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Introduction

GETTING MARRIED is one of the easiest things in the world to do. In general, it requires only a license, a ring, and two witnesses—and some states may require a blood test. Stripped to its most basic formula, a wedding ceremony need take no longer than five minutes. But for two people to stay married for the rest of their lives is one of the greatest challenges they will ever undertake. Whereas getting married involves a single day of elegance, excitement, and encouragement from family and friends, staying married requires a lifetime of commitment, compromise, and caring about the well being of one another.

Part of my responsibility as a Christian pastor is not merely to preside at wedding ceremonies, but to explore with couples the meaning of marriage and the elements that can contribute to success in marriage. In thirty years of pastoral ministry, I have presided at the wedding ceremonies of more than one thousand couples, and I have agonized with hundreds more over the difficulties of sustaining a marital relationship. All of this has taught me one important lesson: The best time to have a discussion about marriage is before you say I do.

The nearly 50 percent divorce rate in the United States, the highest such rate among industrialized nations, attests to the difficulty of sustaining a successful, lifelong marriage. Premarital counseling can play a major role in changing this statistic, because what happens when a couple leaves the altar is greatly influenced by the preparation for marriage they receive before they stand at the altar together.

The purpose of this book is to serve as a resource for building strong marriages. I have written it primarily for couples who are considering

marriage for the first time. However, its principles apply also to those who have experienced divorce and are considering remarriage. They even apply to married couples. After all, if Tiger Woods needs to consult with his swing coach during a golf tournament, then surely married couples can benefit from a resource that can help sustain their ongoing relationship.

The color of dresses to be worn by the bride's attendants, the selection of music, and the reception menu are important items when contemplating a wedding. But ultimately, success in marriage is based primarily on two factors: how suitable two people are for each other and how equipped they are to sustain the relationship that begins when they say I do. Premarital counseling helps couples to assess their suitability and to develop skills that can aid them in building a healthy, lifelong marriage.

It is rare for two people to make a perfect match as husband and wife. There will always be areas of conflict or disagreement. Through premarital counseling couples can sometimes be helped to identify those differences and learn how to accept and even embrace them. In other instances, premarital counseling can help couples recognize the differences are so fundamental that, despite the couple's physical attraction to each other, getting married could be a big mistake. Just as importantly, premarital counseling can help even the most compatible couple become aware of the challenges and tensions they are likely to face in marriage as the years go by.

I once heard a sermon entitled "Never Buy Shoes in the Morning." The preacher, Ernest Campbell, pointed out that over the course of the day a person's foot tends to swell a bit from the strain of walking and perhaps from the heat. If you buy your shoes first thing in the morning before any swelling takes place, they might not feel as comfortable by day's end.

The same principle can be applied to marriage. The true measure of a marriage's strength is not how happy the couple appears to be on their wedding day or how beautiful the bride looks as she makes her way down the aisle. Nor is it measured by the passions that engulf the couple on that first night when they consummate their marriage vows. I know of many couples where one (or both!) parties woke up the next

day, looked at the person lying next to him or her, and wondered, “What in the world have I done?”

The true measure of a marriage is based on how a couple confronts and overcomes the various challenges that arise over time. Not every day will be like the wedding day. There will be other days, less magical and memorable, and more monotonous and mundane. Strong marriages are the ones in which the partners are able to find as much happiness with each other in the months and years after the wedding as they had on their wedding day. To put it another way, healthy marriages thrive as much in the midst of the routines of daily life as they do in the special moments of celebration, passion, and excitement.

This book is designed to help your marriage thrive, first by helping you discern whether or not you and your intended spouse are suitable for each other, and second, by helping you learn how to handle the pressures and problems that even the happiest couples have to face from time to time in marriage. These goals will be facilitated by focusing on seven words, each of which represents an important area or aspect of the marriage relationship. The words are *Faith, Friendship, Frankness, Fidelity, Forgiveness, Finances, and Family*.

Together these seven principles serve like legs on a chair that is no longer sturdy even if just one leg is removed. If a couple faces serious disagreement in two or more of these areas, they would be well advised to think very seriously about whether to go forward. For this reason, the premarital counseling method found in these pages is best used if the wedding is at least two or three months away so that arrangements that might need to be canceled can be kept to a minimum.

For those couples who choose to use this resource on their own, it is important not just to be honest with yourselves as individuals, but also to be completely candid with each other. If you avoid or suppress problems and differences today, they will most likely come back to haunt you later on. For this reason, I recommend working with someone who has premarital counseling experience. A third party is able to pick up on various comments, facial expressions, body language, tone of voice, and other indicators of disagreement or conflict, and can press both parties to explore those areas further than you might do on your own.

My hope and prayer is that you will find the ideas and principles that follow to be helpful, however you decide to proceed. I know that you are excited about your approaching wedding day, but before that day arrives, take the time to be sure that you will be able to keep the vows you are about to take. This book is based upon the premise that what happens between you and your spouse after you are married is determined, in large measure, by the preparation for marriage you receive before you say I do. I offer these perspectives with the hope of helping you to enjoy a lifelong, happy, and healthy marriage.

—*Marvin A. McMickle*