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FRIEND WITH BENEFITS

*This is my beloved,
And this is my friend.*

—SONG OF SONGS 5:16

In the early morning hours one Easter, twelve young runaway nuns climbed into empty fish barrels and were smuggled out of their convent. Their unlikely hero was a renegade monk they had written to, imploring him to rescue them so they could marry and one day become mothers. The escape was a daring and successful adventure, and it led to a most unusual friendship and marriage. The hero monk? Martin Luther.

Luther is widely known as one of the leaders of the Protestant Reformation. Among the most important people to walk the earth, he lived from 1483 to 1546 as a contemporary of the printing press, Copernicus, Henry VIII, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Christopher Columbus, and John Calvin. A copper miner's son, he was born in Germany some 120 miles outside Berlin.

After a powerful encounter with God in which he was nearly struck by lightning, Luther became a priest and a monk. This included taking vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience for the rest of his life. Examining his own sin with a brutal honesty and brilliant legal mind, he nearly drove himself mad seeking to make himself righteous in God's sight out of a terrifying fear of God. This included endless prayer, severe fasting that gave him significant intestinal problems, sleepless nights, freezing cold, and even beating his own body in an effort to atone for his sin.

But by the grace of God, Luther had an epiphany that changed not only his life but also the lives of countless others. While studying the Bible, he learned that righteousness is a gift God gives by grace from and faith in Jesus

Christ and not something earned or merited through human religious and moral performance.

Because of the prominence of Martin Luther the theologian, very little attention is given to Martin Luther the husband; however, constantly looming in the background of his works is the ever-present influence of his wife, Katherine von Bora Luther.¹

Katherine was born on January 29, 1499. She was only six years old when her mother died, and she was sent to a Benedictine cloister to be educated. Around the age of nine or ten she moved to a convent, and by sixteen she was a nun. At this same time, miles away, Luther was beginning to disagree with the Catholic Church's teaching on the preferability of singleness and celibacy in honoring God above marriage. Though himself still a virgin, Luther began teaching and writing on marriage from the Bible, culminating in his booklet, *On Monastic Vows*, which condemned much of the monastic lifestyle.

Among the readers of Luther's booklet were Katherine and the other nuns in her convent. They longed to escape, marry, and become mothers. So they wrote to Luther asking the renegade monk to help them escape. To do so was an offense punishable by death. Nonetheless, after their rescue, three of the nuns returned to their families immediately, and the remaining nine were taken to Luther's Augustinian monastery in Wittenberg. Luther helped six of the nuns find a home, husband, or job. Eventually every one of the nuns was married with the exception of Katherine—whose devoutly Catholic family did not want her back.

Luther tried repeatedly to find a husband for Katherine with no success. Being a very bold woman, she went so far as to tell Luther that if he could not find her a husband, she expected him to step up and become her husband. But Luther did not marry for many reasons, including the following: "Because I daily expect the death decreed to a heretic."² And he simply did not want to marry, saying, "Good God . . . they will never thrust a wife on me!"³

Much to everyone's surprise, eight years after leaving the priesthood, the ex-monk Martin married the ex-nun Katherine in the backwoods of rural Germany on June 13, 1525. One of the reasons Martin gave for his marriage was to spite the devil, which is perhaps the least romantic statement ever uttered. Their marriage was a public scandal and arguably the most significant marriage outside the Bible in the history of the world. They set in motion a

model for Christian faith and maturity through marriage, sex, and children, rather than through singleness and celibacy.

What is perhaps most curious is that their marriage did not start with love or attraction, as Katherine was not physically attractive, but rather with a commitment to the principles of the Bible and service to God. One biographer said, "Martin and Katie did not get along very well because of their clashing temperaments and personalities." Certainly they were not romantically in love, and there is no evidence that any kind of courtship preceded their marriage. Martin even confessed to his friends afterward that of all the fugitive nuns, he found Eva von Schönfeld the most attractive, while the proud and haughty Katie alienated him. "I never loved Katie then for I suspected her of being proud (as she is), but God willed me to take pity on the poor abandoned girl."⁴

Making matters worse, their critics were relentless. A folktale in that day said the Antichrist would be born from sex between a priest and a nun, which led to wild speculation about what their children would be like. And Martin's nemesis, Erasmus of Rotterdam, spread a vicious rumor that they married only because Martin impregnated her out of wedlock. This was a lie he repudiated three months later, but the damage to the Luthers' reputation was done. Another powerful critic said, "You have truly sinned . . . nightly wanton and chamber with a nun . . . Obstinate and defiant wretch . . . captured by the net of eternal damnation; be merry until you descend into hell, as you surely will, where, infernal brand! you will burn forever, and be eaten alive by the never-dying worm."⁵

Even Martin's friends were not fond of Katherine. He reported that many cried with grief upon hearing of his hasty marriage.

On top of all this, the couple lived in great poverty with great responsibility. They had three boys and three girls during their first nine years of marriage. Tragically, one daughter died at the age of thirteen months and another at thirteen years in the arms of her devastated father. By all accounts, Katherine was a wonderful mother and Martin a loving and fun father who spent his evenings playing music for his children and teaching them the Bible, which was a welcome and joyous diversion from his busy and stressful life.

Martin's old forty-room monastery became their home, and Katie quickly went to work cleaning the bachelor pad, including throwing out the straw bed Luther had not changed in more than a year, decorating the home, planting a

garden for fresh food, changing Martin's diet to nurse him to health and help overcome his legendary flatulence problem, and growing herbs, as she was a bit of a naturopath. Their home was bustling with activity. Martin was constantly studying and publishing to fuel the Protestant Reformation, preaching and teaching, working on translating the entire Bible into German, traveling, and keeping up a vast correspondence with ministers across many nations. Apparently Katherine often sat with Martin as he wrote letters, for they frequently included sections about what Katherine was doing at the time and the greetings she sent. Their home was constantly filled, and as many as twenty-five people lived with them at any one time, not to mention the eleven orphans they sheltered. Dinners there often fed more than one hundred people.

The couple's early years were reportedly awkward, likely because neither had spent much time in the company of the opposite sex during their monasticism. Martin reported, "Katie used to sit down next to me while I was studying and, not knowing what to say, would begin to ask questions like: 'Dear doctor, is the prime minister of Prussia the duke's brother?'"⁶ Something that helped them learn to live together in love was their willingness to dish out and take a joke. They were known for being brutally honest with each other, poking fun at each other, and doing so as friends. For example, when one would start to nag, the other would commonly retort that perhaps a little prayer should occur before "preaching a sermon." His letters often teased her, but Katherine certainly could hold her own. Martin often struggled with severe depression, and it was very difficult to pull him out of his funk. But Katherine found creative ways to do so. On one occasion she dressed up like a grieving widow in black mourning attire and met Martin at their door upon his return home. "Are you going to a funeral?" he asked. "No," she replied, "but since you act as though God is dead, I wanted to join you in the mourning." Luther quickly recovered!⁷

Through their years together, the Luthers built a genuine friendship. This is easily noticed in the letters we have from Martin to his wife. His favorite title for her was "Lord Katie." He also called her his "dear rib," "Sir Katie," "the empress," "my true love," "my sweetheart," and "a gift of God." In a romantic statement that perhaps only a theologian's wife could truly appreciate, Martin referred to his favorite book of the Bible, Galatians, as "my Katerine von Bora [*sic*]."⁸

When he suffered from catarrh, kidney stones, constipation, insomnia, dizziness, and a buzzing—“not a buzzing but a roll of thunder”—in his head, she nursed him back to health. When he would fall into his frequent bouts with severe depression, she would hold him, pray for him, comfort him, and read Scripture to him. She drove the wagon, looked after their fields and gardens, purchased and pastured cattle, brewed beer, rented horses, sold linen, helped edit his writings, prepared meals, kept house, raised kids, entertained guests, and was often awake by 4:00 a.m. and working until 9:00 p.m. She was such an incredibly hard worker that Martin had to frequently urge her to relax and even offered to pay her to sit down and read her Bible. She reportedly had a keen theological mind and often sat with Martin and visiting theologians to discuss and debate theology—something unusual for a woman in that day.

The tenderness with which Martin spoke of his wife increased throughout their marriage. He wrote, “I am a happy husband and may God continue to send me happiness, from that most gracious woman, my best of wives.”⁹ Luther’s earlier teaching on marriage essentially portrayed marriage as a sort of necessary evil to stave off sexual temptation. But, as his loving marital friendship with Katherine grew, his perspective matured as suggested by statements such as, “The greatest gift of grace a man can have is a pious, God-fearing, home-loving wife, whom he can trust with all his goods, body, and life itself, as well as having her as the mother of his children.”¹⁰

After preaching what would be his final sermon, Martin died at the age of sixty-two, while away from his beloved Katie. In his will he said, “My Katherine has always been a gentle, pious and faithful wife to me, has loved me dearly.”¹¹

Grace and I ran across the story of the surprising marriage of Katherine and Martin while we were researching this book. It underscored something we’d noticed: *Marriage is about friendship*. All the talk about spending time and doing life together, making memories, being a good listener, growing old and taking care of each other, being honest, having the long view of things, repenting and forgiving can be summed up in one word—*friendship*.

In researching this book, we read all or part of 187 books on marriage, most written by and for Christians. Not one of those books had one chapter or major section of a chapter on marital friendship. As we dug deeper, we could find only one significant Christian book written on a theology of friendship, and that was written in the 1100s by a Christian monk commenting on Cicero's view of friendship.¹² In more recent years, only a few popular books have been written on friendship from a Christian perspective and they do not reference friendship in marriage in any significant way.¹³ Likewise, the most popular book written about the friendships of Christian women does not speak about a wife's friendship with her husband.¹⁴ And every book I (Mark) have read for men that includes a section on friendship speaks only of friendships between men based upon Jonathan and David's friendship, while neglecting every marriage in the Bible as a possible example of friendship.

Husbands and wives who want their marriages to be enduring and endearing must be friends. One of the most respected sociologists studying marriage said, "The determining factor in whether wives feel satisfied with the sex, romance, and passion in their marriage is, by 70 percent, the quality of the couple's friendship. For men, the determining factor is, by 70 percent, the quality of the couple's friendship. So men and women come from the same planet after all."¹⁵ He continued by saying,

Happy marriages are based on a deep friendship. By this I mean a mutual respect for and enjoyment of each other's company. These couples tend to know each other intimately—they are well versed in each other's likes, dislikes, personality quirks, hopes, and dreams. They have an abiding regard for each other and express this fondness not just in the big ways but in little ways day in and day out. . . . Friendship fuels the flames of romance because it offers the best protection against feeling adversarial toward your spouse.¹⁶

Grace and I are friends. Since meeting, we've been friends. By God's grace, until our season of life under the sun is done, we will be friends. At times our friendship has been strained, but it is because of the friendship that we remain together. Our first dates together were not extravagant because we were broke teenagers, but they were fun because we just liked to hang out together. Our first date included a hamburger, a walk along the Seattle waterfront, and a

long chat on the beach by a fire. We did not spend much money, but we each made a friend.

We drifted bit by bit as I (Grace) tried to hide the lie from Mark and after I realized he probably wasn't a Christian. I wanted the friendship but without the conflict. I didn't understand that true friendship involves healthy conflict and hard discussions as God reveals sin and repentance, and reconciliation takes place.

In those difficult days when our marriage struggled, and our growing church was sapping Mark's energy, he used to say he felt alone and always would because of the nature of ministry. It felt hopeless that we could ever return to that trusting, fun, free friendship. I tried to fight it, but I also partially believed he was right and found myself giving up hope too. It felt as if no matter how much I tried to become a good friend, he was determined to be alone, and yet was upset because of it. I was very confused. It wasn't until God had me tell Mark I wasn't his enemy that the light went on for him and he saw I truly wanted to learn how to be his friend and not make him feel so isolated. I clearly remember the fight we were having in the bathroom when I pleaded silently with God to give me words to explain and give Mark a heart to believe those words. God told me what to say and I saw a physical change in Mark in that moment. He started to soften and want to trust me again. As I later walked through my abuse history, he became a friend again. In a good way I was forced to trust him, and he worked hard to respond lovingly.

As Mark has studied friendship, it has been an amazing gift to me, and hope has returned. We both needed to understand what a healthy friendship could be. I feel safe again, knowing we are *both* working on the friendship and building trust. It is easier for a woman to think of doing life with a friend than with a dictator or unemotional ruler. The husband is still the head, but a "loving her as Christ loves the church" head—a considerate friend.

Friendship is an integral part of a truly Christian marriage and a safeguard against emotional adultery. In our years together we have seen many couples, including pastors and their wives, commit emotional adultery. Emotional adultery is having as your close friend someone of the opposite sex who is not your spouse.

Sadly, too many books and sermons on marriage focus only on the Bible verses about marriage. They should also examine the mountain of Bible verses

on friendship because those apply to the most vital human friendship of all with our very best friend, our spouse. The Bible itself weds marriage and friendship. A wife in Song of Songs says, “This is my beloved, / And this is my friend.”

Perhaps the only major Christian theologian to speak much about friendship was Augustine (AD 354–430). He wrote often about friendship in his book *Confessions* as he lamented bad friendships earlier in his life, the death of a close friend, and what he learned about true friendship. In tender fashion he spoke of human friendship as “a nest of love and gentleness.”¹⁷ He also spoke of friendship in the most practical terms:

To make conversation, to share a joke, to perform mutual acts of kindness, to read together well-written books, to share in trifling and in serious matters, to disagree though without animosity—just as a person debates with himself—and in the very rarity of disagreement to find the salt of normal harmony, to teach each other something or to learn from one another, to long with impatience for those absent, to welcome them with gladness on their arrival.¹⁸

We have a few true friends. There are people we do not choose to do life with but simply have them in our life by circumstance (for example, family, coworkers, classmates); those who are not godly, trustworthy, or loving; those who are not peers (both those ahead of and behind us in maturity and life lessons); and those with whom our lives happen to intersect but there is no intentionality to live life together (for example, neighbors we barely know).

But the word *friend* is too often used for relationships that are not friendships, including online “friends” on social networking Web sites. This can lead to unreasonable expectations or someone being hurt and disappointed. So the word *friend* needs to be used carefully. We are to be friendly toward all people, but only friends with a few.¹⁹ We make a mistake when we call anyone we are friendly to a “friend.” This is an especially important distinction for extroverts, those in ministry, and those in serving professions, where you know and help a large number of people.

Marital friendship requires both the husband and wife to be willing to invest what it takes to be a good friend. Friendship is costly in everything—time, energy, emotion, and sometimes money. Those who want their spouses

to be friends without seeking to be good friends in return are selfish and demanding. And those who want to be good friends but do not help their spouses reciprocate are prone to be taken advantage of, abused, neglected, and suffer from their marriages.

In our marriage, we have made the mistake of assuming we were friends and not working on our friendship as we ought to. Instead, we invested countless hours on a long list of people we were trying too hard to make our friends. Over time, nearly all those people left. Only a few have remained and become true friends.

Through it all, we have learned that friendships take so much time, energy, and investment that you can only have a few friends—maybe two or three real friends. In the same way, Jesus had many foes, many fans, and only three real friends—named Peter, James, and John—who had the most privileged access to Him. To be sure, Jesus in humility calls us His friends,^a and as God now glorified in heaven where He is without any limitations, He alone can have innumerable friendships, whereas we are finite and limited to a few.

The sad truth is that we live in a world that encourages selfishness, independence, convenience, isolation, and using people rather than loving them. Curiously, people holding these same values simultaneously complain about the lack of community, kindness, hospitality, love, generosity, and friendship in our day. Perhaps more than ever, we must acknowledge that friendship is desperately needed, and the first step is not whining about our lack of friends, but rather becoming good friends. This is why Proverbs 18:24 says, “A man who has friends must himself be friendly.”

Marriage often starts out as a journey between friends. It gets off course as friends become business partners trying to pay the bills, parents trying to raise the kids, caregivers trying to tend to aging parents, cab drivers trying to shuttle family members to various events, event planners trying to pull off everything from holidays to birthday parties, and lovers trying to keep the flames of passion hot. Perhaps the key is to always be working on the friendship, because in the end the rest of marriage seems to come together more easily and happily when you are working on it with your friend. As a fun way to look at the issue, here’s what we believe it means to be married F-R-I-E-N-D-S:

^a John 15:15

F—Fruitful

Friendship with our spouse, like everything else, exists to glorify God and serve His kingdom. A portion of a love letter from the great Baptist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon to his wife illustrates this point well: “None know how grateful I am to God for you. In all I have ever done for Him you have a large share, for in making me so happy you have fitted me for service. Not an ounce of power has ever been lost to the good cause through you. I have served the Lord far more and never less for your sweet companionship.”²⁰

Marriage includes a spouse, and often children. But the goal, center, and purpose of marriage is not self, spouse, or children. The ultimate goal of marriage and family is the glory of God. Only when marriage and family exist for God’s glory—and not to serve as replacement idols—are we able to truly love and be loved. Remember, neither your child nor your husband (or wife) should be who you worship, but instead who you worship with.

It was God Himself who not only created marriage, but also commanded that it “be fruitful.” This explains why Satan did not even show up until Adam and Eve were married. Our enemy hates the fruitfulness that can come from a husband and wife serving God together.

In a letter to a newly married couple, from his prison cell in Nazi Germany, pastor, theologian, and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about God’s glory as the ultimate purpose of marriage:

Marriage is more than your love for each other. It has a higher dignity and power, for it is God’s holy ordinance, through which he wills to perpetuate the human race till the end of time. In your love you see only your two selves in the world, but in marriage you are a link in the chain of the generations, which God causes to come and to pass away to his glory, and calls into his kingdom. In your love, you see only the heaven of your own happiness, but in marriage you are placed at a post of responsibility towards the world and mankind. Your love is your own private possession, but marriage is more than something personal—it is a status, an office. Just as it is the crown, and not merely the will to rule, that makes the king, so it is marriage, and not merely your love for each other, that joins you together in the sight of God and man.²¹

In marriage we have a duty to God, our spouses, the world, and future generations. But we are sinners. A husband and wife need to acknowledge that when the Bible speaks of fools it is not just speaking about other people, but about them as well. Even the wisest among us has moments of folly. So God gives us spouses to serve as wise friends by praying with and for us, attending church with us, speaking truth, and providing Scripture along with good books and online classes, lectures, and sermons to nourish fruitfulness in our lives.

Life is so complex, dangerous, and stressful that the Bible often likens it to a war with the world around us, and the flesh within us betraying us to the Enemy. In light of this battle, what we need is a wise battle plan compiled by a multitude of counselors. Proverbs, the book of wisdom, speaks repeatedly of the importance of wise friends. Proverbs 20:18 says, “Plans are established by counsel; by wise guidance wage war.” Proverbs 24:5–6 says, “A wise man *is* strong, yes, a man of knowledge increases strength; for by wise counsel you will wage your own war, and in a multitude of counselors there is safety.” And Proverbs 13:20 says, “He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will be destroyed.”

How has your spouse been a wise friend used of God to make you more fruitful? In what ways can you be a better and wiser friend to cultivate fruitfulness in your spouse? In what ways can you better use your spouse’s wisdom to make your life and family more fruitful?

***R*—Reciprocal**

While it only takes one spouse to be friendly, it takes both spouses to be friends. When both spouses are unfriendly, the marriage is marked by conflict and coldness. When one spouse is friendly and the other is unfriendly, the marriage is marked by selfishness and sadness. But when both spouses each make a deep, heartfelt covenant with God to continually seek to become a better friend, increasing love and laughter mark the marriage.

It is common to hear married people speak of “falling out of love” with their spouses, and “falling in love” with someone else in adultery. In using the language of “falling” they are cleverly avoiding any responsibility, as if they were simply required to follow their hearts. But the Bible tells us not to follow

our hearts, but rather “guard” them because they are prone toward selfishness and sin.^a

According to the Bible, love does not come from our hearts, but rather through our hearts. This is because “God is love,” and in relationship with God through Jesus Christ, by the Holy Spirit, we receive God’s love to share with others.^b It is through the presence of God the Holy Spirit in our lives that we are able to love our spouses. Galatians 5:22 says, “The fruit of the Spirit is love.” And Romans 5:5 says, “The love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.” Even when we don’t feel loving with our spouses, we can give love to them and receive love from them if we live Spirit-filled lives.

In the Bible love is often a feeling. But rather than being a feeling that promotes action, it is often first an action based upon obedience to God that results in a feeling for our spouses. This explains why the Bible commands husbands to love their wives^c and wives to love their husbands^d rather than commanding them to *feel* loving. This further explains why the Bible even commands us to love our enemies.^e

In the Bible, love is also a verb; it is what we do. Like Jesus’ love, it is a covenant commitment that compels us to act for the good of the one we love. This also explains why perhaps the most popular wedding Scripture of all time depicts love as active. First Corinthians 13:4–7 says, “Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

Christian marriage is reciprocal acts of covenant love. This includes the little things. Perhaps some examples from people we asked will be helpful:

“He lovingly makes me coffee every single morning, and it means a lot to me!”

“He runs me a hot bubble bath when he knows I’ve had a tough day caring for our three daughters (all under five)!”

a Prov. 4:23; Jer. 17:9

b 1 John 4:7–21

c Eph. 5:25

d Titus 2:4

e Matt. 5:43–47

“He prays for and with me and laughs at my jokes and we’re silly together!”

“I cook, and he washes the dishes. It makes me think he appreciates my time that was spent cooking dinner, especially since we have two little ones.”

“She lets me pick the TV shows and control the remote.”

“[He] holds onto sentimental things—keeps them hidden where he thinks I will never find them. He has cards and notes I wrote him from when we first started dating.”

“He calls home at lunchtime no matter what . . . just to reconnect and see if we are all doing okay at home.”

“When my gas tank is low, he drives to the gas station and fills it. My husband has pumped my gas for almost twenty years. I appreciate that he notices and takes care of it for me!”

“A while back, I made a commitment to become more healthy physically. Among many changes was only having one soda a week. Every Saturday my wife goes out and buys me one Dr. Pepper so I will have it when I am finished preaching on Sunday.”

“[She] surprises me with pizza and hot wings and a beer when I get home from work!”

“She leaves encouraging notes with my keys or on my car steering wheel in the mornings.”

“We walk to the library hand in hand, choose books, read them, and then swap. Later that week, over wine on the porch, we discuss those books. My favorite thing ever.”

“He opens the car door. I never had that before, and it means a lot to me.”

“She’s excited to see me every time I come home.”

“[He] knows my favorite ice cream and just the right time for it.”

“I have a lot of girlfriends whose husbands would never go to a grocery store with them or for them. My husband always goes grocery shopping with me to shop for our family of six instead of making me do it all by myself. He brings them in and helps put them away.”

“We go hunting together, which he loves.”

“My husband will not leave the house without kissing me goodbye. Sometimes I am in a rush and try to avoid him . . . but he will stand in front of my car, and climb in to make sure he does [kiss me]. His reasoning is, of course, first because he loves me, but if anything should ever happen to either

of us, he wants to make sure that I know the last time we were together he kissed me and told me he loves me.”

“I love it when she goes with me to a sports bar to watch a game even though she’s not that into it, just because she knows I love it, and I love it when she’s there.”

“He rubs my back.”

“He holds my hand.”

“We were in an antique store, he was bored, and when a Frank Sinatra song came on, he grabbed my hand, twirled me around and started to dance with me.”

“We both take turns writing in a journal that we started when we were married in 2001. The entries range from silly to serious and from sweet to sexy.”

What would you add to the list?

I—Intimate

In our teaching and counseling, we have seen people respond well to a simple explanation of three kinds of marriages—back-to-back, shoulder-to-shoulder, and face-to-face.²²

A back-to-back marriage is one in which the couple has turned their backs on each other. As a result, they live separately and do not work together (shoulder-to-shoulder) or draw each other out in friendship (face-to-face). In such marriages the partners range from strangers to enemies, but are not friends.

A shoulder-to-shoulder marriage is one in which the couple works together on tasks and projects, such as keeping the home, raising the kids, growing the business, and serving the church.

A face-to-face marriage is one in which, in addition to the shoulder-to-shoulder work, the couple gets a lot of face-to-face time for conversation, friendship, and intimacy.

As a general rule, women have more friendships than men. And their friendships tend to be more face-to-face. This is because men commonly have shoulder-to-shoulder friendships around shared activity. If they take

the time to reflect on whom they have considered friends in different seasons of their life, most men recall boys they played with on a sports team and guys they worked with on a job. But they often know very little about these guys they called friends, because their tasks consumed their time and conversation, as they talked about the task in front of them rather than the emotion between them.

Conversely, women's friendships tend to be face-to-face and built around intimate conversation. This explains why women do the sorts of things with other women that men do not do with other men, such as going out to lunch or coffee just to talk, sharing deep intimate feelings while looking each other in the face without a task bringing them together.

Wives, to be a good friend, learn to spend some time with your husband in shared activity. If he's watching a sporting event, sit down and share it with him. If he's working on a project, hang out nearby to help or at least ask questions and be a companion if nothing else. If he's going fishing, ask if you can come sit in the boat with him just to be in his world. For a wife to build a friendship with her husband requires shoulder-to-shoulder time alongside him.

Husbands, to be a good friend to your wife, learn to have deeper and more intimate conversations. Open up, telling your wife how you're doing and asking her how she is doing. Listen without being distracted by technology or a task (put your cell phone away), but instead focus on her, looking her in the eye for extended periods of time. Draw her out emotionally, and allow her to draw you out emotionally. Keep your advice to a minimum and learn to listen, empathize, comfort, encourage, and in so doing resist the constant male urge to find a problem and try and fix it. No wife likes feeling like a problem to be fixed rather than a person who wants to be intimate. For her, intimacy means "into-me-see," which means she wants to know her husband and be known by him. For a husband to build a friendship with his wife requires him growing in face-to-face skills.

Intimacy is ultimately about conversing. As an old proverb says, "The road to the heart is the ear." One book on friendship insightfully notes that there are really three levels of conversation—facts, opinions, and feelings.²³ Most of the conversations we have are about facts—the weather is hot or cold, we are tired, our sports team won, or gas has gotten expensive. As a relationship with

someone becomes more intimate, conversations shift from facts to personal opinions. In this transition we are opening up a bit, allowing someone to get to know us more intimately. We talk about our opinions of such things as theology, politics, and other people. When a relationship becomes most intimate, we begin to share our feelings. We become vulnerable with someone, telling them not just what we do (facts), what we believe (opinions), but who we are (feelings). As C.S. Lewis said, “Eros will have naked bodies; Friendship naked personalities.”²⁴

For me (Grace), friendship with Mark is his willingness to work through tough trials together and not give up or treat me like a project. It means patient correction; providing for and protecting the kids and me; praying with me; having patient intimacy and sex; holding me if I’m crying; having “understanding” or teaching conversations; spending time together (like having date nights, snuggling after the kids are in bed, and listening well); holding hands and taking walks; being generous with compliments or encouragement; and building memories together.

For me (Mark), like many men, I know a lot of guys and get along well with a wide variety of people. I have a lot of fans as well as foes, but until recent years few godly, safe, real male friends. There were not many people I would open up to, trust, and could not conceive of a life without. Some years ago, I sat Grace down and told her that I really needed her to be my intimate friend and “functional pastor.” I think this surprised her on two levels. One, like most men I project a sense of complete self-sufficiency, needing nothing, which is untrue because I hate feeling lonely and really need the intimate connection, conversation, and comfort of Grace. Two, while we do not believe a woman can be a pastor according to the Bible,^a I asked Grace to be my functional pastor. As a pastor myself, I’ve never had a pastor since I left college. So I invited Grace to be the one who checked in on my heart, prayed for me, gave me wise counsel, and knew the most intimate parts of my past and present as well as my longings and fears about the future. And, although Grace does not wish to hold any formal office in our church, she does hold the unofficial office in my life as my intimate friend who pastors my heart, something that has changed my life and our marriage.

a 1 Timothy 2–3; Titus 1

E—Enjoyable

Often life is not much fun. Between the sins we commit and the sins committed against us—not to mention Satan, demons, and the curse—Jeremiah’s lament, “Why did I come forth from the womb to see labor and sorrow,” makes sense.

But a friendship with an enjoyable spouse can make a world of difference—someone who knows how to have a good time, relax, go on an adventure, or just toss it all to the side for a holy diversion. Any couple who hope to exit this life together still holding hands must be friends who have fun along the way and laugh a lot.

God commands married couples to:

*Go, eat your bread with joy,
And drink your wine with a merry heart;
For God has already accepted your works. Let your
garments always be white,
And let your head lack no oil.*

Live joyfully with the wife whom you love all the days of your vain life which He has given you under the sun, all your days of vanity; for that is your portion in life, and in the labor which you perform under the sun.
(Ecclesiastes 9:7–9)

The big idea is that life is short. In the original language, the word *vain* is the Hebrew word *hebel*. The word occurs some thirty-eight times in the twelve chapters of Ecclesiastes and is variously translated as *meaningless* (NIV), *vanity* (KJV, NASB, NKJV, RSV, NRSV), or *emptiness* (NEB). How one translates that word affects their entire view of not only Ecclesiastes, but also the very purpose of life, as that is the central question of the book. While it is difficult to know the exact meaning of *hebel* it seems that *vapor*, or *breath* is the best translation of the word. Life does not have to be meaningless, vain, or empty—though it can be, apart from faith and repentance.

However, life is short. It is fleeting, like a breath on a cold morning that you see for only an instant before it disappears. Life moves quickly. Married

life can seem as if it's only five days long. The first day you meet, the second day you marry, the third day you raise your children, the fourth day you meet your grandchildren, and the fifth day you die first or bury your spouse to go home alone for the first time in many years.

God in His grace gives us spouses as enjoyable friends. And He expects us to get dressed up now and then and have some fun with our friends, eating and laughing to God's glory and our good. There will always be work to do, and once in a while we need to stop working and start worshipping by enjoying the friends God gave us. We are convinced that the couples who pray and play together stay together.

Lastly, an enjoyable friend helps routines become rituals. If your spouse is an enjoyable friend, suddenly a cup of coffee together, a walk after dinner, and trip to the grocery store become sacred rituals filled with meaningful opportunities to have some fun with the friend you are married to.

Date night is a ritual for me (Grace). It is weekly, but it is different each week because the conversation, food, and activities change. Sometimes we go to dinner and a movie, sometimes we find a great spot on the beach and chat, sometimes we do a fun activity or getaway, sometimes we come back home and snuggle up, but we always try to keep that time about us. Family night, every Saturday, is a similar ritual (sabbath time with the family doing various low-key things).

For me (Mark), I've learned to see many of the things Grace does for our family and for me as a series of sacred rituals. She is far more Martha than Mary. This hardworking woman devotedly serves and manages a busy home with five kids, ministry demands, and a high-maintenance, drama queen of a husband. But when we were not as emotionally connected in prior years, I did not value her service because it felt as if she was doing things *for* me rather than *with* me. As our friendship has grown, I have come to see her service differently—more as sacred rituals motivated by love than as tasks performed by a business partner.

One example in particular happens every Sunday morning. I leave the house around 7:00 a.m. and do not return until 10:00 p.m. because I preach all day. In recent years we have developed a ritual. Grace gets up early to make me breakfast (French press coffee sweetened with raw honey and Huevos Rancheros with chorizo sausage and green chilis are my favorites), and together

we connect before I head out to preach. Between services, Grace and the children join me for lunch in my office, and I get a bit of time to connect with my family—I miss them when I am away from them. These Sunday rituals mean the world to me and have made a big difference in my life and ministry as well as in our family.

N—Needed

In the beginning there was God.

Before there were date nights or divorce lawyers, there was God.

One gloriously happy, completely united, altogether loving God. In fact, before there was anyone or anything there was one God in three persons living in unbroken union and eternal communion.

Then, God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness . . . So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”^a God made the man first, and for the first time in recorded history something was declared to be “not good,” even though sin and the curse had not yet entered the world. God declared, “It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him.”^b The man had God above him, and creation beneath him, but no woman alongside him to walk as an equal partner, lover, and friend to reflect something of the mystery of the Trinity of Friends. God’s solution was a friendship in the covenant of marriage. Subsequently, the first human friendship was between a husband and wife, meaning your nearest and dearest friend is to be the one you are in covenant marriage with. So, unlike the rest of creation that God spoke into existence, God crafted the woman with His proverbial hands as the gift of a friend.

Curiously, God made the woman from a rib taken out of the man’s side. Perhaps this was because she belongs at his side as an intimate equal and not in front of him as feminism would teach or behind him as chauvinism would teach. For Grace and me, this may also explain why she likes to snuggle burrowed into my side and why it feels like home to her.

^a Gen. 1:26–27

^b Gen. 2:18

We need human friendships in addition to friendship with God. And God's answer is first a spouse and then other godly friends of our same gender. For a man, this means he must jettison the stereotype of a "true man" standing alone against the world. God said it best, "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him."^a Anyone who tells his or her spouse "I don't need you" is in fact calling God a liar. A man needs his wife as his companion and friend. And a wife needs to be helpful by God's design. The more his need for her and her need to help him are celebrated as gracious gifts from God, the faster oneness and friendship blossoms in the marriage. Any religious person who says they do not really need human friends because God is their friend is calling God a liar because He's the One who says we also need human friends.

D—Devoted

A devoted friend is dependable through varying seasons of life. The Bible speaks a lot about times and seasons. Wisdom is about knowing what season someone is in and responding accordingly. This takes humility, discernment, and attentiveness. A bad friend is one who always has to be happy and have a good time, as if life was a never-ending party; or who always has to be sad, somber, and serious, as if life was a continual funeral. A devoted friend agrees with Ecclesiastes 3:4, which says there is "a time to weep, and a time to laugh."

To be a devoted friend requires wisdom from the Holy Spirit accompanied with an emotional sensitivity to others. Rather than first thinking about yourself, Philippians 2:3–4 says, as a good friend you need to "in lowliness of mind . . . esteem others better than [your]self. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others." As we do, we are able to obey Romans 12:15 and "rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep."

The opposite of a devoted friend is a fake friend. Proverbs speaks a great deal about fake friends. Fake friends are what the Puritan Matthew Henry called "swallow friends" who "leave when winter comes." Fake friends are with

^a Gen. 2:18

us so long as they get something from us—be it the sense of worth they receive from us needing them when we are suffering, to the benefits they accrue from our seasons of blessing. A real friendship is about both people giving and taking in every season without keeping a record of what is given and taken. A fake friendship is about one person doing all the giving and the other doing all the taking. Fake friends quickly desert us when life with us becomes complicated, costly, inconvenient, or no longer meets their needs. Proverbs 18:24 says, “A man who has friends must himself be friendly, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.”

It is in the darkest seasons of life that God reveals to us our most devoted friends. These kinds of friends seem to rise up to the challenge of trouble just as Proverbs 17:17 says, “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.” Someone has said that a friend is the person who walks in when everyone else walks out. In marriage, being a devoted friend in all of life’s seasons is key to building oneness, intimacy, and trust.

We had to learn to do this by listening well and being attentive, so that our responses were authentic. For me (Grace) this included learning what a friend truly is. I wrongly considered nearly anyone and everyone a friend. I served people tirelessly, even though most of my “friends” did not reciprocate in any way. Such people are not friends, but rather people God asks us to serve for different seasons, encouraging them toward maturity and serving others.

Grace and I observed devotion in marriage early on in our relationship. Her uncle John was a frail elderly man whose wife Gladys had to be placed in a home because of her declining health and decimated memory due to Alzheimer’s. John rented an apartment close to her care facility so that he could faithfully visit her multiple times every single day for years, until the day he died. Although Gladys did not remember John or any of the days they had shared over the course of many decades, he faithfully sat with her for hours every day because—despite their marriage being difficult—she was his best friend and he loved her dearly. John could have moved on with his life, divorced her, married a woman he enjoyed, and never visited her again, and she would have been completely unaware because she remembered so little. But he loved her faithfully as a devoted friend, every day staring into the eyes of his wife who could not remember who he was or even his name.

Grace loved her uncle John very much, and they were close. When we began dating in high school, I, too, enjoyed getting to know John. Occasionally, Grace and I would join him as he went to visit Gladys. The night before we married, I stayed at John's apartment, and he asked me to promise that I would love Grace and remain devoted to her no matter what. I gave him my word, and after watching his example knew exactly what he meant as he was asking me to covenant to being Grace's best friend.

S—Sanctifying

Author Gary Thomas asked the vital question, "What if God designed marriage to make us holy more than to make us happy?"²⁵ We truly do not know how selfish and sinful we are until we live with someone in marriage. Most of our dating time is spent pretending to be people we are not, and after a few years of marriage, our spouses start to discover who we truly are rather than the characters we have been acting like. The same is true for them.

Regarding our selfishness and sin, our spouses do not change us as much as they reveal us. Once we're exposed, we have to decide if we will be changed for the good, what the Bible calls being sanctified. A husband and wife need to accept that they each are, and are each married to, a weak, failed, flawed sinner who needs loving help and patient endurance. As sinners, we all fall into sin, and without a friend we are often simply stuck, unable to get up and move on with our lives. This is why Ecclesiastes 4:9–10 says,

*Two are better than one,
Because they have a good reward for their labor.
For if they fall, one will lift up his companion.
But woe to him who is alone when he falls,
For he has no one to help him up.*

True friends are revealed when someone has failed and fallen into sin. Those who rush to help them up—knowing full well whom they are helping and what they have done—are true friends. We may say we are someone's friend, but unless we are quick to pursue them in the sin they have fallen into, we are not really much of a friend. We know that we are considered a godly

friend when the person in sin trusts us enough to come clean with us, be honest, and ask for our help. This is particularly true of our spouses who need us to pursue them most diligently when they have fallen most grievously.

As sanctifying friends, a married couple need to lovingly, humbly, graciously, and kindly speak the truth in love so that they may grow to be more like Jesus Christ. This kind of truth telling that calls us out of our sin rather than pushing us deeper into shame is what Proverbs 27:6 means: “Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful.” A spouse who only showers you with praise, never disagrees with you, and avoids conflict at all costs, is an enabling rather than a sanctifying friend.

A godly friend loves God and loves us enough to hate our sin and speak truthfully about it with us. This is why Proverbs 27:9 says, “Ointment and perfume delight the heart, and the sweetness of a man’s friend gives delight by hearty counsel.” The word *earnest* simply means “to be honest.” This means that one of the God-given duties of our spouses as friends is to be honest with us for God’s glory and our good. Sometimes this requires that they sting us with a rebuke—what some people affectionately call “stabbing us in the front.” And if we are wise, we will love our spouses all the more for loving us enough to risk our friendship for the sake of our good. Proverbs 9:8 says, “Rebuke a wise man, and he will love you.”

In closing, the earnest pursuit of a good marriage can quickly become overwhelming because there are so many things to work on. We, too, have felt this anxiety—where do we start; how can we possibly work on spirituality, communication, scheduling, sex, spirituality, finances, family of origin issues, and so forth, all at once? But we’ve also found that by always working on our friendship, the rest of marriage seems to sort itself out in time. So we would commend to you the goal of devoting the rest of your life to being a better friend to your spouse.