* and *how can it be like us?*
  - c. *Where are we in this?*
  - d. *Where do we fail?*
  - e. *Where do we thrive?*
  - f. *Where would we like to be?*
  - g. *What do we need to do?*
  - h. *How can the principles of this Psalm help heal our marriage?*
  - i. *What are we going to do about it?*
4. Each spouse ask the other:
  - What would you like to see happen in my heart?
  - What do you think God would like to see happen in our hearts?
  - What is your goal for our marriage?
  - Do you feel it is possible to get there? What do you think it will take? What do I need to do?

5. Pray!!!

Keep in mind that a good soldier is willing to die for his or her country. Are you willing to live for your spouse and Lord? If so, we can come together and be committed to solve our problems. If not, we will fail our marriage and disappoint our Lord and Savior!

**Remember, love confirms the authenticity of Jesus' followers!**

Show me a marriage where there is love, and I will show you a marriage that is connected with Christ and a family that is connected with one another, resulting in a marriage that is a power in the church and community!

With the movie *Fireproof* and the book *Love Dare* coming out I was asked to write an article on it, and I remember I already did. This was a sermon I did some years ago that I just retooled for my church today. What I sought to do was lay out from God's Word and some of my experiences what we can do to put the happiness, fun, and joy back into our marriages. This is also the introduction to a summer Bible Study series we will do with *Into Thy Word Ministries* starting in July. In this, we will explore the concepts stated here and seek to apply practical and biblical means to improve ourselves and our families.

*Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Colossians 3:15-17*

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Be Blessed, Rev. Richard J. Krejcir, Ph.D.

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