

HIGHER LOVE

Discovering God's Design for Your Marriage

PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

FOCUS
ON THE
FAMILY



TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC.
Carol Stream, Illinois

*Essentials of Marriage: Higher Love
Participant's Guide*

Copyright © 2009 by Focus on the Family
All rights reserved. International copyright secured.

Focus on the Family and the accompanying logo and design are federally registered trademarks of Focus on the Family, Colorado Springs, CO 80995.

A Focus on the Family book published by Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188

TYNDALE is a registered trademark of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. Tyndale's quill logo is a trademark of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without prior permission of Focus on the Family.

Cover design by Jessie McGrath

Cover image (top) copyright © by Tarek El Sombati/iStockphoto. All rights reserved.

Cover photo of bride and groom copyright © by Image Source Photography/Veer. All rights reserved.

Cover photo of couple holding boxes copyright © by George Doyle/Getty Images. All rights reserved.

Cover photo of couple near fire copyright © by Corbis Photography/Veer. All rights reserved.

ISBN: 978-1-58997-563-7

Printed in the United States of America
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 / 15 14 13 12 11 10 09

CONTENTS

Welcome!	v
1 Finding Holiness and Happiness	1
2 It's Not About You	13
3 Truth and Consequences	25
4 Achieving Spiritual Intimacy	37
5 Marriage Myths and Expectations	49
6 Walking in Their Shoes	59
Notes	69
About Our DVD Presenters	70

QUICK START GUIDE FOR COUPLES

Whether you're studying in a group, as a couple, or individually, this book is for you. It's packed with discussion questions, advice, biblical input, and application activities.

But maybe all you'd like to do right now is watch the accompanying DVD and talk about it with your spouse. If so, go directly to the "Catching the Vision" section of each chapter. There you'll find the discussion questions you're looking for.

When you have more time, we encourage you to explore the other features in this book. We think you'll find them . . . essential!

For even more help with your relationship, go to
focusonthefamily.com/marriage.

WELCOME!

If there's anything you don't need, it's one more thing to do.

Unless, of course, that one thing might make the *other* things a whole lot easier.

We can't guarantee that this course will take all the challenge out of your marriage. It won't keep you from forgetting your anniversary, thaw all the icy silences, or make your spouse alphabetize the shoes in your closet.

But it *will* help you understand why you're married, how to stay that way, and how to enjoy it to the fullest. That's because you'll learn the essentials—what's vital to a healthy relationship, keys to working out your differences, and what God considers most important in “holy matrimony.”

In other words, you'll discover how to be the husband or wife you really want to be.

That takes effort, but it doesn't take boredom or busy work. So we've designed this course to be provocative and practical. At its heart is an entertaining, down-to-earth video series featuring many of today's most popular marriage experts. And in your hands is the book that's going to make it all personal for you—the Participant's Guide.

In each chapter of this book, you'll find the following sections:

Finding Yourself. Take this survey to figure out where you stand on the subject at hand.

Catching the Vision. Use this section as you watch and think about the DVD.

Digging Deeper. This Bible study includes Scripture passages and thought-provoking questions.

Making It Work. Practice makes perfect, so here's your chance to begin applying principles from the DVD to your own marriage.

Bringing It Home. To wrap up, a licensed counselor affiliated with Focus on the Family offers encouraging advice you can use this week.

Whether you're using this book as part of a group or on your own, taking a few minutes to read and complete each chapter will bring the messages of the DVD home.

And isn't that exactly where you and your spouse need it most?

Note: Many issues addressed in this series are difficult ones. Some couples may need to address them in greater detail and depth. The DVD presentations and this guide are intended as general advice only, and not to replace clinical counseling, medical treatment, legal counsel, or financial guidance.

Focus on the Family maintains a referral network of Christian counselors. For information, call 1-800-A-FAMILY and ask for the counseling department. You can also download free, printable brochures offering help for couples at <http://www.focusonthefamily.com/marriage/articles/brochures.aspx>.



Chapter 1

FINDING HOLINESS AND HAPPINESS

When Kay and Carl married, they made a commitment to honor each other. They hoped nothing could break their bond. They had high moral values and a personal relationship with the Lord. Their security was in Jesus—not in themselves, not in each other.

They were beginning in the right direction. Could they stay the course?

It didn't take Kay long to realize that Carl had a lot of faults she'd failed to recognize. One was his inept handling of their money.

Kay had a choice. She could handle the problem in a way that was consistent with her faith, which took the authority of the Bible seriously. Or she could turn elsewhere for advice.

Every marriage needs a bond to sustain it during the trials that will surface. Is faith in Christ really the glue that can keep a marriage together? How does a biblical worldview make a difference?

—Betty Jordan
Licensed Professional Counselor¹

FINDING YOURSELF

Identifying Your Needs

Take a few minutes to fill out the following survey.

1. How might each of the following describe your wedding in 10 words or less? Why?

your maid of honor _____
your best man _____
your parents _____
your pastor _____
God _____

2. How would you rank the following elements of marriage from most important to least? How do you think God would rank these factors? If the rankings are different, what do you think accounts for that?

___ whether spouses agree on political issues
___ how often spouses pray together
___ whether spouses plan to have children
___ how involved spouses are in ministry
___ how much spouses enjoy each other's company
___ how much money spouses give to church work

3. How do you think each of the following would define marriage?

your spouse _____
Jesus Christ _____
someone who's been married a dozen times _____
your kids, if you have any _____
your oldest living relative _____

4. Did your wedding ceremony acknowledge God's involvement in your marriage? If so, how? If not, why not? _____

5. Since your wedding, have you acknowledged God's involvement in your marriage? If so, how? If not, why not? _____

CATCHING THE VISION

Watching and Discussing the DVD

Why did God invent marriage? To make us happy? Not according to author Gary Thomas, whose ideas about wedded bliss in this video segment may turn your assumptions upside-down.

God is more interested in making us *holy*, Gary explains, and marriage is a great place to work on that. As if that's not enough, Gary urges husbands and wives to see God not only as their Father—but also their Father-in-law. That's because our spouses are God's children, and we're to treat them that way.

Dr. Greg Smalley adds a story from his own marriage, rounding out a thought-provoking look at why you got married—even if you didn't know it at the time.

After viewing the DVD, use questions like these to help you think through what you saw and heard.

1. If you stood on a street corner in your town and asked people, "Why did God invent marriage?" what would they answer? If you surveyed 100 of those people, how many do you think would give you replies like each of the following? Why?

- “For raising children.”
 - “So we wouldn’t be lonely.”
 - “To torture us.”
 - “To make us better people.”
 - “Who said He invented marriage?”
2. Gary Thomas believes God created marriage to make us holy, not just to make us happy. Which of the following best describes your reaction to that idea?
- “That figures, since God doesn’t want anyone to be happy.”
 - “It doesn’t seem to be working.”
 - “Being happy is a result of being holy.”
 - “That explains why I’m so miserable.”
 - other _____
3. How was Gary’s experience with the ice trays an example of a spiritual challenge in marriage? What do you think God wanted him to do in that situation? Why?
4. Who’s one of the holiest people you’ve ever met? Was he or she also one of the happiest? Does that make you interested in holiness? Why or why not?
5. What do you think you could learn about loving, giving, forgiving, confronting, or asking forgiveness in each of the following situations?
- Your spouse blames you when the restaurant you chose for dinner has a long waiting list.
 - You borrow your spouse’s cell phone and discover that he or she’s been getting calls from an old flame.
 - Your spouse can’t seem to give up smoking, and you have asthma.

6. Gary says that many people expect their spouses to give them fulfillment, joy, and unconditional love—which only God can provide reliably. If you gave up those expectations tomorrow morning, how might the rest of your week be different?
7. If you really believe your spouse is God's child, and that He's protective of him or her, how will it affect what you do in the following situations?
 - You wish your spouse would lose 20 pounds.
 - Your spouse forgets to pay the car insurance bill, then gets in a fender bender after coverage lapses.
 - Your spouse is accused of shoplifting.
8. According to Gary, we need to accept the following three spiritual realities about marriage. Which of them is hardest for you to understand? To accept? To remember during everyday disappointments and conflicts?
 - Marriage is a very difficult relationship.
 - You stay married even though your spouse isn't perfect.
 - God is your spiritual Father-in-law, and you love your spouse out of reverence for Him.
9. Why does Gary sometimes “pray” song lyrics about loving his wife when he wakes up? How would you put that message in the form of a prayer about your spouse? How often would you be willing to pray it?



Bible Study

The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” . . .

So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field.

But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

The man said,

*“This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called ‘woman,’
for she was taken out of man.”*

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

(Genesis 2:18, 20-25)

1. Do you think God expected to find a “suitable helper” for Adam in the animal kingdom? Why or why not?
2. Why do you suppose God took Eve out of Adam, only to decree that they reunite again? What does this tell you about God’s purposes for marriage?
3. Is it hard to imagine feeling “no shame” about being naked? Why or why not? Do you think that’s still true of most husbands and wives? Why or why not?

4. If Genesis 2:18, 20-25 were the only thing you knew about men and women, how would you describe God's view of marriage?

When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan. Large crowds followed him, and he healed them there.

Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"

"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."

"Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"

Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery."

The disciples said to him, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry."

Jesus replied, "Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it." (Matthew 19:1-12)

5. Is it lawful today to divorce "for any and every reason"? What reasons do most divorcing couples give?
6. Why did the disciples think Jesus' view of marriage made singleness look good? Do you think most people would agree? Why or why not?

7. If Matthew 19:1-12 were the only thing you knew about men and women, how would you describe God's view of marriage?
8. If you believe that God Himself has joined you and your spouse together, how might this affect your reactions to the following situations?
 - You disagree strongly over whether to buy a house.
 - You're tired of spending holidays with your in-laws.
 - Your spouse is diagnosed with Alzheimer's.
 - The two of you are asked to start a small group for your church.
 - Your spouse warns that the two of you are "drifting apart."

MAKING IT WORK

Applying the Principles

This chapter's DVD segment urges couples to seek holiness, which leads to real happiness. Does that sound good to you—or like something you'd rather avoid?

It depends on your attitude toward holiness and happiness. To help you and your spouse discuss these two concepts, try coming up with a "Happiness Meal" and a "Holiness Meal."

Most of us know what a "Happy Meal" is. But what would you put in a "Happiness Meal" and a "Holiness Meal"?

Would you put junk food in the Happiness Meal? Comfort food, perhaps? Would you put health food in the Holiness Meal? Or leave the bag empty and give the money to hunger relief?

Is there a meal that would qualify as both?

Here are menu items to choose from. You can choose up to six items per meal; write them on the blanks next to the appropriate bag.

Chicken nuggets

Milkshake

Broccoli

Tofu

Salad

Raw onions

Candy bar

Double cheeseburger

Diet soda

French fries

Other _____

Deep-fried macaroni and cheese bites

Granola

Nothing

Oyster crackers and grape juice

Onion rings

Filet mignon

Peanut butter and jelly sandwich

Water

Regular soda

Prunes



When you're done, compare your choices to those of your spouse if possible. Then discuss the following:

Based on our meal choices, what do we think makes us happy? How has that been reflected in the way we spend time as a couple?

When we think of holiness, do we think of depriving or punishing ourselves?

What attitudes about these two concepts might we need to examine or overcome before we can practice what we've learned in this session?



Encouragement from a Counselor

Remember Kay, who had to choose whether to handle her marital problem with God's view in mind?

She decided to take an approach that echoed 1 Peter 3:3-6: "Your beauty . . . should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear."

When Kay respectfully and graciously confronted Carl with their dilemma, he was able to hear her instead of being defensive. Now it was his turn to decide whether his response would reflect his faith.

He decided to apply principles he'd learned in 1 Timothy 3:3-6, especially the instructions to be gentle, not quarrelsome or proud or greedy. In particular, he didn't allow pride to get in the way of learning new budgeting methods.

In other words, faith helped keep them together.

Then came another challenge. Carl and Kay moved to another state, leaving the church that had been an awesome support system for them. Knowing what a difference faith had made to them individually and as a couple, they looked in their new location for the nurturing and fellowship of other believers. They found it in a church with solid teaching, where they began to volunteer. Again their faith provided resources that strengthened their relationship.

Faith helps keep couples together despite the smaller challenges of everyday life, too. When Carl offends Kay, for example, her understanding of what the Bible says about forgiveness is activated. So is her commitment to apply those principles. She knows that God has graciously extended forgiveness to her, and expects her to do the same for others (Matthew 18:23-35). This helps her to have a forgiving heart toward Carl, preventing a root of bitterness—a marriage killer—from taking hold. Forgiveness is a vital ingredient of the glue that holds marriages together.

So is fidelity. Carl and Kay have pledged to be faithful to one another, which might prove difficult for Carl in his job. He works with women who are congenial and attractive. All the temptations are there—travel, creative teamwork, the opportunity to share confidences. Carl isn't blind, but the eyes of his heart are enlightened (Ephesians 1:18). Having received the gift of a relationship with God, he's not about to mess it up. He chooses to "Avoid every kind of evil" (1 Thessalonians 5:22). His commitment to Kay flows from his commitment to the Lord.

If you're a follower of Christ, staying together as a couple involves the same things that living your faith does—constantly putting aside pride, working daily on fully accepting God's forgiveness, and seeking to do what pleases Him. The following passage applies to marriage as it does to all of life: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us" (Hebrews 12:1).

Can faith keep you together? God's Word says it can.

—Betty Jordan
Licensed Professional Counselor²

NOTES

1. Adapted from Betty Jordan, “How Can Faith Keep Us Together?” in *Complete Guide to the First Five Years of Marriage* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006), p. 279.
2. *Ibid*, pp. 279-281.
3. Adapted from Rob Jackson, “What Does a Christ-centered Home Look Like?” in *Complete Guide to the First Five Years of Marriage*, p. 288.
4. *Ibid*, pp. 288-291.
5. Adapted from Sam Kennedy, “Is It Ever Too Late for a Marriage?” in *Complete Guide to the First Five Years of Marriage*, pp. 412-413.
6. *Ibid*, pp. 411-413.
7. Adapted from Lon Adams, “Do We Have to Pray Together?” in *Complete Guide to the First Five Years of Marriage*, p. 285.
8. *Ibid*, pp. 285-287.
9. Adapted from Glenn Lutjens, “Did I Marry the Wrong Person?” in *Complete Guide to the First Five Years of Marriage*, p. 60.
10. *Ibid*, pp. 60-62.
11. Adapted from Romie Hurley, “How Can I Understand My Spouse’s Personality?” in *Complete Guide to the First Five Years of Marriage*, pp. 27-28.
12. *Ibid*, pp. 28-30.