Also by the Author
The Great Work of the Gospel:
How We Experience God’s Grace
Section One

Matters of the Heart
Because I wanted it badly, I did not think clearly. I was bent on having it, so I was foolish in the way I pursued it. I so hoped it was true that I fell for what was false. I heard only what I wanted to hear and looked right past the red flags. I did not handle things wisely; I was clueless but did not know it (which means I was profoundly clueless). At the time, it seemed so good. How did it turn out so badly? When it all played out, I was right back where I started, only poorer, embarrassed, and embittered. I felt used, and I felt stupid, mainly because I was used, and I was stupid.
I’m talking about a used car and the way I went about obtaining it. I went online and was defrauded out of four thousand dollars. Looking back, it was all there on the web site—general guidelines on doing things right when purchasing a used car online. There was a special section about online fraud. I suppose I never considered that I’d be a victim of fraud, so I never noticed the link or read it before venturing on.

The webmaster knew I needed instruction. He knew something about human nature—about what Abe Lincoln would call “the lower angels of our nature,” about people at their predatory worst who feed on people in their most gullible innocence and ignorance. So there it was, spelled out and illustrated. Here is what to look for and what to avoid—sure signs of fraud and other straightforward instructions and guidelines for doing things right when buying a used car online. As the webmaster, after all, he wants his clients to find what they are looking for and to obtain it in a way that leaves all parties involved pleased. But I did not consult the webmaster.

**There Is a Way That Seems Right**

The Proverbs warn us: “The simple believes everything, but the prudent gives thought to his steps” (14:15). I *know* this is true. Another proverb says, “There is a way that *seems* right to a man, but its end is the way to death” (14:12). I think this refers to the common practice of following our own judgment without informing it with the wisdom of others or instructing it with a sense of right and wrong, wise and foolish. It is the error of self-confidence asserting itself with no foundation other than its having originated from self.

It is one thing to act foolishly—to be a simpleton—when buying a used car. It is another when it comes to matters of the heart. The stakes are infinitely higher. Failure here means weeping into tear-stained pillows through sleepless nights. It means hot flashes of shame. It means spiritual incapacitation when it comes to things like prayer and worship. It can mean single-parenting or child sup-
port. It has dragged too many off to Planned Parenthood with an innocent in the womb, where the Proverb finds literal fulfillment: “There is a way that seems right . . . but its end is the way to death” (Proverbs 14:12). Should we escape this ultimate consequence, we are still awash with self-doubt and self-loathing. We are spent and left poorer in spirit and zest for life. We are less trusting and have less to work with when we finally muster the courage to try again. We identify with more country music and blues than is good for anyone’s well-being.

This book is about doing things right in matters of the heart. It is for those who know by painful experience, if not by observation, that the postmodern paradigm of meeting up, hooking up, shackling up, and breaking up is bankrupting the rich treasure of love itself. It doesn’t matter that this is what most people are doing. You can see it does not ring true. It does not work. It is time to revolt against the times, to consult the webmaster, to learn how to spot fraud in matters of the heart, and to enter into a relationship as one “who gives thought to his steps” (Proverbs 14:15). To that end, I want to speak plainly and directly about right and wrong, wise and foolish, even good and evil, that you may avoid being defrauded and find what you want in matters of the heart.

**Borrowing My Learning Curve**

My oldest son called me about the car. He was remarkably polite and restrained when I told him the news. If ever there was a moment for ridicule, this was it. “Pop, you dope! How could you be that dumb?” I think he was a bit shocked. He went online and reviewed all my steps, tracing out the error of my ways. He was consoling. He was also borrowing my learning curve!

It is not the first time. He got married at age twenty-four, young by the measure of our times. His wife, Alisha, was even younger, only twenty-one. In open affront to our materialistic values, they got married while they were both still in college, with some twenty-thousand dollars in school debt hanging over their heads. They did
not live together prior to marriage, and contrary to almost every “boy meets girl” movie made in Hollywood during the last twenty years, they chose to be abstinent until they were wed.

They did not wait to finish school but they did wait to be sexually intimate. Surely this is all wrong! I hope to persuade you that it was all very right. My wife and I did the same thing. We met. We melted. We refrained and abstained. We thought (mostly I thought) about our future. I wrestled with the M-word. I argued with myself: “I can’t really be in love, can I? Why can’t I picture my life without her? I only met her a month ago! I’m still in college and the most expensive thing I own is my forty-five-dollar tennis racket. I drive a car with a missing fender! How can I even think about m . . . ma . . . mar . . . marriage?”

Martin Luther once received a letter from a young man in love and struggling with the M-word. Luther wrote back, “Stop thinking about it and go to it right merrily.”¹ This is what I decided to do. Only, unlike my son, I was only twenty-two-years-old.

Then again, maybe my son did not learn this pattern from his parents, but from his grandparents, who first met as babies in their church nursery. They were high school sweethearts; indeed neither had ever had another date. They wanted to be together. In those days, there was a clear cultural expectation of waiting till marriage before practicing intimacy. So they married—at age nineteen. Should their good health continue, my wife’s parents will celebrate their sixty-fifth wedding anniversary just as this book goes to press.

The Purpose of This Book

The objective of this book is to provide a winsomely radical alternative to the prevailing ideas, almost absolute doctrines, that guide our current thinking about manhood and womanhood and define our actions and expectations when pursuing matters of the heart. It is not my aim to be radical for radical’s sake. Paradoxically, it is

radical only in that postmodernity has radically gone and changed all the rules and definitions, and I say with Shakespeare, “I am not so nice, to change true rules for odd inventions.”

This book presupposes that you too question the status quo and have enough independence of thought and willpower to wonder if previous generations, though blind to some faults, might have some wisdom and insight for you, to which the current age has shut their eyes and stuck their fingers in their ears in a rush to create new truth at every turn.

If you are ready to give thought to your steps and can muster the courage to be a nonconformist, this book will give you much to consider and lots of decisions to make. “Every mind is a mason,” wrote Victor Hugo (1802–1885). The purpose of this book is to provide you stone with which you can fashion a strong, enduring, and satisfying plan for doing things right in this most tender and precious matter of the heart.

**Mr. Wonderful**

A while back, a staff member introduced her husband to me. “John, I want you to meet my husband, Mr. Wonderful.”

I smiled. Such high praise can be the stuff of high irony. I looked at him to read his reaction. “Mr. Wonderful?” I said, needling him as I reach out to shake his hand. “That’s a lot to live up too.”

He blushed, but she went on. “No, I mean it. He is such a wonderful husband to me. I can’t help but say it.”

Then she rattled off a few of the things he did to make her so fulfilled and happy. I was in awe. Here was a woman simply enjoying the love of a good man and saying it as if it were as normal as iced tea in August. It sounded radical—winsomely radical.

Her delight in him and in their marriage was a stark reminder to me that no matter how many cynics speak of the war between the

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2Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew*, 3.1.80.
sexes, no matter how many times we hear that half of all marriages end in divorce, no matter how many diatribes are written by angry feminists, and no matter how many beer commercials present men and women at their worst stereotypical selves, there are examples of mature manhood and womanhood all around us. They are in our churches. They are in our extended families. They are in the neighborhood. They are people, full of human frailty to be sure, who have nonetheless, learned to do things right in matters of the heart. As a result, they are reaping the wonderful benefits of a healthy, enduring, mutually satisfying love affair with one another.

The Pudding Test
Wouldn’t you like to sit down with a man whose wife calls him “Mr. Wonderful” and ask him about doing things right in matters of the heart? He is the one with true authority to write about matters of the heart. His wife’s joy is the proof of his pudding. Tragically, soon after this greeting, my coworker’s husband was diagnosed with cancer. He has since died. So you are stuck with my insights. But I have pudding too.

My situation is similar to that of the preacher C. J. Mahaney. In his book *Humility: True Greatness*, he wrote, “I’m a proud man pursuing humility by the grace of God.” We would be suspicious if he claimed true greatness as an authority on humility.

In the same vein, I write about love and marriage and need to admit that my own wife does not go around calling me “Mr. Wonderful.” But it will do no good to write about doing things right in matters of the heart without having some of my own pudding by which to prove it. The stakes are too high to write theoretically and dispassionately in a “do as I say, not as I do” sort of way.

Dr. Expert
Wayne and Tamara Mitchell, who write a national weekly relationship advice column, ask a good question: “Why doesn’t selling

advice come out of getting it right? Why doesn’t getting it right precede selling it?” Their critique is aimed at relationship gurus John Gray and Barbara De Angelis.

John is the author of the best-selling book *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*. He was married to the best-selling author Barbara De Angelis, author of *How to Make Love All the Time* and *Secrets about Men Every Woman Should Know*. Along the trail of their lucrative lecture tour and book sales, John and Barbara divorced. Though their marriage ended, the lectures and advice continued. That’s why the Mitchells warn readers about looking to experts, as defined by academic degrees and titles, rather than by the pudding of a life lived out together. This is sound counsel.

In contrast, I remember as a young married man learning of the stunning decision of Dr. James Dobson of Focus on the Family. Author of some very popular books on marriage and child-raising, he was in high demand on the lecture circuit. Suddenly Dobson announced that he would no longer accept speaking invitations (with the rarest of exceptions). Why? Dobson was married and had young children. He did not want to write and speak expertly about matters of the heart while things fell apart at home. He wanted to do things right in matters of the heart. He wanted the authenticating proof of his counsel regarding male and female, marriage, and the high calling of parenthood to be written large in his real and everyday life. He wanted his own tasty pudding.

**The Wisest Thing I’ve Ever Done**

So what about me? I will tell my story along the way, for better and worse. For now it is important for you to know that my wife and I have enjoyed nearly thirty years together (and no, we have not been married for forty years!). We have remained true to each other and raised three children together. We have lived and are liv-

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6 Tragically, Barbara is on marriage number five, yet she is now a co-editor of *Chicken Soup for the Couple’s Soul*. 
ing out the contents of this book. We believe it and we practice it. That we live it out imperfectly is evident to all who know us; what they do not know is how much better things are because we live it out to the degree that we do. I shudder to think where my life and marriage would be today if others had not passed on to me and my wife this compelling vision of manhood and womanhood and talked plainly about doing things right in matters of the heart. That they did and that we listened is the very outworking of God’s grace in our lives.

As for real expertise, a banker, a teacher, a postman, or a receptionist you know might have as much as I, even more. I would highly recommend befriending real folks who have what you want. As for my authority, I point not to my degrees and licenses (which I have) but to the Bible. I will admit to being foolish for not consulting the webmaster when buying a used car. But I will declare it the wisest thing I have ever done to consult the Maker and Master of hearts when it comes to matters of the heart.

**The Heart Knows Its Own Bitterness**

As for my insight, much of it has been painfully forged from twenty-five years of pastoral counseling. “The heart knows its own bitterness” (Proverbs 14:10). I have heard my fair share of people pouring out their anguish. For twelve years I served as a pastor. For the last fifteen years I have preached and stirred up Christian communities to establish pregnancy help centers in and around Boston. Into these centers stream those bearing the bitter fruit of postmodern sexual ethics.

I have sat with hundreds of women and couples struggling with the fears and fallout of an unexpected pregnancy. In this context I’ve also seen the harm of sexually transmitted infections, the anguish of abortion, and the challenges of single parenting and adoption. I have seen the anorexic and the self-mutilating high achievers. I have talked to women who are ashamed of the sexual choices and angry at the bill of goods sold to them in the name of
feminism. I have talked to teens who, unfortunately, listened attentively in their sex education classes and now in their twenties, sit astonished in the discovery that there is no condom for the heart!

They were taught that there is no right and wrong in such matters. Wrong! They were taught, “no one can tell you when you are ready.” Why not? What are parents for? Where do ethics and morality come in to it? “Truth is what you make it for you personally,” they were told. Now they know this is not true! Pregnancy is not a truth, subject to private interpretation. These educators undermined parental authority and moral and religious education and taught, “When you feel you are ready to have sex, it is right to have sex.” Wrong again. The truth is that there is a way that feels right but leads to bitterness and death.

These anguished young women assume the fault lies with them. They must have missed something, so they try the whole routine of meeting up, hooking up, and breaking up—again and again. Five to ten years later they begin to realize it wasn’t their execution that was at fault; the whole paradigm is false.

Young men wonder why abortion is not a safe, simple procedure, since everyone told them it was. “What’s her hang up? Jus’ git ’er done!” Or they stare at the baby waving a tiny hand on the ultrasound screen and wonder, “What does it mean for me to be a man now?” Before, it meant being good at seducing girls. Now, an impulse to run wages war against an impulse to do whatever it takes to protect this little innocent, pulsating with life and waving at him from within the mother.

**Paralysis in Matters of the Heart**

In contrast to the many young adults who are experiencing pain from doing things wrong are those young adults in paralysis, unsure of the right thing to do when it comes to matters of the heart.

I led a retreat for college students a few years ago. For the most part these were highly intelligent young adults from some
of the forty-five colleges in the Boston area. They were either Christians or people actively considering the Christian faith. They were optimistic about their education and knew they had a bright future in terms of their career options. Something alarming happened there.

In group discussions with the men, they expressed confusion about role expectations and hesitation about doing *anything* in matters of the heart. I was thinking, “This cannot be good for the ladies!” After all, these are good guys! These are men who have a heart for God, a moral center, and so much more. These are the rainbow trout of our species. If women can’t fish here, they are in trouble. All the other ponds are full of carp!

In my various conversations with the young women, they expressed that what they really wanted in a relationship was not what they were being taught by our popular culture that they were *supposed* to want. They wanted men to be, well, more *manly*! I was thinking, “Do the guys I just talked to know this?”

The young men, not being ready to act the way they are supposed to act these days, lacked confidence to act the way they really or naturally wanted to act. All was confusion, paralysis, and misunderstanding. Proverbs 13:12 says, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life.” Is there not a life-fulfilling answer to this heart-wrenching paralysis?

**Mason Work for the Soul**

I think there is an answer. There is much that can be said about doing things right in matters of the heart. Others have tried to answer it more academically and more exhaustively. This book is a user-friendly, basic version. In this section, I attempt to get to the heart of manhood and womanhood according to the Bible. What does it mean to be a *man* and not a woman? What is distinctively meaningful about being a *woman* and not a man? What marks

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the mature man? What does it mean to be, dare I say, a godly man? What marks the mature and godly woman and makes her attractive and fulfilled? How do we complement and fit together? In Section 2, I present direct and clear lines of approach. When a man loves a woman, and loves her well, what does that look like? Let us have an illustration! When a woman longs for Mr. Right, how should she conduct her search and lay the foundation for a healthy marriage?

I present a compelling vision of complementarity between the sexes. I propose action, but it is a complementary action for each. I bring into sharp relief the points of decision that will determine whether a person is undermining his or her own happiness or cementing in place another firm stone in a foundation of a lasting love and an enduring friendship. For, in the words of Ella Wheeler Wilcox:

Love, to endure life’s sorrow and earth’s woe
Needs friendship’s solid mason work below.

It is not chicken soup. It is mason work for the soul’s happiness on earth.