



# Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage (Part II of V)

## “Communication”

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# “Communication”

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## What Can I Hope to Get From this Seminar?

Whether you are here due to personal need, the needs of others, or for a general interest in the topic, we hope this seminar will benefit you. If we do our job well, parts of this seminar will speak to you personally. There will also be parts that speak to aspects of this subject that are different from your own experience. What follows are **six unavoidable facts** that should help you profit from all of the material you hear (bold faced text taken from Paul Tripp and Tim Lane *How People Change*):

**1. Someone in your life had a problem this week.** That person may be you. Even if you are here for yourself, chances are you know or will know others who struggle in this area. Because we live in a fallen world and have a sin nature, we can be certain that we will battle with sin and suffering in our lives. Because we love people, we can be certain we will be called on to love and assist others in their battle with sin and suffering.

**2. We have everything we need in the Gospel to help that person (2 Peter 1:3).** God has given us Himself, the Gospel, the Bible, and the church and promised they are effective for all things that pertain to life and godliness. Our task as Christians is to grow in our understanding of and ability to skillfully apply these resources to our struggles. These resources are the essence and source of “good advice,” and we hope to play a role in your efforts to apply and disseminate this “good advice.” We do not aim to present new material, but new ways of applying the timeless, eternal truths of the Gospel found in Scripture.

**3. That person will seek help from friends, family members, or pastors before seeking professionals.** Counseling (broadly defined as seeking to offer hope and direction through relationship) happens all the time. We talk with friends over the phone, crying children in their rooms, spouses in the kitchen, fellow church members between services, and have endless conversations with ourselves. We listen to struggles, seek to understand, offer perspective, give advice, and follow up later. This is what the New Testament calls “one-anothering” and something we are all called to do.

**4. That person either got no help, bad help, or biblical, gospel-centered help.** Not all counseling is good counseling. Not all advice that we receive from a Christian (even a Christian counselor) is Christian advice. Too often we are advised to look within for the answers to our problems or told that we are good enough, strong enough, or smart enough in ourselves to overcome. Hopefully you will see today how the Bible calls us to something (rather Someone) better, bigger, and more effective than these messages.

**5. If they did not get meaningful help, they will go elsewhere.** When we do not receive good advice (pointing us to enduring life transformation), we keep looking. We need answers to our struggles. This means that as people find unfulfilling answers they will eventually (by God’s grace) come to a Christian for advice. When they eventually come to you, we hope you will be more prepared because of our time together today.

**6. Whatever help they received, they will use to help others!** We become evangelists for the things that make life better (this is why the Gospel is simply called “Good News”). We quite naturally share the things that we find to be effective. Our prayer for you today is that you will find the material presented effective for your struggles and that you will be so comforted and encouraged by it that it will enable you to be a more passionate and effective ambassador of the Gospel in the midst of “normal” daily conversations.

## Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage Mentoring Series

This seminar is one piece of a five part series of seminars designed to facilitate mentoring relationships for married or engaged couples (one-on-one or in a group setting). Our goal in these seminars is to cover the key subjects that often hinder, but could greatly enhance, a couple's ability to experience all that God intended marriage to be.

We believe that change that lasts happens in relationship. Private change tends to be short-lived change. Living things exposed to light grow. Living things kept in the dark wither. This is why we designed this series to encourage you to give your marriage the light of Christian community by studying these materials with others.

These materials are built upon a central premise – God gave us marriage so that we would know the gospel more clearly and more personally. It is the gospel that gives us joy. Marriage is meant to be a living picture of the gospel-relationship between God and His bride, the church. For this reason, we have two goals for you as you go through this study:

1. That you would get to know and enjoy your spouse in exciting, new, and profoundly deeper ways, so that...
2. ... you would get to know and enjoy God in exciting, new, and profoundly deeper ways.

This series of seminars is arranged around five topics that represent the most common challenges that face a marriage. While the challenges of each area are acknowledged, the tone of these seminars is optimistic. We believe that those things that cause the greatest pain when done wrongly bring the fullest joy when done according to God's design.

These seminars are both sequential and interdependent. Each seminar is meant to build upon the ones before it and lead into the ones after it. If you are going through these materials for general marital enrichment or pre-marital counseling, it is best to complete them in order. However, if you are looking for guidance in a particular area of need, it is possible to start with the subject of greatest urgency in your marriage.

**1. Foundations:** Why is marriage hard? Why do so many marriages that begin in sincere love end in divorce? What are the essential things a couple should focus on to have a marriage that flourishes? What is a covenant and why is marriage a covenant? Why do we have a marriage ceremony? What are the roles for a Christian husband and wife? What if I don't "fit" or like the masculine-feminine stereotypes or don't have the personality to match a "traditional" husband/wife?

**2. Communication:** What does a couple talk about over a life time? What if I'm not good with words or listening? How do we maintain friendship when we're having to keep up with so many logistics? How do we disagree and protect our marriage without losing what's important to each of us individually? Why do words matter so much and why can they hurt so badly? How do we make things right after they go wrong and not let negative momentum build?

**3. Finances:** Why are money problems the number one cause of divorce? How do we maintain reasonable expectations for money in a debt-sick culture? How do two people manage their money together when it is hard enough to manage as a single person? Who should administrate the finances and how involved should the other person be? How do we learn self-control and contentment as a couple? How can "budget" become an exciting or, at least, pleasant word?

**4. Decision Making:** How do we manage our time? How do we navigate situations where we each want good things that cannot both happen? How do we determine God's will for our personal and marital lives? How do we functionally express the biblical roles of headship and submission? How do we ensure that life's tough decisions draw us closer to God and each other instead of creating distance? How do we respond when bad things happen to a good marriage or our plans?

**5. Intimacy:** How do you maintain the "spark" of marriage over a lifetime? How do you continue learning each other without feeling like you know all there is to know? How do we protect our expectations from highly romanticized cultural ideals? How many ways are there to express love and why are they all necessary? How do we enjoy a balance of both intimacy and intercourse? How do we grow as lovers throughout our marriage?

## Evaluation:

### Listening

**Note:** Each major section of the Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage series will have a brief evaluation tool to help you assess your marital strengths and weaknesses. Complete the evaluation before reading the material, then review the assessment again after completing each section to learn the accuracy of your initial self-assessment.

**Instructions:** Read the following descriptive statements. Consider how well they describe your experience or perspective on your marriage. If you are engaged, consider how well they describe your courtship experience or your beliefs about what you think your coming marriage should be. Mark the answer that best fits how you respond:

(CD) Completely Disagree, (SD) Somewhat Disagree, (NS) Not Sure, (SA) Somewhat Agree, or (CA) Completely Agree

1. I enjoying listening to my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
2. My spouse enjoys listening to me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
3. My spouse can tell that I am interested in what he/she says.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
4. I can tell that my spouse is interested in what I say.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
5. I value the things my spouse tells me enough to remember them.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
6. My spouse values the things I share with him/her enough to remember them.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
7. My spouse trusts that I appropriately value his/her thoughts and opinions.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
8. I believe my thoughts and opinions are appropriately valued by my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
9. My spouse usually feels understood when he/she talks to me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
10. I usually feel understood when I talk to my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
11. I lovingly listen when my spouse wants to talk even if I'm tired.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
12. My spouse lovingly listens when I want to talk even if he/she is tired.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
13. I can allow my spouse time to process without getting insecure or upset.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
14. My spouse allows me time to process without getting insecure or upset.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
15. My spouse feels safe to express his/her thoughts and opinions with me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
16. I feel safe to express my thoughts and opinions with my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
17. I frequently ask questions to draw out more of what my spouse is thinking.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
18. My spouse frequently asks questions to draw out more of what I'm thinking.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
19. I resist the temptation to read into what my spouse means in conversation.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
20. My spouse resists temptation to read into what I mean in conversation.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
21. I resist the urge to interrupt my spouse when he/she is talking.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
22. My spouse resists the urge to interrupt me while I'm talking.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
23. I resist the urge to be impatient if my spouse's words are not interesting to me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
24. My spouse resists the urge to be impatient with me if my words are not interesting.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
25. I begin my turn in conversation by building upon or referencing what my spouse said.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
26. My spouse begins his/her turn in conversation by building upon or referencing what I said.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
27. I give non-verbal gestures to indicate I'm listening and affirm my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
28. My spouse gives non-verbal gestures to indicate he/she is listening and affirm me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
29. I maintain good eye contact when talking to my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
30. My spouse maintains good eye contact when talking with me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
31. I am patient and wait till the end of a conversation to make a judgment.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
32. My spouse is patient and waits till the end of a conversation to make a judgment.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA

**Key to Survey Scoring:** For each set of questions tabulate your score using the following numerical values. The scoring is weighted with the “neutral” NS answer being a negative score, because if you have not defined or pursued important aspects of your marriage relationship it will negatively impact the marriage.

CD	–	Negative 3 points	SA	–	Positive 1 points
SD	–	Negative 2 points	CA	–	Positive 2 points
NS	–	Negative 1 point			

If your total score...

- ...**matches or exceeds the total number of questions**, then this area of marriage is an area of strength.
- ...**is less than the total number of questions**, then this area of marriage could use attention or refinement.
- ...**is a negative number**, then this area of marriage should be given immediate and concentrated attention.

➤ Questions 1-10: ( Total: \_\_\_\_\_ in 10 questions)

This set of questions examines the “**the atmosphere of listening**” necessary for a gospel-centered marriage. Listening is a skill that can be learned but not one that can be coerced. Listening is a form of honor and humility that reveals how much we value and appreciate the other person.

Recommended Resources: You won’t learn to listen from a book. Repent for not creating an atmosphere of listening (honor) in your marriage. Pray to God for the desire to listen well. Commit to your spouse to value his/her words.

➤ Questions 11-16: ( Total: \_\_\_\_\_ in 6 questions)

This set of questions examines the “**the obstacles of listening**” that we must avoid in a gospel-centered marriage. Listening is a skill that is most necessary when it is most difficult. When listening is most necessary we are most prone to make excuses for not fairly representing the other person. We must realize the value of listening if we are going to persevere in listening when it is most needed.

Recommended Resources: *Strengthening Your Marriage* by Wayne Mack (Unit 4)

➤ Questions 17-32: ( Total: \_\_\_\_\_ in 16 questions)

This set of questions examines the “**the skills of listening**” aspect of healthy marital communication. Listening is not a personality trait (i.e., either you have it or you don’t), but an aptitude (i.e., can be developed if it is a weakness). The items you did not mark as “agree” need to be major points of intentional personal growth and accountability. Not listening is a form of dishonor.

Recommended Resources: *Preparing for Marriage* by Dennis Rainey (chapter 5)

Sometimes within a marriage the problem is not one specific area or issue but an overall imbalance in the effort, skill, thoughtfulness, and awareness being put into the marriage. Below is a list of questions that reveal your perspective on your effort and your spouse’s effort in the marriage. Use the same numerical scoring system as you used above. In this case, the closer your scores are to another, the more mutual (and typically healthy) the marriage.

\_\_\_\_\_ **My Score** – Using the same scoring system as above add together the score for odd numbered questions.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Spouse’s Score** – Using the same scoring system as above add together the score for even numbered questions.

## Chapter I

### What We Have Here Is a Failure to Communicate:

#### The Obvious and Not-So-Obvious Things That Disrupt Communication

**Plumb Lines:** These are the “sticky” statements that capture the core messages of this chapter.

- The vast majority of communication problems are listening problems, not expressing problems.
- If you don’t know what to say, ask more questions.
- Healthy communication is a disposition of grace and humility before it is a skill.
- What we hear often says as much about us as the person speaking.

**Memorize:** James 3:2-5 (ESV), “For we all stumble in many in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle his whole body. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. Look at the ships also: though they are so large and driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.” As you memorize this passage reflect upon these key points:

- “We all stumble” – James is not making an excuse for sin, but putting an end to denial and blame-shifting.
- “Perfect” – If our words reveal our hearts (Luke 6:45), then pure words would reveal a pure heart.
- “Whole body” – Words mediate life. Learning healthy communication will bless your entire marriage.
- “Bit... rudder” – Our words will determine the direction of our lives.
- “Small... great” – James is drawing our attention to how we tend to ignore the things of greatest significance.

#### Teaching Notes

“Authentic communication is much more than just talking. It is understanding and being understood (p. 148).” Dennis Rainey (editor) in *Preparing for Marriage*

“Words do not primarily express our culture or family upbringing or biochemistry, but our souls. When our words are unkind and ungrateful, no one else is to blame. Such words come from inside us (p. 137).” John Henderson in *Catching Foxes*

“If you minimize the heart struggle that both of you have carried into your marriage, here’s what will happen: you will tend to turn moments of ministry into moments of anger... This leads to the second thing that happens: the reason we turn moments of ministry into moments of anger is that we tend to personalize what is not personal (p. 24).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

“We are tempted to recast both Jesus and love in the image of our personal desires (p. 40)...I began to meditate on this paradox: Jesus loves people, and yet they’re disappointed in him (p. 42)... My duty is to love her, not to be perfect. In fact, sometimes loving her may well disappoint her... Sometimes we suffer in our marriages because we labor under false understandings of love built upon the foundations of our own desires and fears (p. 45).” Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*

“The attitude of earning love is disastrous in marriages and leads to anger and insecurity. Spouses who believe they’ve earned or deserve love angrily demand it or toil anxiously to avoid using it (p. 48)... The principle captured in the phrase ‘knowledge puffs up, but love builds up’ (1 Corinthians 8:1b) tells us that in a conflict, being right and doing right aren’t always the same thing (p. 158).” Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*

“In all healthy relationships the well-being of the other person is important to us even when we’re mad, tired, or busy.” Leslie Vernick in *The Emotionally Destructive Relationship*

### Embedded Study

Who doesn't want to improve their ability to communicate? The few people who don't believe they need to grow in this area have spouses who wish they would. Beyond the normal challenges of communication, the closeness and longevity of a marriage relationship introduces new challenges.

We'll begin our journey into understanding gospel-centered communication with a quick primer on the three basic parts of communication. Most of us have a truncated view of communication. We want to learn how to become more convincing at getting people to “buy in” to our points. We want a course on argumentation or advertising more than communication.

1. **Sender** – This is the person who “sends” a message (verbal or nonverbal). You and your spouse will alternate in this role (hopefully not talking over one another). We are “flawed senders” who must remain humble about whether we communicated as clearly as we think we did. We are also “senders with a history” who's past message sending efforts impact how our current message sending is received and interpreted.
2. **Message** – This is the “content” that the sender wants to be understood, accepted, or responded to. The meaning of any message resides in what the author intended. Recipients are not free to assign *meaning* to the words of others based upon their own experience. However, the *significance* of a message will likely be impacted by the recipients experience and the sender should seek to understand how this impacts his/her message.
3. **Recipient** – This is the person who “receives” the message. We must also realize that we are “flawed receivers” who hear things through the filter of our fears, preferences, dreams, and expectations. The more emotionally close a recipient is with a sender/message, the greater influence these filters will have upon how the message is heard (for better or worse).

The art of communication is (a) having two mature people who (b) patiently strive to understand the objective message being sent, and (c) appreciate the subjective experience that shapes how the message is received. Patience and humility are vital because communication has both objective and subjective components. Pride, impatience, and defining communication as either completely objective (truth) or subjective (personal experience) are the core traits that lead to unhealthy communication.

In *Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage: Communication*, our goal will be to learn how to pass messages back and forth in a way that is (a) free from the distorting influence of overgrown good desires – sin, (b) honors painful experiences that shape the significance of a message – suffering, and (c) nourishes the quality of the marriage relationship – unity. This will not be accomplished by mastering a system, but by surrendering to and emulating our Savior. Communication is a relationship, not a recipe; more a function of character than ability.

“With this admission we confess that our communication struggle is not primarily a struggle of technique, but a struggle of the heart. Our war of words is not with other people; it is a battle within (p. 30)... We are the common element in all of our communication problems (p. 40).” Paul David Tripp in *War of Words*

Ultimately, good communication is an act of faith in God's surpassing value to such a degree that we are willing to risk not having our preferences met in order to “love your neighbor as yourself (Matt. 22:39).” In the end, we find that we received both – God as our true treasure and what we want most from marriage (Luke 9:24). However, as we too often find, if we put what we want most first we get neither – we are disappointed with God and our marriage.

### Put Yourself Into Words

What are your concerns, fears, or challenges regarding communication? Just like you shouldn't make your spouse guess at what you're thinking or feeling, don't begin this seminar by letting these things be undefined. You may find that this seminar answers your concerns directly or you may find that it helps you restate these questions in a more effective way. Either way, defining what you want to address will help you assimilate what is taught. Resist the urge to merely wait for your question to be answered. Listen for how the gospel walks you into these questions.

Being able to balance wanting to learn specific information with patiently allowing someone (even God) to walk you to that information is a skill that is foundational to good communication. You can begin to refine that skill even in the way you prepare to hear/read this material.

What are your hopes for marital communication? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



What are your fears about how communication will go or has gone in your marriage? \_\_\_\_\_

What would you define as the greatest challenges you've faced in communicating well? \_\_\_\_\_

## 20 Things that Make Communication Hard

Many couples who sincerely try to improve their communication fail to get the results proportionate to their effort. The result is that they feel defeated or get angry. From this they either begin to blame “incompatibility” or their spouse. Periodically they feel convicted and commit to “try harder” at what didn’t work before.

The purpose of this chapter is to help you discover common misconceptions or oversights about communication that prevent sincere effort from producing marital unity. These are diagnostic assessments meant to prevent your current efforts (evidenced by going through this seminar) from being rendered ineffective by the same false assumptions or oversights that undermined previous efforts.

Each point is followed by “Couple Discussion Questions.” It is not expected that the two of you are going to have 60 conversations (20 points multiplied by 3 questions per point), but that you can have one or two conversations about each area that significantly impacts your marriage. The ability to have these conversations without defensiveness or attacking each other is a mark of the humility essential for effective implementation of anything else you’ll learn.

1. **We learn to communicate before we know we’re learning.** Usually a student knows when he or she is being taught. However, most of what is taught at home is highly informal. It is taught through what is considered “normal.” Tone of voice, level of honor in disagreement, what can or can’t be discussed, what things are “significant,” how or when questions are asked, whether conflict is engaged, and many other aspects of communication are firmly ingrained but rarely put into words (hence, they are harder to evaluate).

Too often we assume these learned habits are “just who we are,” “something we cannot change,” or “things our spouse needs to learn to accept” even if they are destructive. Even if these habits are not destructive, a primary implication of the command to “leave and cleave (Gen 2:24)” is for a husband and wife to decide the kind of communication culture that will best honor God and bless one another in their marriage.

In this area we must resist the common temptation to blame our past for our adult choices. We are people *with* instincts and habits not people *of* instincts and habits. We don’t fly south for the winter like geese. God granted us dominion over creation (Gen 1:28), including ourselves. This is expressed by a level of self-awareness that animals don’t have. We can think about and evaluate our own thoughts and values. We must not neglect this gift by failing to examine our lives (including our communication habits) and submitting them to God.

Couple Discussion Questions: What are the most pronounced communication habits / styles from your home of origin (good, bad, and quirky)? What are the habits / style of communication culture you want your children to learn before they know they’re learning? Are there unhealthy aspects of communication that you try to get your spouse to accept as “just who you are”?

2. **There are so many types of communication.** Ask a couple, “Do you communicate well?” and they can answer in at least a dozen different ways. Planning, updating, complimenting, resolving conflict, dreaming, listening, processing, verbal, nonverbal, emotional, factual, hypothetical... the list of types of communication could go on and on.

It is easy for a couple to answer the question “Do you communicate well?” the same way they answer the question “Are you a good athlete?” They can both respond “Yes” but be talking about things as different as football and swimming. They may both be right and still have a hard time “playing together.” It is important to remember that communication is not one skill but a collection of different skills that must be synchronized in a healthy marriage.

In the “Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage” series we will address communication in three areas. In this seminar, we will address the foundational skills of communication (listening, day-to-day sharing, and conflict resolution). In the seminar “Decision Making” we will address the functional skills of communication (planning, discerning God’s will as a couple, creating common expectations for time and household roles). In the seminar “Intimacy” we will address romantic communication.

Couple Discussion Questions: What types of communication are your strengths? What types of communication do you most need to improve? How has not recognizing the various types of communication resulted in conflict in your marriage or other relationships?

3. **Communication won't play by "rules."** Communication is living interaction between changing/growing people. Rules are a form of dissection. By definition when you dissect something, the patient is dead. Rules can be helpful reminders of healthy principles of communication, but they cannot give life to a relationship.

Often couples become mechanical as they pre-think each thing they say to ensure it's an "I statement" instead of a "you statement." Or they track their ratio of positive to negative statements in order to verify that they are a "good spouse." Other couples live thinking that there is some set of principles that will unlock communicative-bliss as soon as they're learned but live timidly until then.

The best that rules can do for communication is to serve as a reminder of what it means to honor one another. The worst thing rules can do for communication is to tempt us to believe that we can (or should) become skilled enough communicators that grace is not needed for a healthy marriage.

The Bible does not give a golden rule for communication beyond this, "Speak the truth in love with a greater concern for the benefit of the other person than your own personal preferences (paraphrased Eph. 4:15, 29)." If you lose sight of this you can communicate with technical excellence and still ruin your marriage (1 Cor. 13:1-3).

Couple Discussion Questions: Are you prone to relying on rules more than giving / receiving grace for healthy communication? When have you experienced communication becoming mechanical because the focus was on following rules of communication? When have you seen rules of communication help maintain honor when it would have been easily neglected?

4. **We likely think and process information differently.** Ask each other, "What is the most compelling factor in deciding what kind of car to buy, how to relax, or whether a conflict is worth having?" Chances are you have different answers. The way we think (personality and values) and how we process information (learning style and preferred pace of decision making) impacts what we find convincing.

These differences are captured in many different metaphors (love languages, learning styles, personality types, temperaments, etc...). Each picture of these differences has its strength and weakness. Each picture may or may not be the best way to describe the challenges facing a particular couple.

The main take away should be to emphasize humility and patience more than discovery and complexity. If we are humble enough to accept that our spouse does not have to think like we do and patient enough to be willing to learn (a) what is important to them and (b) how they make decisions, then we will discover what we need to know about our spouse.

Couple Discussion Questions: Are you more prone to pride, impatience, defensiveness, or insecurity when your spouse processes information differently from you? How can you remind yourself to see these as moments to continue to learn and honor your spouse? How can you honor these differences instead of allowing them to become points of avoidance, cutting humor, or conflict?

5. **"Understand what I meant..." (grace) "But that's not what you said..." (literalism).** This double standard is common. When we hear how someone is offended by a misinterpretation of what we said, we want them to understand what we meant. We don't like to consider that our words, tone, history, or body language may have betrayed what we meant to say. Yet when we are offended by what someone says we hold them responsible for what and how each word was spoken.

We experience our words differently from how we experience the words of others. If you ever listen to yourself on the answering machine, you should know you sound different than you think you do. When we speak we're aware of everything we're sorting out as we speak and feel many things connected with our words that we don't or can't verbalize. We know the small percentage of what we say/feel that we verbalize has a larger context. But too often we respond as if what someone else says is the totality of what we need to understand.

This happens in marriage as much, if not more, than in any other communication context. In marriage, we are more prone to assume we know our spouse and what he/she meant. In marriage, we assume our spouse knows us well enough and should give grace to know that is not what we meant. The gospel is most needed in marriage, because our unhealthy tendencies are most prone to express themselves where we most "let our guard down."

Couple Discussion Questions: What recent examples can you give of this pattern in your marriage? How accurately do you think you hear yourself when you are sharing about things that are important or upsetting to you? Are you willing to give your spouse the benefit of the doubt when what he/she meant doesn't match with what you heard?

6. **Good communication requires healthy humility.** Healthy communication is a disposition before it is a skill. Often when we grow frustrated with bad communication we shift from pride to unhealthy humility – self-pity, “Fine! If I don't know what I'm talking about, then I just won't say anything. You do all the talking. I'll just listen.”

Unhealthy humility is not actually humility. It is passive manipulation. It is a form of faux-repentance that takes the relationships hostage through silence and sulking. It punishes the other person for being willing to speak the truth in love. We silently demand the other person “fix it for us” and imply they think we are stupid by our false humility.

Healthy humility asks questions and listens to the answers instead of shutting down. Healthy humility trusts that our spouse is on our team and working for the good of the marriage. Healthy humility puts the good of the marriage ahead of our embarrassment. Ultimately, healthy humility wants to honor God and love the other person enough that it mutes our tendency to hide our weaknesses.

Couple Discussion Questions: Do you think of humility as the foundational character trait of healthy marriage communication? What forms does your pride or unhealthy humility take? How can the two of you promote healthy humility in your marriage?

7. **In marriage “pet peeves” begin to feel morally significant.** Your spouse has access to more things that are important to you than anyone (followed closely by your children). Those things that aren't important, but are important to you – the “pet peeves” and preference we all have and want “right” at home.

The problem isn't that we have preferences, but when we assign moral weight to our preferences and then begin to judge others accordingly. We know we are doing this when we get angry (or “frustrated” as we prefer to call it) and begin to look down upon those who do not meet our expectations. This frequently results in a husband-wife conversation degenerating into the tone of a parent-child conversation.

How a couple handles their pet peeves is one of the stronger predictors of how well they handle conflict resolution. Most couples who get into chronic conflict cannot remember what started most of their arguments. This reveals how easy it is for the significance of preferences to get out of balance in a marriage. We begin to hurt those we love the most over the things that matter the least.

Couple Discussion Questions: What are your pet peeves and strong preferences? How do your responses (anger or withdrawal) reveal that you're giving them moral significance? How can the two of you honor each other's preferences without allowing them to become the emotional thermostat of the home?

8. **The emotional momentum of life shapes our hearing and speaking.** We don't speak and listen in a vacuum. What we are thinking about just before someone speaks shapes how we hear what they say. On a bad day we hear and say the same message differently than on a good day. What we hear often says as much about us as the person speaking. What we say often reveals more about us than the content of our words.

The “emotional momentum” of a relationship is called trust. In the absence of trust the emotional momentum can cause a compliment to be received with suspicion. In the presence of trust a criticism can be given and received as a good thing (Prov. 27:6). When a couple understands this dynamic, they will understand importance of not allowing offenses to linger without prompt repentance and forgiveness (Eph. 4:26-27).

Marital communication is not merely a point in time interaction; it is more like the current of a river than a drop of rain. Only when a couple roots how they respond to their weaknesses (suffering) and failures (sin) in the gospel will they be able to keep the tides of their marriage moving towards hope and unity.

Couple Discussion Questions: When do you tend to lose sight of the importance of “emotional momentum” and become fixated on the issue of the moment? How have you seen the influence of trust skew the way messages were given and received? What are the things that you say and do which indicate your communication is being skewed by emotional momentum?

9. **The impersonal becomes personal.** Anyone who has coached a team or taught a class with their child in it knows this effect. If another student or player misbehaves it is less personal than when your child does the same thing. In that moment we're not responding to the action, but to what we have invested in the person. Matters of immaturity are responded to as disobedience or embarrassment – either way the actions become “about the parent.”

Within a marriage a large percentage of our rhetorical questions reveal that we are personalizing what is not personal. Because we naturally think of ourselves all the time (even when we’re not being selfish), we assume that other people are thinking of us when they make choices we don’t like and intentionally provoking, neglecting, or seeking to insult us.

Even when the actions of others are intentionally hurtful we must remember the offense is primarily against God and the solution is primarily in God; the offense is secondarily against us and the resolution secondarily with us. The offense is real, but when we insist on restoration with us before repentance to God we distract from the source of genuine change. We trade hope for relief and wind up with neither (likely blaming the other person for this result).

Couple Discussion Questions: Do the two of you repent to God for your sin before asking your spouse for forgiveness? Can you view moments when you offend one another as moments when God calls you to minister to one another? How can you talk about things that bother or offend you without framing them as personal attacks?

10. **It is hard to think and listen at the same time.** The more we think about what we want to say next the less we are listening to what the other person is trying to say now. It is the equivalent of trying to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth at the same time (be careful with that experiment). Information doesn’t simultaneously travel two ways in the same mind any more than air simultaneously travels in two directions in the same body.

There is a great deal of self-restraint involved in listening well. We must give primacy to what our spouse is saying over what we want to say next. If it is an argument, we must put ourselves at a “competitive disadvantage.” If it is an ordinary conversation, we are called to put the other’s interest ahead of our own (Phil. 2:4). It is this sense of unfairness that often causes us to resist being good listeners.

This is *the* choice that we often don’t realize we need to make in order to improve our communication. We think improving our communication means becoming clearer at what we want to say when most often it requires becoming clearer in understanding what the other person is saying. Until we see this choice and grasp its importance we are likely to “try harder” and see our results stagnate or decline.

Couple Discussion Questions: What percentage of the time when your spouse is talking are you thinking about what you want to say next? How is listening a primary means of honoring each other? When is focused listening most difficult for you (i.e., conflict, when the television is on, etc...)?

11. **Honoring people in a conflict feels like we’re saying they’re right.** When we point out the strongest elements of what someone is saying and assume they have good motives for what they’re doing/saying, it feels like we are agreeing with them. When we restate someone’s position in a way that they would agree with it, we surrender the opportunity to prematurely begin our counter-argument by negatively reframing what they said.

This type of dishonor is what is so offsetting about most political discussions. Suspicion pervades and grace evaporates as neither party is willing to highlight (or even acknowledge) the strengths or good intentions of the other side. The result is dialogue that produces tension, anger, and division.

The same thing happens in a marriage when a husband and wife are unwilling to fairly represent the other in a disagreement. One way to define honor in marriage is a willingness to lose an argument before misrepresenting or vilifying what your spouse is saying. When we make this commitment we will find that it is another example of the gospel paradigm if we are willing to lose our life, we will find it (Luke 9:23-24).

Couple Discussion Questions: Is it competitiveness or defensiveness that most frequently tempts you to misrepresent your spouse in a disagreement? What positions or actions of your spouse are you most prone to misrepresent? How does the type of honor mentioned above create an atmosphere of trust and peace in your marriage?

12. **Martial communication requires us to show interest in things that do not naturally excite us.** In marriage we cannot be like the boy with his father who likes fishing but not baiting his hook, removing the fish, or paddling the boat. We cannot choose to participate in the things that are of interest to us and neglect everything else. That is how children approach life; marriage is for adults.

Rather, we must be like the person who enjoys Facebook and is willing to relearn how to use it each time Zuckerberg decides to “improve” it. A better picture would be listening to a friend talk about a hobby until you wanted to try it yourself. You value the relationship and engage with the conversation to the point that their interest becomes contagious and you willingly “catch” their enthusiasm.

This is essential for a lifelong relationship. A big part of any relationship is the exchange of ideas, life events, thoughts, feelings, and dreams. When we only show interest in our preferred subjects, then we will run out of things to talk about and create a self-centered tone for our marriage. When we are willing to invest our attention in non-preferred subjects we create an atmosphere of other-mindedness and foster personal / marital growth.

Couple Discussion Questions: What have you learned to enjoy simply because your spouse enjoys it? How have these things blessed your marriage and grown you personally? What things are each of you interested in learning more about in the next year?

13. **Communicating forces us to face things about ourselves we don't like.** The closer a relationship and the more life it shares the more our weaknesses (skill and character) will be revealed. Communication is not just about saying and hearing things correctly. The most crucial moments of marital communication are how we respond when we say, hear, or do things wrong.

Unless we realize this, we will blame our spouse for being critical when, in actuality, it is one of the God-designed functions of marriage to serve as a mirror of our character. We can't blame our spouse for what is revealed about us in marriage any more than we can blame a mirror for bed head and morning face.

It is not mere poetic symmetry when our wedding vows said, “For better or worse.” Our spouse will see our “worst side.” We must have the humility to acknowledge these weaknesses (instead of denying or blame-shifting) each time they affect our spouse. When our spouse's weaknesses affect us we must have the patience and grace to realize these are prime moments of ministry in marriage. Together we must pursue Christ in our weakness.

Couple Discussion Questions: What are the weaknesses that you are least prone to acknowledge? Do you place greater emphasis upon your responding with humility or your spouse wording his/her concerns according to your preferences? What are the key phrases that should alert you that you are being defensive or blame-shifting in a moment when your weaknesses are revealed?

14. **Forgiveness is not fair.** Most of our emphasis upon the “rules of communication” is trying to prevent anything from being unfair. That is great until one spouse sins against the other. Sin always introduces injustice into a relationship. At that moment we know we “should” forgive, but often resist because forgiveness is not fair.

Even when we say that we forgive because we have been forgiven so much by Christ (Eph. 4:32), we are still only saying that we respond to grace by giving grace. We have not made grace fair. We have only reminded ourselves that we are ultimately on the benefitting side of “unfair.”

Based upon personal history and temperament this will be harder for some people to accept than others. But even if it is hard, it remains an essential concept for a healthy marriage between two imperfect people. Tripping over this truth is what causes many couples to fall into “score keeping.” It is only the gospel that frees us from this dangerous temptation.

“Only when we accept God's love as something we can't earn can we begin to give unearned love to our spouse. It's critical to know this grace as the foundation of love for your spouse... Your best efforts will be driven by a giving-to-get love that falls short of what God intends for marriage (p. 51).” Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*

Couple Discussion Questions: How much does it bother you when things are unfair? In a moment when you are not offended, what kind of resistance do you have to this truth? In moments when you are offended, what kinds of resistance do you have to this truth?

15. **It is often hard to determine what is significant in a disagreement.** The first thing that needs to be done in many conflicts (which is rarely done) is to determine how significant the subject is. If a husband and wife disagree on the relative importance of what is being discussed, they are unlikely to agree on the solution or when / how to implement it.

“One of the things that Christians are disagreed about is the importance of their disagreements. When two Christians of different denominations start arguing, it is usually not long before one asks where such-and-such a point ‘really matters’ and the other replies: ‘Matters? Why it's absolutely essential (p. x)...’ The Historic Christian Faith turns out to be something not only positive but pungent; divided from all non-Christian beliefs by a chasm to which the worst divisions inside Christendom are not really comparable at all (p. xi).” *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis

A husband and wife must maintain the perspective Lewis espouses for all Christians – that the things that unite them are greater than whatever they happen to disagree on at the moment. When this sense of proportion is lost, an argument will ensue that will look silly later, but its disproportionate damage will remain.

Couple Discussion Questions: In a disagreement are you prone to think an issue is more important or less important than your spouse does? What factors tend to most influence when you exaggerate or minimize an issue? What are the key indicators that you and your spouse disagree on the importance of a subject in an argument?

16. **We call self-control problems “communication” problems.** Rudeness, anger, abuse, disrespect, manipulation, and other absences of self-control are personal problems not relational problems. To conceive of them otherwise is a form of blame-shifting by the offender and/or codependency by the offended.

Scripture is clear – your (singular) words reveal your (singular) heart (Luke 6:45). There is no caveat which says if your preferences are not met or someone is rude, then you can blame another person for your sin. Once a couple begins to explain their sin (aggressive or passive) by the other’s actions, then the marriage is set up for rapid deterioration.

Trust in marriage is built on the expectation that both people will take responsibility for their sin, pursue God in repentance, pursue the other in confession, and pursue holiness through a return to healthy living. A major factor in the undermining of trust in modern marriages is the proliferation of blame-shifting explanations for a lack of emotional and volitional self-control by one or both marriage partners.

Couple Discussion Questions: In what areas of life are you most prone to lose self-control? When you lose self-control who or what are you prone to blame? How can you develop a character to acknowledge these lapses of self-control and, thereby, protect your marriage from the ensuing difficult exchanges?

17. **Communication takes time and energy.** Good communication is like many life disciplines (i.e., house cleaning, budgeting, etc...). If you neglect it to “save time” it will cost you far more time than you saved. If you invest the needed effort consistently, the return you reap will far exceed your initial investment.

Good communication also takes energy. Listening and sharing are not passive skills. They are not like watching television or surfing the internet. They require engagement. Unless we recognize this we will be prone to give our spouse our mental and emotional left-overs.

For these reasons it is very hard to have good marital communication within bad life management. We fail to realize it is our choices (i.e., overly full schedule, lack of sleep, etc...) we are trying to blame for our choices (i.e., rudeness, distance, difficulty paying attention, etc...). We then get angry/dissatisfied with our spouse when it won’t work.

Couple Discussion Questions: What blocks of time are regularly set aside for marital communication? How do the two of you ensure that you are consistently talking through the important areas of life? How can you ensure that you are saving mental and emotional energy for the times when you interact with your spouse?

18. **Busy lives mean we cram big topics into small spaces.** When we try to squeeze a 30 minute conversation in a 3 minute window, it is like covering the end of a water hose with your thumb – it spews everywhere. Overcrowded lives sets us up for bad communication.

The timing of important or difficult conversations matters. Overcrowded lives do more than create distance; they contribute to hard conversations becoming hostile ones. This is why it is essential for a husband and wife to ensure they have regular (preferably daily) blocks of time to talk. If important conversations have to be squeezed in tight window or wait 48-72 hours for an opening, then your marriage is not the functional priority it should be.

After a couple has children, location increases in importance because even within the home viable places and times decrease. Factors such as children’s bed time and not allowing work to creep into evening hours become important to protect against losing regular time together.

Couple Discussion Questions: What most frequently causes you to rush or expedite an important marital conversation? Do you trust that if an important conversation needed to be had your spouse would make it a priority? What aspects of family life do you have to manage most in order to maintain adequate time for marital communication?

19. **The more we know each other the less it can feel like we have to say.** Dating communication is easy because everything is new. Early marriage communication is plentiful because there is so much to decide. A few years into a marriage and the mindlessness provided by an established routine necessitates an additional level of intentionality to maintain regular, meaningful communication.

As you move from dating to marriage to a long life together, you will (or at least should) move from being a novice to an expert on your spouse. However, no one ever accidentally becomes an expert on anything. There is a pivotal phase in this process where the “generally informed” person becomes dissatisfied with casual knowing and wants to know all there is to know about their area passion.

Most marriages start with this level of interest (that is one of the key marks of being in love; Phil 1:9), but we neglect the discipline of “continuing education” that is required of any expert. This is the discipline of staying up-to-date on the latest developments in your area of passion (i.e., your spouse) and anticipating the upcoming changes.

Couple Discussion Questions: In what areas of life are you well-informed and keep up with the latest developments? How do you motivate and discipline yourself for this continued interest and learning? How can these habits and patterns be used to facilitate an ever-deepening knowledge and appreciation for your spouse?

20. **Marriage is a lifelong conversation building on itself.** Communication is not a task we finish. Referring to marriage as a “lifelong conversation” might give the impression that marriage is “all talk.” But that would miss the point. Everything we do (words, silence, action, and non-action) communicates. Marriage is defined by the messages we are sending back and forth.

With this in mind, we realize that communication is not merely something we do, but the reality in which we live. Communicating is more like aging than putting on makeup or exercising. It is always going on but sometimes we’re more aware of it than others. It is building on itself either gracefully in a way that bestows honor or in chronic deterioration. There are no short cuts to aging well or satisfying marital communication.

That is why this seminar is not primarily designed to teach you techniques (things that you sometimes “do”), but a lifestyle. Techniques usually create seasons of a good marriage, especially during those seasons when we are keenly aware of the consequences of being bad or neglectful. But lifestyle changes are more lasting.

Rooting these lifestyle changes in the gospel requires a keen awareness of both the adversary (Satan) who would draw upon your flesh (sin) to destroy your marriage and the Advocate (Jesus Christ) who gave you the power (the gospel) to overcome and the pattern (Scripture) to follow in order to bless your marriage.

Couple Discussion Questions: Do you view communication more as an activity or a lifestyle? How can the rhythms and patterns of your marital communication remind you of the core truths of the gospel? Do you guard your words as if they were Satan’s primary tool to destroy your marriage and God’s primary tool to bless your marriage?

Which points stood out to you most from this list of 20 challenges? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

What have you learned about yourself and your marriage in this chapter? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

### Conclusion

Take a deep breath. It might be easy to be overwhelmed at this point. Rest in the fact that this seminar will not be giving you dozens of skills to learn and master. It will merely ask you and your spouse to adhere to a few gospel principles.

1. Enter your spouse’s world like Jesus entered our world by fully engaging when you have the opportunity to listen.
2. Show an interest in your spouse that is reflective of God’s love and interest for your spouse.
3. Model Christ’s example of personal sacrifice as the way to freedom and joy during times of difference.

Skills will be added to these core principles, but don’t allow those skills to distract you from the main thing – be Christ-like towards your spouse. Skills are merely examples and applications of your primary calling in marriage (and all other relationships).

“Adopting the attitude of Jesus in your home will dissolve most disputes before they truly begin (p. 160).” John Henderson in *Catching Foxes*

“The reconciliation of a marriage must be a lifestyle, not just the response you have when things go bad (p. 57).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

In the chapters that follow we will merely be looking at different facets and implications of these core gospel truths. The purpose of those chapters is to prevent these core truths from becoming clichés or platitudes. But if you get overwhelmed by the “practical” applications, return to these core truths and remind yourself (a) healthy communication is only possible because of what Christ has already done, not because of what we must do, and (b) all the details are merely implications of three basic truths.

## Chapter 2

### Listening

## The Neglected Key to a Marital Communication

**Plumb Lines:** These are the “sticky” statements that capture the core messages of this chapter.

- Be a servant-listener: seek to understand before being understood.
- The vast majority of communication problems would be resolved with better listening.
- Good listening is simply living incarnationally.
- Listening is a skill that is most necessary when it is most difficult.
- The word listen contains the same letters as the word silent.

**Memorize:** James 1:19-21 (ESV), “Know this, my beloved brothers, let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.” As you memorize this passage reflect upon these key points:

- “Know this” – Humorously, James assumes we would be prone to skip over his instructions on listening.
- “Quick to hear” – We will be quick at one and slow at the other; we choose – listening or speaking.
- “Slow to speak... anger” – Being quick to speak has emotional consequences; we need to see the cause and effect.
- “Produce... put away” – The choice to listen well is a choice to pursue godly character and relational unity.
- “Receive... implanted word” – Salvation began with listening. Marriage also moves from death to life by listening.

### Teaching Notes

“If you want to develop an intimate marriage relationship, you would be wise to speak less and listen more. The person who speaks less is more willing to set his own self-centeredness aside and build oneness in marriage. He is better able to understand another viewpoint. And he is willing to seek the best for his mate (p. 154).” Dennis Rainey (editor) in *Preparing for Marriage*

“Of all the principles involved in effective communication, none is more important than good listening (p. 68).” Wayne Mack in *Strengthening Your Marriage*

“Rarely will we agree on all the topics of marriage. Rarely will we agree on the exact proper use of money, or the exact proper amount of sexual intimacy, or the exact proper way to handle the children. God did not design everyone to agree exactly on all these matters. Rather, God redeems and enables husbands and wives to reflect Christ and the Church amidst their disagreements, and to grow in love for one another under every circumstance. This love tends to be expressed through gracious speech, humble listening, eagerness to serve, and longing for Christ to be magnified in our marriages (p. 164).” John Henderson in *Catching Foxes*

“The idols that you worship erect a filter that screens out information that doesn’t match up with expectations. Idols also amplify other messages that you’re sensitive to. Approach every topic with humility—a willingness to learn something new and correct faulty understandings. Communicate a humility that allows room for more information or a different perspective (p. 109).” Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*

“There’s no point moving on to the next idea or responding to what you heard if your spouse doesn’t believe you understand what’s been said (p. 133)... How does your spouse typically feel misunderstood by you? If you don’t know, then ask (p. 135).” Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*



### Embedded Study

We often miss the power of common things. Being at a little league game doesn't seem like a big deal until you hear an adult lament, “My father never came to any of my games.” We often only fully appreciate the significance of small things our spouse does after they pass away and “life feels so empty now.” When we look back at the people who most shaped our lives, it usually because of their presence and care in ordinary moments rather than great actions or profound words.

Listening is another common thing which often has a power that few people realize. Consider the power of listening represented in this quote by C.S. Lewis on humility.

“Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call ‘humble’ nowadays: he will not be a sort of greasy, smarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what *you* said to *him*. If you do dislike him it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all (p. 128).” *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis

Because all we get to do as infants and children (or so it seemed at the time) is “listen to big people,” we tend to view speaking as the mature, powerful, and significant part of communication. We think listening is for the weak or immature person who lacks influence or the ability to contribute. If we applied this same logic to nutrition we would think that eating fruits and vegetables was a sign of weakness.

An overlooked implication of devaluing listening is how we think about prayer. With a low view of listening, we “grade” God based on how He responds to our request, while missing the great honor that the Creator would be omni-available to our moment-by-moment thoughts and concerns. Yes, God answers prayer, but let's not skip over the reality that we are never alone and we are always understood. Similarly, let's respond to what our spouse says (in word and action), but let's never minimize the power of listening to remind our spouse we are with them “in good times and in bad” striving to understand/share their joys and sorrows.

In this chapter we will seek to elevate our value of listening and increase our capacity to unleash its power to enrich our marriages. We will do this in three sections: (1) How Not to Listen, (2) Types of Listening, and (3) How to Listen.

**Read Proverbs 1:5 and 15:28.** How does the Bible's pre-eminent book on wisdom introduce the famous verse that “fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (1:7)”? With a call for a high view of listening. We will never be wise unless we appropriately value listening. Until we understand this we will fail at applying anything that we learn about creating a good marriage. When we fail to listen well our mouth “pours out evil things (15:28).” This can result from one of two causes: (a) we get upset before we understand, or (b) we offer “good advice” that doesn't fit the situation. Either way, our words discourage and result in the deterioration of the relationship. Let us not forget that wisdom (and the marital blessings wisdom brings) begins with what we understand (listening well) not what we say (convincing, accurate speech).

### How Not to Listen

Not all silence is listening. Not all questions invite, or even want, an answer. There is such a thing as bad listening. The way we listen can both negatively influence what is being said and distort what we hear. We need to be aware of how our listening effects communication or we will self-righteously accuse our spouse at times when our poor listening set them up.

We are going to look at eight ways not to listen. As you read each one, consider the habit involved, the values revealed, and message communicated. Bad listening skills are all three (habit, values, and message). In order to improve as a listener you must engage and change at all three levels. Becoming a better listener begins with a willingness to hear what is wrong.

**1. Interrupting:** Interrupting says that my thoughts are more important than your thoughts; or I'd rather risk you forgetting what you're trying to say than me forgetting what I want to say. Interrupting implies that I know what you're about to say and it needs to be changed. If interrupting is a habit of yours, memorize Philippians 2:1-5 and repeat it to yourself each time you interrupt your spouse. Use it as the basis of your confession and focus upon how listening is a key form of loving your spouse as Christ loves the church (Eph. 5:25).

“So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort in love... in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.” Philippians 2:1-5

**2. Premature Advice:** Giving premature advice communicates that your spouse is a problem to be solved instead of a person to be heard. Giving premature advice reveals that you are listening to respond (self-centeredly) rather than listening to understand (other-mindedly). Premature advice insinuates your spouse is in a relationship because of what

he/she can get from you (advice or assistance) rather than to be with you (for love and devotion). As a general rule, hold off on giving advice until you are asked a direct question for guidance.

**3. Intellectualizing:** When we depersonalize a conversation by focusing on the ideas rather than the person we are not listening well. For example, if one spouse is upset about an issue (i.e., something the other spouse said or did) and the other spouse asks about the “policy” behind the emotion (i.e., “Don’t you think I have the right to...?”), then the person and their experience took a backseat to an idea (i.e., a discussion of how marriage should influence the personal liberties of each spouse). It is often beneficial to engage in these broader discussions, but only after it is clear I want to hear you not debate you. A sure sign of intellectualizing is if you try to make emotional conversations logical for your own comfort. Until you join your spouse where he/she is, the conversation is not going to go anywhere productive.

**4. Minimizing:** This is bad listening by faux-comfort. Even if our spouse is over-reacting we need to walk them to this realization by calmly listening and asking good questions rather than trying to generate this change in a few sentences. When someone is over-reacting, rapid changes are rarely met with pleasant responses. Often, however, our spouse will not be over-reacting. We simply do not know the situation well enough to understand their response. In these cases minimizing is insulting, dismissive, and erodes trust in your judgment. Give the benefit of the doubt until there is strong evidence to the contrary. This benefit of the doubt is a direct biblical application of love – “[love] believes all things (1 Cor. 13:7 NASB).”

**5. Free Association:** Our spouse’s words should not be used as a springboard to topics of greater personal interest (general conversation) or personal advantage (in a disagreement). Respond to what you’ve been asked. Don’t use a question as a free association exercise. This is a highly self-centered way to listen. If this is done in a conflict, it will likely come across as manipulative (because it is). Honor your spouse by either answering their question or asking for clarification. If what came to your mind is important enough that you remember it after addressing what your spouse said or asked, then raise the subject to extend (rather than replace) the initial conversation.

**6. Fear Filtering:** We tend to hear/see first what we fear most. This radically impacts how we listen, especially in difficult conversations. If you fear snakes, then when you walk in the woods every crooked stick is a serpent until it proves otherwise. If you fear failure, rejection, disrespect or something else, then it will be what you naturally hear during conflict or when talking about sensitive subjects. This is the primary reason we personalize what is not personal. More will be said about how to counter this in chapter four, but for now take time to reflect on the implication from this on how you understand Proverbs 1:7, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.”

“Emotions play an important role in honesty... Anger and fear are emotions that require extra care. Both can tempt us to cover rather than reveal ourselves (p. 107).” Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*

**7. Bad Questions:** Yes, there is such a thing as a bad question. We can ask questions to make people feel stupid / childish (i.e., What made you think that was a good idea?), to trap people / make them feel mean (i.e., Do you think I do this [referring to a sin or foolish choice] because I think it’s fun?), or to end a discussion (i.e., Why would you think anything else?). These kinds of bad questions give the façade of listening; after all, questions mean I want to hear from you, right? Bad questions are worse than ineffective listening, they are a primary form of manipulation. If you are guilty of this form of bad listening, then you take it very seriously. You are sinning against your spouse in a way that silences him/her and undermines the trust that is essential for a healthy marriage.

**8. Emotionally Dominating:** Your spouse should never avoid a conversation because, “I could never talk to my spouse about [blank] because he/she would break down or blow up?” It is wrong to use anger, fear, self-pity, or despair to shield yourself from unpleasant conversations with your spouse. When we do this we put our comfort ahead of the integrity of the marriage; our preferences begin to trump reality. We train those around us to view reality through the lens of our emotions. It doesn’t matter what is true anymore; it only matters if you are willing to hear. This failure to listen well results in chronic family dysfunction that can last for generations. If you are prone to this kind of emotional domination, then seeking formal counseling is strongly advised. As a form of self-intervention, memorize and meditate on John 8:32 when you are tempted to use your emotions as a shield from listening well.

“You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free (John 8:32).”

From these examples of poor listening you should realize that it takes humility and courage to listen well. Listening well requires accepting that you are not in control of the conversation, that you may not know how to respond, that there are significant things you don’t know, that other people are worth being heard, and that my thoughts are secondary for a period of time. It takes a person of high character to listen well.

“It takes grace to be ready to listen and willing to hear (p. 77).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

### Types of Listening

“Are you a good listener?” is a question like, “Are you a good student?” The answer is usually, “It depends?” In school it often depends on the subject. With listening it depends on the type of listening required. Some careers allow us to specialize in one or two forms of listening and excel with those skills. Marriage, however, is a relationship that requires the willingness to engage in all types of listening for the relationship to flourish.

We will examine five types of listening. A central question that frames each type of listening is provided before the explanation. Comprehending is foundational for all effective listening. Appreciating and empathizing are forms of listening primarily for the purpose of bonding. Discerning and Evaluating are forms of listening primarily utilized during problem solving.

1. **Comprehend** – *What is being said?* This is the do-not-pass-go question of listening. But it is amazing how frequently we overlook the necessity of comprehending. Taking time to ensure that we understand what has been said is the essence of being “quick to hear” and “slow to speak” (James 1:19). There are many reflective listening and restatement skills to help with comprehension, but they basically boil down to two questions: (1) Do you see the value of understanding before speaking? (2) Are you willing to spend some of your “air time” speaking verifying that you understand?

“It is self-love that makes you more committed to what you understand than to understanding your spouse (p. 171).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

Give recent examples when this type of listening has or would have blessed your marriage: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. **Appreciate** – *What is good about the speaker or message?* This is what fuels the patience of listening. To listen to someone is to affirm the value you place on the relationship. One of the ways that we train our thoughts – and the thoughts of others – to focus upon those things that are true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise is by how we listen. If we listen with the filter “what is wrong or in need of correction” we will struggle to have a Philippians 4:8 thought life. As we listen we should search for things to affirm. Appreciative listening should be verbalized in the form of affirmation or gratitude which encourage the person or apply their message.

Give recent examples when this type of listening has or would have blessed your marriage: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. **Empathize** – *What is the emotion in the speaker or message?* This is the most bonding aspect of listening. It displays a willingness to enter your spouse’s world. Notice how Paul relationally engaged with people, “being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves because you had become so dear to us (1 Thes. 2:8).” This captures empathetic listening. Elsewhere Paul says we are to “rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep (Rom. 12:15).” Listening to the joys and sorrows of our spouse should not leave us unmoved. If the experience of being in “one body” (the church) should illicit this response between fellow Christians, then empathetic listening should be even more present in the “one flesh” relationship between husband and wife.

Give recent examples when this type of listening has or would have blessed your marriage: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. **Discern** – *What is accurate or most important in what is being said?* This form of listening emotionally steps away from the speaker and message in order to gain a more objective perspective. This detachment assumes that the message is either biased or poorly filtered for the most relevant information. The cautiousness also assumes that what is important to the speaker may not be what is most important to the listener. For these reasons, in marriage, discerning listening should most often be preceded by appreciative or empathizing listening – that is what it means to “give the benefit of the doubt.” Without the bonding forms of listening, discerning listening creates or perpetuates distance. Consistently resorting to discerning listening is an indication that the marriage lacks a strong foundation of shared values, purpose, or trust.

Give recent examples when this type of listening has or would have blessed your marriage: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. **Evaluate** – *What is the appropriate response to the speaker or message?* This type of listening is focused upon action more than understanding. This kind of listening often gets a bad rap because of husbands who are prone to exclusively use this “fix it” mentality when listening. Evaluating is the appropriate final stage of listening in many (not all) conversations.

Premature evaluating is a form of pride (believing I know all I need to know) that devalues the relationship. The absence of considering the appropriate response is a form of passivity (either laziness or disregard) that devalues the relationship. The marker that evaluating is the appropriate style of listening in most conversation is usually a pause, a change from sharing to asking, or articulating a decision that needs to be made. If these communicative markers are not clear in your marriage, it would be wise to discuss how the two of you reveal that conversations are ready to move from understanding to evaluating.

Give recent examples when this type of listening has or would have blessed your marriage: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

### How to Listen

We are often poor listeners because we think of listening as merely hearing and retaining information. In a day of information overload, the significance of listening is easy to overlook. Consider this expanded definition of listening – listening is how you enter the world of another person.

In relationships “insiders” and “outsiders” are determined by what you share and what you’re willing to hear. When you tell someone your private thoughts you make them an “insider.” When you withhold your private thoughts you make them an “outsider.” When you are available to listen you are demonstrating your willingness to become part of your spouse’s world, which is more than sharing the same space (house).

**Read Ephesians 5:25 in light of John 1:14-18.** How did Jesus love his bride, the church? Jesus fully entered her world in order to understand her unique challenges and her experience of those challenges (Heb. 2:17-18). How do we apply the profound theological truth of Jesus’ incarnation to our marriages? We listen to our spouse until he/she feels understood. In the same way that Jesus’ incarnation provides us assurance that He understands every aspect of our life (Heb. 4:15-16), our listening assures our spouse that we are for/with them in the midst of life’s joys and struggles.

This reality is convicting. We realize we have neglected one of the simplest, most meaningful and foundational ways that God calls us to love our spouse. But conviction without instruction results in guilt without hope. The gospel always gives hope in equal (or greater) measure than it brings convictions. So below we will provide many skills and perspective intended to enhance your listening ability.

No instruction can create or replace desire. The main skill in being a good listener is wanting to be a good listener. The core of listening is placing enough value on the other person and what he/she is saying that you quit playing your thoughts (mentally or verbally) over theirs. When you begin to do this you will find that your responses and body language almost always draw out the other person. The skills below are merely examples of things that value other people.

- Show and Maintain Interest:** Some conversations are interesting because of their subject. This makes effective listening much more natural. However, there are times when our interest is given because of the value we place on the relationship instead of the subject. When, in marriage, we only listen well to subjects of interest we either force our spouse to perform (creating undertones of pressure/rejection) for our attention or neglect important areas of life (creating family systems that will inevitably fail).
- Honor through Body Language:** The majority of indicators of interest are non-verbal: eye contact, pleasant facial expressions, nodding your head, leaning forward, facing the speaker, relaxed shoulders, unfolded arms, and removing distractions (i.e., checking your phone or working on a project). When we fail to honor our spouse through body language we create a temptation for them to increase the “force” of their speaking in order to gain our attention. Honoring body language decreases the temptation towards ineffective communication.
- Glean Purpose before Content:** Words serve a purpose. If your spouse is afraid and you debate the accuracy of his/her descriptions, then you are missing the purpose for the content – likely increasing their fear which will be expressed as anger. To slow your listening down begin with the question, “Why is my spouse talking?” instead of “What is my spouse saying?” Once you know your spouse’s purpose for speaking it will help you utilize the appropriate type of listening from the list above.
- Be Aware of Filters:** We must be willing to hear a message as it was intended, not as we experience it. Look at the list of “filters” below and consider how their influence would impair your ability to fairly hear your spouse.

Fears	Past Experiences	Values	Beliefs
Expectations	Future Dreams	Prejudices	Assumptions
Interests	Recent Events	Insecurities	Other: _____

The differences that exist in the personality, history, and aspirations of a husband and wife requires that we are aware of the impact of these filters if we want to have “the same conversation” as we talk about a given subject. If we are not aware of our filters, we will change the meaning/significance of our spouse’s words and hold them responsible for our reaction. This is a recipe for shutting down communication.

5. **Clarify Confusing Points:** Often a confused expression or tilted head is enough to request clarification without interrupting. Good clarifying questions assume that there is a good answer for what doesn’t make sense yet. For example, it is better to ask, “How *do* [assumes there is an explanation] those two points fit together?” than “How *can* [expresses skepticism that there is an explanation] those two points fit together?” Times of confusion tend to be critical junctures where grace leaves communication. For this reason, couples should realize the need for extra grace and patience during exchanges of clarification.
6. **Summarize Information:** Summarize the key points or experiences your spouse has shared before giving a response. This reveals that you are listening and ensures that your “take aways” match what your spouse was sharing. Beyond insuring that you are responding to what your spouse was actually trying to say, this has another benefit. It also allows you to clarify whether your response is to a part or whole of what your spouse said. When we fail to summarize what we’ve heard, it is common for partial perspectives/suggestions to come across as total generalizations/fixes. Each time the speaking-listening roles change in a conversation that will be a moment when trust is gained or lost. This is why interruptions are so bad for communication. A 30 second summary at these exchanges often saves many 30 minute (or longer) arguments.
7. **Listen to Affirm / Honor:** It is so easy to just listen for what needs to be different, changed, or corrected. After all, that is where the progress, growth, or change will happen as a result of communication. When we succumb to this temptation, listening becomes a very negative exercise. Too often this kind of point is made as a way to avoid hurting the feelings of someone who is sensitive. When we frame listening-to-affirm this way, we miss how it shapes our character and attitude. If we want to be a Christ-like listener, we will discipline ourselves (until it becomes something we naturally enjoy) to find things to affirm, celebrate, or encourage in what our spouse says.
8. **Postpone Evaluations:** There is a time for evaluative thinking in marital communication. It is usually near the end of a communication exchange (unless it’s a purely problem solving / decision making interaction). The willingness to suspend critical thinking during casual conversation is a way to communicate trust and to show that the relationship has value beyond what it achieves. This is why casual conversation (next chapter) is so important to marriage; it is a primary time when the marriage is honored and your spouse is cherished simply for who they are.
9. **Listen Like You’re Taking a Prayer Request:** The question is often asked, “How do I know if I have listened well?” Here is a good litmus test – could you pray for your spouse about this topic of conversation in a way that he/she felt like accurately represented him/her to God? God may use you to answer the prayer you would pray and if He chooses to do so the time you took to understand your spouse’s concern will make you a much more fit instrument in His hand. Until you can represent your spouse in prayer you have listened well.
10. **If You Don’t Know What to Say, Ask More Questions:** Often the pressure to know what to say is what prevents us from listening well. We become like the person who so badly wants to sleep that his desire to sleep prevents him from sleeping. Listening is best done when we’re relaxed (otherwise our fears focus our attention on ourselves instead of our spouse). Giving yourself the freedom to merely ask another question if you don’t know what to say can often be the thing that makes the implementation of these other skills possible.

### Conclusion

Listening goes on the list of things that aren’t complicated, but it are hard. Most of the things on this list share one thing in common – they require dying to self in order to love God and love others well.

Chances are you were not blown away by any of the practical advice in this chapter. That should be both encouraging and discouraging. It is encouraging to know that the most relationally inept person can listen well and, thereby, bless every relationship he/she is in. It is discouraging to realize that most often the only excuse for not listening well is pure neglect of social basics.

This should call our attention again to our need for the gospel in order to have a satisfying marriage. Our marriages deteriorate not because marriage is complex, but because we are selfish and self-centered. Even when we want to be selfless to love well those we care about, we fall short.

In order to listen well we need something that can motivate us to die to ourselves without simultaneously causing us to cave back in on ourselves through self-pity or martyrdom. There is only one person (Jesus Christ) with one message (the gospel) who can accomplish these twin tasks. The more we rely on what Christ did for us and treasure the gospel until we emulate it, the more naturally we will treat others as God has treated us.

## Evaluation: Day-to-Day Communication

**Note:** Each major section of the Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage series will have a brief evaluation tool to help you assess your marital strengths and weaknesses. Complete the evaluation before reading the material, then review the assessment again after completing each section to learn the accuracy of your initial self-assessment.

**Instructions:** Read the following descriptive statements. Consider how well they describe your experience or perspective on your marriage. If you are engaged, consider how well they describe your courtship experience or your beliefs about what you think your coming marriage should be. Mark the answer that best fits how you respond:

(CD) Completely Disagree, (SD) Somewhat Disagree, (NS) Not Sure, (SA) Somewhat Agree, or (CA) Completely Agree

1. I regularly share my thoughts, plans, dreams, and fears with my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
2. My spouse regularly shares his/her thoughts, plans, dreams, and fears with me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
3. I engage in topics of conversation even if they are only important to my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
4. My spouse engages in topics of conversation even if they are only important to me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
5. I think about what I want to talk about with my spouse when I see him/her next.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
6. My spouse thinks about what he/she wants to talk about when he/she sees me next.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
7. My sense of humor does not put my spouse down or highlight his/her weaknesses.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
8. My spouse’s humor does not put me down or highlight my weaknesses.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
9. I honor things that have sentimental value to my spouse even if I don’t understand.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
10. My spouse honors things with sentimental value to me even if he/she doesn’t understand.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
11. I cannot think of a subject or event I would hesitate to share with my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
12. I do not know of subjects or events my spouse would hesitate to share with me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
13. I do not have secrets that I am resisting telling my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
14. I do not wonder if my spouse is being honest with me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
15. My spouse does not doubt if I am being honest with him/her.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
16. We find it easy to have things to talk about when we are together.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
17. We enjoy spending time together.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
18. We laugh frequently when we are together.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
19. As a couple we are able to enjoy and discuss our differences.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
20. Our conversations result in us being growing people growing closer together.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA

**Key to Survey Scoring:** For each set of questions tabulate your score using the following numerical values. The scoring is weighted with the “neutral” NS answer being a negative score, because if you have not defined or pursued important aspects of your marriage relationship it will negatively impact the marriage.

CD	–	Negative 3 points	SA	–	Positive 1 points
SD	–	Negative 2 points	CA	–	Positive 2 points
NS	–	Negative 1 point			

If your total score...

- ...matches or exceeds the total number of questions, then this area of marriage is an area of strength.
- ...is less than the total number of questions, then this area of marriage could use attention or refinement.
- ...is a negative number, then this area of marriage should be given immediate and concentrated attention.

➤ Questions 1-20: ( Total: \_\_\_\_\_ in 20 questions)

This set of questions examines the features of “**day-to-day communication**” present in a gospel-centered marriage. Day-to-day communication is the breathing of marriage – we rarely pay attention to it until it stops happening, and then it’s a crisis. Good daily communication is what keeps planning (mundane) and conflict (unpleasant) communication from removing the desire for romantic communication.

Recommended Resources: *Love Talk Starters: 275 Questions to Get Your Conversations Going* by Les and Leslie Parrott

Sometimes within a marriage the problem is not one specific area or issue but an overall imbalance in the effort, skill, thoughtfulness, and awareness being put into the marriage. Below is a list of questions that reveal your perspective on your effort and your spouse’s effort in the marriage. Use the same numerical scoring system as you used above. In this case, the closer your scores are to another, the more mutual (and typically healthy) the marriage.

\_\_\_\_\_ **My Score** – Using the same scoring system as above add together the score for odd numbered questions through 14.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Spouse’s Score** – Using the same scoring system add together the score for even numbered questions through 14.

## Chapter 3

# Day-to-Day Communication The Oil in the Machine of Marriage

**Plumb Lines:** These are the “sticky” statements that capture the core messages of this chapter.

- Our regular, day-to-day communication is what determines how we “normally” communicate.
- Good day-to-day communication is both preventative and a buffer for conflict.
- Enjoying and cultivating common conversation is the life blood of a lifelong relationship.
- Building a conversationally full marriage can be a key step towards a conversationally full prayer life.

**Memorize:** Ephesians 4:29-30 (ESV), “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.” As you memorize this passage reflect upon these key points:

- “No corrupting talk” – God created words to serve the purpose of building up our spouse.
- “Fits the occasion” – Ask yourself, “How would God want me to engage or affirm my spouse in this moment?”
- “Gives grace” – Christian lives are a “journey of grace.” Your words should move your spouse forward on this journey.
- “Do not grieve” – When our words compete against God’s purposes in/for our spouse, God is grieved.
- “For the day of redemption” – In heaven you will see the spouse God has been allowing your words to help shape.

### Teaching Notes

“Because they were not talking these things through with one another, they began to develop individual thoughts about them (p. 103)... So the character and quality of the friendship between a husband and wife always functions as an accurate measure of the health of their marriage (p. 145-146).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

“I can’t make fun of you in someone else’s home and respect you in our home (p. 97; Kathy)... Early in our marriage my wife and I agreed not to belittle one another in public even in jest. Our agreement came after noticing how often in group settings our friends used ridicule (often disguised as teasing) to get an edge over one another. Remarks about appearance, reminders of a past embarrassment, or drawing attention to a dumb comment are standard ways that couples use the shield of social conversation to jab at each other’s faults and foibles. My wife and I actually enjoy teasing one another, but we do not kid in a way that is demeaning for the sake of a laugh from others (p.137).” Bryan Chappell in *Each for the Other*

“Because of sin and shame we often hide our thoughts and feelings from ourselves and our spouses (p. 93)... Honesty isn’t just communication free of lies (p. 95).” Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*

“If suffering alone taught, all the world would be wise, since everyone suffers. To suffering must be added mourning, understanding, patience, love, openness, and the willingness to remain vulnerable (p. 143)... Communication is thus the blood of marriage that carries vital oxygen into the heart of our romance (p. 158)... Marriage provides the small experimental laboratory whereby we can learn to engage in spiritual fellowship. Everything that happens broadly in social contexts has a mirror in marriage—disagreements, wounding words, conflict of interests, and competing dreams (p. 162).” Gary Thomas in *Sacred Marriage*

“The paradox is that friendship cannot be merely about itself. It must be about something else, something that both friends are committed to and passionate about besides one another (p. 113).” Tim Keller in *The Meaning of Marriage*

### Embedded Study

What is the least obvious and most important part of a fish tank? The water. Water is essential for the life of the fish and plants. Water upholds and sways the decorations. Water is what reflects the light in “aquatic” ways and captures our attention. Yet no one ever looks at a fish tank and says, “Wow! You’ve got great water.” If the tank is algae-ridden, then people may say, “Yuck! You need to clean your water.”

Water in a fish tank shares a roll similar to day-to-day communication in a marriage. It is essential for the vitality of the marriage, surrounds all the special and significant moments, and it captures all the “relational” qualities of a marriage that we were made to enjoy. But day-to-day is too often ignored or neglected unless it reaches a point that it is noticeably unhealthy.

In this chapter we will talk about two aspects of cultivating healthy day-to-day communication: (1) cleaning the tank – removing the contaminants of good communication, and (2) filling the tank – providing a lifetime-supply-answer to the question, “So what are we supposed to talk about?”

### Cleaning the Tank

Good day-to-day marital communication requires maintenance. It is not something you can leave on autopilot and expect to have frequent, quality interactions that cover the breadth of life issues that face a marriage. That would be the equivalent of a teacher putting no effort into planning a class and expecting to cover all the necessary areas of curriculum well.

“You need to be committed to talk, talk, and talk... Sinners living in silence do not produce unity, understanding and love (p. 161). You must listen, listen, and listen... Listening is not about being passive. Listening is an active commitment (p. 162).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

The majority of what we’ll look at in the “Cleaning the Tank” section is merely preventing the responsibilities of life that are shared in marriage from stifling the friendship that sparked the marriage. It is learning to maintain the elements of friendship while “doing life together.”

“If it is the joy of each other to make the other happy, a hundred problems will be solved before they happen (p. 134).” John Piper in *This Momentary Marriage*

### Equilibrium Agent

Often communication books will provide a ratio of how many positive comments are needed to cancel out a negative one. If we actually try to keep up with the math, it tends to become laborious, disingenuous, or legalistic. But if we see the picture behind the numbers it can provide the benefit without the bondage.

Communication has a “tipping point” at which it begins to become toxic (deteriorating health rather than contributing to health). There are many difficult and negative things that couples will have to discuss. Avoiding budget cuts, child discipline, or life disappointments is not “being positive,” it is living in denial. The solution to maintaining marital equilibrium is not eliminating all unpleasant conversations. It must be accomplished by engaging in enough satisfying, enjoyable, meaningful conversations that the home remains a life-giving environment.

“A wife, if she is very generous, may allow that her husband lives up to perhaps eighty percent of her expectations. There is always the other twenty percent that she would like to change, and she may chip away at it for the whole of their married life without reducing it by very much. She may, on the other hand, simply decide to enjoy the eighty percent, and both of them will be happy (p. 97).” Elisabeth Elliot in *Love Has a Price Tag*

Self-Examination: In what ways are you prone to negatively skew the equilibrium of your marriage: pessimism, critical comments, being purely functional, discontentment, failing to encourage, impatience, unrealistic expectations, etc...?

**Read I Thessalonians 5:1-11.** Notice what Paul’s concluding application was to the coming “Day of the Lord.” It was to encourage one another (v. 11). These people were facing uncertainty (v. 1-2), social challenges (v. 3-5), and having to work diligently both physically and spiritually (v. 6-10). In the midst of this environment, Paul reinforced the importance of using their words to build each other up. Not only this, Paul put his counsel into practice by highlighting this was something they were already doing (v. 11). So do not hesitate to be repetitive in your encouragement or enjoyable conversations.

### Removing Barriers

We communicate (both listening and speaking) through the filter of our fears and pride. Both our insecurities and our boasts influence what we hear and what we say. Removing these barriers does not mean eliminating fear and pride from our life. That won’t happen. It does require being humbly self-aware and open about these areas of your life.



Self-Examination: Which of these barriers of pride or insecurity are you prone to filter communication through?

I have to be strong.	I don't want to disturb the peace.	What I think/feel is not important.
I don't want to sound stupid.	I don't want them to worry about me.	I can handle this on my own.
My approach to this is better.	Other: _____	

These barriers become the reasons we don't talk, talk in code, don't say what we mean, or are wrongly offended by what others say. Trust is letting the barrier of pride or insecurity be known, preferably before, the content of our thoughts. Once we do this, the differences between a husband and wife (which are often attributed to gender, personality, or home of origin) begin to make sense and generate unity instead of division.

**Read Hebrews 4:14-5:10.** Notice that it is the weakness of Christ's humanity that allows Him to be such a great Savior. We can trust Christ because He knows us and has made Himself known to us. It is only the gospel that gives us the courage and freedom to acknowledge the barriers of pride and insecurity. Disclosing these barriers requires the belief that there is sufficient grace to cover/change them. Instinctively we know that apart from Christ this grace does not exist, so we hide like humanity has done since the inception of sin (Gen. 3:8). When we stop hiding our weaknesses we begin trusting our spouse on the basis of a mutual trust for what the gospel means for our marriage.

“You simply cannot have a relationship with someone whom you do not trust. Such a marriage is a cycle of doubt, accusation, conflict, recrimination, hurt, disappointment, and withdrawal. I've listened to people who have so little trust between them that they literally debate everything the other says... Here's what you need to understand: the building of trust between you begins vertically before it ever begins horizontally (p. 154).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

### State of the Union Addresses

Many couples get caught looking for “the right time” to have a conversation. When life doesn't slow down, it begins to feel like there is never a good time. So the difficult and logistical conversations stockpile until an unpleasant conversation begins and the emotional gravity of the moment declares this to be “the time” for everything to come out at once. This dynamic either creates a really ugly argument or sense of despair as we think, “How did we let things get this bad?”

Most often things really aren't “that bad” and any of the points in the argument could have been addressed peaceably if they were discussed individually. This is why couples can make up and act like nothing happened (which is encouraging about the state of the marriage, but puts them back in the cycle for the next eruption).

A “State of the Union Address” is simply a regularly set time when a couple looks at one another and asks, “How are we doing? Have I begun to neglect anything that is important to you? Have I missed any changes in your life that make you feel less cared for by me? Have I started doing anything that is a concern for you?” Giving up one evening of television or activities per month (or even once per quarter) for this kind of conversation would revolutionize most marriages.

While these conversations may sound like maintenance at first, if you will try them (with humility and good listening skills) you'll find them to be highly romantic. Two people asking first-person evaluative questions out of a commitment to the marriage over their personal preferences is highly bonding. It shows the kind of selflessness and other-mindedness that comprise true love.

Self-Examination: If I asked my spouse these kinds of questions on a monthly or quarterly basis, could I receive his/her answer without being defensive? Could I receive his/her answer as an invitation to new ways to bless my marriage? Am I willing to sacrifice the time and activities which currently fill that time in order to enrich my marriage?

**Read Hebrews 10:19-25.** If we are going to “stir up one another to love and good works (v. 24)” we must ask each other real questions about how we're doing. We must be willing to hear real answer to those questions. Notice that this passage begins with a reminder of where we find our ultimate acceptance – in Christ (v. 19-23). Couples who neglect finding their acceptance in Christ will have a harder time having healthy conversations as they evaluate their marriage. Notice also that this passage ends by reminding people not to neglect these kinds of interactions (v. 25).

### Filling the Tank

When you finish reading this section you should *never* again be able to say, “What is there for us to talk about?” That has actually been a primary objective of the entire *Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage* seminar series – to fill your marriage with excellent conversations (embedded throughout every seminar) and dates (Appendix A in every seminar) that draw you closer to Christ and each other.

In this section, we list 270 conversation topics in ten categories. The goal is to provide a variety in the type of conversation, multiple topics within each type, and an understanding of how each type of conversation contributes to the quality and closeness of your marriage. As you read, don't become overwhelmed. We'll discuss how to assimilate “all there is to talk about” within your marriage at the end of this section. That will involve a tissue box, but not for the reason you think.

### Daily Review Topics

In marriage it is important to know what is going on in the life of your spouse; not as a parent, spectator, or news reporter, but as a prayer partner, encourager, friend, and lover. Showing interest in the incremental changes of your spouse's life is a way to show your love. Otherwise trivial things are significant because they are happening in the life of someone important to you. This perpetual honor-of-interest is a great way to affirm your spouse and counter the drift-of-indifference that erodes many marriages.

- What was the highlight of your day?
- What was the lowlight of your day?
- What made you smile today?
- I Corinthians 13 – I saw a great example of love today when...
- I was encouraged today when...
- What simple pleasure did you enjoy today?
- We never got to finish talking about...
- I don't say thank you enough for...
- I thought of you when...
- What do you need help with today?
- What was the most random thing about your day?
- How can I pray for you today?
- How can I make your day better, easier, or more complete?
- What has been on your mind most today?
- What did you think about the news today?

### Reflective Topics

There is a level of intimacy that comes from considering challenging, personal questions together. One measure of closeness is the kinds of questions you're willing to engage with another person. Your spouse should be the person with whom you have the most and best of these conversations. This is one of the key ways to make sure that nobody else becomes more of an “insider” in your life than your spouse. Conversations like these are how you get to the point that the person who knows you best loves you most and is your most faithful companion in life's journey.

- What are the biggest challenges you anticipate facing this week, month, or year?
- What are some of the blessings in our life that we often overlook?
- 10 years from now I believe [blank] will prove to be the most significant thing we did during this season of life.
- What is on the short list of things you “need” in order to be content?
- What difficult season of our marriage or personal life can we now give thanks to God for?
- How is where we live now (time and place) different from where you grew up?
- Fruit of the Spirit: Where or how do you think *self-control* does or could bless our marriage most?
- How have you noticed your priorities change over the last year or since we've been married?
- I miss it when we used to...
- Philippians 4:8 – It is a joy to think about the aspects of your character that are *pure* and *lovely* [describe].
- It meant a lot to me when you said [blank].
- The advice I would give a young couple based on our first year of marriage would be...
- My favorite part of our courtship was...
- Here are ways I have seen God grow you and shape your character in the last 5 years...
- My favorite memory from our first year of marriage was when...
- I have noticed my motivation to [blank] increase/decrease lately.
- What is your favorite memory with your grandparents?
- What are the most important yet subtle ways we can protect our marriage and family?
- The freedom that I most enjoy or appreciate is...
- What is your favorite childhood picture / memory?

- The thing that has surprised me most about you since we've been married is...
- What is your favorite holiday memory?
- How is life different from what you thought it would be at this age?
- How have we changed (personality and values) since we got married?
- What is your favorite memory from our honeymoon?
- What is the biggest surprise we have experienced this year?
- What are the top three highlights from our marriage this year?
- What is the most meaningful conversation you remember us having this month?

### Romantic Topics

Married couples should flirt and have intimate conversations. You stoke the fire of your interest about anything (i.e., job, hobby, faith, politics, etc...) by talking about it with those who share your passion. Why would we not do the same for our marriage with our spouse? Often when we talk about other interests we are not learning new information; we are merely rehearsing what we enjoy again (often in the same words we've used many times). Why would we be hesitant to do this with our marriages? Too often we only rehearse our disappointments with one another. Use these questions to spark many, many conversations where you rehearse the delights of our marriage with your spouse.

- What is your favorite memory from our courtship, first year of marriage, or this past year?
- When have been the moments that our love for each other has grown the most (dating, engaged, married)?
- Fruit of the Spirit: I see *goodness* in you most clearly when...
- My favorite date we've been on so far is...
- I have great confidence in you...
- I love watching your joy when you/we...
- I Corinthians 13 – Your *kindness* blesses me when...
- A date that would be fun to me is...
- Thank you for...
- I hope our kids get your... (an indirect way to complement qualities you appreciate about your spouse)
- Philippians 4:8 – What are the things that are *excellent* and *worthy of praise* in our life and marriage now?
- I think your most attractive outfit is...
- It makes me smile when you...
- For our next anniversary I would like to...
- I noticed you sacrifice [blank] for our marriage/family and it meant a lot to me.
- Three things I love about you more now than when we got married are...
- My favorite way you say “I love you” is...
- You look most attractive to me after...
- The most meaningful gift you have ever given me was...
- I have really seen you grow in [blank] area of your life.
- What I like most about your sense of humor is...
- You make it easy to trust and love you by...
- The little things that you do which mean a lot to me are...
- The best compliment/surprise you ever gave me was...
- On our next three day weekend we should...
- You show me honor when you...
- How could I make a “regular day” most special for you?
- I was challenged by your sense of hope and perseverance when...
- You bless me by [list] and my life is better because of you.
- What form of mild affection (i.e., holding hands, cuddling, etc...) do you enjoy the most?
- How can I make the time we spend together more special for you?
- What is your favorite picture of us together?
- I miss you most when...
- I feel closest to you when...
- I am most proud of you for...
- What compliment can I give you that would be most meaningful to you in this season of life?

## Planning Topics

Thinking about and preparing for a shared future is a way that we demonstrate commitment to and enthusiasm about our marriage. Too often the word “planning” is heard with a sterile, business meeting connotation. Think about how someone plans for a vacation, business venture, retirement, or having children. That planning is not laborious or tedious. While there are details involved in each, the overarching tone is excitement for what is ahead. When you contextualize marital planning conversations as the pursuit of God’s blessing, the conversations below should take on a similar feel.

- What are your plans, hopes, or dream for the next month / year?
- I see your diligence in [blank] and it encourages me to think about our future together.
- This summer I would like to...
- I think we need to focus on [blank] in the character of our kids for the next period of time.
- If we are going to make our marriage the priority it should be then we need to...
- For our next family picture...
- Before we retire I want to...
- The next project I’d like to engage with our house is...
- A good idea for our marital or family devotions would be...
- What should our next significant purchase be?
- What should our next family outing be?
- By the end of this year I want to...
- We need to [blank] with our finances.
- We need to [blank] with our time.
- What is most important for you to avoid burnout or discouragement in this season of life?
- What is the next marker in the life of our marriage / family and what do we need to do to prepare for it?
- What ambitions or life goals do you have and how can I support you in those?
- Where would you like to visit and what would you want to do there?
- What would be the marks of a “good life” as we grow old together?
- How and where would you like me to be more, less, or differently involved in decision making?
- What is a goal you have for this week and how can I help you accomplish it?
- What would make a great day trip for the two of us?

## Evaluative Topics

Enhancing something is a form of love. Men who love their cars are constantly tinkering with them. Women who love their homes are perpetually updating the decorations. The fact that they find something to improve is not an indication that they are dissatisfied with their car or home; actually it reveals the opposite – they delight in them. Similarly, if we love our spouse and marriage, we will engage in conversations about how to best steward this God’s blessing.

- What are the skills that you most need to learn, refine, or implement at home?
- I’ve really seen you grow in [blank] ways recently.
- Fruit of the Spirit: Where do you see that I need to become more *faithful* or *reliable*?
- I want to manage [blank] better than I have recently.
- I Corinthians 13 – I need help thinking about how to handle [blank] situation without being *rude*.
- I Corinthians 13 – I want to protect our marriage by...
- What do you think we should put more time into and what would we take that time from?
- What has become more important to you than it used to be in the last year?
- I need to relax about [blank] because I can tell it’s becoming too important to me.
- Philippians 4:8 – How have we begun to focus on the things that are dishonorable more than *honorable*?
- Philippians 4:8 – How have we begun to focus on the things that are unjust more than *just*?
- I need to work on how I communicate when...
- I need to be a better listener when...
- I would like for us to be more unified on...
- I should use more words when...
- I should use fewer words when...
- The area of my life that I need to take better care of is...
- I give up too quickly or press too hard on...
- I believe you show excellent wisdom and discernment in/with...

- My character goal for next month is...
- You make me feel safe because I don't have to worry about...
- Does our budget represent our family mission and values?
- I see Christ most in you when...
- I want to do a better job of expressing [blank] emotion.
- I feel most/least known by you in [blank] areas of my life.
- When I put myself in your place...
- How well do we handle disappointment (individually and as a couple)?
- How well do we handle our weaknesses (individually and as a couple)?
- Do we spend too much or too little time and money on entertainment?
- How has being married made facing life's challenges different?
- What could I do that would have the greatest positive impact on your sense of confidence and security?
- What one thing could I do each day that would be a blessing to you?
- What is the hardest change in our lives at this time for you to accept?

### Confessional Topics

Confession of sin, weakness, and shortcomings is a significant way that we display how much we value our spouse and marriage. When we confess, we show that we value our spouse and marriage more than our pride. When faced with a choice of whether to protect/defend ourselves or honor the marriage, confession proves we choose the latter. The gospel reminds us that every marriage is comprised of two sinners in need of grace. Confession is how we display that we believe this reality and enact its implications.

- What are the greatest character challenges you are facing at home?
- Fruit of the Spirit: I need to grow in *patience* with...
- Fruit of the Spirit: I need to grow in *gentleness* with...
- I have been slow to repent for...
- I Corinthians 13 – I have grown prone to *envy* [blank] recently.
- I Corinthians 13 – I have been prone to *irritability* about [blank] recently.
- I over use the excuse that...
- I tend to be sarcastic, harsh, or silent about/when...
- It is hardest for me to maintain hope in the area of...
- I need to show more honor to you and our marriage by...
- I tend to be too controlling with/about...
- My emotions are too tied to...
- I have been grumbling too much about...
- I can tell I am becoming more selfish or self-centered in/with...
- I need to forgive...
- My sense of humor tends to degrade [blank] and I need to show them more honor.
- I should have taken more responsibility for...
- I am too concerned with [name's / group's] opinion of me.

### General Interest Topics

What do you enjoy simply because your spouse enjoys it? What do you know a good deal about merely because it is important to your spouse? The longer we are married the longer and deeper these lists should become. A couple doesn't have to enjoy the same things in order to enjoy one another – this is one of the most destructive myths that discouraged couples begin to believe. When we are selfless enough to show interest in the things that intrigue each other, our marriages will always be rich and our conversations full.

- Recently I have begun to enjoy [blank] more.
- I Corinthians 13 – What do you enjoy that I can learn about so I don't always *insist on having my way*?
- I would like to learn more about or how to...
- What do you find most rejuvenating and what about it gives you energy?
- I want us to make more time to...
- I want to understand more about why you enjoy...
- Tell me more about what you have been doing or plan to do with your hobby.
- I've noticed myself getting more competitive about...

- My favorite thing to do outdoors is...
- My favorite thing to do indoors is...
- Politically, I am most interested in...
- How are things going with your [goal/dream/project]?
- I realize now why [blank] is so important to you more than I did when we were first married.
- You enjoy [blank] and we should do it more.
- What would you like to do or get for your next birthday?
- I want to help you more with...
- What meal have we not had in a while that you would enjoy?
- What things do you enjoy more now than you did 5 years ago?
- How can I show more interest in the things you enjoy?
- What talent or interest do you want to develop?
- If you could pick one new thing for me to do with you what would it be?
- What is it about your interests that are most refueling?
- What is your favorite thing to do in the Spring, Summer, Fall, or Winter?
- What is your favorite thing to do that is free?
- What are the little things that make for a great weekend?

### Spiritual Growth Topics

A Gospel-Centered Marriage has one ultimate purpose: Christ-likeness. Both husband and wife are striving to be more like Christ in order to (a) find personal satisfaction, (b) bless one another, and (c) reach the world. If that is the shared mission of husband and wife, then there is plenty to talk about. If both husband and wife are willingly pursuing Christ and realize that we are changed by grace, then these are safe conversations. If these conversations become strained, then you need to ask yourself (a) am I valuing something other than Christ, (b) are we trying to become more like Christ through external pressures rather than grace, or (c) has life become more about me than reaching the world?

- What you have you been learning in your personal Bible study recently?
- How has God challenged or encouraged you in the sermons recently?
- What things are you praying about that I can also pray for?
- Fruit of the Spirit: My sense of *peace* is most closely tied to...
- Where have you seen God at work in your life this week?
- I believe my spiritual gifts and experience could best serve...
- I Corinthians 13 – I believe God is calling me to be less *arrogant* about...
- What do you appreciate most about our church?
- I have seen you make great progress in your ability to forgive...
- Philippians 4:8 – The *truth* that I most often forget or neglect is...
- What do you appreciate most about the leaders of our church?
- What do you appreciate most about our small group?
- I believe God is calling me to sacrifice [blank] in order to [blank].
- When I am afraid I...
- How can we improve the quality of discipleship that is occurring in our family?
- I think we should be praying more for/about...
- If I thought about God and the gospel more I would...
- The “if only” I have learned to live without and still trust God is...
- What do you appreciate most about the worship at our church?
- I have seen you grow in your willingness and ability to serve our family by...
- What do you appreciate most about the servant leaders at our church?
- I have noticed God’s mercy in...
- I feel most close to God and am aware of His presence when...
- What do you appreciate most about the preaching at our church?
- I want to focus more on [blank] in my personal Bible study and devotion time.
- Beatitudes: Which of the qualities in Matthew 5:3-12 do you believe you are currently growing in?
- What is the biggest personal, family, or church blessing we should give thanks to God for?
- Who are we (personally and as a couple) making intentional efforts to share Christ with?
- What worship song or hymn best tells your life story?

## Social Topics

We were created to live in community. Our spouse should be our best friend, but not our only friend. We should have friends who are mentoring us, friends we are mentoring, friends we just “do life with,” and friends we are seeking to win for Christ. There are sides of your spouse’s character that you will only get to see and enjoy when he/she interacts with people who are different from you. One of the primary ways that a husband and wife encourage each other to live in healthy Christian community is to talk about the kinds of questions listed below.

- Who are the five most important people in your life right now?
- How can I be praying for your friends?
- How can I be praying for your Christian influence at work?
- Fruit of the Spirit: Who is the *kindest* person you know and how do they demonstrate kindness?
- I would like to see us get more involved with...
- I am grateful for our friends [name] because of how they enrich our lives.
- Philippians 4:8 – What are some of the most *admirable* qualities that we see in each other’s friends?
- Who is an older couple we need to have over for dinner and learn from their marriage?
- Who is a younger couple we need to spend time with and pour into their marriage?
- I should seek the advice/guidance of [name] about [blank].
- How can I help or encourage you to get more quality time with your friends?
- What old friend (couple or individual) do we need to reconnect with?
- Who is the first person you turn to for advice on an important question?

## Popcorn Topics

Random conversations can be a fun, light-hearted way to enjoy your spouse. Doubtless many rabbits will be chased in the conversations listed above, but below are some questions just meant to generate fun conversation. As with all the other categories, be creative and add to the list. These lists are not meant to be exhaustive (or exhausting), but merely to get you thinking about the possibilities.

- What nickname has no one called you in a long time?
- What is your idea of a dream vacation?
- If we were to move to another country where would you want to move?
- What habit of mine used to be annoying but now you find endearing?
- What decoration within our home is most meaningful to you?
- What is the most/least helpful piece of advice you’ve ever received?
- If you could ask God any question you wanted, what would you ask?
- My idea of a good Monday, Friday, weekend, etc is...
- What is something I still don’t know about you?
- If you were President and First Lady, how would the media “spin” your marriage?
- What event in your life would have won a prize on “America’s Funniest Home Videos”?
- What stereotypes do you not fit?
- What do you remember about our first date?
- How would our marriage be different if we switched personalities?
- What do you still not understand about your spouse?
- If every marriage were like your marriage how different would the world be?
- If you and your spouse had known each other in Middle School what would you have thought of each other?
- What do you think will be the “stand out quality” that your kids use to describe you to your grandchildren?
- What person in the Bible or history do you most identify with and why?

The question now shifts from, “What is there to talk about?” to “How are we going to have all of these conversations?” That is a powerful shift in mindset. But it is essential that you don’t get overwhelmed into passivity. A chapter like this can have the effect of a strong rain – there is so much information no action soaks in. Here are three suggestions help you assimilate these conversation possibilities.

First, rank your areas of strength and weakness. It is less overwhelming when you realize that you are already having or are comfortable having many of these conversations. You can intentionally put effort toward those areas of conversation that are most difficult or least natural. This intentional effort would probably entail carrying a list of the questions in your area of discomfort so that you can give them more forethought before discussing them with your spouse.

**Daily Review**

Husband's Comfort/Skill Level:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Wife's Comfort/Skill Level:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

**Reflective**

Husband's Comfort/Skill Level:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Wife's Comfort/Skill Level:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

**Romantic**

Husband's Comfort/Skill Level:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Wife's Comfort/Skill Level:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

**Planning**

Husband's Comfort/Skill Level:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Wife's Comfort/Skill Level:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

**Evaluative**

Husband's Comfort/Skill Level:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Wife's Comfort/Skill Level:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

**Confessional**

Husband's Comfort/Skill Level:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Wife's Comfort/Skill Level:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

**General Interest**

Husband's Comfort/Skill Level:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Wife's Comfort/Skill Level:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

**Spiritual**

Husband's Comfort/Skill Level:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Wife's Comfort/Skill Level:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

**Social**

Husband's Comfort/Skill Level:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Wife's Comfort/Skill Level:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

**Popcorn**

Husband's Comfort/Skill Level:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Wife's Comfort/Skill Level:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Second, you can set this list at your dinner table and rotate picking a subject from one area per night when you have dinner at home. If you have children and this would be difficult, you can put the list in the area of your home where you settle after putting the children to bed and engage a question before you begin any entertainment activities. Regardless of when and where, the main idea is to place the questions in an area where you are regularly with your spouse so that you remember to initiate conversations.

Third, you can put your favorite conversations from this list (along with your preferred additions) on slips of paper into an empty tissue box and have a raffle whenever there is a free moment for conversation. This brings a playful element to these conversations which is important (we continue to do things that are fun). In this version you can also add slips of paper with compliments and words of encouragement to one another to be drawn out and echoed during these conversation times.

**Conclusion**

After a commitment to listen well, the next most important communication commitment you can make is to talk about life. If Christ wants his bride to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thes. 5:17) and husbands are to “love their wife as Christ loves the church” (Eph. 5:25), then a gospel-centered marriage should be filled with conversations.

Despite the modern American proverb, quality time does not replace an adequate quantity of time. In the absence of a significant amount of pleasant conversation (those not built around a conflict, disagreement, or problem solving), then a normal amount of “hard conversations” will begin to make a good marriage feel like a bad marriage.

The call of this chapter is simply to enter each others’ worlds by having frequent conversations. Ask good questions, listen well, and share your thoughts. Don’t allow silence to atrophy your awareness of the person God wants you to most know and bless over the course of your lifetime.



## Evaluation: Conflict Resolution

**Note:** Each major section of the Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage series will have a brief evaluation tool to help you assess your marital strengths and weaknesses. Complete the evaluation before reading the material, then review the assessment again after completing each section to learn the accuracy of your initial self-assessment.

**Instructions:** Read the following descriptive statements. Consider how well they describe your experience or perspective on your marriage. If you are engaged, consider how well they describe your courtship experience or your beliefs about what you think your coming marriage should be. Mark the answer that best fits how you respond:

(CD) Completely Disagree, (SD) Somewhat Disagree, (NS) Not Sure, (SA) Somewhat Agree, or (CA) Completely Agree

1. We recognize that conflict done well is part of a healthy relationship.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
2. We do a good job of selecting wise times to have difficult or in-depth conversations.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
3. We agree on the type or level of offenses that need to be discussed.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
4. We are able to enter a difficult conversation with hope because of our pattern of conflict.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
5. We do not have the same disagreements over and over and over again.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
6. We are usually able to find solutions to issues that are mutually satisfying.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
7. We have a healthy and God-honoring pattern of resolving conflict.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
8. We do not allow an area of a disagreement to seem more important than our marriage.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
9. We listen to each other well and represent each other fairly even when we disagree.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
10. We resolve conflicts in a timely manner and do not let them linger for days.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
11. I accept my spouses' level/lack of desire for organization and order.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
12. My spouse accepts my level/lack of desire for organization and order.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
13. I accept my spouses' level/lack of desire for peace and harmony.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
14. My spouse accepts my level/lack of desire for peace and harmony.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
15. I accept my spouses' level/lack of desire for social interaction.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
16. My spouse accepts my level/lack of desire for social interaction.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
17. I accept my spouses' level/lack of desire to make decisions and be in charge.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
18. My spouse accepts my level/lack of desire to make decisions and be in charge.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
19. I do not allow my personal goals/preferences to take precedent over the marriage.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
20. My spouse does not allow personal goals/preferences to take precedent over the marriage.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
21. I do not allow hurts or concerns to accumulate before addressing them.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
22. My spouse does not allow hurts or concerns to accumulate before addressing them.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
23. I am able to lovingly overlook annoying things my spouse does.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
24. My spouse is able to lovingly overlook annoying things I do.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
25. I have good judgment about when something changes from annoying to offensive.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
26. My spouse has good judgment about when something moves from annoying to offensive.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
27. I maintain honor towards my spouse even when we disagree or argue.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
28. My spouse maintains honor towards me even when we disagree or argue.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
29. I resist the temptation to “clam up” or “shut down” when saying something difficult.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
30. My spouse resists the temptation to “clam up” or “shut down.”	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
31. I do not use “being honest” as an excuse to be harsh or dogmatic.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
32. My spouse does not use “being honest” as an excuse for being harsh or dogmatic.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
33. I do not use the silent treatment as a way to punish my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
34. My spouse does not use the silent treatment as a way to punish me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
35. I do not resort to insults or demeaning comments during an argument.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
36. My spouse does not resort to insults or demeaning comments during an argument.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
37. My spouse feels safe when I express my anger or hurt.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
38. I feel safe when my spouse expresses his/her anger or hurt.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
39. I am able to deal with change without it disrupting the marriage.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
40. My spouse is able to deal with change without it disrupting the marriage.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
41. I am willing to be interrupted to hear what my spouse has to say.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
42. My spouse is willing to be interrupted to hear what I have to say.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
43. During a disagreement I resist the temptation to be stubborn or inflexible.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
44. During a disagreement my spouse resists the temptation to be stubborn or inflexible.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
45. I resist the temptation to always have to win an argument.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
46. My spouse resists the temptation to always have to win an argument.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA

47. I am able to identify and willing to admit the desires that lead me to sinful conflict.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
48. My spouse is able to identify and willing to admit the desires that lead to sinful conflict.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
49. Going into a disagreement I am on guard for how my desires would tempt me to sin.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
50. Going into a disagreement my spouse is on guard for how his/her desires tempt to sin.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
51. Either of us will punish the others by restricting access to money.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
52. Either of us will pressure others to give up things important to them.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
53. Either of us will refuse to take a break or give space in an argument.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
54. Either of us have broken or thrown things in an argument.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
55. Either of us have used physical posturing to intimidate another person.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
56. Either of us will restrict others from leaving a room when I'm upset.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
57. Either of us have hit, slapped, or squeezed during an argument.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
58. Either of us have mentioned or held a weapon during an argument.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
59. Either of us have made verbal allusions to physical harm during an argument.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
60. Either of us have threatened to harm myself during an argument.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
61. When repenting we address everyone involved in or exposed to the sin.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
62. When repenting we avoid words like if, but and maybe.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
63. When repenting we admit specifically what our faults were instead of generalizing.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
64. When repenting we give thought to and verbalize how our sin hurt the other person.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
65. When repenting we accept the consequences for our actions.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
66. When repenting we offer a tangible, realistic plan for how we plan to change.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
67. When repenting we make a clear request for forgiveness.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
68. When repenting we are patient and allow time for forgiveness to be granted.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
69. I regularly repent (as defined in items 61-68) and ask my spouse for forgiveness.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
70. My spouse regularly repents (as defined in items 61-68) and seeks my forgiveness.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
71. When forgiving we remember how much Christ has personally forgiven us.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
72. When forgiving we remember that the penalty for sin was absorbed by Christ.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
73. When forgiving we make a commitment not to dwell on this sin.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
74. When forgiving we make a commitment not use this sin against our spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
75. When forgiving we make a commitment not to bring this sin up to other people.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
76. When forgiving we make a commitment to give our spouse the benefit of the doubt again.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
77. When forgiving we give evidence (word, emotion, posture) that the relationship is restored.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
78. I am able to effectively forgive and not keep a record of wrongs.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
79. My spouse is able to effectively forgive and not keep a record of wrongs.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
80. Our times of forgiveness contribute to our marriage growing closer and more intimate.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA

**Key to Survey Scoring:** For each set of questions tabulate your score using the following numerical values. The scoring is weighted with the “neutral” NS answer being a negative score, because if you have not defined or pursued important aspects of your marriage relationship it will negatively impact the marriage.

CD	–	Negative 3 points	SA	–	Positive 1 points
SD	–	Negative 2 points	CA	–	Positive 2 points
NS	–	Negative 1 point			

If your total score...

- ...matches or exceeds the total number of questions, then this area of marriage is an area of strength.
- ...is less than the total number of questions, then this area of marriage could use attention or refinement.
- ...is a negative number, then this area of marriage should be given immediate and concentrated attention.

➤ Questions 1-10: ( Total: \_\_\_\_\_ in 10 questions)

This set of questions examines the “**foundations of healthy conflict**” aspect of gospel-centered conflict resolution. What we believe about conflict matters. If we believe it is inherently bad, we will avoid it. If we believe there will always be a loser, we will chose between the roles of victor or martyr. Conflict also has momentum. How we handle past conflicts shapes our expectations and practices for future conflict. Only gospel-centered humility and wisdom can turn this momentum into healthy momentum instead.

Recommended Resources: *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande and Tom Raabe (particularly Chapter One and Appendix A) and *War of Words* by Paul David Tripp

➤ Questions 11-20: ( Total: \_\_\_\_\_ in 10 questions)

This set of questions examines the “**honoring differences in conflict**” aspect of gospel-centered conflict resolution. Conflict cannot be reduced to mere subjects and options. It also includes people with personalities, preferences, and values. These people talk about subjects and decide between options. Often we inadvertently dehumanize the other person by focusing exclusively upon the policy.

Recommended Resources: Review the “Celebrating Our Non-Moral Differences” exercise in chapter two of *Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage: Foundations*.

➤ Questions 21-50: ( Total: \_\_\_\_\_ in 30 questions)

This set of questions examines the “**healthy practices of conflict**” aspect of gospel-centered conflict resolution. Conflict is something we do. We either do it well (meaning, in a way that builds unity) or poorly (in a way that detracts from marital unity). Because of our sin nature our “natural” approaches to conflict (both instinctual and learned behaviors) do not contribute to unity. The humility, patience, and other-mindedness necessary for constructive conflict come through living out the core truths of the gospel.

Recommended Resources: *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande and Tom Raabe (particularly Chapters Two, Three, and Appendix F) and *Pursuing Peace* by Robert Jones.

➤ Questions 51-60: ( Total: \_\_\_\_\_ in 10 questions)

This set of questions examines the “**red flags in conflict**” aspect of gospel-centered conflict resolution. Not all conflict is dangerous, but the actions and attitudes described in these items are reasons for significant concern. If these behaviors (even just a few) are occurring in your marriage, they need to be taken seriously. It is recommended that you pursue marriage counseling and not try to rectify these concerns privately.

Recommended Resources: *Marriage Counseling. The Emotionally Destructive Relationship* by Leslie Vernick and *Mending the Soul* by Steven Tracy.

➤ Questions 61-70: ( Total: \_\_\_\_\_ in 10 questions)

This set of questions examines the “**robust repentance**” aspect of gospel-centered conflict resolution. Repentance is much more than saying “I’m sorry,” yet too few couples even formally apologize for their wrongs against one another. Neglecting repentance in marriage is like neglecting oil changes in your car. It may not be noticeable at first, but when the damage does come to light it will be costly.

Recommended Resources: *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande and Tom Raabe (particularly Chapter Four).

➤ Questions 71-80: ( Total: \_\_\_\_\_ in 10 questions)

This set of questions examines the “**full forgiveness**” aspect of gospel-centered conflict resolution. In a marriage between two sinners (which is every marriage) there is not a more important skill to learn than forgiveness (although repentance is equally important). The mark of a lifelong healthy marriage is not the absence of offenses, but the willingness to view offenses in light of our forgiveness from God and, therefore, being willing to forgive.

Recommended Resources: *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande and Tom Raabe (particularly Chapter Five); *Unpacking Forgiveness* by Chris Brauns; and *Choosing Forgiveness* by Nancy Leigh DeMoss

Sometimes within a marriage the problem is not one specific area or issue but an overall imbalance in the effort, skill, thoughtfulness, and awareness being put into the marriage. Below is a list of questions that reveal your perspective on your effort and your spouse’s effort in the marriage. Use the same numerical scoring system as you used above. In this case, the closer your scores are to another, the more mutual (and typically healthy) the marriage.

\_\_\_\_\_ **My Score** – Using the same scoring system as above add together the score for odd numbered questions in 11-50, and questions 69 and 78.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Spouse’s Score** – Using the same scoring system add together the score for even numbered questions in 11-50, and questions 70 and 79.

## Chapter 4

# Conflict Resolution Navigating Differences without Dividing

**Plumb Lines:** These are the “sticky” statements that capture the core messages of this chapter.

- Conflict done well can be the best friend of your marriage.
- The best outcome for marital conflict is neither avoidance nor victory, but honor and unity.
- The biggest battle in every conflict is with yourself not your spouse.
- The surest evidence of idolatry is an over-reaction; be sure not to misname it a need.

**Memorize:** James 4:1-2a, 6 (ESV), “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel... But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’” As you memorize this passage reflect upon these key points:

- “Causes” – We often become so consumed with “what” we think is wrong that we fail to ask “why?”
- “You” – Read James 1:1 and realize the original readers were people willing to face persecution for their faith.
- “Passions.... desire” – Conflict done wrong ultimately stems from wanting something bad enough to sin to get it.
- “War within you” – Our desires are not passive. They fight for fulfillment even at the expense of our loved ones.
- “Proud... humble” – The key to conflict done well is not a strategy or skill but humility.

### Teaching Notes

“The Bible nowhere calls us to grin and bear it for the sake of the relationship. In fact, I am persuaded that our silence in the face of wrong is not motivated by a desire to love the other well but by not wanting to hassle through the difficult process of kind and loving confrontation. We are silent not because we love our spouse but because we love ourselves, and we do not want to put ourselves through something uncomfortable (p. 93).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

“Conflict, far from being a sign of moral or marital failure, is God’s chosen means of rescuing his people and destroying sin. Don’t lose sight of this fact: God will rescue us, and marriage, through conflict (p. 141).” Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*

“The nature of sin, you see, is war. Sin creates war—war with God, war with others, and war within yourself (p. 46).... Mercy doesn’t change the need to speak truth. It transforms our motivation (p. 82).... One thing I’ve learned, if I can avert a two-hour argument with two minutes of mercy, that’s a win for everybody involved (p. 87).” Dave Harvey in *When Sinners Say “I Do”*

“This failure to show respect is a sign of immaturity more than an inevitable pathway of marriage (p. 57).” Gary Thomas in *Sacred Marriage*

“Buried expectations can poison a relationship. Unresolved expectations often lead to demands, and demands lead to manipulation. One person maneuvers the other to meet the expectation, while the other tries to avoid it. Inevitably, this leads to isolation in marriage, with two people playing absurd but dangerous games in an attempt to establish control (p. 38-39).” Dennis Rainey (editor) in *Preparing for Marriage*

“Notice that the things that control your life may not be the things that you pursue but the things you avoid. For instance, rejection can be an idol in the same way as approval (p. 30).” Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*

“Trait names and exaggerations work the same way and have a similar effect... Both, in effect, reduce a spouse’s identity to his or her sinful behavior. Trait names and exaggeration communicate, ‘You’re no more and no better than what you’ve just done’ (p. 125)... To sin is to treat people as objects (p. 98).” Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*

### Embedded Study

The best outcome for marital conflict is neither avoidance nor victory, but honor and unity. We must realize how much the mindset we take into conflict determines the outcome of our disagreements. Many of us feel like conflict is inherently wrong and, therefore, whenever it occurs, feel defeated. Others of us are competitive and when conflict arises have an instinctual “game on” response that generates a “refuse to lose” mindset.

Conflict done well can be the best friend of your marriage. This is not a nicer recasting of the mantra “fight hard; make up hard.” It is a reality rooted in the “two sides of the same coin” relationship between love and anger.

“Anger is the fluid that love bleeds when you cut it (p. 97).” C.S. Lewis in *Letters to Malcom*

When we get angry or experience love we are saying that something matters a lot. When we get sinfully angry we are saying that this “something” matters more than our spouse (at least in that moment). When we express self-control we are saying that our spouse matters more than this “something.” This is why conflict done well is romantic – it affirms the value of the marriage over life’s circumstances or people’s failures and creates an atmosphere of safety.

**Read Proverbs 12:18.** Our words will change our lives and our marriage. Those words spoken in moments of intense emotion and pivotal decisions will change our lives even more significantly. As graphic as it may sound, unless our words “bring healing” to the difficult moments, they will serve as “sword thrusts” to our marriage. Scripture uses this imagery to sober our hearts and slow our tongues during times when we tend to be too free with our speech and quick with our words.

Is it natural to do conflict in a way that blesses your marriage? No, if it were, there would be no need for so many books on communication. In the next two chapters we will consider the key skills to getting conflict back on track after it goes poorly – repentance and forgiveness. But first, in this chapter, we will look at the journey into conflict using four questions to guide our thinking.

1. Should we address a particular hurt, concern, or disagreement?
2. How do we determine what we disagree on?
3. How, when, and where should we have these conversations?
4. For what do we need to be most on guard during conflict?

### To Speak or Not to Speak?

The first question in every conflict is whether it is worth addressing. Many unnecessary fights are engaged and many beneficial conversations are avoided in every marriage. The first part of wisdom is not knowing what to say, but discerning whether to speak. This is a discernment issue. If you have a “general policy” for what you do, then you are likely imposing your preferences on your marriage rather than applying biblical wisdom.

“Honest communication doesn’t mean saying the first thing that comes to mind. The goal is always to speak the truth in love with the purpose of building up the other (p. 121).” Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*

Consider the following modes of interaction advocated by Scripture. All are “legitimate” responses to some conflicts or disappointments, because they are biblical. The responses are listed in a progressive order – the early ones for milder concerns and latter for severe concerns. After describing each response, we will provide some guidance on when each response is appropriate. While the order is progressive, not all conflicts will pass through each step.

**Give Grace / Overlook:** (Matthew 7:1-2 and Proverbs 19:11) If we addressed everything we didn’t like we would become negative, perfectionists who held our preferences and standards to be the will of God for our spouse. Giving grace is a primary way that we show that we value our marriage more than our preferences. This is what allows a home to be a warm place where both people feel safe to be themselves and make mistakes. This “atmosphere of grace” should be a trademark of a gospel-centered marriage that lays a foundation of trust for the remaining responses to our differences.

“Trust doesn’t demand perfection. Trust demands humility (p. 141).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

What kind of issues fall under the category of “give grace and overlook”?

- Issues that are not immoral (these are usually matters of personal preference).
- Issues that are not a habitual disregard for your stated preferences (the issue is dishonor rather than the action).
- Things that should come up in day-to-day communication (if you’re implementing chapter three).
- Subjects that will result in bitterness or grumbling on your part if you remain silent.
- Subjects of lesser importance than areas of requested growth and change in the life of your spouse.

**Confess as You Address:** (Matthew 7:3-5) Many things will and should pass through the first filter (even things that are not wrong). But the first filter, when properly applied, changes our attitude at this second level of concerns. We become more humble and patient when we ask good questions. The key principle in this arena of conflict is to model the response to your sin that you desire from your spouse; model the response to your spouse's preferences that you want for your own. When we neglect this principle, we begin to focus most on what we can control least; which is a recipe to exacerbate anger, anxiety, or despair.

“In marriage you are not trusting that your spouse will be perfect, but you are trusting him to be willing to deal with his failures with honesty, humility, and the commitment to change (p. 156-157).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

What kind of issues fall under the category of “confess as you address”?

- Issues that are moral, but which were not vindictive in motive.
- Issues where stated preferences are being habitually disregarded.
- Subjects which are not likely to come up in day-to-day communication.
- Subjects which will negatively impact your spouse's other relationships (i.e., children, friends, work, etc...).

**Seek Counsel:** (Proverbs 11:14 and Galatians 6:2) Sometimes you will “confess as you address” and still not arrive at a workable solution. This is normal. Just as no person is good at everything, no couple will resolve every challenge on their own. When couples skip this stage in the progression and go directly to confrontation (which when prematurely applied is more likely accusation) conflict becomes intense. The humility initially expressed in “confess as you address” should continue as the couple reaches out to trusted advisors (i.e., small group leaders, mentors, pastors, or counselor) to seek guidance on issues for which they cannot reach agreement or find a solution.

What kind of issues fall under the category of “seek counsel”?

- Subjects that the couple cannot agree on whether they are moral or preference issues.
- Subjects where the couple cannot find a mutually satisfying agreement.
- Subjects where the couple disagrees on key aspects of the conflict.
- Subjects where an objective perspective or specialized training would prove beneficial.

**Confront and Call to Change:** (Colossians 3:16) If “confess as you address” is ineffective and “seek counsel” is not embraced, then it is appropriate to “confront and call to change” for significant offenses. The issues that fit in this category and beyond should all be moral offenses; not merely violations of preference. In order for these confrontations to be effective, your tone must remain respectful and controlled (II Tim. 2:24-25). If not, then what you are saying will get lost in how you are saying it. Your spouse should not be surprised by what you are saying, or else you have neglected the prior stages of conflict. This confrontation should follow the basic pattern, “I believe [blank] is sinful, damaging to our marriage, and your relationship with God. I am asking out of respect for our marriage that you give this concern the attention it deserves.”

What kind of issues fall under the category of “confront and call to change”?

- Moral issues which your spouse neglects after multiple “confess as you address” interactions.
- Subjects which are significant enough to damage the marriage, other relationships, or your spouse's reputation.
- Subject where, if you were able to “seek counsel,” that there was consensus on the need for change.

**Be Longsuffering:** (Romans 12:14-21) You should not race through these stages of conflict. There is definitely no “prize” at the end. When we can do so without placing ourselves, children, or spouse in jeopardy we should try to allow “our kindness to bring our spouse to repentance (Rom 2:4)” after a confrontation and call for change. That is the preferred approach to influencing a hard-hearted spouse in Scripture (I Pet. 3:1-6, in this context of patience this passage can be applied from husbands to wives without the connotation of submission). Being longsuffering is not condoning the offensive behavior, but choosing to allow God to be the agent of conviction after confrontation was not received.

What kind of issues fall under the category of “be longsuffering”?

- Neglected personal preferences which do warrant private confrontation but not collective confrontation.
- Moral offenses which do not put the family in physical or financial jeopardy.
- Areas of weakness (i.e., skill, self-awareness, memory, etc...) in your spouse which are hurtful to you.

**Confront and Involve Others:** (Matthew 18:16) If things reach this stage in the confrontation process, then the “others” involved would be spiritual authorities over your marriage (i.e., small group leader, elders, or pastors). If you are not a part of a church, then this phase would likely be called an “intervention.” There are significant social ramifications for this style

of confrontation, so the risk of not confronting needs to outweigh the risk of confronting. When getting ready to make this level of confrontation, the confronting spouse should be receiving personal counsel and guidance.

What kind of issues fall under the category of “confront and involve others”?

- Offenses which are lifestyle in nature (i.e., addiction, adultery, abuse, chronic neglect, deceit, etc...).
- Offenses which if unaddressed are likely to destroy the marriage.
- Offenses detailed in the “red flags in conflict” section of the evaluation at the front of this chapter.
- Offenses for which you would bear legal liability if you did not report and involve others.

**Distance Yourself for Safety:** (Matthew 7:6, 18:17 and Romans 13:1-7) Each of these passages come to the advisement of creating distance after a process of seeking to be reconciled by various means. Distance is never recommended as a threat to coerce change; that either produces short-term change or an escalation of conflict and only makes the unhealthy situation more destructive. However, guilt over believing this phrase is “biblically off limits” often leads to the gamesmanship of avoiding a separation for safety, church discipline, and legal reporting. Again, if you are at this stage, you should be involving a pastor or counselor with experience in the challenge facing your marriage.

What kind of issues fall under the category of “distance yourself for safety”?

- Any form or threat of physical violence or forced sexual activity towards yourself or the children.
- Threats to harm him/herself if you do not acquiesce to your spouse’s demands.
- Unwillingness to end an adulterous relationship.
- Chronic neglect or abuse (more resources available at [www.bradhambrick.com/selfcenteredspouse](http://www.bradhambrick.com/selfcenteredspouse)).

### **What Are We Fighting About?**

“Fighting” is (or should most often be) too strong of a word, but defining the nature and significance of the disagreement is an essential (and often overlooked) part of healthy conflict. Accurately defining the nature and significance of a disagreement is a key part of ensuring that the disagreement is resolved at the early stages of the conflict progression described above.

The first question is, “What is the nature of our disagreement?” Frequently couples are having two different conversations about the same subject. When this happens, it is usually not long before they are talking about two different subjects and can’t remember what started the now argument in the first place.

There are four types of disagreements that a couple can have. We will discuss them in the order from most to least difficult to resolve. This will help us answer our second question, “How significant is our disagreement?” As you study the various types of differences consider how not identifying the type of disagreement you are having pushes a conversation to the more significant types of differences.

1. **Factual Differences:** When a couple does not agree on the facts related to their disagreement, an argument has degenerated to a point that trust has likely been compromised and neither person views the other as “being reasonable.” In these instances, a couple should begin (preferably with the assistance of a counselor, pastor, or mentor couple) with the question, “What relevant facts do we agree upon?” and move to the question, “What contributes to us disagreeing on the other relevant facts that must be either true or false?”

Facts are not something a couple can “agree to disagree on.” Couples can disagree on definitions, values, and policies. But disagreeing on facts is an implicit accusation that your spouse is either lying or crazy. There is not a third option when you disagree on facts, and trust is not given to a deceitful or irrational person.

At this level of disagreement it is important to differentiate between the actual facts you disagree upon and the implication of those facts (values and policies). Discussing implications before resolving the factual disagreements will reinforce the perception that you are in an unsafe conversation with an unsafe person. Arguing about implications also takes you further from the foundational point from which unity will be built.

2. **Differences in Definitions:** “Was what I said really disrespectful?... Did that action really communicate that I don’t love you?... When I did that I wasn’t trying to tell you we couldn’t have sex.” These kinds of statements reveal a difference of definition. A couple agrees on the facts (what was said or done), but does not agree on the meaning of those facts.

In these instances the couple should begin with the question, “Why did (or didn’t) that action/statement mean to you what it meant to me?” It shouldn’t be surprising that two people can interpret the same event/statement differently. But too often in marriage we are surprised (then offended) when our spouse doesn’t think like we do. We turn a moment of learning and honor into a moment of indignation and condemnation.

Sometimes differences of definition are innocent and simply require a time of learning to honor the uniqueness of your spouse. Other times differences of definition reveal selfishness or self-centeredness that should be resolved through repentance. However, until we humbly engage the kind of questions provided above, then a couple will argue based upon the assumption their spouse does or should see the event the same way they do.

3. **Differences in Values:** “Is A worth B? Is this amount of time worth that benefit? Is this level of sacrifice worth that outcome? Is this fun activity worth that cost?” This is the form a difference in value takes. In order to phrase the question this way a couple must agree upon facts and definitions.

These kinds of decisions often have significantly different implications for each spouse. That is why it is best to start these conversations with the question, “If we did A, how would B effect you?” Hearing each other answer this question is a vital part of protecting unity during a difficult decision. Even when “your option” is selected (assuming a third more mutual way cannot be found), it is imperative that your spouse knows you understand and give appropriate weight to how this decision effects him/her.

Like differences of definition, differences of value can be innocent or reveal selfishness. Again, it shouldn’t be surprising that we instinctively consider things from the perspective of our benefit and will frequently need to repent for the biasing effect this has on our values. One of the primary benefits of a gospel-centered marriage is that it creates an atmosphere of grace where we can be honest about this tendency without making excuses.

4. **Policy Differences:** Most disagreements end with an answer to the question, “What are we going to do?” or “How should we respond to having hurt one another (if the disagreement began with hurt feelings instead of a formal decision)?” It is important to see that these kinds of questions can only be effectively answered when there is agreement on facts, definitions, and values.

While on differences of definitions and values a couple may “agree to disagree” or “choose to see things from the other person’s perspective,” on differences of policy a couple will compromise (find a middle/third way), delay the decision (not always possible), or choose between available options. Having taken the time to understand the “differences of definition” will ensure that both partners feel understood. Being sympathetic towards the differences in values is a strong preventative from bitterness or becoming a “purely functional” couple.

In these decisions it is important to be balanced without being measured (i.e., score keeping). It would be an abuse of male headship to say that the husband always gets his way when agreement cannot be reached. It would be an abuse of servant leadership to say that the husband should always defer to his wife’s preference. Navigating these moments will be dealt with more thoroughly in “Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage: Decision Making.”

A quick word on how to use these categories, don’t get too tedious. If you do, then marital conversations will begin to feel like business meetings. When you feel that you and your spouse are “not on the same page” work from the foundation (agreement on facts) to the top (agreement on policy). Identify the level where you do agree and then work toward the actual decision (i.e., policy).

Now we are ready to answer the second question is, “How significant is our disagreement?” Too often couples engage in their disagreement as if the issue were more important than the marriage. When this occurs a couple may agree on facts, definitions, values and policy yet the spouse who places more value on the subject still believes the other person “doesn’t get it.” This dynamic is common even outside of marriage.

“One of the things that Christians are disagreed about is the importance of their disagreements. When two Christians of different denominations start arguing, it is usually not long before one asks where such-and-such a point ‘really matters’ and the other replies: ‘Matters? Why it’s absolutely essential (p. x).’” *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis

When a couple disagrees about the significance of a topic the most important thing is to establish that the issue is not more important than the marriage. A primary way to do this is through listening accompanied by touch. Rudeness (interrupting and rushing) are an indication that the issue is more important than the marriage. This is why listening is such a honoring-rich activity. Inviting your spouse to come close is another way to show the marriage takes precedence over the issue.

### How Should We Disagree?

So you’ve decided whether the issue should be addressed, what type of issue it is, and how significant the issue is... now what? In most cases it is fine to just have the conversation. But if you anticipate the conflict to be difficult to do well, it is important to think through how, when, and where to introduce the conversation.



We have developed a “Conversation Log” to help you think through how to have an effective conflict. While it is unlikely that you will use this document frequently, it helpful to have a visual for how to arrange the pieces of an effective conflict. It can serve as a checklist or protocol as you seek to implement what you’re learning.

The “Conversation Log” can also be used as a post-conflict evaluation. You can use it to trace choices that were made (intentionally or not) as you reflect on the conflict. Too often these post-conflict reflections degenerate into fantasizing about “what I should have said” to “win” the argument instead of assessing “what we could have done” in order to honor one another throughout the discussion.

**When and Where:** Ask yourself, “Does this time and location add to or subtract from the likelihood this conversation will go well?” Are other people around? Is there time to discuss the subject? Are you in emotional control and do you have the information necessary to engage this conversation? Has your spouse had adequate time to prepare for the conversation (if applicable)? When does a decision needs to be reached (is the conversation being rushed or has it been avoided)?

Not all conversations will allow for intentional selection of time and location. But you should get in the habit of assessing how time factors and location variables impact a conflict. Whenever possible you should honor one another by demonstrating self-control and intentionality in when and where difficult conversations are engaged.

**Subject:** Have you ever been in an argument and asked, “What are we fighting about anyway?” only to find both of you staring with confusion at one another? Conflict is a time of powerful emotions – not just anger, but also anxiety, insecurity, jealousy, despair, competitiveness, etc... This contributes to the tendency of difficult conversations to change subjects frequently. When we are emotional, our minds do not tend to stay focused on one thing.

Defining and remaining on subject is a basic, but difficult, skill in effective conflict resolution. When a couple does not do a good job of defining the subject (maybe even by going so far as writing it down) it will be difficult to “stay on subject” in the midst of a conflict.

*Assessment Question:* How many of your conflicts go poorly because they hop from topic to topic or try to accomplish too many things in a single conversation?

If a given topic is an easier subject for you than your spouse, then honor your spouse by giving them the subject in advance. Write it down, give it to them, and say, “I know this isn’t the most comfortable / natural subject for you to discuss [handing them a “Conversation Log” with the subject area filled in], but it is important to me. This topic is something I’d like for us to discuss it this week [or other situation-appropriate time frame].” Having a tangible piece of paper can serve as a perpetual reminder so that you are not in a position to use repetition (i.e., “nagging”) to “check in.”

**Future Topics:** “We can talk about that later,” is the File 13 or black hole of conversation. Unless we have a way to capture important topics that arise during a conversation, each spouse will be prone to try to change subjects whenever it is of more interest / benefit to them.

The bottom side bar of the “Conversation Log” is meant to disrupt this destructive pattern of conflict. It is a place to put important, relevant subjects that need to be addressed so they won’t be forgotten. Remember, if you finish the present conversation and honor one another as you do so, then you will enter those “future topics” with positive momentum and trust instead of negative momentum.

**Guidelines:** These are not rules to be followed, but points of awareness to maintain. If you treat them as rules, then your primary focus will become looking to see when they are broken. That would transform them into weapons. As points of awareness they simply remind of us where our focus needs to be in order to “get somewhere” in the conversation.

*Pray:* Genuine prayer humbles us and places our current conversation in perspective. One of the most common destructive patterns in conflict is allowing the subject to become too large / significant in our eyes. Prayer places every conflict in the context of God’s glory, God’s love, and our need for Him.

*Honor:* If we fail to fairly represent our spouse’s words and tone, then we are no longer talking to our spouse but to a figment of our imagination. We cannot hold our real spouse responsible for how we were offended by what our “imaginary spouse” said or did. If you define what your spouse meant by his/her words you are no longer a safe person to talk to because you have violated a foundational principle of communication – meaning belongs to the author/speaker.

*Sit:* For some people sitting will be a way to maintain self-control. If you are upset, then moving around in conflict will further activate your adrenal system and, thereby, intensify your emotions. For other people sitting will be way to express honor. A difficult conversation should not be multi-tasked. If your spouse is upset and you are giving attention to other things, you are communicating that those things are more important to you than your spouse’s peace of mind.



### CONVERSATION LOG

Date: \_\_\_ / \_\_\_ / \_\_\_ Su M T W R F Sa Place: \_\_\_\_\_ Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Topic:

Difference in \_\_\_ Facts \_\_\_ Definitions \_\_\_ Values \_\_\_ Policy

Discussion Notes:

#### Guidelines for Conversation:

1. Pray before starting
2. Honor one another by fairly representing tone and content
3. Remain seated
4. Avoid body language that communicates anger or withdrawal
5. If you are at a loss for words simply say “thank you.”

#### Progression of an Idol:

I Desire: \_\_\_\_\_



I Demand By: \_\_\_\_\_



I Judge By: \_\_\_\_\_



I Punish By: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Future Topics:

Notes Continue on Back

Action Steps / Decisions:

*Body Language:* The majority of communication is nonverbal, especially as it pertains to establishing the tone or atmosphere of a conflict. The following postures communicate attentiveness and openness: stillness, leaning forward, tilted head, eye contact, relaxed brow, uncrossed arms, uncrossed legs, nodding, soft touch, relaxed hands, and interest noises (i.e., uh-huh or mmm). Paying attention to these variables is an important way to show other-mindedness and improve the atmosphere of difficult conversations.

“*Thank You*”: Effective marital conflict does not require always knowing what to say. If you get “stuck” and don’t know what to say, use that moment to affirm your spouse by saying something like, “Thank you for how you’ve having this conversation with me. I’m not sure what to say right now, but I’m confident because of how we’re honoring one another, we’ll figure it out and be closer because of it.”

**Discussion:** The area of discussion notes should not be a transcript of the conversation. In this area you just want to capture the flow and major points or concerns of both people. If questions are raised that you need to get more information about, then write down the question and who is taking responsibility for that research.

If you view this section as “keeping minutes” in a business meeting, it will feel too formal. But if you realize that you’re merely writing a history of conflict-done-well (we only tend to remember conflict-done-poorly), then you can begin to view this exercise as a valuable form of marriage enrichment.

**Action Steps / Decisions:** Healthy conflict has a beginning (defining the subject), middle (discussion notes), and end (action steps and decisions). Unhealthy communication has a beginning, middle, beginning, beginning, middle, beginning, etc... until it abruptly stops.

Often, because of the various emotions which cloud our memory in difficult conversations, couples will remember what they decided in these interactions very differently. This is why it can be important to right down what you decided at the end of a difficult conversation. This is not an expression of mistrust in one another, but a humble acknowledgement that our desires (see next section) effect our memory.

As we transition to the final section of this chapter, one acknowledgement needs to be made – no marriages suffer from bad communication *because* of “Conversation Log Deficiency Disorder (CLDD).” The purpose of these first three questions is to remove the distractions and excuses that would prevent us from answering the final question about conflict.

“Good communication skills and clever strategies for romance could be helpful, but these devices are never enough in the end. Really, they are nowhere near enough, and can actually be deadly. When skillful communication and clever romance grow and thrive under the sway of sinful desires and personal power they will be manipulative and sinister (p. 151).” John Henderson in *Catching Foxes*

### What Do We Need to Guard Against?

At the end of this examination we still have not answered the main question, one posed very well in James 4:1a, “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?” If we love each other, why do we argue? If we are willing to sacrifice for one another, why do little things come between us? Why do we need to be reminded of such common sense principles of communication, shouldn’t genuine love propel us naturally towards healthy communication?

Until we answer these questions our efforts at consistently implementing anything else we learned and reconciling after bad communication episodes will be thwarted. One of the most common reasons why couples become dissatisfied with their marriage is because they have an inaccurate answer to these questions that leads them to look everywhere except the gospel to remedy their communication struggles. The bold text outline (i.e., desire, demand, judge, punish) for this section is adapted from Ken Sande’s book *Peacemaking for Families*.

**I Desire:** James 4:1b-2a provides the answer to these questions, “Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.” Simply put we engage in unhealthy communication because we do not get what we want and we listen to our desires more than we trust God or honor our spouse.

We cannot simply rephrase the question, “How can I communicate in such a way to ensure I get what I want?” That still centers our life on our desires (idolatry) and is a form of manipulation (sin). Unless the question is, “How can I trust God and honor my spouse as I am honest about my desires?” then our desires (even the good ones) will be a destructive force in our marriage.

“The big battles in marriage are not the ones you fight with your spouse. No, the big battles are the ones being fought in your heart. All of the horizontal skirmishes between husband and wife are the result of this deeper battle (p. 127).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

“One sure sign of idolatry is when we overreact to something (p. 37).” Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*

It is important to note that the Greek word for “desire” in James 4 does not carry the connotation of evil, sinful, or bad. It is a neutral term. The majority of unhealthy marital conflict occurs when we want good things too much. So the most important step in doing conflict well is identifying which desires most commonly “war within you.” Use the list below to help you identify the desires that are most important to you.

Power	Approval	Comfort	Image	Control	Dependence
Independence	Inclusion	Achievement	Prosperity	Work	Religion
Irreligion	Race / culture	A person	Family	Helping	Suffering
Privacy	Schedule	Job	Education	Fairness	A dream
Other: _____			Other: _____		

*Conversation Point:* Talk with your spouse about which of these items are most influential in your emotions or sense of security. Talk about how each one affects you differently. Be willing to admit how those that are most important to you can negatively influence your actions. Ask how you can use those desires that are most important to your spouse to help him/her feel loved and secure.

As a couple, how you approach your driving desires and your spouse’s driving desires is one of the most important aspects of your marriage. You should understand that you honoring your spouse’s desires is an important way for you to protect your spouse from temptation without allowing this to lead you to take responsibility for your spouse’s sin (codependency). You should also be able to communicate clearly and patiently what you desire without explaining your bad behaviors as being caused by a delay in these desires being met (blame-shifting or manipulation).

Culturally, we resist seeing this dynamic by changing the word “desire” to “need.” With this change in vocabulary we begin to believe that any hesitancy or delay in meeting our desires/needs according to our preferences and on our time table is a threat to our personal, emotional, and relational well-being. This makes our over-reactions seem justified.

**I Demand:** With the desire-need change in mindset it is easy to see how we justify our demanding behaviors.

“One of the things that harms marriage is entitlement. Sinners have great skill at turning blessings into needs. It is very easy for us to reason that we are deserving of something and therefore it is right for us to be demanding of it... Here’s how it works: If I am convinced that something is a need, and you say to me, it seems right to expect that you will meet this need... Calling something a need that is not actually a need is one of the ways we tend to excuse self-focus and the demands that accompany it (p. 200).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

What we often miss in this transition is the way that demanding a desire destroys our ability to enjoy it when/if we receive it. Spouses who demand affection or sex are not likely to get the energetic participation they desire. Spouses who demand affirmation are less likely to hear compliments as being sincere and heart-felt. Our demands quickly turn us into the martyrs of our own sinful communication.

Beyond this, demanding a desire usually changes what we receive when our spouse tries to honor our preferences. A spouse who demands respect is more likely to get fear. A spouse who demands to be heard is more likely to get a form a slavish agreement. The result is that demand makes our desires less and less satisfying because it makes what we are receiving less and less of what God designed.

**Read Psalm 115.** Notice how we tend to become like what we worship (v. 8). Consider how lifeless your desires are apart from God (v. 5-7) and the kinds of grace-based relationships God designed. Realize that the only protection from becoming demanding in a way that defines life by our desires is trust in God’s love and provision (v. 9-15).

Reflection: What are the changes in tone, posture, and words that typically reveal you have moved from desire to demand?

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**I Judge:** Once our desires take on the significance of a demand they begin to define the kinds of things that only God should define – right and wrong, worth my time and not worth my time, friend and foe, etc... When this happens anyone who is at odds with our driving desire becomes “bad” in our eyes. They are now on the “other team” as our idol-desire has now defined them. We obey our desire by looking down upon, tuning out, or attacking our spouse for not reverencing our desire as we believe they ought to.

“Think of five good things that are important to you in marriage. Try to imagine what it looks like when any one of those things becomes most important to you, an idol (p. 37).” Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*

These judging actions become self-perpetuating. If we allow our attitude to become judgmental, we must admit our desires took on idolatrous proportions. We know we over-reacted, but use our spouse’s sin or neglect as justification for our own. It feels like we are being judged for our legitimate desire and this makes our spouse seem even more wrong and unreasonable to us.

This is the trap of relational sin; because “nobody is perfect” we always have a “reason” for our sinful communication. Both people feel justified by the logic, “How was I supposed to respond rightly when you [blank]?” There is only one way out of this trap – two people humbly relying upon the gospel.

- Only the gospel shows us that our biggest problem is relying on people for what only God can give.
- Only the gospel gives us eyes to see how we view the world through idol-colored glasses.
- Only the gospel reminds us we are more like the person who neglects or sins against us than we are different.
- Only the gospel allows us to acknowledge these dark realities without getting lost in shame.
- Only the gospel provides the level of acceptance that frees us to respond graciously to the injustices of life.
- Only the gospel unites two people whose driving desires will frequently be at odds with one another.

Reflection: What are the judging labels you put on your spouse when your driving desire is or could be in jeopardy?

**I Punish:** What started so reasonable (legitimate desires grown too large) now becomes destructive (actions and words that harm the marriage) and embarrassing (words and actions we minimize because they’re uncomfortable to admit). When we are the offender in this progression we focus on how legitimate our desires were. When we are the offended, we focus on how wrong and hurtful our spouse’s words and actions were.

The purpose of this chapter is to allow a couple to look together at both ends of the progression (i.e., good desires and sinful punishment) and for both people to deal what they find in light of the gospel. When a couple will take this courageous step together their conflict will draw them closer to each other and closer to God. This is why conflict done well is the best friend of your marriage.

With that said, this part of the self-examination will be highly uncomfortable. In order to gain an accurate assessment you will likely need to ask your spouse what he/she experiences during conflict with you. Every spouse has sin patterns that show up on this list. These sin patterns show up most during conflict. The only question is whether you will admit them during times of peace when the two of you are in a frame of mind to discuss them civilly and deal with them biblically.

“Knowing God’s Word or what he says about marriage isn’t enough; we must be willing to see ourselves accurately, in action, as we interact with our spouses (p. 20)... To admit that you can be manipulative is simply to say that you’re a sinner. The question isn’t whether you manipulate but how you manipulate. To take the time to identify the typical ways that you manipulate your spouse can be a real advantage to growing in love (p. 89).” Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*

We will look at ten ways that couples commonly punish during conflict. Each of these tactics (yes, we are implying that these are done for strategic benefit even when we do them instinctually) has varying degrees of intensity and multiple forms of expression. However, you should be able to use this list to capture a clear understanding of how you punish during conflict.

1. **Exaggeration:** We can distort what has occurred by magnifying what our spouse did, minimizing what we did, inflating our volume, giving their words more meaning than what was actually said, or allowing our emotions to dominate the conversation. All of these are ways to punish our spouse through exaggeration.
2. **Misdirection:** We can make a conversation very slippery by changing subjects or bringing up irrelevant information. This punishes our spouse by frustrating their efforts to address their concern. We create a lose-lose scenario where our spouse must either nag for their concern (in which case we can criticize their repetition or anger) or forfeit / forget their concern.
3. **Mind Reading:** “What you really mean is...” “You did this just because you wanted to...” This form of punishment assumes the worst about your spouse and robs your spouse of his/her voice. It assumes that your spouse would not be honest. At the same time that mind reading is punishing, it is also insulting and can be emotionally abusive.
4. **Trait Names:** Calling someone by their sin (i.e., liar, pervert, addict, etc...) or weakness (i.e., stupid, fatty, etc...) mistakes their actions for their identity. We will either use the emotionally powerful moments of marriage to

reinforce our spouse’s identity in Christ, or we will highlight the things that Satan would use to keep our spouse from Christ. That is the great power of conflict; for better or worse.

5. **Shaming:** Events from the past are the “Cold War” arsenal of marital life. Once one spouse begins to use this artillery there is frequently an “arms race” to make sure that each person is ready for future attacks. When this takes root in a marriage both spouses become well rehearsed in their arguments and conflict becomes highly repetitive. The biggest problem with shaming is that it brings up failures in a way that can only create pain. The difference between shaming a loving confrontation is whether you’re speaking for a redemptive outcome.
6. **Defensiveness:** “You’re a bad person for bringing up my mistake,” is the message and mindset of defensiveness. “I can’t believe you’re going to bring up ‘A’ when you did ‘B’.” This punishing strategy has the double impact of avoiding A while refocusing the conflict on B. Usually anything that would be good strategy in a political debate has no place in a couple’s conflict.
7. **Double Bind:** This form of punishment creates an unwinnable scenario for our spouse. It is the equivalent of a parent saying to a child, “Don’t talk back to me” and “Speak when you’re spoken to” in the same conversation. A spouse might say, “If you loved me you would be a better provider and spend more time with me.” Often the punisher is unaware of the destructiveness of this pattern of conflict because he/she is focused exclusively on how much he/she wants both outcomes.
8. **Appeasement:** Agreeing to something you know you will not fulfill or will foster bitterness is a form of punishment. It is often the lazy way out of conflict that masquerades as “keeping the peace.” It is a passive-aggressive form of punishment that will attempt to make the other person seem unreasonable for their initial request. It is wrong because it is a form of dishonesty that manipulates circumstances for personal gain over blessing the marriage.
9. **Physical or Emotional Distance:** Silent treatment, giving the cold shoulder, and other forms of ignoring are punishing responses to conflict. Again, because these are of the passive-aggressive variety so we tend to justify them by saying they’re “better than the alternative.” That is only true if we assume that the only alternative is an aggressively dishonoring response. The true alternative is a mature response between two people who humbly put honoring God and the best interest of the marriage ahead of their personal preferences.
10. **Unhealthy Attachments:** It can be as “innocent” as overly investing in your children, parents, work, friends, or other positive relationships. It can be as destructive as a flirty relationship with a member of the opposite sex or the mere threat to get what I want (i.e., sex, attention) from another man/woman. In either case the position of your spouse is usurped by someone who gets “promoted.” Whether this is vindictive replacement or passive-aggressive retreat into easier relationships, it is form of conflict punishment that creates inevitable destruction as the friendship of marriage finds a substitute.

Reflection: What forms of punishment are you most prone to implement when your driving desires are not met?

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### Closing

The great danger of this chapter is that you will merely “try harder” to implement “better teaching” as if the reason that you’ve managed conflict poorly in the past has been an information deficiency. We tend to love the kinds of lists and processes found in this chapter because we want to believe that these things will help us tame our tongues and lives.

“We never have followed the advice of the great teachers. Why are we likely to begin now? Why are we more likely to follow Christ than any of the others? Because He is the best moral teacher? But that makes it even less likely that we shall follow Him. If we cannot take the elementary lessons, is it likely we are going to take the most advanced ones? If Christianity only means one more bit of good advice, then Christianity is of no importance. There has been no lack of good advice for the last four thousand years. A bit more will make no difference. (p. 156).” *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis

**Read James 3:2-12.** Notice that our words do influence every area of our lives (v. 2). If it were possible to do conflict perfectly by following the guidelines of this chapter (or better writing) it would give us a perfect life. But after two images of how the tongue influences our lives (v. 3-6), James points out that our words are merely an expression of our hearts (v. 7-12). You cannot change the way someone does conflict without changing the core of their being. That is why the gospel is necessary for implementing what is taught in this chapter.

In the next two chapters we will consider the two key responses which show we are living a gospel-centered life and are vital to the health of every marriage: repentance and forgiveness.

## Chapter 5

# Repenting with Excellence Changing the Momentum of Your Marriage

**Plumb Lines:** These are the “sticky” statements that capture the core messages of this chapter.

- Repentance and forgiveness are the life sustaining inhale, exhale of a healthy marriage.
- Repentance says, “I value our marriage more than my pride.”
- “I’m sorry,” is for mistakes. “Will you forgive me,” is for sin.
- True repentance is followed by change or it is mere remorse.

**Memorize:** Matthew 7:3-5 (ESV), “Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.” As you memorize this passage reflect upon these key points:

- “Speck” – When we’re upset we suffer from “moral vision impairment” – other’s offenses appear larger than ours.
- “Log” – Jesus’ comparing log and speck isn’t meant to measure offenses but correct our disproportionate vision.
- “Hypocrite” – The failure to repent results in a second sin, one of character rather than action, hypocrisy.
- “First” – We repent by faith; our repentance is not guaranteed to be met with forgiveness or confession.
- “Then” – In a gospel-centered marriage our faith creates an environment in which confession is safe and natural.

### Teaching Notes

“Self-centeredness by its very character makes you blind to your own [sin] while being hypersensitive, offended, and angered by that of others. The result is always a downward spiral into self-pity, anger, and despair, as the relationship gets eaten away to nothing (p. 57)... Only if we are very good at forgiving and very good at repenting can truth and love be kept together (p. 163).” Tim Keller in *The Meaning of Marriage*

“I have a theory: Behind virtually every case of marital dissatisfaction lies unrepented sin. Couples don’t fall out of love so much as they fall out of repentance (p. 96).” Gary Thomas in *Sacred Marriage*

“Confession shouldn’t be this scary thing we do our best to avoid; and sin, weakness, and failure should not be the constant elephant in the room that husbands and wives know is there but cannot talk about. Confession should be seen as a wonderful gift that every marriage needs. It should be liberating. It should be freeing. It should not be seen as a moment of personal loss but as an opportunity for personal and relational gain (p. 79).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

“If you aren’t really taking responsibility for what you did, then you aren’t confessing sin (p. 176)... When you are able to describe yourself that accurately then you’re going to be more successful at changing and your spouse is going to find it easier to forgive (p. 177)... Confessing sin is a proclamation of the gospel: a proclamation that there’s a way back from failure, that there’s rescue and healing from brokenness. We don’t have to hide our sin from each other. The reverse is also true. Refusal to confess and forgive is a proclamation of hopelessness and despair. It proclaims that the only hope of overcoming sin is covering it in the same pointless way that Adam and Eve tried (p. 189).” Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*

### Embedded Study

The first half of this seminar was about preventing the need for repentance – the better we understand the challenges of communication, how to listen well, and engage in day-to-day communication, the less we will need to repent. The last chapter was focused on limiting the severity of what we have to repent from – the better we understand what makes conflict spiral, the less damage our sin will do. But no amount of writing on this topic will remove the need for both husband and wife to be excellent at repentance.

If we want a healthy marriage, we must begin to view repentance as a skill to master rather than inconvenience to avoid. Any marriage material that does not teach on repentance as a vital part of maintaining unity is dangerously naïve about the human condition. To avoid the subject of repentance is to assume that we are going to get everything we’ve been learning right every time there is an opportunity to apply it – doubtful.

You need to be able to read this introduction without a sense of dread. Repentance done well is incredibly romantic because it says, “I value our marriage more than my pride.” Moments of sacrifice are always powerfully bonding. When we sacrifice our pride through repentance it bonds us with the one to whom we are repenting. Of all the investments you can make in your marriage, this will likely be the most impactful.

As you read this chapter, it is important that you think of three “time zones” related to repentance.

- Past: How can I repent well before a conflict begins (much conflict is sparked by unrepentance)?
- Present: How can I repent well during or immediately after a conflict (to minimize its negative impact)?
- Future: How can I follow up my repentance with the fruit that would demonstrate genuineness (Matt. 3:8)?

This chapter will be broken into two major sections: (1) What is repentance? and (2) What are the marks of genuine repentance? The first section is intended to equip you to be excellent in the past and present “time zones.” The second section is designed to help you be excellent in the future “time zone” of repentance.

### What is Repentance?

Ken Sande in *Peacemaking for Families*, his excellent book on conflict resolution, describes seven elements of repentance (bold text only). This outline is developed in the order that words of repentance would typically be spoken in conversation. Explanations and applications will be provided for each point.

**1. Address Everyone Involved.** If someone was directly/indirectly affected by your sin or observed your sin, then you should seek their forgiveness. When you fail to seek forgiveness you leave that person believing you think your actions were acceptable to God (particularly damaging for children and others over whom you have leadership responsibilities). Our repentance is often used by God to awaken us to the far-reaching, unintended consequences of our sin.

**Mentality:** Think of relationships scarred by sin as rooms of your home infected by termites. Sin is a destructive force that enjoys doing residual damage until it is exterminated by forgiveness (God’s and the people affected). There is no such thing as an “insignificant termite” in your home. Likewise, there is no such thing as an “insignificant effect of sin” in a relationship. When we think this way we perpetuate a family culture that minimizes personal sin and, thereby, truncates the life-giving impact of the gospel upon our home.

**Exercise:** Make a list of the people directly affected or exposed to your sin. This should be done at least mentally with each sin for which we need to repent.

**2. Avoid If, But, and Maybe.** Our first tendency in repentance is to soften what we admit. Words like if, but, and maybe have no place in repentance. **%If+** calls into question whether what you did was really wrong. **%But+** transforms repentance into accusation. **%Maybe+** indicates you are not convinced your actions were wrong and invites a conversation (or debate) that is likely to go badly and, regardless, is not repentance.

Acknowledge you violated God’s character. Repentance is about more than acknowledging sub-optimal behaviors. It is an admission that I misrepresented the character of the God whose name I bear when I call myself a Christian (i.e., literally **%little Christ+** when the title was first given in Acts 11:26). When we seek forgiveness we are saying, **%ofailed in my life purpose to be an ambassador of Christ (2 Cor. 5:20)’ and I want clarify what I distorted to you.+**

Do not use verbs of completion (i.e., I know...) but verbs ending in **%ing+** (i.e., I am learning...). Avoiding verbs of completion allows the other person to talk about other aspects of our offense without it feeling like they are **%piling on+** to what we have already said **%dknow.”**



Prepare before you confess. A bad confession results in a second offense against the one to whom we were trying to be reconciled. Scripted confessions (for major offenses) are not insincere. Actually, they reveal that we are beginning to understand the power of our words and consider their impact on others before we speak.

**3. Admit Specifically.** One goal of repentance (in the name of loving our neighbor as yourself) is to make forgiveness as easy as possible (which is never easy). We can do this by being detailed in our confession. Generic confession is often a sign of insincerity. We all know what happened, and is no excuse for brevity. Hearing that you can be specific without falling into blame-shifting or self-pity is an important indicator that you are a safe person and that restoration is wise.

If making a list of the specific ways that you have offended someone in preparation for confession causes you to feel intense shame, then you need to make sure that you have repented to God first and embraced His forgiveness. Your spouse's forgiveness cannot be an emotional replacement for God's. When shame drives confession, your emotions of contrition will take center stage and overpower your request for forgiveness.

Exercise: Usually our attention is drawn to the “big event” we are confessing. But rarely is sin merely a pinnacle experience. Consider the areas of neglect or dishonor that led to the “big event” you are confessing and include those in the specifics for which you seek forgiveness.

**4. Apologize (Acknowledge the Hurt).** Sin has consequences; both intentional and unintentional. Repentance expresses empathy and often takes responsibility for the dominoes that fall as a result of our sin. This is not groveling or penance (both of which are emotionally manipulative). It is an exercise in other-mindedness. Resistance to expressing empathy reveals that the same self-centeredness that made our sin seem rationale in the moment.

Mindset: Empathy is post-listening. If effective listening is entering someone's world as they talk, then confessional-empathy is entering their world after we've hurt them. Unless we do acknowledge their hurt, then we give no assurance that will give proper weight to avoiding the creation of similar pain in the future.

Reflection Questions: How did my sin affect my spouse (personally, emotionally, spiritually, socially, professionally, etc...)? What messages did my sin send? What impact did the delay between my sin and my repentance have? What life pattern did my sin continue?

Remember, your goal in repentance is an effort to represent God more accurately to the person you have offended. God is compassionate and understanding to our hurts (Psalm 56:8). If our confession is rooted in a desire to make God known in each moment, then our confession will include evidence that we have reflected on the impact of our sin.

**5. Accept the Consequence.** Repentance is not a plea-bargain or negotiation. Repentance is not a time when we establish the acceptable terms for our sin. If our repentance and confession are sincere, then the need for consequences-as-punishment (to open blind eyes and soften a hard heart) is absent. However, consequences can still play a disciplinary role (reinforcing life lessons and solidifying prevention measures) and a trust-building role (providing tangible fruit to the otherwise unverifiable desire to change). It is acceptable, and often wise, for the forgiving person to request consequences of these latter kinds. However, it is not your place to define what is punitive, disciplinary, or trust-building.

Begin by stating the obvious. If there are clear changes you need to make, state them in your repentance. Do not phrase them as, “I will do [blank] for you, as if these actions were a favor or concession, or “If you insist, I will [blank],” portraying change as punishment. It is more in keeping with repentance to say, “Because I see my need to change, I will [blank].”

End by asking an open ended question. Honest questions are a sign of humility. They reveal that we are not presenting a contract or deal, but that we are seeking to be restored to a person. A simple, “Are there other ways I can show you the sincerity of my desire to change or make you feel honored?” would suffice.

**6. Alter Your Behavior.** The repentant conversation is not the culmination of the journey. It is merely the drawing of the map and acknowledgement that the map is needed. If we stop at verbal repentance our lack of effort gives the person reason to say, “You didn't really mean what you said.”

**Read Luke 14:28-33.** Part of embracing the Gospel is counting the cost of following God and embracing the sacrifice. Obviously, it's worth it. We give up our life of sin and its misery and we gain a life being transformed to what God intended and Heaven. But it feels painful and often we want to back out because of our doubt. The same is true with repentance, because it is rooted in the Gospel paradigm of dying to self to find life.

“He actually thought that by confessing his sin without ever repenting of it, God would be pleased with him (p. 58).” Mark Driscoll in *Death by Love*

Involve others, because change happens in community. Do not let your spouse be the only person who “holds you accountable.” This sets up a parenting relationship in the marriage. Also, the dual roles of forgiving and following up on commitments create a lot of tension. When couples do this, then either the forgiver is set up to be a detective and is accused of being unforgiving, or the confessor is left without support to make changes that were never meant to be made alone.

**7. Ask for Forgiveness & Allow Time.** %m sorry+ is not the same thing as asking for forgiveness. %m sorry+ is an appropriate statement after a mistake or a misfortune you did not play an active role in. %Will you forgive me?+ is the appropriate statement when we have sinned against another person.

Remember, forgiveness is commanded by God, but Scripture never calls on the confessing party to be the one who reminds others of this command or to insist that it be obeyed. As a general rule to promote humility and patience, allow at least as much time for forgiveness as it took you to come to repentance. It is hypocritical to expect someone else to process suffering (your sin against them) faster than you changed your sin.

During the interval between confession and being granted forgiveness love the other person while continuing to work on your personal change. If forgiveness is delayed, then do not insist the other person receives the service as you want to give it (that is self-centered, controlling, and ultimately anti-loving). Ask them how you can best create an atmosphere for them to consider your request. If these steps are done well the presence of a gap between confession and forgiveness should be a non-factor in the marriage.

### **A Case Study**

For the purpose of illustration, let’s give two examples of repentance. We will use the common example of being late for an event, in this case church. For this illustration assume the couple has children who see and experience the impatience and rudeness of the spouse for whom being on time was very important.

He is an example of C- repentance:

[Spoken privately to other spouse] “I’m sorry if I lost my cool. I didn’t mean to raise my voice. But I don’t know what else to do when you guys make us late. I’ll try to do better.”

As you read this attempt at repentance, ask yourself several questions: Is this better than the average attempt at repentance in your marriage? What is missing from the seven elements of repentance discussed above? How would you feel if this repentance were spoken to you? How does it feel to consider giving a more robust repentance?

Here is an example of A+ repentance:

[Spoken to spouse and children] “It was wrong for me to raise my voice, call you guys lazy, question your commitment to God, and ask a bunch of rhetorical questions that couldn’t be answered just to make you feel bad about being late.

Being on time is important to me and in this case too important. I care about what people think of me and was more concerned about walking into church late than loving my family well. I need to be careful not to judge and punish you guys based upon what is important to me.

I can see how my impatience can make going to church a stressful time and harder to focus on God.

I’d like for us to talk later about how we can manage our time getting ready for church better, but right now I would ask for your forgiveness. I want to show you that being on time is not more important than my family so we can have conversations about getting ready for church without a sense of fear or tension.”

As you read this attempt at repentance, ask yourself similar questions as before: Does repentance ever sound like this in your marriage? Where are each of the seven elements of repentance discussed above? How would you feel if this repentance were spoken to you? How does it feel to consider giving this type of complete repentance?

### **What Are the Marks of Genuine Repentance?**

Chances are most of us are really challenged when we realize what genuine repentance looks like. The quick “I’m-sorry-that’s-okay” exchanges of our culture begin to be seen as embarrassingly thin. But there is also a sense of relief when we are able to account for the residual damage that explains the high divorce rate and strained marriages that are still surviving. We needed to know what wasn’t working even if learning it was uncomfortable.

We are still faced with the challenge of discerning what makes for realistic expectations after repentance. Repentance is not something we complete; it doesn’t make us non-sinners who will be free from the future need to repent. But if future

repentance is needed, how can we tell if past repentance has accomplished what God intended? If the “fruit of repentance” (Matt. 3:8) doesn’t mean “finished repenting” what does it mean?

David Powlison gives seven indicators that are marks of genuine repentance (bold text only). These are discussed to give you a more robust understanding of “progress” than merely counting the number of days since you last needed to repent.

**1. Decrease in Frequency of Sin:** Progress does mean that we should sin less. After we repent for a particular sin, there should be noticeable and quantifiable decreases in the frequency of that sin. This is why healthy repentance cannot be exclusively negative (detailing what I should not have done), but must have a future positive element (detailing what should replace my sinful actions or words; Eph. 4:20-24).

A primary benefit for the thoroughness of the definition of repentance we outlined is that going through this process provides the information necessary to effectively fight sin. Sin is like a fungus that grows best in the dark. Repentance not only exposes sin to the blood of Jesus for cleansing, but also exposes the sinner to the light of God’s Word and God’s people as a preventative measure against future sin.

**2. Repenting More Quickly:** Progress means that we will deal with our sin differently when we do fall. A gospel-centered marriage will be marked by an ever decreasing interval between sin and repentance (first to God; then spouse). A home where the gospel is taking root is one where there is a positive expectation that repentance will result in forgiveness for sin, freedom from sin, and unity with one another.

Couple Conversations: Can we see evidence that we are quicker to repent for our failures than when our marriage began? Have we created a marital culture where we associate repentance with restored closeness?

**3. A Change in Battleground:** Progress should mean that you see an advance in your battle against sin to its core fortress: from actions to thoughts/emotions and finally to heart commitments. True repentance means that we are no longer battling our spouse, but our sin. “We” get to be mutually excited as the battleground with sin advances.

The internal battle is that repentance requires acknowledging what good things became too important. Unless we those desires-seen-as-needs can never fulfill what they promise, this change in battleground can begin to feel like we’re being cheated. Once we realize that repentance is God’s process for restoring desires to their appropriate proportion and that this allows those desires to be enjoyed for what they were intended to provide, we realize the marriage is winning.

To help you begin to gain a sense for what it looks like when the battleground changes complete the chart below for the last three times you repented (or should have) to your spouse. The “Event One” sample is taken from the case study of repentance in the prior section.

Battleground	Event One “Late for Church”	Event Two	Event Three
Actions / Words	“Lazy” Raised Voiced Rhetorical Questions		
Thoughts / Emotions	“They don’t care” Embarrassment Rushed		
Driving Desire	Be on time People pleasing		

**4. Having a Greater Sense of Need for Christ’s Mercy and Grace:** Progress that does not see its reliance upon Christ, degenerates into pride and becomes a stronghold for the enemy. If we see our repentance as us “doing better” we’ll feel superior to our spouse when he/she struggles to meet our expectations.

True repentance allows us to experience dependence without shame – humility. We realize that “doing better” is not primarily about “trying harder” or “learning more” but depending on God and moving towards those He has called us to love.

Our primary hesitancy in authentically moving towards people is usually our insecurity (“What if I don’t do it right?” or “What if my efforts are not accepted?” or “What if they see the real / less impressive me?”). As we become comfortable healthily repenting of our failures, then our weaknesses are not as frightening. This is why repentance is the pathway to realness in marriage.

**5. Increase accountability and honesty:** If there is an area you need to grow in your marriage then your spouse doesn't need to be the only person who knows about it. Your friends should know because you tell them instead of (after exasperation) your spouse's friends knowing because he/she told them. Who talks about whose faults to whom is a major predictor of marital health. Make sure it's you talking about your faults to mutually trusted friends of the same gender.

Repentance means that you do not need a ~~reason~~ to be honest and things do not have to be ~~that bad~~ in order for you to have accountability. It means that you realize Christian community is one of God's primary means of preventing sin in the life of His people. Repenting for a consistent struggle only to your spouse will make your spouse start to feel like a parent.

**6. Not Responding to Difficulty by Indulging in Sin:** Repentance changes our perspective on both past sin and future temptation. Difficulty (i.e., conflict, disappointment, financial pressure, etc...) is the time when progress is most clear. When we forget this, we become discouraged by difficulty and this discouragement adds to our temptation. Recognize that when difficulty comes (i.e., conflict, stress, setbacks, etc...) this will be a time when your progress will be most evident.

Too many couples measure progress by the distance between difficulties rather than also measuring how well they manage difficulties together. As this mindset changes, you will begin to enter “normal challenges” with a sense of anticipation (“Here is our chance to demonstrate our growth and reliance on Christ”) instead of futility (“Here we go again”).

Couple Conversations: What are the kind of challenges that you do better as a couple because you learned your marriage was a safe place to acknowledge your faults? How can you inject a “Here's our chance” attitude over a “Here we go again” attitude into difficult conversations?

**7. Learning to Love and Consider the Interest of Real People:** It is easy to get caught up in thinking, “This struggle would be easier/resolved if my spouse would just...” When we think this way our spouse ceases being a real person with strengths, weaknesses, interests and limitations. We try to force our spouse to become a product of our imagination who should be able to transform to what my preferences and situation dictates.

Repentance—owning my failures and taking them to Christ—allows me to love my spouse as a real person who will need to do the same. Our repentance forces our expectations of others to become more realistic. As our expectations become more realistic we get to know our spouse for who God made them to be instead of who we'd like them to be. Far from being a disappointment, we realize that when freed from our expectation-demands our spouse is someone we could enjoy learning and blessing for a lifetime.

## Conclusion

When you (plural) realize that repentance is the road to the marriage you always wanted, you will escape the “we tried and things got better for while” marriage rut. When we resist repentance we try to find the problem in the system (i.e., communication patterns, marital dynamics, etc...) instead of looking at the two people who created and perpetuate that system. Whatever we learn about the system will only teach us about the people who created it.

“No change takes place in marriage that does not begin with confession (p. 72).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

However, when we realize that repentance is a precious gift given by God to those He loves (2 Tim. 2:25), we embrace the practice of repentance as an exercise that will bring “times of refreshing” (Acts 3:19-20) to those individuals and marriages who dare practice it.

The question that faces you at the end of this chapter, like each previous chapter, is not whether you can understand difficult concepts or execute complex relational skills, but whether you will trust how God designed healthy relationships to function between fallen people (Matt. 7:13-14) or whether you will trust your own “common sense” which has repeatedly led you away from repentance (Prov. 3:5-6).

As you decide whether you will build a marriage that is rooted in the gospel and, therefore, rely on repentance as the core “technique” for conflict resolution, consider the impact the culture of your home will have on generations in light of Deuteronomy 30:19.

*“I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse.  
Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live.”*

## Chapter 6

# Uncomfortable Forgiveness Absorbing the Cost of Their Sin for His Glory and Our Good

**Plumb Lines:** These are the “sticky” statements that capture the core messages of this chapter.

- We never forgive more than we’ve been forgiven.
- Unforgiveness is the choice to define your spouse by his/her faults.
- Forgiveness is not a method to be learned as much as a truth to be lived.
- The possibility of a lasting, happy marriage can be measured by a couple’s willingness to forgive.

**Memorize:** Ephesians 4:31-32 (ESV), “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” As you memorize this passage reflect upon these key points:

- “Let” – We do have control over whether we choose to forgive; we can’t control the consequences of our choice.
- “All” – God’s will is that we free ourselves from bitterness by Christ’s payment for our sin and the sin against us.
- “Put away” – A difficult commitment of forgiveness is to quit entertaining ourselves with painful memories.
- “Be kind” – We often get caught trying to force the fruit (forgiveness) instead of planting the seed (kindness).
- “As God in Christ” – We are following in Christ’s footsteps of forgiveness not pioneering new territory.

### Teaching Notes

“Counseling techniques cannot help people forgive any more than a physician can heal a person’s body. Counseling techniques, like a physician’s tool, are merely structures through which God sometimes sovereignly acts (p. 120).” Everett Worthington in “Helping People Forgive” in *Caring for People God’s Way*

“We need to forgive sin and forbear strangeness, and sometimes you won’t even agree on which is which (p. 53).” John Piper in *This Momentary Marriage*

“Their marriage rusted into brokenness by the daily rain of the little drops of unforgiveness (p. 90)...The harvest of forgiveness is the kind of marriage everyone wants (p. 97)... Forgiveness stimulates appreciation and affection. When we forgive one another daily, we do not look at one another through the lens of our worst failures and biggest weaknesses (p. 98).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

“You’ll likely find practicing forgiveness in marriage difficult. This is because the more intimate you are with someone, the more power he or she has to wound you deeply (p. 182)... Fear, anger, bitterness, hopelessness, and even numbness can impede forgiveness. Emotions that keep us tied to past wounds, they rob forgiveness of its life-giving power (p. 185).” Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*

“Christianity does not want us to reduce by one atom the hatred we feel for cruelty and treachery. We ought to hate them. Not one word of what we have said about them needs to be unsaid. But it does want us to hate them in the same way in which we hate things in ourselves: being sorry the man should have done such things, and hoping, if it is anyway possible, that somehow, sometime, somewhere, he can be cured and made human again (p. 106).” C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*

“As regards my own sin it is a safe bet (though not a certainty) that the excuses are not really so good as I think: as regards other men’s sins against me it is a safe bet (though not a certainty) that the excuses are better than I think (p. 124).” C.S. Lewis in *The Weight of Glory*

“You see, God never intended our bodies to hold up under the weight of unresolved conflict and bitterness (p. 67)... Forgiveness is not so much about us as it is about Him. Every opportunity you encounter to practice forgiveness is an opportunity to draw attention to the God who so delights to show mercy and to pardon sinners that He gave His only Son to make it possible (p. 214).” Nancy Leigh DeMoss in *Choosing Forgiveness*

### Embedded Study

C.S. Lewis hit the nail on the head when he wrote, “Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive (p.115; *Mere Christianity*).” We instinctively realize there are few gifts that we can give or receive which are more precious and costly than forgiveness.

With a bit of reflection, we realize that forgiveness is not something we can give ourselves (contrary to the popular notion). It is something that must be given at significant personal cost to the giver. This is what makes forgiveness so precious. Those things that can only be received and not achieved have an indefinable value – forgiveness is on that list.

While it may not be the most popular topic on the marriage seminar tours, there are few skills that predict the longevity and quality of a marriage like the ability of each partner to forgive. Those couples who have an accurate understanding of what forgiveness is (and is not), and are willing to apply their understanding have an essential skill for navigating the inevitable hurts and failures that will be experienced within a marriage.

Yet misconceptions and fears about forgiveness cause many people to be cynical about this essential part of a healthy marriage. Often those who struggle to forgive significantly misconstrue what it means to forgive.

For this reason we will take our time getting to the practical commitments of forgiveness. Our goal is not merely to give a biblically accurate definition of what it means to forgive, but to remove the false assumptions and defensive rebuttals that cause us to resist viewing forgiveness as a blessing – not only to our spouse and marriage, but also for us personally.

In this chapter we will address five major subjects.

1. What You Don't Need to Forgive
2. Options Besides Forgiveness
3. What Forgiveness Is Not
4. What Is Forgiveness?
5. Emotions and Forgiveness

### What You Don't Need to Forgive

Not everything that bothers or annoys us needs to be forgiven. Forgiveness is only for moral offenses. When we try to use forgiveness as the method to resolve relational irritants that are not moral in nature several bad things happen.

- We establish our preferences as the moral standard for our spouse – pride.
- We begin to feel as if we forgive more than we are forgiven – self-righteousness.
- We gain an increasingly negative view of our spouse – judgmental.
- Our marriage begins to be built around an elaborate number of rules – performance-based acceptance.
- We begin to feel as if God were asking too much of us – God-fatigue.

“What else is there?” we might ask. In *What Did You Expect?* Paul Tripp offers three categories of relational strain which do not call for a response of forgiveness (p. 94; bold text only). After describing what goes in each category, we will look at what kind of grace-based, constructive response is called for in each situation.

1. **Human Weakness:** Being clumsy, having struggles with a particular subject / aptitude, experiencing the limitation of a physical illness / injury, succumbing to the degenerative influence of aging, and similar experiences can negatively impact a marriage. These things can be annoying, fear-provoking, or upsetting, but they are not moral and, therefore, do not need to be forgiven.

The appropriate response to human weakness is compassion, patience, and assistance. A couple should be able to discuss the impact that each other's weaknesses has on the other. Taking these conversations out of the “moral sphere” decreases the sense of shame commonly associated with our weaknesses. One of the most bonding aspects of marriage is creating a safe environment to acknowledge our weakness and be loved anyway.

A couple should also be able to discuss how they can support each other's weaknesses. This is a big part of learning God's design for marriage and will be expressed uniquely in each home. But not all weaknesses will be complemented by a spouse's strength. In these cases we show our commitment to the marriage by allowing our affection for our spouse to trump our annoyance with their weaknesses.

2. **Differences in Personality or Perspective:** Being extroverted vs. introverted, optimistic vs. pessimistic, cautious vs. adventurous, concrete vs. abstract, and organized vs. fluid are all examples of difference in personality

or perspective. These differences impact marriages in many ways, but they are not moral, and, therefore, do not need to be forgiven.

The appropriate response to differences in personality or perspective is appreciation, learning, and cooperation. Well-managed and humbly-discussed differences will be what provides a lifetime of enjoyment to your marriage. Pridefully condemning or demanding conformity will leave the two of you feeling defeated and rejected.

Because these are enduring qualities in your spouse which are likely different from your own, these differences are common sources of bitterness. Too often couples get caught trying to make each other “speak their language” rather than appreciating their differences. When this happens dating-attraction becomes marital-division.

3. **Attempting to Do Something and Failing:** As a couple gets to know each other’s weaknesses, personality, and perspectives, they will (or, at least, should) begin to attempt ways of “doing life together” that challenge and stretch both of them. Frequently these love-motivated efforts will fail (or, at least, not achieve the desired result). These moments may elicit a sense of disappointment or shame, but they are not moral, and, therefore, do not need to be forgiven.

The appropriate response to differences in these instances is affirmation and encouragement. Attempting to do a good thing and failing should still be viewed as a good thing. It is at least two steps ahead of attempting to do a bad thing and failing, and one step ahead of being passive.

Responding to these moments with an appreciation that borders on celebration is an essential part of creating a marital culture where both spouses feel free to take healthy relational risks (i.e., flirting in new ways, repenting, willingness to try things your spouse enjoys, etc...). When we allow these moments to get caught up in the moral language of forgiveness we stifle the relational freedom we should be fanning into flames.

**Read Ephesians 4:1-3:** In a gospel-centered marriage a primary motivation for each spouse is to “walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called [referring to salvation] (p. 1).” Paul tells us how we do this, “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, being with one another in love (v. 2).” These actions and attitudes capture the essence of our response to marital annoyances and disappointments which do not warrant forgiveness. Paul tells us what the fruit of such actions will be – unity and peace (v. 3).

### Options Besides Forgiveness

While we should give the benefit of the doubt about whether our spouse’s upsetting actions are weaknesses, personality, or a failure in an attempt to do something good (1 Cor. 13:7), there will be plenty of times when our spouse’s actions are wrong, and our response should be forgiveness. However, because forgiveness is commanded, and we don’t feel like we have a choice, we often fail to assess the ineffectiveness of the alternatives to forgiveness.

Instead of moving directly to “practical” instruction on forgiveness we will examine why the four alternatives to forgiveness inevitably lead to more pain than we would absorb if we chose to forgive. Don’t read these four descriptions as a way to feel guilty (“Yes, I do these things and I know I shouldn’t), but as a way to be informed (“Oh, now it makes sense why these things never work for long, and God calls me to forgive”).

1. **Approve/Affirm:** If forgiveness is for moral wrongs, then we can get out of forgiving by calling wrong “right.” If we become a moral relativist and say, “Who am I to judge? I’m sure they had good intentions,” then the problem of forgiveness is solved. But with this alternative we begin to experience progressively destructive consequences for doing the “right” thing in response to our spouse’s sin. If children are involved then they begin to learn a very backwards and upside-down morality.

2. **Ignore/Denial:** If we are unwilling to call wrong “right,” then we can just not call it anything and try to ignore that it exists. Our life motto becomes, “If I can’t change it, what good does it do to think about it?” We begin to realize that the first step in forgiveness is paying attention to what is wrong and giving sin the moral assessment it deserves (i.e., controlled anger). When we live in denial, our life and marriage decay around us.

3. **Avoid:** Denial-on-steroids is avoidance. We begin to surrender larger and larger pockets of our life (i.e., not going in the room where sin is committed, becoming ignorant of the family finances, failing to ask questions about important areas of life). We think, “When I am not around it, it doesn’t hurt as bad.” However, when we choose to deal with sin by avoidance it grows much larger and faster than we expect. By the time we are forced to face it, the sin is often much bigger than we ever imagined.

**4. Anger/Bitterness:** Actually this bad response is the closest to a good response. We rally ourselves to say, “I refuse to let evil win. I will conquer it or out last it.” Usually this has an initial positive response; enough that we convince ourselves that it “worked.” But then we get carried away by the power it took to correct the wrong (sinful anger or bitterness) or we realize our ability to prevent another’s sin by the force of our own will is too limited (cynicism). The result is that a marriage begins to be rooted in power and performance instead of love and grace.

**Read Jeremiah 6:14-15 and 8:11-12.** Notice the repeated phrase “they have healed the wound of my people lightly.” We quickly see that “light healing” for a serious wound is actually no healing at all. The problem with each of these alternatives to forgiveness is that they are too light. Sin requires blood (Heb 9:22). This is why even our anger and bitterness is actually “too light” a response to sin. As we will learn, our forgiveness is only a response to and pointing towards God’s forgiveness. Anything short of this says, “Peace! Peace!” without any hope of restoring peace.

### What Forgiveness Is Not

Many points of resistance about forgiveness prove to be more myth or hyperbole than reality. While the reality of forgiveness is never easy, forgiveness is not as foolish or outlandish as our fears make it out to be. In this section we will look at five common misconceptions about what forgiveness is.

- **Forgiveness is not containing hurt.** If this is how we conceive of forgiveness, then forgiveness becomes a synonym for being fake. Forgiveness becomes a form of self-imposed silencing. With this bad definition of forgiveness, we resist godly self-control in the name of resisting hypocritical forgiveness or losing our voice.

Forgiveness is what allows us to express hurt as hurt rather than hurt as anger. Even after forgiveness the hurt still hurts. When you forgive, you are not making a commitment not to hurt or to be silent about your pain. You are making a commitment about what you will do with hurt when it flares – speaking for restoration, not revenge.

- **Forgiveness is not letting someone off the hook.** Forgiveness is the complete opposite of saying, “That’s okay.” If the action being forgiven were “okay” then no forgiveness would be needed. Forgiveness is not the same as saying, “This is finished. Nothing more needs to be said about this.”

“You must forgive them. This does not mean minimizing or accepting what they have done, but rather entrusting them to God for his justice through Jesus’ suffering on the cross or their deserved torment in hell (p. 50).” Mark Driscoll in *Death by Love*

Forgiveness is the start of restoration not the culmination. When God forgives us He does not assume we are a “finished product.” God remains active in our life to remove the sin He forgave. Similarly, when you forgive your spouse, that is the beginning of restoring the marriage to what God intended it to be; which may involve continued dealing with fall out of his/her sin.

- **Forgiveness is not an excuse.** Forgiveness does not reclassify the offense from a sin to a mistake. Mistakes are excused. Sins are forgiven. Sometimes we resist forgiving because we do not want to ratify this perceived downgrade in the significance of the offense. Forgiveness is not a downgrade. Forgiveness inherently classifies an offense at the top level of wrongness.

On the opposite side of making an excuse for your spouse’s sin, is over personalizing his/her sin. While your spouse’s sin may have been *against* you, it may or may not have been *about* you. As you seek to express forgiveness by not dwelling on your spouse’s sin, you may have to battle against validating each way your imagination can conceive that your spouse’s sin was *meant* to harm, neglect, or insult you.

**Forgiveness is not forgetting or sentimental amnesia.** A naïve-amnesia view of forgiveness implies that your spouse’s struggle with sin is over and that any future offense can/should be responded to without reference to past/forgiven sin. While forgiveness does mean that you will allow unclear facts to be examined before making accusations and that progress would be considered in determining how to respond to a recurrence into similar sin, this is not the same as forgetting.

Forgiveness is not the culmination of a journey but the commitment to complete a journey. Forgiving does not require a rush of warm emotions towards your spouse that are consistently stronger than the emotions of hurt you feel towards his/her sin. This conception would make forgiveness a state of being to achieve rather than a promise being given and kept.



- **Forgiveness is not necessarily restoration.** Forgiveness and restoration are distinct but overlapping terms. All restoration is rooted in forgiveness, but not all forgiveness will result in restoration. In the case of an unrepentant spouse, forgiveness is still required (remember, none of the alternatives to forgiveness are effective anyway), but restoration (i.e., re-establishing trust in various ways) may be delayed until repentance occurs.

“As individuals we must always forgive in our hearts and not bear grudges. Yet we can certainly forgive someone in our hearts and still seek church discipline for the good of the person who is committing a sin, for the good of the church, for the honor of Christ, and because God’s Word commands it (p. 900).”  
Wayne Grudem in *Systematic Theology*

“For full restoration, forgiveness must be offered in a context of confession (p. 173).” Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*

The kinds of sins for which there may be a delay between forgiveness and restoration would be those involving a high degree of deception or relational betrayal. If you find yourself experiencing a delay between forgiveness and restoration, this is a time when counseling or a mentor couple should be sought.

### What Is Forgiveness?

Forgiveness is the choice to no longer require someone to receive the punishment that their sin deserves. Forgiveness is an act of faith that the penalty for sin was sufficiently paid by Christ on the cross or will be paid by the sinner in Hell. Forgiveness is a willingness to treat the offender as gracious wisdom would allow given the offender’s response to their sin.

“Forgiveness is a sacrifice in the sense that you’re choosing the more difficult path. You’re sacrificing the temporary comfort of ignoring the problem or the pleasure of erecting a wall of bitterness and instead doing the hard and sometimes painful work of moving toward the one who has wounded you (p. 170).” Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*

“Christian marriage should be distinguished from other kinds of marriage; not by the absence of sin, but by the presence of redeeming and reconciling grace (p. 87).” John Henderson in *Catching Foxes*

Ken Sande in *Peacemaking for Families*, his excellent book on conflict resolution, describes four promises of forgiveness (bold text only; fourth promise modified). These four promises will be used to unpack the practical implications of what it means to model Christ’s forgiveness in our marriage and other relationships.

1. **I will not think about this incident.** God promises to remember our sins no more (Jer. 31:34). This is different from forgetting; an omniscient God cannot forget. But God does resist calling to mind those offenses He has forgiven (Psalm 103:12). We are to mirror this choice of God when we forgive. Even though our memory is weaker than God’s, so is our will and self-discipline. So this is often a hard commitment to keep. A good measure of our forgiveness is the dissipation of memories we have about the offense and surrounding details.

What will you do to “take every thought captive” (II Cor. 10:5) when you are tempted to remember forgiven sin?  
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 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

2. **I will not bring up this incident again and use it against you.** Past failures are powerful trump cards in disagreements and effective weapons in an argument. Forgiveness is an agreement to disarm. This promise involves both verbally using past sin against your spouse and mentally using past sin to justify your response against your spouse. This promise keeps the marriage “safe” to have disagreements.

When and how are you prone to use a forgiven sin against your spouse? \_\_\_\_\_  
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 \_\_\_\_\_

How will you discipline yourself to weigh and restrain “every careless [or cutting] word” (Matt. 12:36-37)?  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

3. **I will not talk to others about this incident.** This promise says, “You are safe when you are not present,” and protects the marriage from “his friends” and “her friends” being on separate teams and contributing to division in the marriage.

A gospel-centered marriage exists within community. Therefore a couple should have mutually trusted friends from which they grant the freedom for each other to seek guidance and support. On the basis of Matthew 18:15-17, if a spouse needs to talk about the unrepentant sin of his/her spouse it should be with those who have the relational capital and spiritual authority to lovingly confront the matter.

Who do the two of you mutually trust as good sources of guidance during or after marital disagreements?

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Who are people you might speak with after a disagreement that would be detrimental to the marriage?

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4. **With the appropriate precautions in place, I will give you the benefit of the doubt again.** It is the aftermath of forgiveness – renewed vulnerability – which is often most intimidating. Except in those cases where significant deception or relational betrayal are involved, forgiveness does mean the prompt re-issuing of trust.

“Restoring trust means you have to be willing to take risks again (p. 164).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

“When we pray with and for one another, it demands that we have forgiven one another. Prayer together enhances not only spiritual and emotional oneness, but also physical oneness (p. 221-222).” Dennis Rainey (editor) in *Preparing for Marriage*

A good measure of the level of repentance and unity in a marriage is a couple’s ability to agree upon what constitutes “appropriate precautions.” If it was failure to make an appointment, it may be as simple as using the calendar feature on your phone. If it is substance abuse, it may entail abstaining from carrying cash. However, if a couple disagrees on the “appropriate precaution;” the policy discussion should be tabled until there is agreement on facts, definitions, or values (see chapter four).

What are the most common ways you show mistrust? How will you counter this to give the benefit of the doubt?

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**Read Matthew 6:14-15.** As you consider how hard it may be, at times, to forgive, do not allow this challenge to tempt you to begin to think of forgiveness as optional or something your spouse must earn. When something is hard, it is common for us to wonder, “Can I do it?” However, this question of possibility does two dangerous things. First, it tempts us to rely on our own strength. Second, it tempts us to allow for an option that God does not provide.

“To forgive the incessant provocation of daily life—to keep on forgiving the bossy mother-in-law, the bullying husband, the nagging wife, the selfish daughter, the deceitful son—how can we do it? Only, I think, by remembering where we stand, by meaning the words when we say in our prayers each night, ‘Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those that trespass against us.’ We are offered forgiveness on no other terms. To refuse it is to refuse God’s mercy for ourselves. There is no hint of exceptions and God means what he says (p. 125).” C.S. Lewis in *The Weight of Glory*

As you reflect on this quote in light of your own forgiveness, consider this common pattern or marital deterioration.

“As [they] lost sight of their daily need for forgiveness, they quit being so willing to forgive one another. As they quit forgiving one another and putting away their offenses, they began to keep a record of the other’s wrongs. As they kept a daily record of wrongs, they were increasingly aware of how much their life was affected by the weakness and failure of the other. As they carried this awareness with them, they became increasingly irritated, impatient, and intolerant with one another. So since they were not fighters, they dealt with their disappointment with one another by protecting themselves from one another with distance and busyness (p. 263).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

In light of this, we should remember that a struggle to forgive reveals a failure to understand the personal significance of the gospel. If this is you, do not read this section as an accusation that causes you to turn further in on yourself via self-pity or get defensive and try to focus your attention on the other’s need for the gospel. Instead, read this section as an invitation to receive what Christ has done for you. If that happens, you will read this chapter with new eyes.

## Emotions and Forgiveness

So what does forgiveness mean you are committing to do with your hurt, fears, other emotions and imagination? The last section covered the interpersonal commitments of forgiveness and explains how forgiveness was designed to restore relationships after moral offenses. But what about the personal well-being and peace of mind of the forgiver, doesn't forgiveness have benefits for the forgiver as well?

Yes, it does. No, it's not necessarily selfish to ask. However, if we demand the benefits of forgiveness before we take the risk of forgiveness, we become trapped at the crucial point. In effect, we would be demanding to see the fireworks before we light the fuse. All of that to say, if you want this section to “convince you” to forgive, you will most likely be disappointed. But if you want to understand how forgiveness positively impacts your emotions (even in difficult cases), then you should find encouragement in this section.

In the section below we will trace the seven phase journey of forgiveness that is traveled by the one forgiving.

**1. The context of forgiveness is always hurt.** Forgiveness never begins as a pleasant experience. The emotions of pre-forgiveness are always raw. We never think this is a “good time” for us to need to forgive. The person we need to forgive is always the person who just sinned against us. We should never minimize the painful context in which forgiveness is granted.

**2. Hurt is an experience that does not remove itself.** Time does not heal moral offenses. If time heals an offense, then it was likely not one that merited forgiveness. We begin to feel trapped in the emotional bind; either we will forgive (which is “not fair”) or we will continually carry the weight of bitterness and mistrust. It feels like life is taking the side of our offender.

“Bad things tend to happen when you give offenses time to marinate in your heart (p. 158).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

**3. Justice does not erase history (or emotion).** Neither consequences nor punishment provide the relief that we hope they would. Our offender loses the benefit of his/her offense and may learn valuable lessons, but these do not provide restitution to us. Even if we are rightfully given something as compensation for the offense, its value either seems to trifle the offense or come across as penance. Justice doesn't satisfy.

**4. Repentance does not erase history (some emotion).** Repentance is much better than justice at resolving the emotional pain of an offense. It now feels like apples are being traded for apples; prideful, self-centered response of sin for humbled, other-minded response of confession. But there is no sense of guarantee or control that would provide assurance that future pain could be avoided, so some emotional turmoil remains.

**5. Forgiveness means something must die.** We begin to realize exactly how devastating sin really is. Nothing short of death will stop it. Without being overly dramatic, we clearly see that something will die—love, trust, hope, a dream, dignity, respect... or Christ in their/our place. The only way to escape this maze of moral offense without losing someone or something we love is with a substitute.

**6. We chose who/what to send to the cross.** We begin to realize that the words “I forgive you” can be translated, “I apply Christ to your account. His death satisfies what your offense deserves in a way nothing else can... even my anger or revenge. I see in our relationship a picture of my attempt to be reconciled to God. My actions created a hopeless situation until Christ took my place so in our relationship I will allow Him to take your place.”

**7. We are reminded of peace greater than our pain.** In this memory, we find that forgiveness is not an action or a choice, but a dramatization or re-enactment of the gospel. As we experience the gospel in the emotional freshness (bad and good) of this experience, we are reminded of our journey from death to life (Eph. 2:1-10). We get another taste of hopelessness turned to victory and we remember (because life had distracted us) that our ultimate security and emotional safety is in Christ, not circumstances. This fresh realization places the offense back in its appropriate perspective; without minimizing the offense, it is swallowed up in the greatness of the gospel.

At this point in the chapter it should become clear that forgiveness does not add to anything that wisdom would not already advise if such an offer of grace from God were real. Our hesitancy to forgive (when we rightly understand what forgiveness means) is not a resistance to dangerous folly, but a doubt in or minimizing of God's abundant grace to us.

Bitterness is a form of meditation, but on hurt instead of the gospel. When we allow the hurts of our spouse to walk us through the journey of processing the emotions associated with forgiveness, then “the meditations of our hearts” (Psalm 19:14) center on the gospel and point us to hope instead of doubt or dissatisfaction.

## Conclusion

What does it look and sound like to forgive your spouse of real wrongs over a lifetime? How can we motivate ourselves to forgive without having a negative attitude towards our spouse or becoming a doormat? C.S. Lewis offers great perspective.

“For a long time I used to think this a silly, straw-splitting distinction: how could you hate what a man did and not hate the man? But years later it occurred to me that there was one man to whom I had been doing this all my life—namely myself. However much I might dislike my own cowardice or conceit or greed, I went on loving myself. There had never been the slightest difficulty about it. In fact the very reason why I hated these things was that I loved the man. Just because I loved myself, I was sorry to find that I was the sort of man who did those things (p. 117).” *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis

Forgiveness is seeing the person God made your spouse to be, loving that person so much that you hate the sin they commit (without overly personalizing it), and then living out the gospel forgiveness before them in hopes that it will make God’s forgiveness more real to them.

This is not just how the saved spouse responds to the sin of an unsaved spouse (I Peter 3:1-6), but also how the saved spouse responds to the sin of a saved spouse. Why is that? It is because we do not need the gospel any less after we get saved than we did before we were saved.

Too often Christian marriage becomes less than “Gospel-Centered Marriage” precisely at the moments when forgiveness is needed. Strangely this is a time when a Christian marriage is most equipped to be distinct. But because we tend to deal with marital disruption with techniques instead of grace towards one another, we forfeit the power of God (II Tim. 3:5) that can transform a moment of pain and division into a moment of bonding and unity.

## Appendix A

### Dates from the Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage “Communication” Seminar

You will remember what you rehearse. You will rehearse what you enjoy. Marriage is meant to be enjoyed but requires rehearsing (i.e., remembering) the things that are most important. For this reason, each seminar in this series will provide a collection of dates that are designed to allow couples to review what they’ve learned. Two things you should note:

1. Each date can be taken multiple times. You and your spouse will change over time. Because you change, the same date, with the same person becomes a new experience. Marriage resists becoming stale when we enjoy anticipating and learning what God is doing in our spouse’s life and marriage next.
2. Create the habit of reinforcing key marriage lessons with playfulness and romance. Learn from the content and pattern of these dates. Pick a section of this seminar that was useful to your marriage and create a date that allows you to review those truths in an enjoyable way.

#### Listening Date

**Preparation:** Pick the type of listening from chapter two you most need to improve. Think about the recent examples where this type of listening would have blessed your marriage. Try to gain a better understanding of why this type of listening is hard or unnatural for you. Before the date tell your spouse the type of listening you want to grow in and ask them to think of conversations that would allow you to practice.

**Activity:** Do anything that is mutually enjoyable that isn’t mutually distracting (i.e., watching a movie together). While on your date ask your spouse what he/she wanted to talk about that would allow you to grow in your desired area of listening. As you are together use the “how to listen” skills from chapter two to engage in the conversation.

**Ending:** Verbally commit to continued growth as a listener in order to be a good student of your spouse and to enter his/her world as Christ loved us (Eph. 5:25) and entered our (i.e., the incarnation).

**Follow Up:** Mark your calendar for one month later. Better yet, ask your spouse to mark his/her calendar for one month later. After a month, discuss instances where intentional effort at this type of listening blessed the marriage.

**Goal for Date:** To view the significant part of dates as time spent together instead of merely an excuse for recreation or a meal where no one has to do the dishes. To practice and commit to the kind of conversational-engagement that will make your non-date interactions more fulfilling and a greater enhancement of your marriage.

#### Questions Date

**Preparation:** Make a list of the top 3 to 5 conversations that you and your spouse should have at least monthly. Make sure there is balance in your list (serious and playful; functional and dreaming). Chapter three can help you think of topics.

**Activity:** Create a fun way for each of you to reveal your “Top 5” list. Perhaps you could reveal one question each during each course of the meal. If there is an activity that can be connected with the conversation do that. For example, if one conversation is the spiritual health of your children, then you might go buy a family devotions book as you reveal that topic.

**Ending:** Decide how you will ensure these conversations are had regularly. You might use the “Tissue Box” idea from chapter three or create something that works better for your family.

**Follow Up:** Combine your two lists and post them in places you frequently see (i.e., bathroom mirror or car dash). As the “major questions” of life change, this is a good indicator that you are headed into a new season of life. Having these questions posted is not just a good reminder system; it also draws these season of life changes into conversation.

**Goal for Date:** To make “meaningful conversation” less intimidating and overwhelming. While there are so many things that you could talk about, it is important to narrow the number of things that are essential to talk about.

### Conflicted Date

**Preparation:** Have the courage to put “conflict done right is highly romantic” to the test. Use the material from chapter four to identify a conflict where it was clear you acted/responded poorly. Use the material from chapter five to help you talk about your shortcomings in a healthy way.

**Activity:** Before the date read Acts 3:19-20 together, then each of you confess to the other how your sin impacted the other, and ask for forgiveness (if you have not already). After forgiving each other, pray together and thank God for a marriage where these conversations can be had (preventing a marriage of denial or bitterness). Use the date to celebrate the gift of marriage and the goodness of God in providing the gospel to protect His good gift.

**Ending:** Remind each other of the good things in/about your marriage that are worth protecting by doing conflict with honor. Allow this to remind you that “honor in conflict” is about more than “not being bad;” it is about protecting something that is precious and valuable.

**Follow Up:** In the coming days and weeks point out when your spouse does a good job at the things he/she confessed before the date. It is a great habit to begin catching each other doing things right and growing instead of just getting things wrong and slipping into old habits.

**Goal for Date:** To learn that there is a third way of conflict besides avoidance or conquering. There is honor, and honor in conflict can do more good than dishonor in conflict does harm. This is an essential conviction for a couple to hold if they are going to consistently pursue the “marital win” over the “personal win.”

## Appendix B

### Small Group Accountability Questions From the “Communication” Seminar

How do small marital problems become big marital problems? There are two primary ways: (1) they get ignored, and (2) they are dealt with alone. Ask yourself these questions about any case of divorce or chronic marital unhappiness you know:

If that couple had addressed their struggle early on with the love and perspective of fellow Christians, how different would their life be now? How many generations would be blessed? How much pain and suffering would have been alleviated? How much sin and destruction would have been averted?

The condition of Christian marriage is a church problem. When the church does not fulfill the one another commands of the New Testament, every marriage in that church suffers (even the good ones). Excellent, crisis-based pastoral counseling (no matter how effective) will not have near the impact as small groups regularly asking one another simple, fundamental questions about “Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage.”

For this reason, every seminar in this series will contain a series of accountability questions to be used in the small group life of our church. It is suggested that at least once per month any small group with married couples divide men and women for the prayer time and ask one of the questions below. These questions are written in the first person plural (i.e., we, us, our) to imply that every person in the room should have an answer.

#### Chapter 1

- Have you taken the time to get to know and appreciate how your spouse communicates?
- How well do you honor your spouse in the midst of a conflict?

#### Chapter 2

- Do you value listening by putting intentional effort in enhancing this skill?
- What are the greatest challenges / temptations you face in listening well to your spouse?

#### Chapter 3

- Are you reserving time for a healthy amount of day-to-day communication in your marriage?
- Do you have conversations in the variety of areas discussed in this chapter? Which do you tend to neglect?

#### Chapter 4

- Do you show wisdom in discerning what subjects to address and when to address them?
- What are the driving desires that most commonly lead you to communicate sinfully in your marriage?

#### Chapter 5

- Are there things for which you need to repent, but are resisting doing so?
- Which of the seven elements of repentance do you tend to neglect when you acknowledge a fault?
- Which of the marks of genuine repentance do you tend to neglect after you have repented?

#### Chapter 6

- Are there things you need to forgive, but are resisting doing so?
- What misconception of forgiveness do you hold on to as a reason not to have to forgive?
- Which of the four promises of forgiveness is most difficult for you to keep?

**Rebuttal:** Wow! That seems really personal for a small group discussion.

**Response One:** It is not more personal than a divorce is public. And, it is not more personal than the Bible calls for us to be transparent about our sin.

**Response Two:** Once you have done this for three months and seen the benefits to your marriages, you will laugh at the defensive rebuttal. Accountability is only scary like swimming lessons are scary for a child. Putting your face in the water is only intimidating until you do it. Then you realize a whole new world of freedom and fun awaits.

## Appendix C

### What Do I Do Now?

A plumb line of the Summit counseling ministry is, “We don’t do events; we create resources.” That means you should be asking yourself, “What can or should I do with this information now?”

We have created a series of brief videos that answer that what-now question from several different perspectives. Each of these can be found at:

[www.bradhambrick.com/whatnow](http://www.bradhambrick.com/whatnow)

#### Personal Study or Small Group

Question: I’ve been to several of the Summit counseling seminars and notice there appears to be a couple of different kinds. You frequently recommend studying them as a small group or with a friend. That seems like a great idea, but since I haven’t done that before I’m not quite sure how to start something like that. Do you mind giving me guidance?

#### Pursue Personal Counseling

Question: After attending this seminar I realized I would like to pursue counseling to help me grow in this area. It sounded like there are several different options available. Would you mind explaining to me what those are and how I could connect with the one that best serves me need?

#### Leveraging My Workplace

Question: I’ve heard rumors that I’m supposed to be able to use the Summit counseling seminars to leverage my workplace for gospel influence. My first impression is that it sounds awkward and intrusive; like I’m telling people they’ve “got issues” or “need help.” But I’m also worried about putting up Christian material that might be offensive to some people who visit my workplace. But I would at least like to hear what you’ve got to say. How would this work?

#### As a Professional Counselor

Question: I’m a licensed counselor (LPC) and came across the Summit counseling seminars. I’m excited to see the church addressing these kinds of subjects, and I’m curious how you might see someone in my position (or a LCSW or LMFT) using the materials. I can see recommending them to my clients who are open to an overtly Christian aspect to their counseling, but it seems like there could be more uses than just counseling homework. Could you share your thoughts on how those in private practice might use these resources?

Our goal in Summit counseling is to (1) equip the church to care for one another and our community with excellence; (2) provide quality counseling services that allow our people to get involved in the lives of others with confidence – knowing additional, experienced care is available to come alongside them if needed; and (3) create ways for our members and other Christians in our community to leverage their workplace and careers for greater gospel impact in their spheres of influence.

We hope this seminar and these videos give you a vision for how this can happen and stirs a passion in you to be a part of God’s work of redeeming and restoring hurting individuals and families.