Bob: Ann Wilson and her husband Dave had been married for a decade, and there was an ongoing persistent source of conflict in their marriage. She called it the merry-go-round.

Ann: The merry-go-round was: “I feel like you’re never home. The boys need you. I need you. You’re gone. You’re doing all this stuff for everybody else, and we need you at home.” Then Dave would get angry—he’d get mad and he’d say, “I am home!”—he’d defend himself. I’d say, “No; you’re not home!” And that would just end.

For a long time that had happened, where I was so angry. My anger turned to resentment; my resentment turned to bitterness; and my bitterness turned to nothing—just a hard, crusty heart.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Monday, February 18th. Our host is Dennis Rainey, and I’m Bob Lepine. What do we do, as couples, when our hearts have become hardened toward one another? We’ll talk with Dave and Ann Wilson about that today. Stay with us.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us on the Monday edition. I don’t know if you remember this—this was back almost a decade ago. We were sitting down and brainstorming how we wanted to put together the Art of Marriage® video series—the messages we wanted to share, the themes that we wanted to address, the stories we wanted to tell in that video series. You and I looked at each other and said, “We’ve got to have Dave and Ann Wilson share their story.” We’d heard their story before about how they’d come to a crisis point in their marriage. That wound up being really, for a lot of people, one of the highlights of that whole video series.

Dennis: It did. In fact, we heard that story at the Weekend to Remember®, where Dave and Ann speak. Barbara and I were doing some conferences and heard them share about, really, the concept of a vertical marriage, which is the title of their new book.

Barbara joins us, by the way on the broadcast, along with Dave and Ann Wilson. Hey, everybody, welcome to the broadcast.

Dave: Really glad to be here.
Ann: So am I.

Barbara: Yes; me too.

Bob: We should mention that Dave and Ann are here as guests but—

Dennis: —not for long!

Bob: —little more than guests; right?

Dennis: They’ll be taking over, here in a couple of weeks, as the new hosts—plural—of *FamilyLife Today*.

Bob: You know some of our listeners just went: “Say what?! They’re taking over as the hosts of *FamilyLife Today*?”

Dennis: That’s correct. Barbara and I are not retiring, but we passed the torch to Dave and Meg Robbins back in December of 2017. Now, we’re passing the torch of the radio broadcast, *FamilyLife Today*, to new hosts. We’re excited about it; aren’t we, sweetie?

Barbara: We are real excited about. We’ve known Dave and Ann Wilson for 30 years, at least; right?

Dave: Wow!

Barbara: Isn’t that hard to believe? We’re not that old though.

Dave: We’re not.

Ann: You’re not. [Laughter]

Barbara: Not a bit. Anyway, we’ve known them for a long time. We love them and have admired them. We’re delighted that our listeners are going to get to learn from them and hear from them for many, many more times.

Bob: I’ve been thinking about this in football terms, because Dave was a college quarterback at Ball State University and set all kinds of records at Ball State.

Dave: I can’t wait to hear this, Bob. [Laughter]

Dennis: I can’t either. [Laughter]
**Bob:** This is a little bit like—you’re the quarterback here, and you’re about to make the hand off to the running back. He’ll have the ball, and he’s got to hit the hole and gain the yardage from here on; right?

**Dennis:** No doubt about it. I was glad you used a football analogy rather than sending the horse off to the glue factory. [Laughter] I didn’t know where you were going with that.

**Bob:** There’s no glue factory in your future! [Laughter]

**Dennis:** We’re not done; we’re not retiring. Just to let our listeners know—we think you’re going to be in good hands with Dave and Ann Wilson. They helped start a church near Detroit—Kensington Church. What year was that, by the way?

**Dave:** That was 1990. We had been married ten years and just moved from seminary—just finished our Master of Divinity out in California and moved to Detroit, a couple of hours north of where we grew up in Ohio.

**Dennis:** Well, you’re speaking of the tenth year of your marriage. That is the story where the book you’ve written, *Vertical Marriage*, begins. It’s a classic. It’s what Bob was talking about earlier. It’s a piece in the *Art of Marriage™* in the conflict section, Bob.

**Bob:** And it’s in two parts. We tell the first part of the story at the beginning of the session; the second part of the story at the end of the session. If listeners want to see the story in a condensed format, they can go to our website, FamilyLifeToday.com. We’ve got both chapters up there. We’re going to get the expanded version of this today.

If I had asked you, Ann—ten years into your marriage—did you think you had a good marriage, ten years in?

**Ann:** No; at ten years in, I was very disappointed. I was frustrated; I was angry. I felt lot of guilt too. We were starting this church. Dave was starting it in terms of—he was putting the time and energy into it. We had two kids at the time—they were little; they were three and one. I’m trying to keep the home front steady and still helping Dave as we start this church. He was gone a lot—and more and more. He was also the chaplain for the Detroit Lions, and so he was traveling with the team. He was doing chapels; we were both leading Bible studies for them. Then we both had all this church stuff on top of that.

When you’re in ministry, especially, it feels like you’re competing with God; because all the things Dave was doing were wonderful, godly, amazing things that were expanding God’s kingdom. I felt very selfish and self-centered to say, “We need you at home.” I did say it, and I said it very loud; didn’t I? [Laughter]
Dave: Oh, she yelled it—she did! She’s being nice right now.

You know, an interesting thing for me—and you heard this in the *Art of Marriage*—is I was clueless to this.

Dennis: You thought your marriage, on a 10-point scale, was what?

Dave: I would have said a 10 or a 9.8; and I guaranteed you, Ann agreed.

Dennis: There you go.

Dave: Here’s what I thought—when we first got married, we struggled *big time*. We went to the *Weekend to Remember* as an engaged couple—thought we’d just whiz into marriage and make it work. Six months in, we’re fighting so much I go downstairs at three in the morning because I can’t sleep. I get on my knees, and I open the Word of God.

Ann: I walked in the room—I see him on his knees and I’m like: “Thank you, Jesus! He’s finally on his knees,”—you know? [Laughter] I see him, and I’m so excited to see him: “Look at you. You’re in the Word; you’re praying.” He goes: “I’ve just been reading God’s Word where Paul said, ‘To live is Christ and to die is gain.’ I just told God, ‘God, I’d rather be dead than married to Ann.’”

Barbara: Well, that wasn’t what you were expecting; was it? [Laughter]

Ann: Who says that out loud to their wife?! [Laughter]

Barbara: Wow!

Dave: I hear that now and I’m like, “What an idiot!” I cannot believe I said it. I mean, I prayed it—I really did pray that. You know, you laugh at it now, but you guys know—man, when you’re in that moment, it’s like, “I’d rather die,”—yes. Well, Paul just said death is *glorious*; and this is *terrible*, so I meant it!

Bob: Why were you so miserable six months in? What was it that wasn’t happening for you?

Dave: Everything. [Laughter] I mean, we were your typical couple—madly in love and you have these expectations you don’t even realize you’re bringing in—

Ann: —and baggage.

Dave: —*and* baggage.

Ann: —so much baggage.
Dave: You know, reality doesn’t match up to expectations. There’s this gap; and I filled the gap with “I married the wrong person.”

Ann: And so did I!

Bob: You were miserable, because he wasn’t the man you thought he was?

Ann: I think it’s that, and I think he had—we were fighting, and he’d leave the room. I’d be thinking: “Where are you going?! We’re supposed to work this out.” We had differences in our past / in our sexual past that were just very hard. I have abuse in my background, and so I felt insecure.

Let me add—if someone would have asked me [rating the marriage], I would have said a 1 and maybe a .5. I was so angry that Dave didn’t know how bad we were doing.

Bob: Before we jump back into year ten, there are folks who are just saying: “Okay; how did you get out of, six months in, ‘I wish I was dead and not married,’ to six months later being, ‘Okay; we’ve got this back on track?’” What happened in the intervening six months that helped fix some of those early problems?

Dave: What actually happened—and it sounds simplistic—but we really did pull out the manual, the FamilyLife® Weekend to Remember manual. I’m not saying it’s magic and it’s got all the answers, but it was our only source of “What does God’s Word really say?” Two things happened—one: we pulled it out and said, “Okay; let’s start at block one. What are the five threats?” We’re like: “Wow! All of these are hitting us. What does God want to do?”

Number two was—we started teaching it.

Ann: Yes!

Dave: There’s people that want help. “We’re not able to help them, because we’re not far enough ahead of them,”—that’s what we felt—but we’re like, “We can give them what we’ve got!” As we taught it, we internalized it. It literally started changing our life—it really did.

Ann: It changed everything. I would say—I would look at you both, Barbara and Dennis, and just say, “Thank you.”

Dave: “Thanks!”

Dennis: The Bible says that “Faith comes from hearing and hearing from the Word of God.” I think one of the understated benefits of the Weekend to Remember is for a couple to sit in that conference and listen and hear older/more mature couples talk
about how they have endured trials, all applying the Scripture to their lives. You leave that conference with fresh hope.

Now, I want to go back to your tenth year. You had this glorious evening planned for you and Ann. You actually went out to eat and had the guy who served you armed with ten roses.

**Dave:** Yes, I had this deal with the waiter when I walked in. I gave him ten roses; and I said, “When I give you a look, bring over one rose at a time.” He brought rose number one, and we talked about year number one.

Actually, and then he did that with year two, year three, all the way through ten. I would have told you—I don’t know what Ann would say—I was like: “It’s a great night. We are talking,”—I mean, taaalking—because women don’t want to talk; they want to taaalk; right?

**Dennis:** Right.

**Dave:** We’re talking about our relationship. All I remember about that conversation was—it was all highlights. It was all memories of the first ten years that were good. We didn’t go dark. We went to the best memories of our ten years.

**Ann:** Yes; you were killing it! I think that the waiter was like, “This dude is amazing!”

**Dave:** Yes; I was giving him a *lesson* in romance; right? [Laughter]

**Bob:** Were you starting to soften and go, “You know, he really is a wonderful guy, and I really am lucky to be married to him”?

**Ann:** Oh, Bob, I wish I could say yes; but no! My heart was *so hard* that, intellectually in my mind, I thought: “This is good. This is a good try”; but it didn’t go into my heart, thinking, “I really like you now.”

**Dennis:** So if we’d had you tied up to an EKG, you’d had an occasional blip—

**Ann:** That’s a good way to put it.

**Dennis:** —but not many heartbeats for him.

**Ann:** No.

**Dennis:** You finished the ten roses. You decide you’re going to take your wife out and go show her the building to start this church.

**Dave:** Right.
**Dennis:** Actually, you have ulterior motives even in that.

**Dave:** You know me well; yes, and even Ann figured it out. We’re driving home, and another surprise—we pull in the parking lot. We are about to start our church, Kensington, in a middle school. Ann had not seen this middle school—our team had decided this. I thought: “This will be cool. We'll park here. We'll pray about God doing a miracle in that school and building the church.” And then I thought, “We’ll go park”; and you guys know what I mean by park; right? [Laughter]

**Bob:** I do; yes.

**Dave:** We’re in a little Honda Accord, so it was a little tight. I remember leaning over to kiss her, and she turns her head. Again, I’m so oblivious to what’s really in her heart. I think she just didn’t even realize I’m trying to kiss her. I didn’t even think that she didn’t want to kiss me, so I try again. She definitely turns her head. That’s when I had the wits about me to go: “Okay, somethings wrong here. I don’t need to be a genius; but oh, my gosh.” I just said to her, “Is something wrong?”

**Ann:** My first response was, “No,” because he had put great effort into making this night wonderful; and it was. I didn’t want to wreck it for him. He said again, “But it seems like there’s something wrong.” To be honest, I didn’t want him to touch me—that’s how far gone I was. Finally, he looked at me—he said, “Seriously, what’s up?!”

I just was quiet for a while and I thought, “Alright; here we go.” I said: “I’ve lost all my feelings for you. I have nothing, and I don’t know what to do.

**Dave:** I’m sitting there, and it was as quiet as it just was; because number one, I can’t believe what I’m hearing. Again, I have no idea this is what’s going on in her heart, although there were symptoms and signs for the last year—at least, the last six months—that I did not see; because my eyes were so driven on everything outside my home, except my wife, and she’s being left in the dust.

When she said that, at first, I was like—because she said, “You’re gone a lot, and I’m putting the boys to bed without you.” I literally turned with my right arm to reach into the back seat, where my planner was—back in the days when you had your schedule in your planner—that’s where it was. This is what I did in arguments—if I stayed around long enough to argue, I would win it. I was going to pull that baby out—I really was reaching back there to pull it out. I was going to open it up and prove her wrong—“I have been home. I was home Monday. I was home last…”—you know, because I knew it was in there.

I’m reaching back there to grab it, and this is where this thing turns—it was amazing what happens. It’s only happened to me a few times in my life—I sensed the voice of God. It wasn’t audible; it was just a strong Holy Spirit nudge, but it was so strong. I knew
exactly what He was saying—it was two words: “Shut up!” It was that strong: “Shut up! Don’t you touch that planner. Listen!”

Ann didn’t even know this—I just went like this; I went—and just put my hand back in my lap and I said: “Tell me more. What do you mean by that?”

**Ann:** Well, it was really interesting on my end, too; because I saw him reaching in the back. I thought: “Oh, here we go. Here goes the merry-go-round,” that we were always getting on. The merry-go-round was: “I feel like you’re never home—the boys need you; I need you—you’re gone. You’re doing all this stuff for everybody else, and we need you at home.” Then Dave would get angry—he’d get mad and he’d say, “I am home!”—he’d defend himself. I’d say, “No; you’re not home!” And that would just end.

For a long time that had happened where I was so angry. My anger turned to resentment; my resentment turned to bitterness; and my bitterness turned to *nothing*—just a hard, crusty heart. When he turned around and he said, “Tell me what you mean,” that was the first time he’s ever said that.

I shared all that: “I feel like you’re not home. I feel like I’m parenting alone. I feel like you’re off winning the world, and you’ve left me behind. I’m mad about it; I’m resentful; I’m angry—it’s all of it. I don’t even care anymore. I’m not saying I’ll divorce you, but I’m saying I have no hope that our marriage will ever be good.”

**Dave:** Again, I didn’t say a word—not a word—because I’d heard very strongly from God: “Shut up. Just zip your lip and listen.” I just listened and, again, I heard the voice of God—it was so strong, because He said it several times: “Repent. Repent. Repent.” It was interesting—it was like strong but *gracious*—just like the heart of the Father. You know, it was like, “This is very serious, but I love you; and I’m calling you out of where you’ve been living.”

Of course, Ann doesn’t know this—she’s just sharing. I’m looking at her, and I’m hearing this. I knew—here’s the thing—I knew, in one word, what repent meant. When I heard the word, repent, I knew God was saying: “You’re lukewarm. You preach it; you teach it—you’re not living it. I can’t remember the last time you and I had an intimate conversation,”—God and me. “You’re not opening the Word of God to just love Me and let Me love you. You’re opening the Word of God to get a message to go give somebody; so they’ll pat you on the back and say, ‘You’re amazing.’ You pray ‘Help me,’ prayers.”

Again, this is all in one word. I knew, in this one word, here’s what God was saying: “If you want the horizontal relationship in your marriage”—and anything, really, to work—“I have to be first, vertically. I have to be number one. It’s never going to work without Me being the center and the rock. What you preach has to be real.” All that was in one word, and I knew it.
**Dennis:** When you say “Me,” you’re saying God wants to be the center.

**Dave:** God has to be the center—vertical first. That’s the whole concept of vertical marriage—is: “What would happen if you went vertical with God and really established a relationship with Him? Then, out of that, overflow that into your marriage.” All that was in one word.

Again, I didn’t know all the implications of that; but I knew this: “I needed to repent right now.” When Ann finished what she was saying, I said something like this—I said, “We need to talk about everything you said; but before we talk, I need to do something; and I need to do it right now. You don’t need to do this; I do.” Of course, she has no idea what that was going to be.

For whatever reason, I felt like “I need to be on my knees,” when I did this. I don’t always pray on my knees, but there are times when I just want my posture to be in total submission. I got on my knees in the front seat of a Honda Accord. Don’t ask me how, but I pushed that driver’s seat back. I turned around. The steering wheel was in my back, and I put my elbows on the driver’s seat.

I prayed out loud with my eyes closed. I don’t even know what Ann’s doing—this isn’t about my wife; this is about me and God. I just said: “God, I need to repent. I am a lukewarm Christian. You know me. You know I’ve always hated that in the church. I’ve preached against it, and now I’m that guy.”

**Ann:** He was praying that out loud.

**Dave:** Yes; I prayed it out loud. I said: “I’m asking You to make me the man You called me to be—the husband I’m called to be / the dad I need to be. I’m submitting everything to you.” It wasn’t a conversion moment; it was just putting Him back where He deserves to be—on the throne/the control of my life. “I repent, and I’m choosing to live the life You’ve called me to live.”

I thought we were done—I thought, “Okay; now, let’s talk.” I look over, and she’s on her knees.

**Ann:** I think, when Dave got on his knees, it shocked me. I know that Dave loves God. I know that he’s running hard after God, but that was such a vulnerable place to be—of saying, “God, I repent.” Soon as Dave did that, there was a conviction of my heart, realizing that I had put Dave as the idol of my life. He was like on my throne. I got on my knees and I said: “God, I confess and I repent, too; because I’ve put my marriage and Dave in place of You. I repent of that. My happiness has been determined by him and his actions. That’s just wrong. I give You all of me/all of us—our future/our marriage.” We prayed, “God,”—again, we grabbed hands, at that point, because we’d done this on our honeymoon and at other times, too—“God, take our marriage and make it great. We can’t do it apart from You.”
**Bob:** Some couples will have an experience like this and, then, the next day the habits/the old patterns are back. It was like, “We went to the mountain top, but nothing really changed.” Things really changed for you; didn’t they?

**Dave:** Yes; I’m not going to sit here and say, “Man, it was like boom!” but it was. The next day was like: “Okay; you can pray a prayer like that, but that’s a daily prayer.”

**Bob:** Yes.

**Dave:** It’s something we have to establish *rhythms* and disciplines in our life and in our marriage. I mean, there were many conversations after that night about the horizontal part.

Then, here’s the amazing thing, I think, about vertical marriage. The concept is this—we come into marriage, and we were doing the same thing—even though we taught this differently—we were trying to get happiness from each other; right? When that doesn’t happen—and that doesn’t happen for almost everybody—at some point, you’re disappointed.

Most couples—and we did the same thing—we think, “I married the wrong person.” No, no, no: “You’re looking in the wrong place,”—that’s the answer. Vertical marriage is when you look to the One who can give you the joy and happiness that you want. Now, you come back to your marriage—what?—you’re *overflowing* rather than: “I need…” “I need…” “I need…” It’s like: “No; I’m called by my God to serve. He’s filled me up in such a way I can serve.” It *literally* changes everything.

**Dennis:** As you’ve been talking, I’ve been thinking of Psalm 127:1, which has been quoted many, many times, here on *FamilyLife Today*. It really captures the concept of vertical marriage—it says, “Unless the Lord builds the house—

**Dave:** Right.

**Dennis:** —that’s the vertical.

**Dave:** Yes.

**Dennis:** The other half of the verse says, “…those who build it labor in vain,”—that’s the horizontal. Who hasn’t experienced that?

**Ann:** Yes.

**Dave:** Right.
Dennis: I was thinking back in our marriage. In 46 years, we perhaps didn’t have a romantic night like you attempted, Dave, with the 10 roses; but there have been nights where we have missed each other. The only thing that rescued it was repentance on the vertical—on submitting to God and to Jesus Christ afresh.

Barbara: Yes; the verse that popped into my mind, as I was listening to you, is one that I learned as a brand-new Christian; and that’s Romans 12:1-2—the whole concept of “Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed.” Being transformed is repentance. We can’t become transformed unless we repent.

That’s what we tend to do in our marriages—is we become conformed to the world. We’re trying to do it in our own power and our own strength and apply what we think is going to work. But when we repent and submit, then He transforms us; and then we can experience exactly what you were talking about, Dave.

Dave: Yes; and I’d end with this—my hope is that there are people listening right now and they wouldn’t do this, “Oh, we can listen to FamilyLife Today; and we can get books and resources and that will save our marriage,”—those are awesome, and they’re very important. I’m hoping they go: “Oh my gosh; the only hope we have is Jesus,”—I’m not kidding. I see people, all around the world, get down on their knees right now—turn off the radio, getting on their knees, and repent.

Ann: Even if you’re doing it by yourself—

Dave: Right.

Ann: —even if you have a spouse that’s not there yet—you can still get on your knees. Give your life to Jesus; and re-surrender your marriage, your home, your kids. He hears that.

Dennis: And He does show up then.

Ann: He does show up.

Dennis: It may not fix everything that’s wrong; it may not turn it into instant happiness, but that’s a fresh beginning.

Bob: Yes; and if you prayed that prayer, we’d love to hear about it. We’d love to send you a copy of Dave and Ann Wilson’s book, Vertical Marriage. We’re making it available this week to those of you who can support the ministry with a donation. All you have to do is go to FamilyLifeToday.com and make a donation—ask for your copy of the book, Vertical Marriage, by Dave and Ann Wilson. The book is our way of saying, “Thank you for your ongoing support of this daily radio program.”
We’re here to provide practical biblical help and hope for your marriage and your family every day. Our website is available any time. You can download past programs for free. We’ve got resources and events that are all designed to strengthen your marriage and family relationships. Again, go to FamilyLifeToday.com; ask for your copy of the book, *Vertical Marriage*, when you support *FamilyLife Today* with a donation. You can also donate by calling 1-800-FL-TODAY—that’s 1-800-358-6329—1-800-“F” as in family, “L” as in life, and then the word, “TODAY.”

Tomorrow, we want to talk about how you cultivate good conflict resolution skills in a marriage. Because all marriages are going to have conflict, we need to know what to do with them. Dave and Ann Wilson will join us again tomorrow. I hope you will join us as well.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, along with our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our host, Dennis Rainey, I’m Bob Lepine. We will see you back next time for another edition of *FamilyLife Today*.

*FamilyLife Today* is a production of FamilyLife of Little Rock, Arkansas; a Cru® Ministry. Help for today. Hope for tomorrow.

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