

Teacher Edition

**ARE
WE**



**THERE
YET?**



PAUL & TERRIE CHAPPELL

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First published in 2017 by Striving Together Publications, a ministry of Lancaster Baptist Church, Lancaster, CA 93535. Striving Together Publications is committed to providing tried, trusted, and proven books that will further equip local churches to carry out the Great Commission. Your comments and suggestions are valued.

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Cover design by Andrew Jones
Layout by Craig Parker
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ISBN 978-1-59894-362-7

Printed in the United States of America

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HOW TO USE THIS CURRICULUM

Take a moment to familiarize yourself with the features of this Sunday school curriculum:

Schedule

The lessons contained in this curriculum are undated, allowing you to begin and end the teaching series at any time. There are twelve lessons that may be taught weekly any time of the year.

Companion Outlines

Companion outlines are available as printable downloads through Striving Together Publications. These outlines include blanks that students or members of a group study may fill in during the lessons and also provide support Scripture verses that are used throughout each lesson.

These are excellent tools to engage members of a class or group study. Giving study participants a tangible resource encourages faithfulness to the class, provides participants with a devotional tool for use throughout the week, and allows them to review what they learned previously.

Text

The verses from which the lessons are taken are included at the beginning of each lesson. These are provided so that you may read them through several times in prayerful preparation for your time in class. Many teachers choose to memorize their key verses. During the class hour, we suggest that you use your own Bible for Scripture reading and encourage your class members to do so as well.

Overview

The overview section is provided so that you may be aware of the overall emphasis of each lesson, especially as it relates to the other lessons in the curriculum. These brief statements provide a snapshot of where each lesson will take the students.

Lesson Goals

Bible teaching has a higher goal than the delivery of information. That goal is a life changed. Students want to know what they are to do with what they are given from God's Word. As you prepare for and teach each lesson, emphasize how those listening may apply its truths throughout the week.

Teaching Outline

The abbreviated outline enables you to view the entire lesson at a glance to see how the content fits together. Teaching

with an organized outline increases the student's ability to understand and remember the lesson content.

Lesson Illustrations

Illustrations can be extremely helpful in communicating truth. Throughout the curriculum we have included various illustrations. These illustrations are provided as a guide for the teacher and can be replaced or used at the teacher's discretion. It is recommended that the teacher include some personal illustrations.

LESSON ONE

DREAM DESTINATION

Direction

Text

GENESIS 2:18–25

18 *And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.*

19 *And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.*

20 *And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for Adam there was not found an help meet for him.*

21 *And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof;*

22 *And the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man.*

23 *And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.*

24 *Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.*

25 *And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.*

Overview

Many people think of marriage more as a destination than a journey. They look forward to getting married and then assume once they reach that milestone they have arrived.

In reality, marriage is far more of a journey than it is a destination. But God designed it to be an *awesome* journey. In this first lesson, we take a big picture look at God's purposes for marriage and the direction He has in mind for our journey.

Lesson Goals

At the conclusion of this lesson, students should:

1. Recognize that marriage is one of God's greatest gifts and a relationship to be developed over a lifetime.
2. Commit to the work of intertwining their lives with one another.
3. See their relationship as an opportunity to picture the amazing love of Christ and grace of the gospel.

Teaching Outline

1. The Idea of Marriage
 - A. Created by God
 - B. Designed by God
2. The Bond of Marriage
 - A. Leaving
 - B. Cleaving
 - C. Weaving
3. The Strength of Marriage
 - A. Based on Commitment
 - B. Picture of Christ's Love

LESSON ONE

DREAM DESTINATION

Direction

Text

GENESIS 2:18–25

Introduction

If you really want to get to know someone, you should go on an extended trip together. Between the protracted time together and its unique frustrations, travel has a way of drawing someone's hidden personality to the surface and giving insight into their idiosyncrasies, preferences, and character.

TEACHING TIP

Relate a travel story, ideally humorous, that highlights the differences between you and your spouse. For instance, it may be in how you pack, prepare, or the difference in what an “awesome vacation” means to each of you.

Most couples begin marriage with the idea that marriage itself is a destination. Although we don't actually express it, we approach our wedding with the subconscious expectation that once we pull away in our rental car with cans clanging off the bumper, we are finally "there." From here on out, we assume, we'll be free to enjoy the incredible destination of "marriage" with our new spouse.

But along the way, perhaps even on our honeymoon, we discover that as wonderful as marriage may be, it's more of a journey than it is a destination. Rather than being an island of unending bliss and nonstop fulfillment, it's like a long road trip—the kind of trip where you're excited for the destination, love the memories along the way, and sometimes get annoyed with aspects of the journey.

Although marriage *is* a long journey, God intended it to be the kind of journey that actually gets better the longer you're on it.

If you are still engaged or just newly married, you may not believe that marriage could possibly get any better than what you envision for the first few months of your new life together—daily strolls into the sunset, alternating making each other breakfast in bed, and romantic evenings of paradisiacal joy. This is the stuff of marriage, right?

If, on the other hand, you are approaching this study as a last-ditch effort to save your marriage, you may be convinced that marriage gets worse over time. No more daydreaming of strolls into the sunset for you—you can hardly stand to be together in the same room. You don't see marriage as an incredible journey; you see it as a terrible trick that got you trapped as a lifelong travel partner with someone you don't particularly like to be around.

I won't pretend that every day of marriage is filled with heart-eye emojis and nonstop romance. The early euphoria of newlyweds does settle into real life routines and challenges. Yet some of the best experiences of couples on this journey are found in those real life moments as they see and receive God's grace through each other. So although no marriage has only the kinds of moments you want to post on social media, when the journey is shared by two people who desire to walk in God's ways and are determined to stay faithful to one another, they can be wonderful years that get better with each anniversary.

A great marriage—like a great travel experience—doesn't just happen. It takes a plan and a willingness to move in the direction of that plan. That is what this study is about—a biblically-focused guide to help you invest in the areas that make for an amazing journey together.

After all, the journey of marriage is designed by God to be amazing and profound. This is not the kind of trip you should expect to just coast through and hope you end up somewhere you like. This is the kind of trip you should take with intention and understanding of the destination God created for it.

Let's take a closer look at what this journey looks like.

1. The Idea of Marriage

Have you and your spouse ever argued about who came up with a good idea?

Well, marriage isn't just a good idea; it's an incredible idea, and it was God's.

In Proverbs 30:18–19, Solomon lists “things which are too wonderful for me....” He further defines *wonderful* as “which I know not.” In other

words, these are things that are full of wonder—mind blowing, astonishing.

And the culmination of his list? "...The way of a man with a maid."

PROVERBS 30:18–19

18 *There be three things which are too wonderful for me, yea, four which I know not:*

19 *The way of an eagle in the air; the way of a serpent upon a rock; the way of a ship in the midst of the sea; and the way of a man with a maid.*

The mystery and intricacy of marriage as God designed it is miraculous. It is incredible in its beauty, magnificence, and tenderness.

We read about the first wedding in Genesis 2:

GENESIS 2:18–25

18 *And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.*

19 *And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.*

20 *And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for Adam there was not found an help meet for him.*

21 *And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof;*

22 *And the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man.*

23 *And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.*

24 *Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.*

25 *And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.*

This passage is so significant that it is referenced no less than four times in the New Testament, including by Jesus Himself.

There is so much truth packed into these few verses—truth about God, marriage, building a God-honoring marriage, and loving your spouse. But if we learn nothing else from this passage, we see that God is the one who created marriage.

A. Created by God

It was *God* who said Adam shouldn't be alone. It was *God* who made Eve. It was *God* who brought them together in a sacred union that would bring mutual satisfaction. Marriage originated in the heart of God who perfectly designed it and beautifully created it.

MARK 10:7–9

7 *For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and cleave to his wife;*

8 *And they twain shall be one flesh: so then they are no more twain, but one flesh.*

9 *What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.*

As the originator of this gift, God has purposes for it. As we discover and live out those purposes, we experience marriage the way God meant it to be.

B. Designed by God

Marriage wasn't just God's idea; it was His design. All throughout the creation week, God looked at what He had made and saw that "it was good." But on the final day of creation, after He created Adam and Eve and brought them together, He saw that "it was *very good*."

GENESIS 1:31

31 And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good. And the evening and the morning were the sixth day.

In this first marriage, we see two purposes of God's design—companionship and completion.

Marriage, at its deepest level, is a friendship. I don't mean this in the way that awkward teens say "Can we be 'just friends'?" but in the sense that God designed marriage to give the companionship and completion which He created us to need.

It is interesting to note that even before sin entered the world—when Adam had perfect fellowship with God—God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone." This need for a partner, then, wasn't due to any imperfection in Adam but to his created purpose. It is hardwired into our souls to crave companionship; and one of the ways—perhaps the pinnacle way—God designed for that need to be met is through marriage.

This is why it is so important that married couples give careful attention to the relational aspects of marriage—communication, acceptance, conflict resolution, spending quality time together, and many other topics we’ll look at together through this study.

But it wasn’t *just* companionship, it was also completion. God made Adam and Eve in a way that they perfectly completed one another.

Illustration

How do people complete one another in marriage? Someone asked children questions about marriage. Perhaps their answers will shed some light:

How do you decide who to marry?

“You got to find somebody who likes the same stuff. Like, if you like sports, she should like it that you like sports, and she should keep the chips and dip coming.”—Alan, age 10

“No person really decides before they grow up who they’re going to marry. God decides it all way before, and you get to find out later who you’re stuck with.”—Kirsten, age 10

What is the right age to get married?

“Twenty-three is the best age because you know the person *forever* by then.”—Camille, age 10

“No age is good to get married at. You got to be a fool to get married.”—Freddie, age 6

How can a stranger tell if two people are married?

“You might have to guess, based on whether they seem to be yelling at the same kids.”—Derrick, age 8

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TEACHING TIP

Give a personal testimony of a way in which your spouse completes you.

The companionship of marriage, of course, is deeper than someone who can help you in the areas where you are inept. It is spiritual, emotional, and physical intimacy of two lives. And yes, it is *very good*.

The first wedding ceremony was a magnificent picture of the way God designed Adam and Eve to perfectly complete one another. We see this even in the words used in Genesis to identify them. The Hebrew word for *man* is *Ish*. But the word that translates as *woman*, *Isha*, literally means “from man.” This explains Adam’s statement, “she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.”

If marriage to you is little more than a partner for sex or someone to pay the bills or a person to enjoy in whatever capacity on an as-needed basis, you are missing the fullness of what God intended the companionship of marriage to be—spiritual, emotional, and physical intimacy of two lives. It is an interlocking of souls.

Notice the depth of the relationship God designed for marriage as you again read Genesis 2:24: “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: *and they shall be one flesh.*”

One flesh. This isn’t natural. A bond this close is a miracle of God.

2. The Bond of Marriage

Does what we have seen of God’s design for marriage sound unrealistic? Unattainable? After all, how do you get there from where you are now?

Illustration

Three men were hiking through a forest when they came upon a large, raging violent river.

Needing to get on the other side, the first man prayed, “God, please give me the strength to cross the river.” Poof! God gave him big arms and strong legs and he was able to swim across in about two hours, even with having almost drowned twice.

After witnessing that, the second man prayed, “God, please give me strength and the tools to cross the river.” Poof! God gave him a rowboat and strong arms and strong legs and he was able to row across in about an hour after almost capsizing once.

Seeing what happened to the first two men, the third man prayed, “God, please give me the strength, the tools, and the intelligence to cross this river.” Poof! He was turned into a woman. She checked the map, hiked one hundred yards up stream and walked across the bridge.

Thankfully, the instructions God gives for forming the bond He designed for marriage are clear and straightforward from the first mention of marriage in Scripture. Genesis 2:24 describes three aspects of it, and you can remember these with three rhyming words: leaving, cleaving, weaving.

A. Leaving

“Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother...”

Considering the context in which this was first stated, the verse is almost comical. After all, Adam *had* no father or mother to leave. Yet this truth is so foundational to a healthy marriage that God included His “leaving instruction” in the record of the first marriage.

The word *leave* comes from the Hebrew word *azab* and means “to loosen, i.e., relinquish.” It speaks of a severance.

When a man and woman join in marriage, they are establishing a new identity together, and that necessitates leaving their previous individual identities—physically and emotionally.

We often illustrate this in weddings with the unity candle, as the bride and groom use the two candles lit previously in the ceremony to light the single unity candle and then blow out the individual candles. This symbol doesn’t mean that the bride and groom have lost personal identity, but that they are leaving their previous family units and their identities as separate from each other to create a new home in which they are inseparably joined.

This leaving—not just the physical leaving, but the emotional leaving as well—is vital to a new marriage. Couples need to leave behind the expectations and emotional baggage of the past—how her father treated her mother and the expectations his father had for his mother. Even in homes with a strong, healthy marriage, and especially in homes with a troubled or broken

marriage, there are pieces of the past that need to be left behind.

PHILIPPIANS 3:13–14

13 *Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before,*

14 *I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.*

Ideally before marriage, couples should identify and then refuse to carry into their marriage the anger, indifference, noncommunication, and other habits that may have been part of their upbringing.

But even after marriage as you detect those trends in your life, remember there are some things that must be left behind to create a strong, healthy relationship. This, of course, does not mean that you should forget your past or turn your back on your family. In fact, you should learn what you can from your parents and do all you can to maintain a strong relationship with them. But at some point, you need to recognize the distinction between *learning* and *leaving*.

B. Cleaving

“...and shall cleave unto his wife...”

God designed marriage to be a relationship where partners cleave to one another—like glue, they are inseparable. This word speaks of total acceptance and unconditional love and respect for one another.

When God brought Eve to Adam, his immediate response was full and unconditional acceptance: “And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh...” (Genesis 2:23). This is every woman’s dream—that a man would give her this absolute acceptance. And truth be told, it’s a man’s dream too.

Illustration

The story is told of a young bride who, on the day of her wedding, was almost paralyzed by fear that she would mess the ceremony up. Just before her dad walked her down the aisle, he told her, “Look, it’s simple. There are just three words you need to remember: *aisle, altar, hymn*. You walk down the *aisle*, pause at the *altar*, and the soloist will sing a *hymn*. From there, the pastor will take over the ceremony. Just remember: *aisle, altar, hymn*.”

The bride remembered what her father said as they walked in together. Over and over in her mind she repeated the words: *aisle, altar, hymn. Aisle, altar, hymn.*

And that, as the story goes, is how women go into marriage with the idea that *I’ll alter him*.

Truthfully, many people do approach marriage with the idea that they can change their spouse after they are married. After marriage, most spouses find out that changing another person is not only impossible, but attempting to do so is damaging to their relationship. The instruction of Genesis 2 for a couple to *cleave* to one another includes that we accept and love our spouse for who they are.

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EPHESIANS 5:28–29

28 *So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself.*

29 *For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church:*

Total acceptance and unconditional love are not common in today’s relationships. Some would even say it is impossible or foolish. The world believes that couples who stay married fifty, sixty, and seventy years must have been perfect for each other—that their success is rooted in the fact that they were two lucky people who found their soulmates and that the rest of us mortals are foolish to insist on cleaving to one another during times of pain or difficulty.

The world is wrong. Marriage, as God designed it, carries a commitment to cleave—to hold onto your spouse. It is a decision you make when you exchange marriage vows with one another and a decision you keep every day of your lives as you freely give acceptance and refuse to let your hearts wander from one another.

C. Weaving

“...and they shall be one flesh.”

This is where the real work of marriage comes in. It is the intertwining of lives that happens over time. And it is the stuff of marriage.

In one sense, this becoming “one flesh” is to take place on your wedding day.

HEBREWS 13:4

4 Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled...

1 CORINTHIANS 7:3-4

3 Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife unto the husband.

4 The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife.

Marital intimacy is a gift of God, the physical celebration of oneness and unity.

But the weaving of two lives together is more than physical. It takes place through daily decisions to pursue your spouse's heart, to draw near to each other in acceptance, to entwine your lives around each other.

Weaving in the fullest sense cannot happen without spiritual growth together. When you take two lives who are committed to one another and are daily drawing nearer to the Lord, there is an intertwining of souls that is constantly being strengthened by the power of God. This isn't the result of one day, but of habits carried out day after day—praying together, reading God's Word together, worshiping together, serving together, and living out God's will with one another.

Many couples don't pursue this intimacy. Each partner hopes for his or her personal gratification, but neither has a real long-term goal of weaving their lives together. This, however, is the end goal that God has in mind for marriage—two lives intertwined with one another as they grow together in Him.

3. The Strength of Marriage

Marriage—this wonderful melding of two lives, was designed to last. When Jesus taught on marriage, He highlighted this truth by quoting from and expounding on Genesis 2.

MATTHEW 19:4–6

4 *And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female,*

5 *And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh?*

6 *Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.*

God designed the bonding of marriage to be stronger than momentarily shared interests. This is to be a union that grows stronger through the ups and downs of life. But this doesn't happen by accident. It takes purpose and commitment.

A. Based on Commitment

Marriage, by God's design, is to be one man plus one woman for one lifetime. This is why at a wedding, couples exchange *vows*, not signed contracts.

Illustration

When a couple purchases a home, often, they sign a mortgage contract with the bank. This document includes many contingencies, noting that if either

party defaults in specific aspects of the agreement, the other is released from their obligation to the contract.

But marriage is different. A marriage ceremony is not the exchanging of contracts, but the exchanging of vows.

Marriage is a *covenant*, not a *contract*.

At your wedding, you likely repeated vows similar to these:

I, _____, take thee, _____
to have and to hold....
from this day forward...
for better, for worse...
for richer, for poorer...
in sickness and in health...
to love and to cherish...
'til death do us part.

Marriage is not a 50/50 proposition in which each can expect the other to carry half the load and assume if the other doesn't keep their half, they are free to drop their own. Rather, marriage is a 100/100 percent commitment in which each spouse promises to wholly give themselves to the other regardless of how well the other is doing.

We know from the Bible that while God loves all people (John 3:16, 2 Peter 3:9), He hates divorce.

MALACHI 2:14–16

14 Yet ye say, Wherefore? Because the LORD hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously: yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant.

15 *And did not he make one? Yet had he the residue of the spirit. And wherefore one? That he might seek a godly seed. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously against the wife of his youth.*

16 *For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away: for one covereth violence with his garment, saith the LORD of hosts: therefore take heed to your spirit, that ye deal not treacherously.*

If you have suffered through the tragedy of a divorce, you understand better than anyone how painful the severing of a marriage is. Our purpose is not to stand in judgment of your past or to make you feel condemned over a situation over which you may not have had control. But whether or not you have been divorced in the past, we do want to challenge you concerning your current marriage that you would commit to its permanence.

God didn't design marriage to be a let's-see-if-we-like-it proposition but a covenant of complete commitment to one another. This foundation of commitment will give you the strength to pursue an ever-deepening relationship and to resist the forces that would try to tear you apart.

B. Picture of Christ's Love

If you're familiar with Genesis, you know that in the chapter directly after Adam and Eve were married, these same two people disobeyed God, and through their disobedience sin and death entered the world.

“The Fall,” as we commonly refer to it, was so significant that Scripture tells us its effects

reverberate throughout creation itself, and they certainly touch every aspect of our lives.

ROMANS 8:22

22 *For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.*

Every marriage since—including ours and including yours—has been composed of two sinners. Every obstacle we face in marriage—every misplaced expectation, every fight, every lonely tear, every bitter word, every frustration—is the outcome of the Fall.

So although marriage itself is a perfect journey, the special creation of God, it is undertaken by imperfect people. We enter marriage with a longing to experience all that God created it to be, even if we don't fully understand what that means or that it is God who implanted those desires in our hearts. But we undertake this journey as sinners married to sinners, and that makes for a bumpy ride.

Intricately woven into God's plan, however, is that marriage is a picture of His larger plan to redeem mankind. This is *incredible*.

Your marriage is so much bigger than you—than both of you. It's bigger than your hopes and dreams and fears and struggles. It's bigger than the minutiae of your daily routines. It's designed by God to be the harmony of two lives that, by covenant vows to each other, have entered a relationship picturing the love, sacrifice, and commitment of Christ and the church.

Don't miss where this picture comes from: After the Fall, even as God told Adam and Eve the punishment for sin was death—physical and spiritual—and that because of sin they would be

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banished from the Garden and the presence of a holy God, God graciously promised that He would send a Saviour.

GENESIS 3:15

15 *And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.*

As God who took on human flesh, Jesus offered Himself as the complete substitute for our sin.

We know from the Bible that the payment for sin is death—eternal separation from God in a lake of fire.

ROMANS 6:23

23 *For the wages of sin is death...*

But, Jesus died in our place and offers us the full forgiveness of God as a gift.

ROMANS 5:8

8 *But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*

ROMANS 6:23

23 *...but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

He promises that if we will call out to Him for salvation from our sin, putting our trust in Him, He will save us.

ROMANS 10:13

13 *For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.*

TEACHING TIP

If you have guests in your study or are not sure that each person in attendance has been saved, you might want to say something along the lines of, “If you have not been saved—or maybe are not even sure what this means—I would love to talk with you personally about this or set up an appointment to meet together to talk about it.”

But what does all of this have to do with marriage? Are we just reviewing the gospel story?

Actually, in God’s amazing plan, marriage and the gospel are linked together.

EPHESIANS 5:31–32

31 *For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh.*

32 *This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church.*

What we only see in part in the Old Testament—marriage—is revealed in the New Testament as a “mystery” which was embedded since the beginning of time into God’s purpose—that marriage would be a picture of the love Christ has for the church.

This is why Satan so fiercely attacks marriage—it is the visible representation of the redemption he hates.

And this is also why Christian couples in particular must be committed to following God’s plan for marriage. God’s plan is not only the best in terms of our happiness, but, as Christians, we have

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an added commitment to bring glory to God by reflecting the love of Christ in our marriages.

Undoubtedly, there will be some who go through this study either without their spouse present or without their spouse showing the same care to strengthen their marriage as they have.

But for you, too, this picture of Christ's love is good news. Because even if your spouse does not know the Lord or you feel you are the only one who desires to make your marriage better reflect the love of Christ, God can use your commitment to receive and give His love to strengthen your relationship with your spouse and to bring glory to Himself.

As we work through this study, you may be tempted to think, "Well, that could work for others, but it couldn't work for me." But when you remember the big picture of Christ's love showing through you, it adds perspective and gives strength to invest regardless of your spouse's immediate responses.

After all, the fact that God entrusts any of us imperfect people to live out the perfect picture of His love is nothing short of amazing.

Conclusion

Many couples want marriage to be like a luxury vacation that costs nothing and requires nothing of them. They assume that good marriages just happen and struggling marriages are the result of incompatibility.

Yet, nobody assumes this in relation to any other area of life. We work hard to develop skills, to advance in a career, to perfect a hobby, even to plan a vacation. Good marriages

also take *work*. They require the purposeful pursuit of one another's heart, the willingness to give and receive total acceptance and unconditional love, and a commitment to oneness for a lifetime.

As we work through this study over the coming weeks, our goal is not to have great marriages with no effort. It is to discover through God's Word how to direct our efforts so that our marriages are the awesome weaving together of two lives that God intends for them to be.

Truth be told, no couple has "arrived" in their marriage. We're not there yet; you're not there yet. But as we continue this study of marriage, we'll all be encouraged to continue on the journey and to *enjoy* the journey.

LESSON TWO

IT LOOKED DIFFERENT IN THE PICTURE

Expectations

Text

PHILIPPIANS 2:5–8

5 *Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus:*

6 *Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God:*

7 *But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men:*

8 *And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.*

Overview

One of the most common sources of disappointment in marriage is unrealistic expectations. Often times, these are built in a spirit of pride or self-thought. And if we don't recognize them, we are left feeling embittered toward our spouse because of them.

Our flesh tells us that the only way our unfulfilled expectations can be overcome is if our spouse will change and turn those expectations into fulfilled desires. Scripture tells us it is in learning to change our thoughts by letting the mind of Christ become ours.

Lesson Goals

At the conclusion of this lesson, students should:

1. Recognize the danger of unrealistic expectations and identify some that are already in their minds.
2. Understand how the biblical instructions to die to self and be filled with the Spirit help overcome misplaced expectations.
3. Commit to showing love to their spouse by finding ways to serve.

Teaching Outline

1. Expectations Ruin Relationships
 - A. Marriage will make me happy.
 - B. My spouse should meet all of my needs.
 - C. My spouse will change after marriage.
 - D. Marriage is easy if you are married to the right one.
 - E. Good marriages never struggle.
2. Happiness Is Found in Humility
 - A. Die to self.
 - B. Yield to the Holy Spirit.
 - C. Serve your spouse.
3. Love Is a Choice

LESSON TWO

IT LOOKED DIFFERENT IN THE PICTURE

Expectations

Text

PHILIPPIANS 2:5–8

Introduction

Have you ever seen a travel brochure with pictures that sparkled? And then when you arrived at your destination discovered that the company who made the brochure had little more than a really good photographer? A photographer can capture a small snapshot that is wildly different from the full experience.

Illustration

One travel website lists “30 Most Disappointing Travel Destinations on Earth.”¹ Here are a few it includes:

1. <http://www.placesyoullsee.com/30-most-disappointing-travel-destinations-on-earth/>

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The Blarney Stone in Ireland—The author claims that whoever convinced people it is worth climbing many stairs and hanging your head out over a hole in the wall to kiss a stone and hopefully get “the gift of gab,” surely had the gift of gab!

The Four Corners Monument in the Southwest US—Unless it is very special to you just to know that you’re at the place where four states meet, the marker itself is pretty underwhelming.

Stonehenge—This was one of several locations mentioned that are so full of tourists and tourism that it makes it hard to enjoy.

We’ve all had vacations or travel that was a letdown. Usually, that is because our expectations were unrealistic. Whether those expectations were built up by a travel brochure or a friend’s experience or our own imaginations, we are disappointed when we find reality is less than we hoped.

Sometimes the same thing happens in marriages. We expect that our spouse—or marriage itself—will be something unrealistic, and then we’re disappointed.

We see snapshots of marriage in other people’s lives, on social media, and in culture. From these, we build our own expectations. But we soon discover that our mental images are vastly different from reality.

In this study, we’ll look at some common unrealistic expectations couples tend to have as well as how to overcome any misplaced expectations.

1. **Expectations Ruin Relationships**

Illustration

As Barb was getting to know David and his family, she was impressed by how much his parents loved each other.

“They’re so thoughtful,” Barb said. “Why, your dad even brings your mom a cup of hot coffee in bed every morning.”

After a time, Barb and David were engaged, and then married. On the way from the wedding to the reception, Barb again remarked on David’s loving parents, and even the coffee in bed.

“Tell me,” she said, “does it run in the family?”

“It sure does,” replied David. “And I take after my mom.”

TEACHING TIP

Expectations so easily collide in marriage. Share a personal story, ideally humorous, of a time when you and your spouse approached a situation with completely different expectations.

A single incident of conflicting expectations may be humorous, at least in hindsight. But a steady stream of expectations and misunderstandings sets couples up for a steady stream of disappointment.

In fact, most marital disappointment comes from unrealistic, and often unspoken, expectations spouses have of one another.

We come to marriage with more expectations than we realize—cultural, familial, relational.... There are 1,001 influences from the time we are born until this present moment that shape our perspectives and underlying expectations. Making the situation more difficult is that our expectations are so deeply embedded into our worldview that we rarely consider them as

being a topic of discussion. We simply assume everyone else looks at the world just as we do.

Of course, not all expectations are wrong or unreasonable. Marriage itself is built on the expectation that your spouse will honor his or her vows to you. You *want* your spouse to expect that you love and care for him or her. Together, you expect your marriage will grow and that you are both fully committed to it. It's also not wrong to expect that your spouse will follow through on promises or to make promises you want your spouse to believe.

What we're speaking about here are expectations that are built on a spirit of pride or self-thought. They are often unspoken, and they are sometimes unidentified, even when they are our own. If we don't recognize them, we will become embittered toward our spouse because of them.

We see unmet expectations throughout Scripture. Sometimes they were false expectations of God and sometimes unrealistic expectations of others. The psalmist Asaph expected that ungodly people should not experience wealth while he served God and struggled. When his expectations were not met, he almost lost his faith.

PSALM 73:1–3, 16–17

1 *Truly God is good to Israel, even to such as are of a clean heart.*

2 *But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped.*

3 *For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.*

16 *When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me;*
17 *Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood*
I their end.

Rachel expected she would have children and blamed her husband Jacob when she didn't.

GENESIS 30:1

1 *And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die.*

The workers in Jesus' parable expected they would be compensated above what they had been promised. When they weren't, they nursed a grudge.

MATTHEW 20:10–12

10 *But when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more; and they likewise received every man a penny.*

11 *And when they had received it, they murmured against the goodman of the house,*

12 *Saying, These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day.*

One of the classic accounts of misplaced expectations is in 2 Kings 5 where we find the Syrian captain, Naaman, going to the prophet Elisha to be healed of leprosy. Naaman arrived at Elisha's doorstep with a large entourage, but Elisha simply sent his servant to the door with instructions for Naaman to dip seven times into the muddy Jordan River. Naaman was offended, and he left Elisha's house "in a rage." (Anger is a classic indicator of unmet expectations). Notice Naaman's response:

2 KINGS 5:11–12

11 *But Naaman was wrath, and went away, and said, Behold, I thought, He will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the LORD his God, and strike his hand over the place, and recover the leper.*

12 *Are not Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? may I not wash in them, and be clean? So he turned and went away in a rage.*

Naaman came to Elisha with a full set of unspoken expectations. He expected Elisha would come to him in person, perform an elaborate ceremony, and bring on-the-spot healing. When this didn't happen, Naaman's disappointment turned into anger.

It was only the persuasion of Naaman's servants that brought Naaman around to the place where he was willing to let his expectations go and humbly do as the prophet had told him. (And just to not leave you hanging, Naaman did then experience the miraculous healing of God.)

But think about Naaman's initial response: "*Behold, I thought...*" When you hear yourself say, "But I just thought..." that's your clue that you're dealing with unmet expectations. And when you feel the frustration and anger rising, that is another indication that you are responding to unmet expectations.

Here are several common unrealistic expectations:

A. *Marriage will make me happy.*

It is easy, especially for people who are not yet married or who are struggling in their marriage, to turn marriage into a personal idol, believing that the "perfect spouse" is the answer to any unhappiness in life. This expectation places an incredible pressure on

a spouse. No spouse is perfect, and no person can be your single source of happiness. Only Jesus can give you continuing happiness.

NEHEMIAH 8:10

10 ...*the joy of the LORD is your strength.*

JOHN 10:10

10 *The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.*

Marriage is an awesome gift from the Lord, but it is not a place to depend on for your happiness.

B. *My spouse should meet all of my needs.*

Focusing on your needs can only ruin a marriage. Every husband has unique needs, as does every wife. Ephesians 5 speaks to the individual nature of each spouse's needs as it commands wives to honor their husbands and husbands to love their wives. (And we will look at each of these more closely in our next lesson.)

EPHESIANS 5:22, 25

22 *Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord.*

25 *Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it;*

1 CORINTHIANS 13:4–5

4 *Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,*

5 *Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil;*

But don't miss the obvious—the command to each spouse is to meet the other's needs, not to focus on his or her own needs.

C. *My spouse will change after marriage.*

Illustration

Someone once pointed out that a man marries a woman expecting her to never change, and a woman marries a man expecting to change him—and they are both wrong!

Marrying someone with the expectation they will become a different person after marriage is unreasonable and unfair.

Marriage is not a magic change agent that transforms a person. Before you are married, your job is to be sure the person you want to marry is someone you can trust. After marriage, your job is to work to understand and love the person you married.

1 JOHN 4:11

11 Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another.

D. *Marriage is easy if you are married to the right one.*

Good marriages take effort. It requires real work to understand your spouse and honor and love him or her. This is why God commands to dwell together “according to knowledge.” You are to seek to understand and really know your spouse.

1 PETER 3:7

7 Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered.

A spouse who is passionate about a strong marriage thinks about his or her spouse often and constantly invests in the relationship.

E. Good marriages never struggle.

Actually, most marriages will “hit a wall.” Sometimes a couple is surprised by a season of difficulty in their marriage. This faulty expectation leads them to assume then that their marriage is already as good as gone.

A similar false expectation is, “But I thought godly spouses never need marital counsel.” Once again, people with good intentions struggle. In Lesson 11, we’ll look at more specific advice regarding seeking marriage counsel. But for now, please recognize that to refuse godly counsel is to reject God’s plan for safety.

PROVERBS 11:14

14 Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counsellors there is safety.

If, when you encounter a tough season in your marriage, you recognize that every difficulty can be worked through with the grace of God, biblical truth (perhaps including wise counsel), and a determination to strengthen your relationship, you’ll get through it—and be stronger for it.

EPHESIANS 3:20

20 *Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us,*

You know those marriages you look at and just know are perfect? They aren't. Every Christian marriage is comprised of two sinners. Even godly Christian couples have difficulties. What sets strong marriages apart is that they are committed to work through the difficulties.

MARK 10:9

9 *What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.*

Do you see your thoughts in any of those expectations? If you were to finish this sentence, "But I just thought that he/she would _____," how would you fill in the blank?

2. Happiness Is Found in Humility

Our flesh tells us that the only way our unfulfilled expectations can be overcome is if our spouse will change and turn those expectations into fulfilled desires. Scripture tells us there is another way.

The journey to happiness in marriage is not one of insisting that your spouse change. It is in learning to change your thoughts by letting the mind of Christ become yours.

PHILIPPIANS 2:5–8

5 *Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus:*

6 *Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God:*

7 *But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men:*

8 *And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.*

These words are convicting. And interestingly, they come directly after verses about relational unity.

PHILIPPIANS 2:3–4

3 *Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.*

4 *Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.*

If you were to take this passage at absolute face value, how do you think it would transform your marriage?

Jesus came to earth with *only* an expectation to serve and sacrifice for others.

MARK 10:45

45 *For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.*

Jesus had no hidden agenda—no “If I serve them, they’ll do _____ for me” mentality.

Jesus’ humility is a rebuke to our self-centered thought patterns. If you want to transform your thinking toward your spouse, saturate your mind with Philippians 2:3–8. Read it daily. Think on it. Memorize

it. Write it out. Let it reprogram your mind from one of expectancy to Christlikeness.

Our shift in expectations initially takes place in our minds. But at some point, we must take action steps toward our spouse if we are to shift from expecting to serving.

So, what does Philippians 2 living look like in everyday terms? Here are three actions to take daily:

A. Die to self.

When we trust Christ as our Saviour, He gives us a new nature.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:17

17 Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

But the habits of our hearts and the temptations of life don't vanish overnight. The Bible calls this continuing pull toward sin "the flesh." *The flesh* is my tendency to satisfy my needs or desires outside the obedience of God.

GALATIANS 5:17

17 For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.

Even as a Christian with the indwelling Holy Spirit of God, I have a terrible tendency to build expectations of what my spouse should do or be for me with myself at the center of them. When I say, "I

just thought he/she would understand my need for _____,” that’s usually an indication of selfishness. And pride. And discontent. And....In short, it’s fleshliness.

Here’s the thing about the flesh: you can’t reform it. You can’t just “try harder” to have less expectations or to be less selfish. This is why the Apostle Paul wrote, “I die daily.”

1 CORINTHIANS 15:31

31 ...*I die daily.*

He wasn’t saying that he physically died and miraculously resurrected every day; he was teaching us that the only way to overcome the flesh is to kill it.

In Galatians 2:20, Paul expounds on this truth:

GALATIANS 2:20

20 *I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.*

This verse echoes a truth that shows up throughout the entire New Testament: as believers, we are “in Christ.”

The Christian life was never designed to simply be a “get out of hell free” card; it is to be a life of union with Jesus. Our spiritual relationship to God is that we have the righteousness of Jesus and the ability to allow the life of Jesus to live through us.

But it requires that we choose to die to our fleshly tendencies and desires. Romans 6:11 assures us that as Christians we have the power to do this.

ROMANS 6:11

11 *Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

This daily, dying-to-self decision can be as simple as praying something like this: “Lord, today I die to self. I reckon myself—my tendencies, habits, and selfish expectations—dead because of Your cross and because I am ‘in You.’ I ask You to live through me—that Your power and truth would dominate my heart and that Your Spirit would guide me today.”

I’m not suggesting you recite a certain set of words as a memorized prayer every day. But I am suggesting you make a conscious decision every day to die to self and surrender to let Christ live through you. You may even want to simply pray the words of Galatians 2:20.

A prayer like this cannot and does not obliterate the temptations that will arise during the day, but it can set your heart in the right direction and prepare you to yield to the Holy Spirit during those in-the-moment temptations to selfishness that will arise all day long.

B. Yield to the Holy Spirit.

What does dying to self look like in real time, especially as it relates to expectations in marriage?

For instance, it’s 2:00 in the afternoon, and your wife has asked you *again* if you’ve heard back on any of the job applications you submitted yesterday. Last time she asked, you told her you’d let her know as

soon as you did, which is a pretty clear way of saying, “Please don’t ask again.” You would expect she would understand that, right?

What do you do in that moment? You could respond in the flesh, which, depending on your personality, may involve anything from raising your voice with an exasperated, cutting answer, to giving the silent treatment, to an all-out shouting fight. *Or* you could, in that moment, listen to the Holy Spirit encouraging you to die to self and give grace.

One of the unique dynamics of the Christian life is that it cannot work without the power of God. The Christian life was never meant to be lived in your own strength, but by the empowering of the Holy Spirit who lives within you.

EPHESIANS 5:18

18 And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit;

It is no coincidence that the scriptural command to “be filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18) is the prelude to some of the most direct marriage counsel in the Bible (Ephesians 5:22–33, which we will look at in our next lesson).

Being filled with the Spirit is simply the act of surrender to God. It is a decision of faith to yield control of yourself to the Holy Spirit and to the commands of His Word.

Without allowing the Holy Spirit to fill, or to control, your life, your days will be controlled by false expectations and fleshly responses. In stark contrast, the result of being filled with the Spirit is

a set of qualities every Christian couple wants to characterize their lives and their marriage.

GALATIANS 5:22–23

22 *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith,*

23 *Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.*

We think that if we yield our rights and surrender our expectations to God, we'll be trampled on, made a doormat, be taken advantage of, and lose our identity. But read that list describing the fruit of the Spirit from Galatians 5 again: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance. Could you use those qualities in your marriage? It's a matter of yielding.

C. Serve your spouse.

The only Christlike expectation is the expectation to serve. Think again of Philippians 2 and Christ's humility. Jesus had every right to expect to *be served*. But He chose instead to serve.

The most practical step you can take to curb unrealistic expectations is to purposefully serve your spouse without expecting anything in return. Look for real, tangible, specific ways to meet your spouse's needs.

Illustration

D.L. Moody was the most famous evangelist in the world in the late 1800s. People came from around the world to attend his Bible Conferences in Northfield,

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Massachusetts. One year, a large group of pastors from Europe were among the attendees. They were given rooms in the dormitory of the Bible school. As was the custom in Europe, the men put their shoes outside the door of their room, expecting them to be cleaned and polished by servants during the night.

Of course there were no servants in the American dorm, but as Moody was walking through the halls and praying for his guests, he saw the shoes and realized what had happened. He mentioned the problem to a few of his students, but none of them offered to help. Without another word, the great evangelist gathered up the shoes and took them back to his own room where he began to clean and polish each pair. Moody told no one what he had done, but a friend who interrupted him in the middle of shining the shoes and helped him finish the task later told the story.

Moody's act of service may not have been known by others, but it was evidence of his willingness to humble himself and serve.²

The world conditions us to expect. Glossy advertising, consumer-driven marketing, resorts, amusement parks...they all say, "You deserve more; let us give it to you." Yet the world consistently underperforms. The higher our expectations, the less satisfied reality becomes. Only a servant will be pleasantly surprised.

2. "A Lowly Saviour" (Ministry127.com, accessed July 13, 2017), <http://ministry127.com/resources/illustration/a-lowly-saviour>.

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What could happen in your marriage if, instead of expecting to be made happy, you made it your number one desire to make your spouse happy?

Have you given thought to what your spouse's needs are? Are you willing to set aside your own needs and expectations to meet those?

Remember that Christlike servanthood isn't serving with the expectation of getting. (*If I make his favorite meal, he will become more verbally communicative. If I buy her flowers, she will be more physically responsive.*) It's not manipulative. It is serving with the expectation of serving. That's it.

How do you know what your spouse's needs are? Getting to know your spouse and learning to anticipate his or her needs is one way. Another is to simply ask, "What can I do today to help you?" In fact, that is a tremendous question to ask every day.

3. Love Is a Choice

If you remain married for longer than five minutes, you will experience unmet expectations. It's part of life, and it's definitely part of marriage.

The world conditions us to believe that love is fueled by a spouse being "everything I ever dreamed." When we discover our spouse is *not* everything we dreamed (and no spouse is), we have two choices: we can become disillusioned, or we can choose to love unconditionally and serve sacrificially.

The feeling of being "in love" comes easily when all of my expectations are being met. But true love, selfless love, requires the hard work of discovering what my spouse needs, selflessly serving him or her, and having

the personal discipline and commitment to do that again and again and again.

This is the kind of love described in 1 Corinthians 13.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:4–7

4 *Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,*

5 *Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil;*

6 *Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth;*

7 *Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.*

This kind of love involves real choices.

Illustration

When couples are dating, they usually find it easy to spend long amounts of time together staring into each other's eyes, simply infatuated with one another. In fact, many people can tell stories of being late for work or negligent in other life responsibilities because of being “in love.”

After marriage, however, these same people may find it difficult to spend the same amount of time serving their spouse—washing the dishes when he or she is sick or helping with what you consider to be your spouse's job just because.

The truth is, however, the google-eyed dating is more of a self-satisfying love, while the real-life service is a self-sacrificing love. The first can be immaturity; the second can grow your relationship.

Conclusion

Choosing to serve has a powerful way of releasing our expectations. But it gets even better. It positions us for grace.

I don't know of any Christian spouse who wouldn't agree that what their marriage needs more than anything is God's grace. It's what we constantly need. It's what you need. And it comes through humility—the humility that submits and serves.

1 PETER 5:5

5 Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.

Is choosing to serve when you don't "feel" love a sterile way to live? Is it dead love? Empty of meaning?

Not at all. Because service begins with sacrifice, it makes room for the deepest feelings imaginable.

It is servant-based love that allows you to look back at the self-centered picture you originally had of marriage and laugh. For one, you realize that marriage isn't a ready-made photograph. It is a picture that you paint together—day by day, choice by choice, with brushstrokes of service.

And *this* picture—the one that you paint together—turns out to be even better than the travel brochure snapshot you had in your mind. It's real. And it's painted with grace.

LESSON THREE

PAYING WITH FOREIGN CURRENCY

Needs

Text

EPHESIANS 5:22–29

22 *Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord.*

23 *For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body.*

24 *Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing.*

25 *Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it;*

26 *That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word,*

27 *That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.*

28 *So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself.*

29 *For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church:*

Overview

Both husbands and wives have unique needs in marriage. These needs are fulfilled as each spouse gives to the other by fulfilling their role in God's design for marriage.

Contrary to common assumptions, however, spouses rarely understand the needs of the other intuitively. In this way, giving to meet the other's needs is much like currency conversion in international travel. Each spouse's need and role is equally valuable, but sometimes it takes real work to convert your responses into a way that meets your spouse's needs.

Lesson Goals

At the conclusion of this lesson, students should:

1. Understand the distinction between equality in Christ and roles in the marriage relationship.
2. See the connection between God's instruction to each spouse and the different needs of each spouse.
3. Visualize what it could mean to their spouse if they were to unselfishly give in a way that met his or her needs and purpose to do so in practical ways.

Teaching Outline

1. Currency Differences
 - A. Same Grace
 - B. Different Needs
2. Currency Types
 - A. A Husband's Currency—Respect
 - B. A Wife's Currency—Love
3. Currency Conversions
 - A. Demonstrating Respect
 - B. Demonstrating Love

LESSON THREE

PAYING WITH FOREIGN CURRENCY

Needs

Text

EPHESIANS 5:22–29

Introduction

For all its adventure, international travel includes a tricky detail—foreign currency.

Additionally, currency can be difficult to understand. For instance, at the time of this writing, one American dollar equals 0.76 British pounds, 0.83 euros, 6.52 Chinese yuan, 50.92 Philippine pesos, or 63.78 Indian rupees.

TEACHING TIP

Look up the exchange rate for several of the foreign currencies listed above, and give the current rate.

TEACHING TIP

If you have currency from another country—coins or bills—bring it with you for this study. In advance, look up the exchange rate from that currency to your national currency, and use that as the main example of the challenge of making the currency exchange when you travel.

If you don't study the exchange rates before you get to a country, it's very easy to get taken advantage of. And if you forget to calculate the exchange rates when you are making a purchase, you may end up spending a significantly different amount than you anticipated.

In marriage, “heart conversion” is a lot like currency conversion. When you think about it, marriage is the perfect scenario for misunderstandings. And it's not because I'm right and my spouse is wrong—but because I forget to convert the real currency of my heart into the real currency of my spouse's heart.

In this study, we'll use the comparison of foreign currency as we look at the differences between husbands and wives and learn how following God's instructions regarding marriage helps us meet each other's greatest needs.

1. **Currency Differences**

For all the *sameness* that attracted you and your spouse together, there is this pesky fact that the overriding attraction was rooted in what makes you different—man versus woman.

GENESIS 1:27

27 *So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.*

We instinctively know that men and women are different, but we forget that those differences are deeper than biological. They have to do with how we think, feel, respond, and with the deepest needs of our hearts.

On the surface, some of these differences are easily explained by personality types, backgrounds, or life experiences. But I'm talking about something deeper—something that God embedded into the very makeup of men and women.

A. Same Grace

Before we explore the differing needs between husbands and wives, I want to emphasize that neither type of need-currency is more valuable than the other, nor is one spouse more worthy of one value than the other. These are two currencies of the same value. They simply happen to be two different currencies.

Think of the description of marriage found in 1 Peter 3:7.

1 PETER 3:7

7 *...as being heirs together of the grace of life...*

The ground is level at the foot of the cross. In Christ, the husband and wife have equal value and equal standing before God. They are heirs together of God's grace. It is this togetherness in grace that is one of the greatest joys of a Christian marriage.

Colossians 3 also emphasizes this truth.

COLOSSIANS 3:11

11 Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all.

The corresponding passage in Galatians 3:28 further elaborates:

GALATIANS 3:28

28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.

So when we speak of differences in needs, responsibilities, and roles between a husband and a wife in marriage, we are not talking about a difference in intrinsic value. We are simply referring to the fact that differences between men and women, husbands and wives, go deeper than the obvious surface differences.

As humans, we all have equal value as being made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). As believers in Christ, we have equal standing with God as heirs of His grace. But in marriage, we have varying needs and responsibilities. A good marriage is one in which both spouses learn to understand and fulfill the needs of the other.

B. Different Needs

There are four main passages in the New Testament that address both husbands and wives in the same

passage.¹ Interestingly, three of these highlight the differences in roles and responsibilities between a husband and a wife in marriage.

Also, in all three of these passages, God repeats a specific instruction to wives and a specific instruction to husbands. I believe that these instructions highlight the greatest needs of both.

EPHESIANS 5:33

33 Nevertheless let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence her husband.

COLOSSIANS 3:18–19

18 Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord.

19 Husbands, love your wives, and be not bitter against them.

1 PETER 3:1, 7

1 Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands...

7 Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel...

The verbiage is a little different in each passage, but at the heart of each is an instruction to wives to give respect and a yielded spirit to their husbands and an instruction to husbands to give tender love to their wives.

Wives, respect; husbands, love.

1. 1 Corinthians 7:3–5, Ephesians 5:22–33, Colossians 3:18–19, and 1 Peter 3:1–7

These two commands directly address the basic needs of husbands and wives.

It is the universal need of wives to *feel* loved. Marriage, of course, is built on committed love. So I'm not implying that husbands *don't* need or want love. (They absolutely do.) But women need assurances of love—they need their husbands to express love tenderly and frequently.

And it is the universal need of husbands to *feel* respected. Once again, every human being needs and deserves respect. But men have a deep *need* for respect. In the same way that a wife needs her husband to express sacrificial love, a husband needs his wife to express committed respect.

2. Currency Types

Interestingly, these needs correspond with the biblical roles of men and women in marriage. Husbands are to provide leadership and are commanded to nurture and cherish their wives.

EPHESIANS 5:23–29

23 *For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body.*

24 *Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing.*

25 *Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it;*

26 *That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word,*

27 *That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.*

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28 *So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself.*

29 *For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church:*

A wife giving respect to her husband enables him to fulfill his God-given role.

Similarly, wives are to support their husbands by following their leadership and demonstrating a peaceful spirit.

1 PETER 3:1–5

1 *Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives;*

2 *While they behold your chaste conversation coupled with fear.*

3 *Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel;*

4 *But let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price.*

5 *For after this manner in the old time the holy women also, who trusted in God, adorned themselves, being in subjection unto their own husbands:*

A husband freely and frequently demonstrating tender love to his wife provides the security she needs to fulfill her role.

Of course, in a healthy marriage, no one has to make a choice between love and respect. Both spouses give both to each other. But the specific commands of God related to marriage highlight the greatest need

each spouse has as well as what tends to be the greatest challenge for each spouse to give.

Our culture has, by and large, resisted the roles that God built into marriage, claiming that they are stereotypical or in some way oppressive. Whatever they may be, they are not oppressive. They are God's design for the gift He created.

Illustration

Consider the manual in your car. When you have a question about your car and look it up in the manual, you never assume that the car manufacturer wrote it with malicious intent to make the car less pleasant for you to drive. You assume that following the manual will make your car last longer and your experience in it better.

So it is with marriage. God has called a husband to provide loving, servant leadership in the home, and He has called a wife to give honor and submission to her husband. Following the roles that God embedded into the creation of marriage is integral to your enjoyment of it. Understanding these roles and learning how to communicate love and respect to one another is crucial to having spiritual unity and emotional teamwork in your relationship.

Too many couples want their spouse to give in the way God instructs in Ephesians 5, but each is unwilling to *be* the giving spouse.

In other words, although a husband or wife may not like what the Bible says about their *own* role in marriage, no spouse thinks the *other* spouse's role was unimportant. While a husband may struggle to be a loving servant leader, he wants his wife to respect him. Similarly, while

a wife may struggle to follow her husband's leadership, she wants him to freely communicate affectionate love.

However, it is when each spouse will embrace and fulfill their own roles that the other's deepest needs are met and the marriage flourishes. (And it is neglecting these roles that makes the marriage deteriorate.)

Remember, the goal in understanding these roles is not selfish—so your spouse can do a better job relating to you. The goal is that you know how to give grace and love to one another in the currency that they most readily use and understand.

Let's look at these currencies more closely and then examine how to make currency conversions in marriage. For the sake of clarity, we'll be looking primarily from Ephesians 5 but will reference other passages as well.

Before we begin, however, remember that just prior to the verses we will look at, God gave the instruction for *every* Christian to yield control to the Holy Spirit.

EPHESIANS 5:18

18 *And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit;*

To be able to give to our spouse in the ways that God commands—ways that often go directly against our nature—we must first be filled with His Spirit. We must be willing to surrender our will to follow Christ.

JAMES 4:6–7

6 *But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.*

7 *Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.*

A. A Husband's Currency—Respect

The currency a husband most needs and understands is respect. And that is why God instructs wives to demonstrate respect.

EPHESIANS 5:22–24

22 Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord.

23 For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body.

24 Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing.

That this passage begins with instruction to the wife underscores the importance of her role.

When either spouse fulfills their role regardless of the other's obedience to their own role, it can make a tremendous difference in a marriage. But when a wife gets the ball in motion, it has an even more powerful effect because it changes the whole spirit of the relationship.

The Greek word translated *submit* in Ephesians 5:22 is *hupotasso*. It means “to arrange under, to subordinate, to subject one's self.” Notice the decision involved. This is a *voluntary* submission, a willing choice.

I like what Joyce Rogers wrote in relation to the wife's role in marriage: “To prove submission is a wonderful concept, Jesus became the ultimate illustration of its validity. Although He was coequal and coeternal with the Father, He was completely submissive to the Father's will.”

JOHN 8:29

29 *And he that sent me is with me: the Father hath not left me alone; for I do always those things that please him.*

Notice that superiority or inferiority do not even enter into the equation. A godly wife chooses to submit to and honor her husband's leadership as an expression of her trust in the Lord (Ephesians 5:22).

But she also does it as an expression of love to her husband. Perhaps in part because of the responsibility on him to be the leader, the way a husband most feels love is when his wife communicates willingness to follow his leadership and communicates her respect for him as a person.

Wives sometimes struggle with this. To them, respect is something you earn by proving yourself, but love is something you deserve by being a human. We speak often of the importance of "unconditional love," but we don't speak as often about the importance of respect. Actually, both love *and* respect are due to every person because they are made in the image of God.

A wife is not expected to respect her husband for something he is not. You don't have to lie to yourself or your husband, pretending he has arrived in areas he hasn't. But don't let that stop you from respecting him for who he *is*—in particular, your husband.

The Bible does not teach that all women are supposed to submit to all men. But it does teach that a wife is to voluntarily place herself under the leadership of her husband and that this is pleasing to the Lord.

COLOSSIANS 3:18

18 *Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord.*

Of course, this doesn't mean that a wife is not also her husband's partner and that they don't share ideas and concerns and input with one another as they work toward decisions. But in the larger picture, it is God's ordained plan for the home that the husband is the leader and the wife has a spirit to follow his leadership.

1 CORINTHIANS 11:3

3 *But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God.*

A wife who gives respect to her husband isn't in any way less than her husband. She is communicating love to him in a way that deeply meets his needs and fulfills her responsibilities.

B. A Wife's Currency—Love

The currency a wife most needs and understands is love. And that is why God instructs husbands to demonstrate love.

EPHESIANS 5:25–29

25 *Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it;*

26 *That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word,*

27 *That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.*

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28 *So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself.*

29 *For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church:*

Men often think that physical provision—putting food on the table, a car in the garage, fixing the washing machine, etc.—is what fulfills their responsibilities in marriage.

While the role of provider is important, a wife needs more than physical provision. She needs frequent expressions of affection and love.

We have such flawed images of love that the kind of love God commands husbands to give to their wives is almost beyond our comprehension. So God gives us two specific ways husbands are to show love. First, love by *sacrificing*. This is what Christ did for the church—He gave *Himself* for it.

This surpasses the normal marital love of people who don't know the Lord. It's not a reciprocal love, but a volitional love—the love of Christ acted out.

JOHN 15:12–13

12 *This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you.*

13 *Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.*

The second way flows out of the first: love by serving.

This also is a kind of love that Christ Himself modeled for us.

JOHN 13:13–15

13 *Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am.*

14 *If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet.*

15 *For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you.*

Illustration

Dr. Daniel Kim, who has pastored the Bible Baptist Church in Seoul, Korea, for over fifty years, shared the story of when he asked his prospective father-in-law for his daughter, Young Soon's, hand in marriage.

Before answering Dr. Kim, his father-in-law-to-be (also with the last name of Kim), told him a story from almost twenty years earlier. During the Korean War, he and his family were fleeing what is now North Korea for the south. It was a journey of many miles, made completely on foot and mostly under cover of darkness. Young Soon, now Dr. Kim's wife, was very young and would often cry—a great danger to herself and the entire group. In fact, the group they were with insisted that Mr. Kim separate from them for their safety. He continued on without them, carrying Young Soon the entire journey to the south.

As Mr. Kim finished his story, he looked at the young man asking for his daughter's hand in marriage. "I risked my life for her," he said, "and she is my most treasured possession. You may marry her if you promise to love her *like this*."

Most of us know nothing of the kind of sacrificial love that Jesus gave to us. So God made it even more accessible for us to understand. Not only does God

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command a husband to love his wife as Christ loved the church, but He commands a husband to love his wife as he loves *himself* (Ephesians 5:29).

The ego of men is legendary; we think so highly of ourselves. So God tells us, “You know how to love yourself; love your wife like you love you, and you’ll be doing well.”

While husbands and wives have equal value to God, they do have different needs and different roles within marriage. Embracing these roles and learning how to meet the other’s needs allows both to give to the other in a way that is valuable to both.

3. Currency Conversions

Think back to our comparison of currency conversions as an illustration of meeting each other’s needs.

When you are traveling internationally, the sooner you understand and learn to automatically figure the currency conversion, the more you will enjoy your travel abroad.

This is true of marriage as well. In many ways, marriage is a lifelong journey of exchanging the currencies of love and respect. It is the husband purposefully learning to convert the respect he feels for his wife into loving words and actions. And it is the wife learning to convert the love she feels for her husband into honoring words and actions.

Neither love nor respect is more valuable than the other, nor is one spouse more worthy of one than the other. These are two currencies of the same value; they simply happen to be two different currencies.

Why is it so important to understand these differences and purposefully make the conversion? Husbands and wives tend to assume that their own greatest need is also their spouse's greatest need.

Because respect is a great need in a husband's life that his wife can supply, sometimes he assumes it is her greatest need as well. Generally, a husband finds it more natural to convey respect to his wife than he does to convey sacrificial love. He also tends to feel more insulted when he does not perceive her conveying respect to him.

Similarly, it's more natural for a wife to show affection than respect and to feel more hurt when her husband shows respect without affection.

Illustration

In his book, *Love and Respect: The Love She Most Desires, The Respect He Desperately Needs*, Dr. Emerson Eggerichs calls the scenario described above "the crazy cycle."

A husband is demanding to his wife, and she in turn cuts him down. She feels unloved, and he feels disrespected. Unless one of them will break the cycle, their responses tend to escalate in unloving, disrespectful ways. In reality, both spouses want the opposite of what they are refusing to give.

A Christlike love, especially for your spouse, does not emphasize rights over responsibilities. It doesn't demand the other spouse to first show love in the way that meets your needs before you will show love in the way that meets your spouse's needs.

Rather, it is a willingness to lay down your rights for your spouse.

MATTHEW 16:25

25 *For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.*

How this is practically expressed will look different in every marriage. But here are a few starter applications for both spouses.

TEACHING TIP

The suggestions in this section are primarily experiential practical suggestions, although we have included a few verses where they apply. Feel free to add your own ideas or ask your class for additional ideas.

A. Demonstrating Respect

Here are five ways a wife can communicate respect to her husband:

TEACHING TIP

In our book, Are We There Yet? it was Terrie who shared these principles. If you are a man using this series in a classroom lecture setting without much class discussion, you may want to contextualize these five principles as suggestions from a wife's perspective.

1. Give genuine acceptance. Refuse to try to change your husband. Respect how God made him—his physical characteristics, personality, and even quirks.

We are completely accepted in Christ, valued in the sight of the Father simply because we are His children. Giving full acceptance to your husband communicates that you respect and value him simply for being your husband.

EPHESIANS 1:6

6 To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved.

When you were dating, there were aspects of your husband's personality that attracted you to him. But after marriage, wives often discover a flip side of that characteristic that can drive them batty. (For example, the strong, silent, decisiveness you first admired may come with a reluctance to talk through decisions in depth.)

The temptation is to forget that your husband comes as a person, not as a set of features, and to work to mold him into someone who he is not. This is neither respectful nor fair to him. Choose instead to give him full acceptance, and look for ways to communicate appreciation for specific aspects of his personality you admire.

2. Support his decisions. Give your input during the decision-making process. But even when he makes a decision that goes against your better judgment, support *him* by doing your best to work toward a good outcome on the decision.

And when a decision your husband makes does have a negative outcome, avoid saying, “I told you so.” Your husband already knows you told him so. If you continue to support *him* even through a frustrating aftermath, he will feel that support in a powerful way.

3. Be his recreational partner. Do you remember when you thought it was fun to watch football with your husband just so you could be together? Men are usually more event- or action-oriented, while women tend to be more conversation-oriented. While a deep conversation may be what makes you feel that he loves you, choosing to spend time with him doing something he enjoys makes him feel validated and loved.

4. Pray for your husband’s success. You know your husband’s weaknesses better than anyone. But don’t make these the focus of your prayers for him. Pray for his success, not for his changing.

There may be a time when he has a blind spot in his life that you ask the Lord to reveal to him. But primarily, pray for God to bless him.

If you spend your time in prayer for your husband, thinking about how he needs to improve, you will leave your place of prayer with a stronger desire to change him than to support him. Conversely, if you spend your time thanking God for his strengths and praying for his successes, you leave prayer with a heart to be part of those answers.

COLOSSIANS 4:12

12 Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ, saluteth you, always labouring fervently for you in

prayers, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.

5. Praise him—privately and publicly. Men are so cut down by society today that a wife who verbalizes praise is incredibly attractive to a man. A simple note left in his sock drawer—“Honey, thank you for being such a hard worker. I admire you for it.”—is like a windfall of respect currency to a man.

EPHESIANS 4:29

29 Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers.

Tell him in private moments together how much you love to be with him. And then talk about him positively to others—your children, your friends, on social media, etc.—when he is present.

Public praise is a magnifier, multiplying its effect by the number of people hearing it. The flip side of this is to never, *never* belittle your husband to others. If you have a concern, talk with him about it. But loose comments in front of him or talking negatively about him behind his back will deeply hurt him and ultimately hurt your relationship.

B. Demonstrating Love

Here are five ways a husband can communicate love to his wife:

1. Seek to understand her. Get to know your wife. Study what her needs are, as well as her likes, dislikes, and preferences. Whether it be a Diet

Coke or a special place she likes to celebrate your anniversary, you honor her by caring enough to learn and remember.

1 PETER 3:7

7 Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge...

2. Take initiative in spiritual matters. A husband's leadership in the home isn't just about financial decisions; it is to be spiritual leadership as well.

EPHESIANS 5:26

26 That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word,

While this verse is primarily referring to how Christ leads the church, it is making the correlation that the husband is to do the same.

Even if your personality isn't that of a "born leader," you can be proactive in initiating spiritual growth as a couple or family. This may start simply by beginning a time of prayer and Scripture reading together before bed. It certainly includes praying for and with your wife and taking your family to church. It could also include initiating discussions with your wife about spiritual matters and sharing with her aspects of what God is doing in your life.

3. Give and communicate security. Whether or not you and your wife both work, you must assume the leadership and responsibility of providing for your family's needs.

1 TIMOTHY 5:8

8 *But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel.*

Being a responsible provider gives your wife security. But your wife also needs you to give emotional and spiritual security. She needs you to communicate your love often, tenderly, and freely. This is done by nonsexual caresses, verbal affirmations of love, and frequent moments of thoughtfulness.

4. Spend time together as a family. It doesn't have to be Disneyland. A day at the park, an evening playing games, or even an hour of you playing with the kids means the world to your wife. Women are wired to care for family relationships in a deep way that often holds families together. You communicate love to her when you spend time together as a family.

5. Communicate appreciation for who she is. Even when it comes to communicating appreciation for what she *does*, we men tend to fall short. But your wife wants to know you love her regardless of what she does for you. When was the last time you told her, "Sweetheart, I just want you to know that no matter what happens, I'm always going to be grateful that you let me be your husband. Thank you for being the amazing person you are"?

These are just starter suggestions. You will find that as you purposefully look for ways to communicate love and respect to one another—even when the other is not doing so at the moment—that it will greatly strengthen your relationship and

make it easier for your spouse to also give in a way that meets your needs.

Conclusion

We have spent most of this lesson describing the challenge of remembering to exchange the heart currency you feel with the heart currency your spouse needs and best understands.

The thing about currency, however, is that regardless of what form it is—pesos, dollars, pounds, yuan, or even Monopoly money—it doesn't buy anything unless you *use* it. It doesn't matter what country you are in or what the exchange rate is or how well you understand the exchange rate. If the money stays in your pocket, you get no value from it.

As we close this lesson, I encourage you to *spend* your currency on your spouse. Don't just *think* love or respect. Don't just consider the ways you want your spouse to show you love or respect. Don't be so concerned about not knowing how to make conversions that you keep it in your pocket.

Go ahead and spend it. Giving love and respect to your spouse is the best way to invest in your marriage.

LESSON FOUR

IT'S A TWO-LANE HIGHWAY

Communication

Text

EPHESIANS 4:25–32

25 *Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour: for we are members one of another.*

26 *Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath:*

27 *Neither give place to the devil.*

28 *Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth.*

29 *Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers.*

30 *And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption.*

31 *Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice:*

32 *And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.*

Overview

One of the most common—and problematic—areas of life and marriage is communication. A relationship with poor communication is like a traffic jam. You're not going anywhere, or at least not very fast. But grace-filled communication opens one another's hearts and allows

you to travel further together. In this study, we examine Ephesians 4 for guardrails on the communication highway.

Lesson Goals

At the conclusion of this lesson, students should:

1. Recognize harmful patterns in their communication with one another and the effect it has on their relationship.
2. Recognize the power of encouraging words for building up their spouse and their marriage.
3. Commit to open, honest, consistent communication as a couple.

Teaching Outline

1. The Guardrail of Truth
 - A. No Secrets
 - B. Safe Sharing
2. The Guardrail of Indignation
3. The Guardrail of Kindness
 - A. Never threaten with divorce.
 - B. Never argue in front of the kids.
 - C. Never attack personally.
 - D. Take breaks during tense moments.
4. The Guardrail of Edification
 - A. Building words give instruction and wisdom.
 - B. Building words give direction.
 - C. Building words praise the Lord.
 - D. Building words encourage others.
 - E. Building words are pleasant and appropriate.
 - F. Building words facilitate healing.
 - G. Building words bring security and truth.

LESSON FOUR

IT'S A TWO-LANE HIGHWAY

Communication

Text

EPHESIANS 4:25–32

Introduction

Illustration

The U.S. standard railroad gauge (the distance between the rails) is four feet, eight and a half inches.

Why such an odd number? Because that's the way they built them in England, and American railroads were built by British expatriates.

Why did the English adopt that particular gauge? Because the people who built the pre-railroad tramways used that gauge.

They in turn were locked into that gauge because the people who built tramways used the same standards and

tools they had used for building wagons, which were set on a gauge of four feet, eight and a half inches.

Why were wagons built to that scale? Because with any other size, the wheels did not match the old wheel ruts on the roads.

So who built these old rutted roads?

The first long-distance highways in Europe were built by Imperial Rome for the benefit of their legions. The roads have been in use ever since. The ruts were first made by Roman war chariots. Four feet, eight and a half inches was the width a chariot needed to be to accommodate the rear ends of two war horses.

Maybe “that’s the way it’s always been” isn’t the great excuse some people believe it to be.¹

When it comes to communication between spouses, “That’s just the way we do it” or “That’s the way it was in my family” is all-too-common to hear. We get into ruts in our communication and assume that there is no other way to move forward.

And yet, one of the most important areas in a marriage is communication that is honoring to the Lord and building of each other.

Regardless of the influences of your past or your own history of a couple in communication, if you know Christ as your Saviour, you can move in a new, God-honoring direction.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:17

17 Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

1. Credited to Clark Cothorn Tecumseh on sermonillustrations.com. Accessed July 19, 2017.

In the book of Ephesians, the Apostle Paul describes the power of the gospel to transform our lives. In chapters 1–3, he explains the theology of salvation and what it means to be in Christ. In chapters 4–6, he gives specific instructions related to the change Christ brings into a life.

EPHESIANS 4:17

17 This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind,

So God intends for our lives to change, including our communication.

This is good news because it means that we have the power of the gospel available to make changes in one of the most vital areas of marriage.

The words we speak hold tremendous power. And their power is increased exponentially when we speak them to people we love. If a stranger walked up to you in the grocery store, and said, “I hate you,” you’d probably wonder what was wrong with him, and move on. But if your spouse said, “I hate you,” you’d be devastated.

Our words also hold lasting power long after we speak them. You can probably remember within a matter of seconds the most hurtful thing someone you love said to you. Conversely, you can probably also remember unexpected words of praise or thanks from someone you loved or respected. Although these words may have only lasted mere seconds, they had a powerful influence on you.

This is true in marriage as well. The words you say to one another have extreme significance.

PROVERBS 18:21

21 *Death and life are in the power of the tongue: and they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof.*

Too often, Christian homes are no different than non-Christian homes in communication. Couples who wouldn't think of physically abusing one another may hurt the other even more deeply with sarcastic or cutting words. Husbands demean their wives, and wives belittle their husbands. There's yelling and screaming or silence and cutting off. But no one wins in this kind of environment—not the spouse who hurts the other and not the spouse who clams up and refuses to speak.

Perhaps the saddest aspect of communication dysfunctions is not the harm that is happening, but the good that is being missed.

God created us with a *need* for relational connection, and marriage is the pinnacle of fulfilling that need. But it requires that we communicate with one another in godly, positive, and kind ways. It requires that we purposefully drive both directions on the communication highway—listening and speaking into one another's hearts.

A relationship with poor communication is like a traffic jam. You're not going anywhere, or at least not very fast. But grace-filled communication opens one another's hearts and allows you to travel further together.

In the final eight verses of Ephesians 4, we see four guidelines for how our communication should be conducted. In keeping with the travel theme, we'll look at these as four guardrails providing safety and access along the highway of marriage communication.

1. The Guardrail of Truth

EPHESIANS 4:25

25 *Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour: for we are members one of another.*

This guardrail lines either side of the communication highway, protecting travelers from two ditches. On one side, there is the ditch of speaking anything less than the truth, and on the other side is the ditch of not speaking at all.

Let's look at both.

A. No Secrets

Lying has become a way of life for too many Christians. From hiding the truth, to exaggerating the facts, to bold-faced lies, any breach in truthfulness will damage a marriage because it destroys the trust needed for real communication to take place.

PROVERBS 26:28

28 *A lying tongue hateth those that are afflicted by it; and a flattering mouth worketh ruin.*

Marriage is not a place for secrets. This means no hidden websites. No private texts or secret social media. No hidden checking accounts or credit cards. No blocking access to current accounts. No secret stashes of porn. No hidden relationships. Every part of either of your lives should be fully open to the other.

This is actually the picture we have of the first marriage. Adam and Eve had total transparency with one another.

GENESIS 2:25

25 And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.

Although this verse is obviously speaking of the physical intimacy Adam and Eve shared, it also reveals the safety they felt in each other. They had no need to cover or hide—until sin entered their relationship.

Sin thrives in the shadows. When you hide part of your life from your spouse, no matter how innocent or noble the reason seems, you open your life and your marriage to disaster. Jesus unequivocally stated that the devil is the father of lies and that there is “no truth in him.”

JOHN 8:44

44 Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it.

Any departure from truth in a Christian’s life opens the door to the devil.

Where there have been secrets in the past, they must be brought out into the open, repented of, and sought forgiveness for. This can be painful, and you may need to seek the help of your pastor or a godly counselor. But don’t go on living in the shadows.

That hidden place in your life will pull your marriage into the ditch.

One of the greatest lies Satan uses to keep secrets hidden is that if you exposed the truth of hidden sin in your life to your spouse, it would put a worse strain on your marriage. This is true if you are thinking to expose that sin with the expectation that you will be allowed to go on participating in it. But it is not true where you expose it before it is found out and are humble, repentant, and willing to take whatever steps are necessary to bring victory in your life and healing in your marriage.

Proverbs 28:13 is both a warning against hiding sin and an encouragement to those who want freedom.

PROVERBS 28:13

13 He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy.

You may have a “big secret” your spouse does not know about—a secret sin or a past breach in your marriage faithfulness. You need to bring this out into the light. And you definitely need wisdom (and probably counseling as well) on the timing and method to do it. You may need help to conquer that sin, or your spouse may need help to work through the ramifications of it. But whatever the case, do not keep it hidden. You cannot build a strong marriage on dishonesty or untruthfulness. Truth is always the best foundation for a relationship.

Maybe you have no big secrets your spouse doesn't know. But is everything about your communication fully open and transparent? If your spouse knew

everything you know, would he or she think you had been less than honest?

One of the best ways to promote transparency in marriage is to embrace accountability with one another. Some people feel threatened by accountability. They think it implies a lack of trust. Actually the opposite is true. When you *choose* accountability, you *build* trust.

Illustration

As we were preparing this resource for publication, Vice President Mike Pence made the news because of an article that mentioned, “Mike Pence...never eats alone with a woman other than his wife.”² The media *ridiculed* the Pences for this. In reality, their decision was wise. In a political world where scandals of infidelity are rampant, why would it be thought of as anything less than honorable for a couple to set boundaries of protection around their marriage?

By setting boundaries of accountability for your marriage, you build trust in one another’s hearts. Examples of these would be giving each other immediate and unrestricted access into all living spaces and electronic spaces (shared passwords for accounts, ability to look through each other’s phones, etc.) of your lives, answering each other’s

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2. Ashley Parker, “Karen Pence is the vice president’s ‘prayer warrior,’ gut check and shield” (The Washington Post, March 28, 2017), https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/karen-pence-is-the-vice-presidents-prayer-warrior-gut-check-and-shield/2017/03/28/3d7a26ce-0a01-11e7-8884-96e6a6713f4b_story.html?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main_no-name:homepage/story&utm_term=.5eece2d36ab3

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calls immediately, and not being alone in a private setting with someone of the opposite sex.

A helpful phrase to remember is, “Elevate accountability; eliminate doubt.” If you’re going to be home late from work, don’t leave your spouse wondering where you are or who you’re with. Make a quick phone call to explain why you’re late and when you’ll be home. Your spouse has the right to know where you are, what you are doing, who you are talking with, everything that is on your phone and in your emails, and any other part of your life.

So don’t feel interrogated or violated because your husband or wife asks, and don’t accuse your spouse of mistrusting you. Eliminate any doubt in the other’s mind by elevating accountability between the two of you.

B. Safe Sharing

There is more to truthfulness than what you *don’t* say; there is also what you *do* say. Ephesians 4:25 not only warns us not to lie, but it also instructs us to speak truth.

Good communication is proactive communication where your spouse is the one person on earth with whom you can and do share anything and everything.

Regular communication is the highway to complete openness. Without the real exchange of thoughts and emotions, there will be no depth to your relationship.

Men sometimes feel anxious about too much emphasis on communication. Often men are

reluctant to share deeply and transparently, and many don't think they need to. They don't always find it easy to share their thoughts and feelings, or, for that matter, to know what to do with someone else's thoughts and feelings. But without learning healthy, godly communication, your relationship is going nowhere fast.

Men, please understand that your wife *needs* to talk. Even as sexual intimacy is a need for you, so real communication is a need for your wife. In fact, the more you willingly engage in heart-level communication with her, the safer she will feel emotionally and thus the more responsive she will be to you physically.

Ephesians 4:15, just a few verses ahead of the passage we have been looking at, sets the context for “safety” in sharing with one another.

EPHESIANS 4:15

15 But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ:

“Speaking the truth *in love*.” The emotional climate of a marriage should make it easy to speak the truth and should promote growth together. What this looks like specifically to men and ladies is often slightly different.

To most women, a safe environment is knowing that her husband is listening and that her feelings will not be ridiculed or made light of.

To most men a safe environment is knowing that what he shares will not go further than that conversation. That is, it will not be shared with her mother, her friends, or anyone else. A wife who learns

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to keep confidence with what her husband shares with her will find her husband more willing to share.

This difference is significant because women tend to be more open with their feelings. For a lady to share with someone else what a mutual friend shared with her may very well not be thought of as a breach in trust for any of them. But if a wife shared with a mutual friend what *her husband* shares with her, it feels different to him.

A man's emotions may be simpler or more straightforward than a woman's (and they often are), but he is generally less willing to expose them. A wife who understands this can be the virtuous woman Proverbs 31:11 speaks of.

PROVERBS 31:11

11 *The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil.*

Always remember that there are two sides to speaking the truth—speaking it, and speaking it in love. Without the guardrail of truth, marriage communication winds up in a ditch fast.

2. The Guardrail of Indignation

EPHESIANS 4:26–27

26 *Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath:*

27 *Neither give place to the devil.*

What about when communication (or the lack of it) leads to an impasse in going forward together?

No real relationships avoid conflict. In fact, any relationship that does avoid conflict either has no

depth or has underlying stress that one or the other will not acknowledge.

In our next lesson, we'll look more closely at this passage and at dealing with conflict in general. But for now, let's look briefly at two instructions this passage gives for when you do face a point of conflict that evokes anger.

First, be angry at the problem, not at a person.

Psalm 97:10 tells us that if we love God, we should hate sin.

PSALM 97:10

10 *Ye that love the LORD, hate evil...*

Hatred and anger are not *always* wrong emotions. But they are wrong when they are directed at one another.

So when you are dealing with conflict, determine to stand together in your anger. That is, be angry together at the problem, not at each other.

Henry Ford said, "Don't find a fault; find a remedy." You are on the same team. Rather than pointing fingers at one another, jointly tackle the problem that is hurting or threatening your relationship.

Second, do not let the anger linger.

Determine also that you will never go to bed angry with one another. Ever.

This doesn't mean that you will always be able to develop an answer to problems before sleep. There may be times when you have to simply reach for the other's hand, reaffirm your commitment to solving the problem, and suggest giving it to the Lord until the morning. Even in those rare instances, praying together and committing to stand together against the problem

helps to diffuse the anger and draw your hearts closer to one another. And as we'll see more fully in our next lesson, it also helps protect our hearts from Satan's advances against our relationship.

The guardrail of proactive indignation helps you protect the most important part of your life—your heart.

PROVERBS 4:23

23 *Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.*

Guard your heart, and you will guard your marriage.

Refusing to direct your anger toward your spouse gives you another advantage in communication—the ability to *listen*.

JAMES 1:19

19 *Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath:*

Your grandmother probably said it differently: “There is a reason you have two ears and only one mouth.”

Sometimes we *hear* our spouse without actually *listening* to him or her.

Illustration

Have you ever lived somewhere near a loud noise—like trains or traffic? At first, the noise is distracting and feels overbearing. But in time, you learn to completely tune it out. The noise is still there, and you still *hear* it. But you are no longer *listening* to it.

When our reflex response to a situation is anger, we miss hearing the heart of our spouse. But when we guard

our own heart against anger, we are free to really listen heart to heart and ultimately find a solution together.

3. The Guardrail of Kindness

EPHESIANS 4:29

29 Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth...

Have you ever stepped back and listened to yourself and thought, “Wow! I sound harsh”? I have. I suppose all of us have. Amazingly, the basic courtesies we show strangers are sometimes absent in our dearest relationships, particularly marriage.

If you want to have kind speech, it helps to set parameters.

Illustration

The out-of-bounds areas on a sports court or field help keep the game continuing. Similarly, having pre-determined limits in your communication with one another helps to protect you from saying things in the heat of the moment that you’ll regret later.

The four simple rules for communication that I will suggest here are so basic you might be tempted to overlook them. But unless you have already adopted these rules in your home, I’d ask you to consider committing to them.

A. *Never threaten with divorce.*

Usually whoever mentions divorce first does it to try to get the other’s attention. But once you crack that

door open, even suggesting divorce as a possibility, you are giving Satan entrance to push it open wider.

Make a commitment that the “d-word” will never enter your disagreements or be hinted at as a possibility. If you’ve already crossed that line, why not pray together, renewing your commitment to your marriage and making today a fresh start from which *divorce* is never mentioned again?

B. *Never argue in front of the kids.*

The greatest gift you can give your children is to love your spouse. Sometimes parents purposefully involve their children in arguments or disagreements in order to shame the other spouse or get the children to take sides. Sometimes parents are just self-focused enough to not consider the impact their fighting has on their children.

Hearing their parents fight *does* influence children. It makes them insecure, worries them that the disagreement is their fault, and even impacts their academics because of the emotional distraction it creates.

Make it a rule: you will stand united in love in the presence of your children and will work out disagreements privately.

C. *Never attack personally.*

This is the practical outworking of attacking a problem rather than a person. Instead of accusing, “You always leave your socks on the bathroom floor because you don’t care how much work I do around here,” explain your vantage point and ask a

question: “I’m feeling overwhelmed with keeping the bathroom clean. I know it seems like a small thing, but would you mind putting your socks in the hamper in the bedroom after your shower?”

Don’t presume to know your spouse’s motives or turn an action into a lack of character.

D. Take *breaks* during tense moments.

When you sense frustration or anger rising, take a few minutes to collect your emotions and to remember that you *love* your spouse before reengaging in conversation.

PROVERBS 29:11

11 A fool uttereth all his mind: but a wise man keepeth it in till afterwards.

Instead of giving your spouse a piece of your mind, choose to give yourself a slice of time. Usually, if you will take a few minutes (and be willing to give them to the other when he or she needs them), you are far less likely to say something you will regret.

Illustration

Escalating emotions in communication can be like a car overheating on a road trip. The fact that it is overheating means there is a problem, but it’s best to let the engine cool before addressing it.

Although it is best to not let your car overheat in the first place (just as it is best to not let disagreements in your marriage become heated), when it happens, you need to let the engine cool before pouring water in. Even so, it’s wise when you are frustrated to give

each other some space before attempting to resolve the disagreement.

There is one caveat to the practice of taking a time out, however: neither spouse should use it as a way to shut down conversation. If you need to take time out, it is your responsibility to suggest another time to reopen the discussion later.

You've heard the schoolyard rhyme: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." It's not true. Words *do* hurt. If you have been using your words to tear one another down, determine today to instead use your words to build one another up.

That leads us to our final guardrail.

4. The Guardrail of Edification

EPHESIANS 4:29

29 ...but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers.

We began this lesson noting the power of our words. For all the power they have to wound and hurt one another, they also have tremendous power to build. In fact, to *edify* means "to build." (Think of the word *edifice*—a building.)

And if there is one action that love does, it is build others.

1 CORINTHIANS 8:1

1 ...Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth.

Love edifies—it builds.

Every time we use our words to criticize, we are saying to our spouse, “I don’t love you.” But every time we speak words of encouragement and praise, we are communicating love in one of the most meaningful ways possible.

Encouraging words are so powerful that Ephesians 4:29 says they “minister grace unto the hearers.” You can, through the very words you speak, be a dispenser of grace to your spouse.

One of the best Bible studies you could do individually or as a couple is a study on the impact of our words and how God desires for us to use our words to help others.

Illustration

A husband read an article to his wife about how women use 30,000 words a day to a man’s 15,000. The wife replied, “That’s because we have to repeat everything to men.” The husband turned to his wife and said, “What?”

Since we exchange words with one another every day, we should purpose to use ours to minister grace to each other.

As we finish this lesson, let’s notice seven ways we can use our words to build one another.³ As we do, consider how you can bring this kind of communication into your marriage as you build your spouse with the kinds of words described in these verses.

3. The list provided here is from Terrie’s book, *The Choice Is Yours* (Striving Together Publications, 2011), 156–158.

TEACHING TIP

Choose one or two of the points in this list to share a related personal illustration of a time when someone else, perhaps even your spouse, used their words to positively impact you in the way described in that verse.

TEACHING TIP

Ask people in your group to each read one of the verses, or the verses under one of the points, in this list.

A. Building words give instruction and wisdom.

PROVERBS 10:31

31 *The mouth of the just bringeth forth wisdom: but the froward tongue shall be cut out.*

PROVERBS 15:2

2 *The tongue of the wise useth knowledge aright: but the mouth of fools poureth out foolishness.*

PROVERBS 16:23

23 *The heart of the wise teacheth his mouth, and addeth learning to his lips.*

B. Building words give direction.

PROVERBS 19:20

20 *Hear counsel, and receive instruction, that thou mayest be wise in thy latter end.*

PROVERBS 27:9

9 *Ointment and perfume rejoice the heart: so doth the sweetness of a man's friend by hearty counsel.*

C. Building words praise the Lord.

PSALM 34:1

1 *I will bless the LORD at all times: his praise shall continually be in my mouth.*

PSALM 51:15

15 *O Lord, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall shew forth thy praise.*

D. Building words encourage others.

PROVERBS 25:11

11 *A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver.*

PROVERBS 15:23

23 *A man hath joy by the answer of his mouth: and a word spoken in due season, how good is it!*

ISAIAH 50:4

4 *The Lord GOD hath given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary...*

E. Building words are pleasant and appropriate.

PROVERBS 10:32

32 *The lips of the righteous know what is acceptable: but the mouth of the wicked speaketh frowardness.*

PROVERBS 15:26

26 *The thoughts of the wicked are an abomination to the LORD: but the words of the pure are pleasant words.*

PROVERBS 16:24

24 *Pleasant words are as an honeycomb, sweet to the soul, and health to the bones.*

PROVERBS 31:26

26 *She openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness.*

F. Building words facilitate healing.

PROVERBS 10:11

11 *The mouth of a righteous man is a well of life: but violence covereth the mouth of the wicked.*

PROVERBS 15:4

4 *A wholesome tongue is a tree of life: but perverseness therein is a breach in the spirit.*

PROVERBS 12:18

18 *There is that speaketh like the piercings of a sword: but the tongue of the wise is health.*

G. Building words bring security and truth.

PROVERBS 22:20–21

20 *Have not I written to thee excellent things in counsels and knowledge,*

21 *That I might make thee know the certainty of the words of truth; that thou mightest answer the words of truth to them that send unto thee?*

You have the power, like no one else in the world, to build up and encourage your spouse. Use this power.

Conclusion

As you work at communication in marriage, you will have times when you mess up. You'll scrape the guardrails we looked at in this lesson. Sometimes you'll swerve into the ditch. You may end up traveling in the exact opposite direction you intended to go.

But when you struggle to go forward or when you mess up by overcorrecting, don't just put your communication in park and quit trying. Don't shut down or leave all the communicating to your spouse.

Communication is a two-lane highway, and it works best if you keep moving on it. There may be some frustrations along the way, but it is the highway to happiness in your relationship. So keep driving.

LESSON FIVE

ROADBLOCKS

Conflict

Text

EPHESIANS 4:26–32

26 *Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath:*

27 *Neither give place to the devil.*

28 *Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth.*

29 *Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers.*

30 *And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption.*

31 *Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice:*

32 *And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.*

Overview

Conflict in marriage is inevitable. But it doesn't have to be a lifelong war. It can simply be a roadblock where two people, both filled with grace, work to navigate around it together.

In this study, we return to Ephesians 4 to learn how conflict develops and how to resolve it without allowing it to become ongoing contention.

Lesson Goals

At the conclusion of this lesson, students should:

1. Understand the difference between conflict and contention.
2. Recognize ways in which they tend to wrongly respond to conflict.
3. Visualize the difference it would make in their marriage to give grace to their spouse during times of conflict.

Teaching Outline

1. How Conflict Begins
 - A. Selfishness
 - B. Pride
 - C. Pettiness
 - D. Fear and Insecurity
 - E. Satanic Attack
2. How Conflict Escalates
 - A. Failure to Acknowledge the Problem
 - B. Withdrawal From Real Relationship Development
 - C. Spiritualizing the Problem
 - D. Gunnysacking
 - E. Attacking the Person Instead of the Problem
 - F. Blaming Your Spouse
 - G. Desiring to Win At Any Cost
 - H. Giving in to Avoid Conflict
 - I. Buying a Gift
 - J. Becoming Angry
3. How Conflict Resolves

LESSON FIVE

ROADBLOCKS

Conflict

Text

EPHESIANS 4:26–32

Introduction

If you drive throughout today's Palestine, you will frequently encounter roadblocks. These are not construction roadblocks as you might find in the States, but military checkpoints guarded by either Israeli or Palestinian soldiers.

Anyone passing through must be prepared to show identification papers, and vehicles may be subject to being searched.

For Americans, checkpoints in Israel can feel tense, due to the unfamiliar nature of it and due to the fact that the soldiers are all heavily armored, including wearing machine guns.

But roadblocks in the Holy Land are common. In fact, they are much like conflicts in marriage—they are part of life, and they have the potential to either escalate into full-blown combat or diffuse into nothing more than a delay.

The difference between the two, however, is that while physical roadblocks are out in the open, most relational conflict happens in relative privacy. You may look at couples with “the perfect marriage” and assume that great marriages never have conflict. The truth is, conflict, or at least disagreement, is fairly common in marriage. The difference between a strong marriage and a weak marriage is how partners handle that conflict.

Illustration

As a new bride, Edna moved into the small home on her husband’s ranch. She put a shoebox on a shelf in her closet and asked her husband never to touch it.

For fifty years Jack left the box alone, until Edna was old and dying. One day when he was putting their affairs in order, he found the box again and thought it might hold something important.

Opening it, he found two doilies and \$82,500 in cash. He took the box to her and asked about the contents. “My mother gave me that box the day we married,” she explained. “She told me to make a doily to help ease my frustrations every time I got mad at you.”

Jack was very touched that in fifty years she’d only been mad at him twice. “What’s the \$82,500 for?” he asked.

“Oh, that’s the money I made selling the doilies.”

What makes a Christian marriage distinct is not that conflict never happens. (It is impossible for two people to so completely share their lives with one another for a period of

years and *not* face points of disagreement.) The difference is in how Christians respond to conflict.

If you learn to respond to disagreements in a godly, thoughtful, and resolution-orientated way, the very process of working through it together will build your confidence in one another and strengthen your marriage. If, however, you respond in a reactionary, dismissive, or unkind way, each conflict will breed underlying anger and resentment between you both, which will undermine your marriage.

In our previous lesson, we looked at principles for Christian communication. In this lesson, we'll see the application of those principles in relation to conflict.¹

1. How Conflict Begins

Do you remember your first fight?

TEACHING TIP

Think back to what was your first fight, either before or after marriage. With your spouse's permission, share it with the class. Usually, in the moment of conflict, whatever issue the conflict is over seems huge. But looking back years later, it seems quite insignificant.

We think our conflicts are about who does the housework or who forgot to do something or where we will eat out or things like that.

But in reality, most conflicts are over a difference of perspective and have underlying issues.

1. Some of the material in this chapter is adapted and expanded from lesson 12 of *A Firm Foundation* curriculum (Striving Together Publications, 2004).
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So what *does* cause conflict in marriage? There are many surface causes, but we've boiled these down to several common root issues:

A. Selfishness

This is not to say that every disagreement should be solved by one spouse continually yielding or saying that what does matter to him or her doesn't matter. But often conflict is caused because we care more about ourselves than we do about the other person or the relationship—at least at that moment.

Selfishness is not the absence of love; it is *self-love*. James 4:1 gets to the heart of it.

JAMES 4:1

1 From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?

It is our insistence on having what we want—even at the expense of the other person's happiness—that can create conflict.

Selfishness seems to have been the cause of conflict at the church in Philippi.

PHILIPPIANS 4:2

2 I beseech Euodias, and beseech Syntyche, that they be of the same mind in the Lord.

Two chapters previous, he wrote a verse we have already looked at.

PHILIPPIANS 2:4

4 Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.

For your marriage to be a Philippians 4:2 marriage, where you are “of the same mind in the Lord,” you will both need to practice Philippians 2:4, caring more about the other than about yourself.

B. Pride

PROVERBS 13:10

10 Only by pride cometh contention: but with the well advised is wisdom.

Conflict and *contention* do not have to be synonymous. It is possible to disagree without being contentious, but constant conflict usually includes contention.

Pride makes us unwilling to admit when we are wrong or to acknowledge another person’s point of view. Rather than apologizing, we defend our behavior. Where there is contention in a relationship, pride is at work.

C. Pettiness

Some things really are too small to argue about. Pathological pettiness turns every disagreement into right versus wrong, with one person having to be proven right. This is usually rooted in selfishness and pride.

PROVERBS 20:3

3 It is an honour for a man to cease from strife: but every fool will be meddling.

Some things are better left alone—especially if they really are insignificant and if it doesn’t make a difference (other than in someone’s ego) who is right or who is wrong.

D. Fear and Insecurity

When someone who has been hurt feels a conflict coming on, often they withdraw to avoid it, rather than engaging in resolution.

Unfortunately, problems left unsolved or with only surface solutions usually fester. The increasing tension from what could have been solved grows larger, which, in turn, makes an insecure or fearful person even less likely to be willing to deal with it.

First John 4:18 provides the answer to fear:

1 JOHN 4:18

18 There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love.

Where fear is involved, couples need to identify that fear before solving a conflict and assure the other that in whatever way the conflict is solved, their non-negotiable is their love for one another.

E. Satanic Attack

There can be no doubt that marriage faces enemies that are designed and empowered by Satan himself. Because marriage is a picture of Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:32), Satan *hates* it and wants to destroy it.

Every time a Christian family is broken, the testimony of Christ is harmed. Every time a couple lets conflict grow between them, their own walk with the Lord is harmed.

You have an enemy who is out to destroy your relationship.

1 PETER 5:8

8 *Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour:*

Recognizing this shouldn't make you afraid or "see a demon behind every bush" in conflict. But it should add urgency to dealing with conflict in a godly way rather than reacting in pride or selfishness or pretending no conflict exists.

One or more of these five causes are usually at the heart of ongoing conflict within marriage. Often they seem small (what's a little selfishness in an otherwise okay relationship?), but if these unhealthy roots are allowed to remain without being addressed, the relationship will weaken over time.

2. How Conflict Escalates

Illustration

Throughout Belfast, Ireland, you will find fences and walls erected to separate neighborhoods. These "peace walls" are the result of conflict.

Much of the conflict in Ireland over the years has been over politically inspired Catholic versus Protestant disagreements. Northern Ireland (which is part of Great Britain), in particular, has been fraught with religious-based wars, the most recent of which is referred to as The Troubles—a series of conflicts that lasted over thirty years and ended with the Belfast Agreement of 1998.

During The Troubles, tempers were hot and conflict would easily spark across the city. The solution was what is now known as "peace walls" or "peace lines." Throughout Belfast, fences and walls spontaneously

appeared to separate Catholic and Protestant neighborhoods. The peace lines range in length from a few hundred yards to miles. They are made of iron, brick, and/or steel and are up to twenty-five feet high.

Their name is deceiving, however. Nothing about these walls created peace; they only kept a sort of truce because they separated angry people. That's not conflict *resolution*; it's conflict *avoidance*.

Ineffective responses to marriage conflict are like erecting a wall between you and your spouse. A wall may provide ceasefire, but it can't resolve the issue. The more of these walls you build, the more difficult it is to pursue relational intimacy.

So, what are the ineffective responses to conflict in marriage? Here are ten of the most common.

A. Failure to Acknowledge the Problem

Denial is dangerous to your relationship. When one spouse will not acknowledge that conflict exists, it damages the relationship and discourages the other spouse. First John 1:6 warns us concerning our relationship with the Lord, to not allow sin to go unaddressed, ignoring how it affects our fellowship with Him.

1 JOHN 1:6

6 If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth:

This imagery of walking in darkness versus walking in the light can be applied to the marriage relationship as well. Too many couples will, for a period of months or years, allow serious conflict

to continue while the whole time putting on their church face every Sunday morning and pretending all is well.

Another way this happens is when one spouse says, “What’s wrong? We need to talk about something.” And the other responds, “No, nothing’s wrong.” But both spouses know that something is wrong. Without acknowledging a problem exists, there can be no conflict resolution.

B. Withdrawal from Real Relationship Development

Many couples come to the point where they decide intimacy and oneness are beyond reach. Perhaps for the sake of their children or their convictions about the permanence of marriage, they stay married. But they withdraw their spirit emotionally and spiritually, and often withdraw physically as well.

They live in the same house, but they settle for less than God means for their marriage to be.

Scripture instructs us to *follow after* peace. Rather than withdrawing for the sake of avoiding conflict, we should work to resolve disagreements and work to build up each other, investing in the relationship.

ROMANS 14:19

19 Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another.

C. Spiritualizing the Problem

Sometimes a spouse in counseling will say, “Well, the devil’s just fighting us.” Although that is true, spiritual talk about a problem isn’t the same as rolling up your

sleeves to deal with it. We do need to be alert to attacks from the devil, but we also need to take responsibility for resolving conflict.

D. Gunnysacking

It's amazing how well our memories can work when it comes to holding on to the past faults of our spouse. Harboring past hurts is like keeping them in an internal gunnysack to be able to dump out during disagreements later. No good can come from that.

Once a matter has been addressed and forgiven, it should never come up again. This is the way God deals with our sins.

ISAIAH 43:25

25 I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins.

E. Attacking the Person Instead of the Problem

You have a gift from God in the person of your spouse. Attacking the person you married devalues God's gift and undermines your relationship. When it comes to conflict, work together to seek out the causes rather than turning your arguments against your spouse.

F. Blaming Your Spouse

"I'm the way I am because of the stress she puts me under." "I wouldn't lose my temper if he didn't annoy me so much."

This tactic goes back to the Garden of Eden. Adam blamed the first sin on Eve. She turned around and blamed the serpent.

GENESIS 3:12–13

12 *And the man said, The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat.*

13 *And the LORD God said unto the woman, What is this that thou hast done? And the woman said, The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat.*

It is part of our fallen nature to pass the buck. We instinctively try to avoid responsibility for our words and actions. But you cannot resolve conflict until you accept responsibility for your responses and resolve to be part of the solution.

G. *Desiring to Win at Any Cost*

There are some arguments that are better lost. Nobody really wins in marital strife. You may think you have “won” a battle when you’ve really just robbed a piece of your spouse’s heart. Always remember that your relationship is far more important than who wins any one particular argument.

1 PETER 5:5

5 *... Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.*

H. *Giving in to Avoid Conflict*

On the opposite end of the spectrum is someone who “gives in,” not in a humble, sacrificial way, but simply to make the conflict stop. Someone who consistently

avoids disagreement by just saying, “Whatever you want,” isn’t contributing to building a relationship. If you are giving in in the spirit of 1 Peter 5:5—“...all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility...”—that’s godly. But if you are giving in as an escape for addressing the real issues, that approach will bring long-term damage to your relationship.

I. Buying a Gift

The picture of a man bringing home a dozen roses to get himself out of the proverbial doghouse is familiar. It is true that sometimes a gift communicates love and, when given with sincere words, even apology for anger.

But you cannot buy your way out of dealing with a conflict. In fact, no gift in the world can compensate for discord in a relationship.

PROVERBS 15:16

16 Better is little with the fear of the LORD than great treasure and trouble therewith.

Using a gift as a substitute for addressing the real problem or the issues between you cheapens your relationship over time.

J. Becoming Angry

The deception of anger is that sometimes an angry outburst will quiet the immediate conflict at hand. But this kind of “solving” conflict brings deeper harm to the relationship.

JAMES 1:20

20 For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.

Exclusive license for Aaron King Transaction: 1223348

Another danger of anger is that it tends to escalate. One spouse lets out an angry outburst, and the other responds in kind. Proverbs 15:1 tells us how to break this vicious cycle.

TEACHING TIP

Bring some kind of building blocks—wooden blocks, Legos, foam blocks, or even a few bricks—to use with the illustration below. As you talk about our words, actions, and attitudes being like building materials, hold up a block. And then demonstrate how we can use these to build a wall between us or a home around us.

PROVERBS 15:1

1 *A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger.*

If you continue to respond in anger, you continue to stir the anger in your spouse. But if you choose to humble yourself and respond with a soft answer, your words will begin to soften your spouse.

Illustration

God has given you building materials for your relationship. These are your words, actions, and attitudes.

Each time during conflict that you use your building materials in one of the ten ineffective ways we just looked at, you use them to erect a wall between you and your spouse. Individual instances may seem

insignificant, but over time, these blocks—your words, actions, and attitudes—construct a barrier between you and your spouse.

God desires that you would use these building materials to build—not walls, but a home. Instead of using your responses to put distance between you and your spouse, you can use them to put protections around you both and bring you closer to each other.

But to do this, you must be willing to respond in grace.

3. How Conflict Resolves

Perhaps no area of our lives reveals our walk with the Lord like relational conflict. This is because during moments of conflict our raw responses reveal the true depth of our development in Christlikeness.

A spiritual Christian will take what seems like a large matter and make it smaller by responding properly. A carnal Christian, on the other hand, takes what could remain a small matter and makes it larger.

TEACHING TIP

Once again, the illustration below is one for which you could bring objects to help capture attention and make the illustration more memorable. Bring two buckets (ice cream buckets or five-gallon paint buckets would both work well), and write “Gasoline” on one and “Water” on the other.

Illustration

Pretend that everywhere you go you carry with you two buckets—one filled with gasoline and the other filled with water. The instances of conflict in your relationship are fires. Some are small fires, just a little spark. Some are large fires, threatening to destroy the relationship.

Your choice at each fire is from which bucket you will pour. Even a small fire will become large when gasoline is poured on it. And even a large fire can be put out when water is poured on it. The ineffective responses we have already mentioned are like gasoline, while spiritual, grace-filled responses are like water.

Although it takes many forms and actions in the moment of conflict, there is one basic response we should offer to resolve conflict—grace. We should give grace to our spouse.

The good news is that God freely gives us His grace. Grace is the God-given desire and ability to please God.

PHILIPPIANS 2:13

13 *For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.*

But what does this grace look like during times of conflict?

Grace is listening to your spouse, rather than withdrawing or shooting back with cutting words.

JAMES 1:19

19 *Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath:*

Grace is bearing with your spouse's weaknesses rather than exploiting them and finding ways to "push his/her buttons."

ROMANS 15:1

1 We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves.

Grace is being sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit when He prompts you to apologize for hurtful words or actions.

ROMANS 14:19

19 Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another.

Grace is taking time to seek God's wisdom together rather than relying on your own understanding when you have a difference of opinion.

PROVERBS 24:3

3 Through wisdom is an house builded; and by understanding it is established:

Grace is being the one to suggest that you kneel together in prayer, asking God to help you work through your disagreement. (Don't forget that the oft-claimed verse below was given in the context of resolving disagreements.)

MATTHEW 18:19

19 Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven.

Grace is being courteous to your spouse when you feel insulted or hurt.

1 PETER 3:8

8 *Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous:*

Grace is being willing to humble yourself to seek godly counsel when needed.

1 PETER 5:5

5 *Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.*

Grace is freely asking for and giving forgiveness, keeping a clean slate between you both.

LUKE 17:4

4 *And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him.*

Responding with grace is the result of humbling yourself before the Lord. It is the opposite of our natural response to conflict, which is to allow pride to rise up in our spirit in some form of self-protection or vindication. Pride is gasoline; humility is water.

Romans 12:18 instructs us to pour water on the fires of conflict.

ROMANS 12:18

18 *If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.*

You can't control your spouse, and you often can't control sources of conflict. But you can control your responses. Pour water.

Conclusion

Illustration

Although its very name means “City of Peace,” Jerusalem has been a hotbed of violence and war over the centuries. Why is this? Primarily, it is on account of the Temple Mount—the most sacred piece of real estate on earth. Because Jews, Muslims, and Christians hold the Temple Mount as sacred, the entire city has become an ongoing location of conflict.

Think about this: the conflict that arises in Jerusalem isn't because the city is worthless, but because it is valuable. And so it is with your marriage. It is because of the value and significance of your relationship that Satan seeks to arouse conflict and desires to see you inflict wounds on one another.

What would happen if you each covenanted with the Lord and with each other that rather than fighting *against* each other, you would fight *with* the other to protect your marriage?

What could happen if you determined that no conflict would be allowed to tear you apart from one another, but that you would instead use conflict as a reminder of the value of your marriage?

Conflict in marriage is inevitable. But it doesn't have to be a lifelong war. It can simply be a roadblock where two people, both filled with grace, work to navigate around it together.

LESSON SIX

TRAVELING LIGHT

Forgiveness

Text

EPHESIANS 4:26–32

26 *Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath:*

27 *Neither give place to the devil.*

28 *Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth.*

29 *Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers.*

30 *And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption.*

31 *Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice:*

32 *And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.*

Overview

No Christian is perfect, and every marriage is comprised of two sinners. This means that in every marriage there will be many opportunities to forgive. Couples who hold onto offences against each other add weight to their relational baggage. But couples who learn to become good forgivers also discover that the journey is lighter.

In this study, we return to Ephesians 4 as we discover how God wants us to respond when we have been offended and when we have been in the wrong. We also discover His resource of grace that enables us to forgive.

Lesson Goals

At the conclusion of this lesson, students should:

1. Recognize that every couple struggles and has reasons to need to forgive each other.
2. Understand the importance of repentance for the person who has committed the offence.
3. Forgive past wrongs as an act of the will and purpose to forgive future wrongs as well.

Teaching Outline

1. Overpacking
 - A. Offense
 - B. Response
2. Lightening Your Load
 - A. Rebuke
 - B. Repentance
 - C. Forgiveness
3. Packing Well
 - A. Leave the scoreboard.
 - B. Give grace.

LESSON SIX

TRAVELING LIGHT

Forgiveness

Text

EPHESIANS 4:26–32

Introduction

Have you ever overpacked for a trip? During the time you're packing, you keep adding items to your luggage "just in case," but later, you find the extra weight and items you didn't need weren't worth the work it took to carry and manage them.

Overpacking burdens you. And it often burdens those around you, who find themselves helping to carry the extra luggage.

Yet, Christian couples "overpack" all the time in their marriages. One spouse does something hurtful to the other, and the hurt spouse, rather than investing the energy and love to defuse the situation or heal the offense (as we

discussed in the previous lesson), takes on the burden of anger and unforgiveness.

In Ephesians 4—this passage we have been studying for the past few lessons—we learn how to travel through life with a lighter load. In this study, we'll look at how to respond to offenses with forgiveness.

1. Overpacking

As we journey through life, we will encounter opportunities to take on luggage God never intended for us to carry. Here's how it works:

A. Offense

First, someone—such as your spouse—does a wrong to you. And I can tell you that this is guaranteed to happen.

Jesus told His disciples, “It is impossible but that offences will come.”

LUKE 17:1

1 Then said he unto the disciples, It is impossible but that offences will come: but woe unto him, through whom they come!

It is not a question of *if* your spouse will offend you, but *when*. No Christian is perfect, so no one is married to a perfect spouse. And imperfect spouses offend.

Every marriage will have opportunity for bitterness. It is not so much the offense that is committed as it is our response as the offended that determines the emotional burden we carry.

Illustration

Everybody has their own way of dealing with offenses. Some people explode in anger, and others clam up. There is a story of an airline employee who found his own unique way of dealing with being harassed.

While checking his bags at the airport, a man became indignant with the employee who handled luggage. For several minutes he belittled the young man and criticized his every move. Surprisingly, the curbside porter didn't seem troubled by this man's verbal abuse. After the angry man entered the airport, a woman approached the luggage handler and asked, "How do you put up with such injustice?"

The young man said, "It's easy. That guy's going to New York, but I'm sending his bags to Brazil."

Our natural response to an offense is to become offended in our spirits over what was done to us. The Bible refers to this as "a wounded spirit."

Of course, offenses that are committed against us can create real wounds, and the Bible does not advocate pretending that pain doesn't exist.

However, if we hold onto that offense and allow the wound to linger without applying God's grace, we are the ones who suffer. A wounded spirit becomes a heavy burden. Whether this load is composed of many small grudges that have built up over time or one monumental offense, it makes your relationship heavy and exhausting.

Furthermore, a wounded spirit will burden those around you (especially those closest to you, such as your children) and cause you to lose that which is truly valuable—maybe even your marriage itself, maybe your walk with the Lord.

PROVERBS 18:14

14 *The spirit of a man will sustain his infirmity; but a wounded spirit who can bear?*

A wounded spirit is too heavy for you, and it is too heavy for your marriage.

B. Response

Our thinking is tricky here, because we tend to believe that the reason we have the weights of bitterness or unforgiveness is because of what others have done to us. It is *their* fault—or *his* or *her* fault—that we struggle, right?

The truth is that offenses will come in *every* marriage. What makes the difference in traveling lighter is learning to be good forgivers.

Becoming a good forgiver begins with recognizing what responses we will *not* take.

Illustration

If you travel by air, you'll see a list of prohibited items near security checkpoints in the airport. Some items—weapons, sharp objects, oversized equipment—are permitted for checked luggage but prohibited from carry-ons, while other items—blasting caps, dynamite, spillable batteries—are deemed hazardous and never allowed.

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) doesn't always catch these prohibited items, but God does see every aspect of our hearts.

In Ephesians 4:31, God gives us a list of completely prohibited items for our relationships.

EPHESIANS 4:31

31 *Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice:*

All six of the emotional responses on this list are hazardous to your heart and to your marriage.

Let's look at each of these words and notice how any of them might appear in your relational luggage.

Bitterness is from the Greek word *pikria*, and it means “acridity (especially poison), literally or figuratively.” Think of an acid eating away at a solid, and you have a good picture of what bitterness does in a heart.

Too many times I have seen a bitter spirit change the entire direction of a person's life and deeply affect those around them. We think that refusing to forgive proves we are the strong one in the relationship. But in reality, refusing to forgive makes us weak. An unknown author once wrote, “Unforgiveness is the poison we drink, hoping others will die.” If you want to kill your marriage, bitterness is one of the surest ways to do it.

Wrath is from the word *thumos*, and it means “passion (as if breathing hard)—fierceness, indignation, wrath.” It speaks of the white-heat of a seething anger.

If you go to bed angry, you will allow that anger to simmer in your heart, until it eventually boils over in other ways. You may not even frequently express it, but it is boiling under the surface of your relationship.

Anger is from the word *orge* and means “violent passion—ire, or abhorrence; by implication punishment.” This is the anger that blows up.

Anger in general causes us to react to problems in the flesh rather than to respond in the Spirit. This

is because our anger is usually self-centered—*our* feelings were hurt, *our* rights were violated, *our* efforts were unrecognized.

Clamor is not a word we use often, but it is translated from the Greek word *krauge*, and it means, “an outcry.”

Perhaps the easiest present-day example of *clamor* is 90 percent of the “angry” posts on social media. They are usually more sound than substance and are much like a marital fight in which one or both spouses loosely toss threats or make dramatic claims to get the other’s attention.

One problem with clamor is that it never works. It usually just provokes the same or another type of anger from the other spouse.

Evil speaking is from *blasphemia*, the same word often translated *blaspheme*. It means, “vilification (especially against God), evil speaking, railing.”

This sometimes takes place in person, but it is often slandering someone’s name to others. It is the kind of talk that happens around the water cooler referring to “the old lady” or in the carpool complaining about how, “my husband just can’t seem to....”

Malice is from the word *kakia* and means “depravity...evil, wickedness.” This is when your anger becomes meanness.

It can happen when you actively plot revenge (refusing to speak, freezing a checking account, preparing food you know your spouse hates). But it can also happen when you passively accept sinfulness in your life, excusing it on your spouse’s failure. I have too often heard spouses excuse an

affair or an addiction to pornography in retaliation for “he/she doesn’t meet my needs.”

Unresolved anger in any of these forms will often fuel other sins. When a man harbors anger toward his wife, he may begin to justify immoral thoughts. When a woman harbors bitterness toward her husband, she may begin to look outside the marriage to get her emotional needs met.

Additionally, Ephesians 4:27 warns that anger literally helps Satan. In cautioning against allowing anger to linger in our relationships, Paul tells us, “Neither give place to the devil.” No Christian wants to give Satan “place”—or a foothold—in their relationships. Yet when we allow anger to dwell in our hearts, we are giving Satan room to work.

Finally, anger almost always turns into a deep root of bitterness that adversely affects us as well as every relationship in our life.

HEBREWS 12:15

15 Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled;

Unforgiveness is one of the tactics of Satan to destroy our lives.

2 CORINTHIANS 2:10–11

10 To whom ye forgive any thing, I forgive also: for if I forgave any thing, to whom I forgave it, for your sakes forgave I it in the person of Christ;

11 Lest Satan should get an advantage of us: for we are not ignorant of his devices.

This is why we must guard against anger and bitterness vigilantly. When we make small exceptions, we may find they burrow deep into our relationships and work destruction in ways we don't even realize.

God is specific in His instructions about what to do with anger: "Let all [forms of anger] be *put away* from you." Interestingly, the phrase *put away* is translated from one Greek word, *airo*, which means "to take up or away...lift up, loose." It gives the idea of *lightening your load*.

The way to travel heavy is to let an offense provoke anger in your heart and escalate into bitterness. The way to travel light is to learn to forgive.

2. **Lightening Your Load**

Some people think of forgiveness as stuffing an offense out of sight, pretending it never happened. For instance, an unrepentant spouse may demand a "forgiveness" that never deals with the sin he or she committed against the other.

Biblical forgiveness, however, isn't stuffing an offense deep into your luggage. It is handing the offense over to God. It is trusting God to be the Judge and releasing your right to pass judgment.

This is why when Joseph's brothers, who had sinned deeply against him, were fearful that he would retaliate, Joseph replied, "Fear not: for am I in the place of God?"

GENESIS 50:19

19 And Joseph said unto them, Fear not: for am I in the place of God?

He wasn't saying that what they did when they sold him into slavery wasn't wrong; he was saying that it wasn't his place to make it right. This truth is echoed in Romans 12:19 when Paul writes to persecuted Christians.

ROMANS 12:19

19 *Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.*

A forgiving Christian remembers that he, too, has been forgiven. In fact, Ephesians 4:32 reminds us of this as it instructs us: "...forgiving one another, *even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.*" God did not forgive us because we were good people who had no sin. He forgave us "for Christ's sake"—because Jesus paid for our sins.

Christians are not *good* people; we are *forgiven* people. It is because of the forgiveness we have been given that God *commands* us to forgive others in the same way He has forgiven us.

We think that our unwillingness to forgive is related to the size of the offense committed against us: if someone hurts me greatly, it is harder for me to forgive. But in reality, it is usually related to our *forgetfulness* of the forgiveness we have received.

Pastor Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote, "Whenever I see myself before God and realize something of what my blessed Lord has done for me at Calvary, I am ready to forgive anybody anything. I cannot withhold it. I do not even want to withhold it."

Jesus boiled forgiveness down to three basic steps:

LUKE 17:3-4

3 *Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him.*

4 *And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him.*

Rebuke, repent, forgive—let’s look at all three.

A. Rebuke

The first response to an offense is to go directly to the person responsible and show him how he sinned against you.

This may seem self-evident, but many couples don’t do this. Depending on a person’s personality, past, and the health of their current relationship, he may either hold the offense in or talk to someone else about it. *Both* of those responses are harmful to a relationship and become barriers to forgiveness.

The simple rule from this verse is, don’t talk *about* the person who hurt you, but do talk *to* him.

The question arises, who goes to the other first? When there has been an offense that turns into a standoff, should the one who was offended or the one who committed the offense go first? The answer is, *yes*.

In Matthew 5, Jesus instructs that if someone considers that you have wronged him (“that thy brother hath ought against thee”), you must go to him for reconciliation. In Matthew 18, Jesus says if someone does something against you (“if thy brother shall trespass against thee”), you are to go to him.

MATTHEW 5:23–24

23 *Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee;*

24 *Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.*

MATTHEW 18:15

15 *Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.*

Counselor Jay Adams explains, “There is never a time when you can sit and wait for your brother to come to you. Jesus doesn’t allow for that. He gives no opportunity for that. It is always your obligation to go.”¹

God is not as interested in assigning blame as He is in solving the problem. The issue is not so much one of determining roles—who was hurt and who was the hurter—as it is facilitating reconciliation of the relationship. And this requires humility on the part of both parties. One person has to be humble enough to initiate.

B. Repentance

You’ve heard the statement, “When you forgive, you set two people free, and realize that one of them was yourself.”

The second part of this statement is definitely true. When you forgive someone, you release yourself from the acid of bitterness—even if that

1. Jay Adams, *Christian Living in the Home* (P&R Publishing, 1972), 36–37.

person never repents or receives your forgiveness. As we saw earlier, forgiveness isn't an option for a child of God. We are commanded to forgive as we have been forgiven.

But for true relational restoration to take place, the offender does need to repent. We see this in our relationship with God. Scripture tells us that God's posture toward us when we sin is that He is "ready to forgive" (Psalm 86:5).

PSALM 86:5

5 For thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive; and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon thee.

But it is not until we confess our sin—agree with God that what we have done is, in fact, sin—that we can receive God's forgiveness and have a fully restored relationship.

1 JOHN 1:9

9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Sometimes, even someone who has betrayed their spouse through an affair will take an attitude of, "Look, I'm back. And you'd better forgive me, or it's your fault if our marriage doesn't heal." Even if the other spouse does forgive, a proud, non-repentant attitude cannot receive the forgiveness necessary for true relational restoration. There has to be a humble remorse over having committed sin against the other and a changing of the mind regarding that sin.

This isn't only true in what we consider "large" offenses in marriage. For instance, if I am harsh or belittling toward my wife in little ways, but I never

repent for it—I never genuinely apologize with remorse over how I hurt her—and simply expect her to go on forgiving, our relationship will be clouded by my sin toward her. Even if she keeps receiving God’s grace to forgive me, my hardness of heart toward her will be a barrier in our marriage.

Most of us don’t know how to ask for forgiveness. We hope to toss out a quick “I’m sorry if I was wrong” or go a little out of our way to atone by doing something extra. But to receive forgiveness, we have to humble ourselves to actually ask for it.

Consider these “7 A’s of Confession.”² I have used these in counseling and at times to check my own sincerity in conveying repentance:

Alter your behavior. You won’t be perfect, but if you are genuinely sorry, you will give effort toward changing your behavior. Without real change, there is reason to question your repentance.

Address everyone involved. Only talk to people who are part of the problem or part of the solution.

Avoid “if,” “but,” or “maybe.” Saying, “I know I shouldn’t have yelled at you, but you were being really annoying” is just blaming the other person and finding fault with them for your failure. “I’m sorry if I offended you” is never a real apology.

Admit specifically what you did. If you know you have hurt your spouse but can’t understand what you did, ask the Lord for wisdom and try to look at it through your spouse’s eyes. If you still don’t see it, ask your spouse (or a godly counselor) for help.

2. I do not remember where I originally discovered this list, but looking it up recently, I found it available at the website <http://peacemaker.net/project/seven-as-of-confession/>.

Acknowledge the hurt. Express sorrow for your sin. If it doesn't make you sad that you have hurt your spouse, it is going to be difficult for him or her to believe you want forgiveness, rather than a pass.

Ask for forgiveness. Some of the hardest words are "I'm sorry; I was wrong." But don't stop there. You must ask, "Will you forgive me?" These words, spoken in sincere humility, are powerful for restoring a relationship.

Accept the consequences. If there is any way you can make restitution, do. Don't demand your spouse pretend as if nothing has happened. Where trust has been broken—be it in a small or big way—your spouse may forgive you but needs evidence that he or she can trust you again.

Once an offense has been confronted and apologized for, the next step is to freely give forgiveness.

C. Forgiveness

Illustration

One of the best known prisoners of the Nazi concentration camps is Corrie ten Boom, a Dutch Christian who helped her family hide Jews. For this, she, her father, and her sister were imprisoned. Both her father and her sister died through the brutal treatment in the camps.

Years after the war, Corrie was speaking in a church about the love and forgiveness of God. After the service, a man came to thank her for her testimony. As he approached her, Corrie recognized him and recoiled. He had been one of the guards at Ravensbrück Camp.

He reached out his hand to shake hers, “A fine message! How good it is to know that our sins are at the bottom of the sea!”

She stood frozen.

“You mentioned Ravensbrück,” he continued. “I was a guard there. But since that time, I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fräulein, will you forgive me?”

Corrie later described that moment: “I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion—I knew that.... Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.”³

She told how she reached out her hand to shake his, and *then* the love of God filled her heart.

You may think that you *can't* forgive your spouse because you have no feelings of forgiveness. Remember that God never instructs us to *feel* forgiveness; He instructs us to *give* forgiveness. It is an act of the will.

Where there has been abuse or an affair or deeply entrenched patterns of purposeful hurt toward one another, you may need the help of a godly Christian leader or counselor, and never hesitate to get it. But even the goal of counseling should be for forgiveness and reconciliation.

Remember that God designed marriage as a picture of the gospel.

3. Corrie ten Boom, “Guideposts Classics: Corrie ten Boom on Forgiveness” (posted July 24, 2014, from a 1972 story in *Guideposts*), <https://www.guideposts.org/better-living/positive-living/guideposts-classics-corrie-ten-boom-on-forgiveness>

EPHESIANS 5:31–32

31 *For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh.*

32 *This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church.*

That picture is not complete without forgiveness.

3. Packing Well

Have you ever known someone who is a really good packer?

TEACHING TIP

Perhaps you've seen one of the time-lapse videos of someone packing an exorbitant amount of clothing in a small piece of luggage. (As of this writing, there is one with a guy packing a week's worth of clothes in a small carryon that has over eleven million views on YouTube available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L5UlxHsgD58>.) Showing a video like this, if your location setup allows, could help break up the seriousness of this lesson.

Another idea would be to bring two backpacks or small carry-ons as well as a large amount of awkwardly-shaped luggage (but you will need duplicates of everything), and have a contest to see who can get the most in the backpack in a two-minute timeframe. You could do two or three rounds with new contestants if time allows.

Being a good packer takes skill that is acquired through practice. And it's not just about getting everything in the suitcase; it is also about knowing what to leave out.

We find a list of what you could think of as “relational packing skills” in Ephesians 4:32: “And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.”

A. *Leave the scoreboard.*

If there is one thing you do not have room for in your relational luggage, it is a giant scoreboard.

You see, when it comes to offenses and forgiveness, there are two kinds of people—scorekeepers and grace-givers.

The disciple Peter started out as a scorekeeper. Right after Jesus taught His disciples about forgiveness, Peter asked the question we all remember.

MATTHEW 18:21

21 Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?

You can almost hear the incredulous tone in Peter's voice. “Until *seven times*?” It's as if he thought he was suggesting the extreme limit of forgiveness.

Peter wanted to keep track like a scorekeeper at a basketball game. He wanted to say, “I will forgive up until a certain point. But once you cross the line, I'm released of my obligation to forgive.”

Jesus' answer changed the game.

MATTHEW 18:22

22 *Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.*

If I could paraphrase, Jesus said, “Peter, forget the scoreboard. Forgive.”

Peter, don’t be a scorekeeper; be a grace-giver.

If you’ve read the epistles of 1 and 2 Peter, you know that Peter did become a grace-giver. And he learned it from Jesus Himself.

1 PETER 2:21–24

21 *For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps:*

22 *Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth:*

23 *Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously:*

24 *Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed.*

No one wins when you keep score against your spouse. Not you, not your spouse.

B. Give grace.

If you want to be a good forgiver, you must learn to be a grace-giver. Give grace—and give it persistently.

Directly following the verse telling us to put off anger in all its forms, Ephesians 4:32 provides a short list: “And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted,

forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.”

Kindness, tenderheartedness, forgiveness—these are the skills of great forgivers.

Kind is from the Greek word *chrestos*, and it means “employed, useful...good(-ness), gracious.” It gives the idea of busying yourself to help others. New Testament kindness isn’t simply the absence of meanness; it is the presence of useful goodness.

Tenderhearted is from the word *eusplagchnos*. It means “well compassionated, i.e., sympathetic — pitiful.” It means that you keep a soft heart toward others, even those who have hurt you.

Forgiving is from the word *charizomai*, and it means, “to grant as a favor...pardon or rescue.” Its very definition underscores that forgiveness is a voluntary act of the will rather than a reflex of the emotions.

These are not single actions—they are skills. These are actions we must repeat over and over and over and yet again if we want a relationship free of the baggage of anger and bitterness.

Conclusion

We mentioned at the beginning of this lesson that no couple is perfect. Every person has his or her faults. And most often, these tendencies don’t disappear overnight.

Practicing forgiveness requires patience to forgive again and again and again. But it brings a freedom into your marriage when you are not both carrying last week’s and last month’s grudges.

Also, remember that God continues to give you the single resource you need to forgive—grace.

Are We There Yet?

Does your spouse repeatedly offend? Yes.

Does your God repeatedly give grace? Yes.

So, although neither of you are perfect, determine that if there is one thing you will be good at it is that you will become very good forgivers.

When you become a good forgiver, the journey is lighter.

LESSON SEVEN

BOOKING A ROOM

Intimacy

Text

1 CORINTHIANS 7:1–5

1 *Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me: It is good for a man not to touch a woman.*

2 *Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband.*

3 *Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife unto the husband.*

4 *The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife.*

5 *Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency.*

Overview

God created marital intimacy as an awesome gift—the celebration of oneness and unity and the ongoing consummation of love between a husband and a wife. Within the context of marriage, God designed intimacy to be wonderful and satisfying.

In this lesson, we look at three core values that contribute to its quality. Without these biblical values, intimacy is reduced to an act of selfishness. With these qualities, it is a celebration of one another and marriage.

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Lesson Goals

At the conclusion of this lesson, students should:

1. Recognize that the boundaries God places around sexuality are to protect purity.
2. Identify how they can renew or increase their passion for one another.
3. Understand Christlike love toward one another at all times is an investment in even the intimate moments of marriage.

Teaching Outline

1. Purity
 - A. Guidelines for Purity
 - B. Enemies of Intimacy
2. Passion
 - A. Created by God
 - B. Given to One Another
3. Love
 - A. As Part of Intimacy
 - B. Larger Than Intimacy

LESSON SEVEN

BOOKING A ROOM

Intimacy

Text

1 CORINTHIANS 7:1–5

Introduction

Illustration

One stormy night an elderly couple entered the lobby of a small hotel and asked for a room. The clerk said they were filled, as were all the hotels in town. “But I can’t send a fine couple like you out in the rain,” he said. “Would you be willing to sleep in my room?” The couple hesitated, but the clerk insisted.

The next morning when the man paid his bill, he said, “You’re the kind of man who should be managing the best hotel in the United States. Someday I’ll build you one.” The clerk smiled politely.

A few years later the clerk received a letter from the elderly man, recalling that stormy night and asking him to

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come to New York. A round-trip ticket was enclosed. When the clerk arrived, his host took him to the corner of 5th Avenue and 34th Street, where stood a magnificent new building.

“That,” explained the man, “is the hotel I have built for you to manage.” The man was William Waldorf Astor, and the hotel was the original Waldorf-Astoria. The young clerk, George C. Boldt, became its first manager.¹

If you could choose any hotel for a night away—all expenses paid—you would choose a five-star option. A hotel like the Waldorf-Astoria has a high set of values to which they hold their employees responsible for how they care for their guests.

In fact, many of the nicest hotels have their core values for guest care and customer service posted in their lobby. The better articulated and followed these values are by the management and staff, the better your stay will be. (And the more likely you are to return.)

Marital intimacy also has core values that contribute to its quality. Without these biblical values, intimacy is reduced to an act of selfishness. With these qualities, it is a celebration of one another and marriage.

These qualities are purity, passion, and love.

Before we look at them, however, it is important to understand that God created marital intimacy as an awesome gift. It is, in fact, a key component of the weaving together that we looked at in lesson 1 and is the primary implication of Adam and Eve becoming “one flesh.”

GENESIS 2:24

24 Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.

1. <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/f/faithfulness.htm>

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God designed this intimacy to be the celebration of oneness and unity—the ongoing consummation of love between a husband and a wife.

Like everything good and holy that God creates, Satan works to exploit it by creating counterfeits—corruptions of the real thing. This is why although sex is one of God’s great gifts of marriage, it can also be an area of confusion, misunderstanding, sin, and pain.

This was the experience of the church at Corinth to whom the Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 7. The ancient city of Corinth was renown for its architecture, culture... and the prostitutes in the temple of Aphrodite—so much so “Corinth” became a synonym for “immorality.”

In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul lists sins that were prevalent in the Corinthian society including fornication, idolatry (which would have included sexual practices), adultery, prostitution, and homosexuality. But he follows with the statement, “and such were some of you.” The people who made up the church at Corinth had been saved out of a lifestyle of severe confusion related to sexuality.

1 CORINTHIANS 6:9–11

9 *Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind,*

10 *Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.*

11 *And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.*

Then in 1 Corinthians 7–11, Paul deals with several issues related to marriage, intimacy, celibacy, and purity. We

will look primarily at 1 Corinthians 7:3–5, but I share that background to underscore the sacredness of intimacy as God designed it and the confusion that comes when it is exploited by Satan.

From this passage, and other Bible passages on the same topic, we see three important elements to godly marital intimacy.

1. Purity

Marital intimacy is not dirty or unclean. Within the context of marriage, God designed intimacy to be wonderful and satisfying.

PROVERBS 5:15, 18–19

15 Drink waters out of thine own cistern, and running waters out of thine own well.

18 Let thy fountain be blessed: and rejoice with the wife of thy youth.

19 Let her be as the loving hind and pleasant roe; let her breasts satisfy thee at all times; and be thou ravished always with her love.

But God warns that if you step outside of marriage to indulge in sexual activity, the wounds will be real and lasting.

Let's notice the boundaries God has placed around intimacy as well as the enemies that fight against it.

A. Guidelines for Purity

Throughout the book of Proverbs, Solomon highlights the dangers of being seduced by the lie that sex outside of marriage will bring nothing

more than immediate pleasure. The truth is, it will bring terrible and lasting pain.

PROVERBS 5:3–5

3 *For the lips of a strange woman drop as an honeycomb, and her mouth is smoother than oil:*

4 *But her end is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a twoedged sword.*

5 *Her feet go down to death; her steps take hold on hell.*

Why the deep regret, shame, and wounds from sexual sins? Sex is more than just a physical act; it entwines two souls as well. When this happens within marriage, it is a great gift of God. When it happens outside of marriage, it becomes a sin against your own body.

Once again, looking back to Paul's instructions to the church at Corinth, Paul (under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) instructed these Christians who lived in a city that openly celebrated sexual sin, to turn from these sins.

1 CORINTHIANS 6:16–18

16 *What? know ye not that he which is joined to an harlot is one body? for two, saith he, shall be one flesh.*

17 *But he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit.*

18 *Flee fornication. Every sin that a man doeth is without the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body.*

Illustration

Sexual love is like fire in that when it is built and confined in one location, it brings warmth and

heat. It is pleasurable and useful. But when it has no boundaries around it, it brings destruction and death. Without boundaries, it ravages lives and families.

To protect the sacredness of marital intimacy, God has directly forbidden sexual practices that undermine what He designed intimacy to be. These prohibitions are not meant to *limit* our pleasure, but to *enhance* it. They are boundaries for the protection of sex as the good gift it is.

Physical intimacy outside of marriage, as well as any sexual practices that are unholy, are hurtful to you as well as to your spouse.

Our world has so perverted sex, not only through the porn industry, but by sexualizing *everything*—down to kids' clothes and making *sexy* an acceptable, common-use adjective. The net result of this sexualization is removing the sacredness of marital intimacy.

As a husband and wife, you are joined together in a covenant of oneness, and you honor one another by treating intimacy as a pure, sacred act that can bring glory to God and deep, mutual enjoyment with one another.

Marital sex as God designed it isn't just pleasurable; it is also sacred and honorable. Within marriage, it is *awesome*; outside of marriage, it is damaging. Hebrews 13:4 presents both sides to this.

HEBREWS 13:4

4 *Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge.*

So, what does purity look like *within* marriage? Another way to ask this is, if you are already married,

does that mean anything goes between you and your spouse? In the book *Marriage on the Rock*, author Jimmy Evans provides helpful questions to consider in relation to sexual acts between a husband and a wife:²

Does this increase oneness and intimacy? Is it mutually pleasurable or at least mutually agreed upon? (Spouses should not be forced to do anything against their wills.)³

Is it hygienically and physically safe? Can I do this with a clear conscience before God? (God is not a prude, and He is not embarrassed by sex. However, according to Scripture, if we cannot do something by faith, it is sin.)⁴

Is this something I would want my children to practice in their marriages someday?

B. Enemies of Intimacy

But there is more to purity than just what you do together as a couple. There is the guarding of your own mind and actions. Paul instructed Timothy, “Keep thyself pure” and “Flee also youthful lusts; but follow righteousness.”

1 TIMOTHY 5:22

22 ...keep thyself pure.

2 TIMOTHY 2:22

22 Flee also youthful lusts; but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart.

2. Jimmy Evans, *Marriage on the Rock* (Inprov Ltd., August 2011), Kindle Locations 3933–3939.

3. 1 Corinthians 7:3

4. Romans 14:23

There are two common enemies to purity, often encountered in counseling. One tends more toward men and the other more toward women, but we have seen either spouse struggle with both. In this section, we'll address these issues from their most common perspective, but realize that either of you could struggle with either one of these.

For men, the issue is often lust that is stirred through pornography. We live in such a pornographic age in which porn is not only accessible, but, incredibly, it is rationalized. (*Everyone does it. I can't help it. This is just a normal guy thing.*)

Not only is porn ungodly because it tarnishes your mind and exploits other people in the making of it, but it is damaging to you and your spouse because it is unrealistic. When young men receive their information about sex through locker room talk and glossy images in a magazine or on a screen, they have a fake view of sexuality. They then expect their spouse to look or act in ways that are absolutely unrealistic.

Pornography is a fantasy world that cheapens your spouse. It causes men to *use* their wives rather than to *love* them. It makes even the sex that does happen within marriage selfish rather than wholesome; it makes it about gratification rather than about intimacy, with intimacy a sort of unintentional byproduct.

Some men not only indulge in pornography themselves, but ask their wives to look at trash as well. If this is you, please understand that what you are doing is a sin against God and against your spouse. You are to nourish and cherish your wife—to protect her and to love her as you love your own body.

EPHESIANS 5:28–29

28 *So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself.*

29 *For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church:*

To ask your wife to look with you at inappropriate images or to compare her to other women is terribly degrading and dishonoring.

Porn is designed to cloud purity. It ignites impure thoughts that lead you to fantasize outside the will of God and to respond sexually to someone besides your spouse. Listen to the words of Jesus about this.

MATTHEW 5:28

28 *But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.*

Tragically, with the growth of the Internet, porn has become increasingly accessible, as it is just a few clicks away and offers a promise of secrecy. Online secrecy, however, is an illusion. Regardless of where immoral behavior takes place, it will become exposed and bring destruction to a man's life.

Proverbs 9:16–18 warns of secret sexual sin.

PROVERBS 9:16–18

16 *Whoso is simple, let him turn in hither: and as for him that wanteth understanding, she saith to him,*

17 *Stolen waters are sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant.*

18 *But he knoweth not that the dead are there; and that her guests are in the depths of hell.*

If you engage in pornography at any level, you must get out. And, as with any sin that thrives in secrecy, you will need help. Talk to your pastor, to a godly man twenty or more years older than you, to someone who can help you break free.

TEACHING NOTE

*A few books I have sometimes recommended to men struggling with pornography include **The Purity Principle: God's Safeguards for Life's Dangerous Trails** by Randy Alcorn (Multnomah Books, 2003), **Finally Free: Fighting for Purity with the Power of Grace** by Heath Lambert (Zondervan, 2013), and **Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave** by Edward T. Welch (New Growth Press, 2012).*

While these are a good place to start, usually men need more than a book, but the help of a godly man who can provide counsel and accountability as they break free.

And know that freedom is available. Titus 2:11–12 tells us that God's grace teaches us to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, but to be able to live righteously and godly "in this present world."

TITUS 2:11–12

11 *For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men,*

12 *Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world;*

In a world that is so full of temptation, that last phrase is encouraging.

If men struggle with lust, women struggle as the victims of it. The tragic statistics are that as high as 50 percent of women have endured some form of sexual abuse or assault, and often as a child.⁵

The impact of sexual abuse is profound emotional pain, often including confusion as well as a sense of guilt and shame. Sometimes teenagers or young adults fight this pain by becoming promiscuous. Others struggle with fear and, even after marriage, with a paralyzing inability to respond sexually.

Whether you are a man or woman, if you have suffered abuse, you will almost certainly need the help of a godly counselor who can guide you in seeing, from God's perspective, what was done to you and how to find healing through His grace.

Until you recognize that what was done to you was first, a sin and second, not your fault, you will not be able to free yourself from it through forgiveness. (Also, although forgiveness will be necessary for your own healing, that forgiveness does not mean that you don't report to authorities someone who has committed a crime. This is important particularly to keep a perpetrator from having access to more victims.)

5. M.C. Black, et al., *The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2010 Summary Report* (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011).

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You will also need to be able to share with your husband (or wife) what was done to you as you both work through its results together. If your spouse was sexually abused, I would encourage you to offer compassion and love and then to do your best to understand the effects of that abuse on your spouse.

For starters, know that God does not overlook the sin that was committed against you and takes its effects on you seriously.

MATTHEW 18:6

6 But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.

But also know that He desires to bring healing in your life through His grace.

PSALM 147:3

3 He healeth the broken in heart, and bindeth up their wounds.

God does not take sexual perversions lightly, nor does He stand aloof from those who have suffered by them. The verses below can be helpful in both motivating you to walk in purity as well as in understanding God's heart for your healing if you stand on either side of these issues:

1 THESSALONIANS 4:3-7

3 For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication:

4 That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour;

5 *Not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God:*

6 *That no man go beyond and defraud his brother in any matter: because that the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also have forewarned you and testified.*

7 *For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness.*

These are heavy topics, and the space they deserve is greater than the time we have been able to give them. If either of these topics touch on issues that you deal with, I would encourage you to prayerfully seek biblical help.

Purity in your heart and for your marriage is worth any guidelines you need to put in place to protect it and any help you need to restore it.

2. Passion

If you ever wonder if God really designed marriage to include sexual passion, go ahead and read Song of Solomon, especially chapter 4 describing the wedding night between Solomon and his bride.

Set into Eastern poetry, some of the wording may be different than what you say in your bedroom, but the passion isn't. Here are a few of the tamer quotes:

SONG OF SOLOMON 4:1, 9–11

1 *Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair; thou hast doves' eyes within thy locks: thy hair is as a flock of goats, that appear from mount Gilead.*

9 *Thou hast ravished my heart, my sister, my spouse; thou hast ravished my heart with one of thine eyes, with one chain of thy neck.*

10 *How fair is thy love, my sister, my spouse! how much better is thy love than wine! and the smell of thine ointments than all spices!*

11 *Thy lips, O my spouse, drop as the honeycomb: honey and milk are under thy tongue; and the smell of thy garments is like the smell of Lebanon.*

A. Created by God

God *created* our bodies to enjoy sexual arousal as a married couple. Passion is not an unholy thing; it is a sacred thing.

One of the most helpful aspects of intimacy for both husbands and wives to understand is that arousal for each comes in different ways. Men are more visually stimulated, and women are more gently stimulated.

You can even see this throughout the book of Song of Solomon. During their wedding night in chapter 4 as well as their continued times of making love, Solomon is gentle and tender leading up to and after sex. He begins slowly by describing (with increasing passion) to his bride how beautiful she is to him, gently touching her, and kissing.

She responds to his tenderness, enjoying these moments as much as he does. Song of Solomon 4:16 are the only words in this chapter by Solomon's wife:

SONG OF SOLOMON 4:16

16 *Awake, O north wind; and come, thou south; blow upon my garden, that the spices thereof may flow out. Let my beloved come into his garden, and eat his pleasant fruits.*

For a wife, gentle touches communicate approval, acceptance, and love. Song of Solomon 2:6 and 8:3 speak of a wife's desire for her husband's embrace.

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SONG OF SOLOMON 2:6

6 *His left hand is under my head, and his right hand doth embrace me.*

SONG OF SOLOMON 8:3

3 *His left hand should be under my head, and his right hand should embrace me.*

Misunderstanding and dissatisfaction come when a husband or wife assumes that their spouse is aroused in the same way they are. A husband who doesn't understand his wife's need for gentleness will cause his wife to feel used and frustrated. Similarly, a wife who doesn't understand her husband's need for frequency and visual stimulation will cause her husband to feel degraded and unloved.

Another difference between men and women in intimacy is the setting. Most women prefer a romantic setting and a perfect moment to unwind and celebrate their marriage. Most men, however, find sex to be a great way to unwind, even during stressful seasons of life.

Understanding the difference can help couples be more understanding of one another's needs. It can also help both to anticipate the other's needs and give a greater desire to create romantic times in a way that is enjoyable and satisfying for both.

B. Given to One Another

One of the amazing aspects of God's good design in marital intimacy is the mutuality of it. As God designed it, intercourse is not for self-gratification, but for giving yourself to your spouse. In giving, satisfaction is a byproduct.

With that in mind, the Bible teaches that aside from special times of fasting or physical need, marital intimacy is to be regular between husband and wife. Intimacy is not only a sacred act of celebrating oneness; it is a sacred trust in which you are making your body available to your spouse.

We see this in verses 3–5 of our text.

1 CORINTHIANS 7:3–5

3 *Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife unto the husband.*

4 *The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife.*

5 *Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency.*

This is why it is important that married couples continually grow, not only in their intimacy with one another, but in their ability to demonstrate love to one another—both inside and outside the bedroom.

3. Love

Illustration

Someone asked a group of children what true love is. Here are some of their answers:

“When my grandmother got arthritis, she couldn’t bend over and paint her toenails anymore. So my grandfather does it for her all the time, even when his hands got arthritis too. That’s love.”—Rebecca, age 8

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“When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You just know that your name is safe in their mouth.”—Billy, age 4

“Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your french fries without making them give you any of theirs.”—Chrissie, age 6

“Love is what makes you smile when you’re tired.”
—Terri, age 4

“Love is when my mommy makes coffee for my daddy and she takes a sip before giving it to him, to make sure the taste is okay.”—Danny, age 7

“Love is like a little old woman and a little old man who are still friends even after they know each other so well.”—Tommy, age 6

“Love is when Mommy gives Daddy the best piece of chicken.”—Elaine, age 5

“You really shouldn’t say ‘I love you’ unless you mean it. But if you mean it, you should say it a lot. People forget.”—Jessica, age 8

A. As Part of Intimacy

The most well-known passage on love in Scripture is 1 Corinthians 13. Take a moment to read its core verses, and consider how these apply to the love expressed during marital intimacy.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:4–7

4 *Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,*

5 *Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil;*

6 *Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth;*

7 *Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.*

Love in the bedroom is more than the act of sex itself. It is also kindness, purity, and sacrifice toward your spouse. It is being willing to give of your body in a way that turns on the passions and meets the needs of your spouse as well as honoring your spouse's preferences, conscience, and needs.⁶

B. Larger Than Intimacy

Because love is much larger than the bedroom, it is so important that you keep your love toward one another alive and active, not only in how you practice intimacy, but also in every other aspect of your relationship.

For example, if couples would treat each other all through marriage the way they do on their honeymoon, it would greatly enhance their lovemaking. (You cannot be harsh toward or condemning of one another in the afternoon and expect unselfish lovemaking in the evening.)

Additionally, if couples would invest in regular date times and making deposits into one another's hearts, these would be remembered during intimate

6. In our book *Are We There Yet?* we provide a list of general tips for Christian couples during times of lovemaking. Although relatively general, this list may not be appropriate for a public setting, but it could be a helpful resource for a counseling setting. Additionally, we found the book *The Act of Marriage* by Tim and Beverly LaHaye (Zondervan, 1976) helpful as a young couple. This may also be a resource to recommend in counseling or for couples who have further questions of what it means to please one another in the acts of intimacy.

moments and would make sexual intimacy the celebration of a fuller love.

From a standpoint of time spent, marital intimacy is just a fraction of marital love. It is the consummation of love, not the totality of it. Keep growing, then, in Christlike love toward one another in every aspect of your relationship, and you will find that it has a positive outcome even in your most intimate moments with one another.

Conclusion

Illustration

We noted at the beginning of this lesson that sexual love is like fire in that it is pleasurable within marriage, but destructive outside of marriage. But if you continue reading Song of Solomon, you'll discover love and fire are alike in another way as well—that fire must be stoked.

Perhaps the most famous verse of Song of Solomon is found in its last chapter.

SONG OF SOLOMON 8:7

7 Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it: if a man would give all the substance of his house for love, it would utterly be contemned.

What is interesting about the passion that Solomon describes here is that many years have passed since the beginning of their relationship. They are now in the twilight years of life, and yet, their passion for one another is still strong.

Why are they still in love? How can that be possible?

Remember Solomon and his wife's wedding night in Song of Solomon 4 as they both invested passion into the consummation of their marriage? Throughout the

remaining chapters of Song of Solomon, you'll find that this couple continued to stoke the fire. They had their moments of disagreement, but they made up...and they continued to enjoy physical expressions of love.

Marital intimacy needs the continuing investment of both spouses. It needs the husband to put logs on the fire by showing gentleness and kindness—continuing to give verbal compliments and frequent expressions of love, both inside and outside of the bedroom. And it needs the wife to also stoke the fire—to encourage and respond to her husband's passion, to give time and attention to all of his needs.

Some couples grow more distant the longer they are married. But this need not be if they will continue to keep the fire of their love burning for one another—and take time to rekindle it as needed.

If, when you reach the twilight years of your lives, you want to still enjoy the warmth of a passionate love, you need to choose now that you will continually and purposefully stoke the flames.

LESSON EIGHT

TOURIST TRAP

Contentment

Text

HEBREWS 13:5–6

5 *Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.*

6 *So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me.*

Overview

No one has any idea of the high cost of following discontentment at the beginning of the journey. We think we are in control of how much we will give up for what we want to get. But usually, we are not as in control as we think.

The topic of contentment is important for all Christians, but it plays a significant role in marriage because of how closely it is related to our finances. In this lesson, we study the larger picture of contentment, but give special attention to how it relates to finances.

Lesson Goals

At the conclusion of this lesson, students should:

1. Recognize indications of discontentment in their lives and the stress that places on their marriage.
2. Choose to refocus their goals on the eternal and to trust the Lord with what He gives.

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3. Visualize how the five practices of contentment given in this lesson would impact their family finances.

Teaching Outline

1. Admonitions for Contentment
 - A. Beware of covetousness.
 - B. Avoid comparisons.
2. Values of Contentment
 - A. Focus on the eternal over the temporal.
 - B. Trust in the Lord.
3. Practices of Contentment
 - A. Work
 - B. Budget
 - C. Give
 - D. Enjoy
 - E. Save

LESSON EIGHT

TOURIST TRAP

Contentment

Text

HEBREWS 13:5–6

Introduction

Have you ever bought something as a “souvenir” as a tourist that you have never once used? Something that is, in fact, in storage and you never even see?

Illustration

One list of top worst souvenir gifts included these seven:¹

- A pair of singing flamenco shoes
- A wonky-eyed self portrait
- A giant plastic fish
- A cat in a basket made of real fur

1. <http://www.columbusdirect.com/content/did-you-buy-one-of-the-most-regrettable-holiday-souvenirs-of-2015/>

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- A doll made of shells
- A large Japanese statue with a scary face
- A crab set in a clear plastic setting

TEACHING TIP

If you have an item you purchased as a souvenir, but now see it as a waste of money, bring it to class and tell the story of when you bought it.

Discontentment is something like the trinkets sold at a tourist trap. It convinces you that some *thing* will make your journey richer; that without it, in fact, your journey will be incomplete.

Discontentment can lure you from a place of blessing without telling you the true costs involved. Sometimes these costs involve the sacrifice of your relationship with God, the faith you once embraced, and your dearest relationships.

1 TIMOTHY 6:10

10 For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.

No one has any idea of the high cost of following discontentment at the beginning of the journey. We think we are in control of how much we will give up for what we want to get. But usually, we are not as in control as we think.

The topic of contentment is important for all Christians, but it plays a significant role in marriage because of how closely it is related to our finances.

If I were to ask you to name the top three reasons couples divorce, you likely would name financial disagreements as one of those. And statistically, you would be right. I have read

that as high as 57 percent of divorced couples cite money problems as a primary cause for their divorce.

But there has to be more to that statistic than meets the eye. It's easy to oversimplify statistics, and while there may be many factors involved in money-related marriage issues—including communication habits, transparency (or lack of it) in finances, expectations, and more—I would propose that disagreements regarding finances relate to an area we rarely consider in relation to marriage—contentment.

To be sure, contentment is larger than financial issues—far larger—and we'll look at some of these in this chapter. But because financial disagreements are a significant indicator of contentment, and because finances are so significant in marriage, we'll primarily look at contentment through the lens of finances. As we do, however, I encourage you to apply these truths to the larger picture.

1. Admonitions for Contentment

We will study this topic primarily from 1 Timothy 6 and Hebrews 13, but we'll find that discontentment and contentment are addressed all throughout Scripture—including from the lips of Jesus.

A. *Beware of covetousness.*

Although the word *beware* only appears fourteen times in the New Testament, nine of these times, it comes from the lips of Christ Himself.

Jesus warned His followers to beware of false teachers, false doctrine, and the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees—all cautions to which we would readily agree and often repeat.

But in Luke 12:15, Jesus used His *beware* to warn against a sin we easily excuse—covetousness.

LUKE 12:15

15 *And he said unto them, Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth.*

Covetousness—it's not a word we use very often. But it is a deceptive disease of the heart because it promises that something we don't have will make us happy. When we believe this lie, it will slowly consume our lives and relationships.

That promised *something* varies from one person to the next.

Maybe your temptation toward discontentment comes in the area to which Christ was speaking in the verse above—possessions.

Maybe you struggle with your financial status and wish you had more things, a more comfortable lifestyle, or more financial security.

Or maybe you wish for a different status in life. You long for recognition or affirmation. More online friends. More face-to-face friends. Deeper friendships. More opportunities. Greater respect.

Maybe you long for children that, for some reason, God hasn't given...at least not yet.

Maybe you envy the way your friend's husband treats her.

Maybe you wish your wife's appearance would change.

Maybe you wish your husband's pay check was larger or his career different.

Maybe you would like your children to be more obedient or your home to be more comfortable.

Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not suggesting that it is wrong to try to better yourself or your life situation. If you long for children, pray for them. I have prayed with many couples to have children and have seen God answer in many cases—sometimes through surprise conception, sometimes through the discovery and treatment of medical needs, sometimes through adoption. Similarly, it is right and godly to provide for your family and pursue excellence in your career. There is nothing inherently wrong in reaching for something that you don't have through appropriate means.

But what is wrong is believing that *without* something you can't be happy. Whatever that *something* is for you—tangible or intangible—remember Jesus' words, "a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth." Your life and the story that God is writing is larger than a particular thing.

B. Avoid comparisons.

If you were to ask most Christians to rank covetousness in terms of a "big sin" or "little sin," I would guess that many would put it low on their list. It's simply not a sin we think of often.

Yet "thou shalt not covet" is included in the Ten Commandments.

EXODUS 20:17

17 Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's.

When this command was originally given, to covet something of your neighbor's, you had to see it in person. In your heart, you would compare what you had (or didn't have) with what he had, and you would want what he had.

But today, you don't need to be physically present to see and want what someone else has. In fact, covetousness has a broadcasting tool today that was unavailable in the first century—social media.

It's not that social media is evil. Many godly people have and use it and find benefits in it. It's just that social media makes it finger-tip easy to see all that we don't have and others do have.

After all, the fuel of covetousness is comparison. And social media makes it easy to compare.

Think about it this way: When does a wife most resent that her husband hasn't recently brought her "just because" flowers? Is it just when she is going about her day and is struck with the sudden desire for flowers? Or might it be when she sees her friends' posts about their "amazing husbands"? When does a husband most easily become frustrated with his job? Is it only in the moment when he's at work, and his boss is difficult? Or is it also when his friend is posting about his "perfect job" and how he is advancing quickly in his career?

Social media can touch deeper nerves of covetousness too. When you've had a fight with one another and parted ways with underlying stress, and then comes a private message from an old high school flame—"Hey, what's up? Saw you on here and wondered how you're doing?"—the discontent with your spouse already in your heart and the seeming innocence of the situation can make you more susceptible to making unwise decisions.

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Again, I don't think social media is evil. It's not. Anything sinful that comes of it is a result of sin in the heart, not from a screen.

Even the larger picture of Jesus' warning we looked at a moment ago reveals that covetousness is first and foremost a matter of the heart.

One of the people listening to Jesus wanted Jesus to step in and solve a family dispute over who should receive the inheritance. After declining to become a civil judge, Jesus indicated to the crowd gathered that covetousness could be at the root of our quest for more things.

LUKE 12:13–15

13 *And one of the company said unto him, Master, speak to my brother, that he divide the inheritance with me.*

14 *And he said unto him, Man, who made me a judge or a divider over you?*

15 *And he said unto them, Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth.*

But social media does have a way of magnifying comparison and appealing to the covetousness that creeps into our hearts. And because it seems so benign and often has the illusion of secrecy, it has wounded many hearts and marriages.

If you use social media, I recommend shared passwords. (For that matter, if you use email, share your passwords.) Keep nothing hidden from one another. Even in your profile picture or description, make it clear that you are married and love your spouse. Talk about your spouse and your family

positively. Have no suggestiveness or fishing back to old relationships.

Social media is *never* the place to complain about your spouse. Besides that being a hurtful and wrong way to settle a disagreement or conflict, it makes your marriage more vulnerable to the advances of Satan.

When it comes to any online activity, remember that sin always thrives in secrecy. Your best defense is to keep everything about your life—whether it is physical or electronic—shared with your spouse.

Covetousness has a tendency to sneak into our lives in so many ways. Guard against it as a couple.

2. Values of Contentment

Illustration

In his classic story “How Much Land Does a Man Need?” Tolstoy tells of a greedy man who wanted a vast estate. He is offered what seems like the opportunity of a lifetime. For a small sum of money, he can have all the land he can travel around in one day’s time. Beginning early in the morning, Pahom sets out, determined to claim the best land he finds and as much as he can. He stops to rest and eat only reluctantly, and pushes himself to cover more and more ground. Finally he makes a desperate rush to return to the starting point before sundown so that he does not forfeit his money and his land.

He reaches the hill just as the sun sets and falls dead from exhaustion. Tolstoy concludes, “Pahom was dead! The Bashkirs clicked their tongues to show their pity. His servant picked up the spade and dug a grave long

enough for Pahom to lie in, and buried him in it. Six feet from his head to his heels was all he needed.”

How much is enough? Our natural tendency is to think that more stuff equals a better life. We think if we can accumulate more things (material or intangible), we have come out ahead.

The apostle Paul, however, refuted this teaching in 1 Timothy 6.

1 TIMOTHY 6:7–10

7 *For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out.*

8 *And having food and raiment let us be therewith content.*

9 *But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition.*

10 *For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.*

And just before this passage, Paul defines for us what gain really is.

1 TIMOTHY 6:6

6 *But godliness with contentment is great gain.*

You see, coming out ahead in contentment isn't only avoiding a lifestyle of covetousness, but it is about embracing a lifestyle of godliness.

The real equation for blessing includes an eternal perspective.

Godliness + Contentment = Great Gain

Even if you could gain everything you wanted, you would discover in the process that you lost things

you really needed—things like your relationship, your marriage, your walk with God, your testimony for your children. A covetous lifestyle is never satisfied, but is always seeking more. A godly Christian who is finding satisfaction in Christ, however, will be content with the sufficiencies of life that God provides.

Hebrews 13:5 also speaks to the importance of a lifestyle of contentment.

HEBREWS 13:5

5 Let your conversation [lifestyle] be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.

How do we come to this place of satisfaction? What does a lifestyle of contentment + godliness look like?

It comes with two important values:

A. *Focus on the eternal over the temporal.*

Even the world knows that being content makes you happier. They know, as Benjamin Franklin so eloquently said, “Contentment makes poor men rich, discontent makes rich men poor.” But Christian contentment is more than just not wanting stuff. It includes valuing what lasts beyond this life.

If my heart is tangled around temporary possessions or desires, anything that stands in the way of these becomes an obstacle or a threat. For too many couples, that “anything” is even a spouse. And that is where much of the financial fighting comes into play.

But if my heart is focused toward the eternal, the whole game changes. Although I will deal with the necessary affairs of life and will provide for

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my family and do my best to be a steward of the temporal blessings God has entrusted to my care, these blessings won't consume my focus. When my heart is set on the eternal, it frees me from being entangled with the temporal.

This is exactly what God commands.

COLOSSIANS 3:1–2

1 *If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God.*

2 *Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth.*

Focusing on the eternal also allows you to lay up treasures in Heaven by giving to God's work.

MATTHEW 6:21

21 *For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*

B. Trust in the Lord.

Christian contentment not only frees me from false or fleeting loves, but it teaches me to trust in the Lord as my provider. A godly person learns to live in a trusting relationship with the Lord in every area of life, including the meeting of needs.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:7

7 *(For we walk by faith, not by sight:)*

Perhaps the best biblical example of this is the Apostle Paul. As he thanked the church at Philippi for their generous gift of support for him and his work, he made sure to clarify that his ultimate dependence was on God.

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PHILIPPIANS 4:11–13

11 *Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.*

12 *I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need.*

13 *I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.*

Contentment, then, is not *self*-sufficiency (I have all I need); it is *Christ*-sufficiency (God will provide all I need).

Some of the sweetest times of drawing nearer to the Lord and to each other in a marriage can be during times of having great need. Empty cupboards and empty bank accounts can draw you closer to one another as you pray for God's provision. And His answers to your prayers can bolster your faith together.

The world will tell you that trusting the Lord and focusing on the eternal are empty values. But then the world is full of fractured marriages, empty lives, and disappointment with unfulfilled dreams.

Gain isn't everything; *great* gain is better.

3. Practices of Contentment

What do contented people do?

To answer this question, you first need to understand three basic principles that provide a foundation for contentment.

Ownership—*God owns everything.*

PSALM 24:1

1 *The earth is the LORD's, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein.*

Technically, I don't *own* anything, because everything that I have belongs to God. Making a conscious decision to affirm this truth by "giving" everything I have to God helps me to better practice the next principle.

Stewardship—*God has entrusted me to manage assets for Him.*

What I do own from an earthly standpoint isn't mine to use as I see fit to advance my purposes. It is entrusted to me by God to manage for Him.

As stewards, all God asks of us is faithfulness—that we would manage the assets He has entrusted to us in the way that He would. After all, the determining characteristic of a manager's success isn't *volume*; it is *faithfulness*.

1 CORINTHIANS 4:2

2 *Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful.*

Provision—*God has promised to meet my needs.*

We have the freedom to be faithful with what God has entrusted to us because we have the promises of God that He will meet all of our needs.

Perhaps the greatest expression of trust in God's provision is giving. In fact, the strongest promises for

provision in Scripture were first written to benevolent Christians. It was in acknowledging the sacrificial giving of the church at Philippi, that Paul wrote Philippians 4:19.

PHILIPPIANS 4:19

19 But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.

And it was in writing about the sacrificial giving of the Macedonian churches that Paul wrote 2 Corinthians 9:8.

2 CORINTHIANS 9:8

8 And God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work:

TEACHING TIP

Share a story of a time when God provided for you after you gave to Him in faith. Ideally, share how this decision and then God's provision strengthened your faith as a couple.

Let's take a closer look at the second principle—stewardship. After all, if we're going to manage what God has entrusted to us in a way that honors Him, we need to know how He would have us use it.

There are five basic habits taught in Scripture regarding finances:

A. Work

God blesses diligent labor, and work is the means by which He generally provides for our needs.

PROVERBS 13:4

4 *The soul of the sluggard desireth, and hath nothing: but the soul of the diligent shall be made fat.*

Paul admonished the church at Thessalonica that if they wanted physical provision, they should work for it.

2 THESSALONIANS 3:10

10 *For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat.*

Biblically speaking, it is the husband's responsibility to provide for his family through labor. The Bible tells us that a man who doesn't provide for his family is an offense to the gospel.

1 TIMOTHY 5:8

8 *But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel.*

Many couples have decided that in order to make it financially, both spouses need to work. Some women want to work because they enjoy a service aspect of their job. Some couples have chosen for both to work in order to meet some long-term savings or even giving goals. Ultimately, these types of decisions are between a husband and wife and the Lord.

But from a pastoral counseling perspective, I encourage couples to get to the place where they do not *depend* on the wife's income as a long-term strategy for their family's needs. A wife should know that her husband will provide for her.

And, as we have seen, provision is the husband's biblical responsibility.

Getting to this place may involve careful budgeting, paying off debt, downsizing, or even the husband changing his job or taking on a second job temporarily. It may also involve developing greater contentment.

B. Budget

When teaching on discipleship, Jesus pointed out that even a wise businessman will count the cost before beginning a project.

LUKE 14:28

28 For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it?

Although this verse isn't directly instructing Christians to work out a monthly budget, the verses we have already looked at in 1 Timothy do encourage us to live within our means. A budget is simply a tool to be able to do this.

Because the husband is to be the leader of the home and is responsible for the provision, it is wise for him to be the initiator of this process. But a budget should be something you both work out and come to agreement on together. For a budget to work, it has to be larger than paper or a computer screen. It has to be something you have both bought into and are committed to making work.

Part of living within your means includes avoiding debt. You may not be able to avoid it for

larger purchases (such as a home), but don't get in the habit of living off your credit card. Not only will you regret it years down the road when you are using the money you could be enjoying in other ways to pay interest, but you will add a financial strain to your marriage that could be avoided.

PROVERBS 22:7

7 *The rich ruleth over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender.*

Living by a budget and avoiding debt requires commitment and often frugality. Sometimes it means clipping coupons, learning to do more with less, and creating fun family memories on a shoestring. But partnering together in these can draw you closer to each other as you work together for shared goals.

Through the years, Terrie has helped our family to live by a budget and avoid debt tremendously by her contentment and frugality. She has clipped coupons, learned to make more with less, and created fun family memories on a shoestring. Her willingness to partner in our family budget has drawn us closer to each other and helped us to work together for shared goals.

C. Give

Giving really should come before budgeting because it should be the first item on your budget. The Bible tells us that the tithe, ten percent of your income, belongs to the Lord and should be given to Him first.

MALACHI 3:8–10

8 *Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings.*

9 *Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation.*

10 *Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it.*

But even beyond the tithe, God blesses generosity.

LUKE 6:38

38 *Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again.*

Discuss special offerings together as well as commitments you make for weekly giving to missions and other special projects.

Couples with a heart for the eternal see the material blessings of God not primarily as resources to increase their standard of *living*, but to be able to increase their standard of *giving*.

The root word for *miserable* is *miser*. Those with miserly attitudes toward God often have similar attitudes toward one another. Giving to the work of God and to meet the needs of others are some of the most tangible ways we practice contentment.

D. Enjoy

Sometimes talk of budgeting and giving makes people afraid they will have to live pinched, stingy lives. Actually, these practices free us to be able to enjoy what God has given to us without putting our trust in them.

1 TIMOTHY 6:17

17 Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy;

Budgeting and avoiding debt allow you the freedom to enjoy the financial blessings of God without the weight of interest afterward. And using what God has given you to bless others allows you to enjoy your blessings doubled.

So go on a date night. Enjoy the provisions God has given you. Just bless Him for them as you do, and bless others with them as He enables you.

E. Save

As you make your budget and financial decisions, it is wise to remember the long view—retirement, provision for your wife should you die first, and an inheritance for your children.

PROVERBS 21:20

20 There is treasure to be desired and oil in the dwelling of the wise; but a foolish man spendeth it up.

Just because you have it now, doesn't mean you should spend it now.

TEACHING NOTE

I'm no financial guru, and I encourage couples to read a good book, from a Christian author and perspective, on finances together as they create your financial plan. Some authors of financial books who I have read and been helped by are Larry Burkett, Dave Ramsey, and Randy Alcorn.

Remember, however, that in all your financial planning, that the goal isn't to amass more wealth; it is to wisely steward your resources for the glory of God and the provision of your family.

Conclusion

Illustration

In his excellent book *Contentment*, Dr. Richard Swenson tells the story of a woman from New York City hosting a Russian visitor in the 1980s.

They toured the Big Apple and saw the sights. The Russian visitor was unimpressed. “We have tall buildings in Moscow too... We have sports stadiums too.” On it went: Russia has subways, parks, plays, concerts, the ballet. Finally, exhausted from touring, they headed home. The host quickly ran into a supermarket to pick up a few items. The Russian lady entered the store, froze in her tracks, and then started sobbing. Not even in her wildest dreams had she imagined thousands of different food items in one place.²

2. Richard Swenson, *Contentment: The Secret to a Lasting Calm* (NavPress, 2013), 109.

We become so accustomed to the gifts God has given us that we take them for granted. When we overlook the gracious provision God has already lavished on us, we search for significance and fulfillment outside the will of God, and we become prime targets for the tourist trap of covetousness.

So how do we escape the trap? How do we live with a heart of contentment?

The answer is simple: give thanks.

COLOSSIANS 3:15

15 And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful.

Giving thanks frees our hearts from the distraction of comparison. It protects us from the lure of covetousness. And it reminds us of the treasure we have in God and one another. Gratitude is the expression of a contented heart.

LESSON NINE

UNEXPECTED TURBULENCE

Trials

Text

JAMES 1:1–5

1 *James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greeting.*

2 *My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations;*

3 *Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience.*

4 *But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.*

5 *If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.*

Overview

Nobody likes to anticipate turbulence—on planes or in life. Yet, if there is one thing we can be sure of, it is that we will face times of trial and suffering. In this lesson, we learn from James 1 how couples can grow stronger in their faith and closer in their marriage during these times.

Lesson Goals

At the conclusion of this lesson, students should:

1. Rejoice in the reliability of God’s Word and God’s promises.

2. Recognize the blessings God brings into our lives through suffering.
3. Resolve to grow closer to one another during trials.

Teaching Outline

1. Perspective in Turbulence
 - A. Rely on accurate data.
 - B. View from a biblical perspective.
2. Benefits of Turbulence
 - A. Confidence
 - B. Endurance
 - C. Maturity
3. Together in Turbulence
 - A. Pray together.
 - B. Trust together.
 - C. Press together.
 - D. Receive together.
 - E. Focus together.

LESSON NINE

UNEXPECTED TURBULENCE

Trials

Text

JAMES 1:1–5

Introduction

Have you ever noticed that the strongest, most gracious promises in God’s Word were spoken to people going through the darkest trials?

Indeed, throughout the centuries, Christians have endured trials and persecutions. That was particularly true during the early moments of our faith as Nero, the Roman Emperor, took the lives of many Christians.

Illustration

In 64 AD Rome was burned, and Nero blamed the Christians for its burning.

In the second century, the emperor Decius decreed that all Christians should sacrifice to the Roman gods or be killed. He killed tens of thousands, including ten pastors at Crete.

When James wrote about God's comfort, he was addressing Christians who knew firsthand what it was to suffer for their faith.

Although their trials, burdens, and losses were real, the comfort God would give to overcome suffering was real as well. And so it is for us. God's comfort during trials is both available and sustaining.

Notice three truths regarding the comfort God gives in trials:

1. Our God is a God of comfort.

2 CORINTHIANS 1:3

3 Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort;

2. The Holy Spirit is our Comforter.

JOHN 14:16

16 And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever;

3. We should comfort one another with God's Word.

1 THESSALONIANS 4:18

18 Wherefore comfort one another with these words.

James, who penned the epistle of James, was the earthly brother of Christ. He was at first skeptical concerning Jesus' divinity, but he was convinced by Jesus' resurrection and trusted Christ as his Saviour. He then became the pastor of the church at Jerusalem. (See Acts 15:13).

James was writing to Jewish Christians who had been scattered by persecution. Trials were not hypothetical for them—trials were reality.

JAMES 1:1

1 James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greeting.

Illustration

During the twelfth century, a man named Peter Waldo heard the gospel and trusted Christ. He became an evangelist traveling and preaching the gospel throughout Italy, under the persecution of the Roman Catholic Church.

Because of the severity of the persecution, many Waldensians, as they came to be called, located in the steep and rugged valleys of the Alps for safety. There in caves, they would gather on Sundays for worship.

This went on for over four hundred years as the Waldensian underground church continued to carry out the Great Commission of Christ in spite of tremendous persecution.

And then, in 1655, after a seeming lull to the persecution, the Duke of Savoy sent his army into the mountains and ordered a gruesome slaughter, referred to by historians as “the Massacre in Piedmont.”

The horrors of this massacre are indescribable. Not content to simply kill their victims, the soldiers and monks who accompanied them invented barbaric tortures: babies and children had their limbs ripped off their bodies by sheer strength. Parents were forced to watch their children tortured to death before they themselves were tortured and killed. Fathers were forced to wear the decapitated heads

of their children as the fathers were marched to their death. Some of these Christians were literally plowed into their own fields. Some were flayed or burned alive. Many endured worse. Unburied bodies—dead and alive—covered the ground. Hundreds of the Waldensians fled for a large cave in the towering Mount Castelluzzo. The murderous soldiers, however, found them there and hurled them down the precipice to their death.

Even the few survivors of this massacre continued following Christ, *knowing* it would mean persecution. Yet, they clung to God's Word, received His grace, and grew in faith. Their faith is a testimony that God's grace will be sufficient for *any* difficulty that comes into our lives.

Although you may not be facing intense persecution as a couple, perhaps you are facing an incredible time of trial or pressure. You feel as though you are running from Satan's attacks, hiding in a cave of loneliness, watching destruction come in the lives of people you love, or facing any type of ongoing trial.

Your trial may be financial—perhaps the loss of a job, trouble finding work, bills, debt, bankruptcy. Perhaps yours is health-related. Perhaps you're dealing with doctors, tests, treatment, hospitals, pain, exhaustion. Maybe your trial is a child who is struggling, rebelling, or has left the faith. Maybe you have lost a child or have not been able to have children. Maybe it is an unfaithful spouse, the death of your parents, a child with special needs, a deep life disappointment, a . . .

There are more possibilities than we can name here. But none of these possibilities surpass the grace of God.

These times of trial have the potential to make or break a marriage. On one hand, they can drive us to the Lord and to each other as we seek His help and recognize our need for

His grace. On the other hand, we may respond wrongly to the trial and reject God’s grace and allow the stress to drive us away from one another.

In this study, we’ll see three helpful truths that the Holy Spirit, through James, gave to suffering Christians in the first century and learn how we, too, can grow closer to the Lord and each other through times of trial.

1. Perspective in Turbulence

Nobody likes to anticipate turbulence—on planes or in life. Yet, if there is one thing we can be sure of, it is that we will face these times.

Illustration

Someone once compiled a list of advice to student pilots.

Takeoffs are optional. Landings are mandatory.

Flying isn’t dangerous. Crashing is dangerous.

It’s always better to be down here wishing you were up there than up there wishing you were down here.

The only time you have too much fuel is when you’re on fire.

The propeller is just a big fan in front of the plane used to keep the pilot cool. When it stops, you can actually watch the pilot start sweating.

A “good” landing is one from which you can walk away. A “great” landing is one after which they can use the plane again.

You know you’ve landed with the wheels up if it takes full power to taxi to the ramp.

Never let an airplane take you somewhere your brain didn’t get to five minutes earlier.

Stay out of clouds. The silver lining everyone keeps talking about might be another airplane going in the opposite direction.

If all you can see out of the windscreen is ground that's going round and round and all you can hear is commotion coming from the passenger compartment, things are not at all as they should be.

In the ongoing battle between objects made of aluminum going hundreds of miles per hour and the ground going zero miles per hour, the ground has yet to lose.

Good judgment comes from experience. Unfortunately, experience usually comes from bad judgment.

It's always a good idea to keep the pointy end going forward as much as possible.

Always try to keep the number of landings you make equal to the number of takeoffs you've made.

The three most useless things to a pilot are altitude above you, runway behind you, and a tenth of a second ago.

Although we do not enjoy turbulent seasons of life, we shouldn't be surprised when they come.

1 PETER 4:12

12 Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you:

And yet, it seems like suffering always takes us by surprise, doesn't it?

Think of Job and his wife. In one day, they lost it all—including their ten children. And then Job lost his health. We get a glimpse into the strain these losses placed on their

marriage in his wife's first (and only) recorded words: "Dost thou still retain thine integrity? curse God, and die" (Job 2:9). Job's wife was allowing the trial to make her question God and even her husband's trust in God.

Job wisely responded, "Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" (Job 2:10).

JOB 2:9–10

9 Then said his wife unto him, Dost thou still retain thine integrity? curse God, and die.

10 But he said unto her, Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil? In all this did not Job sin with his lips.

Job persisted in trust, and it seems his wife came along as well. For at the end of the book of Job, God not only restored all that they had lost, but He also gave them ten more children.

God desires to bless you through your times of turbulence as well. Trials do place pressure on the most tender places of our hearts. But rather than allowing the trial to *destroy* your marriage, let God use it to *strengthen* your marriage. This happens when you together decide to respond to the trial in faith and trust.

A. Rely on accurate data.

Illustration

Experienced pilots say one of the most difficult and dangerous conditions for flying is being completely surrounded by fog or clouds. With no visual points

of reference, it is easy to become disoriented. Pilots report not being able to tell if they are climbing or falling, or even flying upside down.

Investigators believe that this kind of confusion was responsible for the plane crash that killed John F. Kennedy, Jr. and his wife in 1999. Kennedy was only rated for VFR—visual flight rules—as a pilot. But the plane was caught in fog, and crashed, killing all those on board.

An experienced pilot knows to believe the instrument gauges over his internal sense of direction. God's Word is to a Christian what the gauges of an instrument panel are to a pilot. The difference is that while a plane's gauges may get off or need to be recalibrated, God's Word never errs.

Often in times of life's turbulence, what we *feel* doesn't match what God's Word declares is truth. The temptation that comes to us during these times is the same as comes to a pilot when what he *sees* doesn't match up with what his gauges *say*: will we trust our intuition, or will we trust the reliable standard of truth?

Couples who trust their intuition respond like Job's wife. They look for the quickest way out of the suffering, rather than for seeing God's purposes fulfilled through the suffering. They take stress out on each other. They lose hope. And many times, their marriages don't make it.

Couples who go through a trial trusting in God's Word, however, find that even when their feelings are reeling, there is a center of truth on which they can stand.

James challenged the Christians to whom he wrote to respond to their time of testing based on absolute truth, rather than on their changing emotions.

JAMES 1:2–3

2 *My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations;*

3 *Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience.*

If you are already familiar with this passage, you may have lost the shock of that first sentence. James literally says to consider your suffering as something that brings joy.

Joy?

Our natural reaction to trials is not joy. When a difficulty descends upon our lives, our reflex is usually worry, anxiety, perhaps anger. It is so easy in these moments to lose perspective of all that we know to be true from God’s Word and to be filled with fear or frustration.

Illustration

The preacher Vance Havner told a story about an elderly lady who was greatly disturbed by her many troubles—both real and imaginary. Finally, someone in her family tactfully told her, “Grandma, we’ve done all we can for you. You’ll just have to trust God for the rest.” A look of absolute despair spread over her face as she replied, “Oh dear, has it come to that?” Havner commented, “It always comes to that, so we might as well begin with that!”

But this passage challenges us not to be an emotionally-centered Christian, but to be a Christian who fully trusts in the truths of God's Word.

B. View from a biblical perspective.

How in the world can we count our trials as joy?

First, it is by understanding the phrase *count it*. It comes from a word used in financial accounting, *hegeomai*, which means “to deem, to consider.”

It is an admonition to step back to think about the bigger picture of what is happening and to trust that God is working through our trial in ways we cannot see.

Illustration

In May of 2001, Erik Weihenmayer accomplished something that only about 150 people per year do—he reached the top of Mount Everest. The thing that made Erik's achievement unusual is that he is the first blind person to succeed in scaling the tallest mountain in the world.

Erik was born with a disease called retinoschisis, and by the time he was thirteen he was completely blind. Rather than focus on what he could not do, he made the choice to focus on what he could do and went much further than almost anyone expected. Erik Weihenmayer's autobiography is titled *Touch the Top of the World: A Blind Man's Journey to Climb Farther Than the Eye Can See*.

Although we cannot possibly see all of God's purposes for suffering from our vantage point, we can, by faith, continue climbing believing that God *can* see and that He is working things for our good.

This doesn't mean that we don't struggle with fear. We often do. But during these times, we can choose to believe the truth of God's promises. We can reach out in faith for God's grace and believe, based on His promise, that He will work even this for our good and His glory. And when we do, it brings peace to our hearts.

The Apostle Paul learned to see difficulty from a higher perspective. He had what he referred to as “a thorn in the flesh” (2 Corinthians 12:7). Paul never tells us what this was, but I believe it to have been a chronic physical difficulty of some kind, perhaps a disease in his eyes.

It seems that for a time Paul was focused on the thorn, much like you and I tend to focus on our adverse circumstances. Three times Paul brought this matter to the Lord in fervent prayer, pleading with God to deliver him from it.

But when the Lord answered Paul, it wasn't by taking away the thorn. It wasn't by taking Paul out of the storm. It was by refocusing Paul's vision on the instrument panel. Rather than granting healing, God assured him of sufficient grace.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:9

9 And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

During life's turbulence, we have two choices: we can trust our feelings, or we can trust God's Word. Our emotional instrument panels get off—sometimes way off. But God Himself never changes. You can trust that He is present, and He is working.

When you trust the gauges, it brings a renewal of joy.

2. Benefits of Turbulence

Another way that couples can learn to “count it all joy” during a time of suffering is to remember that we don’t rejoice because of the trial itself, but because we know that God will work real benefits in our lives out of the trial.

The first two words after James’ admonition to “count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations” are “*Knowing this...*” (James 1:3).

We don’t rejoice because of what we are *experiencing*, but because of what we are *knowing*. What do we know that God will bring through trials?

James 1 suggests three gifts God gives us in trials:

A. Confidence

Even when you already “know” God’s promises in your mind, trials, like no other method, teach you what it means to have heart confidence in those promises. It is the very process of trials that allow us to *know* the truths we so desperately need.

Look at the first three words of one of the most familiar verses in all the Bible: “*And we know* that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.”

ROMANS 8:28

28 And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.

We *know* this truth because it is written in God’s Word. We know it because we see it in the lives

of others in Scripture. But we know it in a personal way when we experience it in our own lives.

ROMANS 5:3

3 *And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience;*

God uses tribulation to bring good into our lives. When we believe this truth, we can have confidence in God even in the midst of uncertainty.

B. Endurance

God also uses trials to bring patience into our lives: “Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh *patience*” (James 1:3).

The word *patience* here is not just the patience of being able to wait for your appointment at the dentist’s office. It means “steadfastness, endurance, perseverance.” It is the patience that can only be developed over time.

This is the patience of a teenage football player in practice. He goes through drills and exercises and routines that leave him sore and achy and wanting to quit. But these very “pain-inducers” build muscle that he is thankful for when he is playing a real game.

Our problem is that we are so short-sighted we don’t value patience. It’s hard to be patient with an unruly toddler, a slow-in-coming test result, or spiritual growth in the heart of your spouse.

It’s not that we don’t want God to work through trials—we do! But we don’t understand that some of that work can only happen over time and behind the scenes.

TEACHING TIP

If yours or your spouse's wedding ring has a diamond in it, use it as a point of reference for the illustration below. "The diamond in this ring could only be formed...."

Illustration

Diamonds are formed under great pressure and heat. If these conditions do not exist, they are simply not formed. It is not that they will be low quality, or smaller in size, but they will not form.

God brings pressure and heat into our lives to create in us what He sees fit, and without it, we will not be formed into the image of Christ. When you are going through a time of pressure, remember that the only difference between a diamond and a piece of coal is pressure.

Think of Joseph. From the time his brothers sold him into slavery until he became the second most powerful man in the world was thirteen years. Not only did those thirteen years set the stage for all the players to be in the right place at the right time for Joseph saving his family from starvation, but don't you think also that some of what he experienced over those years prepared *him* for what God wanted to do through him?

GENESIS 50:20

20 But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.

Think about Paul being stoned and left for dead at Lystra (Acts 14:19). I can imagine that this experience could have seemed like a waste to Paul. Besides the pain he endured, there was an obvious setback to the spread of the gospel. Or was there?

The Bible tells us that Paul left Lystra to preach in Derbe. From Derbe, he returned again to Lystra. Two chapters later, Paul is *again* in Lystra where we learn of “a certain disciple...named Timotheus” (Acts 16:1).

Paul didn’t know it that day he was stoned and left for dead, and he didn’t know it a few days or weeks later when he went back, but there was a young man watching him. And Timothy, who would later become a preacher of the gospel and pastor the church at Ephesus, was influenced through Paul’s endurance. Was Paul’s trial a setback to the gospel? Not when you take the long view.

C. ***Maturity***

God desires to use trials in our lives to make us more like Jesus. Marriage itself is a picture of Christ and His love for us as His bride. In every trial we encounter as a married couple, God wants to bring us to spiritual maturity. We see this in James 1:4, “But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.”

The word *perfect* is from the Greek word *teleios*, and it means “finished, mature.” Sometimes God uses the difficult chiseling of a trial to conform us to the image of Christ. Romans 8:28 is followed by verse 29, which tells us that the “good” God desires to bring out of the hard times in our lives is for us “to be conformed to the image of his Son.”

ROMANS 8:29

29 For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.

This is what God promises in 1 Peter 5:10.

1 PETER 5:10

10 But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you.

This process of confidence, endurance, and maturity is the difference between a couple who grows closer to one another or further apart from one another during difficulty.

3. Together in Turbulence

One of the most amazing aspects of God’s work in our lives through trials is that He can use a trial to strengthen the Genesis 2 “weaving” process of melding two lives together. In an amazing tapestry of providence and grace, God can use these difficult times to weave two lives closer to one another, making their bond even stronger through a trial.

This kind of maturing, however, doesn’t “just happen” as the natural outcome of a trial. Satan will do all he can to use a trial to weaken your relationship. He will try to bring confusion, hurt, isolation, misunderstanding, and doubt.

So what can you do to protect your marriage and grow closer to one another because of the trial? Walk through the trial *together*. Allow us to share five

biblical and practical responses for enduring trials as a married couple.

A. Pray together.

James 1:5 invites us to simply ask God for wisdom.

JAMES 1:5

5 *If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.*

As you go through a time of trial, there will be many decisions you don't know how to make, many needs you cannot meet. Ask God for His wisdom. As you do this together, He will draw your hearts closer to Him and to each other in prayer.

B. Trust together.

Determine upfront that you will continue to trust the sovereignty and goodness of God. There will be many times when your hearts and minds are filled with questions. Take those questions to the Lord; but even before He brings clarity, trust Him. And trust Him together.

PROVERBS 3:5–6

5 *Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.*

6 *In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.*

One of the blessings of a Christian marriage is to encourage one another's faith.

C. Press together.

I love the quote by Hudson Taylor, who was a pioneer missionary to China in the nineteenth century. Taylor himself was no stranger to trials, including burying his wife and five of his children in China. During one season of difficulty he wrote, “It doesn’t matter how great the pressure is; what matters is where the pressure lies. See that it never comes between you and the Lord.”

If this is true in our relationship with the Lord, it is also true in our relationship with our spouse. The trials of life bring a tremendous amount of pressure, and if that pressure wedges between a husband and wife, it can drive the marriage apart like almost no other force. But if that pressure instead pushes a couple closer to one another, it can strengthen their marriage like almost no other force. The difference lies in where the pressure lies.

We face pressure every day of our lives, but during times of difficulty, there is an added challenge in letting that pressure bring you closer to each other in that the normalcy of your lives is upset. It’s hard to have a date night when your baby is in NICU, when your husband is temporarily stationed overseas, or when your wife is fighting a chronic illness. These are times to ask the Lord for wisdom, exercise creativity and flexibility, and allow the pressure to drive you toward each other.

D. Receive together.

Through every trial of life, God offers us comfort.

We already saw from 2 Corinthians 1:3 that He is the “God of all comfort.” So encourage one another to reach out and receive God’s comfort in the ways

He provides it—through His Word, through the Holy Spirit, and through the local church.

Open the pages of God’s Word together, and receive His comfort.

PSALM 119:92

92 *Unless thy law had been my delights, I should then have perished in mine affliction.*

Allow the indwelling Holy Spirit to minister to your heart.

JOHN 14:16

16 *And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever;*

And encourage one another to be faithful in church, even when you may want to withdraw. The entire book of James was written by the pastor of the church at Jerusalem. Through this letter, he reaches out with pastoral comfort to Christians spread throughout Asia Minor because of persecution. The local church is still one of the ways God brings comfort and care to His people.

E. Focus together.

During a trial, there is a temptation to redirect the focus of the trial onto ourselves. Don’t make the trial about you. Remember that it is ultimately about the glory of God. And along the way, focus on your spouse’s needs, your child’s needs, your loved one’s needs—how God wants to use you to meet the needs of others.

GALATIANS 5:13

13 *...by love serve one another.*

You only have so much energy to give. You can either direct your energy toward supporting and serving your spouse or toward sharing how difficult this is for you. If you will die to self and together focus on the other and serving those around you, God will bring great victories into your lives through the trial—and He will get the glory.

Conclusion

Illustration

In 1799, Conrad Reed discovered a seventeen-pound rock while fishing in Little Meadow Creek. Not knowing what it was made of, his family used it as a doorstep for three years.

In 1802, his father, John Reed, took it to a jeweler who identified it as a lump of gold worth about \$3,600. That lump of gold, which was used as a doorstep for three years in North Carolina, is one of the biggest gold nuggets ever found east of the Rockies.

Sometimes what looks to us like a heavy, largely-useless burden is actually God's greatest blessings in disguise. But we never know unless we turn it over to Him and allow Him to uncover the gold in His time.

When you encounter times of testing or turbulence, remember that God desires to use the trial to make you more like Christ and thus make you a better spouse as well. But this process isn't automatic. It requires that you purposefully choose to trust the instrument panel of God's Word rather than your feelings, that you patiently cooperate with God's work in you to bring you to spiritual maturity, and that you hold and encourage one another during the storm.

LESSON TEN

SYNCING YOUR ITINERARIES

Busyness

Text

EPHESIANS 5:15–18

15 *See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise,*

16 *Redeeming the time, because the days are evil.*

17 *Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is.*

18 *And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit;*

Overview

Our busy culture wars against real relational connection. With so many demands on our time, energy, and schedules, it's a challenge to give relationships the priority they deserve. And nowhere is this more true—or more dangerous—than in your marriage relationship.

In this lesson, we study what Ephesians 5 teaches us about centering our priorities on the will of God and the impact this focus has on our relationships.

Lesson Goals

At the conclusion of this lesson, students should:

1. Commit to their relationship with the Lord as the highest priority of life.

2. Understand the importance of relying on the Holy Spirit for balance.
3. Determine daily, weekly, and seasonal times they can invest in their marriage.

Teaching Outline

1. Clarify Your Priorities
 - A. Your Relationship with the Lord
 - B. Your Relationship with Your Spouse
2. Redeem the Time
 - A. Schedule time together.
 - B. Listen to each other.
3. Practice the Exchanged Life

LESSON TEN

SYNCING YOUR ITINERARIES

Busyness

Text

EPHESIANS 5:15–18

Introduction

Illustration

There is an old story from a century ago about two steamboats. They left Memphis about the same time, traveling down the Mississippi River to New Orleans. As they traveled side by side, sailors from one vessel made a few remarks about the snail's pace of the other. Challenges were made and the race began.

Competition became vicious as the two boats roared through the deep South. One boat began falling behind because it did not have enough fuel. There had been plenty of coal for the trip, but not enough for a race. As the boat dropped behind, an enterprising young sailor took some of the ship's cargo and tossed it into the ovens. When the

sailors saw that the supplies burned as well as the coal, they fueled their boat with the material they had been assigned to transport. They ended up winning the race, but burned their cargo.

Sometimes we treat our relationships—especially our closest relationships—like that cargo. We care enough about it to take it onboard our lives, but then when it hinders our pace, we devalue or even use it in order to keep up with the more demanding aspects of our lives.

Our busy culture wars against real relational connection. With so many demands on our time, energy, and schedules, it's a challenge to give relationships the priority they deserve. And nowhere is this more true—or more dangerous—than in your marriage relationship.

When you are dating, it's comparatively easy to keep your relationship front and center. It's new, exciting, and consuming. But then you get married, and, well, it's not that your relationship feels less important to you; it's just that life has a way of shifting your focus. Children come, responsibilities change, urgent matters press. And somewhere along the line, busyness takes over. One day you realize that not only have you lost the points of connection you used to enjoy, but you also lost the oneness and emotional intimacy of your relationship.

What happens in a marriage when busyness takes over?

Emotional drift—If you are not regularly and purposefully connecting with one another, you'll drift apart emotionally.

When a couple is dating, usually they hate being apart from one another; so even then, they are emotionally preparing to share the apart times with the other when they are reconnected. But if, as a married couple, you are

not having times when you regularly connect and share with one another, over time, you'll stop thinking of one another when you're apart. Rather than going through your day with your spouse in mind, you'll disconnect emotionally and be more susceptible to the temptation to connect on a deep emotional level with someone else.

Build up of stress—The responsibilities of life bring enough stress on their own. But when you live with drifting priorities, the stress builds exponentially. And with these increased stresses is a tendency toward increased conflict with each other.

Neglect and resentment—When a husband neglects his wife because he is busy doing stuff, she usually will find replacements (children, volunteer activities, outings with friends, more hours at her job). But the cycle doesn't end there, because the husband then resents the extra stuff she is doing, thinking it is actually his *wife* who is neglecting *him*.

This cycle of neglect and resentment can start with either spouse. But it won't end until both spouses step back, realign their priorities, and say, "You are more important to me than anything in the world. How can I put you first?"

Is there another way? Does Scripture even speak to the issues inundating our hectic, over-scheduled, under-connected lives?

Yes!

The same chapter of Ephesians that later speaks directly to marriage (which we studied in Lesson 3), deals also with principles for living a purposed and directed life.

While the exact pulls for our time and attention change by culture and time in history, the underlying principles for dealing with them remain unchanged.

In this lesson, we'll discover three action items for syncing your itineraries and fighting the busyness that tends to pull relationships apart.

1. Clarify Your Priorities

Sometimes we get so caught up in busyness that we forget the purpose of why we are doing what we do. Socrates warned, "Beware the barrenness of a busy life."

Ephesians 5:15 instructs us to "walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise."

The word *circumspect* comes from the same word from which we get *circumference*. This verse is a warning then against having tunnel vision—getting so caught up and focused in just one direction that we lose the big picture of the calling God has placed on our lives.

Remember that when God gave the operational definition of marriage in Genesis 2:24, He didn't say, "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall sometimes see his wife in passing..." or "and shall live under the same roof with his wife despite having varied schedules with nothing in common." He said, a man should "*cleave* unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh."

GENESIS 2:24

24 *Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.*

The word *cleave* means to "adhere...abide fast, follow close, overtake, pursue hard, stick." This takes intention. If you want to stay relationally and emotionally connected in the midst of a busy world, you will have to fight for it.

Usually what we want when it comes to synchronizing schedules is a life hack—a simple trick that makes it all work. But it has to start with determining what is important.

Illustration

When you are traveling alone, you can organize your itinerary however you would like. But when you are traveling with a group, it helps to have clarity before your trip about what your priorities will be and make sure everyone understands the itinerary.

The same is true in marriage. It isn't enough for you to independently define your priorities—you need to be in agreement on them.

So what are your biblical priorities when you are married? The first is your relationship with the Lord, and the second is your relationship with your spouse. Every other priority must fall after these two.

A. *Your Relationship with the Lord*

The primary priority for every Christian is their relationship with God.

DEUTERONOMY 6:5

5 And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.

Remember that before God gave Adam a wife and the gift of marriage, God first established a relationship between Himself and Adam.

GENESIS 2:15–18

15 *And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.*

16 *And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat:*

17 *But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.*

18 *And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.*

When our vertical relationship with God is not strong, our horizontal relationships with others will deteriorate.

Through the ups and downs of every other realm of life, you must keep your personal walk with God as your top priority. As a Christian couple, you have the privilege of encouraging each other in this and also seeking God together. We'll return to this thought of shared growth in the Lord in our next lesson, but it has to start with you keeping your own heart tender to and seeking after God.

Perhaps the clearest biblical example of priorities is that of Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, who hosted Jesus in their home. While Martha was preoccupied with the responsibilities of entertaining company, Mary sat at Jesus' feet soaking in His teaching. When Martha chided Jesus for letting Mary sit while she hustled, He gently reprimanded her and gave her His focus concerning priorities.

LUKE 10:41–42

41 *And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things:*

42 *But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her.*

One thing is needful.

There are many things that are important. But there is *one* thing that is needful, and that is your relationship with God.

Even in Ephesians 5, before the chapter deals with use of time or the husband and wife relationship, it begins with an instruction to follow God whole-heartedly.

EPHESIANS 5:1

1 *Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children;*

To follow the Lord, we must have a relationship with Him, and we must take time to hear His voice.

You may wonder what this has to do with marriage. The answer is “everything.” Becoming a better follower of Jesus also makes you a better husband or wife. A better parent. A better pastor. A better boss. A better employee. A better friend. A real and passionate walk with the Lord, where you are growing in His Word and giving the Holy Spirit freedom to work in your life, will impact every relationship and aspect of your life.

Illustration

George Müller read the Bible through over one hundred times. He also wrote over thirty thousand letters per year for forty years. He had nine assistants working in a dozen languages. He pastored 1,200 believers, had the oversight of five large orphanages and a huge publishing house, printed and distributed millions of books, tracts, and Bibles. He said, “I never

think of going to my work without first having a good season of time with God and my Bible.”

You simply can't let the priority of your relationship with the Lord slide and expect that it won't affect your marriage. Keeping this relationship strong is needful even to your marriage.

B. Your Relationship with Your Spouse

After your relationship with the Lord, the next priority is your relationship with your spouse.

Even over your children.

Even over your job.

Even over your ministry.

Although most people acknowledge that this is true on paper, many couples struggle to make this priority a reality amidst the demands of life. Along the way, husbands have a tendency to let their vocation supersede the priority of their marriage.

Remember though, *God* has placed a priority on marriage.

EPHESIANS 5:31

31 For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh.

You only have so much time and energy. If something, even something that is a responsibility in your life, is going to do without some of that time or energy, it should not be your marriage.

If husbands have a tendency to put their vocation before their marriage, wives have a similar tendency to do the same with their children. Don't get me wrong. Our children and our grandchildren

are the greatest treasures on earth. We will make any sacrifice necessary for them. But one of those sacrifices cannot be our marriage.

For one thing, the greatest gift you can give your child is to love your spouse. The security that this creates for your child is more valuable than any trade-off involved.

Second, the example you set for your children in making your marriage a priority will give them a pattern by which to build their future homes.

In fact, when your children are grown and married and raising their families, you want to see them putting their relationship with their spouse even before their relationship with you.

And now that we've mentioned it, that's another implication of your spouse coming first. Once you're married, your marriage comes before your parents and in-laws. To *cleave* to one another, you are to *leave* your father and mother.

Priorities do not set themselves. You must purposefully set them and then resist the natural drift away from them. This will include saying “no” to some opportunities or activities that don't contribute toward or that prohibit you from strengthening your relationship. But it is easier to say “no” to something when there is a greater “yes” burning inside. When you start by identifying your God-given priorities, it helps you identify that greater *yes* making your needed *no* more clear.

2. Redeem the Time

Not only does Ephesians 5 instruct us to walk circumspectly, seeing the big picture, but it also instructs

us to redeem the time. And it stresses that we need wisdom in how we spend our time.

Colossians 4 repeats these instructions.

COLOSSIANS 4:5

5 Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time.

Using your time wisely and redeeming time toward what matters most requires that you are intentional in how you use it.

A. Schedule time together.

One of the best representations of your real priorities is your schedule. What we merely suggest we want to do “sometime” rarely happens, but what we actually schedule time for gets done.

Illustration

Just as a good financial manager will make a budget and first pay the mortgage and utilities before allotting money to eating out, so a conscientious spouse will designate quality time together before allowing their schedule to be filled with matters of lesser importance.

The Bible encourages us to “number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.”

PSALM 90:12

12 So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.

If we are to wisely spend our time, we must carry a sense of the fleeting nature of time so we invest it where it matters most.

You cannot build a strong marriage with no investments of time.

One of the best ways to purposefully and wisely invest time into your marriage is by creating routines—daily, weekly, and seasonal routines—that draw you closer to each other.

Here are a few suggestions:

Daily—Make it a priority during mealtimes to sit down with one another, set your phones aside, and talk. If you have children, this family mealtime won't be undivided attention for you and your spouse, but it is still vital.

Early evening, or just before bed, is another excellent time for connection. Give each other a minimum of fifteen minutes where you ask and listen and share about one another's day and pray together.

Weekly—Planning a weekly date night is, in my opinion, one of the most important habits you can set. This can sometimes be at home, provided you really do disconnect from the television, your phones, and independent projects. But go out sometimes as well. These dates don't need to be expensive, but they do need to be regular.

You need undistracted time to talk with one another. Again, this probably means setting your phone aside or turning it off. Try to pull away from the rest of the world for a while and just enjoy your spouse.

In addition to date nights, if you have children, you need to carve out undistracted family time. Once again, the idea isn't how much money you spend; it is how much time you spend. You can feed the ducks at the park, make ice cream sundaes at home, or read together as a family. Not only is this time important as a parent,

but it also builds your marriage when you spend time together investing in your children.

Seasonally—Plan periodic times to get away with one another to focus on your marriage. This may be an annual couples’ retreat, an out-of-town anniversary celebration, or a monthly “extra” activity with just the two of you.

B. Listen to each other.

Perfect balance of time is a myth. Despite your best intentions, you will get out of balance in one or another area on a reasonably regular basis. That’s because balance isn’t static; it requires continual adjustments.

Illustration

Think of a tightrope walker constantly adjusting to keep his center of gravity on the rope. This is how life balance works as well.

The goal, then, is not to achieve “perfect balance,” but to be willing to make adjustments along the way. It means obeying the command to “walk in the Spirit.”

GALATIANS 5:25

25 If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.

This requires that you remain sensitive to the Holy Spirit as He convicts you that you’re not investing enough time in your marriage. But it also requires that you remain open and listen to any concerns that your spouse raises.

Remember that the goal in “redeeming the time” is to understand and do the will of the Lord (Ephesians 5:16–17). And when you are married, the will

of the Lord for you includes investing time in your marriage and together seeking biblical priorities.

3. Practice the Exchanged Life

It's not humanly possible to determine and live God-honoring priorities in our own strength.

This is why God instructs us to “be filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18).

To be filled with the Spirit is to be controlled by the Spirit. The negative illustration given in Ephesians 5:18 is that of someone who is drunk being controlled by alcohol.

EPHESIANS 5:18

18 And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit;

Rather than being controlled by a substance, you and I should be controlled by the Holy Spirit in our responses and actions.

We see this exchange principle throughout Scripture. In Colossians 3, God tells us to “put off the old man” and “put on the new man.”

COLOSSIANS 3:9–10

9 Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds;

10 And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him:

Ephesians 4 also gives this principle.

EPHESIANS 4:22–25

22 That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts;

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- 23 *And be renewed in the spirit of your mind;*
24 *And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.*
25 *Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour: for we are members one of another.*

To have healthy relationships with others, we must practice the exchanged life in which we put off the habits of our flesh and are renewed in our minds by God's Word to serve one another.

We must exchange self-will for a surrendered will to God.

1 PETER 4:2

- 2 *That he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh to the lusts of men, but to the will of God.*

We must exchange fleshly desires for spiritual desires.

COLOSSIANS 3:1-2

- 1 *If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God.*
2 *Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth.*

We must exchange human effort for spiritual power.

2 PETER 1:3

- 3 *According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue:*

These exchanges only happen as we personally seek the Lord and spend time with Him. This is why, just a few verses after this teaching on the exchange principle,

Colossians 3:16 instructs, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom....”

COLOSSIANS 3:16

16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.

As God’s Word fills our minds, we are then able to have the spiritual relationships described in the second half of the verse, “...teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.” When God’s Word dwells in you, it changes you.

This brings us back full circle to where we started. In clarifying and keeping our priorities, in particular the priority of our marriage, we need the wisdom of the Holy Spirit. And this requires that we make seeking God our highest priority.

Conclusion

Syncing your itineraries in marriage is never automatic. It takes time and intention.

Too many couples let the busyness of life steal their understanding of God’s will and their commitment to seek it together. Don’t let that be you.

We all believe in preventative maintenance for our cars. We know if we don’t stop and change the oil every three to five thousand miles, our engine might blow. We rotate our tires and keep them balanced. And we take our cars in for periodic tune ups.

So why not take time to pull over and sync your itineraries to avoid a marital blow up? Decide now that you will keep up with this kind of maintenance along the way.

Don't let yourself get twenty or twenty-five years down the road with a successful career and retirement behind you and kids sent off to college—all of the things you've poured your life into gone—and then you realize that your spouse is a stranger.

Ask yourself now, *What extra thing in my schedule could be set aside to improve our time for relational development?* Invest the time now in syncing your itineraries so you can enjoy the journey *together*.

BECOMING A WORLD-CLASS TRAVELER

Growth

Text

2 PETER 3:18

18 *But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and for ever. Amen.*

Overview

All too often, couples who have been married fifteen, twenty-five, thirty years are no closer to each other than they were as newlyweds. Rather than developing as a couple, they have stagnated. Instead of getting further along, they've fallen into ruts of hurtful relational habits. Rather than growing closer to one another, they become distant or even hostile.

How does this happen? Actually, a better question is, *How can we keep this from happening to us?* In this study, we look at three ways to intentionally pursue growth as a couple.

Lesson Goals

At the conclusion of this lesson, students should:

1. Recognize that growth in their marriage is not automatic but requires intention and work.
2. Understand the need for God's grace in every area of growth.

3. Purpose to grow as a couple rather than allowing their relationship to drift.

Teaching Outline

1. Grow Together in Christ
 - A. With Humility
 - B. Through Habits
2. Learn from Your Mistakes
3. Ask for Help
 - A. From the Lord
 - B. Through Godly Counsel

LESSON ELEVEN

BECOMING A WORLD-CLASS TRAVELER

Growth

Text

2 PETER 3:18

Introduction

Travel is full of the unexpected. But the longer you travel, the better you adapt to issues as they arrive. You become more experienced and you grow as a traveler.

Unfortunately, the same is not always true in marriage. All too often, couples who have been married fifteen, twenty-five, thirty years are at a place in their marriage where, rather than developing as a couple, they have stagnated. Instead of getting further along, they've fallen into ruts of hurtful relational habits. Rather than growing closer to one another, they become distant or even hostile.

How does this happen?

Actually, a better question is, *How can we keep this from happening to us?* After all, growth isn't automatic. It isn't merely by being married for a decade that you become a better spouse; it is by intentionally pursuing growth.

Illustration

A photo of a couple having a date night at Wendy's went viral. With nearly thirty thousand shares and five thousand comments on Facebook, this picture clearly captured people's attention.

You might guess that for this kind of reaction the picture was of a famous couple—perhaps Hollywood celebrities on their fourth marriage. Or maybe it was a couple discovering bad customer service or improper food handling at Wendy's. After all, fame and negativity are two things that spread well on social media.

The picture is better than either of those. It is of an elderly man feeding his wife. They are sitting next to each other, but on either side of the corner of the table. She has her eyes closed; he has his hand by her mouth as if he has just put in a fry. A tray with an empty fries box, a drink, and sauce is in front of them.

Another customer took the picture and posted it on Facebook. She described noticing them together and wishing she could experience a love that strong. She wrote,

“The gentleman got up from his seat to throw his food away and I couldn't resist asking how long he and his wife had been married. He looked at me and asked me to guess his age but not to guess too low. After a few guesses he told me he was ninety-six and his wife is ninety-three who is suffering from Alzheimer's. This is their date night. He also

told me that if they make it till June, they will be celebrating seventy-five years of marriage!”¹

Getting all the way to the end of the line with the person you started out with is one of the most glorious things on the face of this earth. Could a couple be more blessed than to have that happen? To share a deep love and bond that only grows as we age is a beautiful thing.

Seventy-five years and still having date nights!

How does a couple keep their love strong over the challenges of time and disease and need and stress and the difficulties of life?

As we have already seen, God designed for marriage to be more than an “okay relationship” where each person has their own agenda and appreciates the other on an as-needed basis. Marriage is to be the weaving together of two lives.

GENESIS 2:24

24 Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.

This kind of weaving takes both time and effort. Over the years, provided you continue investing effort, you build a repository of shared experiences that draws you closer to one another. As you intentionally lean in to each other through every phase of life and share together in the decisions, plans, events, and memories, you grow closer. And as you, through this process, give attention and intention to your relationship, you become a better spouse as well.

In this chapter, let’s look at three specific ways you can pursue this kind of growth.

1. Fox News, “Photo of elderly man feeding wife on date night goes viral” (Foxnews.com, March 3, 2017), <http://www.foxnews.com/health/2017/03/03/photo-elderly-man-feeding-wife-on-date-night-goes-viral.html>.

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1. **Grow Together** in Christ

Only growth in grace can give you the desire and ability to unselfishly invest in your marriage.

2 PETER 3:18

18 But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and for ever. Amen.

So determine that you will be a couple who grows in grace *together*.

1 PETER 3:7

7 Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered.

Notice that phrase “as heirs together of the grace of life.” When you are heir to something, it isn’t yours unless you avail yourself of it.

Illustration

If I found out tomorrow that I had a long-lost relative who had left me with a multi-million-dollar fortune, that money would only influence my life as I used or invested it. An inheritance that simply *exists* doesn’t help anyone. The same is true of growing in God’s grace.

Through salvation, we have access to the very throne of grace, but even there, God encourages us to ask for grace.

HEBREWS 4:16

16 *Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.*

How do we avail ourselves of the grace of God?

A. With Humility

First, we know that receiving grace requires humility.

JAMES 4:6

6 *But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.*

We don't *demand* God's grace, we *receive* it.

One way that humility is expressed is as we submit ourselves to God in obedience to Him.

JAMES 4:7

7 *Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.*

But another way humility is expressed is when we reach for God's grace through the means He has provided to give us grace.

B. Through Habits

The same passage that tells us God gives grace to the humble tells us that if we draw near to God, He will draw near to us.

JAMES 4:8

8 *Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you...*

Part of the way we draw near to God is through spiritual habits such as prayer, reading and hearing God's Word, biblical preaching, serving others, and other spiritual disciplines that God's Word calls us to practice.

As you pray together, have family devotions, attend church, tithe and give, dedicate your children to the Lord, serve in your church, hold to God's promises, rejoice in His answers to prayer...as you do these things together, over time your hearts intertwine with one another in shared grace.

The trend in our culture, however, is to practice these things *less*. There are people who will tell you to put your marriage before your relationship with Christ and that to pursue growth in grace through spiritual disciplines is legalistic. They'll tell you that if you need Sunday morning for a date time, it's more productive for your marriage to skip church. If you are experiencing financial strain, you should stop tithing. If serving makes you tired, you should stop. In a nutshell, they'll tell you that your greatest problem is that your life is too full and that to simplify you should cut back on everything that doesn't bear immediate results.

There are many aspects of this thinking that are unbiblical. One of them is that God calls us to put our relationship with Him before any other relationship or goal of life.

MATTHEW 22:37

37 Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.

Also, Jesus taught us that discipleship that is worth something costs something.

MATTHEW 10:37

37 He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

But specifically in relation to what we are looking at in this lesson, the idea that you should be less active in pursuing Christian growth is simply shortsighted. Yes, perhaps if you do not tithe on a particular week, it will ease your budget. Perhaps if you sleep in on a Sunday morning, you'll feel more rested that day. But that is a shortsighted way of looking at life and it dismisses the impact of growth over time. It is these very means of growth in grace that actually strengthen your marriage and draw you closer to one another.

You don't want *less* growth; you want *more*. Rather than pulling back from the spiritual activities that help you grow as a couple and as a family, work to increasingly make them part of the daily and weekly routines of your life.

2. Learn from Your Mistakes

If there is one way to grow in any area of life, it is learning from your mistakes. This is good news because most of us have plenty of raw material from which to draw, especially when it comes to marriage.

Learning from your mistakes doesn't necessarily mean you'll never make the same mistake twice (I wish!), but it does mean that you will draw wisdom from them and grow.

PROVERBS 15:31

31 *The ear that heareth the reproof of life abideth among the wise.*

When you do something that doesn't work out, analyze why, and make adjustments going forward.

Our tendency, however, is to blame someone else for our mistakes. This tendency goes all the way back to the first marriage!

GENESIS 3:11–13

11 *And he said, Who told thee that thou wast naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldest not eat?*

12 *And the man said, The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat.*

13 *And the LORD God said unto the woman, What is this that thou hast done? And the woman said, The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat.*

TEACHING TIP

Share an illustration of a time when you wanted to blame your spouse, but the fault was really your own.

Illustration

A married couple had a quarrel and ended up giving each other the silent treatment. Neither spouse was willing to break the silence and acknowledge he or she may be in the wrong or even to overlook the other's fault, so the mute argument continued.

Two days in, the man realized he needed his wife's help. In order to catch a flight to Chicago for a business meeting, he had to get up at 5 AM.

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Not wanting to be the first to break the silence, he wrote on a piece of paper, “Please wake me at 5:00 AM.”

The next morning the man woke up only to discover his wife was already out of bed, it was 9:00 AM, and his flight had long since departed. He was about to find his wife and demand an answer for her failings when he noticed a piece of paper by the bed. He read, “It’s 5:00 AM. Wake up.”

If you blame each other for your mistakes rather than learning from them, the mistakes cost you double—the original discomfort and then whatever it costs to keep having the issue circle until you finally learn.

Once again, learning from a mistake doesn’t mean you’ll never repeat it. (Sometimes what you are learning is that you have a habit that is hard to break!) But it does mean that you take responsibility, take the lesson to heart, and invest yourself in overcoming whatever that area may be.

3. Ask for Help

We have a tendency to think of ourselves as stronger than we really are. But the reality is that we come to times in our lives—and in our relationships—when we need help to grow.

Where we look for that help can shape the future of our lives and greatly impact our marriage.

Where should we look for help?

A. From the Lord

The single unfailing source of help for every child of God is God Himself. People will fail us—even our

spouse will fail us. But God will never fail us, and He invites us to call out to Him for help.

JEREMIAH 33:3

3 *Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and shew thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not.*

When we come to an obstacle of growth, a point that we just can't seem to navigate through, God invites us to ask Him for the resource we need—wisdom!

JAMES 1:5

5 *If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.*

God gives wisdom to us in answer to prayer, but often, He also uses other Christians to help us.

B. Through Godly Counsel

There are times when you as a couple may benefit from reaching out for help to grow through a particular problem or through a difficult or confusing season.

Sometimes couples think of marriage counseling as a last resort and that, even by going, they are saying that their marriage is on the rocks.

The danger in this thinking is two-fold: First, if you wait too long to get marriage counseling, your marriage may be on the rocks when you could have avoided real danger. And second, you miss the ways that God specifically wants to give you wisdom.

The book of Proverbs teaches us that one of the ways we get wisdom in life is by seeking counsel.

PROVERBS 11:14

14 *Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counsellors there is safety.*

PROVERBS 12:15

15 *The way of a fool is right in his own eyes: but he that hearkeneth unto counsel is wise.*

PROVERBS 15:22

22 *Without counsel purposes are disappointed: but in the multitude of counsellors they are established.*

PROVERBS 19:20

20 *Hear counsel, and receive instruction, that thou mayest be wise in thy latter end.*

PROVERBS 20:5

5 *Counsel in the heart of man is like deep water; but a man of understanding will draw it out.*

Seeking counsel doesn't need to be a last resort. It can be simply one of several tools to provide maintenance along the way.

There are a few important things to understand, however, before you seek counsel.

First, talking about your spouse to others is not the same as getting counsel. If you tell your parents, coworkers, or friends (even Christian friends by way of a “prayer request”) about something you perceive to be a weakness in your spouse's life, your spouse will feel betrayed, and you will actually make the situation worse. If you are looking for help solely with your responses and not with trying to change your spouse, go to someone who has at least two decades more experience in marriage than you, and

share nothing that you wouldn't share if your spouse was present.

Second, you need counsel that comes from a biblical perspective. If you ask a secular counselor for help, he or she may be able to give some common sense advice, but they will not have the insight that comes through a thorough understanding of biblical truth. And worse, their advice is likely to be humanistic, focusing on making yourself happy, even at the expense of your marriage. The kind of advice that you really want is gospelistic—focusing on God's grace, sacrificial love, and the covenant of marriage.

Finally, the most helpful counsel is not going to come from your peers. Going to couples who are in a similar life stage as you for help can, in fact, be detrimental. In most cases, they simply do not have the perspective of time and experience to help you. When you go to your peers, you more or less put them in a position to basically take sides (is he right or is she right?) rather than to help you discern the heart of the matter and which biblical principles to apply. When you sense you may need help, I would challenge you to go to a spiritual leader (such as your pastor) or a couple who is more mature in the Lord and has been married a couple decades or more longer than you.

Illustration

If you travel to Greensburg, Kansas, you can pay a visit to what is billed as the “World's Largest Hand-Dug Well.” Construction on the well began in the 1880s. As the railroads made their way across Kansas, a reliable source of water for the steam engines was essential. The work was done by teams of men using

hand tools—shovels, picks, half barrels, pulleys, and rope. As they made their way downward, they lined the well shaft with limestone rock. The finished well is more than one hundred feet deep and more than thirty feet in diameter. It took enormous effort to reach the water, but it produced lasting results.

The Bible likens wise counsel to water in a deep well (Proverbs 20:5). Good advice is not just lying around on the surface—it takes work to find. There are plenty of people who have no idea what they are talking about but will be more than happy to give you a “piece of their mind.” And sadly there will be plenty of people to give you advice that goes directly against the authority and commandments of Scripture. Anyone who wishes to be truly wise and reap the benefits of godly counsel is going to have to reject the simple approach and put forth effort—but the effort is worth it.

Here are four ways you will gain the most from counsel:

Go with a humble spirit. Even if you are not the spouse who desired a counseling appointment, go into it with a teachable, humble spirit. Don’t go with an attitude to prove you are right and your spouse is being overly-sensitive or misunderstanding. Ask the Lord to give the counselor wisdom and insight and be willing to share openly, honestly, and humbly.

1 PETER 5:5

5 Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.

Be prepared to take notes. *Hearing* and *receiving* carries the idea of really listening and with an intent to apply. If you go to someone for counsel and are hoping to learn, be prepared to record what you are given so you can review, think on, and evaluate how well you are implementing it later.

PROVERBS 19:20

20 *Hear counsel, and receive instruction, that thou mayest be wise in thy latter end.*

Follow through on assignments. Most counselors will give you an assignment, perhaps a project or reading, that relates to truths they shared with you and needs that were unsurfaced in your meeting. Take any assignment you are given seriously, and invest the time necessary to follow through on it.

To ask for counsel but not accept the responsibility to pursue growth is a waste of your time and the counselor's time. Change doesn't happen simply because you *hear* truth, but because you *respond* to truth.

JAMES 1:22

22 *But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.*

Set up accountability. When you see a need for growth or change in your life through counseling, set up checkpoints with the person or couple you have gone to for counsel to evaluate growth and ask further questions that have come up. Don't look at counseling as the *end* of your help, but as the *beginning* of it. (The continued availability for

ongoing accountability is another reason it is good to ask your pastor or a more spiritually mature couple in your church for counsel.)

When it comes to seeking help—God’s help and others’ help—for growth in your marriage, remember that your greatest need is to grow in grace. And remember that humility is a prerequisite for God’s grace. Don’t be too proud to ask for help.

Conclusion

Like travel, sometimes life and marriage are unpredictable. Although experience does make you better able to adapt to the unexpected, it can’t change circumstances beyond your control.

This is where faith comes in. Faith isn’t refusing to invest yourself and just hoping it all comes together.

Faith is *pursuing* growth, making adjustments, and trusting that through it all God will weave your lives together for His glory.

HEBREWS 11:6

6 But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.

Faith is what assures you that your diligence in these efforts will be rewarded by God Himself.

So yes, you grow together in Christ, learn from your mistakes, and get help as needed...but ultimately, you recognize that you’re not fully in control. God is.

Continue diligently investing in the process of growth. But do it with a heart of faith in God’s promise to reward your efforts.

ADVENTURE AWAITS

Purpose

Text

REVELATION 4:11

11 *Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.*

1 CORINTHIANS 10:31

31 *Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.*

Overview

Sometimes in the minutia of daily routines or the frustrations of surprising detours or unforeseen obstacles, it's easy to lose the big-picture perspective of the purpose of our lives and marriages.

In this lesson, we step back to look at all we have covered in this series through the paradigm of how God desires to work in us and through us as married couples.

Lesson Goals

At the conclusion of this lesson, students should:

1. Recognize the overriding purpose of their life and marriage is to glorify God.
2. Understand the process of sanctification and its relation to their current struggles.
3. Determine to give their all to the Lord and to each other.

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Teaching Outline

1. Understand the Process
 - A. Justification
 - B. Glorification
 - C. Sanctification
2. Maintain Outward Focus
 - A. Bear fruit.
 - B. Serve others.
3. Give Your All

LESSON TWELVE

ADVENTURE AWAITS

Purpose

Text

REVELATION 4:11, 1 CORINTHIANS 10:31

Introduction

Illustration

A preacher was in Atlanta, several years ago, and noticed in the restaurants section of the Yellow Pages, an entry for a place called Church of God Grill. The peculiar name aroused his curiosity and he dialed the number. A man answered with a cheery, “Hello! Church of God Grill!”

The preacher asked how that restaurant had been given such an unusual name, and the man said: “Well, we had a little mission down here, and we started selling chicken dinners after church on Sunday to help pay the bills. Well, people liked the chicken, and we did such a good business, that eventually we cut back on the church service. After a

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while we just closed down the church altogether and kept on serving chicken dinners. We kept the name we started with, and that's Church of God Grill.²¹

It's all too easy to start out in marriage with a clear sense of direction and purpose, but then to lose clarity in that purpose over time.

When that happens, it doesn't mean that we aren't still passionate or invested, but that our passion and efforts become misdirected. Sometimes relationships turn inward and become self-focused when there is no outward sense of purpose.

Also, with no clarity of purpose, the obstacles we face become overwhelming. When a couple is first married, they know they have a journey ahead of them. And, at least in their minds, they know that there are sure to be a few bumps in the road along the way. But theoretical bumps in the road are different from experiencing real moments of conflict and seasons of frustration. It's like the difference between a mere pothole and having your engine blow. The first is uncomfortable; the second is disheartening.

It's not always disagreements that lead couples to these moments either. Sometimes it's just disappointment in general. Even though you told yourself that your expectations were realistic, somewhere in your heart you believed that marriage would be all bliss and romance. You forgot the realities of what it means to have two sinners in a close relationship that lasts for years.

It is during these times that we must pause to remember the big picture.

1. Charles Paul Conn, *Making It Happen: A Christian Looks at Money, Competition, and Success* (Revell, 1981), 95.

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In this lesson, we want to encourage you to step back and consider the ground we have covered in this series through a larger paradigm.

We told you at the beginning that we wanted you to have a greater goal for your marriage than that it would just be *okay*. We wanted to challenge you to cultivate an *awesome* marriage.

In this lesson, however, we want you to look even wider. We want you to refocus from “Are we having an awesome journey?” to “What are the purposes of God for our marriage? Is our relationship bringing honor to Him?”

Ultimately, the purpose of marriage, as the purpose of every aspect of our lives, is to bring glory to God.

REVELATION 4:11

11 *Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.*

And 1 Corinthians 10:31 brings it a little closer to home as it instructs us to bring glory to God in every activity of our lives.

1 CORINTHIANS 10:31

31 *Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.*

Marriage has an added component of bringing God glory in that it pictures Christ’s love for the church.

EPHESIANS 5:25–27

25 *Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it;*

26 *That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word,*

27 *That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.*

Thus, as Christians in the covenant relationship of marriage, we become representatives of the love Christ has for others. That is both a glorious and a sobering responsibility.

What does it look like in relation to the day-to-day aspects of marriage? How can we as Christian husbands and wives magnify Christ and, through our marriages, bring glory to Him?

1. **Understand the Process**

As mentioned a moment ago, a Christian marriage is a union of two sinners. When we trust Christ as our Saviour, we are born again and given a new nature.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:17

17 *Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.*

But our old habits and the temptations around us don't vanish. We still deal with the flesh, and that pulls us toward selfishness. God's plan for us is to conform us to the image of Christ—a process we call *sanctification*.

But cooperating with this process helps if you understand the big picture.

Sanctification lies between justification and glorification. Don't let all the "*ification*" words cause you to think this is complicated. It's very simple—and very important to understand.

A. Justification

Justification happens at salvation. It is when you are justified in the sight of God because the righteousness of Jesus is applied to your account.

ROMANS 5:1

1 *Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ:*

Justification can *only* come through faith in Jesus and not through our works.

EPHESIANS 2:8–9

8 *For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:*

9 *Not of works, lest any man should boast.*

TEACHING TIP

Once again, this is a natural place in the lesson to give a more thorough presentation of the gospel if you are not sure that everyone present has been saved.

B. Glorification

On the other end of our lives is *glorification*, which will take place when we receive our glorified bodies in Heaven.

1 CORINTHIANS 15:42–44

42 *So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption:*

43 *It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power:*

44 *It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body.*

This is an exciting moment to look forward to. In fact, Romans 8 says that all creation looks forward to being released from the curse of sin and made new. For us, this moment is referred to as “the redemption of our body” because we will receive a glorified body.

ROMANS 8:22–23

22 *For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.*

23 *And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body.*

C. Sanctification

Sanctification is the messy process that falls between justification and glorification. It is the full period of our lives between the time that we are saved and we are with the Lord in Heaven.



The purpose of sanctification is God conforming us to the image of Christ. Romans 8:28–29 describes this process.

ROMANS 8:28–29

28 *And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.*

29 *For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.*

So, although we have already been justified before God, we have not yet been glorified in Heaven. Bible students sometimes say that “we live between the *already* and the *not yet*.” This in-between place is the realm of sanctification.

When you keep the big picture in view, sanctification is an exciting process. To think that God wants to conform us into the image of Jesus is amazing. But in the day-to-day work of sanctification, it’s not always so exciting.

And marriage adds a dynamic to this process because marriage has a way of exposing our *unsanctified* areas—selfishness, insecurity, pride, and any other aspect of our lives not yet conformed to Christ—like no other realm of life.

Marriage also has a way of giving us opportunities to die to self and cooperate with God’s process of sanctification.

This is good news for a Christian who wants to be conformed to the image of Christ. Our problem is that we tend to forget the big picture.

When you forget that sanctification is in the middle of two awesome moments—justification and glorification—it’s easy to become discouraged. Remembering the big picture and realizing that this land between the already and the not yet is full of opportunities to glorify God as you become like Jesus helps to keep it all in perspective. It motivates you to cooperate with God’s purposes and to actively engage in what He is doing in your life.

Romans 12 tells us that one way we do this is by letting God's Word renew our minds.

ROMANS 12:2

2 And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.

Part of the adventure of sanctification for a Christian couple is remembering that the two of you are both on the same journey. So enjoy the journey, and give grace to one another as you come to difficult moments along the way.

2. Maintain Outward Focus

If you're not careful, it is easy to develop tunnel vision regarding your marriage. It is easy when you hit a season of difficulty to want it fixed simply to make your life more comfortable and your marriage more exciting.

But the purpose of our lives is not comfort; it is to bring glory to God. And the purpose of marriage is not excitement; it is that we would be able to serve God better together than we could individually.

What does that look like in a Christian marriage?

A. Bear fruit

Conforming us to the image of Christ is not the only way that God is glorified in our marriages. As Jesus told His disciples, God is also glorified when we bear fruit.

JOHN 15:8

8 *Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples.*

Part of this fruit, no doubt, is the fruit of the Spirit that comes as we yield to the Holy Spirit.

GALATIANS 5:22–23

22 *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith,*
23 *Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.*

This kind of fruit that is so essential in every marriage fits into the process of sanctification that we just looked at.

But in the context of Jesus' conversation with His disciples, it would seem that His emphasis of fruit had to do with the fruit of souls trusting Christ.

JOHN 15:16

16 *Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you.*

Don't miss this truth, because it has the potential to expand your understanding of the purpose of your marriage exponentially.

The word *ordained* simply means “set apart for a purpose.” So God has chosen every Christian and set us apart for the purpose of bearing fruit. This happens as we share the truth of the gospel with others.

Obviously, not all Christians are pastors or teachers, and not every Christian couple is called to what we think of as vocational ministry. But *all* of us

are called to share the message of the gospel with those who don't know Christ.

In fact, Jesus even told His disciples that part of the purpose of the Holy Spirit was to give them the power to witness for Christ.

ACTS 1:8

8 But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.

Just before Jesus ascended to Heaven, He left His final command to the church of reaching the world with the gospel. Every Christian is to have part in obeying what we call the Great Commission.

MATTHEW 28:19–20

19 Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:

20 Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

B. Serve Others

In addition to sharing the gospel, we are to be an active part in our church family, serving others.

One of the reasons the local church is so important for a Christian marriage is that in addition to the preaching and teaching ministries of a church, the church is to equip Christians toward spiritual maturity and the work of witnessing and serving.

EPHESIANS 4:11–12

11 *And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers;*

12 *For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:*

Some people think of the church as an entity that is to serve *them*. But God designed the local church as a place where we are to serve one another.

The Bible compares the church to a body—each member being a vital part.

1 CORINTHIANS 12:12–20

12 *For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ.*

13 *For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.*

14 *For the body is not one member, but many.*

15 *If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body?*

16 *And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body?*

17 *If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling?*

18 *But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him.*

19 *And if they were all one member, where were the body?*

20 *But now are they many members, yet but one body.*

So don't see yourself and your marriage as an isolated entity, but as part of a larger body in which you are to have an active part.

Obviously, this would include being faithful in your church attendance—not just for your own sake and to honor the Lord, but also to encourage and strengthen others in your church family.

HEBREWS 10:25

25 Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.

Illustration

When it comes to travel, we are all susceptible to accidents along the way. But someone calculated that statistically, being in church is the safest place to be!

Avoid riding in automobiles because they are responsible for 20% of all fatal accidents.

Do not stay home because 17% of all accidents occur in the home.

Avoid walking on streets or sidewalks because 14% of all accidents occur to pedestrians.

Avoid traveling by air, rail, or water because 16% of all accidents involve these forms of transportation.

Of the remaining 33% of deaths, 32% occur in hospitals. Above all, avoid hospitals.

You will be pleased to learn that only .001% of all deaths occur in worship services in church, and these are usually related to previous physical disorders. Therefore, logic tells us that the safest place for you to be at any given point in time is at church!

But in addition to church attendance, determine to be actively engaged in serving through

your church and regularly sharing the gospel with others as a couple.

TEACHING TIP

Witnessing and serving can provide great opportunities for spending time together as a couple. Perhaps share with your class the impact it has had on your marriage to serve the Lord together—whether that be inviting people to church, making visits, hosting church friends in your home, discipling other couples, or similar activities. They can be moments of spiritual and relational synergy.

Ask the Lord to help you catch a vision for your marriage that is larger than just the two of you and just your family. Ask Him to allow you to use the gift of marriage to synergistically make a difference for Him in the lives of others.

3. Give Your All

Illustration

It was a turbulent time in Norway at the turn of the twentieth century. Norway had been in union with Sweden and Denmark for over five hundred years. And although Norway has had a king since 872, for the previous five centuries, the king had been shared with other nations and had not resided in Norway.

As a desire for independence from Denmark and Sweden grew, the Norwegian parliament reached out to a prospective king—Prince Carl of Denmark. Carl

agreed to come, but only under the condition that the population wanted a monarchical government and for him to lead it. When word of this reached the Norwegian people, they wanted him to come more than ever. The referendum confirmed this with an overwhelming 79 percent support. Prince Carl further endeared himself to Norway when he changed his name to Haakon, a name used by Norwegian kings five hundred years prior.

King Haakon arrived in November of 1905 with his wife and his young son Prince Olav. He would be the first king of Norway of the past several centuries to live in Norway. Upon his coronation, he assumed the motto, “*Alt for Norge,*” or “We give our all for Norway.”

When World War II came, Nazi forces invaded Norway, and the royal family realized they had two choices—exile or execution. They chose exile, but even from Great Britain where King Haakon and Prince Olav stayed, they used every means at their disposal to unite Norway in resistance toward the Nazi invasion and occupation. Haakon is remembered still for his significant role during this pivotal time in history. He lived to see the end of the war and Norway restored before he died in 1957, leaving the throne to his son Olav.

If King Haakon was revered, King Olav V was loved. In the 1930s, he served as a naval cadet and subsequently moved up the ranks of the military. During the war, he served in significant advisory capacities for allied forces, and once back in Norway, he led the Norwegian disarmament of the German occupying forces. So by the time he assumed the throne, Olav was already known and loved by his country.

Often referred to as a “people’s king,” Olav was extremely popular. He liked to drive his own cars, and

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would drive in the public lanes. Once he took the suburban railway on his way to go skiing. When the press asked how he dared go out in public without bodyguards, he answered, “I have four million bodyguards.” (The population of Norway was four million at that time.)

Olav served as king for thirty-three years. When he died during the night in 1991, the people of Norway began pouring into the Palace Square. With hundreds of thousands of candles, the square was transformed into a sea of candles, a bright tribute to a man who had given his all for Norway.

Olav, like his father had and like his son would, had taken the motto, “*Alt for Norge.*”

It is easy to wonder what would have happened were it not for the personal dedication of these kings. What if King Haakon had assumed the throne only for self advancement? What if he had not given his *alt for Norge*? What if Prince Olav had not so capably helped his father hold the country from exile during World War II? What if he also, in the years after the war, had not given his *alt for Norge*?

It is impossible to write history in reverse, but it is quite possible that without the contributions of these two men, Norway itself wouldn't be an independent country today.

Sometimes the needs in front of us seem overwhelming. How can we, as just two people, make a difference for the Lord through our marriage, especially in the midst of the evil in our world? We look around us and feel discouraged. We look at ourselves and feel insignificant and insufficient. You may even look at your

marriage itself and wonder how your singular efforts could make a difference against a relationship that seems to be falling apart.

You and I never know how God might use us or how He might miraculously work through us. And we never will know until we make ourselves fully available to Him.

ROMANS 12:1

1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.

What do you think might happen in your marriage if you took the motto “We give our all for the other”? What do you think might happen through your marriage if you took the motto “Together, we give our all for God”?

God never asks us to do more than we can do, but He does ask us to give our all for Him. And He promises that He will reward us for it.

COLOSSIANS 3:23–24

23 And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men;

24 Knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ.

Don’t halfheartedly invest in your marriage and expect full returns. Don’t halfheartedly invest together in the work of the Lord and expect miracles. Give your all.

When you do, you will find that God blesses our wholehearted efforts in ways we couldn’t have even dreamed of, and He gets the glory.

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EPHESIANS 3:20–21

20 *Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us,*

21 *Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.*

Conclusion

So...are we there yet?

As we've seen in this study, marriage is an incredible journey that is filled with many "Are we there yet?" moments. It's an awesome journey, but it includes unplanned, and often undesired, "adventures" along the way.

We live between the already and the not yet. And although the process of sanctification in between can be challenging and tiring and downright frustrating, it is full of opportunity to bring glory to God as we live for a purpose larger than ourselves.

So no, we're not there yet.

But yes, the journey we are on is awesome.

Don't give up in those moments when you don't think you can travel the journey even one more mile. There is a bigger picture than the setback you may be facing now. The road ahead holds new challenges, yes, but the challenges are en route to victories.

So, settle in, keep your seatbelts fastened, and decide this journey is going to make it all the way to the destination together.



Striving Together
P u b l i c a t i o n s

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