



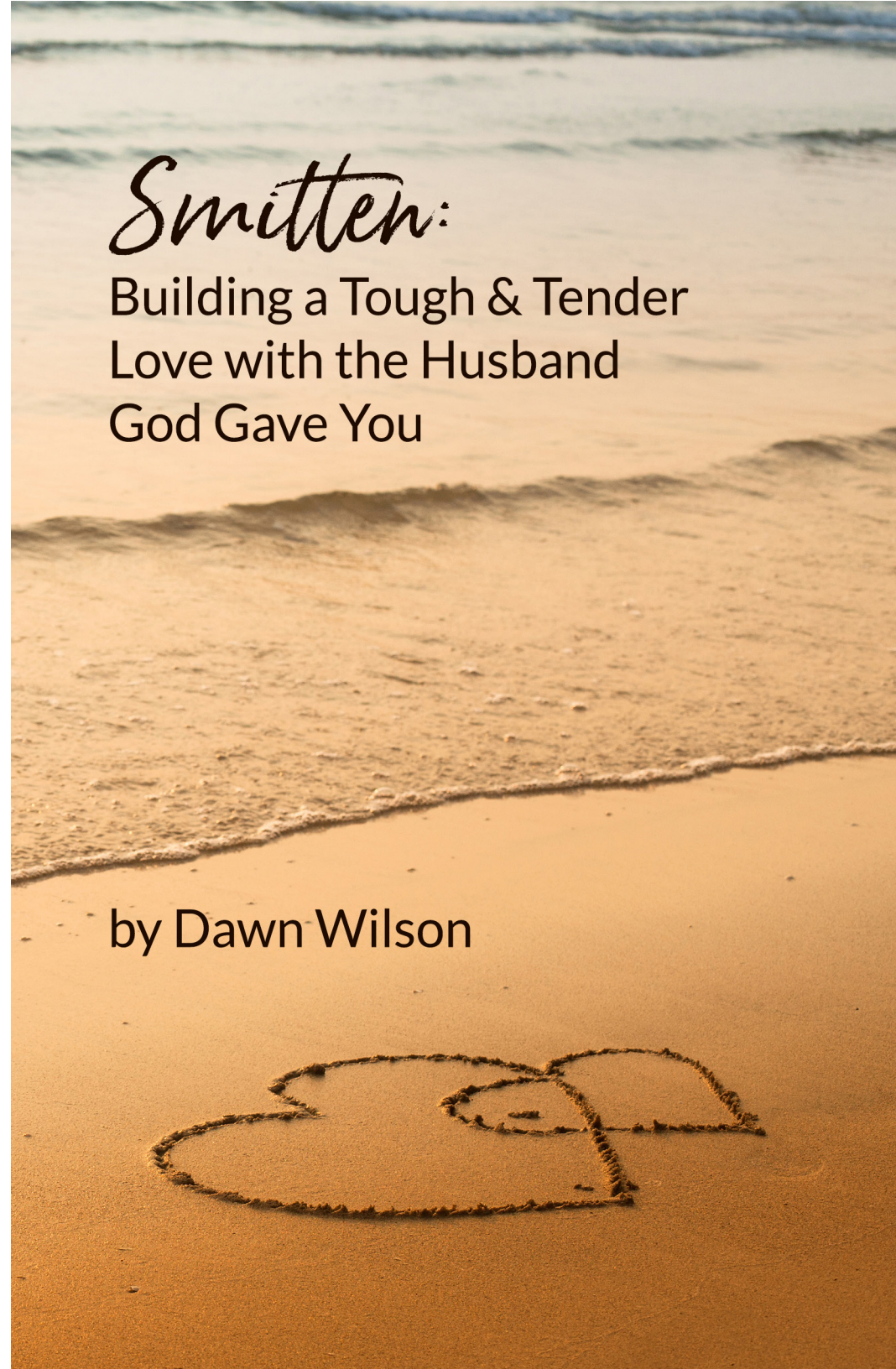
Dawn Wilson, founder and President of Heart Choices Today, is a speaker and author, and the creator the blog, [Upgrade with Dawn](http://upgradewithdawn.com). She is a contracted researcher/reviewer for women's teacher and revivalist, Nancy DeMoss Wolgemuth, at *Revive Our Hearts*, a blogger at TrueWoman.com, writes wiki-type posts at Christianity.com, and is a regular columnist at Crosswalk.com. She and her husband Bob live in sunny Southern California, and Dawn has traveled with Him in Pacesetter Global Outreach. They have two grown, married sons, three granddaughters and a rascally maltipoo, Roscoe.

Dawn Wilson, Heart Choices Today, PO Box 21669, El Cajon, CA 92021

<http://upgradewithdawn.com>

<https://www.facebook.com/dawnmariewilson>

<https://twitter.com/dawnmariewilson>



Smitten:

Building a Tough & Tender
Love with the Husband
God Gave You

by Dawn Wilson



Smitten.

Building a Tough and Tender Love with the Husband God Gave You

By Dawn Wilson

When we see a couple carve their initials in a tree or their names in the sand at the beach, we say they are “smitten.” Christians know the story of one such lovesick couple—Solomon and his bride (Song of Solomon 4:1-15; 6:9; 8:6-7). Today, a young lovesick girl might practice writing “Mrs.” in front of her name, or daydream of her “Mr. Perfect.” And there’s nothing so enduring as newlyweds, gazing into each other’s eyes.

Being smitten, for the purposes of this study, is not about becoming crazy and irresponsible. It’s about staying smitten or reviving deep love—it’s about learning to appreciate and grow with the one God so graciously gave us. It’s about building on and strengthening attraction, not letting it wane. It’s about becoming tough enough to survive temptations in the culture that potentially can drive couples apart, and developing the kind of tender love that revives even the most desperate marriage.

Most people say “for better or worse” when they repeat their wedding vows. But they never truly expect the worst. The marriage relationship can be ruptured by neglect or intentional wounds, by fractured intimacy or unholy behavior. Christians need to decide whether they will allow “Marriage Killers” to crumble their relationship, or if they will work hard to cultivate a tough and tender love.

Some might doubt, after many years of marriage, that God gave them their partner. They might even ask, “What was I thinking?” Is that you? Our gracious Father God orchestrated the circumstances of your meeting and He enabled situations that grew your early love—even if you were unaware of His hand. Even if you did not choose wisely, you still have the opportunity to cooperate in God’s plan for marriage, because He continues to work in and through His children’s lives (Romans 8:28-29a).

Common Marriage Killers include lack of commitment, a selfish mindset, poor communication skills, disheartening attitudes, expecting perfection, clashes over responsibilities, foolish comparisons, lack of intimacy and unhealthy choices. Perhaps the most subtle Marriage Killer is forgetting the adventure—forgetting the “wow” factor in how your partner complements your life.

If you are struggling, you don’t need a new partner. You may simply need

to repair the breach, to deal with the problems destroying your marriage. Ask God for a new perspective and fresh wonder of the partner God gave you. Biblical married love is a series of daily choices wrapped around commitment and enabled by God’s grace.

So how can you build a tough and tender love with your husband? I want to suggest four ways with helpful tips.

1. REMEMBER Your Early Days of Smitten Love.

Highlight sweet memories. Whether your marriage is one year old or 50, it’s always fun and enlightening to remember the early days of “smitten” love. Remember when your husband’s quirks were cute, not annoying?

Here are some ways to help you remember:

- Pull out your wedding pictures and recall the joys of that day.
- If you have a wedding video, watch it again (if possible, with your spouse).
- If you have a copy of your wedding vows, read them again. Think about how those words apply to your everyday living with your husband.
- Look at photos of pre-marriage or early-marriage dates. Recall these fun times and the times that drew you together.

2. REVIEW What Made Those Days So Wonderful.

Marriage is hard work, much more than a life-time date. Many of the patterns for our marriage—both helpful and hurtful—are often developed in the first year or two.

Here are some questions to ask and thoughts to consider:

- What drew you together? Reflect on some early memories in your courtship and marriage.
- How did your similarities encourage the relationship?
- How did your differences—things that might cause you some issues now—help you know your partner was a “gift” to you from God for growth, support, joy and ministry?

- What helped you deal with hard times? Think about the early struggles of marriage, and how you pulled together to overcome them. What qualities did this develop in you? In your partner? How might those kinds of strengths and coping tools help you now?
- What strengths were evident, early on? Ask family members and friends who knew you “back then” what they remember about your early days of marriage. Perhaps they spotted early signs of problems, but ask them to focus on the strengths—especially those your partner had.

3. REVIVE Areas that May Have Crumbled in Your Marriage.

When reality settles into a marriage, couples have a choice. Will they continue to love and support each other, or will they let marriage killers begin to hack away at their relationship?

Every marriage has potential killers for three reasons: (1) the strategies of our enemy to destroy our marriages; (2) the pull and influence of a wicked culture; and (3) our individual sinful, selfish desires (Ephesians 2:1-3)—Satan, the world and the flesh.

I want to share six potential areas that may be crumbling in marriages, and—if you are struggling—how to revive these areas for God’s glory, your growth and your partner’s good:

(1) Move from Self-effort to Faith-based Surrender

In a Christian marriage, God is supposed to be first (Matthew 6:33). He is the foundation and glue for a solid relationship with purpose and stability; and when partners draw closer to Him, they will be drawn closer to each other.

One of the big mistakes in marriage is to try to go it alone without the grace of God. The most crucial choice is to turn from self-effort and, by faith, surrender to the grace of the Gospel of God. This begins with knowing the Lord and receiving salvation through His grace (Acts 16:30-31; Ephesians 2:8; Titus 3:5-7).

But then, Christ-followers need to be sure they haven’t trusted God for salvation only to begin trusting themselves for the changes that need to be made in their lives and homes. The Bible says, *“Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain”* (Psalm 127:1).

Jesus said, *“Apart from me, you can do nothing”* (John 15:5b). We

need to understand the weakness of our self-effort in our role as marriage partners. But on the other hand, we need to understand and embrace the sufficiency of the Gospel for our everyday choices; we need the enabling power of God’s grace (2 Corinthians 12:9; John 17:17; Hebrews 10:10; 2 Peter 3:18).

Stacey Salsbery wrote, *“If the gospel were to captivate me daily, so would the power of God. ... Preach the gospel to yourself, and you will walk in the light.”* (1)

No matter how successful we think our marriage is, we desperately need to trust the power of God and move from marriage-killing self-effort to sufficiency through Him.

(2) Move from Unrealistic Expectations to Cooperation with God’s Plan

The average woman’s mind is full of expectations. We expect our husbands to be mind-readers. We expect they should know what we are feeling. We expect they will be like our dads... or the opposite of them! We expect love will simply happen. We expect our husbands will have the same ideas about romance and sex that we have. We expect we can change them—maybe to be more like us.

Did you notice the self-centered perspective there? Marriage is an exciting gift, but it’s not all about us. It’s supposed to be all about God, His desires for us and our expressions of His love through our marriage. God might have a unique plan for your spouse that doesn’t fit your expected image. The further we get away from God’s big picture purpose with unrealistic, self-focused expectations, the more we open ourselves up to a crumbling marriage.

The Bible says, *“Hope deferred makes the heart sick”* (Proverbs 13:12a). When your hopes, especially any unrealistic expectations, are continually disappointed, you might become heartsick. God knows the deep longings of your heart, and He has a plan to fulfill them—in Himself.

A realistic and God-centered longing that is fulfilled is *“like a tree of life,”* continually nourishing us (Proverbs 13:12b). Our husbands are bound to fail us at some point—only Jesus never fails—so our expectations need to be only in the Lord, not in our husband (Psalm 62:5).

Think about the expectations you have for your husband. Can you release those expectations to Jesus and allow your husband to

breathe, change and grow in God's timing?

(3) Move from Bitterness to Christ-like Humility and Forgiveness

As with all marriage killers, self-focus and pride are likely at work. We like to hold onto our hurts and wallow in self-pity. Maybe we think we deserve better. Maybe we think we know better than our husbands, and they should listen to us. (That may be true, but attitude is everything!)

Pity parties might feel good in the moment, but they are such a waste of time. Holding onto our hurts and grudges only fuels the flames of bitterness and amplifies our problems.

In so many situations in my own marriage, my husband never intended to hurt my feelings, but whenever I shifted into self-pity mode, I allowed bitterness to fester. I had to learn to release my hurts into God's hands. I had to let them go (Proverbs 19:11).

Even if my husband had intentionally offended or wounded me, it's always wise to respond in a godly way. I remember one situation where I needed to confront my husband about a way he hurt me. I approached him with humility and shared my heart—I didn't sugar-coat the issue (Proverbs 27:6; Galatians 6:1-2)—But then I chose to forgive him and trust God to heal my wounds (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13). Jesus is my example in this.

Think about the attacks our Savior endured (Hebrews 12:1-5). Can you trust God to help you respond as Jesus would? Can you forgive your husband, not lose heart and preserve your marriage?

It's been said, "The friends we keep the longest are the friends who forgave us the most." God brings flawed people together in every marriage, and an enduring marriage often reflects good forgivers—or at least one who will make that choice. The Bible says, "Bear with one another" (Colossians 3:13), and sometimes that means overlooking a fault (Proverbs 19:11). Cut your partner some slack, just as you'd want him to give you grace too.

An important tip: Own your own issues. Don't project them onto your spouse. It may be necessary to ask discernment questions to help a partner consider behavior patterns, but always motivate without judging. Judging belongs in a courtroom, not a marriage. Say, "I'm sorry you feel that way. Can we talk about it?" Let grace reign. Always examine your own heart first, and seek to model true love (1 Corinthians 13:4-8a). Remember, it is God's work to renovate hearts.

Once we forgive our partners, we need to go beyond that grace to blessing (1 Peter 3:9). Paul said, "Overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21). Consider what might be behind your husband's behavior, attitudes or words. How can you respond to that deeper need and minister to him? How can you bless him?

Again, Jesus is the example. He saw beyond our surface issues to our deepest heart need. He was wounded for our sins, humbly choosing to sacrifice His life in our stead and forgive us (Isaiah 53:5; 1 Peter 2:21-23; 3:8-9). He chose to bless us! The wounded One understands our wounds, and He can help us love, forgive and bless as He did.

(4) Move from Manipulative Control to Support and Help

We can use Genesis 2:18 to bash our husbands over the head! The word "helper" in this verse makes many women think they have the right to re-make their husbands according to their own design rather than encouraging husbands in their God-given design.

That is controlling, not helping. The word for helper, *ezer*, actually means "one who comes alongside." It's not the same as a servant, although each partner is called to submit to and serve one another (Ephesians 5:21; Galatians 5:13)—and it's certainly not being a doormat. Rather, *ezer* speaks of one who willingly and graciously comes alongside to support and even save. The wife is not inferior or an afterthought. She was created to serve with her man in a unique, God-given role.

The "not good" of Genesis 2:18 was transformed when God brought woman to man as an example of someone who comes alongside and is very good indeed! Other *ezer*-helper passages in scripture remind us God himself comes alongside as an "ever-present help" in our helplessness (Psalm 46:1).

Supporting your husband DOES NOT MEAN you can't communicate concerns with truth, humility and compassion. It's not necessary to ignore habits and sins that hurt your relationship (Proverbs 27:6; Matthew 18:15-20; Galatians 6:1-2). But be careful about manipulation to "fix" your husband. Leave any hubby management issues to the Father's wisdom.

It's tempting to interfere, but as a friend wisely told me, it may be necessary to "duck and let God hit your husband." In other words, don't get in the way of allowing God to teach and help him learn from a foolish decision. Don't try to become your partner's "teacher"

or—heaven forbid—his “mom.” God gave your husband to you for a specific purpose—to be a supportive wife.

What does supportive, build-him-up encouragement look like? It means you will —

- pray for him,
- communicate your heart with honesty and humility,
- be his safe haven,
- honor his role as head of the household and affirm his leadership decisions,
- encourage spiritual growth without nagging or manipulating,
- encourage his manhood,
- be his sexual partner,
- use your gifts and creativity to help him fulfill God’s calling on his life, etc.

Grabbing for control is a sure marriage killer, but cultivating your role as a helper goes a long way in strengthening your relationship and marriage.

(5) Move from Belittling to Building Up in Love and Understanding

It doesn’t take long for the man of our dreams to exhibit some nightmarish habits! Looking back on my early marriage days, I loved what I saw; but now even more, because my husband has changed under the mighty hand of God. I’m not trapped in a marriage with a “different” man—I’m privileged to live with a matured and wiser man.

That doesn’t mean there still aren’t sandpaper moments. The enemy would like to have me belittle and attack my husband, to respond to him with condescension rather than compassion. Nitpicking and nasty responses pound like hammers in a man’s soul. Belittling begins in the mind and moves to the tongue; so deal with critical, ungracious thinking right away.

It didn’t take long for me to learn I could also belittle and discourage my husband without words. My husband read more from my body language than I imagined, especially after years of marriage. My rolled eyes, raised eyebrow and tight lips “spoke” with as much devastation and disrespect as anything I actually said.

God’s Word tells us to respect our husbands (Ephesians 5:33) and we need to learn how to encourage, not discourage them—even through our tone and body language—and respond, not react. On that note, it’s helpful to respond to the Spirit’s promptings before we speak to our spouse. Proverbs 16:1-4 warns us to offer a soft answer, not a harsh rebuke.

One of the projects I worked on in a revival ministry was “The 30-Day Husband Encouragement Challenge.” (2) That resource is a powerful tool for breathing new life into the marriage relationship from the woman’s perspective—and more importantly, from God’s perspective. Even if a husband never responds in the way a wife hopes, cultivating love and appreciation brings glory to God.

Any wife can encourage and affirm her husband and see God work—whether a marriage is experiencing challenges, or just needs a tune up. Instead of belittling, build up with love and understanding. If you struggle with positive ways to be supportive, ask God for insight.

As an extra motivator, be aware of this: Your children, especially your daughters, are watching and learning from you. Your grandchildren are watching. Your friends are watching. And people who want to see how being a Christ-follower works in daily, practical living—they are watching too.

(6) Move From Foolish Imagination to Reality-based Thinking

Watch enough Hallmark movies and you may begin to compare the lead men with your husband. Read enough romance novels and you may find yourself wishing your husband spoke to you “that way.” Fantasies are never a good substitute for the real thing, even if they make us feel better in the moment.

God created our imagination for good, but Satan wants to use it for evil. Be careful about the foolish imagination that makes you see your husband in a different light or tempts you to compare him to some conceptualized ideal. Don’t give the enemy any inroads! Live in reality and shape your thoughts around truth, not fantasy.

How can you do this?

- Capture negative, hurtful thoughts (2 Corinthians 10:3-5) before they find opportunities to lash out through our words.
- Cultivate positive, kind thoughts (Ephesians 4:31-32; Philippians 2:3; Colossians 3:3, 13-14).
- Cease watching or reading anything that damages your relationship—anything that makes you unappreciative of your husband or tempts you to question God’s gift to you!
- Create a fresh script for thinking and speaking about your husband. Spend some time meditating on what is good about him (see Philippians 4:8).
- Cry out to God. Ask Him for the help you need to see your husband as He does.
- Recognize your husband’s gifts and skills. Value them. Discover your partner’s spiritual gifts (Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:8-10) and help him cultivate these gifts—if he would appreciate your help. Recognize and compliment his developed skills. Praise him for them in public.
- Respect your husband. Fill his “respect” cup daily (Ephesians 5:33b). Appreciate him and express gratitude. Never take your husband for granted.
- Reject the idea of a “soul mate.” Marriage is about commitment and investment. Understand that only the Lord can “complete” you, not your spouse (or any other person).
- Reignite your romance. Don’t deprive one another of sexual intimacy. “Not tonight, dear” can become a go-to routine and the devil gets room to tempt. If romance has waned, begin by making simple, loving choices, like holding hands. After his wife died, theologian R.C. Sproul said he regretted not holding her hand more. *“Holding hands costs nothing,”* he said, *“and bears dividends.”*

4. REINFORCE a God-honoring, Tough and Tender Love.

Remember, review, revive ... and now, reinforce. Knowing the biblical blueprint for a God-honoring marriage should enable us to act, to pursue a tough and tender love that strengthens the marriage relationship.

Here are some ways to reinforce “tough and tender” love:

- Read the blueprint. Read and meditate on Ephesians 6:21-33, and ask the Holy Spirit to flood your mind and heart with a fresh vision of God’s plan and purpose for marriage—for your marriage. Fulfill your role as a wife in biblical terms, and faithfully respond to your husband’s role. (Pray that he will learn to fulfill his biblical role too!)
- Revere the “Holy One” in your marriage. Guard your heart against perversions of God’s design for marriage. Learn to resist unholy distortions from the entertainment industry and literature. Concentrate on making your marriage holy, not just happy (1 Peter 1:15-16).
- Remember: Your husband isn’t the enemy. The real enemy is Satan. He’s called “the destroyer” for a reason! He wants to blind you to the truth about your own weaknesses, pet sins and how you hurt your spouse. He suggests evil thoughts and motives. He promotes disunity, bitterness, and an unforgiving spirit (James 3:14-15; Ephesians 4:26-27). He looks for a foothold or opportunity to bring your marriage down (Ephesians 4:27).
- Ramp up the “sizzle.” Make sexual intimacy creative and fun. The marriage bed as God designed it is “undefiled,” and sex is a beautiful gift in marriage. Preserve the sanctity of marriage and the marriage bed. (Read Song of Solomon for ideas on joyful, playful anticipation.) If you struggle with sexual response in your marriage, seek trustworthy Christian counseling or read Bible-based books on sexuality. Your husband needs sexual expressions just as you need loving touch and other expressions of love. Sex is God’s design and it is a good thing within the parameters of marriage! But sometimes we need to work through the “details.”
- Respond to your husband’s masculinity with God-given femininity. There may be times when a woman needs to step up for the survival of the family, but be wary of the push for role reversal. Follow the original plan for the essence of femininity. This includes a relational capacity for building supportive connectedness, responsiveness to God and her husband, a nurturing nature (even if not married), sweet vulnerability—sensitivity and softness, and inner beauty that is even more attractive than outward appearance.
- Radiate Christ in your home. A woman’s disposition can create the atmosphere in her home. Create a nurturing atmosphere. Why reserve a sunny spirit for strangers? Radiate the light of Jesus as you walk in the light in your own home.

- Relax together. Take time to rest and enjoy “play times” together beyond the sexual. Be quick to say “yes” when your spouse offers time together. (What you allow in your schedule indicates your priorities.) Dream together and laugh together. Laughter cushions many of the bumps in marriage, so cultivate a joyful heart (Proverbs 17:22).
- Recruit your spouse. Develop a true partnership. Don’t try to go it alone. Remember, you are heirs of the grace of life together (1 Peter 3:7). Ask your partner, “Can you help me?” And at other times, ask, “How can I help you?”
- Restate your partner’s negatives as positive strengths. See their weaknesses and failings as opportunities to lean into grace and learn how to be gracious. Flip critical thinking on its head and coax out your partner’s strengths. Couples are often agents of rescue in God’s hands, so try to restate negatives as positive strengths. (For example, a husband’s lack of involvement might be discernment—knowing what to avoid. What you perceive as stubbornness might be a sign of caution.)
- Resist the pull of the culture. The world system promotes a false version of God’s biblical design. Reject lustful compromises such as sexual infidelity and adultery. Remember you are one flesh. Don’t invite others into your marriage—in person or through pornography or cybersex. Take responsibility for your thought life. Don’t let your heart or eyes stray. And pray for your husband’s heart and eyes too. Stay pure and faithful.
- Reject the temptation to flirt with others. Be careful about outside relationships at the office and even at church. Flirting can be misunderstood and lead to inordinate affections. You have the power to choose fidelity and reject temptations. Take the way of escape (1 Corinthians 10:13) and be accountable.
- Race to the cross. Make it your practice to beat your partner there! Don’t hesitate, waiting for your partner to apologize or change. Be quick to ask forgiveness, and speedily extend grace, mercy and kindness.
- Rein-in your tongue. Guard your mouth if you want to keep yourself out of trouble (Psalm 141:3; Proverbs 21:23). Use your words wisely (James 3:6). Do away with “corrupt” words, and add more grace-filled, life-building words (Ephesians 4:29; James 1:26).
- Refuse to humiliate or shame. Shaming your partner will not build tender love. Cultivate good will—kindness, graciousness, and encouragement (1 Thessalonians 5:11). Avoid gossip or crude jokes.
- Read and reinforce. Seek out helpful, Bible-grounded books on marriage, or listen to resources that can encourage you. (I personally recommend marriage resources at ReviveOurHearts.com and Love-Wise.com.)
- Reach Out. We should always ask God for wisdom (James 1:5), but sometimes it’s helpful or necessary to ask a godly married woman to share her marriage counsel. That is actually a God-given role for older women in the church (Titus 2:3-5). Take notes! You might also seek out a biblical counselor if you have tough questions or concerns about your marriage.
- Rule out divorce. An unhappy marriage is not biblical grounds for divorce (Mark 10:11-12). Always work toward reconciliation. God can do the impossible in restoring a marriage (Matthew 19:26), and He honors the one who keeps Christian covenant even when it hurts. Don’t resign to Satan’s lies. God can give grace for sinful consequences, but He can also fix a marriage and make up for past failures. As long as one partner understands marriage isn’t about giving 50%—but instead giving 100%—there’s hope for a marriage to survive and possibly thrive. An unbelieving, rebellious husband can be won to Christ and godliness through the behavior of wife (1 Peter 3:1; 1 Corinthians 12:15). Adultery and abandonment are arguments for separation, with divorce as a last resort. Separation is also wise and morally right in cases of spousal abuse, which is immoral and contrary to God’s design.
- Renew your vows, perhaps in a special ceremony. This can be fun and simply a restating of what you both believe for your marriage. But in the case of breached vows, it is a time of promise and recommitment. Remember: There are no “if” statements in wedding vows.
- Reapply the Word of God every day. Spiritual intimacy with God can be the glue needed on days when you feel like your marriage is falling apart. Plan ways to grow together spiritually, seeking God in the Word and praying (together, if your spouse will join you). Even if your husband doesn’t want to participate, God will honor your times of prayer and worship around His Word. Ask God to transform your thinking about your marriage and home (Romans 12:2).

- Represent your partner well and honor God. Your marriage can be a testimony to a watching world. Consider words and ways to help your spouse shine in public.
- Rejoice with the spouse God gave you. Ask the Lord to help you stay strongly attracted to your husband. Smitten!

We all have the opportunity to make fresh choices every day. As married women, we can either decide to let marriage killers destroy our relationships, or we can choose to build a tough and tender love. And if we choose wisely, our marriage will thrive, no matter our changing circumstances.

Footnotes

(1) Stacey Salsbery, "Persevere in Preaching the Gospel to Yourself," Revive Our Hearts' True Woman blog, June 6, 2019, <https://www.reviveourhearts.com/true-woman/blog/persevere-preaching-gospel-yourself>.

(2) The 30-Day Husband Encouragement Challenge, a book published by Revive Our Hearts ministry - <https://store.reviveourhearts.com/products/the-30-day-husband-encouragement-challenge-book>