

Healthy Marriage Tips

From

A to **Z**

By Matt and Laura Coppinger
HeavenlyHomemakers.com

Healthy Marriage Tips from A to Z

What are the secrets to having and maintaining a healthy marriage? We are convinced that there are no secrets. In fact, everything you need to know about enjoying a healthy marriage established long ago and has been fully disclosed in the Word of God. Our Heavenly Father designed marriage, and as always, He is perfect in his plan for bringing man and woman together to glorify him.

We, Matt and Laura, are thankful for God's design for marriage. We love that he brought husband and wife together. And we love how he intentionally made us differently so that we can complement one another.

Yes really, we love that part. How boring would life be if we were all the same? God knew what he was doing when he made two very different creatures and put them together, as husband and wife, for his purposes.

Husbands, wives – God has great things in mind for your marriage. No matter where your relationship is right now, God can restore, heal, comfort, and work in all of His mighty ways to bring your marriage to an incredible level of health.

Our prayer is for each of us to learn to love our spouse and nurture our relationships in a way that honors God to the fullest. As we all seek to wholly enjoy the love of our spouse, may we all look to the greatest Teacher, the One who truly knows what love is.

By God's Grace,

Matt and Laura Coppinger

Table of Contents

Appreciate Each Other.....	page 4
Are You Buoyant?.....	page 6
Consult Your Partner.....	page 8
Dream Together.....	page 10
Empower Your Spouse.....	page 12
Fun With Your Spouse.....	page 13
Give to One Another.....	page 15
Honor Each Other.....	page 17
Be Intentional.....	page 19
Jubilee.....	page 21
Kingdom Focused.....	page 22
Listen.....	page 23
Mentoring Relationships.....	page 25
Nourish Your Marriage Relationship.....	page 27
Own It.....	page 29
Pray With Each Other.....	page 31
Quick to Listen.....	page 32
Read Together.....	page 33
Selfless.....	page 35
Teamwork.....	page 36
Uplift Your Spouse in Prayer.....	page 38
Vulnerable.....	page 39
Worship.....	page 40
X.....	page 41
Yield.....	page 43
Zeal.....	page 45

Appreciate Each Other

Show and Tell - Matt's thoughts

In grade school *Show and Tell* was when the boys brought cool toys from home and told us about them. I could hardly wait for recess to play with them. The girls brought items that were silly and boring. Obviously, there were differing perspectives involving *Show and Tell*.

In marriage we need to show and tell our spouse of our appreciation. This isn't necessarily what I would appreciate my spouse to do for *me*. We need to crawl into the mind of our beloved by asking, "What could I do for my sweetie that would make him/her feel loved?" If I'm unsure then I need to ask my spouse how he/she would like for me to show and tell my appreciation.

If we aren't doing this, we take for granted the roles that our spouse plays and the holes that our spouse fills in our life.

We all know Laura enjoys cooking. Bonus for me - she is good at it. Amazingly efficient too. I, on the other hand, measure everything out precisely and find it challenging to prepare more than one item at a time. I sure appreciated Laura's work and proficiency in the kitchen...meal after meal. How did she know I appreciated it? That's where I needed to show and tell. Eventually, I learned that she enjoys cooking even more when I express my gratitude for her work and help with the clean-up. She really feels loved and appreciated when I say, "Thanks! That was great," and then I hop up and start rinsing dishes and/or get our boys going on their clean-up chores. In a healthy marriage, the husband and the wife both seek out ways they can show and tell their appreciation often.

When we practice this, we empower our spouse to continue doing the action or having the attitude that we praised them for. In our case, neither of us enjoy doing our taxes, but Laura thanks me profusely for taking care of that. My motivation for doing our taxes comes directly from her words of appreciation. When I've finished I can't wait to tell her and receive some appreciation.

How Could You Not Appreciate Seeing My New Stuffed Pink Bunny During *Show and Tell*? - Laura's Thoughts

You know why I feel appreciated by Matt? Because he's *intentional* about showing and telling me what he appreciates. Appreciation doesn't just happen. I'm not sure *any* element of a healthy marriage just happens without being intentional. Showing and telling our appreciation takes thought and work - which means we often need to do things we don't necessarily love doing. What, you think Matt really just *loves* rinsing dishes? C'mon. But he does the job cheerfully, because he loves and appreciates me. And boy do I appreciate the way he appreciates me. After all, we have a lot of dirty dishes at our house. ;)

Now regarding grade school *Show and Tell* and the adorable toys I would bring to bore the boys - here's something else I think we need to appreciate:

God made men and women different - on purpose. Instead of scoffing at our differences, I believe we need to appreciate how God created us to complement one another's strengths and weaknesses. Then, we need to show and tell our spouse how we appreciate that they are different from us.

I can't tell you how much I appreciate that Matt can handle doing the taxes when I'd never make it through the first line of instructions without my eyes glazing over. Yep, God knew what He was doing when He made us with differences.

And now, I believe I will go show my appreciation to Matt by making one of his favorite meals. Which he will then show me his appreciation by rinsing the dishes I dirtied. Ah, the appreciation never stops around here. :)

So, what are some ways you can show and tell your spouse you appreciate him/her?

Are You Buoyant?

Unsinkable...ness - Matt's Thoughts

Do you remember the little jingle "The unsinkable taste of Cheerios, not a lot of sugar to weigh down those Cheerios"? (The off brands are unsinkable too by the way.) You push it down with your spoon and it slides to the side and floats to the top in defiance. You cover it with banana slices and BAM it pops up next to the banana slice with arrogance. You struggle to destroy it and all the evil that lies within it by taking it to Mt. Doom in Mordor where the ring was forged and...oh, sorry, wrong ring.

So, Cheerios - and the off brands of it - are buoyant. Seemingly no matter what is done they overcome and rise to the top. Does that describe you? Do you choose to rise to the top, or do you allow circumstances to dictate your mood? This is a mindset in life that has implications in marriage. People in healthy marriages rise to the top instead of fighting each other. We achieve this by recognizing who the enemy is, joining forces with our covenant partner and relying on the faithful Lord - the original rotfl.

The enemy is Satan, the accuser*. We are in the trench side by side with our spouse defending each other by building each other up with appreciative actions and words. Satan wants to tear down our marriage relationship and friendly fire is one of his most effective tactics. In our family a verse we often quote at meal times is, "Be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry" (James 1:19). The children think we are directing this teaching at them, but I need this drilled into me to help me keep my aim away from Laura.

On my own I don't have that unsinkable...ness, but the Lord is faithful and buoys me. It's a matter of me letting go of my selfishness and living by His Spirit. As with living by the words in James 1:19 this is easier said than done. If we allow, God's grace changes us to be more like him day by day.

Lord of the Rings - Laura's Thoughts

Admittedly, I know a lot more about Cheerios than I know about Mt. Doom in Mordor in *Lord of the Rings*. Four boys and thirteen thousand (off brand) Cheerios later, I've seen the buoyancy of Cheerios a few times. And yet, Matt got me thinking about the *Lord of the Rings*.

Our wedding rings symbolically bind us. They represent the covenant we made with each other and to God on our wedding day.

We have two choices: We can let God be at the center of our marriage, and let Him give us the grace to react and respond to our spouse in a godly way - or we can let Satan creep in and chink away at the beauty of the bond that our wedding rings represent. We can buoy, even when we don't feel like it, even when it hurts, even when it's hard - or we can give in to the selfishness that at the time seems the easier choice.

The question we must ask ourselves is this: In our marriage, who is the Lord of the Rings? Is it God - or is it the Deceiver? Are we allowing God to help us rise to the top, or are we carelessly sinking into a pit of selfish living?

**Read Rev. 12:9-12 for insight on the accuser and how to overcome him.*

Consult Your Partner

Surprise!!! - Matt's Thoughts

In Matt's head about 3pm - Phew, I can't wait for a little *me* time tonight. Maybe I could get some guys together to play some games, maybe even soccer! If that doesn't work out I can always play any multitude of computer games and just relax.

Matt begins making plans with other guys.

In Laura's head about 3pm - Phew, I can't wait for Matt to be able to help me with these restless boys so that I can get a few things done around here. I may even see if I can steal away for an hour or two by myself tonight while the boys are with Matt. (I don't claim to know a whole lot of what is going through her mind so I'll let her go there.)

Laura has her own agenda in mind.

You can see where this is headed, right?

(Of course, all characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.)

I do have occasional game nights, but I consult my partner first.

In a business partnership before making a decision that would affect the company we would consult our partners. More importantly, in a life-long committed partnership with our spouse we need to communicate before acting in many instances. Decisions regarding the way we spend our time and money are maybe the most frequent. In healthy marriages spouses consult each other and align themselves on the same wavelength regarding these decisions. Fortunately, Laura and I discovered this early in our marriage. We talk often about how we plan to spend money and time so that we are on the same page and surprises have become rarer. We save surprises for special occasions.

Should I Buy this Watermelon? - Laura's Thoughts

When to consult...when not to consult? I mean, do I need to consult Matt when I'm at the grocery store to be sure it's okay with him if I buy the watermelon that's on sale for \$2.50? And I'm thinking that I may want to trim my fingernails tonight after dinner. I wonder if that's okay with Matt?

(Above examples are as fictitious as the characters in Matt's story. Except for the watermelon. I *did* buy a watermelon.)

I don't need to consult Matt about every watermelon purchase I make or about every detail of my schedule. Know why? Because we've *already consulted* about our overall grocery budget and food preferences, as well as the roles we play. In this case, I am the chief watermelon picker-outer and purchaser. It's important to be clear about the big stuff so that the little stuff isn't quite so complicated.

"As far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." This verse from Romans is one our family works to live by. Respecting our partner enough to consult him/her about purchases or time commitments is one of the best ways to live at peace. Not only that, do I really want the pressure of making major decisions for our family without consulting Matt? I pretty much don't.

Unless, of course, we're talking about a watermelon.

P.S. We believe that **connecting** with your spouse is super high on the list for a healthy marriage, and hopefully that theme will be evident as it is woven throughout the A to Z tips.

Dream Together

Part One

From Good to Great - Matt's Thoughts

From day one of our marriage Laura and I have had a good marriage. Most importantly, Jesus is our Lord and Savior. Thus, we have similar values which has meant very little conflict in important areas of life. We try to live by the Golden Rule of treating each other as we would want to be treated. Better yet, we are friends, not just roommates. We had a good marriage.

But, in our opinion, a good marriage is not enough. We want to have a great marriage. Not for ourselves, but for God's Kingdom. We believe great marriages honor the Lord. We see Him using couples to accomplish His purposes and we want in on that. Yes, He can and does use anyone in any kind of relationship, but a great marriage is what we are pursuing.

About a year ago I got into an evaluation phase. I put in writing the priorities that were in my head and heart. Then I took a serious look at how I was spending my time. What was on the paper did not fully match up with my real life. The next day I asked Laura to do the same activity. After we reflected on our lives and considered what changes we needed to make, we were then on the launching pad for a great marriage. We would not be satisfied with cruise control in our marriage. We were ready to lift off. We began to dream together by asking, "How can God best use us as a couple for His glory and purposes?"

Good is Good, but Great is Better – Laura's Thoughts

Matt and I are both a little bit "visionary" in the way we think - always coming up with ideas and trying to be creative. Who am I kidding when I say "little bit"? Matt is *very* visionary, a quality I admire and appreciate (most of the time). :)

Because we've always been a couple who "looks into the future" and talks together about our goals and dreams, it's been interesting to recognize how recently we've watched our marriage go from good to great. Having a good marriage has been very, very good. Thank you God for a good marriage!

So how did God make it *great*?

I believe it has a lot to do with the evaluating we've done recently. When you are already connected as a couple, already working hard together toward common goals, already on the same page in the important areas of life – and *then* you ask yourselves, "How can God best use us as a couple for His glory and purposes?" – something pretty amazing begins to happen.

Assignment: Brainstorm and discuss how God can use you and your spouse's abilities, passions, and experience to serve together.

Part Two

God's Marriage Math - Matt's Thoughts

Dreaming together is part of a healthy marriage for at least three reasons. First, dreaming together implies that you anticipate a hopeful future. That alone infuses your relationship. The power of positive thinking is extraordinary and energizing?. It is exciting to think about what can be accomplished together. It doesn't end with just a dream though. Act on it. Make goals and have a plan to fulfill the goals. As you make progress, celebrate with each other and keep the momentum rolling.

Second, dreaming together demonstrates how two become one in marriage. The concept of two becoming one, as stated in Genesis 2:24 and quoted by Jesus and the Apostle Paul, incorporates more than a physical union. You are uniting numerous facets including your ambitions. Instead of two people going in different directions only pursuing their own goals, a merging occurs. Your combined abilities, experience, and passions create an incredible God blessed synergy. The two of you, empowered by God, produce more than the sum of your work individually. God's math equations look like this:

$$\text{Two become One } 1 + 1 = 1 \quad \text{Synergy } 1 + 1 > 2$$

Third, dreaming and praying together about those dreams unleashes God's promise in Ephesians 3:20-21 which reads, "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen." In our dreaming phase we are imagining great works being accomplished for the Lord. Then the Lord takes it and multiplies it beyond what we can even imagine. We bring a sack lunch to Jesus - like the boy who brought some bread and fish (John 6:1-15) - and He multiplies it into a feast for all...with leftovers. So dream big!

Sack Lunch - Laura's Thoughts

Because food is "my thing", I love what Matt said about bringing a sack lunch to Jesus and watching him multiply it. As a couple, we can and should dream big. We can fill our lunch bag with some pretty exciting foods, including juicy fresh fruit and rich desserts - but Jesus is the one that actually makes our offerings *become* something wonderful. That's what he does with our dreams.

Or *sometimes*, He might exchange our sack lunch offering with a different one - one that we'd never thought of and one that is much better for us as a couple and as a family. This can sometimes be painful, but as we see God's great plans for us unfold and recognize that these plans were born out of our kingdom focused dreams, we see that God's plans for us are truly more than we could ever ask or imagine.

Start dreaming. God is huge!

Empower Your Spouse

My Darling, Jet Fuel - Matt's Thoughts

Think back to one of your best teachers, coaches or mentors. They helped you become better. Without them would you have become better in that area of your life? I doubt it. They empowered you.

I really like the word *empower*. I used it in the Appreciate Your Spouse and Dream Together (part two) posts. I've been empowered by the Holy Spirit and the Spirit working through other people. Because of that empowerment, I am able to help others. I have the heart of a coach/teacher. Training, equipping and inspiring others brings me joy. It thrills me to invest in others and watch them succeed.

I have to "Amen!" an article Laura wrote in her Being Your Husband's Help Meet series titled, Make Him or Break Him. We can help our spouses become better and in turn they pass on that energy to others. We can suck the life out of our spouse and become upset when our relationship withers. Another choice we can make is to let our spouse fend for him/herself and see what happens. If I was being torn down by Laura, I don't know that I'd be able to train, equip and inspire others or that I'd be thrilled to see others succeed. I'd be in survival mode relationally.

Instead, she is propelling me toward greater works. She's not merely a support, but my jet fuel. Usually I call her "Sweetie." Other times it's, "Babe." But she's really my, "Jet Fuel".

My Biggest Fan - Laura's Thoughts

Whether I'm standing in the church foyer, watching games at the soccer field or making my rounds at a family reunion - these are the statements I hear from others: "Matt told us about the great dinner you made tonight." "Your hubby was bragging on you earlier when we were talking about how our week's been going." "Matt shared with us some of the writing you've been doing - way to go!" "It was great to catch up with Matt earlier. Sounds like you're Miss America!"

Well, I guarantee you I'm barely Miss Matched Socks most days, *much less* Miss America - but in Matt's eyes...I'm all that and more. It's humbling, it's gratifying...it's *empowering*.

If Matt thinks I'm "all that" - I consider it a challenge to live up to, as well as an honor to be so highly esteemed in his eyes. He's not blind to my weaknesses. He knows my struggles better than anyone. But he values me and has confidence in me. His support of my efforts truly empowers me to become a better, more godly woman. I cannot think of a more precious gift I'd rather receive from my beloved.

Are you tearing your spouse down, or are you working to empower them toward a more godly, productive life for the Kingdom?

Fun With Your Spouse

Fun and Funner - Matt's Thoughts

"What fun it is to laugh and sing a sleighing song tonight...Oh, what fun it is to ride in a one horse open sleigh."

Maybe that is some people's version of fun, but not me. I'm not a grinch. I just don't enjoy singing sleighing songs or riding in one horse open sleighs getting snow and slush flung on me. It's not fun for me to sing that song because in general when I sing the words to songs, I agree with the words. My sweetie, on the other hand, enjoys singing that sleighing song, while I'd rather be ~~cleaning the gunk out from under my toenails~~ playing a strategy game in a warm, dry place with a hot drink. ~~If I can be found~~ When it is time to sing sleighing songs, I do it with my best face on and I try to not talk like a martyr to Laura later. She knows it is not fun for me. I also know that most long strategy games are not fun for her. We have discovered many activities that are fun for both of us!

Couples in healthy marriages seek out ways that they can have fun together and they make it happen. If you find yourself going in different directions for fun, then get together and brainstorm for ways the two of you can have fun together.

Try new exploits: Recently, we went for a bike ride and it turned out not being great fun, but we definitely laughed about the experience. So, even though we don't plan to ride bikes together for pleasure, that episode was a fun time spent together.

Relive pastimes: What did you do that was a blast when you were dating?

Hopefully you have some fun activities in the "old faithful" category: Flirting is fun...and following through is even more fun.

Your tight budget is not an excuse. Be creative considering what you could do for free...and have fun!

Make Time- Laura's Thoughts

According to *His Needs, Her Needs*, a book Matt and I read together before we got married and have since read a second time - a man really appreciates it if his wife will be his recreational partner. That's why, through the years, I've tried so hard to enjoy bike rides and those long, horrible, tedious, boring, never-ending, grueling strategy games that Matt likes so well. (I'm sorry - did I just say all that out loud?)

Thankfully, it's not been too hard to come up with activities we can do together that we *both* enjoy. But why is it that sometimes it becomes too easy to spend all of our time together talking about bills and schedules and life logistics, and we forget to simply stop and have fun? As a

task oriented mother and wife, I personally find it difficult to turn off the never ending "to-do" list in my head and just chill out and have down time with my husband. All work and no play makes a marriage...well, not so fun.

Relax. Be silly. Laugh. Share inside jokes. And oh yes...flirt. ;)

Make time for fun in your marriage.

How do you and your spouse have fun together?

Give to One Another

Give and Take - Matt's Thoughts

Every healthy relationship must consist of both give and take for it to last. We've got the "TAKE" part down with our hands tied behind our back and our fingers, toes, eyes and mid-digital hairs crossed. So we need to put our efforts into the "GIVE."

Give your sweetie a back-rub (if you know he/she would enjoy it). Give your spouse a break today from what is usually their duty or household chore by doing it for them - and then whether that act is noticed or not, give him/her a hug or a kiss. The paradox is that when we give, we are blessed tremendously. For one, usually our spouse will recognize our efforts and appreciate us for it. Sometimes they go after paybacks. When our spouse gives and we catch them, why not have some fun with it and say something like, "I'm gonna get you back," and look for an opportunity soon for "paybacks."

Secondly, I'm guessing you've experienced this paradox found in Acts 20:35, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." You set out to serve someone else and in doing so you are blessed more than you bless those you serve. Maybe it is therapeutic or cathartic for you to look outside of yourself. More than likely, you benefit relationally because your interaction with those you are serving is insightful, memorable, or even profound. Most importantly, your heart becomes more like God's. That heart gives and ... gives some more.

Did You Even Notice? - Laura's Thoughts

I'd like to go with what Matt said about "whether that act is noticed or not..."

Wouldn't we like all of our acts of service and giving to be *noticed*? Don't we want to be verbally appreciated and lavished with praise for all we do? When we perform acts of kindness, break our backs doing the dirty work, unselfishly - day after day - work to meet the needs of our family...we'd all really like to be told thank you and to be given a wonderful appraisal of how great we are.

Oh my, but did I just say, "unselfishly"? Why did *that* word burst forth out of my little typing fingers?

Yes. Did you know that we can do all varieties of acts of kindness and service to our spouse, and much of it can be done with a heart of *selfishness*? With an attitude of martyrdom? With thoughts of "poor me, I work so hard to please my spouse - and for what?" haunting our minds while we labor? I know it's true because I've been guilty of it many times.

When we give to our families by serving and loving them - and especially when we offer love and care to our spouse, we must surrender our selves to God and to our dear one.

We don't give of ourselves so that we'll be noticed, patted on the back or lavished with praise. We give of ourselves because this is what God calls us to do. We love and serve our spouse because we made the commitment on our wedding day to love, honor and cherish.

We give of ourselves because it truly is more blessed to give than to receive.

Honor Each Other

My Queen - Matt's Thoughts

On your wedding day, did you (your name here) promise to honor (your spouse's name here) above all others for as long as you both live? I've heard that phrase at several weddings and whether you said it or not...it is implied. What does that look like in a healthy marriage?

My first exposure to the concept of honor was as a child being taught the commandment "Honor your father and mother." I was taught that it was by my actions and speech that I honored or dishonored my parents...whether I was with them or not. In the presence of one's parents, a child often has the fear of punishment that keeps him in line. Thus, there is a greater impression made regarding honoring or dishonoring one's parents when the child's parents are not present.

Similarly, it seems to me that one displays the greatest honor or dishonor to their spouse when they are not with their spouse by the way they act and ESPECIALLY talk about their spouse. Therefore, any chance we get, we need to speak positively of our beloved. It is easy to get caught up in negative talk. Yes, your spouse has annoying habits, imperfections and character flaws - just like you and every other married person - but let's steer clear of the gripe sessions others are having even if we know we can relate. It's like a pig pen where neither you nor your spouse will get away without getting muddy. Instead, be the one who shifts the conversation from pitiful me to praise for my life-long love. Usually, then, either the crowd disperses or another person pipes in with something positive about their spouse.

Let's shower our darling with presents when they're not present by speaking highly of him/her.

I have much room for improvement, but in her presence I try to treat Laura as my queen, and when we're apart I aim to let everyone around me know by the way I talk about her that she is my queen.

Do Unto Others - Laura's Thoughts

Here's a question: What do we possibly have to gain by talking negatively about our spouse to others? Besides the fact that it's sinful, it actually has the potential to make *you* look bad. After all - *you're the one* who married this person of whom you have nothing nice to say.

There are times I may need to share something about our marriage with another person in an effort to obtain advice on how to handle a situation - but I have to be super careful to do this in a way that *still honors Matt*. And I have to prayerfully choose the person I confide in.

These are the some of the things I try to consider regarding how I talk *to my husband* or talk to others *about my husband* which I adapted from a post I wrote a year and a half ago [called Make Him or Break Him](#):

- Would I want *him/her* to talk to *me* like this?
- Would I want him/her to look at me this way when he's/she's talking to me?
- Would I want him/her to talk to his/her friends about me like this?
- Would I want him/her to talk to me in front of other people this way?

If the answer is "no" to any of those questions, then with all due respect, I have to suggest that you just *hush*.

Or on the flip side, as Matt talked about, if instead you are intentional about saying honorable things about your spouse to others, you will be amazed at what a rewarding experience this is!

Be Intentional

A Conscious Choice - Matt's Thoughts

Jim Collins wrote a business book called *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... And Others Don't* (HarperBusiness, 2001). *Good to Great* shows that greatness is not primarily a function of circumstance; but largely a matter of conscious choice and discipline.

In a healthy marriage, both the husband and the wife are intentional about improving the health of their marriage.

If you wanted to get healthier physically by toning your muscles and improving your digestion, but continued to sit on the couch and eat junk, then your health will not improve. The same goes for your marriage relationship.

A plan must be made, action must be taken, accountability should be in place and a regular check-up/evaluation brings it full circle.

Following through with positive choices can help your marriage shift from good to great.

Meet George Jetson; Jane his wife. - Laura's Thoughts

Our kids have a couple of Jetsons cartoon DVDs which are always good for a chuckle. The head of the household, George Jetson, complains that while during a particularly "busy" day at work, he actually has to reach up to push his button an entire *three* times, if you can possibly imagine this exhausting type of assignment. His wife, Jane, is a homemaker. She punches the family's dinner menu order into her dinner machine thingy, and *tada* - and out comes dinner. Clean up after dinner happens with the push of another button and when she needs to vacuum? Well there's a button she can push for that too. Their lives are about as simple and easy as a life can be, with robots and machines doing all of their work. (And yet, good grief, they still complain about having to push so many buttons. Are people - or um, cartoon characters - never content? Yes, I suppose that's another post for another day.)

I think most of us would prefer life to be as simple and easy as possible. We plan to grow up and meet the man/woman of our dreams. We get married with plans to live happily ever after - the end.

My question would be: What part of your "plan to live happily ever after" actually contains a *plan*?

Like the Jetsons, we'd like to push the "happily ever after" button in life and sit back and let the happiness happen. But a healthy marriage - a marriage full of the joy God intended - doesn't

just happen. You must each be intentional about working to create and maintain a healthy marriage.

Stop sitting on the couch eating the junk food of an unhealthy marriage (selfishness, pride, bitterness, laziness). Stop trying to push the easy button in life, waiting for that happily ever after picture you have of a healthy marriage to just fall into your lap. Stop waiting for your spouse to step up to the plate while you continue to grow more and more discontent.

Your *happily ever after* begins when *you* become intentional about being what God calls you to be as a husband or a wife.

Jubilee

Restart Button - Matt's Thoughts

In the Old Testament (Leviticus 25) we read about the year of Jubilee. Land that had been sold to pay debts was returned to its owner and people who sold themselves as servants were set free so that people in desperate situations would not be taken advantage of. Using a modern day analogy, the restart button was pushed. This was to be practiced every fifty years. In a healthy marriage Jubilee takes place more often than every fifty years. Usually we call it forgiveness and it must occur often. Forgiveness is a MASSIVE component in marriage. We need to push the restart button, offering Jubilee to our spouse, and we need it pushed for us, receiving Jubilee from our spouse.

Several years ago, I really needed Laura's Jubilee. I was playing computer games late into the night for many nights. I wasn't getting the sleep I needed which led to all kinds of consequences that Laura took the brunt of, and more importantly we were not spending the end of the day together connecting with each other. She expressed to me her desire for us to be together more and I agreed, but I was lacking in self-control and did not follow through with my agreement...for waaaaaaaaaaaaay too many nights. This hurt Laura as she felt like I was choosing games over her. She was right, I was choosing games over her, not willfully, but due to immaturity, selfishness and - I'll be blunt - stupidity.

I hurt my wife and I needed the restart button. Thank you Laura for pushing the restart button. (As a side note, we jointly made a plan that has moved us past those issues.)

The Chosen One - Laura's Thoughts

Issues with computer games in a marriage may seem petty to some of you who have experienced painful betrayal in areas such as pornography or infidelity. We realized that at the time of our struggle and we realize it now. But the issue remains the same: I want to be Matt's chosen one. He wants to be mine.

Anytime you choose something or someone instead of choosing your spouse - you're making the wrong choice. That's not what this post is ultimately about, but please hear it loud and clear. Beyond your relationship with the Father, your spouse needs to be your first priority, so **let go of yourself and choose your beloved.**

That's exactly what Matt did. He made the decision to grow through his selfish desires - and he chose to put our relationship first. I became his number one again. But even so, Jubilee didn't occur until I had truly forgiven the hurt he had caused me by what I had felt as neglect. If Matt had made the changes I asked him to make, and then I had simply shrugged and said, "Well, it's about time," our marriage may not be in a much healthier state than it had been.

We had to push the restart button. I had to truly forgive, and together we came up with a plan that worked to grow our healthy marriage. There is no room for bitterness in a marriage that is moving forward toward greatness. Don't wait 50 years for Jubilee. Forgiveness starts today.

Kingdom Focused

Dethroning King Dumb - Matt's Thoughts

I've found that praying the same brief Biblical phrase for several weeks at a time works for me. It is similar to steeping tea. The longer the phrase stays in my head to "brew" the stronger an impact it makes on me. For a couple months now, I've been regularly praying the following phrase Jesus used when he taught how to pray: "Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." My understanding is that I am to be his instrument in making this happen. I want to be a part of bringing God's Kingdom to us, accomplishing His will on earth as it is being accomplished in heaven. I should live to please my King. My problem is King Dumb - that's me - wants to do his own thing. King Dumb has his agenda. King Dumb builds his castle waving his prideful banner. King Dumb feeds his desires. King Dumb cares for others when King Dumb benefits.

Living in our own little King Dumb, or Queen Dumb if that fits you better, is not beneficial to a marriage. The healthiest marriages I have witnessed contain two people with one focus, one purpose, one Lord, one Kingdom. Their lives reverberate another of Jesus' prayers, "Not my will but yours be done."

Don't Mess With My To-Do List - Laura's Thoughts

My world is full of "to-dos". I have writing to do, laundry to do, dishes to do, cooking to do, cleaning to do...a never ending list of to-dos. I get a lot of work done each day. Why? Because I'm driven and am very task oriented. I can knock out a long to-do list and then come back for more. Yes, I'm very good at accomplishing many tasks each day.

What about the kids? What about my husband? What about my church family, my neighbors, the people I run into at the store? *What about them?* Get out of my way - **I have a to-do list**. This is me when I am not being Kingdom Focused. Pretty, huh?

I've had to learn the hard way that life is not about me or my to-do lists. In fact, not only is life not about my to-do lists, it is instead very much about others. People. *God's people*. When I pry my eyes and brain away from my tasks and look instead to the needs of the people God has put in my life, I find that suddenly that laundry pile has very little significance. The clothes still make their way into the washing machine, but my heart no longer dwells on the never ending list of to-dos. When I truly seek to live as Jesus wants me to live, when I stop and listen to what God wants me to do, when I begin to care more about loving others than loving my list...much can be accomplished for God's Kingdom.

Today's to-do list? Focus on God's Kingdom.

Listen

Synchronized Staring - Matt's Thoughts

When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie...that's absurdity. When you look into your spouse's eyes and truly listen...that's *amore*.

Here's a question for self-evaluation: Is my beloved's voice mixing with all the other noise in my life? If so, something needs to change.

Healthy marriages consist of two people listening to each other. My best listening is achieved when my eyes are on my prized one. So, I say, if at all possible, look at your spouse in the eyes when he/she is communicating to you. Okay, when you are changing a diaper, your focus needs to be there, but pause or turn off the media and give your full attention to the most important person in your life; the game or show - or gameshow - really isn't important.

Remember when you first looked into each other's eyes and your hearts raced with adrenaline? Maybe your story didn't quite happen that way, but think about other instances when you would have competed for gold in the Olympic Event of Synchronized Staring. Practice that again right now. If your "Romantic" is not with you now, then at your next opportunity look lovingly into his/her eyes and listen. We can't help but smile when we do this. We smile because we know we are being heard. We smile because we know we are loved.

I'm Sorry, Did You Say Something? - Laura's Thoughts

It is a fact that if I'm working at the computer, Matt has learned that he has to say, "Are you in writing mode or are you able to listen for a minute?" Yes, when I write, I go into a zone. (See like right now - I'm typing and I can't hear a thing you're saying.)

Sometimes that's okay - we all have to learn to be selective about when we share something important with our spouse. If he/she is in the middle of balancing the checkbook, that may not be the best time to share a deep, heart-felt need or request. Just as important as listening is being thoughtful about when we'd like to truly be heard.

Do you know what I love about the way Matt listens to me? *He just listens*. He doesn't talk, he doesn't interrupt, he doesn't jump in with ideas of how to fix my situation. Usually, I just need to share and to be heard and cared for. When he's sharing something with me, he also appreciates if I just let him talk. Sometimes I like to try to finish his sentences for him. That's not nice and I'm working on not doing that. He can finish his own sentences quite well without my help.

If you're a good listener, your ears and heart are open - your mouth is not. And yes, like Matt said, it's best to look into your spouse's eyes when he or she shares. You can really hear better that way.

And that's why, at the end of the day after I've taken out my contacts, I have to say to Matt, "Will you hand me my glasses? I can't hear you very well." Either I'm a weirdo or eye contact is just that important in order to be a good listener.

Or maybe it's a little bit of both. ;)

Mentoring Relationships

What School are You Paying for? - Matt's Thoughts

"How much better to get wisdom than gold, to choose understanding rather than silver!"
(Proverbs 16:16) I'll Amen that.

"Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding."
(Proverbs 4:7) Amen to that too.

Now, how do I get me some of that wisdom and understanding that I so desperately need?

Most of my life I've been enrolled at UHK (University of Hard Knocks). UHK has an amazing presence. There are satellite campuses everywhere I go. But in my shining moments I've sought out a mentor and avoided the expense of UHK.

As Laura and I have aimed for a healthy marriage, we also have looked to some couples modeling a healthy marriage who are farther down the road in their marital journey. We have watched them from a distance and visited with them couple to couple. We've been encouraged from afar and challenged by their words. We've heard their regrets, taking them to heart so as to avoid UHK for ourselves, and we've taken mental notes regarding their victories so that we can attempt to gain the same outcome.

Why don't we do this more often, rather than paying room, board, tuition and fees to UHK?
Many times it's because I'm chasing gold and silver rather than wisdom and understanding.

How can I get me some wisdom?

"Listen to advice and accept instruction, and in the end you will be wise." (Proverbs 19:20)

Red Flag Relationships - Laura's Thoughts

Most of us tend to gravitate toward those who are in the same stage of life we are in. Singles like to hang out with other singles. Young marrieds like to spend time with other young marrieds. Parents with babies like to get together with other parents of babies. And on it goes. This is all great and truly - many of our best friendships are based on the fact that we have so much in common. There's absolutely nothing wrong with spending time and enjoying others in your stage of life - unless those are the *only* people you spend time with.

We've seen marriages destroyed because couples were not willing to look beyond their 20 or 30-something age group for companionship, guidance and encouragement. We've been heart-broken to see relationships crushed because young couples were spending too much time with other young couples. It's *dangerous* - watch and be aware of how close you are becoming with other couples, especially if these relationships are purely for fun and hold little spiritual depth.

Let a red flag be raised and make changes in your couple-to-couple friendships if you begin to find yourself becoming too "comfortable" with your friend's spouse.

Be intentional about spending time with couples who will sharpen you, encourage you and make your marriage stronger. Seek out couples who have been married longer than you and who know more than you about maintaining a healthy marriage. Don't be afraid of people who are older and wiser than you. Sit at their feet, ask questions, soak in what they have to say.

Your healthy marriage depends on it.

Nourish Your Marriage Relationship

I Heart Gardening - Matt's Thoughts

Okra, sweet corn, green beans, tomatoes, jalapenos and best of all sweet bell peppers. Our garden plots have been producing those for us this year. Last year our green beans didn't yield very much, but our sweet bell peppers have consistently performed well. We rotate where we plant most of our veggies each year and I'm convinced that the soil where we planted the green beans last year lacked nourishment. The one exception to rotating our crops has been the sweet bells. They are my "babies" that are always planted in our raised garden bed. If they don't thrive then the year has been a disaster in my opinion. I mix all kinds of nutrients in that soil and make sure they are given proper care so the fruit will be fantastic!

Yeah, this is a marriage post, so I'm guessing you can tell where this is going. Let's make some connections in this metaphor. I have several relationships (garden plots). The more time and effort I put into nurturing a relationship, the better opportunity (soil) there is for that relationship to be healthy (produce a good harvest). Some of my relationships have grown strong and then faded through the years. I'm convinced it is because they haven't been nourished as well. The one relationship I have committed to put above all others is with my wife...she is my "baby." Since she is my highest priority (raised garden bed) I want to mix all kinds of nutrients into that relationship and give her proper care so our marriage will be healthy.



Check out this ginormous red bell pepper from our well nourished soil. Go Big Red!

Empty Calories - Laura's Thoughts

I've shared in the past how sick I got physically when I wasn't getting enough nourishment. A diet consisting of lots of Pepsi and other empty calories can and will slowly suck the life out of a person. I learned this the hard way. We must have healthy nutrients in our bodies in order to thrive physically.

Are you, as the wife or husband, sucking the life out of your spouse, feeding your relationship full of empty calories and causing your marriage to be unhealthy?

Are your actions and words encouraging your spouse to be more godly, more productive and more loving...or are the things you do and the words you say *tearing down* your spouse and wearing him/her out? The more you fill others with the garbage that flows out of you, the less nourished your relationship with that person will be. It is incredibly *wearing* on a person to constantly have to work at pleasing you, satisfying your whims, guessing what your mood will be like today and so on.

Don't be a 2-liter bottle of wasted, life draining calories to your spouse. Instead, be intentional about offering nourishment in the form of words, actions and attitudes that build up, encourage and refresh the soul of the one you love.

In what ways are you nourishing your spouse?

Own It

Man in the Mirror - Matt's Thoughts

The invisible wall between the two of you looms larger than China's Great Wall...and yet you are in the same room. Though audibly silent, the decibel level inside the two heads match a jackhammer. You blew it. Your spouse has been wronged by you and he/she is upset. Excuses and people or circumstances to blame fill your head. There are plenty of them. And wow, he/she needs to calm down. They have wronged you before. Remember the time when...HOLD UP!!!

How 'bout a little 80's flashback to the only Michael Jackson song I reference in a serious way. Remember these lyrics? "I'm starting with the man in the mirror, I'm asking him to change his ways..."

No more justifying, rationalizing or faulting others. And don't you dare dig up the past.

Take ownership of your action (or inaction) in your mind and heart. Take ownership verbally by speaking the truth without any caveats: "I was wrong." "I acted selfishly." "I blew it."

Genuinely apologize and seek forgiveness from your spouse. If your spouse is still livid, forgiveness may not be extended to you right then. I'm going to advise you not to ask for confirmation on the spot. You may want to suggest a cool down period and then revisit this later.

Whether grace is offered immediately or not you must ask yourself, "What do I need to change so that I don't do this again?" Don't ignore this step or you'll find yourself in the same room with your spouse with the Great Wall between you...again. Make a plan to fix it and share this plan with someone. It may be best to share the plan with your spouse. It may also be beneficial to call in help from a friend who will hold you accountable.

Oaf used to be how I felt after I blew it with Laura. In my head I was telling myself, "You big oaf!"

Now OAF is the acronym for the action steps after I've been a big oaf: Own it, Ask for forgiveness, Fix it.

Once more from *Man in the Mirror*: "If you want to make [your marriage] a better place take a look at yourself and then make a ... change. Yeah! Make that change!"

But I Have Baggage - Laura's Thoughts

Wow, I have to say that I never thought we'd reference any of Michael Jackson's songs here at Heavenly Homemakers. I'm a little bit speechless. (Okay, not really.)

I think Matt makes a great point - why do we always tend to blame others when we have done something wrong? Sure, we all come into the marriage relationship with baggage. Some of us

more than others. This can be incredibly challenging and makes life and decision making quite a bit more difficult. But it *doesn't* excuse you from making bad choices and hurting others, particularly your beloved.

Did you do or say something you shouldn't have? No blame-shifting. No excuses. Own it.

Easier said than done, but who said doing what's right is always easy?

Hey, at least it's easier than trying to do the Moonwalk. (That was totally irrelevant, but if Matt can reference Michael Jackson, so can I, right?) (Oh wait - did I just blame-shift?)

Pray With Each Other

Innermost- Matt's Thoughts

Praying together is *ultimate intimacy*. The origin of the word intimate comes from the Latin *intimus* meaning "innermost." So this isn't, "Thank you God for this wonderful day, and our many wonderful blessings. Help [insert name here] get better. In Jesus name, Amen." I'm talking really pouring it all out to God allowing your dearest to hear your heart and hearing your dearest pour it all out to God. You are being intimate with both your creator and your lover. That's what I mean by ultimate intimacy. Healthy marriages contain spouses laying bare together physically and spiritually. Yes, you make yourself extremely vulnerable in these intimate moments. Isn't it great? Thank you God, that we don't have to keep all of life's struggles and joys packed inside. How great it is to share and bare your heart to the Lord with the one you've united yourself in marriage to.

While your innermost feelings flow out to the Lord, you are also hearing from the heart of your spouse and being heard. These connections to our Creator and our life-long marriage partner are vital. Sometimes, due to our busyness of life, different perspectives, or just plain oversight, we are unaware of a load that is weighing down our spouse. I have found that I am able to "check Laura's pulse" by praying with her. How is she doing? How can I encourage her? What specifically is burdening her?

Why don't I pray with her more? It is so beneficial for us. The excuses of time, exhaustion, fear of being heard, selfishly not really wanting to hear her, or whatever else I use in my head just disallow me from stronger unity with my Creator and my Companion. We all desire this ultimate intimacy.

Start Today - Laura's Thoughts

If you're not used to praying out loud with your spouse, this may possibly sound a little bit stressful to you. Oh, but can I urge you to work toward it anyway? It is beautiful to experience, these moments with you, your spouse and God.

If you, as a couple, are not already in the practice of praying together, one of you must take the lead to make this happen. Men - I strongly encourage *you* to be the one. Offer this gift to your wife.

And Gals - encourage this leadership in your husband. Open your heart up to God in front of your man. You can do this.

When you pray as a couple, your marriage bond can strengthen in ways it simply cannot strengthen otherwise. Prayer is powerful and effective.

Do you and your spouse pray together? If not, what do you feel is holding you back?

Quick to Listen

A Family Motto - Matt's Thoughts

Most interactions in any relationship can benefit from the maxims, "Be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry" (James 1:19). Boy, do these ever benefit a marriage relationship. I've tried being slow to listen and experienced the results there. I either needed to sheepishly ask Laura what she said because I wasn't listening or worse yet, I tried to guess what she said and go with that. Your guess to where that has ended up is much more accurate than my guess was at what I didn't listen to.

I've also practiced being quick to speak and found my foot in my mouth. The taste of the sole of my shoe is all too familiar. And yes, I've been quick to anger. That dirty Kleenex that missed the trash can means that I'll have to pick it up when I take out the trash!!! I'm incensed!!! (That's me throwing a terrible two's tantrum.)

We posted about listening and looking into each other's eyes for our "L" marriage tip, and we wanted to add more to it. James 1:19 is one of our family mottos. We try to repeat it often because we need to remind ourselves often and train ourselves. As a soccer coach I know there are fundamentals of the game that must be practiced very often in order to improve our game/skills. Likewise, in life, we feel that these are a few of the fundamentals in relationship development. Practicing these in our family will prepare our sons to be skilled when interacting with others and if they do marry someday, then these can improve the health of their marriage.

Hurry Up and Wait - Laura's Thoughts

I'm trying to understand what it looks like to be "quick to listen". Usually, I'm quick to jump to conclusions, quick to spat out something off the top of my head without giving it much thought, quick to make a judgment on someone before I know the whole story. None of these practices are healthy in *any* relationship, but they can be particularly harmful in a marriage relationship.

So what does it look like to instead be "quick to listen"? Could it be that I simply learn to simply *be still*? To be calm and wait? To listen with my heart to the needs of my beloved?

I try to be quick about every aspect of my life. I find I can get a lot done in a day by being quick about my work. But I think if I were to be quick to stop, be quick to be still, and be quick to listen to what God would have me to do, I may accomplish more for Him than my "quick" efforts ever could. I think I could go from a frantic mode to one of calm and peace.

And it's likely that if I'm quick to walk to the trashcan with my dirty Kleenexes instead of trying to throw them across the room in hopes that one out of ten might actually make it to the destination, I will save my dear husband and myself much time and frustration. *I'm working on that one.* ;)

Read Together

Being on the Same Page - Matt's Thoughts

Variety in marriage is fun. So, when it comes to reading together, mix it up, taking into consideration what would be good for the two of you. Laura and I have never gone wrong by reading books, articles, posts or other material that is written to help marriages. Even if it is not insightful for our context, at the very least we are side by side trying to align ourselves with each other. We have read from the Bible and discussed it and we have read material that is just plain fun...like a joke book. We don't read together every night, but we talk about what each of us is reading separately. I urge you to read at least one book together every year that is specifically for marriage relationships written by an author(s) who has a Christian worldview. Whether you borrow it from your local library, church library, or a friend, or whether you purchase it so that you can own it and reference it, the key word here is TOGETHER. If only one of you reads the book, then you're not on the same page...pun intended. Make it happen TOGETHER.

If you are like us, we have good ideas like reading a book together and then we blink and 2011 is almost history. This "good idea" of reading together probably won't take place unless you agree on the book and schedule it TOGETHER. Of course life happens and schedules need to be rearranged on occasion, but our experience has been that the time together and discussion that follows connects the two of us.

Yes, it needs to be intentional, but beware of the checklist mentality and the critiquing spirit - as in critiquing the author. Speaking from experience, I have needed to choose to have the right attitude when it is reading time. I remember one particular couple's devotional book that I was counting down the pages 'til it was complete. It just wasn't doing anything for me. The reason it wasn't doing anything for me was because of my attitude. Once I stopped the countdown and ceased being critical of the writer's style, then the discussion about its relativity to my marriage improved.

A suggestion if you are having trouble deciding: Visit with other couples who have healthy marriages and see what they would recommend reading and ask them why they would recommend it.

Yeah, What Matt Said - Laura's Thoughts

I think Matt said all of this wonderfully. The only thing I'd like to add is this: For those of you who don't enjoy reading, try books on CD. (I almost said "books on tape", which *like totally* tells you that we grew up in the 80's and that I used to have big hair.) You may not love every book or concept you read together, but be sure to ask yourself if you don't love it because it's difficult to hear. Sometimes the truth hurts. Allow God to stretch you and challenge you with books that enrich your marriage.

Books That Have Benefitted Us or Other Couples (alphabetical order):

Created to Be His Help Meet by Debi Pearl

His Needs Her Needs by Willard F. Harley Jr.

Intended for Pleasure by Ed Wheat MD and Gaye Wheat

Love and Respect by Dr. Emerson Eggerichs

Loving Your Marriage Enough to Protect It by Jerry B. Jenkins

Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus by John Gray

Night Light by Dr. James & Shirley Dobson

Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts: Seven Questions to Ask Before (and After) You Marry by Les & Leslie Parrot (This is what we are currently reading and it good for us even after 17 years of marriage)

The 5 Love Languages by Dr. Gary Chapman

What have you and your spouse read together that you would recommend?

Selfless

Symbiotic relationships - Matt's Thoughts

Just a reminder in case you forgot: The universe does not revolve around you...It revolves around me. HaHa and Ouch because that's what I'm constantly fighting. I need the reminder found in Philippians 2:4, "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others."

When the universe revolves around me, then the relationships I form are self-serving. I befriend someone who is an encourager in order to stroke my ego. I spend time with another so that it will make me look good. I get married for what I'm going to get out of it. God's design is best, where a relationship sharpens both people (Proverbs 27:17).

At our family trip to the Omaha Zoo this summer, I learned about the three different symbiotic relationships - parasitism, commensalism and mutualism. Symbiosis is "the living together in more or less intimate association or close union of two dissimilar organisms" (from merriam-webster.com). (It makes me laugh when I connect symbiosis to marriage as the "union of two dissimilar organisms.")

Let's each evaluate our role in our symbiotic marriage relationships while defining the three types. Does your role fall into the category of parasitism where you are living entirely for yourself to the detriment of your spouse? Maybe commensalism sounds more like the way you treat your spouse. You obtain benefits from the other organism in your more or less intimate association while you neither damage nor benefit them...even roommates should perform better. If you are, instead, selflessly laying your life down for your spouse and your spouse is doing the same, then you are practicing mutualism- a mutually beneficial relationship. Healthy marriages are mutualistic relationships where you serve and sharpen one another because you are selfless.

True Joy - Laura's Thoughts

I have found that when I am truly seeking to live selflessly, that is when I am most joyful. Ironic, isn't it? I would think that my happiness would overflow each time I am able to get my own way and do things exactly the way *I* want to do them, *thankyouverymuch*.

It is okay to allow yourself to be served, to be encouraged by others, to spend time with people who will make you a better person. But if your heart is focused on self - getting, doing and having things your way - and not on what you can give, do and share with others, you will never experience true joy.

It's a beautiful thing when a husband and wife both seek to serve one another selflessly. Needs are met, bitterness and anger fade away, and true peace and joy fill the home.

Selflessness begins with you. Who are you living for?

Teamwork

1+1 is ... - Matt's Thoughts

I absolutely love teamwork. I loathed my chores when I was young: folding laundry, doing the dishes, dusting, vacuuming, cleaning the sinks and toilets. I couldn't do these activities while playing Atari or eating a Scooby snack with "Raggy." Then my sister and I figured out synergy. Well, we didn't know the word *synergy* or its definition – a mutually advantageous conjunction – at ages 11 and 12 but we found out that we could get our chores finished quicker if we worked together. The teamwork routine was that we put off our chores until 30 minutes before mom would be getting home and first we'd frantically do the chores that had to be completed going solo. Then we'd holler from another room, "Ready to do teamwork?" Then, it was almost fun as we accomplished more in a few minutes than we could have by ourselves in twice the amount of time. The flurry of joint activity would complete just as mom drove up and after a high five we could act like our chores had been finished hours ago.

What if in marriage we could "do teamwork"? The Teacher says in Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken."

Man's math is $1+1=2$; God's math is $1+1 > 2$

In a healthy marriage because of God's grace two individuals united accomplish more than the sum of its parts. To sum up and confuse more, God makes the two become one ($1+1=1$) and yet the two are greater than two ($1+1 > 2$).

The Negative Equation - Laura's Thoughts

God's math works every time. When a couple is on the same page and selflessly working together, they can accomplish *so much more* for God's kingdom than they can accomplish as individuals.

But I'd also like to throw in another math equation. In a marriage, if both spouses aren't working together in a selfless way and are instead tearing each other down, $1+1$ can actually be *less* than one.

Since that equation doesn't match up with God's math, I guess we'd need to say that $1+1 < 1$ would be the math of the Enemy. Satan would love to see you and your spouse destroy each other so that not only are you no longer effectively pursuing God's kingdom as a strong Christian couple, you aren't even productive as an individual.

Which equation are you going to choose? Are you going to pursue teamwork, which in effect produces much for the Kingdom; or are you going to live for yourself and treat your spouse in a way that chips away at their productivity?

If your spouse isn't building you up, don't let that give you an excuse for being less productive. And if you are the spouse that needs to step it up and become more of a team player, consider yourself kicked in the pants.

Be what God calls you to be. Anything less just simply doesn't add up.

Uplift Your Spouse in Prayer

Intercessory Prayer - Matt's Thoughts

Blogs are great because run-on sentences are acceptable. So, here goes.

I pray for my children, the elders of my local church, the movers and shakers of our country, those with specific needs I know about. I pray for those in tragedies many miles away because that is sometimes the only way I can help. But I feel like I can pray best for myself and the one I know most intimately, the one I share the most joy and pain with, the one I've failed the most, the one who needs my grace, the one I'm teaming up with to parent our children, the one who lives with my annoying habits, the one encouraging and sharpening me in my faith, the one who vowed for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health until death do us part, the one I committed myself to for life, the one...praying for me.

No Greater Gift - Laura's Thoughts

Wives, we can try to do all the right things. We can cook his favorite meals, work to manage our home in a way that is most pleasing to him, and try to meet his needs in all the ways he prefers. But none of these tasks are as important to our healthy marriage as making it a priority to pray for our husband's needs, and asking God to grow his character into the godly man he needs to be.

Husbands, you can be a hard worker, provide well for your family, help out around the house, and work to meet your wife's needs in all the ways she prefers. But if you are not praying for her, bringing her needs before the Father, asking God to work in her heart for His purposes...something vitally important will be lacking in your marriage relationship.

There is no greater gift we can give our spouse than the gift of prayer. Uplift one another before God. He's waiting to hear you and to work in your relationship in mighty ways.

Vulnerable

Surgery on Your Soul - Matt's Thoughts

Purposely make yourself vulnerable? Although that flies in the face of the human desire to have the upper hand in a relationship it has been my experience that vulnerability, which is seemingly weak, has made me stronger. Hopefully you can follow my choppy thoughts.

In a healthy marriage two people are so connected that they go beyond commonplace communication into touchy topics that make themselves vulnerable. They allow themselves to be vulnerable yet they are confident that they won't be attacked. The two talk about everything: temptations, in-laws, physical intimacy preferences, conflicting opinions and stances, sin in your life, fears, failures, confusing issues in life and in your faith journey, sin in your spouse's life, and other difficult topics.

The two talk about everything, both shallow and deep because they are friends. Friends listen. Friends build up. Friends even wound when necessary. As a matter of fact, the meaning of the root word in *vulnerable* is - to wound. The "wound" is truth spoken in love from your dearest friend who wants the best for you. Like the Biblical Proverb says, "The kisses of an enemy may be profuse, but faithful are the wounds of a friend" (27:6). So, part of making yourself vulnerable is allowing your spouse to do surgery on your soul.

But who wants surgery?!? Well, when there is floating cartilage that locks up your knee often enough surgery becomes an option. When a sizable cancerous tumor is detected, then removal by knife will be chosen. I am a sinner. I want a healthy marriage. I need the knife that removes the floating cartilage and cancerous tumors in my soul. I need the faithful wounds of a friend. And so, becoming vulnerable by sharing my weaknesses with my wife/friend so that she can gently do surgery has made me stronger.

The Gift of Vulnerability - Laura's Thoughts

Whether we realize it or not, being vulnerable is a gift we can give our spouse, ourselves and our marriage. Don't try to put up walls to protect yourself from what you might learn while being vulnerable. Trust your spouse and share your heart. There is great beauty in opening yourself up to hear what you need to hear, to share what you need to share, and to love in a way that is so free you'll wonder why you ever held back.

My greatest moments of personal growth have come from the times I am vulnerable to Matt and let him help me work through my weaknesses. If I ask, "What can I do to stay calm when the boys are trying my patience?" or if I tell him, "I am really struggling today with my feelings toward xyz. I need to forgive and I'm not sure how," Matt doesn't love me less. In fact, when we open ourselves up and share intimately, this is when we grow the most - both in our marriage relationship and in our relationships with the Father.

Worship

Connected - Matt's Thoughts

Woven throughout our healthy marriage posts is the theme of connectedness. A healthy marriage consists of two people connected to each other. Marriages that honor the Lord consist of two people connected to our Creator. So, a healthy marriage that honors the Lord consists of two people connected to our Creator and to each other.

That is our aim and our desire for you. When I consider the periods of our life when we experienced this at its best, by God's grace, it has been due to our times of worship together. I believe that is because worship is both humbling and empowering. Humbling because I'm interacting with the Creator of the universe. Empowering because I'm interacting with the Creator of the universe. What doesn't bode well for my marriage is when I get arrogant or selfish, or conversely, feel useless or incompetent. I'm not the center of the universe, but the One who is the center of the universe is living in me!

Although we urge you to worship together in group settings with other Christians, we want you to also think outside the box...err building. My view of worship may be a bit broader than others, but when I consider Psalm 148, for example, and that the sun and moon, mountains and hills, lightning and hail, plants and trees, and animals and humans are all urged to praise the Lord, my view of worship expands. God's creation praises Him by being (and therefore doing) what they were created to be (and do). What are the two of you created to be and do?

But What If... - Laura's Thoughts

This is our aim and desire for you. This is likely your aim and desire also. What if, however, your spouse doesn't feel the same way about pursuing a relationship with the Creator? Your spouse is not a robot. You cannot program him/her to do and to be what you want.

Do not lose hope. God is stronger, more powerful, and more willing than we understand to do more than we ask or can imagine. Your personal worship and devotion to God can and will bring the light to your household that you desire.

Worship with your spouse is beautiful, but if this is not an option for you at this time, do not underestimate the power of your own personal worship, praise, and heart-cry to the Father. He is listening. He can bring about that connectedness you long for, both with Himself, and with your spouse.

Let your life be worship, with your spouse, without your spouse, all the time. God will be glorified.

X in a Healthy Marriage

Of Course "X" is for Sex - Matt's Thoughts

You and your spouse are not just roommates. God's design for marriage includes passion and pleasure. Have you read Song of Solomon?

Or how about Proverbs 5:18-19? Solomon is giving his sons all kinds of advice in the first nine chapters of Proverbs, much of which has to do with warnings against adultery. It is in this context that he says,

"May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth.
A loving doe, a graceful deer—may her breasts satisfy you always,
may you ever be captivated by her love."

That doesn't sound dull to me.

A healthy marriage includes mutual passion and mutual pleasure. In general, the husband's sexual appetite is stronger - as in he desires sex more often than his wife. It doesn't take much for him to think of his wife in a sexual way. Any of the following are possible: He could simply see his woman and think...sex; he might smell his woman and think...sex; he could hear his woman and think...sex; he may think about his woman and think...sex; often, if he touches his woman he's thinking...sex. For her thoughts to go to sex, in general, it's not so much about one of her physical senses, but if she feels loved. This varies from woman to woman and is part of the two becoming one. They become one as they come to know each other better in every way. If a husband knows and practices what communicates love to his wife "just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" as the apostle Paul puts it in Ephesians 5:25, then she'll want to become one with him in the bedroom too.

Guys, the reality is that we shouldn't have sex as much as we'd like to...the children would starve. It takes time for her passion to build. Show her love every day, not just when you want her in bed that night. When her passion does build, do everything you can to pleasure her. Sex is not for your pleasure only. Again, in a healthy marriage the passion is shared and the pleasure is gifted to your spouse.

Gals, the reality is that, "The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband," and neither spouse should "deprive each other" (1 Corinthians 7:4-5). For his sake, make it happen sometimes before your passion has rebuilt. Giving yourself to him communicates your love to him.

Captivating - Laura's Thoughts

I love the phrase at the end of the passage from Proverbs that Matt shared above, "...may you ever be captivated by her love."

Is there anything in marriage more beautiful than him being absolutely captivated by her, and her being captivated by him? To me, that is a true picture of marital bliss, and everything (and I mean *everything*) that goes along with it. To me, "captivated by" says a lot more than "attracted to" or even "in love with". It also says more than "we have a great sex life".

To be captivated by our spouse means that we are truly one in every sense. This takes vulnerability and trust. It takes a selfless attitude on both parts, and it takes honest and frequent communication. It's amazing actually, how many other pieces of a healthy marriage come into play with sexual fulfillment in a marriage. It is all connected.

Guys, consider what you might do to connect with your wife in a way that makes her feel captivated by you. Gals, your husband finds you captivating, what are you going to do about that? (That was rhetorical. We figured you might take that up with your man.) ;)

Yield

Yielding Yields Much - Matt's Thoughts

Too many times yellow traffic lights and yield signs end up being counterproductive. I have nothing against the signs. It's the way people often react to them. When the light turns yellow, the driver is to take caution and extra care as they travel through the intersection or stop before the intersection. Instead, the driver puts their foot down and ends up being less careful and less precautionary. A yield sign is supposed to help traffic merge safely or make an intersection safer by clearly indicating to one party that they are to give the right of way to the other party. Quite often though, I see one or more cars punch it so they won't have to yield.

Does that sound like you in your marriage? A situation arises where you need to take extra care and/or give up your (right of) way so that the two of you can merge and end up in the "same lane," but you put the pedal to the metal in order to get your way.

I grew up hearing some phrases **in jest** from Christian teenage buddies like "those women need to submit...and be in the kitchen making my dinner...barefoot...taking care of the kids...cleaning my house...washing my clothes..." (I think the list got longer everytime it was stated and we didn't say this when any female was around, except that once when Pete said it in a funny voice, but the girls didn't laugh and none of us guys dared laugh either. Just so ya know, my conviction is that joking like this is inappropriate and I apologize to all women for immaturity in my teen years.)

Although we teenage boys were in fact quoting from Ephesians 5:22, we had missed the verse prior that sets the tone for the section about various relationships - husbands/wives, children/parents and slaves/masters - "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Eph. 5:21). I'm hearing the apostle Paul say here that in healthy marriages both husbands and wives have yield signs. Defer your desires keeping the interests of your spouse above yours. What's great is when both spouses are thinking of each other. Merging your wants with your spouse's aspirations can often be seamless.

It has been my experience that yielding my will in order to merge with Laura has yielded great returns in our relationship.

Submit is Not a Four Letter Word - Laura's Thoughts

It appears to be a sore topic. All my life I can remember hearing women of all ages talking about how they hate the word "submit". This was often said either with a bitter chuckle, or sometimes with a roll of the eyes and a "men are dumb" attitude and tone of voice. This always confused me, and now that I have been married for 17 years, I find that talk like this is very discouraging.

What's wrong with submission? What part of yielding my will to my husband is really so terrible? That is, unless I think this marriage thing is all about me and my happiness.

Submission does not mean that I have to give up everything I want or need. It means I need to think before I speak. It means that out of love and care, I need to put my husband's needs before my own. Mutual submission, as mentioned in Eph. 5:21, means that my husband does the same for me.

Yield. Take caution and extra care as you make decisions with your spouse. You're likely to find that submission makes you quite happy after all.

Zeal

More Than Anyone Else - Matt's Thoughts

If you were anything like me when you were getting to know your future spouse, you did whatever it took to spend time with him/her. You arranged and rearranged your schedule to be together. You had difficulty going separate ways when life demanded that of you. You talked on the phone (or emailed/texted depending on what era we're talking about) when you couldn't be face to face. Your "sweetie" (or insert nickname here) was constantly in your thoughts and you couldn't wait to be together again. The world revolved around that one person that made you whole. You were zealous.

Do you have zeal for your spouse today?

Who do you want to be with more than anyone else? A famous person? A person of great influence? A genius? A genie?

No! You want to be with your spouse more than anyone in the world.

After the "I Do" - Laura's Thoughts

Clearly, the way you showed zeal toward your beloved when you were dating is going to look different than the way you show your zeal now that you're married. I've heard my share of advice about how you should be sure and date your spouse once a week, or how you need to be sure and remember all the things you used to do when you were wooing each other during courtship. Don't hear me saying that these aren't ideas that hold some merit. Continued dating once you're married is a valuable thing. Wooing each other after marriage is sweet and necessary.

But married zeal runs deeper than dating and sweet words.

It means that you seek to know how to best meet his/her needs, and that you lovingly and eagerly pursue ways to meet those needs. It means that you work hard to build your spouse up so that he/she can be a better servant for God's kingdom.

Married zeal comes in the form of a selfless love and an urgent desire to lift your loved one to a seat of joy. It may mean that you need to do something you don't want to do - but you zealously do it anyway because your love for your spouse comes before your own desires to run away from a difficult situation. (I'm talking about everything from a dirty diaper to a painful decision and beyond.)

We all have zeal toward something or someone. Where are you focusing your zeal? Is it in the work place? Is it in your desire to become successful or wealthy? Is it in having the perfect home and the most sharply dressed children?

Or are you zealous in your love for your spouse? Are you daily showing your beloved, with your eyes and your attitude, that you have chosen him/her above all else?

God bless you as you work together with your spouse to honor Him in your marriage!

Copyright 2012 HeavenlyHomemakers.com

This eBook is free to everyone and may be reproduced and distributed freely.

It may not be sold for any reason.