

Chapter One

Principle

1

Choosing to change from the inside out

The choices you make today can be the marriage you save tomorrow

Marriage, today, is not failing because it's more difficult than in years past—I believe it's failing because the foundation has weakened.

As a child, I was captured by the stories that my grandfather told about life on the farm in Oklahoma in the mid 1900's. The images I've held are not those of pleasant surroundings and ideal conditions; they're impressions of twelve-hour days spent working the land, wind storms

Marriage is not failing because it's more difficult—it's failing because the foundation has weakened. that could devastate a crop, blistered and sunburned skin and poverty unlike most Americans know today. Life, in general, was harder then, but interestingly enough, character seemed much stronger. It was a time when

WHAT WORKS for Singles

commitment, integrity and honesty stood in place of contracts, disclosures and bylaws. I'm not suggesting that we return to that time in history, but that we learn from the past and strongly encourage those same principles today.

What do you bring into a relationship? Are you willing to develop qualities that support commitment? Many focus on *finding* the “right” person without first focusing on *becoming* the “right” person. The principle of *reaping* and *sowing* not only relates to financial success, but it relates to success with others. If one desires to find a trustworthy, honest, committed person, he or she should first offer the same. Unfortunately, character qualities such as honesty, integrity, commitment, perseverance and servitude have been compromised. As a result, *marriages, families and other relationships often fail because they embrace values that promote meeting self-centered needs rather than meeting the needs of others.*

It's no surprise that more than fifty percent of all marriages in the United States end in divorce. I believe this number would be significantly lower if basic principles were acknowledged before marriage, as well as after. Love doesn't leave people—people leave love.

True love is not just an ecstatic feeling; it's a decision that we make to remain faithful to our commitment. Marriage was intended to be a commitment based on love, surrendered to service, built on

**Love doesn't leave
people—people leave
love.**

perseverance and held together by commitment. A *FOCUS ON THE FAMILY* newsletter stated that when a research team studied 5,232 married adults who were interviewed in the late 1980's, they discovered that 645 of them were unhappily married. Five years later, these same adults (some divorced, separated or still married) were interviewed again. The study revealed that two-

Chapter Two

Principle

2

Acquire knowledge—apply wisdom

**Minimize the damage—
use the right tool**

Many of my teen years and early twenties were spent working for our family business. One morning while I was digging a trench with a backhoe, I broke an existing water line. Within minutes, the trench filled with water. I rushed to shut off the valve but the handle appeared broken. I struggled to close it with a screwdriver, a pair of pliers and other wrenching tools, but nothing worked. Hesitantly, I called my dad to tell him that I couldn't stop hundreds of gallons of water from pouring into the street. When he arrived, clearly frustrated, he reached into his truck and grabbed a long pole with a special socket attached. As he placed the socket on the

WHAT WORKS for Singles

“broken valve” and turned it, the water stopped immediately. He reminded me, not so patiently, of his words just weeks prior. He had instructed me to keep the special wrench with me at all times for emergencies like this.

I learned two important lessons. First, I received proper instruction, but I failed to listen to my father’s advice. Had I used the right tool, the damage, if any, would have been minimal. In the same way, biblical principles and godly wisdom are available to us, but it’s our choice whether we use them or not. I thought I had other options, the pliers, screwdriver and other tools seemed as if they would work; I felt I could manage without the water-meter wrench, but my failure to heed my father’s advice cost us the price of the job. In the same way, we often think of “our way” as best and God’s principles as optional when, in fact, the opposite is true: God’s directives are essential and absolute.

He should be the first resort, not the last.

Second, I realized that I could not fix the problem alone and called for my father’s help. Likewise, we all encounter problems, and need to ask for help even when problems are self-created. Calling on our Heavenly Father should be the first resort, not the last. Had I called my father first—or listened initially—the damage would have been considerably less. In the same way, heed the *right* advice and look to the *right* source for help in building a foundation of wisdom in your life.

Chapter Three

Principle

3

The pain of discipline vs. the pain of regret

It's easier to pull down than to pull up

Think for a moment. If you are standing on a wall, is it easier to pull someone up to your level, or to be pulled down to theirs? Without much thought, you conclude that it's easier to be pulled down. Likewise, the downward pull of society is strong, especially when one is not firmly anchored.

The question of being *equally yoked* arises routinely during singles' conferences. Christian singles often look for reasons to date unbelievers. Consequently, the principle of the equal yoke is compromised and many find themselves out of balance under the weight of a challenging

WHAT WORKS for Singles

relationship. It's easy to believe that you'll convert the other person once you begin dating. Not so, often the unbeliever has the leverage. The Bible reminds us that we are greatly influenced by the company that we keep (I Corinthians 15:33). The pull of society is strong and it takes an enormous amount of energy to maintain an up-hill stride; an unequal yoke adds weight to the climb—we may enjoy the friendship but **we can be wounded as easily by friendly fire as we can by a foe**. More directly, God counsels us in II Corinthians 6:14, "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what

The problem isn't that we raise our standard and miss it, it's that we lower it and hit it.

communion has light with darkness?" Although this command is crystal clear, many read it with clouded vision. Some may claim to be Christians but that doesn't mean that they are walking in obedience to God's Word—look for the fruit that is produced by their lifestyle. Don't compromise. If they don't have the qualities you're looking for in a future spouse, don't lower your standards, keep them high. Many times, the problem isn't that we raise our standard and miss it, it's that we lower it and hit it.

While talking to a group of young adults, our friend, Pastor David Sill, offered this advice...**"Follow wholeheartedly after Christ and simply see who keeps up."** Countless times in the Old Testament, God warned His people not to be un-equally yoked with other nations, and countless times their disregard led to their downfall. *Who we associate with may be who we become*; we can be either pressed positively or depressed depending on their influence. An unequal yoke not only refers to marriage, it refers to close associates as well. I'm not suggesting that Christians only interact with other Christians; we are called to minister to others in all areas

Chapter Four

Principle

4

Preparation

We play like we practice

As an avid and capable athlete, my dad found great pleasure in coaching my younger brother, sister, and me in a variety of sports. Not far from our home was an open field that my grandfather helped to develop as our community's first *Little League* field. Dad's *Little League* teams and *All Stars* frequently finished league champions, or close. Practicing long, hard and often, sometimes drew complaints from weary players; his response was always...*we play like we practice—if we want to be champs, we practice like champs.*

Success depends not only on attitude but on preparation as well. Sports teams practice year round, corporations prepare by budgeting years in advance and many banks won't lend money without first seeing a business plan. Preparation simply means to train, to plan or to brace oneself for the future with success in mind. With that said, let's briefly shift our focus to an important aspect of preparation—*finding your purpose in life.*

WHAT WORKS for Singles

Finding your purpose in life—*passion inspired by purpose*

George Barna and Mark Hatch point out in their book, *Boiling Point: It Only Takes One Degree*, that as society progresses, many will tend to lower their standards. Instead of rising beyond challenges, they will do whatever it takes to get by; with that, meaning and purpose will decrease. Without meaning and purpose, depression can easily derail our emotional and spiritual health; an important aspect of emotional health is finding purpose in life.

Searching for purpose may affect every area of life. It can determine where we'll live, whom we'll marry, where we'll work and how we'll spend our time. Unfortunately, many search for purpose and meaning in material possessions and other things that do not hold eternal value. If you believe that materially successful people are happy, think again. Most of us understand that money can buy the best mattress, but it can't guarantee sleep. Why do millionaires, movie stars and top entertainers often turn to spirituality, drugs and alcohol for the answers if success satisfies? Many discover that money, fame and recognition are not the answers. CEO's, presidents and vice presidents frequently admit that they are happy when they reach production goals, but very unhappy when under budget, *largely because they measure happiness by what's happening to them*. When things go well, they're happy, when things go poorly, they're unhappy. I'm not suggesting that we shouldn't be productive, but if happiness is measured by our circumstances, it's going to be a very rough road. One of the happiest times in my life, for example, was when I went from running multiple fitness locations to making much less money digging ditches, writing and managing nothing but my daily life. During this transition, I quickly

Chapter Five

Principle

5

Choose wisely

Dating & courting

Quality of choice today affects the quality of
life tomorrow.

Michelle was raised in what many would consider to be a good Christian home. She began dating at sixteen and held high standards for her relationships. She met and dated Mark while they were in college. He told her that he was a Christian and that he valued and respected her standards; he also mentioned that he had been with a few girls but that he felt differently about her. The fact that he had been involved sexually bothered her initially, but he reassured her that it wouldn't happen in their relationship.

WHAT WORKS for Singles

They continued to date and Michelle stopped attending church. She also lost interest in reading her Bible, and prayer was no longer a priority. Mark eventually convinced Michelle to spend the night and she gave in to his advances. She was devastated. Her only comfort was in believing that Mark felt as she did, especially now, and would marry her. She was wrong. Within a month, Mark was gone and Michelle was emotionally shattered—she had given away the gift that she had resolved would be given to only one person.

What can be learned from Michelle's experience?

- Michelle should have regarded Mark's actions rather than His Words. Mark's personal agenda manipulated Michelle—he told her what she wanted to hear. *Actions still speak louder than words.*
- Michelle's relationship distracted her from God. Rather than continuing to grow spiritually, she invested more time in Mark and other activities. She should have followed wholeheartedly after Christ and seen if he kept up.
- When Mark asked Michelle to spend the night, he revealed his motives, no guess work was involved. The enemy didn't push Michelle off the ledge; he took her down one step at a time, one compromise at a time, one mistake at a time. **Take control while you're still in control.**
- Michelle thought that she would someday marry Mark.

This false assumption allowed Mark to edge his way into her heart. Michelle should have

Chapter Six

Principle

6

Prioritizing

First things first

Don't overlook a weak foundation because you like the view

My father was known in our valley for his ability to understand the lay of the land, the condition of the soil and water tables; landowners would sometimes consult him before building. Several rural communities nestled in the foothills near our home were developed around small lakes, and thus, on very high water tables and unstable ground. My father understood the desire to have a lakeside view, but he would often comment about his concern for residents who chose to buy or build a home on questionable ground because of view and location. In time, several

WHAT WORKS for Singles

families were forced to relocate due to rising water levels. The cost to repair or maintain these homes would sometimes cost thousands of dollars.

Stable ground is also essential in developing a positive relationship. As mentioned in the first chapter, the structure of marriage today is challenged because, in general, the foundation is weak. For example, a spouse may find that after a year of marriage her husband has had an affair. His problem with infidelity stemmed from a weak foundation. Did she choose a person of

The foundation (character) not the view (external looks), determines success or failure in a marriage.

character? Did he demonstrate integrity? Did he have positive role models in his life? Did he seek God wholeheartedly? These are questions to ask before marriage. Unfortunately, *many overlook a weak foundation because they like the view.*

Singles often overlook major character flaws because they like how the person looks or makes them feel. It's primarily the foundation (character) not the view (looks) alone that determines success or failure in a marriage, especially through adversity. The inner qualities of a gracious heart are enduring but outer beauty is fleeting. Take away the body and what do you have? In time, that body will change and hopefully you'll be happy with the person inside.

In Matthew 7:25, Jesus states "and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock." The wise man, the man who built his house on the solid rock of Christ rather than on the shifting sand of man's philosophy, withstood the storm, but the foolish man who did not build his house on solid ground lost everything (Matthew 7:27). Strive to build character rich in patience, trust, love, perseverance, commitment and godly wisdom; God will provide plenty of opportunity through

Chapter Seven

Principle

7

Character

**Character—a lifetime to build,
seconds to destroy**

When a vessel is struck, what's inside spills out

I remember a news story involving an enormous oil tanker that sprung a leak off the coast of Spain and millions of gallons of oil gushed out into the sea. It was a horrific site and an environmental disaster. The oil tanker was defenseless against the spill because it was full of oil. In the same way, when an individual is struck, what's inside spills out. Is anger, pride or selfishness exposed, or does adversity reveal patience, forgiveness, commitment, peace, and/or perseverance? *The next time your vessel is struck, consider a cargo check!*

WHAT WORKS for Singles

Regrettably, character appears to be losing ground largely because today's culture often runs contrary to spiritual values. Again, Galatians 5:17 (NLT) describes this conflict, "...And the spirit gives us desires that are opposite from what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, and your choices are never free from this conflict." Clearly, the battle is for our spiritual character. Commit the battle to Christ, and incorporate the A,B,C,'s of spiritual warfare.

A,B,C,'s of developing a godly response

Acknowledge the warfare. Ephesians 6:12 reminds us, "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places." Acknowledge simply means to recognize. If we don't recognize that

there is a thief determined to steal, to kill and to destroy, we won't be prepared to defend or to counterattack.

"The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly." John 10:10

Be prepared. Armies that are undefeated are well prepared. Companies that survive fluctuating economies are prepared. Successful marriages are prepared. Preparation simply means to be ready for the challenges ahead. Olympic athletes spend years preparing for

Chapter Eight

Divorce-hope for the hurting

Broken-yet Unbreakable

Turning brokenness into an unbreakable force

In the book *Sacred Thirst*, published by Zondervan, Craig Barnes writes...“The bride and groom are standing in front of everyone, looking better than they are ever going to look again, getting so much attention and affirmation. Everybody even stands when they walk in so it’s easy to think this marriage, at least, is about them. It’s not. Just look at the worn-out parents sitting in the first pew—they understand this. The only reason these parents are still married is because long ago they learned how to handle the hurt they caused each other. *They know that the last thing you ever want to do with hurt is to let it define you*” (italics mine). This last statement

The walls we build to protect us may eventually imprison us.

offers one of the most profound points that I’ve read on brokenness. Those who do not allow hurt

WHAT WORKS for Singles

to entrap them can turn brokenness into an unbreakable force, but those shackled by past pain are truly imprisoned by it—*the walls we build to protect us may eventually imprison us.*

How can we undo the emotional pain we experience from failed relationships? First, understand that it's not an external fight—it's an internal struggle. Our minds are battlefields where personal conflicts are either won or lost. God works within our spirits by transmitting His Word into healthy thoughts. I don't mean to discount the deep emotional and psychological pain of failed relationships, but I do want to remind you that God makes provision for all of our needs.

Second, of all the books I've read, the sermons I've heard, the couples I've talked with and the devastation I've seen firsthand, one common denominator was present: *those who do not forgive or release bitterness, anger and hurt, never experience freedom, happiness or true restoration.* Ephesians 4:31-32 states...“Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.” Simply stated, if you fail to forgive, bitterness and anger, though skillfully masked, can and will tarnish future relationships. Divorced, separated or single, God can turn brokenness into an unbreakable force, but it is imperative that your mind is renewed by applying biblical principles, beginning with forgiveness.

With millions of American's now classified as divorced and “newly” single, the need to address this topic is unavoidable and necessary. For example, in 1998 over 19-million adults were estimated to be divorced. Those who have walked in true forgiveness know that God

Chapter Nine

Solid Choices in Unstable Times

Seven principles to live by

As this book was nearing completion, we were discussing Morgan's dating experience and her addition to *What Works for Singles*. She jokingly said, "I can tell the readers what doesn't work!" On a more serious note, although this book explains the principles in detail, I asked her to briefly share her experience concerning each one.

Morgan responds...

Like many, I made wrong choices during my single years, but I've since learned that applying biblical principles could have prevented many of my mistakes. Thankfully, as I began to obey God's Word, He brought meaning and a renewed passion to my life; however, I still had to deal with the consequences of my actions from earlier years.

WHAT WORKS for Singles

My previous relationships had this in common—*they lacked peace because I walked outside of the safety and protection of God’s covering*. When I began to date Shane, I was committed to stay within God’s realm of security and shelter by applying fundamental, scriptural principles.

1. Choosing to change from the inside out. A Christian commitment required that I drastically change my mindset. We cannot successfully change our behavior without first changing the inner condition of our heart. Although I accepted Christ as my Savior when I was eighteen, it would take time to break certain patterns that had developed during my teen years. The changes God has made since are beyond measure. Don’t overlook a personal relationship with Jesus Christ—it’s through this relationship, and only through this relationship, that you will be able to build deeply fulfilling relationships and to assure something of eternal value for your life.

2. Wisdom. When I was twenty, I dated a man that I thought I might someday marry. My family, friends and even my pastor encouraged me to reconsider the relationship. Foolishly, I didn’t heed their advice. I rushed the relationship and moved from my home in California to his family’s home in the Midwest, and we were eventually engaged. After a few short months, I moved back home and cancelled the wedding. This burden and heartache could have been avoided had I used wisdom and patience in pursuing the relationship, and paid closer attention to the obvious red flags and the counsel of others.