

COVENANT KEEPERS

“Dedicated To Strengthening Marriages Through Biblical Principles”

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What can you do to build friendship in your marriage?

One of the great romances in the Bible is pictured for us in the Old Testament book of the Song of Solomon. King Solomon and his Shulamite wife had a relationship that many married couples would love to enjoy. What was at the core of this romantic relationship? The Shulamite revealed one of the key ingredients. She declared concerning her husband, “*This is my beloved, and this is my friend*” (Song 5:16). Friendship was clearly at the foundation of their marital relationship and the driving force behind their romance.

You may be asking, “How can I build this type of friendship with my spouse? Are there specific things I can do that will promote friendship? How can I become a better friend to my marriage partner?” As you read the following pages, examine your relationship and determine where you need to make some adjustments so that you and your spouse might become the best of friends.

1. Be a friend. Solomon gave one of the simplest and wisest bits of counsel on the subject of friendship when he said, “*A friend loves at all times*” (Prov. 17:17). Love is more than a feeling or an emotion; it is an action that you take. It is commitment. Love always acts in a friendly manner toward others. True friendship is created and maintained by the practical action of love. Are you showing this quality of friendship to your spouse, or are you critical, independent, or resentful? The way you are behaving toward your mate will have a lot to do with how he or she will respond. The Bible declares “*Whatever a man sows, that he will also reap*” (Gal. 6:7). Consequently, you must first consider your own actions to determine if you are being a good friend or not. Jesus also taught this principle of friendship when He said, “*Whatever you want men to do*

to you, do also to them...” (Matt. 7:12). Therefore, what are you doing to show your partner that you want to be a friend?



Show your love in a practical way

In order to be fair to those of you who are trying with all your heart to be a good friend to your spouse I'd like to say this: there are some people who are so hard-hearted that they will resist all attempts to show them love. Remember, Jesus came as a friend to His own people and they rejected His love and eventually crucified Him. Therefore, don't think it strange if your friendship is rejected at times. Just be sure that you are not the unfriendly one and that you are reaching out in friendship to your mate on a regular basis. If you are then rejected, your conscience will be clear because you have tried.

2. Spend time together communicating on a daily basis. One of the characteristics of true friendship is that friends talk a lot together. They usually spend a lot of time with one another. Friends enjoy just being with each other and sharing the things that they have in common. They can laugh together, comfort one another, and confide in each other their hopes and fears. When is the last time you sat down with your spouse over a cup of coffee and discussed how

you really felt about your job, your church, your ministry, or your relationship with Christ? There is tremendous joy to be found in communicating about the things that matter most to you. Why not take the time to get off alone, just the two of you, and share a meal together where this depth of fellowship might occur. Solomon's wife described this joy of communication when she said to her husband, “*Let me see your countenance, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your countenance is lovely*” (Song 2:14). Solomon, as well, was quite verbally expressive to his wife (4:1-15; 6:4-10; 7:1-9). To experience the friendship and romance that this couple possessed, you must spend the time to communicate.

Jesus strongly believed that communication was essential for friendship with His disciples: “*No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you*” (John 15:15). He had more than a master-slave relationship with His disciples; it was a relationship of love and friendship. Yes, we are His servants, but we are more than that. We are His friends. Jesus called the disciples His friends because He had *made known all things* to them. All that He had heard from His Father He had communicated to them. In other words, He considered real friends worth talking to about all the things on His heart.

The opposite is also true. The less you talk to a friend, the more distant your relationship grows. Think of friends that have moved away and you have failed to keep in contact with them. What happens? The distance in miles translates into a distance in relationship. The only way to bridge this distance is by writing and calling them, and the friendship continues.

In addition, you have to be able to communicate to your friend in a loving

She is your companion and your wife by covenant Mal. 2:14

manner about the weaknesses that affect both of you. This is also an essential part of friendship. Gentle confrontation through wholesome communication will only deepen your friendship. Solomon said, *“Open rebuke is better than love carefully concealed. Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful”* (Prov. 27:5,6). If your friend sees you about to do something that could harm you, he or she would naturally try to stop you. Sometimes this causes hurt feelings, but your friend is actually being faithful to you. A true friend will rebuke you at times simply because you are friends and because friendship requires truthfulness.

If you desire to grow as friends and to see the romance in your marriage increase, you must increase truthful communication. This requires that you set time aside to encourage growth in this area. Ask God for an honesty to be able to talk about all things. Remembering to speak the truth in love will enable you both to avoid any conflicts that may result. Don't miss the joy to be found in communicating with your spouse!

3. Reconcile conflicts. The Bible declares that at one time we were all enemies of God. *“Yet now He has reconciled”* us unto Himself (Col. 1:21). This work was accomplished because Jesus wanted friendship and relationship with us. He said, *“Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends”* (John 15:13). The cross was the supreme demonstration of His love and offer of friendship. He could only make this offer by first reconciling us unto Himself by His death. However, His life also proved that He was serious about reconciliation. Scripture tells us that Jesus was *“a friend of tax collectors and sinners”* (Matt. 11:19). He befriended those who were the outcasts of society, those that others hated and despised. He even reached out the hand of friendship to those who despised Him. This was His way of life and the example that drew each of us to be His friend.

You must possess the same heart and take the same action of loving reconciliation toward your spouse if you ever want to become friends. Unresolved conflicts greatly destroy marital friendship and intimacy. Each unresolved conflict must be seen as one brick in an imaginary wall that divides your marriage. When you refuse to

reconcile each issue you only build the wall that divides you higher and higher. If this wall-building continues, eventually you will have little or no relationship with each other. Therefore, you must continually seek to reconcile all those issues that you have suppressed or avoided in your relationship. Be assured that the moment you begin to hold resentment and bitterness in your heart, the friendship and intimacy will immediately begin to disappear. This is true in all relationships.

Ask God for an honesty to be able to talk about all things.

Consider how this works with a co-worker that you are holding resentment toward. When you refuse to reconcile a particular conflict, you can both sense the tension and strain between you. The friendship can't continue until the conflict is brought out in the open and resolved. This is why Paul encouraged Christians to keep a very short account with each other when conflicts arise. He said, *“...do not let the sun go down on your wrath...”* (Eph. 4:26). Yet, Christian couples commonly violate this principle and refuse to reconcile, allowing issues to go unresolved for days, weeks, months, or even years. Remember, when you go to bed angry, you wake up just as angry the next morning. Wouldn't it be better to resolve the issue the same day and wake up in the morning with a tender heart instead of a hard one?

Yes, it is difficult to resolve some conflicts. But remember, love and a desire for renewed friendship will always seek reconciliation. So keep working at it! Examine your own heart as to where you have not been a good friend or have failed to be loving. Confess it to your spouse and ask forgiveness. If you want the friendship and romance to grow in your marriage, you must resolve the conflicts.

4. Be responsive to your mate's requests. This is another essential and important aspect of friendship. Let me illustrate by using a parallel situation. If one of your friends made a request for

help with some activity that was very important to him or her, and you refused without a good reason, wouldn't there be an immediate strain upon your friendship? Or, if you asked one of your friends to stop a specific action that was offensive to you and he or she would forget over and over again, wouldn't your friend's insensitivity aggravate and upset you? If these actions continued, you would begin to assume that this person who asserted to be your friend might not care as much as professed. Isn't that what you would conclude? Of course it is. Real friendship means that you listen to the requests made and sacrificially give in order to meet those requests or needs. You would especially try to respond to a request if it was an issue that offended your friend. If you continually refused, you wouldn't be friends for very long.

Jesus taught this principle of friendship in relation to Himself when He said, *“You are my friends if you do whatever I command you”* (John 15:14). Our friendship with Christ requires an eagerness to please and is of a much higher order than any human relationship because we are called to obey Him in all things. However, if we were continually disregarding Christ He would obviously question the sincerity of our profession of love.

Similarly, if you desire to build friendship within your marriage relationship, sensitivity to your mate's requests is fundamental. You must begin to listen to what your spouse is telling you concerning his or her needs and actively seek to respond in a loving way. What is your partner specifically asking you to do? Is it an offensive behavior that needs to stop, or a caring action that needs to be performed? If these requests are reasonable and biblical, you should seek to sacrificially love and give to your spouse in these areas. This may not be easy, but no one ever said that sacrificial love would be easy. That's why it's called sacrificial.

5. Give up controlling behavior. See to it, however, that your requests for change in your spouse are *reasonable*. We are not called to mandate every detail of our partner's life. Beware of trying to convert your mate into your very own personal robot, with no identity of his or her own. This personal freedom is even seen in our friendship with the Lord. It is

important to remember that He doesn't try to control every decision we make; how we wear our hair, what we eat, or who are friends will be. He gives us the freedom to make our own choices over all of the non-moral issues in our lives.

In his epistle to the Romans, the Apostle Paul taught believers this principle to keep them from battling over non-essential issues. Some of the gray areas in those days entailed questions related to what days they were to worship and whether they were to eat meat or only vegetables. He explained that they had to decide these issues individually and not allow others to judge them for their choices. In order to avoid unnecessary conflict among the brethren he taught, "Let each be fully convinced in his own mind" (Rom. 14:5).

In your marriage relationship there are a multitude of non-moral and non-biblical issues that can create conflict. Some spouses condemn their mates, refusing to allow them the right to a personal opinion. When this occurs it is simply a problem of self, of trying to remake your spouse into your own image. This hard-line philosophy will only destroy the friendship you possess. True love chooses not to criticize one's personal opinions but allows and accepts them.

Let me give you some examples of controlling behavior in the context of friendship to illustrate my point. Would you go into a friend's house and begin to criticize the decor of his or her home? Would you reprimand your friend every time he or she did something you personally disliked? Would you interrupt a friend and declare that his or her opinion was unimportant? Never! If you did, you wouldn't be friends for very long. In our normal daily relationships we never try to control every detail of our friends' lives because we realize their decisions are of a personal nature and are, therefore, left to individual choice. If we are so tolerant and respectful of our friends, shouldn't we give the same benefit to our best friend?

If you see the wisdom in these examples, why then do you show a lack of acceptance for the personal decisions of your spouse? How can you be fair with one person and so unfair with another? It basically comes down to selfishness. I am not saying that you shouldn't discuss gray issues or try to compromise over them, but at some point you simply have

to accept the different ideas and opinions of your mate. Your spouse will never be just like you!

6. Spend some recreation time together. When you first dated, recreation was a very important part of your courtship time. You found fun things to do together and spent hours talking about things that you had done and hoped to do in the future. These times together deepened your friendship, which eventually lead to romance and marriage.

However, after marriage many couples fail to continue to do the very things that made them such good friends. It's easy to get caught up in the demands of the children's needs, of business or job pressures, or in personal hobbies or sports. Consequently, many couples spend less and less time together and the friendship slowly dies.

Your spouse will never be just like you.

It is interesting to note that one of the keys to the friendship and romance between Solomon and his wife was to take opportunities for recreation together. The record reveals that they were constantly doing things together. They met and spent time together in the field where she kept her flock (Song 1:7,8). He came and met her for a spring-time walk, just to smell the flowers (2:10-13). They also took time to go away for a trip to the villages and to walk in the vineyards (7:11,12).

What fun things do you do together on a regular basis that would encourage friendship with your spouse? Do you *make* the time to be together or has your mate been squeezed out by other priorities? For this activity to be successful in building friendship, it must be something you both enjoy doing and preferably something that is as inexpensive as possible. This is important because if you aren't both excited about the activity or it costs too much money to do on a regular basis, you won't continue.

Find as many activities as you can that will encourage communication together.

Going out to a movie is a great date, but it doesn't allow for much communication with each other unless you go out beforehand to dinner or go for an after-movie walk to discuss your ideas about it. If you can find recreation that simultaneously allows for communication, you are enhancing friendship in two areas. Outdoor activities such as walking, hiking, fishing, bikeriding, or camping can be fun and are often inexpensive while facilitating conversation.

7. Demonstrate trust. In the Old Testament when King David spoke about a friend that had betrayed him, he referred to him as one in whom he had trusted. "Even my own familiar friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted up his heel against me" (Ps. 41:9). Friendship and trust are always linked together because trust is an essential key to any friendship. You must have confidence that your friend cares about you and that this individual will always keep your best interests at heart. Trust produces a sense of security and dependence in your mutual commitment.

Yet, when a spouse questions your word, your faithfulness, or your commitment by asking you twenty questions every evening about who you saw and what you did all day, you obviously conclude that your mate doesn't trust you. This isn't a trusting love, but a selfish one by a person demonstrating fear, insecurity, and immaturity. This kind of selfish love will destroy the relationship. When you sense your spouse is possessive and controlling concerning your other relationships, it quenches the romance and the friendship because you realize your spouse doesn't trust you and your love.

Paul said that love "*believes all things*" (1 Cor. 13:7). This trust is a fundamental key to the marital relationship God wants to build in your home. He wants you to love your spouse enough to trust that he or she will be faithful and honor the commitment of your marriage vows. No amount of coercion could ever enforce faithfulness because faithfulness is an act of love. Love cannot be forced. Control or coercion will only destroy the love. Every time you begin to talk or act as if you don't trust your spouse you are destroying the friendship between you.

On the other hand, you can introduce legitimate doubt in a trusting mate from

past failures or by questionable or unwholesome behavior. Have you been caught in a lie to your spouse? Have you taken some action that appears compromising? If this is the case, there is a good reason for your mate's doubt. You must therefore, begin to build your spouse's trust again. To do this you must humbly acknowledge your past faults and ask your spouse's forgiveness. Then, stop any doubtful activity you are engaged in. Trust can be built again if you are willing to be completely honest with your mate and prove your trustworthiness. (There is nothing wrong with your spouse needing some time to see proof that you are trustable again.) Trust is something you build one day at a time. Why not start building today?

Where do you get the ability to be a friend?

To be the friend that I have described you need a power and love that is far beyond yourself. Why? Because it is not our nature to be sacrificial in our giving or to be instantly willing and responsive to the requests of others. Our nature is to do just the opposite. Yet marriage requires genuine love and self-sacrifice which are contrary to our natural way of relating to others. Therefore, because we are self-oriented by nature, we need God's help to be the friend He requires us to be.

The ultimate solution to this dilemma of selfishness is to first grow in your friendship with God. As you grow in your friendship with the Father you will naturally grow in friendship with your spouse. This is always the biblical order for any change in your life. As you grow in your love for the Lord, you can't help but grow in love for others. His love destroys selfishness. John said, "*He who loves God must love his brother also*" (1 John 4:21). In other words, you must love your mate because the Holy Spirit is dwelling inside you and naturally seeks to express His love through you to others.

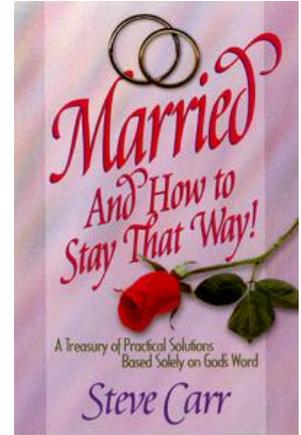
This truth is also seen in the life of Abraham. He is portrayed in Scripture as an example of faith and love. But he wasn't born that way. He grew in his walk of faith and obedience by growing in his relationship with God. Abraham was called "*the friend of God*" (James 2:23). Friendship with God transformed this man day by day, making him a man of faith and love.

If you have turned away from the friendship of God, this is where you need to begin. He doesn't want to be your enemy; He wants to be your friend. He demonstrated this by sending His Son to die for you. He has stretched out His hand of friendship to you. If you want to take His hand, bow in prayer right now to ask His forgiveness and surrender yourself to His Lordship. As you reconcile with the Father and become His friend, you will find that this is the first step toward greater friendship with your mate. Don't miss the grace and strength He longs to give. He will enable all of the changes needed in your life and marriage. Ask Him to begin the work today.

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