

THE **ONE** LESSON
THAT **CHANGED**
MY **MARRIAGE**



Joey Bonifacio

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®

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*To Marie, the love of my life.
God knew exactly what He was doing when
He brought us together.*

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Acknowledgments

Introduction

You may be wondering why I needed to write an entire book on marriage when there was only one lesson to learn. The reason is because, like everything else that demands excellence, the answer to one question leads to many other questions.

These chapters are not an attempt to download lessons from our marriage but to inspire and instigate the reader to ask more questions that could lead to answers that can help grow healthy marriages.

Whether you are starting out in marriage or have been down the track longer, my prayer is that this book will help you arrive at answers that will make your marriage become what God intended it to be.

Chapter 1

The ONE LESSON That Changed My Marriage

*"A successful marriage requires falling in love many times, always
with the same person."*

- Mignon McLaughlin

As Marie and I celebrated our 32nd wedding anniversary just recently, I got reminded of the one marriage lesson that changed my life and consequently, ours.

We were visiting a church in snow-covered Washington, DC. Though it happened in 1988, I can still remember the moment vividly in my mind. The pastor said, “At the end of your life, you will find yourself in a hospital bed somewhere and the people surrounding your bed will not be your business partners and associates; they will be your wife and children. The saddest day of your life is when you look into her eyes and both of you realize that you did not love her and your children the way you should have.”

It was then the Holy Spirit used this man’s sermon to put a longing in me to make my marriage become what God intended it to be. Such is the power of a preacher whom God uses at the right season and moment.

I knew it would take years of renewing my mind to get it there, but God rewarded my desire through a simple revelation about marriage. Just as a strong, reliable chair depends on four sturdy legs, a successful marriage depends on these **four essential ingredients**:

1. Trust

Trust is the *foundation* of a successful marriage. Whatever you do, make sure that it builds trust. Anything that destroys trust must be avoided or discarded.

There is nothing uglier than a jealous wife or husband. Make every effort to build trust, whether through your words or actions, in all aspects of your marriage.

2. Love

While trust is the foundation, love is the *motivation* of a great marriage. It's about serving the other person and not waiting for them to serve you. It's about dying to selfish desires and finding joy in bringing pleasure to your spouse.

Marriage is a daily journey of continually growing in joy, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.

There is nothing more beautiful than a confident spouse who knows she is the one who brings joy, warmth, and pleasure to your eyes.

3. Forgiveness

Forgiveness is the *reset button* of a marriage that has hung. It allows couple to reboot when the frictions of life affect them. It's the thing that Jesus says makes the imperfect perfect. Forgiveness is what cleanses a relationship everyday and leaves no trace of rust that creates even more friction.

There is nothing more peaceful than a marriage further overwhelmed by a constant and immediate atmosphere of forgiveness.

4. Communication

Lastly, communication is the *process* to a successful marriage. Just as photosynthesis is to plants and sun, communication is the process of continual and interdependent exchange of words, ideas, and actions between two people that build the relationship.

Couples are like trees and the sun: the more they communicate, the closer they lean toward each other. And there is nothing more comforting than to know that you can freely share, be heard, and listened to by the person who loves you the most.

Marriage can be like a favorite chair that is not just a piece of furniture, but the seat we choose to settle in each and every time. It may be worn out on the outside, but it continues to swallow our contours in ways that are firm yet familiar. It does not just accommodate but affirms that this seat is mine—and here is where I belong. It has recorded many a conversation only two lovers have shared. And for as long as its four legs remain stable, it will continue to support us as we slump into it at the end of each day.

As I look back on 32 years, I am grateful to God for this one lesson that changed my marriage and my life. They are, after all, the same four ingredients that have made my relationship with the Lord what it is today.

Chapter 2

How to Turn One Lesson into REALITY

*“What the mind of man can conceive and believe, it can achieve.”
-Napoleon Hill*

I wish I could say that transforming a marriage is as simple as listening to a pastor's moving message or reading one article and *voila!*—a changed marriage. But that is far from the truth.

The lesson was like a **discovery**. While discoveries can initiate us to adopt a certain change in our lives, rarely do they produce a lasting difference. A good discovery should simply serve as a precursor that leads to something more important: **desire**.

The Power of Desire

No one can make you do something you don't want to do. I have found that my failure to change is not because I can't, but because I simply *don't want to*. Ultimately, it is a matter of wanting one thing more than another that becomes the impetus for change in our lives.

Think about students who have a hard time getting up in the morning for school. You'll find them to be the last ones arriving in class, but the first ones standing in line for the premier showing of *Spider-Man* or *The Avengers*. The difference? **Desire**.

People will always discover newer and better ways to live everyday. Unless these discoveries turn into desires, they will remain just great ideas that do not make a lasting difference. Real desire is a strong intense wanting for something, and is so much more than clicking a "like" button.

Making a Decision

After having my own *eureka* moment about marriage, I went home with a desire and an intention to make a change. But the change came slowly and eventually the desire to change waned. It was not until I made a **decision** to genuinely change that real transformation took place.

Discoveries bring about a desire to change. Although this is good, no amount of desire will make a lasting difference until you decide to commit to change. The operative words here are “until you decide.” And until you make that decision, you are like a chain smoker who discovers that smoking causes cancer and genuinely wants to change, but still won’t quit.

The Bible says that a double-minded man is unstable in all his ways and should not expect to receive anything from God (Jas. 1:7-8). This is the Bible’s way of saying that indecisiveness gets you nowhere.

From Decision to Discipline

If discovery is realizing the need to climb a mountain, and desire is wanting to make the climb; decisiveness is buying the gear, getting up in the morning, and putting on your climbing shoes.

While this paints a good picture of change, the reality of it is much easier said than done. In most cases, change may prove to be just as difficult as climbing a mountain. It’s easy to start but difficult to continue when one gets to the more challenging parts. This is where **discipline** comes into play.

Discovery leads to a desire that necessitates a decision. But once you find yourself in the trenches, it is only discipline that will make the lasting change.

The Path of the Four Ds

The goal of this book is to help you discover things that will help your marriage, instill in you a desire for a successful one, and actually make the decision to make changes for the better. That’s why after every short chapter, I encourage you to answer these basic questions that will help you act on that one lesson for that day:

1. What did you **discover** from this chapter?
2. Which of these discoveries do you **desire** to see in your marriage? Why?
3. What **decisions** will you be making in order for these desires to become reality?

I will also include some exercises that, with a little discipline and dedication, will move you closer to your destiny in marriage. Read them together with your spouse and get on the road of:

Discovery → Desire → Decision → Discipline

In case you are not married but plan to be someday, read on. Better yet, share what you are learning from this book with others whom you know will benefit from it.

Chapter 3

The RISK and RESPONSIBILITY of Trust

Whether it's between you and your banker, grocer or doctor, relationships rise and fall on trust. This is true for our marriages and even our relationship with God as well. Trust is the foundation of any relationship.

So why trust and not love? Because it is possible to love someone, live in the same house with them, and share the same bed—but still not trust them. And without trust, your marriage has no leg to stand on.

The Teacup of Trust

I once heard someone say that trust is like an elegant bone china teacup: beautiful, fragile, and the rightful container of a loving relationship.

In a relationship, the giver of trust takes a risk by handing the fragile teacup to the other person, as there is no guarantee that the receiver will handle the trust in a worthy manner. In return, the receiver who has been entrusted with the fragile container has the responsibility of making sure that the teacup is carefully handled.

Such is the nature of trust in any relationship: the giver takes a risk while the receiver is responsible to care for the precious teacup and its contents. In a marriage, both parties share the roles of giving trust and receiving responsibility over their relationship.

See-Through, Sensitive yet Strong

Thomas Frye developed the first version of bone china in 1748. It was not until the late 1790s that Englishman Josiah Spode perfected the formula and process that made bone china what it is today—the favorite chinaware of both Buckingham Palace and the White House.

The reason why fine bone china is the tableware of choice for these fine residences is because of its translucency, fine texture and whiteness. Despite this, it has one of the highest levels of mechanical strength and chip resistance.

It is the same with trust. Though fine and fragile, it is also strong and chip-resistant because it is made of the right materials. But more than being just a translucent piece of china, trust's strength lies in its transparency.

It is this strength that allows these kinds of tableware to be gold-embossed with the most beautiful and intricate of designs, including the seals of the Queen of England and the President of the United States. The more trust a relationship has, the greater the value and beauty it will contain.

How to Turn the ONE LESSON INTO REALITY

Answer the following:

1. What did you **discover** from this chapter?

2. Which of these discoveries do you **desire** to see in your marriage? Why?

3. What **decisions** will you be making in order for these desires to become reality?

Discipline:

Draw a teacup on your bathroom mirror, or draw one on a piece of paper and put it on your refrigerator door. Write the words, "TRUST: Handle with care" under it.

Prayer:

Chapter 4

The HISTORY of TRUST

Often, when we think of Adam, Eve, and the fruit, what we see is one bite on the fruit; but the Bible tells us that there were two. Read to the end, and you'll find a surprising revelation.

There is no love story that explains trust better than Adam and Eve's. Being the first couple ever, they were both placed by God in the Garden of Eden to enjoy the best of all worlds.

The Garden of Delight

For starters, they were entrusted with the freedom to eat from any tree in the garden and the layers of delight that the garden had to offer. Eden literally means "garden of delight." It had the most beautiful trees that produced the lushest fruits.

God entrusted Adam and Eve with the freedom to eat from any of these trees and delight in anything else that the garden had to offer. But with all the freedom given to them, God had but one prohibition: ". . . *but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die*" (Gen. 2:16-17).

Trust takes a risk. God took this risk by giving Adam and Eve the freedom to eat from any tree in the garden except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And when trust is given, it also demands a response.

The Test

The riskiness of trust makes it the best way to test the strength of any relationship; hence, God's prohibition in the first place. There was nothing particularly special about the one tree. The point was just to see if Adam and Eve believed and trusted God's Word.

God intended for the couple to enjoy the best of all He had. In return, the couple had to trust God's every word in order to keep their relationship with Him intact. Before anything else, it is important to note that the command was given to Adam and not to Eve. It was his role to trust God and make Eve know of God's command.

Often when we read this story, we have Eve to blame for the disobedience. The common belief is that she enticed her husband to eat the fruit. I, on the other hand, have a very different take on the story.

Adam's Story

My long association with men (myself included) and what the Bible says about us have led me to believe that Adam wanted to eat the fruit himself but was too cowardly to actually do it. He wanted to know why God made the one restriction but did not want to face the consequence of death. This theory of mine becomes even more provable by the fact that Adam was standing with Eve when Satan deceived her:

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate (Gen. 3:6).

Adam failed in his role as the leader who was first entrusted with God's Word. First, he did not do anything to stop disobedience from taking place. Second, Eve's interaction with the serpent reveals that she was misinformed about God's prohibition.

She did not know that she would certainly die if she ate the fruit because all she said was, "you will die" (Gen. 3:3 NIV), as opposed to God's message that "you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:17).

Forgetting this one crucial word was enough for the serpent to retort, *"You will not surely die"* (Gen. 3:4) and convince her otherwise. So, guess who kept the information from her in the first place?

Broken Trust

There is no doubt that Eve was guilty of letting her misplaced passions lead her to sin. On the other hand, Adam's lack of trust in God does not make him any less guilty. As the husband and custodian of God's Word, it was his responsibility to keep the trust of God and to encourage his wife to keep trusting in Him.

An interesting twist to the story happened when the Lord came down to Eden. He asked Adam if he ate of the tree and Adam's response was, *"The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit of the tree, and I ate"* (Gen. 3:12). Adam committed the perfect crime. He got to eat the fruit and put the blame on his wife. Our boy was so flawed that he even had the gall to blame God Himself. Adam's excuse: "I am a victim of this woman you created and her wrong desires."

Adam and Eve's story is the very first time that trust was given and the "teacup" broken. If you've ever wondered why women don't trust men, wonder no more. It's a story as old as the Garden of Eden.

How to Turn the ONE LESSON INTO REALITY

Answer the following:

1. What did you **discover** from this chapter?

2. Which of these discoveries do you **desire** to see in your marriage? Why?

3. What **decisions** will you be making in order for these desires to become reality?

Discipline:

Draw or paint a picture of a twice-bitten fruit to remind yourself and your spouse of the consequences when we don't handle well what has been entrusted to us.

Prayer:

Chapter 5

The TRUE NORTH of Trust

A good way to tell if you're headed in the right direction is by using a compass. A compass guides you to your destination by veering you away from all the wrong paths and leading you only to the right one. In the journey of marriage, your compass would be trust. The starting point—the north of trust—is the truth.

Trust and truth are so intricately connected that they are one letter shy of each other. The more truth found in a relationship, the more trust there will be, and the stronger the relationship becomes. Hence, without truth, there can be no trust.

Like trust, truth is a matter of the heart. Unfortunately, our hearts have a penchant for deception. The Bible tells us that *"The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure"* (Jer. 17:9 NIV).

The Hard Truth

Jesus once said that the truth sets us free (Jn. 8:32). The story of Adam and Eve tells us that Eden was once a place of freedom for both of them while they walked in the truth of God's Word. But when they started to believe the lies about God, they broke away from the relationship and became enslaved to sin.

What is sad about this story is that Adam and Eve forgot the one thing that could have restored their relationship with God: the truth. When God asked Adam the truth, his response was to blame the woman and God. So then God turned to Eve to get to the bottom of it: *"Then the Lord God said to the woman, 'What is this that you have done?' The woman said, 'The serpent deceived me, and I ate'"* (Gen. 3:13).

This was Eve's version of the truth. At first glance, Eve's response looks like the truth. It is with no doubt that the snake deceived her. But here lies the problem with arriving at the truth: it is not as easy to find as we think it is.

The truth, the absolute truth, was that Eve's misplaced desires caused her to sin. This could not be found in her words, but in the depths of her heart: *"So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate . . ."* (Gen. 3:6).

In the same way, absolute truth is never found in the facades we see. Rather, it is revealed in the innermost thoughts of a person. As Antoine de Saint Exupery said, "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye."

The Cover-Up

Adam and Eve's attempt at denying the truth was to cover up their nakedness. Like our forefathers, we have become so adept in showing who we would rather be than revealing who we really are. We choose to believe in airbrushed images more than the reality behind them.

This "covering-up" business that works so well in the media can never work in a marriage. Interfacing with our spouses 24/7 makes us experience the good, the bad, and the ugly—the whole truth and nothing but. There is no faking life here.

The wonderful thing about marriage is that in it can two people be both naked and unashamed: to be known for who we really are, to be loved and accepted despite our imperfections. Given all this, how can we walk in the truth in our marriage? Here are three simple steps:

1. Avoid Synthetics

Synthetics are substances that mimic the real thing. The most common synthetic material is plastic. When I was a teenager, we called things that didn't represent the truth, "plastic."

From ceramic plates to stainless steel utensils, almost anything nowadays can be replicated and made into “plastic.” And while that’s not a bad thing, “plastic” counterparts end up being treated as disposable because they are not as valuable as the real thing.

Marriages aren’t synthetic; they are the real thing. They have value because they form the foundation of families. Because of this, they cannot be treated as disposable relationships. If we want a lasting relationship, we must settle for nothing less than the truth in our marriages. We must always strive for the real thing.

2. No Other Versions

The truth is not what you make of it. One plus one equals two; any other answer is simply not true. Truth does not have many versions. There is just the truth and the lie. Adam and Eve chose to believe their version of the truth rather than face the reality of their deception.

A good verse to remember is this: *“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us”* (1 Jn. 1:8). No matter how you spin it, there is only one absolute truth. Train your heart to seek for this absolute truth, not the synthetic or your best version of it.

3. Keep Things Simple

Jesus said, *“Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil”* (Mt. 5:37). Another way of saying this would be to keep things simple.

Finding the truth is not very complicated. It’s calling a spade a spade, or even simply, letting your “yes” mean yes and your “no,” no. Not so complicated now, is it?

In the same way that a compass guides us on the journey to our destination, trust guides a marriage to reach its true destiny. Trust, like a compass, operates on one premise: truth. And it is only in striving for the truth daily that we find our way home and into our spouse's loving arms.

How to Turn the ONE LESSON INTO REALITY

Answer the following:

1. What did you **discover** from this chapter?

2. Which of these discoveries do you **desire** to see in your marriage? Why?

3. What **decisions** will you be making in order for these desires to become reality?

Discipline:

1. Reflect further:

- How much truth do you bring into your marriage?
- Does your spouse have access to your most unguarded thoughts?
- How much of the truth about you does your spouse see and know?
- What can you do to foster trust in your marriage?

2. Holding in your hands a picture of a compass or an actual one, commit with your spouse to constantly navigate your marriage to its true destiny by fueling trust with truth. Display this compass or picture in a prominent place to remind yourselves of the commitment you made together.

Prayer:

Chapter 6

TRUTH SAVES the Day

In the last chapter, I wrote about how truth is the starting point of trust in a marriage. On the same note, it is impossible to hide something in a marriage because marriage makes two people become one flesh.

One of the things under this category (which I'm sure other married couples will agree with) would be bad breath. When you are with the same person everyday and wake up beside them every morning, you will find yourself experiencing a real "close-up moment" that is not as exciting and romantic as the ones we see on television.

Strange as this may sound, sometimes even something as mundane as bad breath can teach us a lesson or two about relationships.

The Story of Bad Breath

Back in the early 1900s, bad breath was just what it was—bad breath. Lambert Pharmacal was the lone company that offered a solution to bad breath, and that product was Listerine. At the onset, Listerine generated a mere \$700,000 in revenue annually. Genius struck in the 1920s when Listerine started to advertise bad breath by using the term's medical counterpart, halitosis, and by targeting couples who were constantly close to one another. This halitosis slant on bad breath worked: Lambert Pharmacal's revenue skyrocketed to \$8 million the year the campaign was released.

Saving Marriages

While Listerine did help in making couples' conversations more pleasant, the point is not how Listerine saved marriages, but how the truth saved Listerine. As Listerine grew more popular,

consumer manufacturing giant Procter and Gamble saw the opportunity to make a competing product and give Lambert Pharmacal a run for their money. That's when they introduced Scope, the mouthwash to compete against Listerine.

Scope had a fresher-looking green color as opposed to Listerine's urine-like yellow. It also came in a more attractive bottle. More importantly, it had a great mint flavor compared to Listerine's bitter medicinal taste. Overnight, Scope took the lead; it threatened Lambert's flagship product and, consequently, the company's existence.

How the Truth Saved the Day

Instead of contesting Scope's advantages over Listerine, Lambert Pharmacal did the unthinkable. They didn't just admit their weakness, they *advertised* it: "The taste that you hate twice a day." In doing so, they reminded people why they needed a mouthwash in the first place—to treat halitosis.

It worked; people switched back to Listerine because they thought that it did a better job of killing germs than its better-tasting counterpart. In the end, it was Lambert's honesty that brought back the product's credibility and saved the company.

Here are two lessons on truth that we can learn from Listerine:

1. Embrace your strengths—and weaknesses. Then your spouse will, too.

People intuitively know there is no such thing as a perfect product or person. So when caught in a place where our imperfect selves are exposed, our response should be honesty and the truth, and not denial or cover-up.

We all have good things to offer, as well as not-so-good things. But this is precisely the reason why we all need relationships—so that we can be a positive addition to others as they are to us.

In order to build relationships, we need to be aware of the truth about ourselves and be open to admitting them to others when necessary.

2. A simple embrace won't cut it; improving will.

Now that we've embraced the truth about ourselves, make the necessary changes. It's not enough that we admit our shortcomings; we need to find ways to change for the better in order to keep our relationships. Let me say that again: *to keep our relationships*. The reason why we have to make the necessary (positive) changes right now is so that we can enjoy its long-term benefits in the future.

Listerine realized that while they had a good product, it could stand some improvement. In time, they developed a line of products that still delivered the same germ-fighting capability without the bad taste and the urine color. Listerine today comes in a variety of exciting colors and fresh-tasting flavors. They even made their bottles more beautiful.

Truth and Lasting Results

A marriage joins two people as one. This means that *everything* about your spouse—the beautiful and the ugly, the inside and out—is now a part of you and vice versa. It is because of this that spouses end up knowing their partner so well.

Married people simply can't hide from the truth. It is as present in their lives as their spouse is. But the good thing about truth is that it gives us a chance to stop, reflect, and often repent of our own shortcomings. And if our repentance is true, it will spark in us a positive change that will deliver lasting external results.

Hurtful as it may be at times, we need a dose of the truth daily because it gives us the opportunity to alter our course and eventually head in the right direction—with our spouse right beside us.

How to Turn the ONE LESSON INTO REALITY

Answer the following:

1. What did you **discover** from this chapter?

2. Which of these discoveries do you **desire** to see in your marriage? Why?

3. What **decisions** will you be making in order for these desires to become reality?

Discipline:

1. Think further:

- What is one truth about yourself that you need to embrace?
How can you improve it?
- Marriage joins two people as one. This means that everything about your spouse is now a part of you and vice-versa. What is one truth that you need to embrace about your spouse?
- What does embracing the truth about ourselves and our spouses bring to a marriage?
- Celebrate each other as a whole person. Thank God for your spouse, “warts and all.”

2. Plan a change project. Tell your spouse about a weakness you have and enlist your spouse’s help to change. The next time you have a conflict, own up to the truth.

3. Keep a small bottle of mouthwash on display to remind yourself and your spouse of how truth saves the day.

Prayer:

Chapter 7

How to Trust in TROUBLED WATERS

Her name was Florence Chadwick and she was a talented swimmer. She began swimming when she was very young, knowing even then her passion for ocean swims.

At the age of 10, she became the youngest person to swim across the mouth of San Diego bay. She then turned to competing (and winning) in several rough water competitions and ocean relays in the decades that followed.

At 31, she became the first woman to swim the 21-mile English Channel, setting a world record. Three years later, she set her heart to swimming the 26-mile route between Catalina Island and the California coastline.

The 26-mile swim turned out to be her most memorable one yet; it became the story she was often remembered for. Several small boats trailed her the whole time just in case anything dangerous happened to her. On she swam, the hours pushing forward with every stroke that she completed.

Overcoming the Fog of Doubt

She was swimming for 15 hours when a thick fog had settled on the water and blocked her view of the coastline. She started to doubt herself and told her mother (who was in one of the boats) that she didn't think she could make it. Nevertheless, she kept swimming.

After an hour, she gave up and asked to be pulled out of the water. As she neared the coastline, it dawned on her that she only had a mile to go before she reached her destination.

More determined than ever, she swam the same route two months after. The same thick fog greeted her on the water but this time, she swam on until she finally reached the Catalina coastline.

When asked how she succeeded, she said it was the mental image of the coastline on the other side that kept her swimming the whole time. She went on to swimming the same route twice more in life.

Troubled Waters

Florence was an exceptional swimmer who had several championship titles under her belt. Despite this, she still experienced challenges that made her doubt herself.

The same goes for marriage. We have the compass. We know which way to go. But no matter how long we have traveled on this journey, or how well we have gotten to know our spouses, nothing can ever prepare us for life's unexpected and unwanted twists. The way forward becomes simply too dark and foggy to trust.

So what do you need when you find yourself directionless in the middle of the dark expanse of the sea? Or when you find something unknown standing in your way as you move forward in life?

You need a clear image of your destination to hold on to as you steer yourself towards it. This image, in the figurative sense, will be the one to light the way.

Firm, Immovable Light

Like Florence, we too can overcome even the most troubled waters. And I'm not talking about relying on sheer self-determination here; I'm talking about relying in God's Word.

God, the Author of marriage, has given us His Word to guide us on our journey. The Word of God is described as *“a lamp to my feet and a light to my path”* (Ps. 119:105). This, coupled with the fact that it is founded on Jesus Christ Himself, makes God’s Word the best source of truth there is, and the only light that can guide us when all else fails. Hence, the longer and deeper we find ourselves in our journey, the more we need to train ourselves to look to God’s Word for guidance.

Lasting trust is built on truth, the greatest of which is found in God’s steadfast and immovable Word. Through the years, Marie and I have looked to the reliability of God’s Word to move us forward, because whether in the calmest or most troubled of waters, nothing is more trustworthy.

How to Turn the ONE LESSON INTO REALITY

Answer the following:

1. What did you **discover** from this chapter?

2. Which of these discoveries do you **desire** to see in your marriage? Why?

3. What **decisions** will you be making in order for these desires to become reality?

Discipline:

1. Think further: How well would you say your marriage is anchored to the Word of God? What will you do to improve this situation?

2. As a couple, begin this week to study God's Word together, especially if you are going through troubled waters. Do it weekly for starters, then daily when it becomes a habit. What does the passage you're studying say about your current situation?

Prayer:

Chapter 8

Love Is NOT a Verb

As I mentioned previously, love is the motivation of a marriage. It is what drives us to serve our spouses instead of the other way around in our daily journey of becoming other-centered with our spouses. I don't know about you, but this sounds to me like a pretty tall order to follow. And like all things complicated, the best way to learn something is to first understand what it is.

Love—*luv, amore, L-O-V-E, <3*

Love is arguably the most spoken, sung, and written about topic in the world. Everyone just has something to say about it. Hollywood's take on love would either be expressed through a song about heartbreak or a movie dripping with cheese. A medical take on love would talk about endorphins being released in one's neurons. Sociologists see love as a romantic and marital phenomenon. There are just so many different takes on love by so many of these "experts," it is no wonder the rest of us are so confused about love!

Love Is Not / Love Is

The truth of the matter is that we're not supposed to try and define love. Try as we might, we will never succeed. To define something is to encase it in a box, and you can't do this with love.

Love is beyond human comprehension, wit or experience, beyond a gut instinct, a fleeting emotion, or a lifetime decision. Because love is not a *what* but rather a *who*. God is love (1 Jn. 4:7).

God himself is love. He didn't need to create man to experience love; He could already experience love within Himself. Theologians could only conclude that God created man out of love, out of Himself. This brings me to the point that what one needs in order to love is not man, but Love Himself.

What Love Becomes

A friend once narrated to me a memorable incident of hers that took place over a year ago. She sat in a small group and the leader asked the group to define what patience was. The group responded with several answers, such as:

“Accepting someone else for who they are and loving them no matter what”

“Seeing the beauty in another person and from this, dealing with them”

My friend’s favorite answer (and the one she remembers to this day) was the one that silenced all other answers. It was this: “Patience is the first definition of love” (1 Cor. 13:4).

Patience is not one of my strongest factors. I am, in fact, a rather impatient man. But I have learned that without patience, love cannot be had, if only because it is the starting point of love —“Love is patient.”

Hard Fruit to Grow

The Bible says that patience is a fruit of the Spirit. Just like a fruit that takes time to grow and requires “patience,” patience takes time to become what it should be. For instance, while I may have learned to be patient with my wife when she is late for an engagement, I realize that I’m still impatient with her when it comes to other things.

But through the years, I have learned and am continually learning patience through my daily interaction with God. I have seen how patient He has been with my shortcomings and long-time bad habits. Patiently, He has led me to overcome and arrive at the place of transformation.

His constant patience has motivated me, if not given me, the impetus to be more patient with Marie. True, it has taken years, but through it all, I have learned to be more patient. After all, to learn patience means taking time.

How to Turn the ONE LESSON INTO REALITY

Answer the following:

1. What did you **discover** from this chapter?

2. Which of these discoveries do you **desire** to see in your marriage? Why?

3. What **decisions** will you be making in order for these desires to become reality?

Discipline:

Think further:

1. On a scale from 1 to 10, 10 being the most patient and 1 being the least, how would you rate your patience with your spouse?
Encircle your answer.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Why did you give this rating?

What makes you impatient with your spouse?

2. Using the same rating scale, how would you rate how patient you think God has been with you?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Why did you give this rating?

Why has God had to extend longsuffering to you for?

3. How does knowing about God's patience with you affect how patient you can be with our spouse?

Prayer:

Chapter 9

Love and a WARM HEART

As a pastor, I have often heard wives question the idea of submitting to their husbands as to the Lord. And after they have said their piece, I remind them that the verse actually says that wives should submit to their husbands in “everything” (Eph. 5:24).

Then, as if this weren’t enough, some of them go ballistic with questions like, “What if your husband has proven to be faulty in decision-making?” and a host of other questions.

Why Wives Can’t Complain

It is at this point that I remind these women that while submitting to a limited, imperfect man is often not an easy thing, they really have nothing to complain about. Why? Because, while the Lord commands wives to submit to their husbands in everything, husbands are commanded to love their wives as Christ loved the Church (Eph. 5:25).

I’ll say it again: Husbands, the standard of your love for your wife is Christ’s passionate, devoted, and unwavering love for the Church.

I must admit at the number of times I have felt incapable and burdened at the thought that I cannot love my wife in the same way Christ loves me. That commandment seems impossible to follow than that of my wife submitting to me in everything.

And for that, wives, you can’t complain.

A Husband’s Mission

And it does not stop there. Not only are husbands supposed to love their wives as Christ does, the Bible also commands husbands to love their wives as their own bodies, to love her as he loves himself (Eph. 5:28). This is where the Bible and marriage come full circle, as Paul quotes Genesis, saying, “A man shall leave his

father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh” 9Eph. 5:31; Gen. 2:24). This means that when my wife is hungry, I feel her hunger. When she is in pain, I feel her pain. When she is happy, I am happy and so on. Wow, that’s hard if only because it can only be achieved supernaturally!

So, what husbands face is a difficult quest that can only be completed through supernatural means. Now this is what you call mission impossible.

Grappling, struggling, and Obeying

My wife often complained that I was insensitive and not very good at empathizing. So every time I was with her, I grappled with the question, “How, in this moment, would I love Marie just as Christ loved His Church and gave Himself up for her?”

But over the years, I learned that there’s something about faith and trusting in the Word of God that makes loving your spouse not as difficult or burdensome. Whether you are a wife who’s questioning the logic of submitting to your husband, or a husband who’s struggling to learn to empathize with your wife, this truth applies to everyone. The Word of God works—and always works—when we fully trust, believe and obey it.

It was only when I got serious about obeying God in this area of my life and believed that His Word was reliable and true that I eventually began to empathize with Marie.

Warm Heart

Amazingly, I started to enjoy empathizing with Marie. It made the Bible come alive, and I got to experience the reality of two people miraculously becoming one.

Then it happened. At first I thought it was a fluke until it kept happening again and again. Initially it happened when I had ben travelling on the road for a while. Then it transitioned to even the simplest of encounters; like whenever Marie would enter a room.

It wasn't everyday. It did not happen often, even. But every time it did, the sensation was unforgettable.

I would, over and over again, feel that same warm sensation right smack at the center of my chest. And all was well.

I've heard other husbands talk about similar experiences. They were not all the same, but they all experienced being one in flesh with their wives as they obeyed the Word of God and received its promise.

How to Turn the ONE LESSON INTO REALITY

Answer the following:

1. What did you **discover** from this chapter?

2. Which of these discoveries do you **desire** to see in your marriage? Why?

3. What **decisions** will you be making in order for these desires to become reality?

Discipline:

Think further:

Husbands, what does it mean for you to love your wife as you love yourself? If you were to put that into action, what would that look like? How would things change for you? Describe it.

Wives, if you were to submit to our husband the way the Church submits to Christ, what would that look like? Describe it.

Begin to act on this biblical admonition from Ephesians 5:22-29 today.

Prayer:

Chapter 10

Why We Keep Watching LOVE STORIES

Love stories have become a staple among movie genres. They never fail to sell, and it is probably because we are all, at some level, lovers on the inside.

Whether it is little children enamored by *Beauty and the Beast*, persecuted lovers who carry the torch of classics like *Dr Zhivago* and *Romeo and Juliet*, or city dwellers captivated by the online love affair of *Sleepless in Seattle*, we have all become easy prey to Hollywood's purveyors of love stories.

A Common Theme

What's funny about the whole thing is that the theme doesn't change and the message is the same: Boy meets girl. Girl is from rich part of town while the boy has a blue-collared background. But the chemistry is too much to handle, and they just can't live without each other. For the *Twilight* couple Edward and Bella, the stakes are even higher as vampire and human love each other, and the cost of their relationship is a matter of life and death.

In any case, whether it's *Twilight* or *The Notebook*, these movies are all about the great price that the pair had to pay to keep the valuable relationship.

Wired for Love

All of us fall for this theme because of the way God designed us. He created us wired on the inside with a longing to love and to be loved. We all want to be loved at this level: to have someone with so much to lose and yet are willing to trash all the comforts, privileges, fame, and fortune just to be with us.

Our godly design makes us so attracted to love. This is the reason why we are so enticed by love stories. And there is no other story that paints a more beautiful picture of love than the Gospel, which, at the heart of it, is a love story where God—the most special and important Person in the universe—loved us so much that He willingly let go of all the comfort and security of heaven to come down to earth and be with us.

How This Affects Us

When we get this kind of love, our marriage takes on a very different meaning. We realize that we can love our spouses in this crazy way because of our godly design and, more importantly, since God first showed us how.

But unlike a 90-minute movie, God's love for us is eternal. It began even while we were being formed in our mother's womb and will outlast anything in all creation. And with the love we receive from God, we are now able to give to our spouses in turn.

It is only as we understand this kind of love will we be able to love one another like the characters in the movies we watch, not for a brief moment in time, but for all the days of our lives.

How to Turn the ONE LESSON INTO REALITY

Answer the following:

1. What did you **discover** from this chapter?

2. Which of these discoveries do you **desire** to see in your marriage? Why?

3. What **decisions** will you be making in order for these desires to become reality?

Discipline:

1. Think further: How would the way you love change if you remember the kind of love you received from God?

2. Do something this week for your spouse that feels more in keeping with the love you received from God.

3. Watch a movie with your spouse this week and see how the element of sacrifice is demonstrated there.

Prayer:

Chapter 11

The LOVE FRUIT

Even after many years of being married, I have often wondered to myself why I am not exactly the most loving of spouses. First Corinthians 13 says that *“love is patient, love is kind; it does not envy, boast and is not rude,”* etcetera, yet I keep finding myself unable to measure up. What is even more frustrating is that I am supposed to be a Christian, and a pastor at that.

Not a Fruit but the Fruit

It was not until I got a revelation from the Bible that my views changed and my self-frustration lessened. Before this revelation, there was no telling how many times I have read the verse in Galatians 5 about love being the fruit of the Spirit. But on that day, the word “the” stood out and the verse took on a new meaning.

According to the Apostle Paul, love is not just a fruit of the Spirit, but it is *the* fruit of the Spirit. This is clarified by an earlier verse that lists down what the acts of the sinful nature are.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control . . .
(Gal. 5:22-23).

Now, Paul wanted his readers to notice. You can tell by the way he used several interesting word choices here. We know that Paul lists down the acts of the sinful nature and the fruit of the Spirit. But why did he write the *“fruit of the Spirit is . . .”* in parallel to the phrase, *“the acts of the sinful nature are . . .”*? Grammatically speaking, it did not make sense. The only sensible way to understand this is that Paul wanted to point out something here that lay hidden beneath the words.

The Fruit's Qualities

Paul's word choice was direct, deliberate, and significant. His point was to say that there are many acts of the sinful nature but only one fruit of the Spirit. So if there is only one fruit of the Spirit, why list down other things such as joy, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control?

I am convinced that each item on this list is a characteristic of love. This truth was born two books earlier in 1Corinthians 13, the most popular chapter on love. Let's look at the parallel:

Galatians 5:22-23	1Corinthians 13:4-7
Love	Love
Joy	Rejoices the Truth
Peace	Not self-seeking, not easily angered, keeps no record of wrongs
Patience	Patient
Kindness	Kind
Goodness	Does not delight in evil
Faithfulness	Always protects, trusts, hopes, and perseveres
Gentleness	Not rude
Self control	Does not envy, boast, is not proud

Connected to the Vine

The revelation of love being the fruit of the Spirit comes full circle as it was Jesus Himself who was already hinting on this in John 15:5 (NIV) when He said, *“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit . . .”*

Simply put, if we remain in relationship with the Lord, then we will bear much fruit. So what were we to remain in that would produce this fruit? Jesus specifies this for us four verses later when He said, *“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love”* (Jn. 15:9).

Love is a fruit. It takes time to grow. Like an orange connected to a branch, it progressively gains more color, grows more flavorful, tastes more refreshing, and produces quality seeds that can be later reproduced.

The next chapter shows how this revelation applies to our marriages.

How to Turn the ONE LESSON INTO REALITY

Answer the following:

1. What did you **discover** from this chapter?

2. Which of these discoveries do you **desire** to see in your marriage? Why?

3. What **decisions** will you be making in order for these desires to become reality?

Discipline:

Think further:

If love is the fruit of the Spirit, and fruit-bearing requires abiding in Christ, how could you grow in your love for your spouse?

How can you and your spouse abide in Christ today?

Prayer:

Chapter 12

LOVE STRAINED

In the previous chapter, I wrote that there was but one fruit of the Spirit (love) and from it sprung several specific characteristics. Here is a recap of those characteristics (Gal. 5:22-23): “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control . . .”

I also wrote about the frustrations I’ve had with myself in not being as loving a husband as I should be. Thankfully, it is this particular revelation on the fruit of the Spirit that assuaged my frustration and, more importantly, gave me the strategy to love Marie.

Killing the Frustration

Love is a fruit. And like any other fruit, it needs to be connected to the vine (or branch) in order to grow and mature into a fully ripened one. Similarly, we need to remain connected to the Lord in order to experience the way He loves and become more like Him. This is how our relationship with God progressively shapes and matures the way we love others.

From this, the first thing I did was to adjust the expectations I had set for myself and for Marie. I learned to put my trust in the fact that as I continue to grow in my relationship with God, it will be God (and not me) who will make my love grow and improve over time. Yes, I know that I will still sometimes fail in some areas but it will also be God’s love that will work within me, correcting the mistakes I make along the way.

The Strainer of Love

Meanwhile, as God continues to progressively transform me, I live my life with love using what I have grown to call the “strainer of love.” What I do here is that I picture love as an orange being squeezed into a glass. And in order to get the best results, I have to use a strainer.

Here's how it works: Whenever I find myself in a "tussle" of sorts with Marie, I use my love strainer to prevent the wrong things from going into her glass. I ask myself. "Will the words I am about to say make me a loving person? Do they communicate patience and kindness? Am I creating an atmosphere of peace? Am I being gentle?" etcetera.

My love strainer allows me to keep the wrong things out and the loving things in. so while I do not yet have the mature fruit of love, I am able to give a quality of love that is, in some measure, better by using my love strainer.

Imagine the Day

As we keep ourselves connected to Christ, the fruit of love continues to mature in us. We become more loving, patient, kind, joyful, peaceful, good, gentle, faithful, and self-controlled.

But while we find ourselves still in the process of growing a love like His, we can use this "love strainer" to give our spouses the best fruit of love in our lives.

After all, this is how God intended our marriages to be.

Once in a while, I like to imagine the day when I am able to love my wife in the perfect manner of the Spirit. I'm not there yet but, as I continue to hold onto God, I am progressively getting closer. And if I, with all my faults and imperfections, can get to that place one day through God's love, so can you.

How to Turn the ONE LESSON INTO REALITY

Answer the following:

1. What did you **discover** from this chapter?

2. Which of these discoveries do you **desire** to see in your marriage? Why?

3. What **decisions** will you be making in order for these desires to become reality?

Discipline:

1. Put every decision and action you make today in relation to your spouse through your love strainer. Ask the questions I asked earlier using Galatians 5:22-23 as your “love strainer.” For example:

- Will the words I am about to say make me a loving person?
- Do they communicate patience and kindness?
- Am I creating an atmosphere of peace? Am I being gentle? Etc.

(See the rest of Galatians 5:22-23.)

At the end of the day, log how things were made different as a result. What was your spouse’s response? How did you feel afterward?

How would you describe the love fruit resulting from going through the love strainer?

2. Draw or display a strainer that would remind you to allow your thoughts, actions, and decisions in relation to your spouse to go through the love strainer first.

Prayer:

Chapter 13

How to KILL Your MARRIAGE

There is a saying that goes, “Not forgiving is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die.” This is true for all relationships, most especially marriage. Nothing kills a marriage faster than an unforgiving spouse.

Forgiveness is one of the main tenets of the Gospel. Can you imagine what life would be like if we were never forgiven? Or can you imagine a world that does not understand forgiveness?

The best place to learn forgiveness is in our marriages. Why? Because the proximity between spouses is so close that the probability of offending each other is greatly multiplied in marriage.

The Consequences

Unforgiveness in a relationship is catastrophic and could only lead to dire consequences. The primary consequence of being unforgiven is to live in guilt, fear, and accusation—and that’s never healthy in a marriage. But the more serious consequence lies in the heart of the person who has not forgiven.

The Bible says, the “. . . *‘root of bitterness’ springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled*” (Heb. 12:15). Bitterness fills the day of an unforgiving person. Unforgiveness is like tying yourself to the person/s you have not yet forgiven and allowing every activity they do (whether positive or negative) to affect you. Hence, we are never released and rested until we forgive.

An appropriate picture of unforgiveness, as mentioned earlier, likens it to drinking poison while expecting the other person to die; when in reality we are the ones being progressively killed. Unforgiveness is tiring, burdensome, and even deadly.

The Reset Button

Sometimes marriage is like a computer that has hung from several internal malfunctions. You need a reset button in order to reboot and restore it back to normal. Forgiveness is a marriage's reset button. It is God's provision for restoring relationships.

As we have seen in the earlier chapters of this book, trust is the foundation of all relationships. Without it, our relationships will not have a leg to stand on. However, no matter how truthful or reliable we try to be, the fact remains that we cannot and will never be 100% trustworthy on our own. We are still human after all. And while that's no excuse, we must strive to be worthy of trust. This where forgiveness comes in.

Forgiveness is the only thing that can reset our relationships when they fail. It cleans a slate that has been tainted with failure and allows us to move on, re-engage, and grow in our relationship.

Humbling and Liberating

Forgiveness, especially among spouses, is both a humbling and liberating experience. The one who has been forgiven requires humility to acknowledge their wrongs and, in turn, they receive freedom from their past mistakes. On the other hand, the one who forgives should be humble enough to accept that they, too, will one day be at the receiving end of forgiveness. They also become liberated from all possible bitterness and resentment towards their spouse.

Humility and freedom are essential in sustaining the life of a marriage. Forgiveness is the key to achieving both.

How to Turn the ONE LESSON INTO REALITY

Answer the following:

1. What did you **discover** from this chapter?

2. Which of these discoveries do you **desire** to see in your marriage? Why?

3. What **decisions** will you be making in order for these desires to become reality?

Discipline:

Think further:

Are you carrying unforgiveness in your heart? Is there something you need to forgive your spouse or yourself for? How might bitterness be taking root in your heart today?

Prayer:

Chapter 14

How to SAVE Your MARRIAGE

There's a piece of reality which most people try to romanticize in order to veer away from: the reality that there is no such thing as a perfect person, let alone a perfect partner. Given that reality, what marriage actually does is to join two imperfect individuals to become one through the perfect love of Jesus Christ.

We flawed and foolish beings cannot love perfectly. Only Jesus can. This is why no matter what we do, we cannot escape the occasional bumps we will face in our marriages. But what we can do in these situations is to forgive and ask for forgiveness. Forgiveness saves marriages.

So, why forgive? The urgency of forgiveness is seen in God's desire to engage Adam and Eve after they sinned. God, who saw Adam and Eve sin against Him, immediately made His way to the Garden to engage them and get them to come to the place of admitting their sin.

Nothing could be more treacherous than to turn away from the God who gave you life—the God who gave you nothing but the best of what He had. And Adam and Eve did just that: they stabbed Him in the heart by siding with His enemy, the serpent.

Learning to Forgive

The best way to learn how to forgive is to first experience being forgiven. We cannot do something if we don't even know what it is. It is when we receive forgiveness that we understand what it looks like.

Going back to "The Fall" story, it was God's immediate desire to show Adam and Eve what forgiveness looks like. But in order to be forgiven, they needed to acknowledge the offense and infraction they committed against God. If one does not own up to his or her errors, then there is nothing to forgive. This is why humility is so vital.

It is only when we put ourselves in a vulnerable position of humility by acknowledging our faults and shortcomings that we allow others to forgive us. This also teaches us firsthand what forgiveness looks and feels like.

Creating the Atmosphere

To live in a home of forgiveness, one must create the atmosphere that promotes and espouses it. When we as a couple learn to live humbly by acknowledging our neglect, asking for forgiveness, and freely forgiving one another, we create an atmosphere of forgiveness. The effect of this is that even our children will learn to forgive us and their siblings freely.

Let's look at what happens when we do the opposite: when Adam and Eve insisted on pride by refusing to acknowledge their sin, they modeled a life of pride instead of humility, a life of cover-up instead of transparency.

The result of their actions was seen years later when their children came before the Lord. Abel gave an acceptable offering while Cain gave what God had previously cursed. But instead of humbly acknowledging his deficiencies, Cain reacted by not wanting to own up to his failures. (Now where did he get his attitude from?) His non-admission was equivalent to his refusal to be forgiven. What's there to forgive if you don't acknowledge any wrongdoing?

The Door to Death

God was urgently teaching the first couple what forgiveness looked like so that their family would know, understand, and live in an atmosphere of forgiveness. Unfortunately, their resistance to God's way resulted in a son who did not know how to ask for forgiveness.

When forgiveness is taken away from the equation of our relationships, we open the door that leads to death. Cain who never knew what forgiveness was, had no release from his guilt and shame and no way of rebooting his soul. That's why he killed his own brother.

The Harsh Reality

People often say that God is harsh, not realizing that the first killing in the Bible was not done by Him but by man. Not being able to forgive others is the same as killing them in your mind. It's murder because what you are actually doing is writing them off as insignificant and killing all possibilities of reentering into a relationship with that person.

And as I have said previously, this happens quite often between us and our spouses if only because they are who we interface with regularly.

It is impossible to not make mistakes in our relationships, and just as impossible to fix them without forgiveness coming from both sides of the equation. So, ask forgiveness because we are imperfect, and forgive just as we have once been forgiven.

How to Turn the ONE LESSON INTO REALITY

Answer the following:

1. What did you **discover** from this chapter?

2. Which of these discoveries do you **desire** to see in your marriage? Why?

3. What **decisions** will you be making in order for these desires to become reality?

Discipline:

Think further:

1. Are you creating an atmosphere of humility and forgiveness in your marriage, or an atmosphere of pride and cover-up? What is one thing you can change to foster an atmosphere of humility and forgiveness in your marriage?

2. Do you need a “reboot for your soul”? God made it possible when Jesus paid for your sins on the cross with His life. So that by putting your trust in Him, in what He has done to save you, you can get a brand new start of forgiveness—a clean slate under new management—and turn over the reins of your life to Him. That is the grace of God. You receive what you do not deserve. And mercy: you do not get what you deserve. It is that brings you new, eternal life. All you need to do is ask Him in faith.

3. Now, does your marriage need new life, too? Then just as you had been forgiven, forgive or ask for it, and start anew.

Prayer:

Chapter 15

UNCAGED FREEDOM

Freedom is rooted in love. Hence, the freedoms we enjoy are rooted in love.

Here are two examples: A father who loves his wife and children would want to provide for them. So the free food, clothing, and shelter that his family enjoys are products and manifestations of his love for them. In the same way, the reason why we get to enjoy the liberties bestowed on us as citizens of our nation is because of the love of those who served to fight and protect those liberties in the first place. I am sure you can think of other examples.

Some may argue that they get free things from companies, such as internet, coffee, candies, etcetera. But the reality is that as customers and employees, they give back to the company in terms of the business, time, and effort they put in exchange for the free products. There is nothing free about this situation, nor is there any love found here.

Things that are truly free come without any returns or exchanges. Now, some things may look like they are free but the truth is that they are not. They are made to look free to lure us into doing something for the people and institutions that offer them.

Setting Your Spouse Free

While there are many expressions of freedom that spouses provide for each other, nothing quite cuts it as forgiveness. It is the single act that always sets us free.

Unforgiving spouses imprison each other by confining the other in guilt and condemnation, keeping them from being free to love each other back. Both spouses then are deprived of the very freedom that love espouses.

On the other hand, when we as a couple learn to forgive each other on a regular basis, we consistently and persistently set each other free. Forgiveness, after all, is an expression of love.

The Other Side of the Story

While it's true that we should willingly forgive our spouse, there is another side to the story: the act of asking for forgiveness.

This is just as important as forgiving our spouses because in doing so we admit that we have wronged our spouses. I have found that the times I simply ask for forgiveness from Marie allowed her to forgive me more easily than the times I became defensive, proud, aloof or insensitive of my infractions.

I am reminded of the story of Adam and Eve. God, in wanting to restore His relationship with Adam and Eve, engaged them in the Garden after they sinned against Him. While His desire and intent was to forgive them, their refusal to admit and own up to their sin left God with nothing to forgive.

Open Door, Still Locked

Often, we think of forgiveness as a get-out-of-jail pass, not realizing that forgiveness is not about getting out of prison but about being free to return to the person who loves us.

The image that comes to mind when I think about it is that of a bird that chooses to remain in its cage even after the door has been opened for it to fly out. This is what it means to be forgiven by God: He has already opened the prison doors for us by forgiving us. But if we refuse to admit our wrongdoings, we remain stuck in a prison filled with bitterness, resentment, anger, guilt, and condemnation. What is worse is if we escape from our prison but kill the relationship in the process by becoming distant to the person afterward.

Always Be Quick

Let me put this all together. Always be quick to forgive, for in doing so, you express love by setting your spouse free. Conversely, always be quick to admit your errors, thereby creating an opportunity for your spouse to forgive you. This way you don't just open the door and save the relationship, you also keep each other free to fly closer to one another. This was the way Jesus set us free to get out of our prison and enjoy an eternal relationship with the Father.

How to Turn the ONE LESSON INTO REALITY

Answer the following:

1. What did you **discover** from this chapter?

2. Which of these discoveries do you **desire** to see in your marriage? Why?

3. What **decisions** will you be making in order for these desires to become reality?

Discipline:

1. Draw an open cage or display an actual one to remind yourself and your spouse to constantly set each other free by forgiving each other.

2. The next time you and your spouse have a conflict, be free to admit sin. Don't resent, be prideful or defensive. Be humble. What was the experience like? How did he/she respond? Were you able to fly freely back to him/her?

Prayer:

Chapter 16

No Ordinary PRISON

One of the questions I am often asked is, “How can I forgive my spouse who has offended me repeatedly?” That’s a fair question that can only be answered by no less than Jesus Himself.

In a conversation about forgiveness, here was Jesus’ response to a similar question:

Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times” (Mt. 18:21-22).

In other words, never stop forgiving. That’s how!

But That’s Unfair!

Well, life is, too, unfortunately. But as I have pointed out in previous chapters, when we learn to receive the Lord’s forgiveness for our sins, we will learn to give it to others in turn. Then over time, as we increasingly choose to forgive, our spiritual as well as our emotional muscles become stronger, and our ability to forgive becomes second nature to us.

Of course, it’s unfair. It wasn’t fair, too, when Jesus had to die for our sins despite the fact that He was not guilty of any. You see, every infraction is a debt, and every debt needs to be paid. Moreover, every payment has a cost. This means that each time you forgive someone, you are effectively paying for that person’s debt against you—and that’s a hard thing to do.

Unmerciful and Wicked

After Jesus was asked this question on forgiveness, He proceeded to tell a story about a servant who was deeply indebted to his master, the king (Mt. 18:23-35). Pleading his case before his master and asking for mercy, the king granted his plea.

Immediately after, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him so much less than what he owed his master and insisted that he pay him back immediately. Unable to pay, he had this servant thrown in prison. The king heard of the incident and had the servant brought before him. Here's what happened:

Then his master summoned him and said to him, "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt (Mt. 18:32-34).

To Jesus, not forgiving another person of his offenses against us is wickedness. More than that, it actually angers God so much that He makes us languish in the prison I described in the previous chapter. In another translation, this wicked servant was "tormented" in prison until he could pay back what he owed.

Tormented?

Yes, tormented. The fact is, unforgiveness is no ordinary prison; it is a prison of agony and torment for those who choose to put themselves there. Think about the people who have offended you whom you have not forgiven: there they are, nonchalantly enjoying life while you are tormented that they are doing so and are oblivious to your hurt feelings.

I find this often happening to me. Marie does something that offends me and I say, "I forgive you," though deep down inside, I still haven't. Then she goes around the house, smelling the flowers, savoring her meals, going "tra-la-la-la-la" while enjoying her day and there I am, tortured. Why is she having the time of her life and here I am in misery?

When we don't forgive, we are the ones who are in torment, and not the person we have not truly forgiven. The solution, as Jesus said, is to keep on forgiving. In the end, this will benefit your soul and your marriage.

But what about grave situations such as adultery, physical injury, illegalities, or threats to life and limb? Jesus' answer still stands: forgive up to seventy-seven times.

How to Turn the ONE LESSON INTO REALITY

Answer the following:

1. What did you **discover** from this chapter?

2. Which of these discoveries do you **desire** to see in your marriage? Why?

3. What **decisions** will you be making in order for these desires to become reality?

Discipline:

In Matthew 18:21-22, Jesus told Peter to forgive 77 times when the latter asked how often he must forgive a brother who keeps sinning against him. In other words, don't stop forgiving. To remind yourself to forgive your spouse continually, according to Jesus' prescription, write the number "77" on your birdcage drawing, or if you have an actual miniature birdcage, write the number on a piece of paper and tack it on the birdcage.

Prayer:

Chapter 17

The FINAL INGREDIENT

By now, I hope it has become clear that marriages stand on the three legs of trust, love, and forgiveness. There is however a fourth leg that I have found to be essential in order to make a marriage succeed. That final leg is **communication**.

After 32 years of being married, I realize that a big part of my marriage issues stems from not being able to communicate well with Marie. Communication is the process that brings us into communion so we can become a community.

Photosynthesis of the Soul

Communication is to us humans what photosynthesis is to plants. A plant placed inside a house will lean towards a window where it finds the sun. This is because it needs the sun's light to keep it alive. The sun provides life through a process known as photosynthesis.

Here's how it works: The sun gives off light that a plant stores as energy. It then uses the energy to convert carbon dioxide (CO₂) and water into oxygen. Oxygen is taken in by humans and in exchange, they exhale carbon dioxide that is absorbed by plants, and so continues the never-ending process.

In a similar manner, communication with each other is an exchange of words, thoughts, ideas, and actions that we process and convert in order to breathe life into our relationships. Just as a plant leans toward a sunlit window, so do husband and wife lean toward each other to have a meaningful exchange with one another.

Good Communication Leads to Communion

Communion is synonymous with affinity, togetherness, closeness, harmony, understanding, and connection. The result is genuine community. Communication is the vehicle that gets spouses from point A (having communion with one another) to point B (becoming a genuine community). This is why communication is so important. We find the first acts of communication in the book of Genesis when God communicated with Adam. He did this by speaking His Word to him.

The first part of the communication is **speaking**. Our words contain expressions that help us commune with one another. Words can also be written. For years, Marie and I have exchanged letters, cards, and these days even text messages, emails, and Instagram posts. This continual exchange enables us to nourish one another.

Do E-E-T

The second part of communication is **listening**. This consists of understanding, accepting, and agreeing with each other. Frankly, this was not my strong suit. But by being aware of its vital importance in communicating, I've learned how to listen.

Here are three key tips that have helped me:

1. All Eyes. Keeping an eye contact is one of the best ways to listen. It tells your spouse that you are interested and are engaged. To avoid staring, I move from looking into Marie's eyes to her mouth and then back to her eyes in a circular motion. This keeps me listening while telling her that I am actively engaged in the conversation.

2. All Ears. As I have confessed, listening is not one of my stronger suits. I had to learn. An added technique to using my eyes is to summarize Marie's statements in my mind and after two or three points, I try to distill the main idea she was trying to say, then summarize it into a sentence I repeat to her, saying, "Did you mean . . .?"

3. Bite your Tongue. If you have been a frequent visitor of my website, you know that I can be very opinionated. Imagine being married to me. In order to give Marie a chance to express herself, I have learned the fine art of biting my tongue (while keeping a smile on my face). I bite my tongue and remind myself that less is more.

We need to talk less to listen more.

How to Turn the ONE LESSON INTO REALITY

Answer the following:

1. What did you **discover** from this chapter?

2. Which of these discoveries do you **desire** to see in your marriage? Why?

3. What **decisions** will you be making in order for these desires to become reality?

Discipline:

1. Begin a 20-minute daily full-attention communication habit with your spouse where you talk about your thoughts and feelings about your day, insights from God’s Word and your walk with God, ideas, problems, and things you want to get off your chest. Take a walk, have coffee, make it a sacred time of communion between husband and wife.
2. Practice EET—focus all eyes, all ears, bite your tongue when your spouse speaks to you.

Prayer:

Chapter 18

PING PONG

Speaking and listening are both essential to communication, but depending on your strength, one could be easier than the other. However, most of my friends tell me that there are more people who have problems listening than those who don't like to express themselves.

In my case, speaking comes more naturally than listening. I rarely have a problem expressing my thoughts to Marie. But if I'm not careful, I could alienate her from the exchange if she realizes that I am not really concerned nor am I listening to her.

Listening involves a clear understanding of where the person is coming from, what she is trying to communicate, and, if possible, thinking about the reason why she is saying what she's saying.

An Essential

Robert Logan and Sherilyn Carlton in the book, *Coaching 101*, describe listening as "the essential cornerstone of every relationship. How do you help people think through their goals, opinions, [and] their feelings? By listening. People want to know they are being heard."

Oftentimes, what we call listening is not really listening. To be specific, your silence in a (conversation while the other is speaking) doesn't necessarily equate to listening to them. This is because we already know what we're going to say after they speak; we're merely paying them the courtesy of waiting for them to finish before we speak.

Playing Ping Pong

My wife Marie once gave me an illustration that helped me not just to see but also to understand the importance of listening. Here's what she said:

“Joey, you need to learn to play ping pong. Talking to people is like playing ping pong. You have to hit the ball and then let the other person hit the ball back to you. No one will want to play with you if you’re the only one hitting the ball. You can’t expect people to just keep picking up the balls that you hit.”

Her message hit home. Marie did not just give me a tip like “bite your tongue.” She raised the ante and made me see how I myself would not like to spend time picking up someone else’s balls. Communication is an exchange; and like ping pong, it becomes enjoyable only when each player is able to hit the ball back to the other.

Keeping in mind the advice of James 1:19, “. . . *let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger,*” one of the benefits of listening and curbing our words is that we don’t get angry as easily.

Listening is a lot like ping pong. We are sometimes gentle and other times aggressive with our words, but by genuinely listening to one another, we can communicate effectively and enjoy the exchange.

How to Turn the ONE LESSON INTO REALITY

Answer the following:

1. What did you **discover** from this chapter?

2. Which of these discoveries do you **desire** to see in your marriage? Why?

3. What **decisions** will you be making in order for these desires to become reality?

Discipline:

1. Genuinely listen to each other. Practice silencing your thoughts when your spouse is speaking as you can clearly hear him or her. To see if you were able to listen well, reflect their words back to them, such as “You mean . . .?” and see if they agree. Rate yourself to see if your listening has improved. What is the impact on your spouse by being heard this way?
2. Play ping pong with your spouse this week. Share your thoughts about communication that you learned from this chapter after playing.

Prayer:

Chapter 19

WORDS Without ACTION

We are all aware that communication involves exchanging words and listening to one another. There is, however, an often underestimated means of communicating that can be profound yet even more powerful than spoken words.

Daniel Henderson said, “Our messages tell people what to do. Our lives show them how to do it.”

What I am talking about is action. There is some truth to the popular saying, “Actions speak louder than words.” Let’s again consider the story of Adam and Eve, the literal first couple on earth.

A Talking Snake?

Have you ever wondered why Eve was talking to the snake in Genesis 3? Let me lay to rest this common cause of confusion. You see, the devil has no physical body. He is a spirit being like his demon cohorts. As such, in order to communicate, he needs a physical entity to be able to manifest his presence and converse. And since there were no other men and women at the time, he used the snake to do his bidding.

He began his assault on the woman by simply tempting her and posing the question, “*Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden’?*” (Gen 3:1). It was communication in the form of temptation.

When the woman proceeded to answer the devil’s question, she may not have been aware of it at the time, but she was communicating to her husband her desire to continue to converse with the devil even though she did not say so. Actions speak volumes.

Unexpected Consequences

What resulted after was something both Adam and Eve did not expect. The devil responded to her saying, “*You will not surely die*” (Gen. 3:4). From just being tempted, the devil had upgraded a simple conversation to a deception.

Whereas God had said that they would surely die if they ate the fruit, the devil made them believe otherwise. By engaging the serpent in a conversation, Eve communicated her willingness to listen and her desire to know more. Our actions communicate.

From there the devil said, “*For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil*” (Gen 3:5.) The devil had flipped the truth into a lie, turning enticement into deception. Our actions communicate more than we think.

Commission and Omission

Actions do not just speak louder than words; inaction, too, can communicate powerfully. Here’s what happened next:

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate (Gen 3:6).

Many people wonder where Adam was the whole time the devil was speaking to Eve. The answer is found in the verse above. He was standing right there with her, listening to the conversation.

You’d have to ask, why did he not do anything to stop the conversation? But that’s for another book. The point of this story is to illustrate how powerful our actions (and inaction) can be in communicating with others. Eve’s actions communicated her

desire to her husband just as strongly as his inaction communicated his agreement with her.

Communication is more than just exchanging words and listening to one another; our actions and inaction speak just as clearly.

How to Turn the ONE LESSON INTO REALITY

Answer the following:

1. What did you **discover** from this chapter?

2. Which of these discoveries do you **desire** to see in your marriage? Why?

3. What **decisions** will you be making in order for these desires to become reality?

Discipline:

The next time you sense your spouse is giving off non-verbal signals through action or inaction, talk about them to clarify if you are reading the signals correctly. Do this regularly. Doing so with sensitivity will communicate to your spouse that you care about what he/she thinks and how he/she feels.

Prayer:

Chapter 20

UNMECHANICAL: A Special Kind of Connection

We have seen that communication involves words, listening, and action. There is, however, the most powerful thing we need to be aware of when we communicate with others: **the spirit**.

Have you been around people who told you the right thing but for some reason did not communicate it in the right spirit? I have. Even more, I have been guilty of doing exactly this.

Hearing Without a Word Spoken

There is an interesting verse that is recorded in Genesis 3, right after Adam and Eve sinned against the Lord.

And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden (Gen. 3:8).

Adam and Eve didn't have to see the Lord to know where He was; they already felt His presence among them. This was the power of God's Spirit communicating with them. It was also the same Spirit that convicted them of their sin and caused them to hide from God. In this part of the story, no words were said and yet God's mere presence was communicated.

At the end of the day, communication is spiritual. The spirit by which we communicate with our spouse matters just as much as our words and actions.

The Silent Treatment

When Marie and I had issues during the early years of our marriage, we would enter into what I now call the "silent zone" (others call this the silent treatment). We did not say anything to each other but we would both know that things were not good between us.

For instance, if I had offended Marie, she would not say anything but her silence communicated that something was not right. Even more so when I knock on a locked bathroom door and get no reply. The silent treatment speaks volumes.

How and why does that happen? That's because our spirits speak in a way that oral and written words cannot. Conversely, Marie can sit silently with me when I am stressed and, without words, communicate how much she sympathizes with my situation.

Combing All Four

From God's playbook, we can combine all four of communication's basics so that we can communicate clearly and effectively with one another. In the Garden of Eden, God did not start communicating with Adam and Eve using words. He began by communicating with His Spirit. And instead of giving a sermon or making a point, God asked them a question.

"Where are you?" was God's way of asking where they were in their relationship with Him, where they were in spirit. What followed was a set of questions designed to make Him listen instead of speak:

He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" (Gen. 3:11).

Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" (Gen. 3:13).

Finally, God takes action and kills animals just to wrap Adam and Eve with their skin and blood. This sacrifice sends God's message of love by covering them despite their sin and rebellion. At the same time He sends them out of Eden—a communication of love, righteousness, and justice so clear that it cannot be misunderstood.

As I have previously pointed out, communication is to marriage what photosynthesis is to plants. Communication is what maintains the health of a marriage. It's the exchange of life: the healthier the exchange, the healthier our marriages get.

How to Turn the ONE LESSON INTO REALITY

Answer the following:

1. What did you **discover** from this chapter?

2. Which of these discoveries do you **desire** to see in your marriage? Why?

3. What **decisions** will you be making in order for these desires to become reality?

Discipline:

1. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 5 means you talk regularly, hear each other out, and communicate without blowing your top, and 1 means communication hardly exists and is volatile, how would you rate the health of your communication with your spouse?

2. Why did you give your communication this grade? Go back to the lessons on trust, love, and forgiveness to see what has contributed to this situation if it is not favorable. What will you do about it?

Prayer:

Conclusion

**The POINT
Between
JOURNEYS**

As we end, let me remind you once again that marriage is a relationship. The etymology of the word combines two words: *relation* and *ship*. A relation is someone we are connected to, while *ship* originally meant “to be contained in a journey.”

Marriage, therefore, is a journey we have with a person we are connected to for the rest of our lives until we enter the realms of eternity with Christ. So to end, here’s a quick summary and review of what we had been talking about. Marriage is about:

1. Laying the right foundation. Before anything, it is important to lay the right foundation to any relationship, most especially marriage. The *foundation* of every successful marriage is **trust**.

2. Having the right motivation. If trust is the foundation of a marriage, **love** is its *motivation*. Love is the very thing that God inscribed into our souls when He created us and He wants it established in our marriages and families.

3. Hitting the reset button (whenever necessary). But more than just trust and love, the fact remains that regardless of how trustworthy spouses are or how much love they give one another, there are limits to both. Our trust and love, unlike God’s, are imperfect. The good news is that God created a way out: forgiveness. **Forgiveness** is the *reset button* to a trust that has failed and a love that has faltered.

4. Building on the relationship. Marriages are designed to grow stronger over time. We build our marriages through constantly communicating with our spouses by exchanging our thoughts, words, and sentiments with them. **Communication** is the *process* by which we build our relationships.

The Journey Continues

While our journeys through marriage may all need the four imperatives of trust, love, forgiveness, and communication, our own particular journey is in many ways unique from those of others—largely because of our context, our ages, the time, season, and the unique situations we face. This brings us to the important junction of enjoying the journey particularly with your spouse.

More importantly, keep in mind that the journey only works when we have Christ in the ship as we journey together in relationship with one another.

Bon voyage! May God bless you and your spouse as you continue on with your own marriage journey, and as you grow closer to fulfilling your marriage's destiny in Christ.

How to Turn the ONE LESSON INTO REALITY

Concluding Activity

Draw, paint, obtain a picture, or construct a miniature model of a boat. Have you and your spouse write your names on it to remind yourselves of this message to persevere and remain committed to one another. Make a commitment with each other before the Lord, saying, "We will journey together until we reach our destination." You could also write these words on your boat if there is space.

Acknowledgments

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Thank you, ladies. Without your help, this book and the lessons contained therein will be relegated to my brain and will have no hope of being of any benefit to anyone.

A visit to a church in snow-covered Washington, DC in 1988 led to a life-changing lesson that became the impetus to a series of realizations about marriage for Pastor Joey Bonifacio.

The One Lesson That Changed My Marriage

Many couples who get married will find that success in marriage does not come easily. This is because a life of oneness involves dynamics that do not come to us naturally. As a result, a lot of married couples end up hurt, frustrated, disillusioned, and lonely.

But God intended marriage to be so much more than a great disappointment.

Unpack what Pastor Joey Bonifacio learned to be the four essentials of a successful marriage and see how these play out in the daily dynamics of married life. May it instill in you a desire for a successful one, and lead you to decide to make changes for the better.

First appearing as a blog series in joeybonifacio.com, this book now comes with interactive questions that facilitate your thought processing after each chapter and suggested activities to help you act on your decisions.



Joey Bonifacio and his wife Marie have three adult sons and one grandson. He is a lead pastor at Victory Fort Bonifacio. He also serves as the Executive Director of the Real Life Foundation and is a member of the International Apostolic Team of Every Nation Ministries. Joey has authored three books: *The Promise No One Wants*, *The Mystery of the Empty Stomach*, and *The Lego Principle*. Listen to his podcasts, watch his videos, and read his blog entries at joeybonifacio.com.



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