

10 Choices  
SUCCESSFUL  
COUPLES  
Make

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The Secret  
to Love That Lasts  
a Lifetime

DR. RON WELCH



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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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*To my wife and soul mate, Jan.*

This book is about choices, and without doubt,  
you are the best choice I have ever made.

Thank you for believing in us,  
for letting the love of Christ shine through you,  
for teaching me what love and forgiveness truly mean,  
and for walking by my side on this journey called marriage.

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*one*



## Marriage Is about Choices

They were like so many couples I see in premarital therapy. For Paul and Grace, the future had never looked brighter. “I fell in love with him the first time I saw those beautiful blue eyes,” Grace gushed. “The more I got to know him, the more I knew he was the only man for me.” Paul was equally effusive in his praise. “Grace completes me. She is everything I could ever want in a wife and a partner. I’ve never felt this way about anyone—I have fallen totally and completely in love with her.”

Aren’t engaged couples wonderful?! They are so certain their relationship is the best thing since sliced bread and so excited about their future together. The excitement of the engagement is followed by the wedding celebration and the blissful honeymoon. They feel they are riding a wave of happiness that will never end.

Not to burst this bubble of happiness, but let’s take a closer look at what Paul referred to as falling in love. We use this phrase a lot. We have a Valentine’s Day image of Cupid shooting an arrow that hits us with such force that we have



no choice but to fall in love. Think about it, though. Do we really “fall” in love?

I don’t think so. In fact, I don’t think it is a passive act at all. Love doesn’t just happen to us. I would argue that love is a clear, intentional choice that we make. I believe it is more accurate to say, “I choose to love you.”

### “Jumping” into Love

Maybe we don’t have much control over that initial desire or interest that attracts us to another person. I know when I first saw the woman who would become my wife walk out in that black dress, I sure didn’t feel like I had any control over what was happening to me. However, I wonder if those feelings are actually what love is. I think those feelings might be attraction or infatuation or desire—but not love.

It would be more accurate to say that we “jump” into love. When we literally fall, we view that as an accident; it’s certainly not something we intentionally wanted to happen. Love isn’t an accident, nor is it a stroke of luck we are fortunate to experience. Rather, I believe love is more like being high up on the diving board at a swimming pool, looking down at the water far below, and making the choice to jump into the unknown.

Making that type of jump is not easy. You don’t know what the end result will be, and that is what makes the decision scary. The great thing about diving, though, is that each time you make that dive and come back up to the surface, it is easier to do the next time. Choosing to love your partner is a skill you can learn, and the better you get at it, the less scary and out of control it feels.

## **I Choose to Love You**

This lifelong choice—the “I love you for better or for worse” vow type of thing—is definitely an intentional, repetitive choice. It is not a one-time choice you make when you stand in front of God and your family and friends and say, “I do.” This is a decision you make over and over again every day.

Choosing love is not just about the tough choices either, such as how many kids to have or where to live. These decisions get our attention because the consequences seem so big. You can probably point to several choices you have made in your relationship that have had a significant effect on your future.

Choosing love is the day-to-day decisions you make . . . where to go to dinner, whether to wash the dishes or pick up your socks, what television show to watch. This may be where love truly grows—where choosing love actually happens.

Perhaps choosing love is the choice to get up and calm the baby rather than go back to sleep and let your partner do it. Maybe choosing love is the choice to drive ten miles to get the kind of ice cream your spouse loves instead of the cheap kind at the store close to home. Choosing love can be seen in the choice to keep quiet rather than say that one thing you know will cause hurt and pain. In each of these decisions, you say, “I choose to love you.”

### **Making Decisions**

Much effort has been put into researching how we make decisions. William Glasser created “choice theory.” The big idea here is that people are unhappy because they are in bad relationships, and their bad relationships are based on bad choices.

He believes that when people learn to make better choices, their relationships improve and they become happier people.<sup>1</sup> I believe this means that even the most challenging relationship could be improved if the couple made different choices.

William Samuelson and Richard Zeckhauser wrote an article titled “Status Quo Bias in Decision Making.” They found that people preferred to maintain the status quo and stayed with their original decision, even if a new alternative appeared better.<sup>2</sup> Even in financial investing, people choose to stick with what they know rather than jump into a clearly better option.<sup>3</sup>

Both of these ideas are solid. These studies help us see that in marriage, partners may really struggle to change the habits they have formed over the years, even when doing so could improve their relationship. The choices we make in our relationships directly affect our emotions, and the assumptions we make about each other cause us to expect our partners to succeed or fail. But there is more to the story. Our choices are also affected by our values, by the way we think and feel, and by the consequences of previous choices. Even more importantly, we have each learned patterns of decision making from the families we grew up in. We will look at these in more detail in chapter 5.

### **Three Ways to Make Choices**

Over the years, I have seen couples take one of three approaches to making decisions. Some choose to compromise, others choose to trade off getting what they want, and still others simply allow the person most affected to have his or her way.

### ***Compromise***

Joel and LaKisha faced a difficult choice. LaKisha's mother had passed away a few years earlier, and her father's health was now failing. Family had always been important to her, and she wanted her father to come and live with them.

Joel valued family too, but he wasn't sure it would be possible to balance caring for her father and taking care of their own three kids while both of them worked full-time. He felt that a care facility might provide a better option for LaKisha's father, but she was very much against "putting him in a home for old people." Her father was aware that he could not take care of himself as he had in the past, but he wanted to remain as independent as possible.

They struggled with this issue with little progress for several weeks, until Joel suggested a compromise. "I wonder if we could do both?" he asked pensively. LaKisha looked up and patiently waited for him to continue.

"We agree your dad needs someone to help take care of him."

LaKisha nodded her agreement but then said, "You know I believe that is our job, not some worker in a nursing home."

Joel responded, "I get that, but let's think outside the box here. What if we found a care facility where he could live during the week when we are at work but that would also allow him to live at our house on the weekends?"

LaKisha thought for a moment and then said, "I had never thought about something like that. I don't think you can have part-time care, though. I think he has to live there or not live there." Joel suggested they at least call some places and find out. It turned out that some facilities offered full-day

programs, but they could not find any that allowed residents to live there only during the week.

After some additional negotiating, they agreed to compromise by having LaKisha's father attend a program during the day, hiring an in-home caregiver for the evenings, and caring for him themselves during the night and on the weekends. They would have to trade off at night sometimes, but they had done that when their children were younger.

In many situations, as this couple discovered, there are options that neither person has thought of. Sometimes people need outside input to come up with these alternatives. Often, compromise can lead to a solution that allows both parties to get at least some of what they want.

### ***Trade Off***

At least once each year, usually in early March, Maria and Lucas had the same discussion. One of them would ask, "Where should we go on vacation this year?" Lucas had a couple of weeks he could take off in June or July, and as a teacher, Maria had summers off. They always had difficulty figuring out where to go, and they would eventually compromise on some place they could both live with but neither really loved.

This particular year Maria wanted to go to a beach in California, but she knew Lucas didn't like sitting on the beach and wanted to go to the mountains. In the past, they would have ended up somewhere like Las Vegas, which neither really wanted. This time Maria said, "I've got an idea, Lucas. What if we go to the beach this year, and you share that with me, and next year we go to the mountains, and I share that with you?"

Lucas thought for a minute. “So this year you get to do what you want, and next year I get to do what I want, and we don’t have to settle for something neither of us wants?”

Maria said, “Yes, that’s it exactly! What do you think?”

Lucas smiled and said, “This seems pretty simple. Why didn’t we think of this sooner?”

In contrast to the first couple, these partners discovered that they didn’t want to settle for a compromise. They wanted to find a way they could each have exactly what they wanted (at least some of the time). The trade-off allowed each to sacrifice at one point and then get what they wanted at another time.

### ***Allow the Person Most Affected to Decide***

After ten years of marriage, Lance and Kelly were faced with a big decision that involved Kelly’s job. She had the opportunity for a promotion, but it would mean moving the family to Texas. Lance was close to his brothers and parents, who all lived in Colorado, which would make a move difficult for him.

There was no room for compromise in this choice as a decision had to be made one way or the other. There was also no way to trade off, as this was a onetime decision. The company had given Kelly two weeks to decide, and they realized that they had to make a decision in which one of them was going to be hurt or disappointed.

As they talked, they determined that Lance’s need to be close to his family could be addressed by frequent flights home and Skype calls, but Kelly might never get a career opportunity like this one again. They chose to move because the need for Kelly to progress in her career outweighed the

need to live in the same town as Lance’s family. This type of choice involves allowing the person who is most affected to make the call.

### Is Conflict Bad?

With so many good options for making decisions, couples still end up in conflict. In fact, according to a recent study, conflict is a way of life for many couples. For example, the study found that the average couple spends forty minutes a day disagreeing and arguing over things such as household chores and money.<sup>4</sup>

By itself, this isn’t really surprising. What is shocking is that couples reported an average of 2,455 fights a year.<sup>5</sup> Do the math; that’s approximately seven conflicts every single day. Of course, some couples argue more or less than this, but this study shows that each day holds the potential for several conflicts between you and your partner.

The author of the study, Nikki Sellers, states, “The fact of the matter is that bickering on a daily basis is all part of being in a normal, healthy relationship.” She goes on to say that “the normal co-habiting couple will have to put up with each other’s daily annoyances—even if things such as housework, what to have for dinner, cleanliness and the television can prove to be very irritating.”<sup>6</sup>

Take a look at the following list that shows the number of arguments these couples had during a year’s time and what they were about. I am betting some of these are familiar to you.

Not listening—112

Overspending—109

Money—108

Laziness—105

One of you snoring—102

Bills—98

What to eat for dinner—92	Driving too fast—91
Walking past things to go upstairs—90	Dirty house—90
What to watch on television—89	Disciplining the children—88
Dirty washing left around the house—88	When to have sex—87
Taking each other for granted—84	Children's bedtime—83
Getting home late from work—82	Not taking washing out—82
Getting in the way in the kitchen—82	Treading mud into the house—80
Spoiling the children—79	Who should cook the evening meal—79
Swearing in front of the children—79	Not closing cupboard doors—79
Parking the car—77	Not answering your phone—76
Failing to say please/thank you—75	Not saying "I love you"—69 <sup>7</sup>

Nonetheless, world-famous marital researcher John Gottman feels that conflict is a good thing overall.

If there's one lesson I've learned in my years of research into marital relationships—having interviewed and studied more than 200 couples over 20 years—it is that a lasting marriage results from a couple's ability to resolve the conflicts that are inevitable in any relationship. Many couples . . . believe the claim "we never fight" is a sign of marital health. But I believe we grow in our relationships by reconciling our differences. That's how we become more loving people and truly experience the fruits of marriage.<sup>8</sup>

Ken Johnson, a conflict mediator, agrees that conflict is not inherently bad, but argues that some types of conflict are clearly worse than others.<sup>9</sup>

I agree with these authors. Conflict, in and of itself, is not a bad thing. Disagreements, differences of opinion, and misunderstandings are bound to happen in any significant relationship. What is important is how we deal with them.



## Fighting Is a Choice

Things happen every day that create the need to negotiate the difficult waters of marital conflict. It is not a matter of whether we will have conflict with our spouses. As we have seen, it will happen, and if we are not careful, it will happen a lot. What matters is how we handle conflict when it occurs.

We don't wake up in the morning and say, "I want to fight today." Well, maybe some of us do, but that is another book! Most of us would rather get along with our husband or wife each day. We try hard to let things go, but every day presents a plethora of opportunities for disagreements and conflicts.

One of the biggest myths about marriage is that fights "just happen"; they are random, unpredictable events. Instead, people make a conscious, deliberate choice when they decide to turn a disagreement into a fight.

Saying that fights are inevitable makes it sound as though you might as well lie down and give up right now, but nothing could be further from the truth. If that were true, you would end up in a fight every time you had a difference of opinion, and that clearly doesn't happen. You can learn to see conflicts coming if you know what to look for, and you can make a choice to fight or not to fight.

This book will provide you with the tools you need to see where you are in the conflict process, teach you skills for handling conflict well when it happens, and help you learn that you have a choice in how you respond to conflict. Perhaps most importantly, it will teach you how to make the choice to end a conflict quickly and not make things worse.

## **Choosing Not to Fight**

*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* defines *conflict* as a “fight” or a “battle.”<sup>10</sup> The fact that we so often call a disagreement between two partners a “fight” says a lot about our perception of marital conflict. Fights have winners and losers and usually get worse as they go on, with one or both parties often getting hurt.

We even use analogies from battle when we talk about marital conflict. We talk about “winning” the fight, as if one side will conquer the other. We call making unfair statements in a conflict “hitting below the belt,” and we refer to using hurtful statements as “bringing out the big guns.”

Marriage can feel like a fight when couples are dividing scarce resources. They don't have enough money to buy everything they both want. There isn't enough time to do the things they both would like to do. They can either work together to share the limited resources or fight each other for their fair share.

Think about this for a moment. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that competing with your spouse to win some type of battle rarely brings you closer. If you make the choice to work as a team instead, your marriage will look radically different.

### **Ten Choices That Will Change Your Marriage Forever**

The big idea behind this book is that you can make choices in ten specific areas that will transform your marriage. You are in control of the conflicts that occur in your relationship. Conflicts will happen, but fights don't have to. You can make different choices.

Both of you can decide to work together as teammates instead of competing against each other to achieve your own individual goals. You can make a choice to do what your partner needs and give up what you need. You can choose to forgive your spouse even when you don't feel your partner deserves forgiveness.

Making the choice to love your partner does *not* mean:

I love you, as long as you are who I want you to be.

I love you, unless doing so is inconvenient.

I love you, as long as I can still get my way.

What saying “I choose to love you” *does* mean is that you are making a commitment to love your partner by making the ten specific choices I am outlining in this book. Making these choices will have consequences—sacrifice is a given in choosing to love your spouse. None of us can get what we want in a relationship all the time. Couples who successfully choose to love each other learn to agree to disagree and to honor and respect each other rather than live in the world of insults and anger that fighting creates.

Each chapter in this book will deal with one of these ten choices that all couples face in marriage. To help you learn to make these successful choices, clear strategies for achieving positive outcomes and making good decisions will be offered. You will learn specific skills you can practice and eventually master. An arrow has been placed in the margin alongside particular section headings to indicate where couples can make a truly transformational choice and *choose love*.

Each chapter also includes one or two exercises to complete with your partner to help you experience what it feels

like to make successful choices in these areas. For each of the exercises, choose the best location, time, and circumstances to provide the greatest opportunity for success. You might choose a location that is quiet, with few distractions, like a corner booth in a restaurant or a park bench. The best times are often when you are not rushed, so mornings before work or late at night rarely work well. A relaxing breakfast or lunch may be much more effective. As for circumstances, avoid times when you are hungry, tired, or emotionally overwhelmed.

The ten choices in this book don't come out of thin air. They are based on three very powerful sources of information that I have learned from over the years. All three have contributed to identifying these ten specific strategies for success in marriage.

First, and most importantly, I have been in clinical practice in the field of psychology for more than twenty-five years. I have learned a great deal about what successful couples do in their relationships. In some cases, I observed the choices couples made that consistently led to positive results. In other cases, what they didn't do well was instructive; when they made changes in those areas, the outcome was much more positive. Over the years, I have found that these ten areas consistently lead to success in strong marriages and successful transformation in troubled relationships.

Second, in thirty-two years of marriage, I have learned what works and what doesn't work in my own relationship with my wife, Jan. Over and over again, when my wife and I base our choices on the principles presented in this book, the outcome makes our marriage stronger and healthier. In other words, I work very hard to practice what I preach.

Third, as a professor of counseling for more than twenty years, I have studied the marital relationship with great devotion. I have specifically been interested in learning from master therapists and top quality researchers in the field, applying their wisdom to my work with couples. Their influence has helped shape me as a therapist. You will see references to their theories and concepts in many places throughout this book.

### **What You Need to Know about Me**

All of us are on a journey, and knowing a little about a person's journey helps us understand the traveler. So, by way of introduction, let me tell you a few things about my journey.

I was fortunate to grow up in a Christian home with loving parents who gave me the opportunity to go to college and have a career as a psychologist. I have maintained that faith in God throughout my life, and you will see that in my writing as I talk about principles such as selflessness, forgiveness, and repentance. My faith in Christ is a big part of who I am, and it informs the principles I believe in.

However, this book is not another book written by a Christian to other Christians to help them be better Christians. In contrast, the ten choices in this book form a model of marriage that leads to healthy, strong, effective marriages regardless of your particular faith tradition. Some of you may want less spirituality in this book, while others may desire more, but it is my hope that these choices will prove to be valuable for everyone, regardless of where you are in your faith journey.

The stories of couples you will read about in this book are based on my experiences over the years as a psychologist,

therapist, and professor. However, you should know that the names and details of the people and situations described in this book have been changed or presented in composite form in order to ensure the privacy of those with whom I have worked. Every attempt has been made to change all information that could lead to anyone, including the clients themselves, recognizing any individual portrayed in any story.

In addition, you should know that my own marriage has not been a smooth ride. We are making good choices now in the ten areas that you will read about, but that has not always been the case. As I wrote about in my first book, *The Controlling Husband*, we have had to overcome many challenges, including my own selfishness and baggage that were brought into the marriage from the past. It would be fair to say that I am not speaking to you from an ivory tower but as one who has spent a great deal of time in the trenches.

In this book, I am offering choices I have seen work and that I use myself. You can have confidence that these ten choices will make good relationships stronger and difficult relationships healthier. These ten choices provide hope that change is not only possible but absolutely achievable.

## Hope You Can Believe In

This book is all about hope. There is hope that if you have made poor choices in the past, you can change the way you do things in the future. There is hope that your relationship and your future as a couple are not at the mercy of disagreements or conflict. There is hope that the marriage you dreamed of when you said “I do” is not only possible but within your reach.

I call my private psychotherapy practice Transformational Marriage. My wife and I came up with this name for the business based on the complete transformation needed for a marriage to truly change for a lifetime. Our logo features a butterfly, as the metamorphosis of a caterpillar to a butterfly gives all of us hope that change is possible. The butterfly's journey truly exemplifies the healing and change that can occur in a marriage.

This is the good news about your marriage. It is *not* hopeless, and you are *not* helpless. Your marriage doesn't have to continue on the way it is. You can choose to start making choices that will transform your marriage. In the next few chapters, you will learn how to understand the process of what happens when you and your partner are in conflict and how to focus more on the way you treat each other than on what you disagree about.

Learning to make these choices will not be easy, nor will the potential challenges to your relationship be easy to overcome. Rome wasn't built in a day, right? The choices you have made in the past have served to keep you safe and protected in your relationship.

The hope you can believe in is that you and your partner can choose to be in control of what happens in your relationship. If you have the courage to take the journey this book will lead you on, the possibilities are endless. Reading this book with your partner, being open to feedback from each other, and choosing to become the most authentic, loving partners possible can lead to real and lasting transformation in your marriage.