

Letters
TO A
Romantic

FIRST YEARS OF MARRIAGE



SEAN PERRON
& SPENCER HARMON

This book is biblically rich and also very practical. It will step on your toes in a good way. Again and again Sean and Spencer take us to the heart of the matter of marriage: the heart. I gladly commend this work to those who desire to live out a faithful and Christ-centered marriage together.

—**Danny Akin**, President, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

The early years of marriage can be some of the sweetest—and some of the hardest. This book is a gold mine for every young couple! Built on a foundation of the gospel, it offers practical and honest advice on issues such as finances, sexual intimacy, communication, conflict, and more. You don't have to navigate these challenging areas alone. Do your marriage a huge favor and grab a copy of this helpful book.

—**Kristen Clark and Bethany Beal**, Founders, GirlDefined.com; Coauthors, *Girl Defined* and *Love Defined*

Letters to a Romantic: First Years of Marriage is a remarkable resource. It manages to be both extremely practical and persistently gospel focused. The plain, unembarrassed, and open discussions about sex alone are a must-read. But Harmon and Perron go beyond the obvious essentials of sex, money, and in-laws and zoom in as well on matters like hospitality, godly approaches to rest and entertainment, and how to love a spouse who is doubting their faith. Whether you consider yourself a “romantic” or not, this book will strengthen every young marriage—and I can personally report that its wisdom is strengthening at least one older marriage, too!

—**Alasdair Groves**, Executive Director, Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation

In the early years of marriage, the cement of convictions and culture dries quickly. That's why this book is urgently needed. Sean and Spencer have done a masterful job of serving newlyweds—heck, of serving any married couple—by tracing a straight line between the romance that we desire and the beliefs that we should treasure. The

result is a tool that will help to build solid foundations for durable marriages.

—**Dave Harvey**, President, Great Commission Collective;
Author, *When Sinners Say “I Do”* and *I Still Do*

Sean and Spencer have hit another home run with their third in a series of important books meant to equip couples for the steps of their relationship from dating to marriage. While many books focus on marriage in general, Sean and Spencer have provided an eminently readable, thoroughly biblical, and altogether practical book for couples who are specifically in their first years of marriage. Brimming with wisdom and insight that they have gained from their pastoral and counseling experience, this resource will be one you will surely pass along to young married couples for years to come.

—**Jonathan D. Holmes**, Founder and Executive Director,
Fieldstone Counseling; Pastor of Counseling, Parkside Church,
Chagrin Falls, Ohio; Author, *Counsel for Couples: A Biblical and
Practical Guide for Marriage Counseling*

As they have in their other volumes, Sean and Spencer root the realities of romance in Scripture’s relevance for daily life. Seasoned by their early years of marriage, these two men are desperate for you to taste of the richness of God’s Word, which has proven itself to be a sturdy and strong foundation for marriage. With pastoral clarity, they help young couples to consider the importance of the patterns and rhythms they establish in their early years and to make them a worthy investment that will help their later years to be all the more sweet. I can say, as someone who has been married for twenty years and now has six children, that their advice is wise beyond their years and provides a practical guide for true romance that will flourish and sweeten with every passing year.

—**T. Dale Johnson**, Executive Director, Association of Certified
Biblical Counselors; Associate Professor of Biblical Counseling,
Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

This book is rich wisdom about the complex situations that surround the first year of marriage. Its words come from faithful men who have walked this road with grace and are eager to pass on what they have learned to you. This resource is an investment in your marriage that will pay dividends for decades.

—**Heath Lambert**, Senior Pastor, First Baptist Church,
Jacksonville, Florida

This book for newlyweds is needed and tremendously helpful. It contains timely challenges and encouragements as well as relevant instructions for people at every stage of marriage, though its material is especially relevant for newlyweds. Having been in ministry and having had the privilege of performing the premarital counseling as well as the weddings of numerous people over the past sixty-two years, I wish that this book had been available to give to all these couples as they began their marriages. Marriages that begin right are much more likely to continue right. And I highly recommend this book as a vital part of that good beginning.

—**Wayne Mack**, Academic Head, Strengthening Ministries
Training Institute; Director, Association of Certified Biblical
Counselors—Africa

This book wisely addresses the most significant challenges that many young Christian married couples face in a way that is both practical and biblical. My wife and I are eager to give this resource to the young husbands and wives whom we have been counseling. It is fun to read and would make a great couples' devotional.

—**Jim Newheiser**, Director of the Christian Counseling Program
and Associate Professor of Christian Counseling and Pastoral
Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary

This book combines biblical instruction and practical observations made by men who are discovering how to build a marriage for the long haul. I believe newlyweds and nearlyweds will find it especially helpful. My favorite aspect of this book is the enthusiasm,

passion, and positivity about marriage and family that permeate every page.

—**Jimmy Scroggins**, Lead Pastor, Family Church, West Palm Beach

The patterns of the first few months of married life soon—for better or worse—harden into habits. These habits set trajectories that can take a couple far from where they want to be in many areas of their relationship. This book can help to break bad habits in a marriage and then reshape them into routines that are more glorifying to God and satisfying to a couple.

—**Donald S. Whitney**, Professor of Biblical Spirituality and Associate Dean for the School of Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Letters
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Romantic



Also by Sean Perron and Spencer Harmon

Letters to a Romantic: On Dating

Letters to a Romantic: On Engagement

Letters
TO A
Romantic

FIRST YEARS OF MARRIAGE



SEAN PERRON
& SPENCER HARMON

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To my parents:

I praise God for your faithfulness to each other.

—Sean

To Melody, Harper, and Wally:

You have filled our early years with joy.

—Spencer

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FOREWORD

Letters to a Romantic: First Years of Marriage is a unique book. Even though there are many books on marriage issues, they are not specific for newlywed couples. The chapters in this book cover twenty-two relevant issues and answer the questions that almost all newlyweds wonder about.

Each chapter is warm and inviting due to its letter format. The chapters are easy for each couple to personalize. The chapters are brief, and both husband and wife would benefit greatly if they read and discuss each chapter together. Additionally, each brief chapter contains discussion questions at the end, thus making it easy for them to see their strengths as well as their weaknesses that need work.

Harmon and Perron are both young pastors and have been trained as biblical counselors. Both have been married for over five years and have children. So they know firsthand what the first five years are like from their own lives as well as from the couples they have counseled. Thus, they take the reader on a contemplative stroll up and down the aisle of relevant topics they may face. Their chapters are full of very practical applications that are based on specific Scriptures.

The chapters are Christ-centered, and it is obvious that both

Foreword

authors have a very high view of God. They remind the reader that everyday, ordinary married life is an opportunity to either honor God or steal his glory. Some days, your marriage may be difficult and you may feel discouraged; but remember that even on the most difficult days, it is always an opportunity to glorify God and show love to your spouse. This book reminds you of the many special opportunities you have to do this.

Its topics are immensely practical—parents, sex, children, money, church, impurity in marriage, suffering, and even doubting God. Each brief chapter stands by itself, and in pertinent chapters Harmon and Perron have teamed with their wives to obtain a more balanced view.

Walking the reader through God's relevant and sufficient Word on these issues, Harmon and Perron have developed an effective tool for couples and for those counseling newlyweds. This will be a very valuable tool in the biblical counselor's toolbox.

We recommend this book to you and pray that God will bless each reader to the praise of His glory and grace.

Martha Peace
Stuart Scott
June 2020

INTRODUCTION

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THE FIRST YEARS

Sean and Spencer

Dear Romantic,

Why should you listen to two guys who aren't even thirty talk about the early years of marriage?

Neither of us has been married for longer than ten years. There is still a lot of marriage for us to experience. We are young pastors at the beginning of ministry. Our kids are young. We have just exited the “first years of marriage” ourselves. Shouldn't we not bother with writing a book and simply keep our heads down while those who have more years under their belts speak to these issues?

Those questions are the very reason we wrote this book.

We know we have blind spots and immaturities—you'll read about many of them in the coming pages. As we write these letters to you, we aren't pretending to be marriage experts. That's why these chapters are relatively short—you'll find a resource

section in the back listing books that have been written by those much wiser than we are.

Yet we believe there is an advantage to writing a book from right on the “other side” of the early years of marriage. Most books on marriage are aimed at addressing timeless problems with timeless truths that are found in Scripture. This is always needed. But we also recognize that people gain unique help from listening to those who have just walked through the same season they are in. The early years of marriage involve unique struggles and opportunities that are easy to forget by the time someone is three decades into marriage.

Picture us, then, not as veterans of marriage who are sharing sage stories of years long past. Instead, think of us as fellow soldiers in the trenches who have been here a few years longer than you have. We want to share with you what we have learned since we’ve gotten here, some pitfalls to watch out for, and a weapon that is absolutely necessary if you want to make it to victory.

That weapon, of course, is the Bible.

We believe that the Bible, not us, is a sufficient source of marriage advice. That means that age and experience are important, but the helpfulness of any marriage advice should be determined by how faithfully it reflects God’s Word—not whether or not it comes from someone who has been married for a long time. You can have wrinkles and yet no wisdom, and you can also be young and have lots of it. God’s Word is what makes the difference (see Ps. 119:99–101)

Our goal in this book is not to point you to ourselves, our experience, or our advice. Our goal is to point you away from ourselves and to the only source of real help: Jesus Christ as he is revealed in Scripture.

We wrote this book on the first years of marriage with the later years of marriage also in view. These years are deeply influential.

The way you talk and think about sex and children and money and conflict now influences the way you'll be talking about these things on your thirtieth anniversary. We want those conversations to be shaped by Scripture and conformed to Christ.

As you read, you will notice that our wives have cosigned many of the letters. The teaching of kindness is on their tongues (see Prov. 31:26), and their wisdom has permeated this book. Their tone and tenderness have blessed our writing, and their thoughtful additions are words fitly spoken (see Prov. 25:11).

Our prayer is that, as you read, you will hear the familiar words of the person who is most qualified to talk about marriage—Jesus Christ (who never married)—and will forget all about us. And we also pray that, as we all listen to him, our marriages would look more and more Christlike during the first years and every year that follows.

Until then,
Sean and Spencer



WHEN MARRIAGE EXPOSES YOUR HEART

Spencer

Dear Romantic,

Marriage is an experiment in exposure. Every day, you are more exposed to your spouse—to his or her character, quirks, rhythm of life, sin, and struggles. This isn't shocking. You married a dynamic saint-and-yet-sinner who both strives and stumbles (see Col. 3:9–10) and whose dreams, preferences, and habits are developing throughout these first years of marriage.

What's more jarring, though, is how marriage exposes *you*. Your preferences, decisions, and convictions now have a direct and sustained impact on another person—your spouse. Too often that impact can leave your spouse feeling hurt and you feeling confused. How did we get here? Marriage unearths the deep roots of our hearts, and we can often be discouraged at what we find.

Our hearts are the control centers of all the *beliefs, values,* and *commitments* that we carry into every area of our lives—things that directly impact how we relate to God, others, and

our circumstances.¹ The question is not *if*, but *how*, our hearts impact our marriages—and we need to be willing to evaluate them in the light of Scripture.

OUR HEARTS IN MARRIAGE

It's tempting to think that all the problems you face in these early years come from the *outside*—from your spouse, your circumstances, your resources. But Jesus locates all these problems on the inside: “For *out of the heart* come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person” (Matt. 15:19–20).

Jesus doesn't say that our anger, envy, discontent, or laziness *happens* to us because of some *real* problem such as a foolish boss, lack of money, or stressful schedule. Instead, he wants us to see these issues as mirrors that reflect a deeper problem in our hearts—sin. If you have been married for more than a week, you have probably seen all kinds of problems in your marriage that you want to change. Jesus wants you to know where they come from.

But Jesus doesn't just want us to know the source of these issues so that we can feel bad about how sinful we are. He shows us our hearts so that our marriages can, when we have faith in his gospel, bear fruit for his glory.

THE HEART OF MARRIAGE

We can't figure out marriage on our own—any more than we are called to cleanse our sinful hearts on our own. Only Jesus

1. This definition of our hearts is deeply influenced by Jeremy Pierre's excellent book, *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life: Connecting Christ to Human Experience* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2016).

has the resources that we need if we are going to bear fruit in our marriages. This means that we must look at the sin in our hearts that bears fruit in our marriages and then *trust* Jesus for the forgiveness he makes available through his death on the cross and resurrection from the dead. It also means *continuing to trust* Jesus for power over sin in our marriages.

If you have realized that you can't do marriage on your own, take comfort—Jesus knew this and has given you a promise to soothe your soul. He tells you that your heart will not produce fruit unless you abide in him—that apart from him you can do nothing (see John 15:4–5). We *need him* and his gospel. We need forgiveness for our sinful hearts through the cross, and we need faith so we can root our marriages in him every day.

This is why Paul's marriage advice grows out of the gospel message itself. Husbands take their cues from the way that Christ relates to his people—he is the leader who humbly lays down his life for the good of his wife (see Eph. 5:25). Wives take their cues from the way that the church relates to Christ—they submit themselves to their husbands' good leadership, just as the church follows Jesus (see Eph. 5:24).

Only Jesus is able to address the complex problems that we face in these first years of marriage. And, as we abide in Jesus as he is revealed to us in the gospel, not only do we find solutions to our problems, but we also display that sufficient gospel for the whole world to see.

ALIGNING OUR HEARTS

My hope for you as I write this book is that your marriage would grow and bear fruit. That happens when your *heart* believes God's Word and when you act on it in every area of your life. You're going to get a lot of practical advice in this book. My

hope is that it will help you to change. But in order for any of us to experience change that is rooted in the *gospel*, there are at least three steps we need to take.

Naming the sin in our hearts. One of the biggest temptations we face in the early years of marriage is to minimize our sin or to call it something different from what Jesus does in his Word. We reconceive our rebellion against God as merely an “inconvenience” to our happiness or to the happiness of our spouses. Be committed instead to agreeing with Christ about the sin that you bring into your marriage. Jesus promises forgiveness for and power over *sin*—not inconveniences.

Hating the sin that we find in our hearts. One of the signs that we have repented of our sin is that we *hate it* for what it is—sin against God. Our hearts must be motivated not just by a desire to get problems out of our lives but by a desire to display the gospel in our marriages.

Replacing the sin that we find in our hearts. The call of Christ is not primarily for us to develop a refined sense of our own sinfulness. His primary call is for us to repent of our sin and put on faith in Christ (see Gal. 2:20). This means believing God’s Word and applying it to problems in our marriages.

As you seek to grow, strengthen, and change in your marriage, my hope is that you would be rooted in the gospel. Only the gospel can expose your deepest problem—your sin—and then provide the only solution that leads to lasting change.

Marriage is an experiment in exposure. God designed it that way. But the beauty of this design is that even as marriage exposes painful things about us, it also exposes the way in which

Christ, his grace, and the gospel uniquely address all the problems we face.

Until then,
Spencer

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways has marriage exposed you? Be specific.
2. What is harder—trusting Jesus to forgive you of your sin or trusting Jesus for the power to change? Why? Discuss this with your spouse.
3. This chapter lists three components of biblical change. Which of them is hardest for you? Why?