

## Preface

You might be curious about a guy who would write a book called *When Sinners Say “I Do.”* My name is Dave and . . . well . . . I’m a sinner. Saying “I do” twenty-five years ago to my beautiful wife not only didn’t solve that problem, it magnified it times ten. Engaged people can sometimes wonder whether “I do” holds a magical power that charms us into selfless and instinctively caring people. It doesn’t. Would I have said, “I do” if I knew what “I do” really meant? Without a doubt. Would the grin in my wedding pictures have been less self-confident and more, how shall I say it, *desperate*? Most assuredly!

What do I mean when I say I’m a sinner? Picture in your mind a guy in sackcloth and ashes, prostrate on the ground, throwing dust on his head in shame.

No, scratch that. Picture this instead.

I used to have a failsafe system for vacuuming my car. Give me fifty cents and four minutes, and you could do surgery on my carpets. The key is mat placement, nimble feet, and doors ajar. Once the machine sprang to life, I would work like a human black hole, sucking everything into the vacuum that wasn’t bolted down. Sure there was a cost—I lost important

## PREFACE

papers, checks and even a pet or two—but there are always casualties in the maintenance of an orderly system. It was my way. The only way.

Have you ever been so devoted to your way that it makes you, well . . . stupid?

One day at the car wash, I deposited my two coins and spun quickly to work only to crack my knee on the open door. The blunt force trauma to my knee was so sharp that both of my legs buckled. As I lay moaning, the faint hum of the vacuum cleaner pierced my consciousness reminding me that precious seconds were slipping away. I knew that the “Four-Minute-Autosweeping-System” by Dave could be compromised. Dizzy from pain and clutching my throbbing knee, I stumbled to my feet and threw myself into the car. They still talk about that spectacle at the car wash. Let it be known for the record, though, that I did successfully sweep the entire car in the requisite four minutes. Obviously, I have a pretty ridiculous drive to compete.

Maybe you think a guy who has pastored couples for over twenty-one years should be above that kind of behavior. Read on—it’s worse than you think.

I have control issues. Add to that, I love to be right. That means I tend to see other peoples’ opinions as inferior. I hate being wrong. Also, what people think about me sometimes determines what I do. I worry about problems I can’t even solve. You’ll find out a lot more about my particular package of mixed-up motivations throughout this book. But I can vouch that the more you get to know me, the more you’ll admire my wife.

I found a passage from the Bible that describes the biggest problem for me and the biggest challenge in my marriage. “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do” (Galatians 5:17).

*Preface*

What I love about this passage is not just that it describes my life so well; it's that it was written by somebody who you assume would have solved the sin problems of life. Isn't Paul the one who wrote, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). True, but he's also the guy who confessed, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:24).

The Apostle Paul was wretched? How does that work? Man, he must have been really bad. But what if I told you that a great marriage—a God-glorifying, soul-inspiring, life-enduring union—springs from the conviction that we are sinners just like Paul. Would that intrigue you enough to go to the next chapter? That's where we are headed, if you have the courage to come. Curious?

Let me help you with something that has helped me. To say "I am a sinner" is to stare boldly at a fundamental reality that many people don't even want to glance at. But when we acknowledge that painful reality in our lives, several great things become clear. We find ourselves in good company—the heroes of our faith, from Old Testament times to the present, who experienced the battle with sin on the front lines. We also acknowledge what everybody around us already knows—particularly our spouses. But, by far the greatest benefit of acknowledging our sinfulness is that it makes Christ and his work precious to us. Like Jesus said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:31–32). Only sinners need a Savior.

If you are married, or soon to be married, you are discovering that your marriage is not a romance novel. Marriage is the union of two people who arrive toting the luggage of life. And that luggage always contains sin. Often it gets opened right there on the honeymoon, sometimes it waits for the week after. But the suitcases are always there, sometimes tripping their owners, sometimes popping open unexpectedly and disgorging

PREFACE

forgotten contents. We must not ignore our sin, because it is the very context where the gospel shines brightest.

Which leads me to the point of this book. *When Sinners Say "I Do"* is not a depressing thought. It recognizes that to get to the heart of marriage, we must deal with the heart of sin. A great pastor once said, "Till sin be bitter, Christ will not be sweet."<sup>1</sup> He was getting at a profound truth of the gospel. Until we understand the problem, we will not be able to delight in the solution. Grace is truly amazing because of what we were saved from.

I think there's a powerful application for marriage here: *When sin becomes bitter, marriage becomes sweet.* When the sin we bring to marriage becomes real to us, then the gospel becomes vital and marriage becomes sweet.

Sound scary? Sure it does. But the gospel is good news that solves the problem of bad news. The very sin that you fear seeing is the very reason why Christ died in your place. The gospel translates our fear to worship.

My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought!  
My sin, not in part but the whole,  
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more;  
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!<sup>2</sup>

The next life is taken care of, so why not work on making this one even better? Your marriage can be built or rebuilt upon a solid and enduring foundation. But we must start where the gospel starts; there lies the hope for sinners who say "I do."