

It's Not About Marriage

By Matt Black

(1st chapter to Marriage Enrichment book)

But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and
all these things will be added to you.

MATTHEW 6:33

WE OFTEN FEEL LIKE FAILURES when it comes to marriage. In my own life, I must confess that my marriage has humbled me more than anything else in my Christian experience. Sometimes I feel like I have “failure” stamped across my forehead. As I have been preparing this book on marriage enrichment, I sometimes feel that I am the last person on earth that should write this. The truth is each chapter has come out of my own failures. As I have studied and interviewed dozens of couples in my local church, to my amazement, the Lord has reminded me that I am not a failure, and neither are you. We are His precious children. We are weak, but we are growing stronger in Christ. God has a word in His Scriptures that identifies those who are battling against indwelling sin and making slow but steady progress: overcomers. We are overcomers – we are more than victorious (Rom 8:37; Rev 3:12).

What are some common difficulties in marriage? Perhaps it is communication, finances, impatience, time management, sickness, thinking your spouse can fulfill you, responsibilities and roles, love life, in-laws, different philosophies of family and culture, or the struggle to understand each other as male and female. Those are a lot of potential challenges in marriage! None of us received a special handbook before we were married explaining the unique struggles and trials we would face, but they are nonetheless real.

We sometimes have the temptation to think that if we just address one of the above issues and discipline ourselves to be more godly and do more, then we would finally be happy in marriage. It actually doesn't work that way. Our victory is much deeper than the difficulties in marriage. Let me put it personally: my victory comes through addressing my deepest problem – my own selfish heart. Marriage is not mainly about me and my spouse. Marriage is mainly about me and my Savior. As my heart receives more of His love and is stunned more by His grace, my strength and joy increase. “The joy of the Lord is my strength” (Neh 8:10). My whole life is touched and changed by Jesus, and that includes my marriage. The way to a more fulfilling marriage is not mainly by focusing my attention on my marriage. It's about looking more toward Christ.

Marriage is About More than Happiness

Many times we think of marriage in the wrong way. When we were young, in the days before marriage, we might have thought about marriage like a fantastical story of romance.

For many, marriage is thought about in terms of one's own happiness. Yet so many enter marriage and the hang ups, the quirks, the insults, and the misunderstandings all take us by surprise. We often do not think of those things before marriage.

St. Paul tells us that marriage will most certainly complicate life and bring "worldly troubles" (1 Cor 7:28). Those who get married will have "trouble." The Greek word for "trouble," means "pressed together," "squashed" or squeezed. What Paul is teaching here is simple. Anytime you press two sinners together in a marriage relationship, there's trouble! This is not rocket science. There's a greater potential for misery in marriage. It's true. If you are single, the only person that can make you miserable is you. In marriage, that potential is doubled!

"Marriage presses two sinners together in the closest possible ways. The two become one, but they are still two personalities, two distinct people with their own likes and dislikes, their own characteristics, emotions, temperaments, and wills. We bring our sinfulness into the marriage and it sometimes creates war. That is true even of the best marriages. When one partner is immature, self-centered, temperamental, or domineering, every conflict is magnified."¹

Marriage is ordained of God, good, holy, and fulfilling; but it does not solve all problems. It actually brings more. Marriage never should be used as a way of escape, even from loneliness. Many people carry their loneliness right into marriage and end up making another person lonely.

Marriage is about more than happiness. It is about holiness. God uses marriage to humble us and see our infinite need for Him.

Marriage is More than Romance

Many of us were not prepared as we entered marriage because we had a misconception of love. We saw it as *eros* (romantic or erotic love) and not *agape* (selfless love). Puritan Matthew Henry said: "the woman was made of a rib out of the side of Adam; not out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be loved."² This is true. One of God's purposes for marriage is *eros* love (since He created sex to be used for His glory), but more importantly, God's greater purpose for marriage is the *agape* love of self-sacrifice. Certainly, there is also *phileo* (brotherly) love in marriage. So there are all these kinds of love, but selfless *agape* love is God's primary love for marriage or any other relationship. *Agape* love is a love of radical commitment and self-sacrifice that leads us to radically serve and lay down our lives for those we love.

Marriage is More than Solving Our Problems

Some people approach success in marriage very superficially. We want "five steps" to a long-lasting marriage. We naturally want an easy solution. We are sometimes disappointed because we follow the "steps" and read the marriage self-help books, and we see very few

¹ John MacArthur, Jr, *1 Corinthians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 181.

² Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Gen 2:21-25.

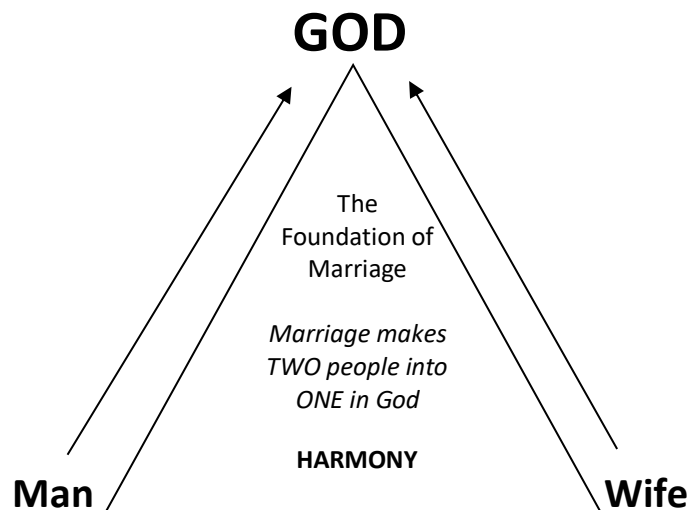
meaningful results. The reason for this is because many marriage books deal with “fruit” issues instead of “root” issues.

We have to get down to the root issue. This chapter is entitled “it’s not about marriage” for a reason. We could examine the various bad fruits of your marriage, and we might even propose noble solutions and remedies. Yet this would not bring lasting, meaningful change to your marriage. Lasting change comes by dealing with the root issues of your life which have very little to do with your marriage and your spouse. If you want to see lasting change, you have to get your eyes off of your marriage and off of your spouse, and onto the Lord. Lasting change can only come through the life-giving power of the new birth and a new and reinvigorated relationship with Christ.

Take a moment and examine yourself and see if you have experienced the new birth. If you have not been made new in your heart through faith in Christ’s death and resurrection will never have any meaningful change in your life, much less your marriage. Jesus said in John 15:5, “Without me, you can do nothing.”

Marriage is More than a 50/50 Arrangement

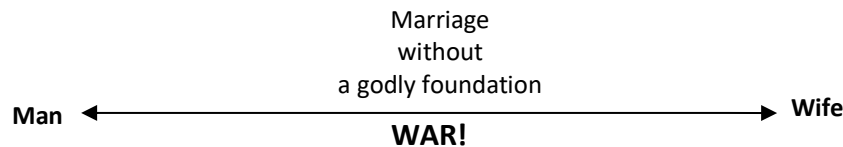
But doesn’t my spouse have to do their part? In today’s culture the expectation of married people is that each would do his or her part. Single people are looking for their “soul mate.” They want someone to complete them – someone who is compatible. It’s a 50/50 arrangement. But this is an immature view of marriage. This view of marriage is a recipe for battle because it sets up high levels of expectations that will most certainly be unrealistic. Marriage that is a 50/50 arrangement is a marriage without God. Both need to give 100% and trust wholeheartedly in Christ for help and direction. Consider this helpful illustration.



Take Your Eyes Off Your Marriage

Marriage without God is just asking for a tug of war with an emphasis on the WAR! Only as husband and wife are looking to God can they have the same vision for life and arrive at the unity and harmony God intended.

Without God at the center of our lives, all we can expect is a battle of our own wills (as the next illustration demonstrates).



None of us was made to be independent – fighting for our own way. That turns everything toxic and makes life difficult for ourselves and others. God created us to live in harmony with Him. Without a walk of harmony with Jesus we cannot ever be truly happy and satisfied in our inner lives, much less live in harmony with others, especially in a marriage relationship. Without the joy of Christ fueling our focus, we can only look forward to war in marriage.

The famous English professor C. S. Lewis said it this way, “When I have learnt to love God better than my earthly dearest, I shall love my earthly dearest better than I do now.”³

Marriage is a Tool of Sanctification

Marriage is hard. Marriage is really not about the romance or happiness or even your children or your legacy. The Bible calls marriage a “profound mystery” that is a picture of Christ and His bride (Eph 5:32). Indeed, marriage is not about marriage. Marriage is a tool God uses to sanctify and grow His people to maturity.

Tim Keller in his book *The Meaning of Marriage* writes:

“While marriage is many things, it is anything but sentimental. Marriage is glorious but hard. It’s a burning joy and strength, and yet it is also blood, sweat, and tears, humbling defeats and exhausting victories. No marriage I know more than a few weeks old could be described as a fairy tale come true... Sometimes you fall into bed, after a long, hard day of trying to understand each other, and you can only sigh: ‘This is all a profound mystery!’ At times, your marriage seems to be an unsolvable puzzle, a maze in which you feel lost.”⁴

Marriage humbles us. I remember before I got married, I thought: “Wow, I am growing in Christ. My wife-to-be is growing in the Lord. This is going to be an amazing marriage.” Then we got married, and I realized how immature and selfish I really was. I know that in some ways I will struggle against this indwelling selfishness until the day I see Jesus face to face. But I am so grateful that He promises to complete the work He has started (Phil 1:6). His mission will not be fulfilled until I am fully conformed into Jesus’ image (Rom 8:29).

Marriage is a Covenant

Marriage is actually not a contract that is 50/50, but a covenant between you, your spouse and God. Your Savior is Jesus. Jesus says in Matthew 19:6, “What therefore God has joined

³ C.S. Lewis, *Letters of C.S. Lewis* (Orlando: Harcourt Books, 1988), 429.

⁴ Timothy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God* (Crawfordsville, IN: Penguin Publishing Group) 13.

together, let not man separate.” Marriage therefore is a **covenant**, not a mere **contract**. Your spouse was never meant to complete you. You are “complete in Christ” (Col 2:10).

Marriage is designed to help grow us into selfless people and to blossom in our relationship to God. Without a daily walk with your Creator through His Son Jesus Christ, you will become a very selfish person. God created us not to rule our own lives and make our own decisions, but to be His servants and to carry out His kingdom agenda on earth.

Tertullian (155-240AD), one of the early fathers of the Christian church described an ideal marriage in his day, and it is still relevant today:

How beautiful, then, the marriage of two Christians, two who are one in hope, one in desire, one in the way of life they follow, one in the religion they practice.

They are as brother and sister, both servants of the same Master. Nothing divides them, either in flesh or in Spirit. They are in very truth, two in one flesh; and where there is but one flesh there is also but one spirit.

They pray together, they worship together, they fast together; instructing one another, encouraging one another, strengthening one another.

Side by side they face difficulties and persecution, share their consolations. They have no secrets from one another, they never shun each other’s company; they never bring sorrow to each other’s hearts. Psalms and hymns they sing to one another.

Hearing and seeing this, Christ rejoices. To such as these He gives His peace. Where there are two together, there also He is present, and where He is, there evil is not.⁵

Marriage is a Picture of the Greatest Love Story

Marriage is something greater than the here and now. God has designed marriage to be a picture of His love for you and me. Marriage is a picture of the greatest love story ever told. There are two books in the Bible that illustrate this story for us.

The Song of Solomon is a true love story about King Solomon and how he pursues his wife, a poor farm girl. In this romantic poem, this rich king pursuing this poverty stricken maiden is a beautiful picture of how God the Father sends his Son to pursue a Bride. Jesus loves His poor, sinful Bride. He takes us in as His Bride, and gives us His riches.

In the Old Testament book of Hosea, we find another breathtaking illustration of God’s love for us. Hosea is a prophet, and he is told to marry a girl (named Gomer) who would become unfaithful. She becomes so immoral that she ends up in the ancient “slave market” where human slaves are bought and sold. By this time, she’s all used up, but Hosea buys her back, not to be his slave, but to be his wife. So it is with our Lord Jesus Christ. He purchases us with His own blood.

From these love stories we see that God is generous. God is selfless. God is kind. God is good. God loves. God sacrifices. So a husband should sacrifice and lay down his life for his wife, as a reflection of God’s love. Consider two very well-known verses.

John 3:16, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

⁵ Quintus Tertullian, *Treatises on Marriage and Remarriage* (New York: Paulist Press, 1955), 35.

Ephesians 5:25, “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.”

Seek First the Kingdom

You see, your marriage is really not about your marriage. Jesus put it another way. He said, “But seek first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness, and all these things shall be ministered unto you” (Mt 6:33). As we minister and sacrifice of ourselves for God’s Kingdom, He takes care of the rest.

In other words, the very best way to work on our most important earthly relationship (marriage) is by getting our eyes off each other and on to our relationship with God. For anyone who has been married for any length of time, that is certainly easier said than done. How can we do it? We need to make certain commitments in our heart in order to put our eyes on the Lord.

Commitment #1: God is the Author of Marriage⁶

We can get our eyes on God by first beginning with a commitment to the fact that God is the Author of marriage. Many who think about marriage and family wonder if the idea came from the jungle story, “Me Tarzan, you Jane; come with me to live in my tree house.” Others may think about “The Flintstones” and imagine a man and a woman from a communal group in a cave deciding to move to their own cave together. They came up with a good idea, called it marriage and when children came along, called it family.

Yet the Bible tells a completely different story. Genesis, written about 3500 years ago, makes it very clear to us that marriage was God’s good idea, however. God designed and defined marriage when He brought Eve to Adam (Gen 2:24). We see this model in a traditional church wedding where the bride is escorted down the aisle of a church by her father and brought to her groom. That wedding is made legal by our government through a marriage license, but the union is from God. “He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the Lord” (Pro 18:33).

It was God’s design that a married man and woman become “one flesh” and through sexual intimacy fulfill God’s command to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth,” (Gen 1:27-28). Adam and Eve’s obedience led to the births of Cain, Abel, Seth and many other sons and daughters (Gen 4:1-2;5:1-5). This marriage union resulted in the parents (one father and one mother) and their children becoming what God called a family. Marriage is God’s idea.

Commitment #2: God is the Author of *My* Marriage

God is not only the Author of marriage, but He is the Author of your marriage and my marriage. That is, God has providentially guided your present marriage to where it is today. Jesus said: “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate” (Mk 10:9).

You might say, “Well I’ve been divorced several times,” or “we got married on a whim,” or “there was so much sin surrounding our marriage.” You might think it is not God’s will for you to remain married, because you began in such a sinful way. Remember, though you may

⁶ Parts of this section are adapted from “Good Idea or God’s Idea?” by Dr. Ronald Allchin of the Biblical Counseling Center of Arlington Heights, Illinois.

have been out of control, God was in total control. He chose to save you and revive your heart so that you would be in this marriage at this time for His own plans and purposes. God put your marriage together. Accept that.

Your marriage is a part of the greater plan God had when you were “predestined” by Him “to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom 8:28). Indeed, your failures, including failed relationships, divorces, and innumerable sins are all part of what God is using to work for your good and His glory (Rom 8:28). The wisest thing you can do now therefore is to accept that your present marriage is a part of God’s greater plan. He saved you in it and you are not released from it until death parts you and your spouse. “For a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage (Rom 7:2).

Commitment #3: Joy is from God, Not My Spouse

“By all means marry. If you get a good wife, you’ll become happy. If you get a bad one, you’ll become a philosopher.” – Socrates

Socrates, though making us laugh, was wrong. Even a good wife will not make a person truly happy. Your spouse is not your Savior. True, meaningful lasting joy can never come a finite creature. Certainly there is joy in marriage, but your spouse was never meant to be your Savior to fulfill all your needs and joys. Only Jesus can do that. “The joy of the Lord is your strength” (Neh 8:10). If a married couple hopes to find the joy and happiness that God intended, each needs to live in marriage the way God designed it. As a couple grows in their love for Christ, they will grow in their love for each other by learning to serve and sacrifice for one another, expecting only the “well done” of Christ in return.

Pastor and theologian Richard Phillips says: “Compatibility is not the key to marriage. It is our conviction, based on experience in ministry and God’s Word, that two Christians who share an attraction, who are committed in faith to God through Christ, and who are determined to obey the Bible’s teachings will be able to love each other in marriage.”⁷

Duke University ethics professor Stanley Hauerwas wrote an article in the 1970s that famously introduced the idea that no two people can be truly compatible:

Destructive to marriage is the self-fulfillment ethic that assumes marriage and the family are primarily institutions of personal fulfillment, necessary for us to become “whole” and happy. The assumption is that there is someone just right for us to marry and that if we look closely enough we will find the right person. This moral assumption overlooks a crucial aspect to marriage. It fails to appreciate the fact that we always marry the wrong person. We never know whom we marry; we just think we do. Or even if we first marry the right person, just give it a while and he or she will change. For marriage, being [the enormous thing it is] means we are not the same person after we have entered it. The

⁷ Richard Phillips, *Holding Hands and Holding Hearts* (Philipsburg, NJ: Puritan and Reformed, 2006), 158.

primary problem is... learning how to love and care for the stranger to whom you find yourself married.⁸

We often expect to receive unrealistic joy from our spouse. It's not a fair expectation. You ought to expect to lay down your life in service to your spouse. Consider the words of Kent Hughes in his book *Disciplines of a Godly Man*:

“Marriage is a call to die to self. Christian marriage vows are the inception of a lifelong practice of death, of giving over not only all you have, but all you are. Is this a grim gallows call? Not at all! It is no more grim than dying to self and following Christ. In fact, those who lovingly die for their spouse are those who know the most joy, have the most fulfilling marriages, and experience the most love.”⁹

We have to receive our joy and identity and purpose mainly from the Lord before we begin to reap the benefits and joys of marriage. Contrary to popular opinion, I am not completed by marriage; I am “complete in Christ” (Col 2:10). My joy comes from Him.

Commitment #4: My Marriage Covenant is with God

We exchange our vows before God and witnesses in the wedding ceremony, “for as long as we both shall live” (1 Cor 7:39). We vow “for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health.” These are not just promises to my spouse, but these are covenantal promises to God. As John Piper says in his book *Momentary Marriage*: “Staying married, therefore, is not mainly about staying in love. It is about keeping covenant. “Till death do us part” or “As long as we both shall live” is a sacred covenant promise – the same kind Jesus made with His bride when He died for her.”¹⁰

God intends marriage to be permanent – as long as both spouses shall live. You need to make the commitment that your marriage is a permanent relationship no matter what may come. A married couple are committed to leave their parents, hold fast to each other and become one unit. Marriage is the only place where one plus one equals one (Gen 2:23-25). This is a covenant with God that is not based on the behavior of the spouse.

The covenant of marriage in Scripture is a legal, binding agreement that cannot be broken. Traditional wedding vows bind a man and a woman to mutual obligations that each must fulfill, even in the face of difficulty. Covenant is the same word that describes God's contract with His people, the most comprehensive concept to define one's relationship with God.

He made this promise, “I will be their God, and they will be my people” (Jer 31:33). Just as God keeps His covenant promises to His people, He expects the husband and wife to keep their covenant promise to each other (Prov 2:17; Mal 2:14). He gave specific roles in this

⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, “Sex and Politics: Bertrand Russell and ‘Human Sexuality,’” *Christian Century*, April 19, 1978, 417–422. Available online at www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1797 (as quoted in Timothy Keller's *The Meaning of Marriage*).

⁹ Kent Hughes, *Disciplines of a Godly Man* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991), 35-36.

¹⁰ John Piper, *This Momentary Marriage – A Parable of Permanence* (Minneapolis: Desiring God Foundation, 2008), 25.

covenant relationship, commanding the husband to love his wife and the wife to respect her husband (Eph 5:33).

Marriage is a commitment to a covenant of companionship. God's reason for forming Eve was so that Adam wouldn't be alone; he needed a companion (Gen 2: 20-22). As Adam and Eve spent time together they grew in companionship both vertically with God and horizontally with each other, growing in many exciting spheres as a model for us to follow for meaningful and lasting companionship in marriage. As they interacted intimately with each other they grew in spiritual, social, intellectual, emotional and physical companionship (Gen 1-3).

When one or more of these primary spheres of companionship is neglected, problems arise in a marriage. The good news is that a couple can find a solution in God's Word for every issue that creates conflict (1 Cor 10:13). Whether communication problems, financial struggles, sexual discord, parental disagreements or any other differences a couple may have, solutions can be found in God's Word to build the harmony and oneness that God desires in marriage.

Commitment #5: Marriage is a Picture of God's Love

Marriage is not only meant to be lived on the horizontal plain of human companionship, but it is really a picture of God's love for us – each marriage tells the story of God's desire to give His Son Jesus Christ a bride. That bride is the church.

St. Paul tells us in Ephesians that the purpose of marriage is to be an illustration of God's love for His church, His people. In chapter 5 and verses 25-32, he says: "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church."

You are loved by God. You must believe this. He says: "I have loved you with an everlasting love" (Jer 31:3). You are beautiful in His sight. You say, "I don't feel beautiful!" What did King Solomon say in Ecclesiastes 3:11? – "He has made everything beautiful in its time."

When I was a Sophomore student at Ponchatoula High School in Louisiana, one of my most transformative and life shaping-classes was Art class with Mrs. Kim Zabbia. One of the lessons taught me that if I wanted to replicate an object, I had to be totally committed to it. I had to get my eyes and my mind off myself and with my pencil, replicate each part of the object with its minute details. I had to be committed to every detail, every turn and shape of that object. I had to get my eyes and my mind off myself and onto that object, taking in every detail into my mind, and drawing it with my hand.

This is the secret to a happy, growing marriage. If you get your eyes off yourself and onto the love of Christ, you will get your happiness from the Lord. Marriage is to be a picture of how an amazing, loving God can pour out His affection on unlovable people like us. We are to find our joy in imitating that kind of divine love in marriage.

Commitment #6: Marriage is about Holiness

If a married couple hopes to find the joy and happiness that God intended, each will have to find it by seeking holiness. Happiness can never be stable by seeking that happiness in circumstances or emotions. “Holiness” is a word that is unfamiliar to modern culture. It means to be separated for special use. Theologically it means to become more like Christ. Marriage is a place in a Christian’s life where he or she can become more and more conformed into the image of Jesus Christ. He laid down His life for His bride, and in marriage we learn to imitate Him.

No spouse fulfills the happiness expectations in marriage. It’s impossible. Marriage is not about who can make me happy. No spouse can meet that expectation.

Simply put, seeking happiness in marriage is a sure pathway to misery. If you seek happiness you are guaranteed to be unhappy.

Instead God tells us to “seek first His kingdom and righteousness” and only then will find what we have been looking for (Mt 6:33). Holiness is the pathway to happiness because that is a happiness based on the infinite God and His Son who is willing and able to be all that you need. If you wholeheartedly desire happiness by being holy and surrendered to the Lord, then you are building your contentment on a foundation that never shifts or cracks (Mt 7:24-27).

It’s Definitely Not About Marriage

Though this is a book that advertises itself to be about enriching marriage, the focus is really not on marriage. If we aim to enrich our marriage, we will be unhappy every time. We must aim to enrich our relationship with Jesus Christ. Every good thing flows from that fountain. If we enrich our devotional life with Him, everything else, including marriage, will be enriched. So really this book is not about marriage, but instead, it’s about discipleship and following hard after the Lord.

Questions

1. Which diagram more describes your marriage?
2. Are you willing to do whatever it takes to renew your covenant of marriage with God and with your spouse?
3. Are you committed to following Jesus Christ personally and in your marriage?