

THE WHOLE *hearted*
WIFE



*10 keys to a
more loving relationship*

SMALLEY
ERIN, GREG, AND GARY

INSPIRED BY GARY SMALLEY'S *KEYS TO A LOVING RELATIONSHIP*

*Praise for
The WholeHearted Wife*

What's better than a book with the name "Smalley" on the cover? How about a book with three Smalleys! Erin and Greg, along with Greg's dad, Gary, offer women a powerful message that will help strengthen and reinvigorate their relationships with their husbands. This is a great book for Christian women.

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President, Focus on the Family

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National radio host; speaker

Author of *Your Beautiful Purpose*

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BRADY BOYD

Senior Pastor, New Life Church

Author of *Addicted to Busy*

This book is full of practical advice for women. Let's face it . . . being a wife is far more complicated than most of us realized when we said, "I do." Greg and Erin do an excellent job of equipping you to honor God and your husband, regardless of the current state of your marriage.

DR. JULI SLATTERY

Author; clinical psychologist; co-founder of Authentic Intimacy

What a fantastic book! Every wife—regardless of age or stage in her marriage—will benefit from this inspiring, humorous, and practical message.

DR. LESLIE PARROTT

Marriage and family therapist

#1 New York Times best-selling author of *The Good Fight*

The Smalleys bring both professional expertise and personal experience to the important conversation of what it takes to nurture a loving marriage. The Smalleys have successfully combined their humor and personal experience with their expertise from years of marriage ministry, making *The WholeHearted Wife* a great resource for any married couple.

DR. TONY EVANS

Pastor of Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship, Dallas, Texas

Author of *Kingdom Woman*

THE WHOLEHEARTED WIFE



THE WHOLE *hearted*
WIFE



*10 keys to a
more loving relationship*

SMALLEY
ERIN, GREG, AND GARY

INSPIRED BY GARY SMALLEY'S *HIDDEN KEYS TO LOVING RELATIONSHIPS*

FOCUS
ON THE FAMILY



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The Wholehearted Wife: 10 Keys to a More Loving Relationship

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Preface



For Women Only?

You may be wondering why we've written a book on marriage that's just for women. Great question! As you'll see in the pages that follow, you have the ability to influence the overall temperature of your marriage. You may think that improving your marriage requires your husband's participation. Ideally it does, but even if he isn't motivated to work with you, a stronger, more satisfying marriage is still within reach. Ultimately, the key to a more loving, vibrant relationship with your husband lies in discovering how you can become a wholehearted wife.

You may be reading this book for any number of reasons. Perhaps you have a good marriage, but you want it to be great. You know that even the best marriages encounter challenging times. After all, in the chaos of life, it's easy to grow increasingly disconnected from your husband. So you're reading this book to find ways to reconnect and deepen the love you share.

Some of you may be facing serious disappointment in your marriage. Neither your relationship nor your husband is living up to what you expected. You may be disillusioned over what has unfolded over the years and feel this isn't what you signed up for. You may be worn out and exhausted from caring for an entire family, maybe even working outside

the home full-time. You know your marriage needs help, but trying to make even the smallest change can feel impossible and hopeless. Perhaps you have very little desire to work on your marriage at all. You just want out, but you know it shouldn't be that way, and you hope this book will renew your motivation to try again.

For others, your marriage may be in crisis, and this book may be a last-ditch effort to see if there's anything you can do to save your marriage and turn things around. Perhaps you're dealing with serious issues in your marriage such as emotional or physical abuse, addictive behaviors, infidelity, mental illness, or some other damaging or debilitating condition. If you and your husband are struggling with any of these issues in your marriage, we strongly encourage you to talk with a licensed, professional Christian counselor.*

But this book can also help you find hope for change even in the midst of the most difficult circumstances. No matter where you are in your marriage, this book offers encouragement and valuable help for change and growth. Whether you've been married for two weeks or twenty-two years—the keys presented in this book are for you. If you feel helpless and stuck, gazing across an ever-widening chasm in your marital relationship, in these pages you can find the help and hope you need. Or if you think that your marriage is on solid ground, but you refuse to settle for mediocrity, this book can serve as a practical companion and guide as you pursue a more loving relationship with your husband.

As you begin this journey, you might be like I (Erin) was twenty

* The Focus on the Family Help Center counselors are here to listen and pray with you, as well as provide guidance and resources to help you and your family thrive. Arrange to speak with a licensed Christian counselor at no cost by calling 1-855-771-HELP (4357) Monday through Friday between 6:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m. Mountain time. Due to high call volumes, it may be necessary for you to leave your name and number for a counselor to return your call.

years ago, driving down Highway 5 in Southern California to a conference at which “the preacher,” now my father-in-law, was speaking. At this point in my marriage, I was struggling and wanted to hear some words of encouragement. As I listened halfheartedly to the message, my mind wandered back to a college chapel service where, many years earlier, I had listened to the same man speak. What I learned from Gary Smalley back then had been life changing. And now I was hearing these same basic concepts again, except this time they were impacting not only my life but also, ironically, my marriage to his son.

Fast-forward to my marriage today. Thanks to the principles I learned from Gary Smalley during this earlier crisis point in my marriage, I’ve seen my marriage relationship change dramatically over the years. I’ve also been reminded at various stages of my life to keep practicing these principles. (Somehow, even when we know the truth, we need regular reminders to believe and live it.) Over many years, Gary crystallized these core truths about marriage from Scripture and his experience of working with thousands of married couples. The principles he developed, originally presented in the book and video series *Hidden Keys to Loving Relationships*, had a powerful impact on an earlier generation of married couples. But so many women today haven’t been exposed to these biblical principles combined with common sense that I first heard Gary Smalley talk about when I was a college student.

The book you’re holding in your hands is the culmination of an effort to ensure that all women, young and old, have the opportunity to discover how they can experience a more loving relationship with their husbands. We (Gary, Greg, and I) decided to offer this new book and curriculum, *The Wholehearted Wife: 10 Keys to a More Loving Relationship*, to help women learn how they can influence their marriages for good. Our ultimate desire is to see marriages transformed among new generations of women as they discover the joy of becoming wholehearted wives.

As you read this book, keep in mind that every marriage has three entities: a woman, a man, and the marriage itself. We've written the book with this framework in mind, and we encourage you as you learn each key principle to first consider, "How does this principle apply to me?" Then ask yourself, "How can I use this principle to better love and care for my husband?" Finally, ponder this question: "How can I apply this principle in my marriage?"

We don't expect women to apply the ten key principles in the same way. Every marriage is different and has its own unique challenges and circumstances. But no matter what shape your marriage is in—strong, a bit frayed at the seams, or hanging by a thread—the tried-and-true concepts in this book apply to any married woman in any situation.

As you put the key principles into practice in your marriage and continue applying them in the years to come, we pray that you'll become the wholehearted wife God has called you to be. We also pray that you'll recapture, or perhaps experience for the first time, the vibrant, loving relationship with your husband that you've always wanted.

We welcome you on this life-changing journey!

Introduction



The Marriage You've Always Wanted

I (Erin) will never forget that day in 1987. I was attending a late-afternoon chapel service at Grand Canyon University (GCU). As I sat on a wooden pew with my friends, waiting for the service to begin, I glanced around the chapel. I decided the building had to be 1970s vintage—the musty smell and burnt-orange accents gave away its age.

The organist led us in a few ancient gospel hymns, and then this Gary Smalley guy emerged as the speaker. Admittedly I was a little out of my element sitting in an outdated chapel on a Monday afternoon, waiting to hear from a preacher. In my family, God talk had been strictly limited to Sundays. And chapel services had been nonexistent at the University of Arizona, where I'd attended my freshman year. So when I transferred to GCU as a sophomore, my expectations for spiritual enlightenment weren't very high. But the faculty and students at GCU had a passion for God that was unlike anything I'd ever seen. I wasn't quite sure what to make of it.

As Gary Smalley began to talk that day, I listened halfheartedly, mostly thinking about the homework I needed to get done. I was also thinking about the preacher's son named Greg.

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Earlier in the week, I was involved in a hilarious prank on Greg, who had fallen asleep in Old Testament theology class. Greg wasn't just sleeping; he was drooling sleeping. His friends encouraged me to "help" him, so I shook him and woke him up from his deep sleep. Actually, I went a little further than that. I whispered to him that the professor had called on him to pray. So very boldly Greg stood up and began to pray right in the middle of the professor's lecture. Everyone in the class burst out laughing, and Greg immediately knew he'd been the brunt of a big joke. At the time he wasn't remotely attractive to me. A drooling, sleeping boy wasn't what I was looking for.

As my mind wandered back to Gary Smalley and his teaching, words and phrases such as *honor*, *closed spirit*, and *anger* caught my attention. I began to listen more intently and embraced the hope that I might actually learn something. And learn I did. This preacher was presenting new concepts about relationships that made so much sense. I especially remember him talking about plugging into the right source of power and satisfaction in our lives. That source wasn't people, circumstances, or things. It was God. The difference between a poor source and the right source, he said, was like a 110-volt outlet versus a high-power 220-volt source. The first one just couldn't provide significant power, and the same was true in our lives. People, circumstances, or possessions could not fill our hearts in any lasting way; real fulfillment, meaning, and power were things only God could provide. As someone who was still trying to figure out what faith was all about, this illustration really hit home. I knew it was true in my own life. Any satisfaction I found never seemed to last. I was beginning to find this preacher guy's advice surprisingly insightful.

That day in chapel I didn't realize how much Gary Smalley's advice would change my life and relationships. I also had no idea that years later I'd be engaged to his son, waiting in another chapel for Gary Smalley himself to perform the wedding ceremony!

Disillusionment Hits Home

I (Erin) can still remember walking down the aisle in my perfect wedding dress—a tulle gown radiating with small, sparkly rhinestones. My best friends were standing at the altar waiting for me to arrive. The program had been set up perfectly, with each minute accounted for. Gary guided us through the ceremony with grace and precision. Soon Greg and I were gazing dreamily into each other's eyes as we said our vows, and before I knew it, he was lifting my veil to kiss me.

Shortly after this perfect ceremony, Greg and I left for our honeymoon. But within hours we realized that marriage wasn't going to be quite as picture-perfect as our wedding.

Think back to your own wedding day. I'm quite sure that when you said "I do," you didn't anticipate feeling any different than you did at that moment. As little girls, we dreamed of our wedding day and planned out every glorious detail—the design of the ring on our finger, the color scheme, the flowers in our bouquet, the style of dress we wanted, and the perfect honeymoon location. We may have imagined a dashing Prince Charming sweeping us off our feet and remaining completely devoted to our happiness forever after. As we gazed into the future, we all had great expectations and hopes of a fulfilling, happy marriage.

Then over months and years of married life, disappointments and unmet expectations chipped away at our wedded bliss. Disillusionment hit home as we noticed the flaws in our husbands—so much so that at times we could see only the negative. The rose-colored lenses through which we once viewed our husbands began to darken. Our idealistic hopes collided with a disappointing reality, and we personally discovered what we may or may not have been told ahead of time: Marriage can be hard! Our natural reaction to disillusionment is to pull away, to disengage from the relationship, to hold back (rather than engaging

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passionately and wholeheartedly). We may convince ourselves that this is as good as it gets, so we had better accept “reality” and get on with married life, such as it is. But the loss of vitality and passion in our relationship brings with it a heartache that won’t go away. Somewhere along the way reality snuffs out the dream of a perfect marriage, and we’re left with the feeling that we’ve been cheated somehow. We wanted a vibrant, loving relationship with our Prince Charming, but we ended up grasping at an illusion that seems to exist only in our dreams. Disillusionment diminishes, dulls, or chips away at an open, free-spirited, and wholehearted expression of love. When we close off our hearts, love begins to wither and dry up. We know that marriage isn’t supposed to be this way, but we also know that our childhood dream isn’t realistic. The degree of disillusionment varies from marriage to marriage. For some women, the disappointment may be mild, but for others the gap between expectations and reality leaves us with a devastating void in our lives.

When I married Greg, I assumed that this son of Gary Smalley, the renowned relationship expert, would possess all the important tools to be a great husband and guide us into a successful marriage. However, hours into our honeymoon we had our first major argument as husband and wife. And within two years we were on the brink of a separation.

Let me clarify that at the time I was working as a labor-and-delivery nurse, and Greg was a full-time student studying to earn a doctorate in psychology. He was brilliant when it came to working with other people’s marriage issues. However, when it came to everything in our relationship, we had a difficult time seeing eye to eye. We had different personalities, different habits, different likes and dislikes. We did laundry differently, spent our free time differently, and had differing opinions.

I can remember coming home from a crazy twelve-hour shift at

the hospital and learning that Greg had been out to the movies and lunch with a good friend. Why hadn't he been holding down the fort at home, cleaning up the house, or putting a meal together instead of leaving it all for me to do? I had always encouraged him to do stuff with his friends before we got married, but afterward I didn't feel quite so generous.

Conflict over these and other issues became frequent and mis-managed. Our hearts grew distant and closed toward each other, and each of us began to wonder if we had married the wrong person. How had we come to this perfectly awful place after what seemed like such a perfect wedding?



They say that when a man marries a woman, he thinks, "She's the one I've been waiting for. She'll never change"—and she always does. And a woman looks at her man, and thinks, "He just needs a little work; after we're married, I'll help him change"—and he never does.

—Old saying cited in Lauri Przybysz, "Changing Your Spouse—and Yourself"



A Barrage of Demands

On top of the disillusioning reality that marriage is hard work, I (Erin) soon discovered that married life is incredibly busy. Early on in our marriage, balancing our relationship with work and life's demands was challenging enough. But then we added kids to the mix, and their needs consumed my energy and attention.

I especially remember the season of having three young children when each day drained every ounce of energy I had. I so desired to

greet my husband excitedly at the end of his hard workday. However, the reality often was that I felt utterly exhausted, and all I wanted to do was escape the four walls of my home. Usually I ended up going out for coffee with a girlfriend who was also battling the same exhaustion. And occasionally Greg and I would get a babysitter so we could make time for us to connect—but not nearly as often as we would have liked.

Now those three kids are in elementary school, high school, and college. But as God in His sense of humor would have it, I'm the mother of a preschooler again through the gift of adoption—this time in my mid-forties—and once again I'm always tired. I wake up in the morning dreaming of the long run I'll take, the quiet moments I'll enjoy on my deck gazing at the majestic view of Pikes Peak, or the intimate conversations about life I'll savor with a girlfriend over coffee. But somehow most days don't go that way. Life's realities—a sick child, a clogged toilet, an unanticipated car repair—along with daily demands often make me feel weary and worn out.

The good news is that I have more focus and experience to help me out this time around—not to mention better vitamins. I also have a clearer vision for how to approach my marriage.

Sometimes I actually do stop to remind myself to connect with Greg and nurture our marriage. But there are times it feels like just one more thing to add to the to-do list—along with cleaning the house, making dinner, doing laundry, and getting multiple children to sports practice on time. And, oh yes, somewhere in there I'm supposed to be intimate with my husband.

If you're anything like me, by the end of the day, you've given, given, given to everyone else and have nothing left to give. Let's face it, as married women we often encounter a barrage of demands. Is it any wonder that exhaustion and hopelessness can set in, causing us to lose motivation to improve our marriages? And the longer such circumstances drag on, the more our initial desire to try harder can

dissipate. We know we need to nurture more loving relationships with our husbands, but often we just want to fall into bed each night and sleep soundly.

We're not alone in feeling this way. Consider these statistics:

- The majority of working Americans say they don't have time for the most important relationships in their lives.¹
- Since 1973, leisure time in America has decreased by about 20 percent.²
- A 2012 survey conducted by the American Psychological Association (APA) titled "Stress in America" indicated that almost half of all women surveyed reported an increase of stress in the past five years.³

Without a doubt, American life is busy and stressful, especially for the typical married woman.

Yet in spite of all our busyness, the desire for loving relationships doesn't go away. And it shouldn't. As women we often define ourselves by the quality of our relationships. Typically, the quality relationship every married woman wants most—the one she dreamed about when she walked down the aisle in her white dress—is with her spouse. As busy, stressed-out married women whose dreams collided with reality, we may wonder whether that kind of relationship is even possible. Let me assure you it is!

Jesus said He came so that we might "have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). Isn't this what we're longing for in our marriages—a full life and a vibrant love? Married life may not resemble the life of our dreams. In fact, most likely it won't. Jesus didn't come to fulfill our dreams of the good life. But He did promise us a full life.

So how can we experience that kind of life and love in our marriages? I know for sure that it doesn't come by living on autopilot. No dream or worthy goal comes easily. We must *intentionally pursue* what matters most in our lives and marriages.

Your Influence Can Make All the Difference

Perhaps you feel powerless to improve your marriage because you know it “takes two” for real change to take place. I (Erin) couldn’t agree more. It does take two committed individuals to improve a marriage. However, I also believe that we as women often sell ourselves short when it comes to the overall impact we can have on our marriages. Instead of minimizing our role, we need to embrace an important truth: *As women we can greatly influence the state of our marriages.* Let me say very carefully here that we cannot (and shouldn’t try to) *control* our marriages, or our husbands, but we can *influence* them. The word *influence* means “the capacity . . . to produce effects on the actions, behavior, [and] opinions of others.”⁴

What the Bible Says About Influence

No marriage book or counsel can guarantee the outcome of a relationship. But the counsel of God regarding marriage is true and sure: The growth of one person in a marriage relationship impacts the other person. Scripture indicates this is true even when one partner in the marriage isn’t a follower of Christ. Take, for example, Paul’s encouragement to spouses in the church at Corinth, which was filled with struggling believers living in a morally decadent city:

If a Christian woman has a husband who is not a believer, and he is happy to live with her, she must not divorce him. The husband who is not a believer is made holy through his believing wife. And the wife who is not a believer is made holy through her be-

lieving husband. If this were not true, your children would not be clean, but now your children are holy.
(1 Corinthians 7:13–14, NCV)

And the apostle Peter, also speaking to wives whose husbands were not following God, reminded them that their godly lives would speak louder than words as an influence upon their husbands. A godly life is, in fact, the best means of influencing a marriage. Peter expressed it this way:

Wives, fit in with your husbands' plans; for then if they refuse to listen when you talk to them about the Lord, they will be won by your respectful, pure behavior. Your godly lives will speak to them better than any words. (1 Peter 3:1-2, TLB)

The most effective way we can positively influence our marriages is by changing what we *can* control: ourselves. We can control our attitudes, our actions, our decisions, our priorities, and even our words. This happens, however, only through the power of the Holy Spirit. He alone can change the human heart—from which all of our behaviors, choices, and responses flow. Our goal, then, as women must be to first deal with ourselves.

I (Erin) love how Linda Dillow differentiates a goal from a desire in her book *What's It Like to Be Married to Me?*

A goal is a purpose to which a woman is unalterably committed. She assumes unconditional responsibility for a goal, and it can be achieved if she is willing to work at it. A desire is something wanted that cannot be obtained without the

cooperation of another person. It is an objective for which a person can assume no responsibility because it is beyond her control. Reaching a desire must never become the motivating purpose behind behavior, because then a person is assuming responsibility for something she cannot fulfill on her own. *A goal is something I want that I can also control. A desire is something I want that I cannot control.* [Emphasis added.]⁵

We may desire a more vibrant, loving, and intimate marriage, but as Linda so eloquently expressed it, we must never make a desire “the motivating purpose behind [our] behavior.” Why? Because it’s beyond our control. In essence, if we want a more loving relationship with our husbands, we must first pursue the goal of becoming more loving, God-focused wives.

It took me a long while to grasp that and be willing to turn to God for His help. I’ve had to make choices about doing chores cheerfully instead of nagging Greg to do them. I’ve had to make a choice of how I would respond to him when he walks in the door at “the bewitching hour”—you know, 5 p.m. when everyone needs help with homework, you’re trying to fix dinner, the baby is fussy, and the kids are rushing out the door to sports practice. Would I ignore him? Would I treat him as one more demand on my already full plate? Would I nag him to not just stand there but pitch in (can’t he see what needs to be done!)? Or would I pause for a moment, set everything aside, and greet him with a kiss? Both types of responses set a tone and sent a message to my husband. And both tended to influence our marriage and his response to me. God helped me see that making these kinds of choices begin in *my* heart and greatly affect our marriage.

The same is true for you. No matter what your relationship looks like or how you feel about it, we want you to know there’s hope. You

truly can make a difference in your marriage by becoming the woman and wife God intends you to be.

A More Loving Relationship Begins with You

Often in marriage we become very aware of our spouses' problematic attitudes and behaviors, and we think our input, directly or subtly, can fix them. Believe me, I (Erin) have tried with all my might to let Greg know that he should stop watching so much television, or work a little less, or put his dishes in the dishwasher. I've often done this indirectly or covertly. But when my subtle input didn't work, I would get frustrated and feel like giving up because I knew I couldn't change him.

I used to say things like, "I can't change Greg. He's going to do what he's going to do." But then the Lord would say ever so gently to me, "No, you can't change him . . . but I can. And I can also change *you*." Ouch.

Honestly, it was much easier and more fun—and self-justifying—to talk about Greg and what he was or wasn't doing in our relationship. That definitely kept the focus off me—but ultimately it kept me from growing as a person. It kept me from having to take a long, hard look in the mirror.

Many of the things I disliked about Greg pointed to things I disliked about myself. But I couldn't see those things until I stopped and looked. Learning to focus on my own flaws and the ways God wants to change me has been an ongoing process. But I've gradually come to realize that I can't change my husband or anyone else. I can focus only on myself and cooperate with God as He changes my heart.

That's really the bottom line for married women: *A more loving relationship with our spouses begins with us*. It begins with the realization that ultimately we cannot change our spouses. We can, however, take

a penetrating look at ourselves and ask, “How can I become the best wife I can be? How can I approach my relationship with my husband differently? What can I do to nurture a more vibrant, loving relationship with him?”



A wise woman knows that it's not her words, but her behavior that carries the biggest clout when it comes to compelling change. The more Christlike you are, the more positive your influence will be. If you truly want to influence someone else for good, you won't focus on changing his behavior. You'll focus on changing your behavior. You'll work at becoming more godly, and on interacting in a more godly way.

—Mary Kassian, *Girls Gone Wise in a World Gone Wild*



Becoming a Wholehearted Wife

Once we've embraced the truth that a more loving relationship with our spouses begins with us, we may find that our hearts aren't all that thrilled about taking the first steps toward change. In fact, the condition of our hearts is often the first change that needs to take place. Change, like love, is a matter of the will, but it also involves the heart. And heart-level change doesn't happen overnight. It takes time.

Disillusionment and broken dreams may have caused us to wrap our hearts in a thick, self-protective layer of armor. Our hearts may have been closed off from our husbands for years. Hurt and resentment may have grown deep roots. We may long for a more loving relationship with our husbands, but before we can truly open our hearts again, the armor needs to be stripped away, and our stony hearts need

to soften. For many of us, letting down our guard and softening our hearts may seem impossible. Thankfully, we belong to a God who is a heart specialist. Just as He alone can change the hearts of our spouses, He alone can change our hearts.

An amazing thing happens when we allow God to change our hearts. He fills us with His unconditional love and enables us to reach out to our husbands wholeheartedly without demands or preconditions. Romans 5:5 reminds us that “God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.” As we focus on becoming more like Jesus, the fruit of His Spirit will grow in our hearts, and His love will flow through us to influence our marriages and our spouses (Galatians 5:22). God’s love has the power to transform even the most hopeless relationship. This is the secret of becoming a wholehearted wife.

In Ephesians 6:7, the apostle Paul tells us to “serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men.” I believe that God is calling us to serve wholeheartedly, not only at work and in ministry but also in our marriages. Being wholehearted means giving ourselves fully in every aspect of our relationships with our spouses, not out of a sense of duty, but because we’re ultimately serving the Lord. Loving and serving wholeheartedly involve the whole person—spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and physically.

Let me clarify, however, that just as there are no perfect marriages this side of heaven, there are no perfectly wholehearted wives. But as we become more Christlike, we will love our husbands more wholeheartedly, and when we fail or fall short, we can ask God to forgive us and empower us once again to devote ourselves fully to Him and our spouses.

To be wholehearted wives, we can’t invest ourselves halfheartedly in our marriages. Loving wholeheartedly means engaging fully in our marriages and seeking the best for our husbands. When disillusionment and shattered dreams threaten to diminish our love, we must resist the

temptation to pull away, disengage, or give up. We must guard against closing off our hearts self-protectively when disappointments come and promises are broken.

Ultimately, we must entrust our marriages into God's care and trust wholeheartedly in His ability transform them. No matter what your relationship with your husband is like right now, take heart! As you learn the keys to a more loving relationship, God will mold you into the wholehearted wife He intends you to be. So let's get started!

Key One: Honoring



The Value of a Diamond

One momentous day in third grade, our (Greg and Erin's) daughter Murphy came home from school with a flyer that had caught her attention. She had learned that day about Crater of Diamonds State Park located in Murfreesboro, Arkansas, approximately a five-hour drive from our home. The brochure highlighted the fact that this park is the only diamond-producing site in the world that's open to the public. Visitors are welcome to search for diamonds and keep whatever they find. In fact, at this park someone had discovered a forty-carat diamond. Murphy had read all this in the brochure and was captivated. She begged and pleaded for us to go hunting for diamonds. We had to admit it did sound pretty interesting.

Memorial Day wasn't too far off, and it turned out that some friends not far from Murfreesboro had invited us to their cabin for the weekend. Perfect! We could make an adventure of it—and maybe even strike it rich. So in great anticipation we piled into the car for the five-hour drive, met our friends at their cabin, and got up early the next morning to begin our quest for diamonds.

Well, it was what the brochure *didn't* say that set the tone for the day. Crater of Diamonds State Park is a thirty-seven-acre, barren wasteland. Dirty. Dusty. Hot. Humid. Nasty! We discovered that we had to

rent shovels, sifters, and buckets just to begin our search for diamonds. Then we were told to simply pick anywhere we wanted and start digging. Every shovelful went into a sifter. Next, we had to shake the sifter until we found any little nugget bigger than a pebble. Then we had to sift again, this time in water that just got dirtier and dirtier. If we thought a tiny nugget looked as if it might be a diamond, we were told to take it to the evaluator.

Needless to say, it didn't take long in the sweltering heat and muck for us all to discover that this treasure hunt wasn't what we had envisioned. Twenty minutes into the shoveling, bucket dumping, and sifting, the kids were crying—and on the inside so was I (Erin). I can clearly remember the sweat accumulating around my feet as the perspiration ran down every part of my body, collecting dusty grime along the way.

After an hour of strenuous work, none of us had found a thing. What a contrast to the treasure hunt we had anticipated. We had embarked on this adventure with high hopes. We had devoted an awful lot of resources—gas, travel, time, and hard work—just for the chance to unearth a diamond we could bring home and proudly display. Murphy—and the rest of us—valued diamonds. You might say that in our minds they held a place of honor.

Honoring what we deeply value and cherish is one of the most vital principles in marriage. I (Gary) have spoken around the world to thousands of couples and have written numerous best-selling books on relationships. And to this day I still consider the idea of honor essential for a successful marriage. In fact, honor is foundational to all other relationship-building principles you'll ever learn. This concept appears in almost all of my books and in virtually all of my marriage videos.

Marital expert Dr. John Gottman agrees that honor (or admiration) is one of the most important aspects of a healthy marital relationship:

Admiration [is one] of the most crucial elements in a rewarding and long-lasting romance. Although happily married couples may feel driven to distraction at times by their partner’s personality flaws, they still feel that the person they married is worthy of honor and respect.¹

The fact that honor is an essential ingredient in relationships is no surprise, since Scripture states that God Himself deserves our honor (1 Samuel 2:30; Revelation 4:11; 5:12–13), and the Ten Commandments include the command to honor (Exodus 20:12). The apostle Paul also emphasized the importance of expressing honor in relationships: “Be devoted to one another in . . . love. *Honor one another above yourselves*” (Romans 12:10, emphasis added).

Honor is “a decision expressed by placing high value, worth, and importance on another person.”² It’s essentially an attitude you hold toward your husband.³ It means viewing your husband as a “priceless diamond” and granting him a “highly respected position” in your life.⁴ Closely related to honor is the concept of cherishing. Like honor, cherishing is an attitude that conveys deep value and high regard.



Marriage should be honored by all.

—Hebrews 13:4



Sometimes it’s difficult for us to affirm our husbands’ value because we feel worthless and devalued ourselves. We may have grown up in an abusive home or lacked the nurturing love we so desperately needed as children. Or other life experiences may have beaten us down and made us feel flawed or unlovable. Whatever the case may be, the first step in learning to honor our husbands often involves understanding and embracing our own value in God’s eyes.

Embracing Your Value

Have you ever wandered through a maze of mirrors at a House of Mirrors carnival attraction? The curved and elongated mirrors are designed to reflect distorted images when you stand in front of them. The mirrors can make you look short, tall, thin, fat, funny, weird, crazy, or scary depending on how the image is distorted.

Like a house of mirrors, the world we live in is filled with distorted images. When Adam and Eve's perfect world was destroyed, we inherited from them a fallen, sin-stained world. Every aspect of our culture, including TV shows, movies, and magazines, presents a distorted image of reality. Not even the things we consider good or normal in today's world come close to God's original flawless design.

And if that isn't bad enough, we also have to contend with an enemy, "the father of lies" (John 8:44), who relentlessly tries to twist the truth about who we are. No wonder it often feels as if we're living in a crazy house of mirrors!

What do you see when you look in the mirror? Does your image look warped, or does it reflect the truth about how God created you?

You might wonder why this matters, but the fact is, how we view ourselves directly impacts how we view our husbands. In fact, *we can't adequately love and honor our husbands unless we love ourselves and understand our value in God's sight*. The second greatest commandment tells us to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31). The assumption is that we already love ourselves, but many of us struggle with doing just that because we don't understand our value.

If we want to see a true reflection of our value, we need to look at ourselves in God's mirror. Consider these truths from the Bible that declare how much your heavenly Father cherishes you:

- He knit you together in your mother's womb and knows everything about you (Psalm 139:1, 13).

- You are “precious and honored” in His sight (Isaiah 43:4).
- He knew you even before you were conceived (Jeremiah 1:5).
- He takes “great delight” in you and rejoices “over you with singing” (Zephaniah 3:17).
- You are more valuable to Him than “many sparrows” (Matthew 10:29).
- Nothing can ever separate you from His love (Romans 8:39).
- He has “lavished” His love on you and calls you His child (1 John 3:1).

Even if you were the only person on earth, God would have sent His Son to die for you. You’re that precious to Him! The apostle Peter described God’s amazing love in these words:

For you know that God paid a ransom to save you from the empty life you inherited from your ancestors. And the ransom he paid was not mere gold or silver. It was the precious blood of Christ, the sinless, spotless Lamb of God. God chose him as your ransom long before the world began. (1 Peter 1:18–20, NLT)

But for some of us, really feeling valuable and loved is difficult, and we may need to take some specific steps to re-train our minds to see God’s view of us rather than a distorted one. Christian counselor Robert McGee addressed this issue of grasping your great personal worth in his popular best seller *The Search for Significance*. McGee recommends writing the following truths on a three-by-five-inch card to remind us of our value in Christ:⁵

1. I am deeply loved by God (1 John 4:9–10).
2. I am completely forgiven and am fully pleasing to God (Romans 5:1).
3. I am totally accepted by God (Colossians 1:21–22).
4. I am a new creation, complete in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Embracing your personal value is so important to a healthy marriage that we (Greg and Gary) devoted an entire chapter to it in *Winning Your Husband Back Before It's Too Late*. In the chapter “Looking in the Mirror . . . Becoming Whole,” we reminded women that they must become secure in their identity in Christ and confident of their unique worth in Him.⁶

If your identity isn't rooted in Christ, you may try to draw all your worth from your husband—a need he can never meet. Or you may believe that your worth is based on fulfilling your husband's expectations. This makes your worth dependent on your husband's viewpoint rather than on God's.

Author BeNeca Ward illustrates this in her book *Third Generation Country*:

My mother sat me down and said, . . . “True beauty is in the eye of the beholder, which means that how beautiful you are to other people is always going to be subjective.” . . . She went on to tell me that I needed to . . . identify [and] celebrate what I thought was [beautiful or] weird or unusual [about me] because God had given . . . me [those special things to make] me different from everybody else. I learned how to appreciate, embrace, and enhance those special things so that they would shine rather than be hidden.⁷

Take a few minutes right now to consider your life and answer these important questions:

1. How do I honestly see myself?
2. What do I value about myself?
3. What is God's design for me?
4. How did God uniquely create me?
5. What special gifts and talents has God given me?

Here are a few of the characteristics I (Erin) value about the way God designed me:

1. I'm highly relational. I love being with and relating to people—especially other women.
2. I love to help others when they are hurting—both physically and emotionally (which is why I became a nurse and a counselor).
3. I live life passionately and wholeheartedly. I love deeply, rejoice greatly, and grieve losses sincerely.
4. I have a deep faith in the Lord, and I love to worship in very traditional ways.
5. I'm adventurous and love to try new things.

So what's on your list? God has beautifully and creatively designed you, so thank Him for the unique gifts and abilities He has given you. Let those “special things” shine! And remember: When you embrace your own value in God's sight, you'll gain a greater understanding of your husband's value and a deeper desire to honor him.

Honoring Your Husband

One of the best illustrations of what it means to honor your husband is an analogy I (Gary) used when I was speaking at a large marriage conference. A friend of mine had loaned me an old, beat-up violin for making a point. Several of the strings were missing, and the one that was still there was actually hanging off, attached only on one end of the violin. There was little of the polish or brilliance you might see from a professionally owned instrument.

I passed the violin around so the audience could see it. At first it moved along pretty quickly from person to person. But when I pointed out that the word *Stradivarius*, though faded, was etched inside the violin, the room instantly came alive with oohs and aahs. All of

a sudden, this battered violin took on a whole new level of significance. It was valuable! After all, many Stradivarius violins, made in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, are valued at more than a million dollars.⁸ The violin was passed around slowly and carefully after that comment. Its value had been recognized. This is what honor conveys.

The most powerful way to honor your husband is to recognize and affirm his immense value. Remember the way the audience reacted when they realized the old violin was a Stradivarius? Now imagine yourself oohing or aahing when your husband walks into the room. This may sound a bit ridiculous, but if you really choose to view your husband as a valuable treasure, a precious gift from God, your attitude toward him will reflect this. Treating him as someone you deeply value and cherish will also make it easier to put legs on the idea of loving him, especially when it's difficult. In many cases, love begins to flow when you've made the choice to honor your husband.



How we handle our husband's short comings reveals more about our own character than our [husband's].

—Courtney Joseph, Women Living Well Ministries



At times you may not feel like honoring your spouse. But here's the good news: The choice to honor your husband is just that—a choice. You can choose to treat your husband as if he's a priceless treasure—a Stradivarius or a twenty-four-carat diamond—regardless of your feelings. You can choose to treat him with respect simply because he's your husband, whether or not you agree with everything he does.

How do you view your husband? As an old, beat-up violin or as a Stradivarius? How do you treat him? Like a worthless pebble or a twenty-four-carat diamond you've just unearthed?

Ephesians 5:33 says, “The wife must respect her husband.” Note that the apostle Paul didn’t qualify this statement. He didn’t say, “Respect your husband as long as he deserves your respect.” God has placed husbands in a leadership position in the marriage, and for that reason alone, wives are called to respect and honor them.

This doesn’t mean you must honor your husband’s negative qualities or shortcomings. Rather, truthfully focus on those qualities you value and admire.⁹ This is in keeping with Philippians 4:8:

Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

Honor affirms what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable. That’s why it’s so important to affirm with words and actions the good we see in our husbands. When we choose to recognize their immense value and treat them like priceless treasures, we’re honoring them. This is what Romans 12:10 (NASB) calls us to do: “Give preference to one another in honor.”

Another way we can honor our husbands is by recognizing and valuing the differences in our relationship. Differences can sometimes cause great irritation in a marriage, but they can also spice things up and stimulate growth. In essence, how spouses handle their differences can determine in great part whether a marriage will succeed or fail.

I (Gary) have been speaking and writing about gender differences for more than thirty years. The following are a few of the key differences I’ve discovered through decades of research and observation. See if you recognize any of these differences in your marriage:¹⁰

Men . . .

- love to share facts;
- tend to connect by doing things with others;

- tend to be very competitive and task oriented;
- usually find their identity through their accomplishments;

Women . . .

- love to express feelings;
- tend to connect by talking;
- tend to be relationally motivated and focused on cooperation;
- usually find their identity through their relationships.

It's true that generalizations like these don't always apply across the board. But in my experience, they're accurate about 70 to 80 percent of the time.

My point is this: You honor your spouse when you *value* his differences instead of despising them or viewing them as irritants. One way to honor your husband's differences is to make a list of the God-given things you admire about him. In fact, recognizing that these traits are part of the way God designed your husband is another way to praise God! Making a list of positive characteristics can also help restore honor where it has been lacking in your relationship.

Here are a few of the things I (Erin) value about the way God designed Greg:

1. He has a laid-back personality and a great sense of humor. I've especially appreciated this trait when I've run into immobile objects with our vehicles, including the closed garage door, the movie drop box in the McDonald's drive-through line, a pole in a dark parking lot, and his dad's truck, which was parked right behind me in the driveway.
2. He's generous and giving to those in need—including our family! As a dad he's always willing to help our kids with their homework, spending hours assisting them with difficult assignments. He'll even step into arts-and-crafts mode when necessary.

3. He not only recognizes my gifts and abilities (like writing and speaking), but he also encourages me to develop them.
4. He always takes good care of me and our family. I experienced this in a new way as I started writing this book. When I was awakened by intense, severe pain one night, Greg jumped right into crisis mode. He carried me to the recliner and slept on the floor next to me (after I refused to go to the emergency room—I'm such a good nurse!). The next morning he canceled his meetings, took me to the emergency room, and held our family together while I was in the hospital. Throughout the entire ordeal, he showed a new level of caring for me.
5. He prays over me every night before bedtime. Hearing these affirming words at the end of a long day is such a blessing to me!

I smiled, laughed, and cried as I wrote my list. It represented an intentional effort to see the positive qualities in my husband. At times those qualities have caused some frustration in our relationship. For example, although his laid-back personality has been a blessing and relief whenever I've had run-ins with immobile objects, sometimes I want him to get feisty over something I'm feeling feisty about. You know what I mean? "Join me in my drama. Don't calm me!" But the great news is that Greg balances me.

There's always a flip side to each personality trait, so I have to choose whether to view Greg's traits in a positive or negative light. How will you view your husband's traits?

Now it's your turn to list some of the things you admire about your spouse.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

When you're finished with your list, share it with your husband. That's another way to honor him!

Honoring your husband and choosing to focus on his positive qualities can have a powerful impact on your relationship. Listen to Lisa's story:

When I married Brad, he was already years into a busy and demanding career at a Fortune 500 company. The expectations for performance were high, and he felt the weight of them. His pressured work demands meant long evenings that left me alone with our kids a lot. I enjoyed my role, but over time I began to resent his preoccupation with work, the constant stress he would talk about, and his seeming indifference to the ordinary but important issues I was dealing with at home each day.

Then one day as I was listening to a Christian radio broadcast, the cohosts challenged listeners to make a list of five or ten qualities we loved about our spouses and thank God for them every day for two weeks. I was so frustrated at that point in our marriage that I could only think of two positive qualities. But I decided that every day I would go to the spare room in our basement, get down on my knees, and thank God out loud for those two things.

The first day I slipped out of bed before my husband was awake and quietly headed downstairs. As an act of the will—certainly not because of any warm fuzzy feelings—I voiced my thanks to God. The next day I did the same. By the third day I was actually able to expand my thanks, citing specific ways I was seeing those qualities in action. In the second week the icy coldness around my heart had begun to thaw. I began to appreciate what he was doing and to realize anew that he had more really great traits I had been overlooking.

I learned from this prayer challenge that making a choice to be thankful for my husband and recognizing his good qualities could actually lead to a change in my heart. Honoring my husband this way didn't solve all of our marital problems, but it certainly changed how I felt about him.

How to Honor Your Husband When He's Behaving Badly

Greg Smalley

1. Separate out the *person* from the *behavior*. Your husband is worthy of honor regardless of his behavior simply because God created him, like you, as a valuable person.
2. Recognize your perception of your husband is impacted by his poor behavior. It's easy to "switch lenses" when you're constantly hurt, fearful, or frustrated by your spouse's negative behavior. Consequently you may see everything through a negative lens. When this happens, you'll tend to notice only his negative behaviors and overlook the positive. Psychologists call this confirmation bias. The solution is to actively look for the positives. This will balance out the tendency to focus on the negatives.
3. Make sure you consider how you might be distorting the problem. You might have a hot button, a pet peeve, an old wound, or an issue in your family of origin that makes a particular behavior loom large in your mind.
4. Confront just the negative behavior—not the person—using healthy conflict-resolution tools. (See my book *Fight Your Way to a Better Marriage* for a practical discussion of how to navigate conflict in a healthy way.)

It's amazing what God can do when we choose to honor our spouses and focus on their positive qualities! If you want to have a more loving relationship with your husband, remember that he's a gift from God, a treasured possession—just as you are. As a wholehearted wife, seek to honor him each day by cherishing him and affirming his value. Treat him like a Stradivarius!

Cherishing Your Marriage

So far we've talked about embracing our own value and honoring our husbands as precious gifts. But it's also important to realize that our *marriages* are valuable as well. Marriage is God's idea. After all, the Bible begins with a marriage (Genesis 2:24) and ends with a marriage (Revelation 19:7–9). Jesus even performed His first miracle at a wedding (John 2:1–11).

Throughout the Scriptures, the metaphor of a bride and groom is used to describe the relationship between God and Israel and Christ and the church (Jeremiah 2:2; Hosea; Ephesians 5:22–33). In Malachi 2:16, when God said, “I hate divorce,” He was declaring His passionate love for marriage. One of our favorite verses is Hebrews 13:4: “Marriage should be honored by all.” God intensely values marriage and wants us all to do the same. He created the sacred union between you and your husband, and He cares deeply about it.

As individuals, you and your husband matter. But you are more than just the sum of two parts. You're a marriage *team*, and your *oneness* is of great worth. “For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24, NASB).

Over the years many scholars and researchers have studied the importance of marriage, and they've discovered some astonishing advantages. The Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank in Wash-

ington, DC, compiled and published one such list, which includes the following benefits of marriage:

- Married people tend to experience less depression and fewer problems with alcohol.¹¹
- Getting married increases the probability of moving out of a poor neighborhood.¹²
- Being married increases the likelihood of affluence.¹³
- Married people are more likely to volunteer.¹⁴
- Marriage is associated with a lower mortality risk.¹⁵
- Married couples report greater sexual satisfaction.¹⁶

So what are some of the things you value about the unique partnership you and your husband share? The list for Greg and me (Erin) includes the following:

1. Because of problems we encountered early on, as well as our unique upbringings, we've become passionate together about strengthening marriages.
2. We have fun and laugh with each other.
3. We share a spiritual relationship.
4. We enjoy raising our children together.
5. We're glad that we are riding life's roller coaster together.
We're on an amazing shared adventure!

Now it's your turn. What do you cherish most about your marriage?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Doesn't cherishing your marriage this way make you want to *do* something to express how much your marriage and your husband mean to you? Actions naturally flow from an attitude of honoring and cherishing what we deeply value. That's the theme of our next chapter.

Now that we've explored what it means to embrace our own value, to honor our husbands as precious gifts from God, and to cherish our marriages, we're well on our way toward experiencing more loving relationships with our spouses.

Are you ready to put honor into action?