

STEP ONE

*Chapter 1*

Understanding Commitment  
in a “Maybe I Do” World

*To have and to hold  
from this day forward,  
for better or for worse,  
for richer, for poorer,  
in sickness and in health,  
to love and to cherish;  
and I promise to be faithful to you,  
forsaking all others,  
until death do us part.*

**A**s reflected in these beautiful vows, commitment is at the core of a deeply fulfilling marriage. Most of us dream of journeying through life with that special person who knows how to make us smile, help us believe in

ourselves, hold us close, and treasure us always. While we hope that commitment will take us to the mountaintops, we know that it can take us through deep valleys too. The road to lasting love takes dedication and determination, and I feel it is only fair to warn you that this book is not for the faint of heart. It will take you to the inner regions of your heart as we look together at the importance of commitment and how to maintain and deepen your commitment over the lifelong course of your marriage.

True commitment is far more than saying “until death do us part.” That vow reflects the sanctity of marriage, but it doesn’t guarantee that you will have a lifelong happy marriage. This book can help you go far beyond simply *staying together* to really *being together* in the full mystery and magic of marriage.

## **The Way Forward**

Over the course of these pages, I am going to provide important information that will help you understand the concept of commitment. In this chapter, I focus on what current marital research and theory say about commitment, including a look at the trends in our culture that make it less likely than ever that people will fulfill their deepest desires for lasting love. After laying that foundation, we’ll go deeper in the second chapter, looking at the nature and origin of the powerful desire to be fully known and accepted in marriage. We’ll do this by studying Adam and Eve, the first couple with deep desires and the first to experience the fear of rejection.

In the middle section of this book, we will look at major myths related to commitment—myths that many people believe but that take lasting, committed love further out of the realm of possibility. We’ll look at the following:

- The myth that you can have it all
- The myth that loved ones will wait forever to be a priority in your life
- The myth that the grass is greener
- The myth that love is all about you and what you can get from your mate
- Myths about children and divorce, cohabitation, and soul mates

In each one of these areas, what you believe can affect how you choose to live your life. Each myth has the potential to erode your chances for a great marriage, and each represents beliefs that you need to battle in order to achieve a great marriage.

In the last section of the book, we will focus on three powerful themes. The first is about the importance of having a vision for your marriage (and life). A proper vision propels you to accomplish great things—and a lasting, loving marriage is a great accomplishment in life. The second theme involves coping with the sense of loss that often comes hand in hand with true commitment. Commitment requires your giving up some paths for the sake of the road you choose to travel, and sometimes you will feel a sense of loss about the paths not taken. The final theme is about the importance of acting on the long-term view. We will look at how to invest fully in your marriage so that you can continue reaping its blessings in the years to come.

The last chapter in the book is not for everyone. It’s for those of you who are really struggling, who have lost your way and need to get back on the right path. In that chapter we will look at ways to recapture what has been lost so that you and your partner can live together with hope and happiness.

## **Research and Religious Bases of This Book**

Much of what you'll find in this book is based on solid research. In various research centers, such as the Center for Marital and Family Studies at the University of Denver, where Dr. Howard Markman and I lead a team of excellent social scientists, researchers study a wide range of elements that help us understand how great marriages come about and what causes some couples to struggle. These elements include communication, happiness, family backgrounds, expectations, problems, commitment, and conflict styles.

But I don't just draw on research that my colleagues and I conduct. There are many studies that teach us about commitment, and many important points in the book are well founded both in sound research and insights from the Scriptures. If you wish to learn more about some of the topics I discuss, please check the notes organized by chapter at the back of the book.

Now, to start giving shape to the substance of the book, let's meet two couples on their wedding day.

## **Dreams and Fears**

The big day had finally arrived. The wedding had been carefully planned and everything was going smoothly—except that Lisa didn't feel so smooth inside. As her mother helped her straighten her veil, Lisa whispered, "What if I'm not making the right choice?" Although she could have been expressing wedding-day jitters, Lisa really did have doubts. Although she and Steven had dated for four years, and no one else had come along whom she liked as well, her parents had divorced when Lisa was seven. She remembered the pain of their separation as if it were yesterday. That event, and the preceding years of turmoil and conflict, had left her skeptical that any marriage could really work—at least over many years.

While Lisa wondered whether she was doing the right thing, her mother tried to comfort her: “Honey, you don’t have to worry so much. Remember, you can always come back home if things don’t work out with Steven.” To her mother’s surprise, Lisa burst into sad and anxious sobs. Lisa didn’t really want to hear that there was a lifeboat; she knew she could go home if she had to. She wanted to hear that it was possible to have a lifelong, happy marriage with Steven. She had grave doubts, and she wanted them to go away.

Through her tears, Lisa said to her mother, “Mom, thank you for trying to reassure me. But I desperately want to know that it’s really possible for this to work, that it’s not a fairy tale. I am so afraid that we don’t have what it takes, but I want our marriage to last all my life. That just doesn’t seem realistic, does it?”

Well, does it? What do you think? Lisa’s parents had divorced, but her mother told her that things could be different for her and Steven. She didn’t need to end up unhappy in her marriage. She didn’t have to end up divorced. She gave Lisa all the reassurance she was hoping for. Lisa managed a smile, but she still agonized: “Do we know how to live out a commitment over many years?”

Soon after asking that question, Lisa married Steven, with all her desires and doubts intact. She desperately hoped that she and Steven would remain faithful in their dedication to each other for the rest of their lives, that they would stick, but she knew that they could end up just stuck together for decades.

On the same day, Jeremy and Suzanne were getting married across town. It was a day of anticipation and rejoicing for both of their families. In one room of the church, Jeremy was with his father and his brother Chris, who was Jeremy’s best man. Suzanne was with her mother, her sister, and Jeremy’s mother getting ready in another part of the church.

As Jeremy's father and brother sat in the room chatting with him, Jeremy closed the door. He said, "I have something to say that I want you both to hear." Jeremy stood before father and brother and went on: "The commitment that I am making today is sacred. I am committing myself to Suzanne for life, for all that I am and can be in this marriage. I am asking both of you to hold me accountable to this commitment. I am asking you to push me to love her in the fullest measure for all of my life."

Jeremy's father hugged his son, and the three men vowed to support one another in living out their commitments. It was a powerful moment that none of the men would forget.

As you can see, Jeremy's concept of marriage was very different from Lisa's, but their desire was similar. His parents had demonstrated commitment to each other by showing their love in the ups and downs of their life. That was the model that Jeremy brought to his marriage. By watching his parents he had inherited a clear sense of the sanctity of the wedding commitment.

After Jeremy spoke to his father and brother, he and Suzanne said their vows together—the traditional vows that opened this chapter. Before they said them, they had pondered the words, and they meant every one of them. But would making these public vows be enough? It would be if they follow through.

The two couples in these stories began their wedded life with similar hopes and dreams. But they had very different levels of confidence that they could really fulfill their vows of marriage in a full, happy life together.

## **Reality Is Rough**

Here in the United States, 40 to 50 percent of young couples who marry for the first time will eventually divorce.<sup>1</sup> Many will end their

marriages within the first few years of their wedding day. In contrast, most older couples have a very low risk of divorce. These couples truly married for life and have made it through some tough trials. But even though the divorce rate for these older couples will be nowhere near 40 to 50 percent, the number of divorces for older couples has gone up as well.

Where do the promises of marriage go? Most couples start out wanting the “until death do us part” kind of marriage. Just as important, all couples I have met want that “to love and to cherish, to have and to hold” kind of marriage as well. Most of us get married because we believe we have found the special person with whom we can have all these things. Although couples may increasingly fear that divorce is a possibility, I am convinced that most newlyweds start out believing that it will be other couples who will divorce, not them. It’s hard for them to believe that their love will not be cherished and deepen over time. They think, *Our commitment can’t possibly erode like that of so many other couples.*

As divorce has become far more common, the level of confidence that people have in marriage has gone down. This is widely believed by researchers to be the reason that young people are putting off marriage until an older and older age, that they are more likely than ever before to have children without being married, that they feel they must be financially established prior to marrying, and that they enter into prenuptial agreements. People are hedging their bets because after all, you can’t be too sure about marriage anymore—or so these people believe.

This crisis of confidence in marriage affects many people, and children of divorced parents most of all. As we’ll see in Chapter Seven, those whose parents divorced are more likely to come into their own adult relationships anxious about whether they will last and more accepting of the possibility of divorce. The lack of confidence also

compounds the risks for couples in which one or both spouses' parents divorced—the concern that commitment may not last actually makes it more likely that it will not last.<sup>2</sup> The worry that marriage won't work out becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

## **How and Why Commitment Develops**

When you become deeply attached to another and fall in love, you may enter a period of anxiety about the future of the relationship. The anxiety becomes greatest after you have experienced intense satisfaction but before the two of you have committed to be together. From a psychological standpoint, various forms of commitment develop in order to make this anxiety go away. It's scary to be in love with someone when you don't know whether the person is going to remain in your life.

There are many incremental steps in forming commitment. When teenagers pledge to go steady, that's a form of commitment. When teenagers give a "steady" a class ring to wear or hang around the neck, they are pledging a higher level of commitment. Hold it! Stop a second and think about what you just read. Teenagers don't do those things anymore, which I think is very meaningful. There used to be all kinds of symbols couples had that spoke of their deepening commitment, but virtually none of them is widely visible any longer.

These old practices were important because they were public emblems between two young people that communicated "you are mine and I am yours." Even though these commitments were often immature in many ways—teenagers were making them, and they were not meant to be full, lifelong commitments—they were right for the dating couple's level of development, and they functioned as mature commitments do: to get rid of the anxiety about loss.

The force of such emblems of commitment, simple as they are, affects both the internal and the external parts of relationships. Internally, they communicate a sense of allegiance, that “you can count on me to be here for you.” Externally, they convey a sense of exclusivity. Each person is publicly identified as “belonging” to the other, at least for a time. These messages have many levels of meaning, but the root of them is “You have me; you can relax.” When given to a partner in marriage, a full, clear commitment embodies both messages—*you can count on me* and *others take note, we are a couple going through life together*.

I believe that the old emblems of developing commitment have gone the way of the dinosaurs because commitment itself has been under steady attack since the early 1960s. What has replaced them? For many couples, cohabitation has become one of the few tangible steps they believe reflects their growing commitment and the desire for security. As we’ll see in detail in Chapter Seven, the problem with taking this step is that cohabitation outside of marriage does not reduce risks for couples; in fact, decades of research show just the opposite. Furthermore, it’s a step that’s actually associated, on average, with lower, not higher, levels of commitment in men toward women.

Real commitment has real power to turn a good relationship into a great marriage. It lays a firm foundation for the attachment between partners. Without that security, partners don’t feel safe, and they will not invest as much in the future.

### **Safety: The Foundation of a Great Marriage**

In our research, I and my colleague Howard Markman have come to believe that the most essential elements of a great marriage are three types of safety:<sup>3</sup>

1. *Safety in the connection.* Feeling emotionally safe, feeling that you will be supported and accepted. It allows you, for example, to talk openly and well about key issues.
2. *Personal safety.* Feeling safe from physical or emotional harm or intimidation.
3. *Safety in commitment.* Feeling secure that you mutually support each other, work as a team, and have a clear future together.

The focus of this book is the third type of safety; I will show both its power and how to develop it to the fullest in *your* marriage. As I'll show you in the next chapter, however, through a look at Adam and Eve, the first type of safety is what we all long for most deeply. Yet the first type needs the foundation of the third type in order to reach full potential in marriage. Of course, personal safety is crucial as well, and commitment when there is ongoing danger should be avoided. If you are in danger in your marriage or relationship, this book will not provide the help you need. I strongly encourage you to seek outside help to take wise steps to become safe.

Although most people still long for greater acceptance and a deeper connection, they have begun to disconnect that longing from the need to develop security in commitment. The erosion of commitment in marriage has actually made it more and more difficult for people to achieve their deepest desires in life.



### **Exercising Your Commitment**

How safe do you feel in your marriage or relationship regarding the commitment you and your partner have made to each other?

If you feel anxious about the commitment, think about what makes you feel that way and ask your partner to do the same. Then discuss what you would both need to do to strengthen the feeling of safety in your relationship.

## Troubling Trends

There are also many trends that make it less likely that young people will achieve their desire for lasting love and security. Consider these facts:

- Over many years, the University of Michigan’s “Monitoring Our Future” survey tracked teens’ answers to the question of whether or not they agreed with the statement, “Most people will have fuller and happier lives if they choose legal marriage rather than staying single or just living with someone.”<sup>4</sup> In the late 1970s, 39 percent of girls and 38 percent of boys said yes. By the late 1990s, however, 38 percent of boys still said yes, but only 28 percent of girls said yes. The survey has shown that most young people do expect to eventually marry.<sup>5</sup>
- An overwhelming majority (94 percent) of never-married singles agree that “when you marry you want your spouse to be your soul mate, first and foremost.”<sup>6</sup> (We will focus on this point in Chapter Seven.)
- Less than half (42 percent) of single young adults believe that it is important to find a spouse who shares their own religion.<sup>7</sup>
- The greater portion of children born to women ages twenty to twenty-four in the United States are now born to

unmarried women—thus reflecting the degree to which child rearing is becoming disconnected from marriage.<sup>8</sup>

- When asked “How likely do you think it is that you would stay married to the same person for life?” only 61 percent of teens in 1995 thought this was “very likely.”<sup>9</sup> (To learn more about these and other trends, which are reported on regularly in publications of the National Marriage Project, please see their website: <http://marriage.rutgers.edu/>.)

As these statements show, young people don’t have great confidence that lasting marriage is possible. They are also unsure of the benefits marriage actually provides. At the same time, however, they want marriage as much as ever and have extremely high expectations for the kind of partner they want to find (a soul mate).

The pessimism that research uncovers about what teens feel is possible and what matters, combined with their continuing desire for a great marriage, is stunning. I am especially concerned about the growing tendency of young women to think that marriage won’t matter much for them in the face of growing evidence that women get the best from men when men make the commitment to marry them. Along with sociologist Steve Nock, I believe that committing to a future with a woman, especially in marriage, appears to change men—it draws them to invest more, sacrifice more, and take on more responsibility.<sup>10</sup> I am not saying that marriage can turn a bad man into a good man. I am saying that there is plenty of evidence that marriage, on average, makes most men better men and better partners to their wives. If our culture continues to erode marriage, I believe it will ultimately be bad for both men and women, but women will suffer more, and sooner. You can read more about my specific thoughts about men and women and commitment in marriage by going to our website ([www.PREPinc.com](http://www.PREPinc.com)) and downloading the

paper entitled “What Is It with Men and Commitment, Anyway?” on the Policy Issues and Marital Research page.

## Two Kinds of Commitment

What are the ways in which commitment is expressed in the warp and woof of a life together? Consider these two statements and what is reflected in each:

“Mary sure is committed to that project.”

“Bob committed to that project; he can’t back out now.”

The different kinds of commitment reflected in these two statements profoundly affect your marriage. Michael Johnson, a researcher at Penn State University, noted this distinction some years ago. His theories and mine have diverged a bit over the years, but we both continue to emphasize the importance of this most basic distinction.<sup>11</sup>

In the terms I use in my work, the first statement reflects commitment as *dedication*, and the second reflects commitment as *constraint*. *Dedication* implies an internal state of devotion to a person or project. It conveys the sense of a forward-moving, motivating force, one based on thoughtful decisions you have made to give your best effort. *Constraint* entails a sense of obligation. It refers to factors that would be costs if the present course were abandoned. Whereas dedication is a force drawing you forward, constraint is a force pushing you from behind. When you combine the two, as Bill Coffin, an expert in the prevention of marital and family problems, has noted, it’s like epoxy glue. Mixing the two components gives married couples a superstrong bond.

Research has shown that couples who maintain and act on dedication are more connected, happier, and more open with each other.

That's because dedicated partners show their commitment in the following very specific ways, which we will look at throughout this book:

- They think more like a team, with a strong orientation toward “us” and “we.”
- They make their partner and marriage a high priority.
- They protect their relationship from attraction to others.
- They sacrifice for one another without resentment.
- They invest of themselves in building a future together—they have a long-term view.

Those who lose dedication and have only constraints will either be together but miserable (hardly a pleasant situation for the couple or their children) or come apart. The loss of dedication represents the loss of the will to try, the loss of the sense of “us,” and the loss of the actions that protect a marriage over time. Furthermore, a marriage without dedication is a marriage without passion. I don't mean romantic passion, though that could be part of it. I mean a marriage devoid of life. I want to help you steer clear of that. This book is mostly about the dedication side of commitment: what it looks like, what it does, and how it keeps the two of you connected and contented in life. Let's take a look at how the forces of dedication and constraint work.

### **I Signed Up for Adventure!**

Jason was up late one night, surfing the channels on TV. He was fresh out of high school—an eighteen-year-old with his life ahead of him. However, he was not certain where he wanted his life to take him. But that night he found the answer in a U.S. Marine Corps

commercial: “Be one of the few and the proud.” He thought to himself, *Those guys look strong. They look proud. I bet they have an exciting life.*

Jason thought about it for weeks, with the idea of joining the marines steadily growing inside him. Finally he got up his nerve and went to talk to the recruiter, who painted a picture that might not have been entirely realistic: exotic lands, important duties, choices, and, most important, adventure. Jason signed up on the spot. Though basic training turned out to be pretty tedious, combat training proved to be more exciting. Jason thought he had found what he was looking for.

When he completed his training, Jason got his orders and shipped out to an island in the Indian Ocean he had never heard of. *No big deal*, he thought. *This is an adventure.* Well, six weeks later, he was into his fifth week of guard duty on a wharf for navy supply ships. It was not exciting work. It was not an adventure. It was pure, hot drudgery. *I may be one of the few*, he thought, *but I’m not so proud at the moment. I did not sign up for this!*

Most of us don’t talk to a recruiter before we get married. However, like Jason entering the corps, many of us start out in marriage with unrealistic expectations, or we pay attention only to the really wonderful-sounding stuff. When he signed up for the marines, Jason was filled with a sense of dedication. I say a “sense” because his dedication was not very strong at that time—it was really more like *potential* dedication. But his initial dedication carried him happily through the commitment of signing up, basic training, and combat training.

What was enough to see Jason through the early stages of joining the marines was not enough to see him through the hard duties that carried no particular prospects for glory and adventure. His dedication began to drain away. He was still committed, but he was

no longer a free man. He could not go to the staff sergeant and say something like, “Sir, this has been an interesting time so far, but I don’t think I’m really into being a marine anymore. I’d like to be excused.”

Jason came to know the full force of constraint. Although he did talk with the chaplain about his dilemma, he could not simply get up and walk away. (Actually, he could, but the Marine Corps takes a rather dim view of that as I understand it.) Mostly he felt aware of what the costs would be if he left.

Jason took on his commitment with the force of dedication. It was his choice. He did not have to do it. Despite that, when he was faced with unmet and unrealistic expectations, deep disappointment grew. Although he was no less constrained before his dedication left him, he was not very aware of his constraint until then. Once he became aware of it, he realized, *I cannot leave, or else I’ll go to federal prison*. He felt trapped. And trapped he was. What was he to do?

Jason made it through his three-year commitment to the marines. The awareness of his constraint led him to make the wise choice to embrace dedication again, and at that point his dedication was more informed and more mature. He realized that he had made the choice to join the marines, so he would do his best with it. *After all*, he thought, *as long as I am in this boat, I might as well quit shooting holes in the bottom and learn to sail*.

It was a good attitude, and with that attitude Jason’s assignments got better. As he discovered, sometimes all of life hinges on a positive shift in perspective. To put it in terms a marine would love, *When you hit the beach, you can sit there and get pinned down and shot up, or you can take the hill. Go for the hill. Go for the higher ground*.

After fulfilling his duties with honor, Jason left the corps and went back to his hometown.

## **Committing to a Choice**

When Laura graduated from high school, she, like Jason, had no idea what she wanted to do for a career. She did know, though, that she wanted to go to college. After agonizing over the choice, she decided to go to a university in another state. But she wasn't sure she had made a good decision. She was afraid she'd miss her family.

As it turned out, she loved the school she had chosen. She also was able to see her family often, because her roommate had a car and liked to go home with Laura for occasional weekends.

But close to the end of her sophomore year, Laura still had no idea what sort of career she wanted. She had always enjoyed photography, but her parents had told her it would be hard to make a living as a photographer. So she decided to major in business and perhaps become an accountant. Her father was an accountant, and he seemed to like his work and was always very busy. But the decision was hard, and Laura worried that she was always going to have trouble making decisions. But accounting it was.

At the start of her senior year, she met a new classmate who had just done a summer internship as a photographer at a local magazine. It sounded great. It sounded exciting. And suddenly Laura was filled with doubts. She should have majored in photography and followed her interest. Compared to photography and magazine work, accounting seemed like a mistake.

When Laura dedicated herself to her choice of accounting, she had put aside her interest in photography. Now that interest was back. The constraint that made her choose accounting instead of photography began to feel like a noose. But she was so close to graduation. She couldn't start over at this point. And if she said she planned to make photography her career, her parents would worry.

Laura took some time to think. And the more she thought, the more she realized that she had made a choice she needed to stay with. It was the right thing to do on several levels.

But she still felt a sense of loss. *I could have become a magazine or newspaper photographer*, she thought. *I think it would have been fantastic. I won't be able to do that now.* But she also realized that being a photographer might not be the right career for the kind of life she wanted. For instance, she might have to travel a lot, rather than be close to her family, and there might not be many magazines to work for where she wanted to live.

She also realized that she could still pursue her interest in photography. It wouldn't be her career, but she could take photos for herself, and maybe attend some classes later on. That made her feel better and helped her recommit herself to a career in business. And after thinking some more, she decided that the future was probably going to continue to be full of choices and that from time to time she might mourn the "road not taken." But that was OK. It was part of life.

## **Déjà Vu**

After Jason got out of the marines at the age of twenty-one, he decided to go to college. While he had been a marine, he had found that he really liked to work with computers and was very good at it. His superiors had caught on to his skill and asked him to complete a variety of tasks using high-tech equipment and computers.

Jason applied to and was accepted at a college where he could study computer science. It was there, in a computer lab, that he met Laura. She was the same age, but three years ahead of him in her course work. He thought she was beautiful, and he learned she wasn't seeing anyone. She thought he was good looking too, but she did

wonder about his short hair. He explained that he had grown to like short hair when he had been a marine, and told her a bit about his life in the corps. Laura thought the ex-marine was intriguing. Jason thought Laura was great.

They fell deeply in love. As they dated, they learned many things about each other. They both had a love of the outdoors. They also had similar church backgrounds, coming from families with strong faith in the basics. After dating for nine months, Jason asked Laura *the* question. She said, “Yes.” Seven months later, they were married in a traditional ceremony at the church near campus, with a wealth of approving friends and family in attendance. Both were ecstatic. It was a fine day.

Now let’s fast-forward. Six years after the wedding day, Jason and Laura were struggling. She was working for a large accounting firm and enjoyed her work. He was likewise doing fine, working on computer networks at a local company that took good care of its employees. All his colleagues liked him, and he was in line for a promotion.

Things were not so good at home, however. It was far harder to deal with their relationship than either Jason or Laura had imagined. Laura thought, *No one told me about how hard this could be*. Going into the marriage, she hadn’t realized it could be tough. She hadn’t known anyone who struggled much in marriage, at least from what she’d been able to see. Though not perfect, her parents’ marriage was delightful.

But time went on, and Jason and Laura had a child, a girl named Kristi. She grew into an adorable three-year-old and was no problem to them at all. Both of them loved being parents and found that they could have positive times together when they played with Kristi.

But otherwise, things were unpleasant. The two argued frequently. Neither had very good skills for handling conflict, so many

of the arguments ended up with Laura yelling and Jason pulling back into himself. The arguments could be about anything, it seemed, but most were about money, which is typical of most couples. When they talked, as often as not it was an argument, and that is a major danger sign for a marriage over time.<sup>12</sup> They rarely went out or did anything fun, and their sexual relationship cooled.

They drifted. They lost the sense of being friends—another sign that the relationship was seriously off track. Neither tried hard any longer to meet the needs of the other.

Déjà vu struck them both. Laura remembered the day when it hit her that life was going to be a series of choices, with occasional grief attached. Now she realized that her choice of Jason was one that had grief attached. Similarly, it struck Jason that once again he didn't have what he had expected. It wasn't the Marine Corps, but his marriage was going forward because of constraint, not dedication. And his commitment to Laura was for more than three years! He felt deeply discouraged and cheated: *This isn't what I signed up for*, he thought. Both he and Laura felt stuck.

Jason was no longer devoted to Laura in the way he had been, and he knew it. Likewise, Laura was just hanging on. *This happens to other people, not to me*, she said to herself. She and Jason were committed, but it was more from constraint than dedication. Laura had greater dedication than Jason, and she did try to reach out to him in some ways, such as by talking about key issues. Unfortunately, he thought she wanted to fight, so he ignored her.

Constraint doesn't make for deep commitment; without dedication, it merely it keeps you going in the same direction you're already headed. That can be very important during rough times, but it's not enough for experiencing what you most hoped for in your marriage.

Laura didn’t feel quite as trapped as Jason, but she did feel betrayed—betrayed by Jason for not being who she had thought he was and betrayed by herself for believing *her* marriage would be different. Both wondered about divorce, but neither considered it much of an option. They had a crucial choice to make.

Where Laura and Jason would land all depended on what they chose to do—and choosing to do nothing would keep them stuck at best. How could they recapture and protect their dedication? More important to our discussion, how could they have prevented losing it?



#### *Did You Know . . .*

Various researchers and I have been studying the factors that produce greater constraint in marriage,<sup>13</sup> and the following list includes the key factors. A way to understand each of them is that, all other things being equal, any person who experiences a greater number of them will be more constrained in his or her marriage. These factors are also associated with the costs of ending a marriage, which is an essential part of the concept of constraint commitment.

- *Social pressure* refers to whether or not friends, family, and community will disapprove if you end your marriage.
- *Morality of divorce* refers to the degree to which you believe that divorce is a wrong choice in most circumstances.
- *Concern for the welfare of the children* refers to the degree to which you believe your children would be harmed by divorce.

- *Financial limitations and losses* refer to how (and if) your lifestyle outside of the marriage would change and if it would be worse financially, or not tolerable.
- *Termination procedures*, coined by researcher Michael Johnson, refer to how difficult the steps would be to end the marriage.
- *Alternative quality* refers to your sense of the quality of your life apart from your mate and all other dimensions.

These forces can encourage struggling couples to remain committed to their marriage even when they don't want to be. But they are equally present in the lives of happy, dedicated couples. Constraints naturally increase over time in marriage and help couples keep their marriages from coming apart when foul winds blow. Whether you are fairly happily married or struggling, the key is to move beyond having only constraints and back to a life of dedication.

Jason and Laura were in the same troubled waters that too many couples have sailed. Their dedication, along with their joy and attachment, had seriously eroded. Each was aware of how much he or she hated the idea of divorce. Jason was also thinking about how mad his family would be if he left Laura. Laura was fearful about what it would mean to Kristi if her marriage failed. And both Laura and Jason knew that each of them could not make ends meet without the other. Basically, they were in deep trouble—stuck together, but not necessarily sticking together. They had enough constraint that they *would* stay together. The really big question was whether they would reengage and act on dedication.

### **Choice: The Root of the Matter**

As you will see throughout this book, virtually every aspect of commitment revolves around the issue of choice. Commitment fundamentally requires making a choice to give up other choices. That’s stating it simply, but couples who thrive rather than merely survive are those who consistently make the right choices throughout life. Those choices confirm your commitment, protect what you have built so far, and allow you to build toward the future.

It’s choice that really makes commitment so powerful, giving you the ability to do things, daily and weekly, that go a long way toward creating a happy future in your marriage. But beware. You cannot make and keep commitments if you are unwilling to make choices among your options. Meditate for a moment on this simple verse from Solomon:

He who observes the wind will not sow,  
and he who regards the clouds will not reap  
[Ecclesiastes 11:4 (ESV)].

To use Solomon’s words, we have become a society of wind watchers. Wind watchers never plant because the conditions just don’t seem quite right. They never bring in the crop because *it looks like* rain. Hesitancy is Solomon’s target in this verse. People who hesitate to act—who don’t choose to act—often end up with nothing, or at least a lot less than they could have had. Not making clear, committed choices in life is a guaranteed pathway to emptiness.

*But what if I make a commitment prematurely?* you may be thinking. People can make commitments prematurely, and suffer greatly for doing so. For example, they may marry someone they have known for only a short period of time, and that’s usually very unwise.

However, I think a bigger danger is that many people in our culture resist making any clear commitment because they fear they will lose out on something else that might show up. They think, *What if my soul mate comes along a year after I marry this other person? I could lose out.*

### **“Maybe I Do” Commitments**

If wind watchers enter marriage at all, they do so with a *maybe I do* commitment, not a fully expressed commitment that clearly says “I do.” Our “maybe I do” culture encourages us to do that, to hedge our bets and protect ourselves rather than take any risks. But “maybe I do” will not get you where your soul longs to be.

The deepest, richest blessings in marriage are not guaranteed by your commitment, because not everything in life and love is under your control—but your commitment is. So jump all the way in, make the choice to give your relationship your all. Even though contrary winds will come your way, you can choose your course well and apply all your effort to reaching your destination. This book will show you how.



### KEY COMMITMENT ACTIONS

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- Ponder the two kinds of commitment and discuss them with your mate.
- Resolve to deepen dedication in your marriage and ask your partner to do the same.
- Resolve to give your relationship your all.

Now add and take your own action steps to strengthen your commitment even more:

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