

Tools for a Great Marriage

PRACTICAL HELP FOR BUILDING A
MARRIAGE THAT LASTS

WILLIAM BATSON

**FAMILY
BUILDERS
MINISTRIES**

Cape Neddick, Maine

Tools for a Great Marriage

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Where it was deemed appropriate, the author has changed the names and other identifying information of couples whose stories appear in this book.

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FOREWORD

When most couples get married, they fully intend to have a great marriage. They have visions of making each other supremely happy. The great tragedy of this generation is that over half of these couples will have their dreams shattered by divorce. The reality is that great marriages do not simply appear on the horizon of life after the wedding ceremony. Great marriages must be constructed by husbands and wives working together as a team.

I once attempted to build a tree house for my children. However, because I didn't have the proper tools and didn't have the architectural knowledge, my tree house turned out to look more like a ladder leading to nowhere. My desire to construct a tree house was not sufficient to bring the project to reality. I solicited the help of my neighbor. With his tools and expertise, we were able to accomplish my dream.

Couples often come to marriage with few relationship tools and little knowledge of how to build a mutually satisfying marriage. In this book, William Batson not only supplies the tools, but also gives

you the instructions on how to use them to create a truly great marriage. It will still require time and effort on your part, but at least your efforts will be directed toward accomplishing your dream of a great marriage.

Willie Batson is not a novice in the marriage building business. For over twenty years, he has been helping churches establish marriage and family ministries for their communities. Willie and Cindy have been married for 35 years and raised two beautiful daughters, who are now in the process of building their own great marriages. I met Willie over 10 years ago as he drove me from the Boston airport to Worcester, Massachusetts for a conference. Before the ride was over, I realized that I had discovered a fellow marriage builder who had a desire to see marriages thrive, and to see churches lead the way in marriage enrichment. We both agreed that the only hope for restoring the sanctity of marriage in western culture is for churches, of all sizes, to provide ongoing marital enrichment programs. I believe that this book, *Tools for a Great Marriage*, is an excellent resource for churches who are trying to offer couples practical, Biblical guidance in building strong marriages.

Whether you are studying this book as part of a small group experience, or the two of you are simply working through it as husband and wife, you will discover not only the tools, but also the knowledge of how to use those tools to build a great marriage. The dreams you had when you said, “I do,” can become reality when you apply the insights provided in *Tools for a Great Marriage*.

Gary D. Chapman, PhD
Winston-Salem, NC
Author of *The Five Love Languages* and
The Five Languages of Apology

CHAPTER 1

A Great Marriage Tool Bag

What do you give your daughter and her husband on their wedding day? Do you give them an all-expense-paid honeymoon on some romantic island, or a set of table trays? Do you give them a new house, or a lifetime membership at the local gym?

That was on my mind as I pondered what I would say at the weddings of each of our daughters. Since I am an ordained minister, they had asked me to perform their marriage ceremonies. I wanted a creative way to challenge them to build a great marriage. A friend suggested I give them a tool bag. Immediately, my creativity cells kicked into gear, and I decided to give them what we called *The Family Builders' Tool Bag*. The concept was that just as you need tools to build and maintain a house, a couple needs certain tools for building and maintaining a great marriage.

I bought a tool bag, packed it with tools, and presented it to them during their wedding ceremonies. The tools would come in handy around the house and would serve to remind them of what is necessary for building a lasting marriage. I didn't reveal all of the tools at the ceremony, only a few key ones. Let me tell you how they relate to building a great marriage.

A BIBLE

The first one was not your typical household tool. It was a Bible, which is like the foundation upon which you build your house. You cannot just arrive at a building lot, pull out your hammer and some nails, and start putting up walls. I guess you could, but you might not like the results. You need a sturdy and reliable foundation upon which to construct that house.

The Word of God is foundational to building a marriage that is strong, durable, and lasting. The Apostle Paul wrote that all of the Bible "is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It straightens us out and teaches us to do what is right. It is God's way of preparing us in every way, fully equipped for every good thing God wants us to do" (2 Timothy 3:16, NLT). As an example, God's Word is an authoritative resource in teaching us how to get along with others. Just consider the following verses for example:

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. – Ephesians 4:32

Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door! – James 5:9

Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices. – Colossians 3:9

Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. – James 5:16

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. – Hebrews 10:24

Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other. – Romans 12:10, NLT

Imagine the kind of marriage you would have if you both practiced these guidelines – a great marriage!

AN ADJUSTABLE WRENCH

The next thing I pulled out of the tool bag was an adjustable wrench. To succeed in marriage you must be able to adjust to each other's unique personalities and opinions. I remember reading about two porcupines in Alaska that kept warm by cuddling together. Because their quills pricked each other, they moved apart. Soon they were shivering again, and had to cuddle for their own survival. They needed each other, even though they *needled* each other! (I love corny humor.) The only way they were able to survive was by continually adjusting their quills.

Adjusting to each other does not mean you have to fully understand your spouse. I will never understand how Cindy, my wife, can adoringly hold a mouse in her hands, but let out the most horrific scream when she sees a spider on the other side of the room. She will never understand why I don't enjoy swimming as much as she does.

A spouse's willingness to adjust comes from a heart that is grateful for the strengths that exist, rather than frustrated by what is missing. It can be difficult at times to accept your spouse with all of his or her unique and individual traits. When you think about it, those are probably the very attributes that first attracted you to each other. Making adjustments in your attitude about your spouse will result in respect and thanksgiving.

A SET OF CLAMPS

After the wrench, I pulled out a set of clamps, the kind used to hold pieces of wood together. They represent those times when you need to *clamp* your mouth shut to avoid saying things that will be harmful. The Bible advises us to avoid using "foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them" (Ephesians 4:29, NLT).

Your words can bring either life or death to your marriage.

Words are powerful. Your words can bring either life or death to your marriage. Before you speak, it is wise to ask, *Will this be helpful or hurtful?* I am not saying that we should avoid important issues that every married couple must face, but we are to be wise in how we navigate those minefields. The Bible says, "Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue" (Proverbs 17:28).

A HATCHET

Next, I pulled out a hatchet. This tool represented forgiveness, as in, "Let's bury the hatchet." That saying comes from a Native American Indian ritual for sealing a peace treaty. When two warring tribes ended a conflict, they would dig a hole in the ground to bury a

hatchet as a symbol of peace, and as a promise not to attack each other in the future.

Forgiveness is not easy for many couples because of what is expected of them. According to David W. Augsburger, forgiveness is costly in marriage for the following reasons:

- *It means accepting instead of demanding repayment for the wrong done.*
- *It means releasing the other instead of exacting revenge.*
- *It means reaching out in love instead of relinquishing resentments.¹*

Forgiveness may seem like an unnatural act, but it is a most powerful tool for keeping your marriage strong and moving in the right direction.

A CAN OF WD-40

The next item I pulled out of the tool bag was a can of WD-40, something many of us use around the house to keep things working smoothly. The intent of this tool was to remind them that healthy communication keeps a marriage working easily and efficiently. The side of the can lists these features of the product:

- *Stops Squeaks*
- *Cleans and Protects*
- *Loosens Rusted Parts*
- *Frees Sticky Mechanisms*

A married couple who knows how to communicate well is able to drive out the things that can cause their relationship to deteriorate and shut down.

With that I closed the bag, pronounced them husband and wife, and sent them on their way to begin building their own great marriages.

YOUR GREAT MARRIAGE TOOL BAG

Every couple enters marriage with their own bag of tools, but many are frustrated by their attempts at fixing things. They either have the wrong tools or do not use the tools properly. Having the right tools in your marital tool bag and using them properly will help you build and sustain a great marriage. I know the positive and lasting results of using the right tools in the right way. I want you to experience the same thing.

On an airplane somewhere over the northeastern part of the United States, the passenger next to me initiated a conversation. It was soon apparent that we had some striking differences in life experience. He had been married and divorced, was a recovering alcoholic, played in a funk music band, taught piano, and was on his way to a Stevie Wonder concert. Our spirited conversation took more twists and turns than did our airplane that day. When he discovered that I was a marriage educator, nothing hindered him from telling me about the lessons he had learned from his past and present relationships.

His most profound statement related to something he tells his piano students, "Practice makes perfect. But, if you practice wrong, you will be perfectly wrong." Immediately, I thought of the couples who practice wrong relational skills repeatedly. They escalate arguments in order to intimidate and demean each other. They

readily point out the flaws of loved ones and ignore their own serious deficiencies. Doing the same thing so many times and for so long, they become experts in being perfectly wrong. Practice is important, but my new friend taught me that the *way* we practice is much more fundamental to success. Our tools and methods must be grounded in the counsel of God, who designed marriage. Otherwise, they lack the power to sustain a lasting and fulfilling relationship as God intended.

A SPECIAL WORD

I realize that there will be people who read this book who have been previously married. It's possible that something I say will create a little pinch in your spirit. It is not my intent to heap loads of guilt upon you for what happened, or did not happen, in a prior marriage. I want to help you with tools that can make this marriage strong, healthy, and lasting. I hope I am successful.

A GREAT MARRIAGE IS NOT AUTOMATIC

A great marriage is not automatic. It is the result of one man and one woman fully committed to each other and to God's plan of a lifetime together. It takes two people who are willing to do the required work because they know their marriage is worth it.

Do you want a great marriage? Most people do. Yet, few people have great marriages, in large part, because it is so easy to settle for the mundane in marriage. I'm sure that *mundane* is not a word you want associated with your marriage. I doubt you started out with the goal of having a mundane marriage, but it can happen. You get stuck in the routine busyness of doing life together. Work and kids get the bulk of your energy and time. You lose your sense of adventure and settle for safe. As long as you sleep in the same bed, don't fight, go to your kid's games, and pay your bills, then it must be good. You

know your roles. You take out the trash. Your spouse makes breakfast. You keep the social calendar. Your spouse does the banking. You're comfortable. It's a *good* marriage, but it's not *great*.

I'm not against good marriages. They are better than bad marriages. However, I don't think God intended for marriage to become mundane or boring. One of the ways your good marriage can become a great marriage is by filling your marital tool bag with the right tools and tossing out the ones that are not working. That's where this book can help you. As you read the remaining chapters, may God give you courage to do what will help you build a great marriage that lasts.



TOOL TIME FOR COUPLES

1. Successfully completing this book as a couple requires a regular time together for reading and/or discussing the material. Some couples like to take turns reading the material aloud to each other and discussing it. Others prefer reading it separately and meeting to discuss their thoughts and reactions. It does not matter which way you do it, as long as you do it. Decide now when and how you will use this book to improve your marriage.
2. Before moving on to the next chapter, take the opportunity to evaluate your relationship. In the Resource Section you will find an exercise called, *Your Marriage Checkup*. There is one for each of you. Complete the checkup, including the discussion section, in order to know what your strength and growth areas are at this time. When you have finished the book and completed the *Tool Time* exercises in each chapter, repeat the checkup with a different colored pen. Note how you have increased or not increased your level of satisfaction in the various categories and discuss the reasons why. What do you still need to work on?