



# Strengthening Marital Commitment

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*by Mitch Temple*

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## Considering Your Level of Commitment

A good way to start taking inventory of your marriage, assessing its strengths and weaknesses, is to consider your level of *commitment*.

Ask yourself the following:

- Has your marriage been on auto pilot for so long that neither you nor your spouse have a clue where you're headed?
- Where would you like to see your marriage go this year?
- Are you committed to making positive changes?
- Do you expect your marriage to get better by doing the same things you did last year?
- How committed are you to your marriage for the long haul?
- How committed is your spouse to your marriage?

## The Three Levels of Commitment

Commitment is something many claim to have, yet few seem to understand. It is a concept that has been used, abused and improperly modeled for so long that we've lost sight of what genuine devotion looks like.

Where marriage is concerned, commitment is the decision to continue in the relationship. Dr. Michael P. Johnson, Sociology Professor at Penn State University, views the decision to continue in a relationship as a function of three different experiences, or levels, of commitment — personal, moral and structural. These three types of commitment can be described as follows:

1. **Personal Commitment, a.k.a. "I Want To."** If you have a high level of personal commitment to your marriage, you may find yourself saying or thinking, "I *want to* continue in my marriage. I *take pleasure* in being married. I *enjoy* being committed to my spouse."
2. **Moral Commitment, a.k.a. "I Ought To."** Those with a high level of moral commitment might say, "I believe staying in my marriage is *the right thing to do*. I'll stick it out *because of my values and beliefs*. I made a commitment before God and I *should keep my word*."
3. **Structural Commitment, a.k.a. "I Have To."** If you have a high level of structural commitment, the following statements may apply to you: "*External constraints* are keeping me in my marriage. I *have to* stay married. I *can't afford the negative consequences* of divorce on my finances, my social relationships and the way others might perceive me. Divorce would also be detrimental for my children."

Although one facet of commitment may sound "better" or more virtuous than another, our relationships benefit from having all three. The active presence of multiple facets, or layers, of commitment makes one's marital resolve stronger than if only one facet were present. Consider the words of Ecclesiastes 4:12 in this light: "A threefold cord is not quickly broken" (NKJV).

## Strengthening Your Level of Commitment

Another important aspect of commitment is that it must be made, or re-made, on an ongoing basis. There's more to it than just *saying* you're committed to your marriage or simply "feeling good" about your relationship. Commitment must be played out in your actions. Instead of allowing yourself to drift away from your spouse, make a deliberate move toward closer relationship. Strengthen and nourish your marital commitment.

Here are some ideas to get you started:

- **Pray.** Seek God and His will for your life and your marriage. Spend time in honest reflection. Ask Him to show you how to be the spouse He wants you to be. Pray for strength and unity in your marriage.
- **Say it with actions.** Let your behavior reflect your commitment. Make yourself available when your spouse wants to talk. Spend time alone with your spouse. Laugh together. Date each other. Plan for your future together. Build hedges where necessary to guard against external temptations and distractions.
- **Say it with words.** Tell your spouse that you are committed to your marriage for the rest of your life. Let your kids know that you and your spouse are committed to each other through thick and thin.
- **Remind yourself** of all the positive aspects of your relationship. What do you love about your spouse? How has being married blessed you? How has marriage made you grow? What are you thankful for? Ask God to bring these things to mind. Make a list if you have to and review it often.
- **Set goals.** How would you like to see your marriage grow? What areas would you like to see improve? Map out a game plan to achieve those goals and work toward them. Seek outside help if necessary.
- **Get others involved.** Surround yourselves with supportive individuals who share your values and want to see your marriage succeed. Form accountability partners. Seek out an older married couple to mentor you and your spouse.
- **Go public.** Renew your wedding vows. Publicly express your continued commitment to your spouse. Invite friends and loved ones to pledge their support for your marriage.

If you're struggling in the area of commitment or you're unsure how to begin strengthening the level of commitment in your marriage, try the following:

- Seek out a **licensed, Christian marriage and family therapist or Christian counselor** who specializes in relational commitment issues.
- **Attend a marriage seminar.**
- Read valid educational materials on commitment, including the rest of the articles in this article series.

Don't just wish you or your spouse were more committed to your marriage; take action today to make it happen!

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