



Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage (Part I of V) “Foundations”

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“Foundations”

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What Can I Hope to Get From this Seminar?

Whether you are here for personal needs, the needs of others, or a general interest in the topic, we hope that 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 of this seminar that speak to aspects of this subject that are different from your own experience. What follows are **six unavoidable facts** that may 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 has promised that they are effective for all things that pertain to life and godliness. Our task as Christians is to grow in our understanding of and our ability to skillfully apply them 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 that is 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 that we are all called to do.

4. That person received either 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 ourselves for the answers to our problems, or we are told that we are good enough, strong enough, or smart enough to overcome our problems. Hopefully today, you will see how the Bible calls us to something (rather Someone) better, bigger, and more effective than these messages.

5. If they did not receive 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 other unfulfilling answers they will eventually (by God’s grace) come to a Christian for advice. When they eventually come to you, we hope that you will be better prepared because of our time together today.

6. Whatever help they received, they will use to help others! We become evangelists who speak of 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 today effective for fighting 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 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 lasting change happens in relationship. Private change tends to be short-lived. Living things that are exposed to light grow. Living things that are 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 a marriage faces. While the difficulties 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 in order 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” 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?

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: Knowing Each Other and Having Healthy Expectations

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 recognize that marriage is a living relationship and will require work and attention.	CD SD NS SA CA
2. I recognize that we will both change significantly throughout our marriage.	CD SD NS SA CA
3. My spouse recognizes marriage is a living relationship and requires work and attention.	CD SD NS SA CA
4. We have shown the ability to love and support one another in good times and in bad.	CD SD NS SA CA
5. I resist the urge to think that marriage or my spouse should solve life's struggles.	CD SD NS SA CA
6. I resist the temptation to think that it is my spouse's job to make me happy.	CD SD NS SA CA
7. I am free from the distorting influence of a past abusive relationship or home of origin.	CD SD NS SA CA
8. My spouse is free from the distorting influence of a past abusive relationship or home.	CD SD NS SA CA
9. I have resisted making a list of things that I want to change about my spouse.	CD SD NS SA CA
10. I believe my spouse has resisted making a list of things he/she wants to change about me.	CD SD NS SA CA
11. I recognize marriage requires me to willingly do things I'm not good at or don't enjoy.	CD SD NS SA CA
12. My spouse knows marriage requires them to do things they're not good at or don't enjoy.	CD SD NS SA CA
13. I resist the temptation to expect my spouse to compensate for my weaknesses.	CD SD NS SA CA
14. My spouse resists the temptation to expect me to compensate for his/her weaknesses.	CD SD NS SA CA
15. I treat my spouse with more honor than my friends, family, co-workers, or customers.	CD SD NS SA CA
16. My spouse treats me better than his/her friends, family, co-workers, or customers.	CD SD NS SA CA
17. I know the important life events that shaped my spouse's character and beliefs.	CD SD NS SA CA
18. My spouse knows the important life events that shaped my character and beliefs.	CD SD NS SA CA
19. I enjoy hearing about the day-to-day events of my spouse's life.	CD SD NS SA CA
20. My spouse enjoys hearing about the day-to-day events of my life.	CD SD NS SA CA
21. I regularly think about how to bless my spouse based on what I know of them.	CD SD NS SA CA
22. My spouse regularly thinks about how to bless me based upon what they know of me.	CD SD NS SA CA
23. I am comfortable knowing how to encourage my spouse when he/she is down.	CD SD NS SA CA
24. My spouse is comfortable knowing how to encourage me when I'm down.	CD SD NS SA CA
25. I enjoy learning about my spouse's preferences, interests, goals, and dreams.	CD SD NS SA CA
26. My spouse enjoys learning about my preferences, interests, goals and dreams.	CD SD NS SA CA
27. I know my spouse's fears and insecurities and we can talk about them.	CD SD NS SA CA
28. My spouse knows my fears and insecurities and we can talk about them.	CD SD NS SA CA
29. Our marriage is free from any use of illegal drugs.	CD SD NS SA CA
30. Our marriage is free from any abuse or excessive use of alcohol.	CD SD NS SA CA
31. Our marriage is free from any gambling.	CD SD NS SA CA
32. Our marriage is free from lying to cover up painful or embarrassing events.	CD SD NS SA CA
33. Our marriage is free from verbal, emotional, or physical abuse.	CD SD NS SA CA
34. Our marriage is free from controlling behaviors during conflict or because of jealousy.	CD SD NS SA CA
35. We resist the temptation to threaten divorce during conflict.	CD SD NS SA CA
36. Past romantic relationships do not cause me to distrust my spouse.	CD SD NS SA CA
37. Past romantic relationships do not cause my spouse to distrust me.	CD SD NS SA CA

Key to Survey Scoring: Tabulate your score for each set of question 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 1-16: (Total: _____ in 16 questions)

This set of questions examines the “**understanding relationships**” aspect of a gospel-centered marriage. If we have unrealistic expectations of relationships, then marriage will inevitably disappoint us; not because the marriage is bad, but because the measure of our contentment is not realistic.

Recommended Resources: *Relationships: A Mess Worth Making* by Tim Lane and Paul Tripp; *When People are Big and God is Small* by Ed Welch. Chapter one of this seminar will address these kinds of questions.

➤ Questions 17-28: (Total: _____ in 12 questions)

This set of questions examines the “**knowing each other**” aspect of a gospel-centered marriage. A common temptation in marriage is to neglect continually learning about your spouse. Familiarity has a tendency to produce laziness in most areas of life. The time and energy you devote to learning your spouse and family should rival your passion for your career or favorite hobby.

Recommended Resources: Each seminar in this series is interspersed with Couple Discussion Questions. Use these to facilitate ongoing conversation. Chapter two of this seminar will address these kinds of questions.

➤ Questions 29-37: (Total: _____ in 9 questions)

This set of questions examines the “**red flags**” that would destroy a gospel-centered marriage. Often love causes us to want to overlook significant problems. While love does cover a multitude of sins (1 Pet. 4:8), it does not call us to ignore destructive patterns. The most loving and healthy response to a red flag is to take the steps necessary to remove it. If you are engaged, these are reasons to postpone the wedding.

Recommended Resource: If one of these areas presents as a problem in your marriage, you should seek the guidance of a counselor who has expertise in that area. This seminar is for marital enrichment. The issues addressed in these questions are either marital restoration or personal struggle subjects and should be dealt with in personal counseling.

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 questions 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28, 30, 32, 34, and 36.

_____ **My Spouse’s Score** – Using the same scoring system as above add together the score for questions 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 21, 23, 25, 27, 29, 31, 33, 35, and 37.

Chapter I

Why Is Marriage Hard? The Obvious and Not-So-Obvious Things We Rarely Discuss

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

- Character is a better predictor of marital satisfaction than compatibility.
- You will be married to at least a dozen people over the course of one marriage.
- We don’t need higher or lower expectations; we need healthy and articulated expectations.
- The “ordinary” moments of marriage are often the most significant moments in a marriage.

Memorize: Luke 9:23-25 (ESV), “And he said to all, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?’” As you memorize this passage reflect upon these key points:

- “All” – You’ll never be a better spouse than you are disciple. Growing as a spouse requires becoming Christ-like.
- “Deny” – Marriage exists in a context of limited resources (time, money, attention, etc...) and requires sacrifice.
- “Daily” – Like discipleship, a good marriage is achieved in daily moments and decisions, not “special” moments.
- “Save... lose... loses...save” – A satisfying marriage is the product of two people learning joy by sacrificial love.
- “Profit” – It is good to want a great marriage, but we’re often misguided on how to attain, protect, and enrich it.

Teaching Notes

“Our personal dreams for marriage seem so beautiful and convincing that we don’t stop to consider that God’s dreams for us may be different (p. 60).” Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*

“I am persuaded that it is more regular than irregular for couples to get married with unrealistic expectations (p. 16)... The person who was once your escape from responsibility has become your most significant responsibility. Spending time together is radically different from living together. Reasons for attraction now become sources of irritation (p. 32)... Marriages don’t typically change with an explosion. Marriages typically change by the process of erosion (p. 254).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

“But here’s the problem. My wife does not learn about my sins like a physician learns about my diseases or like my counselor learns about my anger and fear. She knows my sins because they so often are committed against *her*... And there’s the Great Problem of marriage. The one person in the whole world who holds your heart in her hand, whose approval and affirmation you most long for and need, is the one who is hurt more deeply by your sins than anyone else on the planet (p. 162)... Marriage does not so much bring you into confrontation with your spouse as confront you with yourself. Marriage shows you a realistic, unflattering picture of who you are and then takes you by the scruff of the neck and forces you to pay attention to it (p. 140).” Tim Keller in *The Meaning of Marriage*

“Destructive to marriage is the self-fulfillment ethic that assumes marriage and the family are primarily institutions of personal fulfillment, necessary for us to become ‘whole’ and happy. The assumption is that there is someone just right for us to marry and that if we look closely enough we will find the right person. This moral assumption overlooks a crucial aspect of marriage. It fails to appreciate the fact that we will always marry the wrong person (p. 417).” Stanley Hauerwas in “Sex and Politics” in *Christian Century* (April 19, 1978).

“When you marry a person, you don’t know what they are going to be like in thirty years (p. 58).” John Piper in *This Momentary Marriage*

Embedded Study

Why?!? Why do so many marriages that begin with sincere love and the best intentions end in divorce? Why do so many marriages that start with great promise and greater dreams end up just staying together "for the kids" and "living as roommates"? These are disturbingly relevant questions regardless of where we are in our marital journey (i.e., dating, engaged, newlywed, or celebrating an anniversary).

Whatever the answer is, Christians are not immune to "it." The divorce rate among Christian couples is equivalent to the rest of the culture. If the statistics are true, then much of what we, as Christians, are doing to correct the problem is ineffective, misguided, or possibly even feeding the problem.

This chapter may feel a little scary. But it is necessary to define accurately what we are seeking to correct. While it is easy to be falsely positive at the beginning of a journey, the result would be an embittered, disenfranchised marriage; however, if we identify accurately the obstacles ahead, we will be encouraged and unified as we navigate those challenges.

Read Luke 14: 28-30. As Jesus speaks of "counting the cost" in Luke 14, that is what we will be doing martially in this chapter. Unless we count the cost, we are likely to lay a bad foundation (v. 29) for marriage and not be prepared to fulfill our lifetime vow. Think of every major decision you've ever made (i.e., choosing a career, buying a house). Do you remember feeling overwhelmed as you realized the commitment? Yet that fear and the advice you received made you wiser (or at least it should have, Proverbs 1:7). That is the purpose of this chapter.

Where Are You?

"Where are you?" was an odd question for God to ask Adam in Genesis 3:9. It was odd, because the question was obviously for Adam's benefit, not God's awareness – God was moving towards Adam as He spoke. Adam was lost at the very moment he was trying to maintain control. That describes most ineffective efforts at improving a marriage. God was willing to help if Adam would see himself for who he was and what he'd done. Like Adam we cannot assume our perspective on marriage is correct, so we ask ourselves, "Where are we?"

What is your view of an ideal marriage? _____

What is your cynical view of marriage? _____

What is your realistic view of a good marriage? _____

When you get upset, angry, hurt, or disappointed by marriage, which of these views is being violated or reinforced?

20 Things that Make Marriage Hard

Have you ever noticed that most romance movies end at the marriage altar when the real relationship is just beginning? A real, happy marriage rarely makes it into the movies. Cinema likes courtship, fighting, and making up. But it tends to sum up the actual relationship in three simplistic words, "happily ever after."

In the remainder of this chapter, we want to help you weed out some of the common beliefs and expectations that often fuel our ideal and cynical views of marriage. Artificially high expectations don't honor marriage, and artificially low expectations don't protect anyone.

The question is not whether these factors are active in your marriage or engagement. These challenges are real, so we all face them in some form. The questions are: Which ones are affecting your marriage? Are you aware of their influence? Are you and your spouse openly discussing them? Do you have a plan to allow these influences to be corrected?

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 the significantly impacts your marriage. Having these conversations based upon a neutral stimulus, like this seminar, is much easier than having these conversations when they are triggered by your hurt, anger, or insecurity and they get lost in the unique aspects of the triggering event.

1. **The mundane nature of everyday life.** You usually realize when you’re doing something significant. That is one of the greatest, yet most subtle, challenges to marriage – the ordinary moments are the most significant. When you do something you view as significant, you prepare for it. When you’re doing something mundane you “just do it,” often mindlessly. Another way to say this is familiarity leads us towards neglect.

The more common and safe someone or something is, the more we tend to neglect it or focus on “more urgent-important things.” Marriage may fall into this trap more than any other relationship.

“It’s in the context of everyday life and relationships that the Christian must be fully armored, prepared, and ready. Where are you most tempted to be selfish? Callous? Impatient? Home is usually one of the places we let our guard down, where we’re most likely to be ourselves around people we no longer feel the need to impress—the people who are stuck with us anyway (p. 143)!” Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*

Couple Discussion Questions: How do you see the “everyday-ness” of marriage negatively impacting the energy or involvement you give to your marriage? What are the practical and tangible expressions of this? What kind of reminders would be most effective to draw you out of the “mundane-marriage-malaise”?

2. **Having to do things that I don’t like and am not good at.** Almost every other relationship we have and activity we do is based upon our personal interests, unique talents, or has immediate compensation. We choose hobbies because we like them. We choose jobs because we’re skilled in that area or because they pay well. We serve in church in areas of our gifting and passion. Therefore, we perpetually have something in common that draws us to the people with whom we are interacting.

At home, there are many responsibilities that just need to be done. Neither of us may like them or be skilled at them. When a significant percentage of a relationship becomes “purely functional,” then it is easy to think “we don’t have anything in common anymore;” however, in marriage, functionality is not a commentary on the relationship: it is a reflection of the nature of life.

Unless we see this, we will begin to grade the quality of our marriage based upon the requirements of day-to-day life rather than the quality of the relationship itself. When this happens, our attitude sours and distorts how much (degree and frequency) we think about the blessings of marriage.

Couple Discussion Questions: Where, when, or how does this reality tempt you towards bitterness, resentment, or discontentment? What expressions (emotional or relational) do these temptations take when you succumb to them? Who do you tend to blame for your dislike of this reality? How can you and your spouse encourage one another in this universal and persistent marriage struggle?

3. **The investor to owner perspective change.** Who hasn’t experienced this? A new job filled with possibilities until you’re on the job, and it’s filled with responsibilities. A new house has great potential until you buy it, and then it’s only filled with projects. Living in something day-to-day changes our perspective as we move from being an “outsider” to an “insider.” The dating-engagement to marriage transition is no different.

Too often, we treat marriage as if it should operate by a different set of rules than the rest of life. This is probably due to our cultural adherence to a romantic ideal (more will be said on that in the following points). But we must realize marriage is not different from the rest of life. Marriage is actually a concentrated form of life. Marriage is choosing who we will “do life with” not who we “escape from life with.”

Couple Discussion Questions: How well do you transition from being a dreamer to being a doer in most areas of life? What are the most important ways for you to continue to invest in your marriage? What are the most difficult ways (remembering or willingness) for you to continue to invest in your marriage?

4. **No longer having to be “on” once we’re married.** When you’re dating you prepare to be together. You think throughout your day, about what you want to say the next time you see one another. Forethought to time together is an excellent measure of being “on” for your spouse. Too often when we’re married, we survive until we get home, crash, realize we’re in the same room, and then try to generate meaningful conversation.

When we’re dating we dress up, try to smell good, shave (our face or legs), don’t burp or pass gas in one another’s presence, and generally think about the other person’s preferences. These expressions of other-mindedness are another measure of being “on” for your spouse. Too often in marriage, we expect our spouse to take us as we are without honoring him/her with the same common decencies that we give to strangers.

When we’re dating we ask questions instead of making assumptions, we listen and respond to what the other person is saying, we remember things that are important to each other, and we respond in other Christ-like ways seeking to enter our partner’s world. Living incarnationally is another vital part of what it means to be “on” in marriage. Too often after marriage, we begin to insist that our spouse live in our world (preferences and tolerating our character weaknesses) rather than entering their world and willfully pursuing Christ-likeness to bless them.

Couple Discussion Questions: What common decencies do you do for other people that you’ve begun to neglect in your marriage? What elements of crudeness are you beginning to allow to cheapen the marriage? What does your level of forgetfulness say about your prioritization of the marriage?

5. **Sharing space and co-managing limited resources.** When we’re dating, we manage limited resources separately: we face the challenge of sharing space with someone else or live alone. When we’re married, we realize where the other person likes to leave their socks, wet towel, and dirty shoes: we become offended because their quirks are now our life.

There is more than quirks involved in this change. With perpetual proximity comes a new kind of knowledge. With interwoven lives comes a new type of influence. We now see each other at our worst physically, emotionally, relationally, and morally. Our “worst” and bad life management can quickly become contagious. This closeness allows our spouse to see, talk about, and be affected by things no else sees, comments on, or finds significant.

“No one else is as inconvenienced and hurt by your flaws as your spouse is. And therefore your spouse becomes more keenly aware of what is wrong with you than anyone else ever has been (p. 139).” Tim Keller in *The Meaning of Marriage*

Couple Discussion Questions: How difficult do you find it to have a shared mindset and approach to managing time, money, and decision making? What are the pet peeves that you need to let die in order to honor and protect the marriage? How are you making your home, lifestyle, and managing processes reflect a unity of the two of you?

6. **You are both changing people.** You will be married to dozens of people over the course of a single marriage. The act of getting married changes you. Having children changes you. Advancing in your career or losing a job changes you. The limits, ailments, and wisdom of aging change you. You are not who you will be.

“When you first fall in love, you think you love the person, but you don’t really. You can’t know who the person is right away. That takes years. You actually love your *idea* of the person—and that is always, at first, one-dimensional and somewhat mistaken (p. 94).” Tim Keller in *The Meaning of Marriage*

“We never know whom we marry; we just think we do... For marriage, being [the enormous thing it is] means we are not the same person after we have entered it. The primary problem is... learning how to love and care for the stranger to whom you find yourself married (p. 417-22).” Stanley Hauerwas in “Sex and Politics” in *Christian Century* (April 19, 1978)

This is why it is absolutely essential to be a lifelong learner of your spouse. Couples who neglect this continual learning often try to excuse their divorce by saying things like, “We’re not the same people we were when we got married,” or “We’ve just drifted apart,” or “We don’t have anything in common anymore.” Each excuse reveals a naïve or lazy view of what marriage is meant to be and how life changes us.

Couple Discussion Questions: Are you a good student of your spouse? Do you have a joy and passion for learning God’s design, purpose, and activity for and in your spouse? Do you fear change? If so, how does this fear affect the way you interpret the various seasons of your marriage?

7. **Overly high expectations of marriage.** To hear some people talk about marriage, one would think that it was Jesus’ rival for bringing salvation to the world and peace to our hearts. Usually their logic centers around making loneliness and emptiness the core problems that cause all other human struggles. When we think of life this way, then the permanent presence of a caring person should make life perpetually “better.”

“We come into our marriages driven by all kinds of fears, desires, and needs. If I look to my marriage to fill the God-sized spiritual vacuum in my heart, I will not be in position to serve my spouse. Only God can fill a God-sized hole. Until God has the proper place in my life, I will always be complaining that my spouse is not loving me well enough, not respecting me enough, not supporting me enough (p. 72-73).” Tim Keller in *The Meaning of Marriage*

Marriage is merely a picture of the covenant (the gospel) that is meant to satisfy our souls. When we forget this we begin to live as if watching a Gatorade commercial should quench our thirst rather than merely teach us about the thirst-quenching product. With this mistake we grow angry. It is as if watching the commercial (marriage) only reminds of our thirst and highlights the inability of the commercial to do what only the actual product (the gospel) can do.

“In short, the Enlightenment privatized marriage, taking it out of the public sphere, and redefined its purpose as individual gratification, not any ‘broader good’ such as reflecting God’s nature, producing character, or raising children (p. 28)... Marriage used to be a public institution for the common good, and now it is a private arrangement for the satisfaction of the individuals. Marriage used to be about *us*, but now it is about *me*. But ironically, this newer view of marriage actually puts a crushing burden of expectation on marriage and on spouses in a way that more traditional understandings never did. And it leaves us desperately trapped between both unrealistic longings for and terrible fears about marriage (p. 29).” Tim Keller in *The Meaning of Marriage*

Couple Discussion Questions: How often does your marital dissatisfaction (anger, grumbling, anxiety, or despair) result from asking from your marriage what you should have asked from God? Does your “if only” thought life resemble prayers to your marriage? Is there room for your marriage to exceed your expectations? Does contentment in marriage seem like a second class enjoyment to you?

8. **Overly high expectations of your spouse.** Most couples have said to one another, “You complete me.” This is a wonderful romantic sensation that comes when we find that someone is a good “match” or with whom we “click.” But it is a sure sign of marital unhealthiness if we really expect it. When this is the case, then our insecurities become (in our mind) our spouse’s fault.

“But it would be wrong to pin the culture’s change in attitude toward marriage fully on the male quest for physical beauty. Women have been just as affected by our consumer culture (p. 33)... They are looking for a marriage partner who will ‘fulfill their emotional, sexual, and spiritual desires.’ And that creates an extreme idealism that in turn leads to deep pessimism that you will ever find the right person to marry (p. 34).” Tim Keller in *The Meaning of Marriage*

“Could it be that her attraction was much more self-oriented than she knew? What felt like love may actually have been excitement that this man she had gotten to know seemed to fit nicely into the dream she had always had for her life (p. 49)... None of us gets our dream in the way we dreamt it, because none of us is writing our own story. God, in his love, writes a better story than we could ever write for ourselves (p. 50).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

“The love partner becomes the divine ideal within which to fulfill one’s life. All spiritual and moral needs now become focused in one individual... In one word, the love object is God (p. 160)... After all what is it that we want when we elevate the love partner to the position of God? We want redemption—nothing less (p. 167).” Ernest Baker in *The Denial of Death*.

Of all the temptations that we could face in marriage, living on the edge of idolizing our spouse may be the preferred idolatry. But we must realize that it is still a temptation that, at its best, will result in a mid-life crisis. The second greatest love of our life should be our spouse, but when that second love becomes first, it mutates from a blessing into a curse as our hopes are placed on someone who cannot support them.

Couple Discussion Questions: Can your spouse disappoint you without you feeling despair or intense anger? How do you intentionally foster your spouse’s deep affection for you while pointing them to Christ? How often do you remind yourself that your spouse is a gift from God meant to mirror His greater love for you?

9. **Overly high expectations of love.** Maybe it’s not the institution of marriage in which we place our hope. Maybe it’s not even the one person we’re married to that we expect to make our lives complete. Often we just get dyslexic with 1 John 4:8 and we read, “Love is god,” instead of “God is love.” We worship God as if love were his only or primary attribute, instead of worshipping God with a balanced appreciation for all his attributes – holiness.

There are two ways by which this idealized view of love gets commonly expressed. First, we expect love to meet all of our “needs” or use the conception of a “love tank” to capture what it means to have a fulfilling life and good relationship. The only place where Scriptures uses imagery comparable to “love tanks” as sources of personal fulfillment and security it is strongly discouraged – Jeremiah 2:13.

“If you add two vacuums to each other, you only get a bigger and stronger vacuum, a giant sucking sound... If we look to our spouses to fill up our tanks in a way that only God can do, we are demanding an impossibility (p. 52).” Tim Keller in *The Meaning of Marriage*

“A needs-based marriage does not testify to God’s glory; it is focused on personal demands competing for supremacy. Two people, preoccupied with manipulating each other to meet needs, can drive their marriage down the path of ‘irreconcilable differences.’ This is culture language that simply acknowledges that a marriage can no longer carry the weight of demands understood as needs (p. 74).” Dave Harvey in *When Sinners Say “I Do”*

The second expression is usually not heard until a couple gets in trouble and they begin to rationalize their thoughts of ending the marriage with the logic, “We’re just not ‘in love’ anymore.” This second expression is just the hard-times application of the first. Both expressions miss the point that love is supernatural and must be received from God’s grace before it can be given (1 John 4:10). If we are only alternating our own “love fuel” between our respective “love tanks” then evaporation and personal offenses will, with time, inevitably leave us dry and hopeless.

Couple Discussion Questions: What things in life do you deeply and regularly enjoy without relying upon as your source of security or identity? How can you deeply and regularly enjoy marital love, in all its expressions, without making it your source of security or identity? How does viewing marital love as a “highly prioritized, good desire” alleviate much of the pressure associated with viewing it as a “need”?

10. **Viewing compatibility as a noun instead of a verb.** Too often, we treat compatibility as if it were a noun (something two people share; like a cupcake or eye color) instead of a verb (something two people do; like synchronized swimming or conversation). There is a big, often overlooked, difference between compatibility as a noun and a verb.

Think for a moment. Over the course of human history, every combination of husband personality traits and wife personality traits have combined to make excellent marriages. Equally true, every combination of personality traits has ended in painful, bitter divorces. Simply put – compatibility is not the make or break issue for marriage.

Are personality tests bad? No. They usually do a good job in letting couple’s know what common challenges they will face based upon their values and preferences (less mystical words for “personality types”). Rarely is a couple surprised by what they find, and their close friends could have given the same assessment.

Should couples take these tests? Sure. They’re fun and usually provide neutral language to discuss differences that would normally come out during an argument (a time when couple’s assign moral language – “good” and “bad”—to their differences).

Does this mean any morally upstanding person can marry any other morally upstanding person and have a great marriage? No. Chemistry is important to marriage and should not be neglected. But two high character people without “chemistry” will have a better marriage than two people who ignore the importance of character with “chemistry.”

So what is the take away? Learn all you can about your spouse or fiancé. Use personality tests to get to know one another if you like. Be able to predict every foreseeable difference you may have. But, do not begin to think that “compatibility” is something you have (noun). Remember compatibility, if the word is to be redeemed, comes from pursuing the same thing of eternal value together – Christ, His character within us, and His glory around us.

Couple Discussion Questions: Do you tend to measure your marriage by whether you have “it” anymore? What insecurities does this bring? How does that approach inject fear or pressure into your marital enrichment activities?

11. **Two (or more) different ways of “doing family.”** In a day of blended families and remarriage, it is likely that a married couple may bring the expectations and models of more than just two families (his and hers, both singular) to their marriage. The subtle thing about families of origin is that they are what we “know” whether they are something we “agree with” or not. So, they shape our instincts even when we are trying to avoid their influence.

Families of origin are often good. When this is the case a couple may want to take the “best” from both homes. But this creates its own unique trap. Patterns or traditions, which were sincerely good for one’s parents, may not be a good fit for your marriage. When we use our parent’s “good” as our standard, we may falsely believe that we have failed when we cannot achieve it or believe we have a bad marriage when it doesn’t “work” for us.

It is important to consider the influence of the homes you have lived in upon your answers. Below list the homes in which you have lived and those who have served as parent or spouse figures for you.

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Couple Discussion Questions: How do you fall into the temptation of thinking that mimicking is the only or best way to honor your home of origin? In what ways do you focus on the pains of your home of origin so that you know what you want to avoid more than what you want to pursue? How or when does what you “know” about family (good or bad) become the lens through which you evaluate your spouse or marriage?

Note: If there are intense emotional ties (positive or negative) to one or more of the homes you listed above, then this is something you will need to consider at many points throughout these five seminars.

Resource: If your marriage is creating a blended family, then the book *The Smart Stepfamily* by Ron Deal is an excellent resource to help you apply the principles that you will learn in these seminars to the unique contexts and challenges of a blended family.

Resource: If you are struggling to love your spouse well because you have not experienced a loving home, then the book *Loving Well (Even If You Haven’t Been)* by William Smith would be a good resource.

12. **An undefined and changing role.** Listen to the words of Carolyn Mahaney as she thinks about her early days of marriage, “My greatest challenge—by far—was my desire to do this ‘wife thing’ well, but I was not sure how to pull it off (p. 19 in *Feminine Appeal*).” Even if you know biblical gender roles, you don’t enter marriage knowing what they’re going to look like in your home.

Getting married is an experience that changes all of your habits, systems, and relationships at the same time. You walk into a world where expectations are not only not unknown by you, but also are not defined by the two of you and maybe are not even capable of being articulated.

The beginning of marriage is a time when you desperately want to do a “good” job, but “good” has yet to be clearly defined. Worse yet, each season of life may redefine the word “good.” Unless a couple understands this dynamic and communicates about it clearly and regularly, then it is a common place for resentment to build because each spouse views the other as “unfair” and “un-pleasable.” This often leads a couple to give up or argue when they should be talking and dreaming.

Couple Discussion Questions: During this season of your marriage, what are your primary roles, responsibilities, and expectations? How is that different from the previous season of your marriage or relationship? What season do you foresee coming next, and what changes will that likely bring? How do you find yourself clinging to a past season or role in marriage or impatiently rushing towards a future season or role in marriage?

13. **We are sinners and we are self-centered.** No approach to marriage that treats us a “good people who sometimes do bad things” and believes “we only do bad things because of our circumstances” will ever overcome the challenges that face a marriage. The greatest problem that faces marriage is the sin that dwells in the heart of each spouse and wants to make the marriage about “self” rather than loving God and loving your spouse.

“We must never be naïve enough to think of marriage as a safe harbor from the Fall... The deepest struggles of life will occur in the most primary relationship affected by the Fall: marriage (p. 53).” Dan Allender and Tremper Longman III as quoted by Gary Thomas in *Sacred Marriage*

Too often, however, Christians think of the human problem as an exclusively selfish problem. But there is also a self-centered problem. Yes, we want things our way, according to our preferences, and our time table (selfish). But we also naturally see things only from our perspective, and only experience things as they affect us, and only remember things from our vantage point (self-centered).

We are, literally, trapped in ourselves. We are souls trapped in our own bodies and limited to our own eyes, ears, skin, nose, and mouth for information about the world around us. This is a primary reason that only God can love perfectly. He is not limited to a point in space and time perspective.

A primary objective in everything we cover in these five seminars will be to overcome the influence of indwelling sin and being self-centered. This is why we will be dependent upon God for every good thing that is accomplished (James 1:16). This is also why we can be brutally honest about the challenges we face and still have hope for deeply satisfying, lasting marriages, if we submit to God’s plan and rely upon God’s power.

Couple Discussion Questions: How does this section both encourage and discourage you? How does realizing the influence of indwelling sin and the reality of being self-centered people help you depersonalize many of the offenses and irritants of marriage without minimizing or ignoring them? Where are the places where you see your own self-centeredness affecting your marriage most? How can you regularly discipline yourself to look at the world from your spouse’s perspective?

14. **Low view of commitment.** We live in a day when “staying married” is a phrase that is usually said with a negative connotation, as if doing anything that did not feel natural was hypocritical. The problem with this mindset is that it requires marriage to perpetually prove and validate itself.

“In other words, living together cannot work as a trial run to determine if you are able to make the commitment of marriage, because that commitment cannot be experienced unless you are married. This commitment is what sets marriage apart from every other relationship. It changes everything (p. 104).” Dennis Rainey (editor) in *Preparing for Marriage*

It is hard to continually strive to improve something, which involves evaluation, without simultaneously undermining our sense of commitment. When we ask, “Am I satisfied with my cell phone provider?” we are implying the possibility of switching or comparing to other providers – deadly thought patterns for a marriage. Even our marriage enrichment must be guarded from degenerating into a source of dissatisfaction that causes us to link our commitment to our spouse’s performance.

Couple Discussion Questions: How do you motivate yourself continually to engage in marital enrichment without allowing the evaluation process to undermine your sense of commitment? What activities do you already consistently enrich without undermining your commitment during hard/weak seasons? What can you learn from these endeavors that would apply well to your marriage?

15. **Wrong view of ownership over the marriage.** It is right to speak of "our marriage," referring to marriage as belonging to you and your spouse. This is an important concept in order to protect outsiders (i.e., parents, friends, adultery partner) from entering the relationship in a way in which they do not belong.

However, each person in a marriage belongs to God. I Corinthians 6:19b-20 says, "You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God with your body." Your marriage belongs to you like a car belongs to a teenager when his/her parents paid for it. The teenager is not free to do with the car what he/she like, but the parents do want the teenager to learn the responsibility that comes with calling it "his/her car."

"When you marry, you have gotten into something that was invented by God. And if you determine to run your marriage your way, you're in for a lot of trouble, because marriage is God's institution (p. 131)." Tim Keller in *The Meaning of Marriage*

When we have a wrong view of ownership over our marriage, we expect God to bless and our spouse to be pleased with whatever we do with "our life" and, by implication, "our marriage." We get offended by our spouse and angry with God when this does not happen (Prov. 14:12, 16:25). We respond like teenagers who got their keys taken away for being out too late or experimenting with alcohol.

Couple Discussion Questions: Are you okay being a child of God for the rest of your life? Do you view your marriage as a blessing from God given to you to steward according to His design for your enjoyment? When have you operated outside this design and then gotten upset with God or your spouse when it didn't work?

16. **We try to make marriage our church.** We live in a day when few people know us really well. Our lives are too busy. We communicate in e-mails, tweets, and sound bites. Few people live in their home town and most move multiples times during their life. Marriage becomes the only place where we are forced to be really known. This makes the modern marriage relationship more unique in our life experience than God ever designed for it to be.

Too often, one angry spouse says to another, "Nobody else, but you, has a problem with me!" Too often this is true. The angry spouse doesn't allow anyone else to know them well enough to see their faults and doesn't grant friends permission to speak into the faults that are seen. This sets marriage up to fail.

This was not God's design. We have tried to use Genesis 2:18, "It is not good for man to be alone," to justify our spouse being the only person who knows us. We act as if marriage was the only thing God created when He created woman. No! God created the possibility for community, friendship, and church when he created woman. God never intended marriage alone to fulfill us relationally. If that were the case, then God would exist in Duality not Trinity.

Further, not being known or knowing others, means that we are left to compare ourselves and our marriages to the public persona of others. This inevitably leads to insecurity or pride rather than growth and humility. We deal with fictional versions of people and try to force our marriages to measure up to the fictions we create.

Couple Discussion Questions: When are you around married couples that you allow to know you and your marriage well? How might you be asking your marriage and family to bear the full burden of what God designed the biblical community of the church to bear in your life? How has primarily knowing the public persona of other couples added to your insecurity or cynicism about marriage? When and how does this affect your marriage?

17. **Unwillingness to work for a good relationship.** This can stem from laziness or misguided conviction. Some people find the relational work of a good marriage more than they want to give – laziness. Other people believe that marriage should not be work and if they have to do uncomfortable things to enrich the relationship, then they are doing something wrong – misguided conviction.

Even as you go through this seminar you may be asking yourself, “Is this really necessary? Isn’t it enough that we love each other? I don’t enjoy thinking about hard things.” Relational erosion and personal demise almost always begin with asking bad questions that make bad options seem more plausible.

What are the top five things that you believe will shape your life over your remaining years?

- i. _____
- ii. _____
- iii. _____
- iv. _____
- v. _____

Your marriage should be near the top of this list; along with your relationship with God. A guiding question you should ask yourself regularly is, “Am I investing my time in the things that are going to have the biggest impact on my life, my family for generations to come, and God’s kingdom?”

Couple Discussion Questions: When you neglect working on your marriage, how does it either cause a relational drift or force your spouse into a “bad guy” role? Do you hear “work on your marriage” with a negative connotation? What ideas, people, or concepts contribute to a low view of working for a good marriage?

- 18. **Bracing against past hurts.** Our pain makes marriage hard because we focus on what we want to avoid more than what God designed for us to enjoy. It is nearly impossible to be self-protecting (fearful) and self-giving (loving) at the same time. At least it is nearly impossible to relax enough to enjoy being self-giving while we are battling against the instinct to be self-protecting. This makes marriage constant “work” in a way it was never intended to be (balancing points #17). Yet, we often respond in a hybrid of self-protection and self-giving.

In light of this reflection, read I John 4:18, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.” This passage does not mean that love will never call us to pass through fear. Love often requires facing our fears (Psalm 23). But love has the power to so fully redeem fear that the presence of fear is forgotten in light of the beauty of its redemption. This, however, is a process and should not be expected to necessarily be completed quickly.

Facing these fears is an implication of the marital call to leave and cleave. Even if the past hurt is not caused by your parents this call to leave the authority, dependence, and negative influence of past relationships still applies. The principle is that we must quit living in fear in order to experience what God has laid before us. The application is not “just stop it” but to “be honest take the steps necessary to embrace the freedom God has for you.”

Couple Discussion Questions: Is there a significant past hurt which you have not told your spouse or minimized its impact upon you? When do you find yourself bracing against life “being like that again”? When and how does this lead to towards a desire for control or escape?

- 19. **A real enemy who wants to destroy marriage.** There is a frightening statement at the end of Jesus temptation, “[Satan] departed from him until an opportune time (Luke 4:13b).” This is why Peter said, “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like roaring lion seeking someone to devour (I Peter 5:8).”

When Satan tempts a single adult, he can only take out one person at a time. When Satan tempts a married adult with kids, he can disrupt the lives of many people with a single victory. The more pain Satan can bring in a single event, the more joy it brings him and captures his attention. This should not cause us to live in fear, but to live soberly.

What does this mean practically? It means we don’t have to go looking for ways to mess up. Opportunities to harm our marriage are looking for us. We cannot do marriage in a prayerless, mindless auto-pilot mode. Read Ephesians 6:1-20 and mark the verbs (be strong, put on, stand firm, pray) and nouns (truth, righteousness, peace, salvation, Spirit). Does your view of marital enrichment view these as essential elements of a Christian marriage?

Couple Discussion Questions: How would you live differently if you truly believed that evil was daily looking for a way to wreck your marriage? What things would you say more or less if you knew evil was daily whispering lies into the mind of your spouse? What things would you avoid or pursue if you knew that common daily events were part of a larger battle for the heart and soul of your spouse and marriage?

20. **Unwillingness to be weak.** This may well be the capstone struggle of marriage, because it is the core commitment that will keep us from the gospel. Most marital struggles emanate from at least one partner trying to be stronger (right, last word, independent, resilient, attractive, successful, popular) than they naturally are. As odd as it sounds, striving to impress is often the very thing that prevents us from resting in God’s or other’s love.

“The thing that keeps us from growing is our delusion of strength... Our marriage is not damaged by cries of weakness but by pronouncements of strength (p. 251).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

Having to be strong and being loved are about as opposite as *having* to wait and being patient. Patient people wait; just like strong people are loved. But when waiting feels forced then patience is no longer an accurate description of the person (at least not an enjoyable one).

We come to God in our weakness. He loves us when we have nothing lovable about us and this solidifies in our mind that there is nothing we could ever do to make God love us less, because there was nothing we did to make God love us. Marriage, our particular marriage and the entire institution of marriage, was designed to be a picture of this gospel message (Eph. 5:32). It is only when we allow ourselves to be weak and loved that we experience the fullness of what God made marriage to be.

Couple Discussion Questions: How would (or is) your marriage be better if you could be weak in your spouse’s presence and have no doubts of his/her affection or commitment? What weaknesses do you most try to hide from your spouse? How does this hiding affect your ability to receive and rest in the love of your spouse?

Where Are We Now?

Marriage is a journey. Hopefully this introduction has allowed you to articulate more clearly where you are on this journey. Don’t feel rushed to “get it all right” now. That devalues the beauty and joy of everything God wants to do in the process. Your greatest memories, stories, and victories will be in the journey; not the destination.

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

What are you wanting to learn from the rest of these five seminars that this section helped you put into words?

Closing

It would be easy to be overwhelmed at this point and think that a good marriage requires a perfect spouse. These questions reveal how far short we all fall from being a perfect spouse. But Jesus put this kind of high standard before anyone who wanted to be his disciple, “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:48).” His purpose, however, wasn’t discouragement, but revival.

That is the aim of a gospel-centered approach to marriage. We want more than marital enrichment. We want marital revival! We desperately need an intense awakening to what God called marriage to be; not a mere nudging towards more functional principles. The general condition of marriage in our culture cries out to God for a radical transformation of our “common sense” and “best practices” about marriage, because they’re not working.

If we are going to seek a gospel-centered marriage, we must realize such an endeavor will cast us to our knees begging God for the grace, strength, and wisdom to bless our spouse and homes in ways that we are, in ourselves, utterly incapable and sometimes even unwilling to do. But from our knees we will find that God is both willing and capable to give the kind of marriage we could have never had on our feet.

That brings us to one final virtue that is absolutely necessary to experience and enjoy a gospel-centered marriage – humility.

Marriage is a journey from our weakness (both spouses) to God’s strength. Due to the affects of sin, many of our weaknesses are exaggerated strengths. So even our strengths must be handled with humility or they betray us and our marriage. But when handled with humility even our weaknesses become a blessing to our marriage. It is only the gospel that will teach us to view life this way.

Chapter 2

What Makes Marriage Work? Finding the Essential Core of a Good Marriage

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

- The best spouse is the best learner, so we will never “arrive” as a spouse.
- We will have to take the risk of being known before we experience the joy of being loved.
- If we are going to do marriage enrichment well, it must be a lifestyle connected with our life purpose.
- A thriving marriage is lived in a story larger than either spouse, or even both spouses combined.

Memorize: Ephesians 5:28-30 (ESV), “In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body.” As you memorize this passage reflect upon these key points:

- “In the same way” – We’re to present our spouse to God spotless and holy as Christ does the church (Eph 5:27).
- “As their own bodies” – What we’d do for our self should be the minimum we’re willing to do for our spouse.
- “Loves his wife love himself” – We best love ourselves by loving our spouse; creating a home marked by peace.
- “Nourishes and cherishes” – We’re to be excellent (willing, skillful, and frequent) at what builds up our spouse.
- “As Christ does” – We can only love our spouse this way because of God’s love for us (1 John 4:10-11, 19).

Teaching Notes

“We are not to live *for* one another, but live *beside* one another *for* the Lord. Our lives are not meant to *revolve* around one another, but they are meant to *revolve together* around Jesus Christ (p. 141).” John Henderson in *Catching Foxes*

“One of the riskiest, but most rewarding benefits of a marriage relationship is the exhilarating experience of knowing and being known, of revealing and having another person reveal himself or herself to you (p. 19)... If the person who knows you best also loves you most, your marriage will be truly special (p. 88).” Dennis Rainey (editor) in *Preparing for Marriage*

“The Christian teaching does not offer a choice between fulfillment and sacrifice but rather mutual fulfillment through mutual sacrifice... So, what do you need to make marriage work? You need to know the secret, the gospel, and how it gives you both the power and pattern for your marriage (p. 47)... Within this Christian vision for marriage, here’s what it means to fall in love. It is to look at another person and get a glimpse of the person God is creating, and to say, ‘I see who God is making you, and it excites me! I want to be part of that. I want to partner with you and God in the journey you are taking to his throne. And when we get there, I will look at your magnificence and say, ‘I always knew you could be like this. I got glimpses of it on earth, but now look at you!’ (p. 121)” Tim Keller in *The Meaning of Marriage*

“Surely God could have made it ‘good’ on the first attempt. Pay close attention: God is creating drama to underscore something important about marriage (p. 59).” Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*

“Marital dissatisfaction is best met with prayer, ‘That is why I need you, O God’ (p. 237).” Gary Thomas in *Sacred Marriage*

“It is not your husband or wife’s choices that you are rejecting, but God’s... It is God who formed your spouse with his or her natural gifts and personality, and after he did, he stood back and declared your spouse ‘good.’ It is hurtful to your spouse when you disrespect her for things she did not choose or reject her for things she cannot change. Every difference is an opportunity to celebrate God’s creative artistry (p. 211).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

Embedded Study

What?!? What does it take to make marriage work? How does our marriage enrichment not degenerate into a series of random acts of kindness driven or distracted by the tyranny of the urgent? How do we ensure that our individual acts of marital enrichment are working together to build a momentum and gather energy from one another?

These are important questions to ask, even if you are not currently discouraged or overwhelmed by the number of seemingly unrelated things that need to be done to improve your marriage. Marital enrichment that feels random is hard to maintain, easily forgotten, and tend to get bumped down the priority chain. This is why we must not allow marital enrichment to remain random.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the “big picture” that gives meaning to all the “little pieces” of marital enrichment. This chapter does not give all the “little pieces,” that is the purpose of the rest of this series. But you should get the framework to make enrichment seem purposeful.

In this chapter, we will address three key components that are essential to prolonged marital enrichment. These three components are highly inter-related, as each one feeds the other two:

1. Combining two individual life stories into one larger marriage-gospel story.
2. Committing to be a life-long learner of your spouse.
3. Embracing the vulnerability that comes with a covenant relationship.

Writing Your Marriage-Gospel Story

You have to know how to tell the events of your life as a story or life becomes meaningless. Most of us struggle to do this. This presents a great challenge for marital enrichment. In a life without a story, important things have nothing to attach to and keep slipping off our radar. We survive one day at a time doing what has to be done in a need-driven way (food, bills, shelter, etc...) until we escape through entertainment. This is how many of us also do marriage: a pressure motivated, need-driven mindset (satisfying whatever upset my spouse last) alternating with entertainment escapes.

In light of this, we must realize that if we're going to do marriage enrichment well, it must be a lifestyle change that connects with our life purpose. That is bigger than most people expect. But we cannot have a really good marriage as an appetizer with the “rest of life” as the main course. Marriage was never meant to be an accessory to “my” (singular) identity for the few hours I am at home. Marriage was meant to be the story in which life happens; not vice versa.

A story is more than a purpose statement. Most of us have tried to write a purpose statement before and seen it fade in relevance with time. Purpose may capture a season of life, but rarely captures our whole life. In the same way that we'll be married to at least a dozen people over the course of a single marriage, we'll change enough to have multiple purpose statements over the course of lifetime.

This is why we are speaking of “story” not “purpose statements.” A single story can have many chapters, each with their own purpose and key events, contributing to the same narrative. Whatever is used to give meaning to our marriage enrichment must have this kind of adaptability if it is going to remain relevant throughout our changing lives.

“Our marriages are unfolding stories, not just a series of random events or a collection of facts. The way we understand and retell the story of our marriages to ourselves and others shapes the way we live in our marriages (p. 267).” Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*

“Tell your [marital] story. Tell it to your kids, your friends, your brothers and sisters, but especially to each other. The more your story is implanted in your brain, the more it serves as a hedge against the myriad of forces that seek to destroy your marriage. Make your story so familiar that it becomes part of the fabric of your being. It should become a legend that is shared through the generations as you grow a family tree that defies all odds and boasts marriage after marriage of stability, strength, and longevity (p. 142).” Jerry Jenkins in *Hedges: Loving Your Marriage Enough to Protect It*

As you learn to tell your marriage story, we will look at telling it in three sections: (1) birth to wedding, (2) wedding to present, and (3) future dreams and fears. If you are engaged, you will only need to complete the first and third. After you have taken the time to record your life-marriage story, we will go back and learn to identify the gospel themes that are meant to be the “grand narrative” that defines your life and marriage.

Learning to Tell Your Story

Stories are made up events, but a story is larger than the events that comprise it. This will be a guiding principle as you learn to tell your marriage story. You will begin by listing formative events in your life, courtship, and marriage. But telling your life-marriage story is about more than building a chronologically-arranged list of events.

Events: Begin each worksheet by writing in the key life events which shaped you in the order in which they happened. Questions to prompt you in this part of the exercise are included in each section below. For “Birth to Wedding” general time markers are given to help you outline these events. In the other two, it would be wise to begin by charting the time periods that will divide that segment of your life-marriage story.

Experience: After you list the key events, it is helpful to assess how you experienced those events. A simple “-5” to “+5” scale has been provided. These represent pleasant (peaceful, joyful, excited, etc...) and unpleasant (i.e., angry, anxious, grieving, etc...) responses to each item. From this you should begin to be able to see what the major seasons of your life-marriage have been like: good seasons (+3 to +5), bad seasons (-3 to -5), mixed seasons, and “blah” seasons (-2 to +2).

In this part of the chart place an “x” where that event ranks on the unpleasant-to-pleasant spectrum. Once you have completed the list and rated the experience of each event, connect the dots to give yourself a visual of how that section of your life story has unfolded. A sample of this completed exercise is provided at www.bradhambrick.com/foundations.

You should begin to notice whether the major shifts (good or bad) in your life have been the result of your choices or situational changes outside your control. You can probably begin to notice where your instincts towards trust or mistrust gained their current force.

Meaning: There is a “comment” box beside each event for you to summarize how you originally understood the significance of that event upon you. Comments can be serious or playful, but they should accurately represent the way that event actually impacted you at that time.

What were the common themes you used to interpret the pleasant parts of your life? What were the common themes you used to interpret the unpleasant parts of your life? These are probably the same themes that you use to interpret the pleasant and unpleasant events in your marriage today. Until we see that we are interpreters of life, we are slaves to the interpretations that come to us naturally.

You should begin to notice how you responded to things “in the moment” compared with the significance you give them now. Too often, we only attribute this difference to the passing of time, but most often it is not time that creates change but a *change in perspective* (which is just a more common phrase for looking at the same facts from the vantage point of a different “story”).

We will come back to this column when we begin the process of making sense of our life in light of the “Grand Narrative” of the gospel. We cannot change the “events” column. We cannot change the “experience” columns, at least not our initial reaction. But we can, by God’s grace, change the “meaning” column. Even in light of the gospel, not everything in this column will become pleasant (that is the prosperity gospel, which is a false gospel). But we can interpret our successes and failures, blessings and trials, in a way that protects our marriage from the threats of pride, insecurity, and mistrust.

Birth to Wedding

An exciting, and sometimes unsettling, part of marriage is that two individual stories are becoming one shared story. From the wedding forward, you have two individual histories with a shared present and future. The first chart gives clarity about what has been joined together by your marriage covenant and what is being weaved into one by your married life.

What should you include in your life-marriage story?

- Key events – vacations, accomplishments, tragedies, moves, family changes, secrets
- Key people – family members, teachers, church leaders, coaches, friends
- Major interests – hobbies, sports, organizations
- Significant decisions – good and bad
- Spiritual markers – good and bad
- Accomplishments – goals/dreams set, disappointments, points of progress, and completion
- Jobs – skills developed, key connections established, life-direction determined

- Maturation markers – personal, emotional, relational
- Courtship – meeting your spouse, falling in love, obstacles to relationship, learning each other

Wedding to Present

Agreeing on how to divide the major sections of your married life is the first part of telling your wedding-to-present story. How do the “chapters” of your marriage divide? The first year, children, moves, and jobs are common dividers. But you may think of others.

After you think of the key chapters or headings for your married life, begin listing the key events, people, decisions, spiritual markers, and accomplishments for each chapter like you did for your birth-to-wedding story. Mark the ups and downs of each experience and trace the line that is created.

Remember, the point of these exercises is to build unity (emotional and narrative) in your marriage. So, talk about the things you write. Reflect on how you see events differently now from when they occurred, and consider what that says about what God has done in your life and marriage.

Too often, we think of our Christian testimony in exclusively individualistic terms. But, if marriage makes us “one flesh” then we should be able to give a marital testimony. This exercise will help you and your spouse feel unified in ministry even when you are not doing ministry together. When you have verbalized how your stories have joined, then you can see how you are ever-present in each other’s ministry.

Future Dreams and Fears

Your marriage story is not just about where the two of you have been, but also about where you are going. God created our temporal lives with a glorious suspense called “the future.” When we fail to appreciate this God-given suspense we either surrender to anxiety or apathy. A shared dream for the future is a vital part of unity and romance in the present.

Too often, a marriage begins to deteriorate when personal ambitions and dreams are not woven into a joint story. With this divide, as “progress” is made, a couple begins to be excited for one another from an increasing distance. Or, even worse, other people are more aware of the progress being made, and those other people begin to fill the role of *primary encourager*.

As you write this part of your story, there will be a couple of key differences from the prior two exercises. First, you are writing fiction not history, because you are writing about things that have not happened. Cultivating this kind of joint, joyful foresight is a powerfully important marital skill. Appendix A has a collection of dates to help you review these materials on fun, romantic evenings. This exercise can make for an enjoyable annual “Dream Date.”

Don’t get caught up in merely trying to make plans and map out steps. That is something that can and should be done later. Here you are expressing the vulnerability of shared hopes and fears. That is profoundly bonding. Don’t allow the logistics of implementation rob you of the romance of dreaming. Once you finish sharing about this page, then pick a couple of dream you each want to pursue.

“A main part of intimacy between two persons is precisely mutual knowledge of their treasures.” Dallas Willard in *The Divine Conspiracy*

This page is the fuel for a marital prayer life. Post this in your house in a place that you see frequently or where you pray regularly. Revising this page annually can be a great marital exercise. Once you have a history of what your dreams have been over a number of years, it can be a sweet time reflecting on God’s faithfulness, provision, and reminding yourselves how God’s ways truly are better than our ways (Isa. 55:8-13).

Second, you are writing about things that are separate *and* shared. Your birth-to-wedding stories were two separate stories. Your wedding-to-present story was one shared story. Your future story is an attempt to dream as one. You may choose to write in different color pens for his (blue), hers (pink), and ours (purple) dreams. But include them all on the same page, so that you see the interconnectedness and challenges of your shared hopes and fears.



Sketching our Marriage Story Birth to Wedding

	Unpleasant Experience					Pleasant Experience					Comments
	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	+1	+2	+3	+4	+5	
Birth											
Elementary Age											
Middle School Age											
High School Age											
College Age											
After											

Modified and adapted from *Preparing for Marriage* edited by Dennis Rainey (pages 36-37)

Start by listing all the roles (i.e., spouse, child, parent, employee, church member, etc...) you currently have or would aspire to have (i.e., 1 Tim. 3:1). Most often, our dreams and fears will cluster around these roles. Arranging your dreams and fears this way is an opportunity to reflect on (or brainstorm if necessary) the way you share each role. Having a shared mindset about the role each dream or fear attaches to makes it more natural to share each dream and fear.

Read Ecclesiastes 4:9-12. This passage is often more sentimentally than practically applied to marriage. It is a wonderful concept and an immense blessing when enacted. But unless we are intentional in how we think about our dreams and fears, it will remain a theory that only serves to discourage or embitter us by its absence when it is needed. The third story exercise is when we gain the advantage of being two-as-one. The next section will reinforce our marital unity with the third chord (v. 12).

What should you consider under each role you listed?

- The next natural changes for this role
- Dreams or fears you have regarding each role
- Points of remaining bitterness or shame connected to this role
- Areas of desired character or skill growth
- Areas of provision for which you are dependent upon God
- Specific burdens or aspirations you have for each role
- Passages of Scripture God has impressed upon you for a given role

Gospel as the “Grand Narrative”

Most people are unable to talk about the gospel as the theme of their life because they have never thought through their life as a story. Hopefully, your work in the previous sections has removed this obstacle for you and your spouse. This section moves the three story exercises from merely reflective-relational exercises to tracing the hand of God through your life, marriage, fears, and dreams.

“Many of us didn’t marry because we had a grand vision of becoming more like Jesus. But for now, if you don’t find this motivating at least accept that this is what God’s Word clearly teaches (p. 70)... Jesus isn’t a consolation prize for the unhappily married. He’s the grand prize for the married and unmarried alike (p. 71).” Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*

The gospel doesn’t rewrite your story; it reinterprets your story. The facts of your life will not change, but the significance of those facts has (or, at least, can) change significantly. For this reason, it is suggested that you use color, more than words, to identify where the core themes of the gospel appear in your life-marriage story. The “x’s” and line will not move, but they will become three dimensional and multi-colored.

The chart below contains the major themes of the gospel and a color-coding system. Use these colors to trace the line that runs through your charts. In some areas the colors may stack like a rainbow as you see multiple themes surrounding the same event.

Theme	Description	Color
God’s Faithfulness	The gospel begins with God’s faithfulness. Before, during, and after our sin and its affects God is faithful. That is our hope. As the King of Kings (purple for royalty), we can count on God to be faithful. Where do you see God’s faithfulness in your story?	Purple
Sin & Suffering	The gospel is needed because of the marring affects of sin and suffering upon our lives. We are born corrupted by sin. We live in a broken world with people who will hurt us. Our lives are marred (black like spilled ink on a work of art) by these realities. Where do you see sin and suffering in your story?	Black
Undeserved Love	We could not fix ourselves or make up for the wrongs we had done. We deserved punishment and rejection, but Christ lived the perfect life necessary to merit heaven and died the death we deserved (red represents his blood) in order to demonstrate the depth of God great love for us. Where do see God’s love and grace in your story?	Red

Faith / Hope	A story filled with sin and suffering should be a dark story. Whenever we experience faith and hope (yellow like the breaking of the morning sun) it is intended to be a reminder that our story has been invaded by Someone greater than our sin and suffering. Where do you see the themes of faith and hope in your story?	Yellow
Joy	Laughter is the privilege of those who feel safe. Soldiers in battle don't make jokes. Pleasure and joy are common-grace tastes of what God intends for His people and meant to remind us of the home, Heaven, God provides for those who accept His gift of grace (orange for warm and inviting). Where do you see the theme of joy in your story?	Orange
Generosity	Without the gospel we live in a context of limited time, love, and resources. Before we experience the gospel, life is about getting as much of “it” (whatever you value most) as you can. Once we are filled with God's love we are freed to be generous (green represents money, which is commonly associated with generosity). Where do you see the theme of generosity (in yourself and others) in your story?	Green
Community	We are saved <i>by grace through faith into</i> a community called the church. This is how we realize that our life is about more than ourselves (blue to indicate the breadth of God's body, like the sky). Where do you see the theme of Christian community in your story?	Blue
Perseverance	By the gospel God forgives our sin (justification) and shapes our character (sanctification). Character shaping is the process by which God makes us like Jesus (brown for steady, solid growth like a tree). Where do you see the theme of perseverance in your story?	Brown
Surprise	Because of the truths of the gospel we are able to trust God with the unexpected and God rarely works as we expect Him (asterisk to represent something out of the ordinary). Where do you see God's unexpected hand guiding your story?	Asterisk (*)

Now that you have completed tracing the gospel themes through your story, examine what you wrote as the significance or meaning of each event in the “comments” column. What did you learn, re-learn, or unlearn about God, the gospel, and your story?

Marriage Enrichment and Story

Now, you are ready to see your marital enrichment activities as more than random acts of kindness that merely prevent your spouse from being upset with you. Hopefully, you can see that in marriage enrichment you're cooperating with and celebrating God's activity in your life story. Gospel-centered marriage enrichment trains us to see God's faithfulness and activity in the most common details of our lives (home, character, relationships) on a daily basis.

Read Deuteronomy 29:1-9. Notice the tension. Moses said, “You have seen (v. 2),” and “But to this day the Lord has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear (v. 4).” God was active in amazing ways as He led His people from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. They saw it, and they missed it. The purpose of this chapter is to make sure that the same thing cannot be said of your marriage. As you go through these five “Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage” seminars, ask God to give you a heart to understand, eyes to see, and ears to hear how marriage was meant to point you and the world around you to God.

- Marriage roles mirror how God relates within the Trinity.
- We honor our covenant partner like God honors His covenant partners.
- Our words to one another should be an echo of God's response towards us.
- We joyfully sacrifice for one another like Jesus joyfully sacrificed for us (Heb. 12:1-2).
- We eagerly listen to one another like God eagerly receives our prayers.
- We respond to each other's failures and weaknesses like God responds to ours.
- We celebrate each other's successes and strengths like the Father celebrates ours.

- We join each other in our suffering like the Spirit joins us in our suffering.
- We manage our finances to build God’s kingdom more than our own.
- We live as a married couple with intentionality and transparency in decision making like our self-revealing God.
- We make choices that honor our spouse and, thereby, highlight the wisdom of God’s Word.
- We enjoy one another in the pinnacle experience of sex as a picture of the pleasure God wants us to have in Him.
- We take pleasure in one another as God takes pleasure in His bride.

When we view our marriage enrichment as creating an increasingly vivid portrait of the gospel, the “same old activities” (i.e., listening, sharing, dating, budgeting, resolving conflict, planning, romancing, etc...) which have a tendency to become mundane and lifeless get plugged into something larger that continually breathes new life into them. Then we will have “eyes to see” that we can no more grow bored with a gospel-centered marriage than we can figure out an infinite God.

Marriage Enrichment: The Lifestyle of Being a Life-Long Learner

A good fisherman never tires of learning about fishing. An avid scrap-booker is eager to learn new ways to make things cute or meaningful. A good spouse is defined less by their current skills and abilities and more by their willingness to be a continual learner of their partner. A skilled spouse who grows lazy or distracted will soon live in a deteriorating marriage. A spouse with below average marriage skills who is consistently learning about their partner will experience the encouragement of steady marital improvement and a deepening affection for their spouse.

This has a simple, yet profound, implication – a good marriage is a lifestyle, not something you “finish.” As you go through these seminars, remember you are learning a gospel-centered way of life that blesses and gives life to your marriage, not a few biblically-based techniques to be activated when needed or turned back on when a problem arises.

Unless you think this way, you will create a cycle of being discouraged by hope. It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that marital effort is only triggered by marital crisis and that “better” is only a temporary word that responds to guilt or fear. Protect your marriage from this trap by approaching these seminars with the mindset of embracing a lifestyle.

These seminars are written to facilitate this kind of lifestyle change. While the seminars are topical, they are highly inter-related. This interconnection is designed to protect you from studying this material as a collection of helpful concepts, suggestions, and techniques.

- What you learn in “Foundations” must be expressed in communication, finances, decision making, and intimacy.
- What you learn in “Communication” builds off what you learn in foundations and be vital for implementing the skills you gain in finances, decision making, and intimacy.
- What you learn in “Budgeting” will assume a solid foundation and ability to communicate while setting the stage for decision making and greater intimacy.
- What you learn in “Decision Making” will be most the practical unpacking of foundations, communication, and budgeting, and be great protection for intimacy.
- What you learn in “Intimacy” will be celebration and fruit of what you worked for as you applied foundations, communication, budgeting, and decision making.

The lifestyle of being a life-long learner will continually reinforce two key truths about marriage and your spouse. First, your spouse is different from you in ways that have no moral significance. Yet, the closeness of marriage tempts us to begin to think of our spouse’s differences as being “bad.” This reveals our tendency to try to “make our spouse in our own image.” It also reveals that we’ve lost the enthusiasm to learn about the person God has blessed us with.

“Worshipping God as creator in your marriage means that when you look at your husband or wife, when you consider your spouse’s personality and gifts, and when you think about how differently he or she is hardwired from you, you will celebrate the glory of God as creator, expressed in who he designed your spouse to be (p. 279).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

The exercise “Celebrating Non-Moral Marital Differences” (found on the next page) is designed to help you think through and talk about this common marital pitfall. If you have been married for a number of years, a fruitful exercise is to use this chart to see how you and your spouse have changed over your marriage. In addition to marking where you are now, mark where each of you were on these variables when you married. Use a blue highlighter to cover the range between where the husband began and is now. Use a pink highlighter to mark the range between where the wife began and is now.

Second, your spouse is being continually crafted by God, and you must continually pay attention or you'll get left behind. Because we will be married to dozens of people over the course of a single marriage, we must commit to a lifestyle of learning our spouse, or we'll be as out-of-touch as someone with a cell phone from five years ago. A huge part of creating a gospel-centered marriage is enthusiasm for learning and participating in what God is doing in/through your spouse's life.

Embracing Vulnerability

A great marriage is not a place where you are safe because you are strong and competent. A great marriage is a place where you can be safe even when you are weak and uncertain. If this seems odd to you, then it has likely been uncomfortable for you as we've looked at the pleasant and unpleasant aspects of our life-marriage stories and examined our strengths, weaknesses, and differences in becoming a life-long learner of our spouse. But, with a little reflection, we quickly realize that a marriage where you have to be happy and strong all the time is an exhausting marriage. It is unsustainable. We wear out under the pressure regardless of how sincere we may be.

Read 2 Corinthians 12:9-10. This is a portrait of what God wants to give you in a gospel-centered marriage. Are you willing (i.e., humble enough) to receive it? There is great freedom to express your strengths when you do not have to hide your weaknesses. Being loved in light of (not just "in spite of") your weaknesses and failures is what the gospel is all about. When we forget or neglect this truth then the moments when our weaknesses and failures are apparent become intense moments of shame, conflict, hiding, or avoidance. When we embrace this truth and conduct our marriages accordingly, then our homes become a much needed refuge from the demands of a performance-driven world.

Over the course of your life when and with whom has it been safe for you to be weak?

What areas of weakness or failure are most difficult for you to share or even admit to yourself?

Can you pray without shame about these things, or are you asking your spouse to do what you've not allowed God to do?

"To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside of Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell (p. 169)." C.S. Lewis in *The Four Loves*

Marriage can be a foretaste of heaven when we are honest enough to experience the gospel where we need it most. But we walk into a "heavenly marriage" the same way we are invited to walk into Heaven – by humbly opening our weaknesses and failures up to the gospel's transforming power in confession and transparency.

Marriage is where God intends people to prepare for the experience of being fully known and fully loved. We are learning here what we will know fully in Heaven. Our enjoyment of Heaven will be greater because of knowing what it was like for vulnerability to be fear-provoking. Knowing the role marriage plays in our gospel journey gives us patience for one another in our weakness and prevents us from expecting from the sign (marriage) what only the destination (heaven) can provide.



Celebrating Our Non-Moral Marital Differences

Introduction: The longer we are married, the easier it can be to view the ways our spouse is different from us as "bad" (moral language) or as a sign of incompatibility (threatening language). This exercise is meant to help you see and celebrate the non-moral differences between you and your spouse. The attributes listed are neither morally good nor morally bad. Neither side nor the center is necessarily "holy." If you view these characteristics as moral qualities it will be harmful to your marriage. Your responsibility is to celebrate how God made your spouse and put the gospel on display finding ways to express loving unity in the midst of non-moral diversity.

Instructions: Write your initials where you believe you are on each spectrum. Write your spouse's initials where you believe he/she is on each spectrum. Compare your assessment with your spouse's assessment. Talk about (a) ways the two of you have viewed your differences as "bad" and this has caused conflict, (b) ways that your differences compliment one another well, and (c) how you have changed over the last few years.

Attribute	Scale	Attribute
Extrovert	_____	Introvert
Bold	_____	Timid
Calm	_____	Excitable
Reserved	_____	Expressive
Optimistic	_____	Pessimistic
Flexible	_____	Structured
Logical	_____	Emotional
Athletic	_____	Non-Athletic
Loud	_____	Quiet
Sentimental	_____	Stoic
Outdoors	_____	Indoors
Trusting	_____	Cautious
Detailed	_____	Generalizer
Organized	_____	Disorganized
Confident	_____	Insecure
Spender	_____	Saver
Conventional	_____	Unconventional
Leader	_____	Follower
Punctual	_____	Non-punctual
Aggressive	_____	Passive

Modified and adapted from *Preparing for Marriage God's Way* by Wayne Mack (p. 11)

Evaluation: “We” Identity and Leave & Cleave

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 enjoy becoming more of the kind of person who can be used by God to bless my spouse. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 2. My spouse enjoys becoming the kind of person God can use to bless me. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 3. I regularly and intentionally seek to be used by God to enrich the life of my spouse. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 4. My spouse regularly and intentionally seeks to be used by God to enrich my life. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 5. I spend time thinking about how we can realize my spouse’s dreams and ambitions. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 6. My spouse spends time thinking about how we can realize my dreams and ambitions. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 7. I do not feel like I have to compete with anyone in my spouse’s life. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 8. My spouse does not feel like he/she has to compete with anyone in my life. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 9. I voluntarily abstained from habits or practices that make my spouse fearful or upset. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 10. My spouse has voluntarily abstained from habits or practices that cause me fear or upset. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 11. I have made the changes that marriage necessitates without resentment or bitterness. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 12. My spouse has made the changes marriage necessitates without resentment or bitterness. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 13. I honor my spouse in my interactions with members of the opposite sex. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 14. My spouse honors me in his/her interactions with members of the opposite sex. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 15. We have a set of traditions and customs that we enjoy and give us a sense of family identity. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 16. God has enriched my life through the experience of being married. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 17. I naturally think of consulting my spouse when making plans or spending money. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 18. My spouse naturally thinks of consulting me when making plans or spending money. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 19. We are creating a home that represents us more than recreates our parents. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 20. We have a good relationship with our extended families. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 21. I have healthy separation from my family and allegiance to our marriage. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 22. My spouse has a healthy separation from his/her family and allegiance to our marriage. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 23. I am free from any bitterness towards my parents or family. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 24. My spouse is free from any bitterness towards his/her parents or family. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 25. My spouse’s perspective and values means more to me than my parents. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 26. My perspective and values mean more to my spouse than their parents. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 27. We are able to make plans without seeking the permission or approval of parents. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 28. Our parents have accepted that their opinion is no longer authoritative in our lives. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 29. I put the benefit of my marriage ahead of my family’s expectations. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 30. My spouse puts the benefit of our marriage ahead of his/her family’s expectations. | 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 1-18: (Total: _____ in 18 questions)

This set of questions examines the “**sharing a ‘we’ identity**” created by a gospel-centered marriage. When you marry you are no longer primarily a “me” but a “we.” This is part of the truth that married couples become “one flesh.” Thinking primarily as an individual will harm a marriage.

Recommended Resources: *Marriage Matters* by Winston Smith (especially chapter 18); *Each for the Other* by Bryan Chappell

➤ Questions 19-30: (Total: _____ in 12 questions)

This set of questions examines the “**leave and cleave**” aspect of a gospel-centered marriage. Marriage is a relationship that changes our identity and, thereby, changes (to a greater or lesser degree) all our other relationships. Scripture particularly emphasizes how this change affects our relationship to our parents.

Recommended Resources: *Strengthening Your Marriage* by Wayne Mack (Unit 1)

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 questions 1, 3, 5, 9, 11, 13, 17, 21, 23, 25, and 29.

_____ **My Spouse’s Score** – Using the same scoring system as above add together the score for questions 2, 4, 6, 10, 12, 14, 18, 22, 24, 26, and 30.

Chapter 3

Beyond Pageantry and Sentimentality How the Wedding Ceremony Helps Us Understand Covenant

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

- Contracts are relationships of mutual benefit; covenants are relationships of mutual joy through mutual sacrifice.
- At the most, you’ll only make four major covenants (Savior, church, marriage, and children) during your lifetime.
- We all must resist the tendency to obsess over the most temporal and neglect the most eternal.
- Marriage is designed to be a living, walking portrait of the gospel that “goes into all the world (Mark 16:15).”

Memorize: Matthew 19:4-6 (ESV), “[Jesus] answered, ‘Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.’” As you memorize this passage reflect upon these key points:

- “From the beginning” – Marriage’s existence and design were not God’s plan B response to anything.
- “Leave... cleave” – Your response to the world around you, even family, is changed when you enter a marriage.
- “One flesh” – You’re sharing life when you marry. How you think about and administrate life should display this.
- “No longer two” – Jesus re-emphasizes the oneness of marriage to show how radically it transforms our identity.
- “God has joined” – Once you have made a covenant, God’s seal supersedes your choice in terms of importance.

Teaching Notes

“How a man thinks about marriage will certainly affect his perspective of his role, his wife’s role, and the relationships itself (p. 60).” Stuart Scott in *The Exemplary Husband*

“Society still considers the parent-child relationship to be a covenantal one, not a consumer relationship (p. 81).” Tim Keller in *The Meaning of Marriage*

We must not forget that the marriage ceremony is a covenant-making ceremony.

“You must individually receive your spouse as God’s provision... You must accept His gift. Receiving your spouse demonstrates your faith in God’s integrity. Adam’s focus was on God’s flawless character, not Eve’s performance. He knew God, and he knew that God could be trusted (p. 87)... In the 100/100 plan, there is no talk of ‘meeting each other halfway.’ You are both willing to do anything it takes to make the marriage work (p. 94).” Dennis Rainey (editor) in *Preparing for Marriage*

“What most divorces mean is that at least one party, and possibly both, have ceased to put the gospel first in their lives (p. 35).” Gary Thomas in *Sacred Marriage*

Embedded Study

What makes marriage hard? Ouch! That was a hard chapter. What makes marriage work? Wow! It is so easy to neglect those things. What is powerful enough to overcome the obstacles to a long and mutually satisfying marriage? Covenant! Only when we see what God made marriage to be will we treat marriage as God intended for it to be treated and experience in marriage what God intended to give.

When something becomes common, its meaning and significance are forgotten. This is true of marriage and the wedding ceremony. Weddings have been in so many movies we begin to think they are good cinema instead of sacred covenant or that they belong to Hollywood instead of the Holy God. We begin to compare the pageantry and the bride’s dress more than we reflect on the eternal message being enacted before our eyes.

If we miss the gospel-rich meaning of our wedding as a covenant ceremony, then living a gospel-centered marriage can easily feel like a bait-and-switch. We must remember marriage is always a covenant. This is true regardless of our awareness or intentionality during our ceremony or appointment with the justice of the peace.

In this chapter, we want to learn what it means for marriage to be a covenant by examining the symbolism in a traditional wedding ceremony. If you are about to get married, this should be exciting. If you have been married for a number of years, this should be a call back to marriage fundamentals.

Understanding Covenant

We rarely use the word covenant today. So we need to define the term. If not, we will use our closest cultural equivalent to understand what God designed. This results in two errors. First, we think of marriage as a contract rather than a covenant. Second, we think the Bible only speaks about marriage in a few select “marriage passages.”

The first error creates a profound shift in how we think about marriage. Ultimately, our desires become the measure of our marriage, and there is nothing in our marriage that is bigger than “me.” My happiness becomes the master of the marriage. “Irreconcilable differences” has become code language for, “One (or both) of us is not happy.” Dissatisfaction with service rendered may be a reason for breaking a contract, but not a covenant.

A contract is...	A covenant is...
... a common, legal document regulated by the state.	... a sacred, moral agreement overseen by God.
... based upon mistrust between two people.	... based upon trust between two people and God.
...written to created limited liability.	... accepted to embrace unlimited responsibility.
... embedded with “opt out” or termination clauses.	... intended to be permanent.
... demands joy through mutual benefit.	... seeks joy through mutual sacrifice

“The covenant made between a husband and a wife is done ‘before God’ and therefore with God as well as the spouse. To break faith with your spouse is to break faith with God at the same time (p. 83).” Tim Keller in *The Meaning of Marriage*

“A true Christian marriage proposal is an *offer*, not a request. Rather than saying in effect, ‘Will you do this for me?’ when we invite another to enter the marriage relationships, the real question should be, ‘Will you accept what I want to give?’ (p. 187).” Gary Thomas in *Sacred Marriage*

The last covenant our culture holds as sacred is the parent-child covenant (and even that shows signs of weakening). A parent who forsakes the parent-child covenant (abandoning their child) is viewed as having done a very bad thing; not having made a good choice towards self-actualization or expressing their rights according to legitimate preferences.

Because we still view the parent-child relationship as covenant (whether we use the language or not), we expect parents to do whatever is necessary to learn to love and bond with their children. A lazy, neglectful parent cannot at the same time still be viewed as a “good person.” But marriage, which is based upon the command to leave and cleave, should be held in even higher honor than the parent-child covenant.

The second error truncates how much of God’s wisdom we see as relevant for our marriages. God has more to say about marriage than is recorded in Genesis 1-2, a few passing references in the gospels, Colossians 3, Ephesians 5, and I Peter 3.

“That means that we cannot understand what the Bible has to say about marriage by looking only at the marriage passages, because there is a vast amount of biblical information about marriage not found in the marriage passages (p. 16).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

In the way we see God balancing His love and justice as He pursues His people; we find the example for what we are called to do as husband and wife. In the sacrificial example of Jesus laying down His life in order make relationship with sinners possible, we find the example of what is required of us as husband and wife. In the constant presence and strengthening of the Holy Spirit, we see how we are to interact as husband and wife.

The Wedding as Covenant Ceremony

We will now walk through a traditional wedding. As we do, we will be asking one question – how was the wedding ceremony designed to teach us about covenant? We will look at fifteen parts of the wedding ceremony.

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| 1. Seating of the Family | 6. The Pledge | 11. Communion |
| 2. Groom Enters First | 7. The Vows | 12. Bridal Veil |
| 3. White Wedding Dress | 8. Exchanging of Rings | 13. The Kiss |
| 4. Father Gives Away the Bride | 9. Lighting the Unity Candle | 14. Presentation of the Couple |
| 5. The Charge | 10. The Pronouncement | 15. The Reception |

As we answer this question, our appreciation for and commitment to marriage should increase. A covenant-grade commitment to marriage is vital, because our marriage performance will never exceed our marital commitment; our relational skills will be muted to the degree that our commitment is weak.

Seating of the Family

Family and friends of the bride sit on one side of the church. Those of the groom sit on the other. As participants in the wedding enter and leave the wedding ceremony, they pass through the middle of the two families. This creates two covenant images: the power of covenant to unite and the imagery of God’s covenant with Abraham.

First, the bonding power of a covenant is so strong it cannot be confined to two individuals. As the couple passes between their families, they act like the tongue on a zipper uniting two families. As the husband and wife become “one flesh,” both families share something precious enough (i.e., son or daughter, brother or sister) to create a common identity as family.

“In reality, it is two people and *two families* that are coming together to form a new merger. Your family’s impact on your new family must not be minimized, but rather, understood, and planned for (p. 19).” Dennis Rainey (editor) in *Preparing for Marriage*

Read Ephesians 2:18-22. Observe the power of covenant to bring unrelated people, even people with great differences, into the same family. See how the gospel moves us from being “outsiders” (i.e., “strangers and aliens”) to being “members of the household” (v. 19). As newly joined husband and wife walk out together between their respective families they are involving all in attendance in what the gospel does.

Second, this seating arrangement gives a portrait of God’s covenant with Abraham in **Genesis 15**. The Hebrew word for covenant, *berith* meaning “to cut,” is most clearly seen in this passage. God had Abraham cut several animals in half and make a lane between their carcasses. God passed down this lane as a way of saying, “Shall it be to me like these animals, if I break this covenant.”

While gruesome, this image reminds us of a central theme of covenant relationships – death brings life. God would keep His covenant with man. Man would break covenant with God. But, God would accept the consequences of being broken, Jesus’ death on the cross, in order to restore the covenant.

“Leaving parents and holding fast to a wife, forming a new one-flesh union, is meant from the beginning to display this covenant—Christ’s leaving his Father and taking the church as his bride, at the cost of his life, and holding fast to her in a one-spirit union forever (p. 30).” John Piper in *This Momentary Marriage*

As husband and wife pass through their families, they are also visualizing a death (leaving) that brings life (cleaving). Those in attendance instinctually understand the profound paradox as they experience the simultaneous emotions of sadness and joy.

Look at the following areas of marital life. What are the areas where God has brought unity in spite of diversity between your respective families? What are the areas where one or more people will need to die to self in order to bring life? How are these blessings and challenges affecting your marriage? If you are engaged, you may need to discuss these as anticipated effects instead of examining interactions that have already occurred.

Socio-economic status	Rural vs. Urban	Family Rules	Family Roles
Conflict Patterns	Religious Beliefs	Political Beliefs	Lifestyle Preferences
Openness of Communication	Family Secrets	Financial Values	Privacy Issues
Entertainment Preferences	Styles of Affection	Time Expectations	Expressing Opinions

Groom Enters First

The groom enters the sanctuary and waits for his bride. The husband stands publically, confidently expecting his bride to come, entrusting His reputation to her. In the same way, God took the initiative in our relationship by sending Christ, who came and called for his bride – the church. God puts His reputation in the hands of His bride, trusting them, as His chosen people and redeemed image bearers, to make Him known among the nations.

Read I John 4:9-12. As you read this passage notice the order in which love is shown, how God takes initiative, and how public His actions are. Notice that our ability and motivation to love are only a response to the love God gave us to echo back to Him and channel to others (v. 10-11). Finally, notice how our love for one another was intended to make the invisible God visible to the world around us (v. 12). The covenant-drama you enact at your wedding is the mission you are to live throughout your marriage.

White Wedding Dress

The bride, dressed in white, comes to meet her groom for the entire world to see. She is coming to have her name and identity changed. She is drawn by love. She is lovely in the eyes of her groom, and everyone in attendance sees her through the eyes of her beloved. Her eyes are fixed on his and no one else’s opinion matters. Love triumphs over any fear and any insecurity that might otherwise be present: covenant is giving love the power it was always intended to have.

Read I Thessalonians 4:16-18. Notice Christ entering and calling for his bride and how His bride comes to meet Him. There is pageantry in the moment – angels calling and trumpets sounding (v. 16) – but the focus is on the significance of Christ taking His bride to Himself. Paul concludes by saying, “Therefore, encourage one another with these words.” A wedding does this powerfully because it not only gives us the image of these events and corresponding doctrinal truths, but it also connects us emotionally with the joy, celebration, and relief that will be ours when Christ returns for His bride.

The white dress is a picture of the righteousness given to us by the Groom – Christ. We do not come to Christ in our white garments but in His righteousness gifted to us. We come offering Christ our life, not our spotless record. Christ simply receives us as His beloved.

This will be one of the most essential truths to remember in a marriage. When we begin to wear our own righteousness in marriage, shame will bring lying, insecurity will bring hiding, comparison will bring competing, and pride will bring judging. We will stop loving as we have been loved and start measuring our spouse as we believe we have performed.

“The first way to be shame-free is to be perfect; the second way to be shame-free is based on the gracious nature of covenant love (p. 33)... [Christ’s] bride is free from shame *not* because she is perfect, but because she has no fear that her lover will condemn her or shame her because of her sin (p. 34).” John Piper in *This Momentary Marriage*

Read Ephesians 5:27 and Revelation 21:1-4. Notice, in Ephesians, that Christ presents His bride “to Himself in splendor.” His bride is as pure as He sees her because He has made her pure. Notice, in Revelation, that the bride is again adorned for God (v. 2), and God takes her to Himself (v. 3). But, notice further that God takes the initiative in removing all the painful things that would impede their relationship (v. 4). The bride is pure and free (“dressed in white”), not of her own doing, but because of what *the* Groom did for her.

Father Gives Away the Bride

“Who gives this woman to be married to this man?” asks the pastor.

“Her mother and I do.” responds the father of the bride.

“Marriage is also God’s doing because he took the role of being the first Father to give away the bride. Genesis 2:22, ‘And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and *brought her to the man*’ (p. 22).” John Piper in *This Momentary Marriage*

This is more than just a way to change the arrangement of how people are standing at the altar. It is a picture of God’s design for marriage and demonstration of the four major commitments of the marriage covenant.

Commitment One – Receive: We must realize that our spouse is a gift: we receive our spouse from his/her family and from God. We did not earn our spouse by our good looks, earning capacity, charming personality, or other desirable attributes. You cannot “earn” a person. You receive them as a gift given of their free accord and God’s gracious provision.

A spouse is a gift, which places obligations upon the recipient. A gift of any living thing (even a child getting a pet) comes with these kinds of obligations. We are taking into our care another person. We are declaring that the joy of their companionship is of greater value to us than any other personal pleasure, preference, or convenience. Covenant requires choosing to honor the relationship at the expense of anything we might enjoy that would dishonor the relationship.

Here are some basic commitments that are essential to the covenant of marriage. The practical implications of these commitments will be unpacked in other sections of these seminars. For now, realize that these commitments are part of honoring the marriage covenant and not a “concession” you make for your spouse.

- I will not compare my spouse to other people or my marriage to other marriages.
- I will not have friends (same or opposite sex) who are closer and more intimate than my spouse.
- I will not be alone or meet privately with a member of the opposite sex.
- I will deal with our differences and conflict in a way that values the marriage more than the “issue.”
- I will value no one’s opinion, other than God’s, more highly than my spouse’s.

Couple Discussion Questions: Which of these commitments do you have a tendency to neglect or believe that you are the exception to? How does neglecting one or more of these commitments transform your marriage into a parental or adolescent relationship? When or how do you begin to blame your spouse that these things are necessary, instead of seeing them as the natural implications of the spouse-gift you received from God?

Commitment Two – Leave: As the bride walks from her father to her groom, we see the second commitment of the marriage covenant. The bride and groom are severing the bond of primary allegiance and dependence with their parents to form that bond with each other. Here again, we see the primary image behind the Hebrew word for covenant, “to cut.”

This commitment has five implications (Wayne Mack in *Strengthening Your Marriage*, p. 2-3; modified and adapted, bold text only).

I. **You establish an adult relationship with your parents.** This adult relationship should be marked by honor. But you are no longer a child for whom it is disrespectful to relate to your parents as a peer. You are not “asserting your independence.” You are merely living with the independence this stage of life and covenant require.

Your parents, if they conduct their lives with wisdom and honor your marriage, know you better than anyone else and their counsel should be sought accordingly. If they do not conduct their lives with wisdom or honor the marriage, your parents have more influence over you and interactions with them should be guarded accordingly.

2. **You are more concerned about your spouse’s thoughts and practices than your parents.** In chapter one, we discussed that imitation is not the only way to honor your parents and their positive influence on your life. It should be clear to your spouse that his/her ideas have more influence in your life than anyone else’s.

You may deem others, even your parents, to be “experts” in fields where your spouse is only a novice. In these cases, your primary allegiance should remain with your spouse while referencing the more informed opinions of others. In a day of specialization, it is often assumed that only the opinions of experts matter. Spouses are not required to be specialists, but life partners. You may consult specialists, but you make decisions with your spouse.

3. **You are not controlled by your parent’s affection, approval, or assistance.** In life there are times when you cannot please everyone. If that is hard for you to accept, and for those who place a high value on relationships it often is, do not blame your spouse or parents. It is a result of the Fall and the reality in which we all make decisions.

When you are in a position to either please your parents or spouse, choose your spouse. This is not a 50-50, alternating scenario. It is a matter of allegiance; like a teenager choosing between pleasing their parents or friends. There was a clear right and clear wrong. This “clear right” may not be on moral grounds other than God’s call for you to “honor your mother and father” (then) or “leave your mother and father” (now).

4. **You eliminate any bad feelings toward your parents that tie you to them emotionally.** Both affection and bitterness can be an obstacle to leaving home. This is not a call to “just get over it” but to forgive and appropriately deal with whatever trauma may be involved. Marriage is not forcing you to do this. Marriage is just another reminder of what has always been healthy and best for you.

“Plenty of people have marital problems because they haven’t ‘left’ to cleave to their spouse. You have failed to leave your parents if you are more driven by their wishes and expectations than by your spouse’s. But you can also fail to leave your parents if you resent or hate them too much (p. 128)... If you rigidly impose the patterns that you saw in your own family rather than working together with your spouse to create new ones that fit both of you, you haven’t ‘left home’ yet (p. 129).” Tim Keller in *The Meaning of Marriage*

5. **You do not try to change your spouse to meet your parent’s preferences.** Your spouse should seek to honor your parents by honoring their preferences in the same way he/she would in any other adult relationship. However, you are not called to exaggerate or accelerate that process. While you should desire the bond to be stronger, the obligations are comparable and the pace cannot be microwaved.

Read Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:5; Mark 10:7-8; Ephesians 5:3. This is the most repeated verse in the Bible. That makes sense because it addresses the two most influential relationships in life (marriage and parents) and is a portrait of the relationship God wants with every person (covenant). When God repeats Himself, we dare not take it lightly and assume everything else in our marriage will go fine.

Commitment Three – Cleave: It is common for the negative command (leave) to get more attention than the positive (command). When this happens, marriage will quickly begin to feel like a limitation; like marriage is defined more by what you’re not supposed to do than what you pursue. This dynamic is a recipe for discouragement or rebellion.

It is as important to cleave to (pursue) your spouse as it is to leave your parents. The rest of the seminars are an attempt to unpack what is involved in “cleaving” to your spouse. For now, realize that this is the basis for saying that marriage enrichment is bigger than “being nice,” conflict resolution is more than “getting along,” budgeting involves more than “managing our money,” decision making is more than “staying on the same page,” and intimacy is bigger than “enjoying each other.” These are evidences of the covenant commitment to cleave to one another.

“No other human being should get more of your love, energy, industry, and commitment than your spouse. God asks that a man leave his father and mother, as powerful as that relationship may have been, to forge a new union that must be an even more important and powerful force in his life (p. 127).” Tim Keller in *The Meaning of Marriage*

Couple Discussion Questions: How can you remind yourself and each other that every aspect of marital enrichment is an enactment of the “cleaving” commitment of your marriage covenant? How does this make the practice of daily marriage enrichment more satisfying?

Commitment Four – Become One Flesh: This commitment will be unpacked in the seminars on communication (the method of unity), finances (sharing the same treasure; Matt. 6:21), decision making (the practice of unity), and intimacy (the joy of unity). For now, realize that “oneness” in each of these areas is an essential expressions of your marriage covenant.

Couple Discussion Questions: How does being “one flesh,” which means more than sex, make sex more meaningful and enjoyable? Are you drawn to or fear the vulnerability involved in a “one flesh” relationship? In what ways is it most natural for you to be one with your spouse? In what ways is it most challenging to be one with your spouse?

The Charge

As the bride and groom now stand face to face, preparing to take their marriage vows, the pastor takes a moment to remind everyone present about the significance of this sacred celebration. These remarks are meant to highlight the gospel-meaning of marriage. The charge can vary greatly based upon the pastor, but here is a sample charge.

We are here to observe something that is not just beautiful and joyous, but also profound. [Groom] and [Bride] do not stand before one another as perfect individuals. But they are making an unending choice to cover the faults of the other with their own sacrificial love. They pledge to respond to each other as perpetual examples of Christ’s sacrifice for them. This choice is not a burden to them, but rather a joy, because of the delight they take in one another. Their delight is meant to be the clearest earthly representation of God’s abundant love for us and our joyous response to His love.

[Groom] and [Bride] are here today to make their covenant known publicly to family, friends, and the world. This covenant is marked by the physical symbol of a golden ring. Gold because it is the only metal that does not tarnish and is the standard of value for all other commodities. A ring because it, like all true covenants, has no end point.

Once this covenant is established, [Bride] will take [Groom]’s name in the same way that each person who covenants with God takes His name as “Christian.” From that point forward they will live for the joy of the other and take their deepest satisfaction in seeing the dreams of the other fulfilled in the same way God delights in His people and we find our greatest fulfillment in Him.

In this ceremony, let us see not only the beautiful uniting of our dear friends [Groom] and [Bride] in marriage; let us also see a picture of what God established as a picture of the relationship He desires with each one of us. Let us not only celebrate with [Groom] and [Bride] but be encouraged and drawn to the love of our great God.

Couple Discussion Questions: Do you take being called a Christian as seriously as you took taking your spouse’s name (wife) or giving your name to your spouse (husband)? Have you learned to take your greatest joy in serving God as the necessary preparation for learning to extend that joy through serving your spouse?

The Pledge

The pastor calls the groom and bride by name as he gives both the opportunity to tell the world of their intentions.

[Groom], I want to ask you a series of questions that you are not hearing for the first time. As you hear them again today, I want you to respond to them with the words, “I do.” [Groom], do you promise before God and this community to receive [Bride] as your wife? Do you promise to love her and to care for her? Do you promise to seek with God’s help to be the spiritual head of your household for [Bride]? Do you promise to listen to her, to respect her, and to honor her for the unique and special woman of God that she is? [Groom] “I do.”

[Bride], I want to ask you a series of questions that you are not hearing for the first time. As you hear them again today, I want you to respond to them with the words, “I do.” [Bride], do you promise before God and this community to accept [Groom] as your husband? Do you promise to love and to care for him? Do you promise with God’s help to submit lovingly to his leadership of your household and do you promise to listen to him, to respect him, and to honor him as the unique and special man of God that he is? [Bride] “I do.”

The wedding pledge appeals to the universal instinct of love – to bind itself in an eternal, public promise.

“Those who are in love have a natural inclination to bind themselves by promises. Love songs all over the world are full of vows of eternal constancy. The Christian law is not forcing upon the passion of love something which is foreign to that passion’s own nature: it is demanding that lovers should take seriously something which their passion of itself impels them to do (p. 107).” C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*

The wedding pledge is a declaration that this couple has found something better than personal freedom and wants the entire world to know. This is the nature of covenant, it makes us not ashamed to identify with our covenant partner (Rom. 1:16, 2 Tim. 1:12, Heb. 11:16). We want to tell the world what we’ve found and invite them to find similar joy.

Read Luke 9:26. Jesus calls on his bride, the church, to make a public statement of her covenant loyalty to Him. Any hesitancy in making this statement would call the covenant relationship into question. When we realize that the sacrifices associated with a covenant to Christ are better than anything else the world has to offer (Luke 9:23-25), we are eager to proclaim our covenant-loyalty. This same statement, that the sacrifices of marriage are sweeter to us than any of their alternatives, is the message of the marriage pledge.

The Vows

Now the couple transitions from making a public pledge to taking personal vows. The audience is invited to overhear words that are directed only towards each other. Line after line the couple repeats after the pastor the essence of their covenant.

I _____ take you _____ to be my wife / husband.
 I promise before God and these witnesses that I will love you and be faithful to you.
 I promise to stand with you in sickness and in health,
 in good times and in bad times,
 and forsaking all others,
 I promise to give my life to you fully and faithfully
 as long as we both shall live.

“Promise” has become a light word in our day. Often, it means no more than a commitment to make a sincere effort or a statement of our best intentions. In the Bible, a person’s words and identity were interwoven. God keeps His covenant for “His name’s sake” (Jer. 14:21). Marriage vows display the binding of identities. This is expressed by the wife taking the husband’s last name and the husband giving his name to His wife.

“Since promising is the key to identity, it is the very essence of marital love. Why? Because it is our promises that give us a stable identity, and without a stable identity, it is impossible to have stable relationships (p. 91).” Tim Keller in *The Meaning of Marriage*

Read Ecclesiastes 5:5 and Matthew 5:37. These verses capture how we ought to think about every promise and commitment we make. However, most promises are short-term; the vow ends when the task is complete. Many promises have some form of condition attached (i.e., “I’ll come to your game if it doesn’t rain”). The marriage vow is different; it is a life-time, unconditional promise. Read through the vows, and observe the binding of identity, the removal of conditions, and commitment to termination only by death.

Exchanging of Rings

With the vows (or sometimes in a separate part of the ceremony) the bride and groom will exchange rings to provide a visual reminder of their marriage covenant. Too often the significance and power of wedding rings are ignored, minimized, or manipulated.

During conflict, the power of the wedding ring can be used for relational leveraged if it is taken off or thrown. Or, during daily activities the power of the ring can be minimized as if not wearing it is “no big deal.” We are to be marked by our covenants – circumcision (Old Testament), and baptism (New Testament). This is the role of the wedding ring in the marriage covenant.

Read Genesis 9:13, 17:11, Exodus 12:13, 31:17, Matthew 3:1-17, and I Corinthians 14:22. It is the pattern of God to mark his covenants with a sign. God does this for our good. We are forgetful people; even when we do not forget that something has happened, we often forget the significance of the event. By wearing a wedding ring we are following God's pattern of bearing a sign of the covenants we make. This is why that even after Christ was raised from the dead, and his body was healed the circled scars upon His wrists were not (Luke 24:39). Our rings serve as a reminder of our vow to love our spouse according to the pattern and in response to Christ's love for us (Eph. 5:22, 25).

Lighting the Unity Candle

As these vows are made, something is happening that no one can see but is profound and warrants our attention. To draw attention to the impact of the marriage covenant, a common tradition is the lighting of a unity candle.

Bride and groom each take a lit candle, representing their individual lives, and together light one larger candle. The new flame, indecipherably made of both lives, represents how they have come together. This is a mystery, in some ways comparable to the Trinity. Husband and wife exist as separate people, yet they are “one flesh.”

“In context then, ‘one flesh’ actually means something more along the lines of *woven lives*. The oneness God is speaking of seems to be a total sharing of one another. It is a sharing of ideas, beliefs, joys, difficulties, triumphs, failures, possessions, and bodies (p. 68).” Stuart Scott in *The Exemplary Husband*

“Marriage was never intended to be a lifelong series of his-way/her-way skirmishes. Your home, your lifestyle, and your daily schedule shouldn't reflect the vision, tastes, desires, decisions, or instincts of one of you. No, God has intended your lives to become so fundamentally intertwined, so beautifully woven together in every way, and so much a reflection of a daily commitment to cooperation, that the only term that could be used for your union is ‘one flesh’ (p. 228).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

“Godliness is selflessness, and when a man and woman marry, they are pledging to stop viewing themselves as individuals and start viewing themselves as a unit, as a couple (p. 77).” Gary Thomas in *Sacred Marriage*

Read Ezekiel 37:20-23 in light of Matthew 19:6. Notice the similar language – “no longer two.” Remember what God does in marriage is meant to be a portrait of the gospel. In Ezekiel, the people of God had become distracted from worshiping God (v. 23). This resulted in division (v. 21). God first restored them to Himself (primary covenant), so that he could restore them to being one people in one land (secondary covenant). Their place in the land as one people, instead of two rival kingdoms, was only a sign of their relationship to God. The unity of the marriage covenant operates the same way.

The Pronouncement

“I now pronounce you husband and wife.”

Covenants are made. Therefore, they have a definite beginning. It would be inaccurate to say, “We have always been married.” Similarly, it would be inaccurate to say, “I have always been a Christian.” Saving faith is a covenant made with God that has a beginning. Before that covenant was made, we could not claim any of the special benefits of Christ's death on the cross – forgiveness of sin, assurance of heaven, or the fruit of the Spirit.

Similarly, before the marriage covenant is made, we have no claim on the special benefits of the marriage covenant – living together and sexual intimacy. In the same way that good intentions towards God do not merit heaven, we should not assume that good intentions towards marriage merit presuming upon the benefits of the marriage covenant.

Communion

“[Groom] and [Bride] recognize that their marriage covenant is a living picture of their covenant relationship with God. For this reason, they have chosen for that their first act as a married couple would be to take the Lord's Supper together.

This meal represents the ongoing fellowship Christ has with the church, and they will have with each other. The elements represent the model of sacrificial love necessary for marriage. Their willingness to follow God's loving commands is God's protection over their marriage.

[Couple takes the bread.] 'The Lord Jesus... took bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me (I Cor. 11:23-24)." Take and eat.

[Couple takes the cup.] 'In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me (I Cor. 11:25)." Take and drink."

In communion we see a principle of regularly remembering and re-enacting the covenant that has been made. The parallel for the marriage covenant is sex. Sex is a physical action, intended to be engaged regularly, to remind spouses of and celebrate the "one flesh" miracle God blessed them with through marriage.

Bridal Veil

When the bride enters the sanctuary, she wears a veil. This is not a coy means of flirting with her groom, an insecure response to how she looks, or a trendy piece of wedding paraphernalia that has yet to go extinct. It is another piece of covenant imagery.

In the old covenant, within the temple there was a veil that separated the holy place from the holy of holies (Exo. 26:33). This is where God's glory dwelt, and only the High Priest was allowed to enter this place, and he was only allowed to enter once per year. When Christ died on the cross, this veil was torn from top to bottom (Matt. 27:51) signifying the unlimited access we have to God through Christ.

During the wedding, the groom, representing Christ, is allowed to remove the veil from his bride. Now, by virtue of the marriage covenant, he has gained access to a level of intimacy with his bride he did not have before marriage. In the same way that Christ came to reside in our hearts upon removing the temple veil, the husband and wife come to reside in the same home and discover a whole new level of intimacy after removing the wedding veil.

The Kiss

"You may now kiss your bride." Those in attendance respond in celebration.

Much of the ceremony to this point has carried the weight of marriage's significance. It has been a sober celebration. If this tone did not change, it would give the impression that marriage was solemn. Marriage is sacred and to be held in great honor, but that honor should be expressed through joyous celebration.

In the kiss, we see another element of God's design for marriage – pleasure. There is no reason, outside of God's gracious design, why marriage had to be more than functional. But God created affection, arousal, and intimacy to be enjoyed in marriage. God intends for us to enjoy Him like husband and wife enjoy each other. This corporate response of celebration is a vital aspect of the wedding message. The congregation is invited to enthusiastically affirm the goodness God's design.

Read Luke 15:7 and I Peter 1:12: We see two realities in these passages: (1) angels celebrate the gospel, and (2) angels are dumbfounded by the gospel. They know it is glorious (even beyond their glory) and they don't get it. That should be comforting at this point. We have studied enough about the marriage covenant to be in the same position the angels are about the gospel – we praise God for it and humbly admit we don't fully understand it. But like the angels, we should (a) not allow our limited understanding to limit our celebration, and (b) we should not stop peering into the things we barely understand seeking to know more of God's character in them.

Presentation of the Couple

"It is my honor to present to you Mr. and Mrs. [Groom] and [Bride] [Last Name]."

As the couple turns to face family and friends, the pastor speaks these words to the world. A true covenant will always change the way the world sees you. No one enters a covenant in order to remain the same. The couple walks out of the church as new people, with a new name, and a new identity (husband and wife).

The Reception

“The bride and groom would like to invite you all to stay for a reception to celebrate their marriage.”

Read Revelation 19:6-10. We find there will be a celebration feast after Christ is united with His bride, the church. God made marriage to show us how excited He is to receive repentant sinners into His church. There is no hesitation in God's willingness to save. His response can only be compared to the kind of party we would throw on the happiest day of our lives when we are surrounded by our closest family and friends.

Conclusion

Now that you've reconsidered what it means to establish a marriage covenant, can you imagine thinking of marriage as a 50-50 relationship? Saying, “I'll do my part, if I see you doing your part,” or “I'll meet you half way after I see you start moving towards me.” Does that, in any way, fit the Christ-church prototype of which marriage is to be a living picture?

Couple Discussion Questions: When are you prone to think of marriage as a 50-50 relationship rather than a 100-100 covenant? How have you seen this become contagious in your marriage – both of you becoming frugal in your sacrifice and willingness to bless the other? What language do you need to “red flag” in your thoughts or speech that reveals you are treating marriage as less than what God intended it to be?

Appendix A contains a date entitled the “Covenant Renewal Date.” It is advised that you go on some version of this date around your anniversary each year to serve as a refresher of what it means to treat marriage as a covenant and not allow your marriage to get caught up in the patterns of life's non-covenant relationships.

There are two times when our selfishness tempts us to treat our marriage as less than a covenant – conflict and laziness. We will address conflict more fully in the seminar on “Communication” and laziness more fully in the seminar on “Decision Making.” But in those seminars, we will be addressing the skills needed to manage conflict and avoid laziness. However, no amount of skill will circumvent the need for commitment – that is the role of covenant. We should realize (or admit) we will never out-perform our level of commitment.

The following exercise is designed to give you “eyes to see” the moments when covenant commitment is needed to combat our selfish tendencies in conflict and laziness. On the next page, you will find the words spoken during this wedding ceremony over the image of a puzzle. If unhealthy conflict or laziness is disrupting your marriage (and you're not implementing the good skills you already know), then this assignment is for you.

1. Print a picture of you and your spouse on one side of a piece of paper (high gloss if you want it to look nice).
2. On the other side print a copy of your wedding charge, pledge, and vows with the puzzle in background.
3. Write your first names in the appropriate blanks in the ceremony, and reread your wedding commitments.
4. Cut the picture into its 25 pieces – it is said doing something 21 times makes it a habit.
5. Create a frame in which you will put your marriage portrait together.
6. Begin to look for those moments when your laziness or approach to conflict would harm the marriage.
7. Each time you navigate one of these moments in a way that honors your covenant, add a piece to the portrait.
8. Each time you violate your covenant commitment through laziness or poor conflict remove a piece.
9. Your goal, by God's grace, is to create a lifestyle of:
 - (a) being aware of the moments you are tempted to neglect your marriage covenant, and
 - (b) intentionally loving your spouse as your own body (Eph. 5:28) in these moments of temptation.
10. Keep the picture as a trophy of God's grace in your life and a reminder of your covenant commitment.

Read Malachi 2:15-16. Anytime we see or hear the word “hate” it makes the message being delivered seem negative. This passage has that connotation because it is more frequently used “against divorce” than it is used “for marriage.” Read this passage about God's attitude toward divorce. But, read it in light of this chapter. See covenant marriage as God's great masterpiece to care for people and tell them of His gospel. God does hate to see the gift He gave to communicate His message of healing to become an instrument of pain. Marveling at what God made marriage to be is the core remedy for avoiding the experience of what God hates – divorce.

The Charge

We are here to observe something that is not just beautiful and joyous, but also profound. _____ and _____ do not stand before one another as perfect individuals. But they are making an unending choice to cover the faults of the other with their own sacrificial love. They pledge to respond to each other as perpetual examples of Christ’s sacrifice for them. This choice is not a burden to them, but rather a joy, because of the delight they take in one another. Their delight is meant to be the clearest earthly representation of God’ abundant love for us and our joyous response to His love.

_____ and _____ come here today to make their covenant know publicly to family, friends, and the entire world. This covenant is marked by the physical symbol of a golden ring. Gold because it is the only metal that does not tarnish and is the standard of value for all other commodities. A ring because it, like all true covenants, has no end point.

Once this covenant is established, _____ will take _____’s name in the same way that each person who covenants with God takes His name as “Christian.” From that point forward they will live for the joy of the other and take their deepest satisfaction in seeing the dreams of the other fulfilled in the same way God delights in His people and we find our greatest fulfillment in Him.

In this ceremony, let us see not only the beautiful uniting of our dear friends _____ and _____ in marriage; let us also see a picture of what God established as a picture of the relationship He desires with each one of us. Let us not only celebrate with _____ and _____ but be encouraged and drawn to the love of our great God.

The Pledge

_____, do you promise before God and this community to receive _____ as your wife? Do you promise to love her and to care for her? Do you promise to seek with God’s help to be the spiritual head of your household for _____? Do you promise to listen to her, to respect her, and to honor her for the unique and special woman of God that she is? _____ **responds with the words, “I do.”**

_____, do you promise before God and this community to accept _____ as your husband? Do you promise to love and to care for him? Do you promise with God’s help to submit lovingly to his leadership of your household and do you promise to listen to him, to respect him, and to honor him as the unique and special man of God that he is? _____ **responds with the words, “I do.”**

The Vows

I _____ take you _____ to be my wife / husband.
I promise before God and these witnesses that I will love you and be faithful to you.
I promise to stand with you in sickness and in health,
in good times and in bad times,
and forsaking all others,
I promise to give my life to you fully and faithfully
as long as we both shall live.

Evaluation: Character and Role Expectations

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 have a regular time of reading from the Bible. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 2. My spouse has a regular time of reading from the Bible. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 3. I regularly share with my spouse what I learn in my time of Bible study. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 4. My spouse regularly shares with me what he/she is learning in Bible study. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 5. I pray for my spouse regularly. My spouse knows it, and asks me to pray for specific things. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 6. My spouse prays for me regularly and I ask him/her to pray for specific things. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 7. We agree on the importance and frequency of church attendance. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 8. We agree on the importance and frequency of small group attendance. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 9. We agree on the moral principles by which we ought to live. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 10. We agree on the major doctrines of the Christian faith. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 11. I actively strive to be mature and exemplify the fruit of the Spirit. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 12. My spouse actively strives to be mature and exemplify the fruit of the Spirit. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 13. I seek to bless my spouse by obeying the “one another” commands towards him/her. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 14. My spouse seeks to bless me by obeying the “one another” commands towards me. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 15. We agree on what it means and looks like to be a Christian family. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 16. I believe my spouse’s friends are a positive influence and a blessing to our marriage. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 17. I believe my friends are a positive influence and a blessing to our marriage. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 18. We have married friends who model and actively pursue a healthy marriage. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 19. I have seen my relationship with God grow over the course of our marriage. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 20. I have seen my spouse’s relationship with God grow over the course of our marriage. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 21. I enjoy and agree with how we have divided the responsibilities of managing our home. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 22. I consistently fulfill my household responsibilities as we have agreed. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 23. My spouse consistently fulfills their household responsibilities as we have agreed. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 24. We are able to peacefully talk about new responsibilities when they emerge. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 25. I agree with my spouse about what it means for a husband to lead his family. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 26. I agree with my spouse about what it means for a wife to submit to her husband. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 27. Our marriage is free from negative gender role influences from his home of origin. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 28. Our marriage is free from negative gender role influences from her home of origin. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 29. I believe that a healthy marriage is the essential foundation for being good parents. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 30. My spouse believes that a healthy marriage is the foundation for being good parents. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 31. I trust my spouse to be a spiritual leader and teacher for our children. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 32. I trust my spouse to be a disciplinarian for our children. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 33. I trust my spouse to be an example of Christ for our children. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 34. I trust my spouse to teach our children to enjoy life and how to relate to people. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 35. We agree that parenting should not become more important than our marriage. | 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 “**character**” necessary for a gospel-centered marriage. We are not strong, wise, or loving enough to create a healthy lasting marriage on our own. Unless we recognize our dependence on God to transform our character through marriage, our sinful human nature will eat away at what we most want to preserve and cherish.

Recommended Resources: *Sacred Marriage* by Gary Thomas; *Marriage Matters* by Winston Smith.

➤ Questions 21-35: (Total: _____ in 15 questions)

This set of questions examines the “**role expectations**” involved in a gospel-centered marriage. Any ongoing relationship which cooperatively manages time, money, emotion, ambitions, children, and “life” as a marriage does, must have agreed upon responsibilities and roles to function well.

Recommended Resources: *Each for the Other* by Bryan Chapell (chapters 1-6); *This Momentary Marriage* by John Piper (chapters 6-8).

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 one another, the more mutual (and typically healthy) the marriage.

_____ **My Score** – Using the same scoring system as above add together the score for questions 1, 3, 5, 11, 13, 16, 19, 22, and 29.

_____ **My Spouse’s Score** – Using the same scoring system as above add together the score for questions 2, 4, 6, 12, 14, 17, 20, 23, and 30.

Chapter 4

The Shared Job Description of Husband and Wife: Personal Maturity, Healthy Friendships, and Functional Living

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

- Personal maturity, the ability to be a friend, and a functional approach to life are pre-requisites for marital unity.
- Only having the gospel at the center of your life story can prevent marital burnout.
- Your marital mission is to make it as easy as possible for your spouse to look like, live for, and show others Jesus.
- Healthy living and marriage are primarily designed by God and secondarily canvasses for our personal expression.

Memorize: Ephesians 5:15-18, 21 (ESV), “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit... submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.” As you memorize this passage reflect upon these key points:

- “Look carefully”— The Christian life nor marriage are for lazy people who resist regularly examining their life.
- “Making the best use of the time” – As Paul prepares to teach on marriage, he reminds us of our use of time.
- “Do not be foolish” – Most of what wrecks a marriage is living foolishly (short-sighted, self-centered living).
- “Be filled with the Spirit” – When overwhelmed with your role, remember, it is the Holy Spirit who sustains you.
- “Submitting to one another” – Most of marriage is mutual submission to living out what is mutually agreed upon.

Teaching Notes

“There is a conservative approach to marriage that puts a great deal of stress on traditional gender roles... There is a lot of emphasis on the differences between men and women. The problem is that an overemphasis could encourage selfishness, especially on the part of the husband (p. 66)... It is my experience that it is nearly impossible to come up with a single, detailed, and very specific set of ‘manly’ or ‘womanly’ characteristics that fits every temperament and culture (p. 200).” Tim Keller in *The Meaning of Marriage*

“Your identity as someone’s spouse is secondary to your identity as a servant of God (p. 83).” Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*

“The example the husband sets has eternal consequences. This means headship is more about controlling one’s character than controlling one’s wife. The man who is more concerned with how his wife should obey him than with how he should obey God fails the kindergarten of biblical headship (p. 78).” Bryan Chappell in *Each for the Other*

“God is always worthy of being obeyed and served, so when I act out of obedience to him, the person who receives my service doesn’t have to be deserving—they’re benefiting from what I owe God (p. 188)... Service includes allowing your spouse to give—if, of course, they are willing to give. In other words, service isn’t just washing somebody else’s feet; at times it’s letting your own feet be washed (p. 190).” Gary Thomas in *Sacred Marriage*

“After declaring that there is mutual submission in verse 21, Paul devotes twelve verses to unfolding the difference in the way a husband and wife should serve each other. You don’t need to deny mutual submission to affirm the importance of the unique role of the husband as head and the unique calling of the wife to submit to that headship (p. 78).” John Piper in *This Momentary Marriage*



Job Description: A Christian Husband

Reports To: God through His Local Church as Held Accountable by His Small Group

Hours Per Week: 168 (Full-Time Position; Monday through Sunday)

Summary of Position

Be a growing ambassador and example of Christ in character, thought, emotion, and deed. Lead by ensuring his family has a God-honoring, functional plan to manage life, initiating important conversations, and being the first to sacrifice when life requires.

Skills / Knowledge / Experience Required

- A personal relationship with Jesus Christ evidenced by daily reliance upon the Holy Spirit, prayer, and Bible intake.
- An accurate, sober self-assessment of strengths and weakness that can be shared without defensiveness (Rom 12:1-3).
- Willingness to lead in submission by accepting God’s moral standards and being accountable to specific Christian men.
- Contentment with God’s provision (finances, skills, wife, children, etc…) to model how the family is to find stability.
- Ability to set the tone of the family to be a positive place of mutual encouragement and sacrifice for one another.
- Guide each member of your household to discover, develop, and deploy their unique gifts in God’s service.

Responsibilities

AREA #1: Actively Pursue the Personal Character Necessary to Sustain a Healthy Marriage. Every Christian is to be marked by the traits that Galatians 5:22-23 calls the “Fruit of the Spirit.” Pursuing these character traits is the moral obligation and sign of true conversion for every Christian. These qualities are necessary for a healthy marriage and should never have to be “demanded” by your spouse. Your spouse is only the recipient of a blessing flowing from your imitation of God in these ways.

Passive Distortion (Your Tendency)						Fruit of the Spirit (Standard of "Healthy")					Aggressive Distortion (Your Tendency)
	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	Love	-1	-2	-3	-4	-5
	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	Joy	-1	-2	-3	-4	-5
	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	Peace	-1	-2	-3	-4	-5
	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	Patience	-1	-2	-3	-4	-5
	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	Kindness	-1	-2	-3	-4	-5
	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	Goodness	-1	-2	-3	-4	-5
	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	Faithfulness	-1	-2	-3	-4	-5
	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	Gentleness	-1	-2	-3	-4	-5
	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	Self-Control	-1	-2	-3	-4	-5

AREA #2: Actively Pursue the Marks of Christian Relationships for Your Marriage. God’s call for how Christians relate to one another should be most clearly seen in marriage. Marriage should be the example of Christian friendship, not the exception. When you take the actions described below you are fulfilling your Christian duty not “going the extra mile.”

Command	Reference	My Strength	My Weakness	My Spouse's Desire
Accept One Another	Romans 15:7			
Admonish One Another	Colossians 3:16			
Bear One Another's Burdens	Galatians 6:2			
Build Up One Another	Romans 14:19			
Confess to One Another	James 5:16			
Encourage One Another	Hebrews 3:13			
Be Honest with One Another	Colossians 3:9			
Honor One Another	Romans 12:10			
Serve One Another	Galatians 5:13			
Spur On One Another	Hebrews 10:24			



AREA #3: Fulfill Shared Responsibilities of Marriage Not Pertaining to Gender Roles. There is much more to a Christian marriage than gender roles – headship and submission. Paul introduces his famous passage on genders roles (Eph. 5:22-33) with a preface calling for every believer to examine their life systems (Eph. 5:15-21). While it is the headship-responsibility of the husband to ensure a couple answers these questions, either spouse (or both) may bear the responsibility of primary oversight of these areas.

“Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise, but as wise...” (v. 15)

- **Finances:** Do you have a monthly family budget that keeps up with all income and expenses? Does your monthly income exceed your planned monthly spending? Do you have a system for saving for significant future expenses?
- **Household Tasks:** Do you have a list of daily, weekly, yearly, and periodic tasks necessary to operate your household? Do you have shared expectations about each other’s available time, skills, and interest? Have you agreed upon who will assume responsibility for which tasks? Are you flexible and sacrificial when changes need to be made to this division of labor?

“Making the best use of the time, because the days are evil...” (v. 16)

- **Time:** Do your expectations for yourself and your spouse fit within a 168 hour week? Do each of you arrange your schedule prioritizing time for God and each other? Do you regularly evaluate your use of time to ensure you are living your priorities as life changes?

“Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is...” (v. 17-18)

- **Daily Decisions:** Do you have shared moral values to guide your decision making? Do you study Scripture together when you disagree on a moral decision or whether a decision is a moral issue? Are you free of negative controlling influences (i.e., alcohol, debt, bad peers, etc...) that lead to foolish decisions?

“Submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ” (v. 21)

- **Attitude and Lordship:** Do I blame or resent my spouse for having to meet the requirements of a Christian husband or wife? Do I view the ways I bless my spouse as acts of worship to God? Do I view my joy in blessing my spouse as a primary way that I disciple and guard the heart of my spouse?

AREA #4: Fulfill Your Unique Gender-Calling to Represent Christ in Your Family. A husband, through his God-given personality and gifting, is to obey God by serving as the head of his family. If areas one through three are sincerely engaged by both husband and wife, then this headship should rarely necessitate the use of headship as “authority.” However, whenever his authority is exercised, it is should be clear that his motive is love rather than merely satisfying his personal preferences.

A husband should initiate creating an environment where it is safe, normal, and encouraged for his family to pursue God. Everything about household operation should be designed or engaged for this purpose (Deut. 6:4-9). A husband is to learn each member of his family and disciple them to have maximum impact for God’s kingdom (Psalm 127:4). The items found on this job description are how God intends for a husband to measure success in life.

Husband Roles	Reference	My Strength	My Weakness	My Spouse’s Desire
Servant Leader	Matthew 20:25-28			
Shepherd of the Family	I Timothy 3:1-7			
Man of Understanding	I Peter 3:7			
Provider for the Family	I Timothy 5:8			
Protector of the Family	Colossians 3:19			



Job Description: A Christian Wife

Reports To: God through Her Local Church as Held Accountable by Her Small Group

Hours Per Week: 168 (Full-Time Position; Monday through Sunday)

Summary of Position

Be a growing ambassador and example of Christ in character, thought, emotion, and deed. Supporting her husband's God-honoring, functional plan to manage life, contributing to important conversations, and being willing to sacrifice when life requires.

Skills / Knowledge / Experience Required

- A personal relationship with Jesus Christ evidenced by daily reliance upon the Holy Spirit, prayer, and Bible intake.
- An accurate, sober self-assessment of strengths and weakness that can be shared without defensiveness (Rom 12:1-3).
- Willingness to live in submission by accepting God's moral standards and being accountable to specific Christian women.
- Contentment with God's provision (finances, skills, husband, children, etc...) to model how the family is to find stability.
- Ability to reinforce the tone of the family to be a positive place of mutual encouragement and sacrifice for one another.
- Assist each member of your household to discover, develop, and deploy their unique gifts in God's service.

Responsibilities

AREA #1: Actively Pursue the Personal Character Necessary to Sustain a Healthy Marriage. Every Christian is to be marked by the traits that Galatians 5:22-23 calls the “Fruit of the Spirit.” Pursuing these character traits is the moral obligation and sign of true conversion for every Christian. These qualities are necessary for a healthy marriage and should never have to be “demanded” by your spouse. Your spouse is only the recipient of a blessing flowing from your imitation of God in these ways.

Passive Distortion (Your Tendency)		Fruit of the Spirit (Standard of "Healthy")		Aggressive Distortion (Your Tendency)
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-5 -4 -3 -2 -1		Joy	-1 -2 -3 -4 -5	
-5 -4 -3 -2 -1		Peace	-1 -2 -3 -4 -5	
-5 -4 -3 -2 -1		Patience	-1 -2 -3 -4 -5	
-5 -4 -3 -2 -1		Kindness	-1 -2 -3 -4 -5	
-5 -4 -3 -2 -1		Goodness	-1 -2 -3 -4 -5	
-5 -4 -3 -2 -1		Faithfulness	-1 -2 -3 -4 -5	
-5 -4 -3 -2 -1		Gentleness	-1 -2 -3 -4 -5	
-5 -4 -3 -2 -1		Self-Control	-1 -2 -3 -4 -5	

AREA #2: Actively Pursue the Marks of Christian Relationships for Your Marriage. God's call for how Christians relate to one another should be most clearly seen in marriage. Marriage should be the example of Christian friendship, not the exception. When you take the actions described below you are fulfilling your Christian duty not “going the extra mile.”

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Encourage One Another	Hebrews 3:13			
Be Honest with One Another	Colossians 3:9			
Honor One Another	Romans 12:10			
Serve One Another	Galatians 5:13			
Spur On One Another	Hebrews 10:24			



AREA #3: Fulfill Shared Responsibilities of Marriage Not Pertaining to Gender Roles. There is much more to a Christian marriage than gender roles – headship and submission. Paul introduces his famous passage on genders roles (Eph. 5:22-33) with a preface calling for every believer to examine their life systems (Eph. 5:15-21). While it is the headship-responsibility of the husband to ensure a couple answers these questions, either spouse (or both) may bear the responsibility of primary oversight of these areas.

“Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise, but as wise...” (v. 15)

- **Finances:** Do you have a monthly family budget that keeps up with all income and expenses? Does your monthly income exceed your planned monthly spending? Do you have a system for saving for significant future expenses?
- **Household Tasks:** Do you have a list of daily, weekly, yearly, and periodic tasks necessary to operate your household? Do you have shared expectations about each other’s available time, skills, and interest? Have you agreed upon who will assume responsibility for which tasks? Are you flexible and sacrificial when changes need to be made to this division of labor?

“Making the best use of the time, because the days are evil...” (v. 16)

- **Time:** Do your expectations for yourself and your spouse fit within a 168 hour week? Do each of you arrange your schedule prioritizing time for God and each other? Do you regularly evaluate your use of time to ensure you are living your priorities as life changes?

“Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is...” (v. 17-18)

- **Daily Decisions:** Do you have shared moral values to guide your decision making? Do you study Scripture together when you disagree on a moral decision or whether a decision is a moral issue? Are you free of negative controlling influences (i.e., alcohol, debt, bad peers, etc...) that lead to foolish decisions?

“Submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ” (v. 21)

- **Attitude and Lordship:** Do I blame or resent my spouse for having to meet the requirements of a Christian husband or wife? Do I view the ways I bless my spouse as acts of worship to God? Do I view my joy in blessing my spouse as a primary way that I disciple and guard the heart of my spouse?

AREA #4: Fulfill Your Unique Gender-Calling to Represent Christ in Your Family. A wife, through her unique personality and gifting is to obey God by being a well-suited helper for her husband as the head of the family. If areas one through three are seriously engaged by both spouses, then submission should rarely necessitate “relenting.” However, when his authority is exercised, it is should be clear that she supports his leadership without bitterness and that there is grace when her husband is wrong.

A wife should build upon her husband’s efforts to create a home environment where it is safe, normal, and encouraged to pursue God. Everything about household operation should be designed or engaged for this purpose (Deut. 6:4-9). A wife is to learn each member of her family and find ways to encourage and enhance her husband’s efforts to equip each one for effective service to God (Psalm 127:4). The items found on this job description are how God intends for a wife to measure success in life.

Husband Roles	Reference	My Strength	My Weakness	My Spouse's Desire
Well-Suited Helper	Genesis 2:18			
Submissive to Her Husband	1 Peter 3:1-7			
Woman of Competence	Proverbs 31			
Enthusiastic Lover	Solomon 5:10-6:3, 7:9-13, 8:10,14			
Overseer of Her Home	Titus 2:3-5			

Embedded Study

Falling in love is easier than knowing what to do once you're there. Marriage is similar to your final graduation. As long as you're going to school, there is a clearly defined “next” (courses to complete, papers to write, tests to take, applications to fill out, etc...). Once you finish and can do “what you always wanted,” it is least clear how to make “it” happen. How do you get from degreed to employed? How do you get from employed to fulfilling work? How do you prevent fulfilling work from leading to burnout and find contentment?

Through the process of dating, engagement, wedding planning, ceremony, and honeymoon there is also a clear “next.” But, what do you do when you get home from the honeymoon? How do you get from being married to having marriage roles? How do you get from having defined roles to having a mutually fulfilling life? How do you find lasting contentment and avoid allowing roles from becoming stereotypes or relational ruts?

In these final three chapters, we will be looking to answer the following questions: (a) What does the Bible actually teach and what do Christians only culturally assume about gender roles? (b) What are the pre-requisites to the healthy and satisfying implementation of roles within marriage? (c) What kind of process can a couple walk through in order to effectively discover what roles will look like in their unique marriage?

There is an overlooked assumption in these questions – none of us know what we're doing when we get started. Even if you grew up in a healthy family, there is no guarantee that what worked for your parents will work for you. Even within the guidance of biblical parameters, there is much that must be tailored to your unique personalities, skills, and schedules.

Another complicating variable is that gender mattered very little before marriage. Once you past the “cooties” stage of life, the only functional gender differences were which public restrooms you were allowed to use. Yet once we're married, then God's design for making us male and female takes on a significance that was largely irrelevant.

“Up until then [testimony of a newlywed couple], we had pretty much lived in a unisex world, as students taking the same classes, competing for the same grades on a level playing field, rarely forced into any consideration of what God's intention may have been in making us male and female (p. 171).” Tim Keller in *The Meaning of Marriage*

Is it any wonder that gender roles are a frequent point of conflict and confusion? We haven't even discussed the abuse of gender roles as complicating variables. Fortunately, you are not fighting a culture battle in your home. As you think about marriage roles, you are merely discerning how to honor God's design and enjoy one another in your family.

There is a second assumption we will bring to this chapter – the majority of married life does not require a constant focus on the biblical gender functions of headship and submission. The members of the Trinity (Father, Son, and Spirit) do not have to constantly emphasize headship and submission, but they are present. A healthy marriage is the same.

This is why, in this chapter, we will define those aspects of a husband's and wife's job description are not gender-specific:

- (1) **personal maturity** as expressed by the fruit of the Spirit,
- (2) ability to be a **healthy friend** as defined by the one another commands of the New Testament, and
- (3) **functional living** marked by managing key life resources well.

It is primarily the absence of these virtues that makes headship and submission difficult. As with any area of life, we lay the foundation for doing what God would have us to do by being who God would have us to be. As a reminder, being who God called you to be requires understanding your life as a part of God's “Grand Narrative of Redemption” (see chapter 2).

Area #1: Personal Maturity

The first part of the job description for a husband or wife is to be mature. There is no such thing as a “good” and “immature” spouse, because marriage is for adults not children. This is a neglected implication of the call to “leave and cleave.” It is assumed that when you leave home and start a family of your own, you are ready for the lifestyle of a mature adult.

How do we measure maturity? In our day we have neglected to ask this question. We have been more concerned with authenticity (i.e., being true to ourselves) than maturity (i.e., being true to God's design for us). Marriage, and every other human institution, has suffered because of this change in emphasis. God defined maturity for us:

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires (Galatians 5:22-24).”

Any authenticity that honors God and blesses your marriage will result from expressing your unique personality and skills through these core virtues. While in chapter two we discussed celebrating non-moral differences, we are now examining how to protect a marriage’s moral foundation. Before examining the nine attributes of maturity listed in this passage, it is important to look at the way that Paul framed these marks of maturity.

“But”: This contrasting word reveals that maturity is unnatural to us. Just as children require the interaction with adults to mature, we are dependent upon God’s Spirit for maturity.

“Fruit of the Spirit”: Paul tells us where to obtain these marks of maturity. When the Holy Spirit is planted in our lives like a seed, He is faithful to bear these evidences of His presence.

“Prayer reminds you that in your marriage, you are never left alone to the resources of your own strength and wisdom (p. 257).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

“Is”: The singular verb emphasizes the singular noun – fruit. This is not a fruit buffet at which we get to choose those entrées we like best. As Christians, we do not get to be selective image-bearers; choosing which parts of God’s character we like to display best. The fruit (singular) of the Spirit are not like spiritual gifts (plural). We are called to express the fruit of the Spirit in balance, while we are given certain gifts in various measures.

“No Law”: When we violate God’s character we usually do so in the name of freedom. But it is by reflecting God’s image that we escape the law. Consider: when you violate the fruit of the Spirit through immaturity, do you become more free or less free?

“Those Who Belong to Christ”: You do not express these attributes to please your spouse. Yes, you do belong to your spouse, but you first and foremost belong to God. Your spouse’s failures do not become legitimate reasons for immaturity. Your unconditional obedience to God is a blessing that spills over onto your spouse.

“Flesh... Passions and Desires”: The contrast to the fruit of the Spirit is the works of the flesh. Either your passions will serve you as you serve God, or you will serve your passions as you think you’re serving yourself.

As we examine each virtue, it is important to think three dimensionally. Too often we tend to think of each virtue as having only one opposite, or one type of opposite (usually aggressive). When, in fact, each virtue has distortions in both directions (aggressive and passive). When we think two dimensionally about maturity we usually run towards the opposite distortion instead of the godly virtue (i.e., the spouse who only fears “neglect” is prone to “obsession” or “nagging” as much as love).

As you read through the table below, circle the distortions of Christian maturity to which you are most prone. Feel free to add to the chart. Write your tendencies in the appropriate line on your job description.

Remember, one of the keys to making marriage work is embracing vulnerability (chapter 2). Either you will humbly acknowledge these weaknesses to your spouse and invite your spouse into your sanctification, or you will force your spouse into the awkward position of choosing between ignoring or nagging something significant.

“In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if many marriages end in divorce largely because one or both partners are running from their own revealed weaknesses as much as they are running from something they can’t tolerate in their spouse (p. 97).” Gary Thomas in *Sacred Marriage*

Passive Distortions	Fruit of the Spirit	Aggressive Distortions
Neglect Apathy Indifference	Love	Hateful Obsessive Lusting / Perpetually Dissatisfied
Gloomy Emotionally Unresponsive Cold	Joy	Unsustainable Enjoyment of Life Exaggerated Response to Life Events Unrealistically Ambitious
Living in Denial Ethical Compromises Always Neutral	Peace	Critical Argumentative Must Have the Last Word

Quitter Short-Sighted Lenient with God-Given Authority	Patience	Overly Opinionated Condemning of Weakness Slow to Listen
Codependent Easily Manipulated Lack of Personal Identity	Kindness	Cruel Non-generous Self-Centered
Lazy Lack of Moral Conviction Lack of “Salt & Light” Impact	Goodness	Without Mercy Entertained by Immorality Legalistic
Deceit by Concealing Undependable View Faith as Irrelevant	Faithfulness	Deceit by Lying Hyper-Spiritualizing Actively Doubting God
Soft Relationally Uninvolved Giving False Hope	Gentleness	Demanding Brutal Honesty Giving No Hope
Indulgent of Self or Others Other-Dependant on Others Lacking Life Structure	Self-Control	Compulsive Rigid Self-Sufficient

Read I John 3:4 and James 4:17. Notice that sin can be both commission (aggressively stepping over the law of God) and omission (passively ignoring the law of God)? Within marriage, sins of omission frequently lead to sins of commission. Usually before we start doing what we shouldn’t be doing, we stop doing what we should to be doing. This becomes a vicious cycle when one spouse rationalizes their partner’s passive sins as justification for their active sins. Soon, both people feel like the victim. It is absolutely essential that you protect your marriage by regularly and openly evaluating yourself in these areas. God calls every member of His family to do so (I Cor. 11:28). Why would we operate our families differently?

Couple Discussion Questions: Do your most frequent struggles with sin come in the passive or aggressive variety? How does that affect your spouse? Are you more prone to confess your aggressive sins or passive sins? Note: More will be said about confession, forgiveness, and restoration in seminar two: “Communication.” In which of these nine areas do you tend to be defensive (after you sin) or hesitant to engage your spouse (before you sin)?

A vital lifeline for continued maturity is regular study of God’s Word. There are two common struggles that contribute to a lack of Bible intake. First, we can be confused about what the Bible is or how to read it. Rank your personal Bible awareness on a scale of 1 to 10 in each of the following areas:

_____ I have a general grasp of the Bible story from Genesis to Revelation

Recommended Resource: *The Jesus Storybook Bible* by Sallie Lloyd-Jones. This children’s Bible is a fabulous resource for both children and adults. It provides vivid and easy to grasp presentation of how the entire Bible is about Jesus and what He did for us on the cross.

_____ I know specific Bible passages that relate to my most frequent or intense life struggles

Recommended Resource: *Quick Scripture Reference for Counseling* by John Kruijs. This is a topically arranged reference tool that provides Bible passages relevant to common life struggles.

_____ I know how to properly interpret basic Bible genres (e.g. narrative, epistle, poetry, prophecy, etc...)

Recommended Resource: *How to Read the Bible for All It’s Worth* and *How to Read the Bible Book by Book* by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart. The first book gives a description of each type of literature in the Bible and how to interpret it. The second book gives brief helps for understanding each book of the Bible passage by passage.

Second, we lack a reading plan or allow routine to create neglect. Some people do not regularly read their Bible because they don’t know when or what they would read. Other people have had many “seasons” of Bible reading, but quit when the “habit” becomes monotonous and lifeless. The chart on the next page is meant to help you both gain a plan for Bible reading and develop enough variety to allow for a life-long enjoyment of Scripture.

Couple Discussion Questions: When do (or would) the two of you talk about what you’re learning from the Bible? How do you decide what you’re going to read, listen to, or memorize in the Bible? How would you like your spouse to be involved in that selection process? What things make you most/least comfortable when discussing the Bible together? How can you best protect and honor this time together?

Couple Discussion Questions: How would you define the current trajectory of your spiritual life? What are the key factors (present and past) that have contributed to or hindered your spiritual growth?

Area #2: Healthy Friendship

If it is fair to say that college is high school on steroids, then it is equally fair to say that marriage is friendship on covenant. The same marks Scripture provides for a healthy friendship are the foundational relational commitments expected between a husband and wife. The frequency of application and level of commitment will just be much higher.

Marriage is too frequently held to a lesser standard than friendships. We expect our spouse to understand or accept things that we know would offend our friends. We think we can “make it up” to our spouse when we would “make it a priority” with our friends. We must abandon this mindset if we are going to fulfill the responsibilities we accept when we embrace the title of “husband” or “wife.”

Scripture gives us the marks of healthy friendship in the “one another” commands of the New Testament. These commands capture how one believer is to treat another believer and what our “reasonable expectations” of one another should be. For this reason, they should be most clearly enacted and will be most needed in a marriage.

We will examine 10 of the “one another commands.” As you discuss them with your spouse, complete the “Area #2” section on your job description. In each of these areas you have strengths and weaknesses. It is important for you to be aware of these and to discuss them openly. Discuss how your spouse best receives each interaction. Marriage will be the intersection of these strengths, weaknesses, and preferences.

Completion of this section will require many conversations. So, do not get so focused on completing the exercise that you fail to enjoy the conversation. These conversations set the job description up to be effective.

Accept One Another

Romans 15:7, “Therefore welcome [“accept” in the NIV] one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”

There should never be a concern, “Am I [blank] enough for my spouse?” In marriage acceptance is based upon relationship instead of performance. The same is true in Christ – we are accepted as adopted children of God, not because we are productive kingdom citizens. This acceptance motivates our service to God as an act of worship; not mere duty. Similarly, it is our acceptance of each other that allows our marriage enrichment to be motivated by love instead of fear.

Note: Acceptance is different from forgiveness, which will be discussed in the seminar “Communication.” In brief, acceptance is our response to non-moral difference; forgiveness is response to moral offenses.

Couple Discussion Questions: Which of your spouse’s non-moral characteristics (see chapter 2) are hardest for you to accept? In what ways do you communicate non-acceptance (verbally and nonverbally)? In how many different ways can you communicate acceptance? Which forms of acceptance do you find most meaningful or satisfying? When things have been difficult or strained how can you communicate acceptance without “acting like nothing happened”?

Admonish One Another

Colossians 3:16, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”

Admonish means to call on someone to make a needed change. But, notice the tone of the passage; Paul does not assume this type of confrontation has to be heated. A husband and wife will know each other’s faults in ways no one else will. It is vital for married couples to know the difference between moral offenses and non-moral differences. It is equally vital that a couple create an atmosphere where it is safe to speak about both the sins and weaknesses life reveals.



Bible Intake Assessment

Type of Study: The first column provides five different types or levels of Bible intake. Having variety in how you receive Scripture helps you maintain this discipline. Which one(s) you emphasize may vary based upon learning style, season of life, ministry setting, and current life challenges.

Scripture: A passage is listed to illustrate where the Bible calls for this kind of study.

Implementation: Each type of study can be engaged in many different ways. By brainstorming these options you provide yourself a "change of pace" when your current or preferred approach begins to feel stale.

Frequency: The four options listed are daily (D), weekly (W), monthly (M), or periodically (P). If you intend to make a given implementation method part of your regular Bible intake circle the frequency that best matches your intentions.

Type of Study	Scripture	In what ways can Bible study be implemented at this level in your life? (Be as creative as possible)	Frequency
Hearing	2 Timothy 3:14-17	a. Sunday Sermon	D W M P
		b. Bible on CD or Mp3	D W M P
		c. Download sermons	D W M P
		d.	D W M P
Reading	John 17:17	a. Personal reading	D W M P
		b. Reading with spouse	D W M P
		c. Read through the Bible in a year plan	D W M P
		d.	D W M P
"A man can no more take in a supply of grace for the future than he can eat enough for the next six months, or take sufficient air into his lungs at one time to sustain life for a week. We must draw upon God's boundless store of grace from day to day as we need it." D.L. Moody			
Studying	2 Timothy 2:15	a. Small group participation	D W M P
		b. Reading a Christian book or commentary	D W M P
		c. Print a book of the Bible on computer paper to mark more freely	D W M P
		d.	D W M P
"Our age has been sadly deficient in what may be termed spiritual greatness. At the root of this is the modern disease of shallowness. We are too impatient to meditate on the faith we profess... Rather it is unhurried meditation on gospel truth and the exposing of our minds to these truths that yields the fruit of sanctified character." Maurice Roberts			
Memorizing	Psalm 119:9-19	a. Selected verses on personal life struggles	D W M P
		b. Whole chapters that are meaningful to you	D W M P
		c. Memorize key passages useful in sharing the gospel	D W M P
		d.	D W M P
"While some advocate a kind of meditation in which you do your best to empty your mind, Christian meditation involves filling your mind with God and truth." Donald Whitney			
Applying	James 1:22-24	a. Recording needed applications in a journal	D W M P
		b. Discussing points of application with spouse or small group	D W M P
		c. Have a point of emphasis for each month	D W M P
		d.	D W M P
"All too often people rush to the application stage and bypass the interpretation stage: they want to know what it means for them before they know what it means!" Richard Foster			

Couple Discussion Questions: Are you prone to confront issues prematurely or avoid confrontation? Does this tendency change based upon certain subjects? How well do you receive correction or instruction? Do you think it is out of place for your spouse to admonish you? How are you prone to admonish your spouse in a way that makes the issue seem more important than the marriage? How would you prefer your spouse to bring these conversations to you?

Note: More guidance for these conversations will be given in the seminar "Communication."

Bear One Another's Burdens

Galatians 6:2, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."

"I don't want to be a burden to my spouse," is a common rationale for neglecting this area of marital friendship. A vital skill in marriage is to be able to hear each other's burdens without thinking you have to "fix" them. The freedom to speak about burdens and the certainty of not being alone with them is a defining mark of Christian friendship that should find its highest expression in marriage.

Couple Discussion Questions: How and when has the habit of not speaking about certain things entered your marriage? How does this open the door to other people to become a closer friend than your spouse? How does this make the expression of love and commitment feel more hollow? Can you listen to your spouse's burdens without having to fix them?

Build Up One Another

Romans 14:19, "So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding."

Ideally, every marital interaction would have the effect of building each other up. We should not be satisfied with anything less than the ideal. Difficult conversations should be had with the intent of strengthening your spouse. Mundane moments should be engaged to strengthen the sense of stability in your spouse's life. Pleasure should be embraced as a celebration of good things in your spouse's life. The guiding question of each interaction with your spouse should be, "How can I use this moment to cooperate with what God is doing in my spouse's life?" This question makes every moment different.

Couple Discussion Questions: How can you more intentionally build up your spouse during (a) difficult conversations, (b) mundane moments, and (c) pleasurable times? How does this mindset change your response to each of these kinds of moments? When and how is it wise to enlist other people to build up your spouse? How does the goal to build up your spouse help us escape our natural self-centeredness?

Confess to One Another

James 5:16, "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working."

Nobody is going to be less surprised to learn that you are a sinner than your spouse. Your sin is either going to be confessed, covered up, or ignored. Which do you think is healthiest for your marriage? Notice the progression in James 5:16: confession leads to prayer, prayer leads to healing/restoration, restoration leads to a righteous life, and righteous living creates a more powerful prayer life. If you want the latter part of that for your marriage, then you must have the humility (James 4:6) to start at the beginning with confession.

Couple Discussion Questions: What is the most frequent approach you take towards sin in your marriage: confess, cover up, or ignore? In how many ways does unconfessed sin eat away at a marriage? What percentage of marriage failure do you think began with unconfessed sin? What are your most frequent rationalizations for not confessing to your spouse? How can the two of you protect confession as a safe and good activity in your marriage?

Encourage One Another

Hebrews 3:13, "But exhort [encourage] one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."

If we only encourage one another when there is a reason (good or bad) we create a performance-driven atmosphere in our marriage. When this happens, pride or insecurity will erode at the trust and enjoyment of marriage—sin uses this dynamic to reinforce its lies and harden our hearts. This is why we should strive to fill any moment of silence with a word of affirmation, encouragement, or affection. We can rest assured that when our spouse is listening to us encourage them, they are free in that moment from hearing the lies of Satan (Eph. 5:26).

Couple Discussion Questions: What kind of interactions does your spouse find most encouraging? When are the times when your spouse would most benefit from encouragement? What are some un-seized moments in your day that could be used to encourage your spouse? How does encouraging your spouse change the way you think about him/her?

Be Honest with One Another

Colossians 3:9, “Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices.”

Lying can take many forms – changing facts, omitting facts, creating false “facts,” false emotion, minimizing, blame-shifting, saying “I don’t know” when you do, hidden agendas, verbalizing suspicion to divert attention, exaggeration, and many others. The result of lying is that we are less known or inaccurately known by our spouse. We invite (or more accurately force) our spouse into a false reality. When this happens not only is your spouse’s trust broken after the truth is revealed, but your ability to receive his/her love is diminished until the truth is revealed.

Couple Discussion Questions: In what ways are you prone to lie? When you have been less than honest how does it impede your ability to receive your spouse’s love? How can the two of you demonstrate a willingness and ability to receive difficult or unpleasant truths from one another? How is the notion of “protecting someone from the truth” foolish?

Honor One Another

Romans 12:10, “Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.”

Honor is a way of relating that one values the other person more than our personal preferences. We honor our spouse when we refrain from making jokes at their expense, stay within the budget we agreed to, make our schedule and whereabouts known, do not allow minor issues to become points of major anger or despair, and resist the urge to dismiss conversations that seem insignificant to us. We show honor when we eliminate the notion that any personal preference will take precedence over treating our spouse with dignity.

Couple Discussion Questions: What are the most common ways that you show dishonor to your marriage or your spouse? When you treat your spouse or marriage with dishonor how does it affect your level of commitment or what you think being committed means? What expressions of honor are most important to your spouse? What pleasures or conveniences are you prone to put ahead of honor?

Serve One Another

Galatians 5:13, “For we are called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.”

The only place where a good serve is more important than it is in tennis is marriage. If you don’t enjoy serving, you won’t enjoy marriage. You’ll enjoy parenting even less. We must remember what life is all about – bringing glory to God by becoming more like Jesus. And Jesus was a servant (Mark 10:45).

“I wanted to serve, yes, because that made me feel in control. Then I would always have the high moral ground. But that kind of ‘service’ isn’t service at all, only manipulation. But by not giving Kathy an opportunity to serve me, I had failed to serve her. And the reason underneath it all was my pride (p. 55)... If a man or a woman wishes to bring him- or herself more fully into the biblically defined gender roles, it does not actually require assent from the other person. Since both the headship role of the husband and the submission role as a wife are *servant* roles, one can always begin to serve without waiting for permission. Often this will be an invisible change of attitude before it is every visible in action (p. 191).” Tim Keller in *The Meaning of Marriage*

Couple Discussion Questions: Is pride or laziness the heart condition that interferes with your ability to enjoy serving your spouse? When you think of serving what picture or person comes to mind? How does a servant’s heart make the expression of personal freedom safer in marriage? In what areas can your service be the biggest blessing to your spouse?

Spur On One Another

Hebrews 10:24, “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.”

Do you ever dream about how your spouse was designed by God to change the world and how you fuel the work God is doing through your spouse? You should. This kind of dreaming is essential to a lasting romance. This is an essential transition from dating-dreaming to marriage-dreaming. In dating-dreaming we tend to be highly self-centered – how can this person play the role of spouse in my ideal life narrative? In marriage-dreaming we have the opportunity to become joyously God-centered – how can I delight and contribute to how God wants to change the world through my spouse?

Couple Discussion Questions: Do you know and pray over your spouse’s spiritual gifts regularly? Ministry opportunities? When and how do you celebrate spiritual growth and fruitful ministry in your marriage? What are the areas in which you benefit from frequent “spurring”? What kinds of “spurring” does your spouse respond to best?

What are your strengths and weaknesses within the 10 traits of healthy friendship?

How does expression of these characteristics outside of marriage compare to their expression within your marriage?

Area #3: Functional Living

A workable plan for functional living is necessary for the healthy application of headship and submission. Otherwise, the husband makes an unending number of choices for the family and the wife loses her ability to bless the marriage with her full potential. It is the headship-responsibility of the husband to initiate the creation of these plans, administering. But either spouse may bear the responsibility or primary oversight for these areas of mutual submission (Eph. 5:21).

“Poor leadership is the cause of many conflicts in marriage (p. 118).” Stuart Scott in *The Exemplary Husband*

“The basic roles—of leader and helper—are binding, but every couple must work out how that will be expressed within their marriage. The very process of making these decisions is a key part of what it is to think out and honor your gender differences (p. 187).” Tim Keller in *The Meaning of Marriage*

Also, if we think of marriage exclusively through the lens of gender roles we will begin to live by stereotypes as much, if not more than, we live by biblical instructions. Stereotypes may fit well for a majority of the population (that’s how they became stereotypes), but they are not normative and should not be treated as if they are sanctioned by God.

“I thought being the head of a home meant that I had to make all the decisions, no matter how small. I had to decide what we would eat, whom to visit, what Kathy should wear, when we would sleep, when to get up, what cereal to buy—it was exhausting. I was drowning in decisions. In taking over the life of two persons, I was struggling to keep my own head above water. I did not understand that my wife could support me the way God designed if I have her no opportunity to express herself... Not allowing my wife to grow was the unhealthiest thing I did to our marriage (p. 74).” Bryan Chappell in *Each for the Other*

As we separate those spheres of marriage that are expressions of headship and submission from those that are gender neutral, we are able to resist the temptation to define leadership, biblical manhood, or biblical womanhood by certain skill sets or personality types. This is essential because God’s requirements for men and women are not personality-bound. Every man can be what God intended for a Christian husband. Every woman can be what God intended for a Christian wife.

In order to see how “area #3” fits with biblical teaching on gender roles in marriage, it is important to look at how Paul introduced his passage on gender roles. Ephesians 5:15-21 was meant to be the introduction to Ephesians 5:22-33; creating

the framework necessary for the healthy expression of headship and submission. Below we will examine implications of the key phrases in this introductory section of Scripture.

“Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise, but as wise...” (v. 15)

Mutual submission begins with examination, not authority. Proverbs 29:18 makes it clear that leadership without vision (a clearly articulated, workable plan and method of implementation) is foolishness and leads to destruction. Paul calls on every Christian to examine their “walk” (i.e., approach to life) to make sure it is wise.

Living wisely involves managing finances. While the skills necessary to correct weaknesses in this area will not be provided until the seminar on “Finances,” it is important to define these matters as a mutual marital responsibility.

- Do you have a monthly family budget that keeps up with all income and expenses?
- Does your monthly income exceed your planned monthly spending?
- Do you have a system to plan and save for significant future expenses?

Living wisely also involves decision making. While the skills necessary to correct weaknesses in this area will not be provided until the seminar on “Decision Making,” it is important to define these matters as a mutual marital responsibility.

- Do you have a list of daily, weekly, yearly, and periodic tasks necessary to operate your household?
- Do you have shared expectations about each other’s available time, skills, and interest?
- Have you agreed upon who will assume responsibility for which tasks?
- Are you flexible and sacrificial when changes need to be made to the agreed upon division of labor?

“Don’t become so wed to the details of your roles that you’re unwilling to step into the world of your spouse to do what’s necessary (p. 213).” Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*

“Making the best use of the time, because the days are evil...” (v. 16)

Mutual submission ensures that its expectations are fair. There are more good things to do than can fit into any given day, week, month, year, or life. If our expectations of ourselves or one another are only filtered through the question, “What is wrong with me wanting to [blank]?” we will be sincere, exhausted, disappointed, angry fools. We must conduct our lives and marriages with the realization that time is a limited resource.

Living wisely involves time management. While the skills necessary to correct weaknesses in this area will not be provided until the seminar on “Decision Making,” it is important to define these matters as a mutual marital responsibility.

- Do your expectations for yourself and your spouse fit within a 168 hour week?
- Do each of you arrange your schedule prioritizing time for God and each other?
- Do you regularly evaluate your use of time to ensure you are living your priorities as life changes?

“Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is...” (v. 17-18)

Mutual submission provides a context for daily decisions that can honor God and the marriage. Most of life is unplanned and impromptu, even for well-planned people. We don’t know what opportunities or challenges are going to arise in the coming hours, days, weeks, months, or years. Marriage requires the skill of mutually-honoring spontaneity.

Living wisely as a married couple requires a cohesive approach to decision making for both personal and couple decision; decisions that allow time for forethought and those must be made in the moment. While the skills necessary to correct a weakness in this area will not be provided until the seminar on “Decision Making,” it is important to define these matters as a mutual marital responsibility.

- Do you have shared moral values to guide your decision making?
- Do you study Scripture together when you disagree on a moral decision or whether a decision is a moral issue?
- Are you free from controlling influences (i.e., alcohol, debt, bad peers, etc...) that lead to foolish decisions?

“Submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ” (v. 21)

Mutual submission voluntarily accepts the standards discussed in this job description to honor Christ. Your spouse should never have to “enforce” or nag you into complying with any part of this job description. When you accepted Christ as Lord, you accepted His standard for your life and committed yourself to relying on His power to carry it out. Your spouse is simply the person you most want to bless with your obedience to Christ. In light of this, ask yourself:

- Do I blame or resent my spouse for having to meet the requirements of a Christian husband or wife?
- Do I view the ways I bless my spouse as acts of worship to God?
- Do I view my joy in blessing my spouse as a primary way that I disciple and guard the heart of my spouse?

Area #4: Gender-Specific Roles

Mutual submission alone is insufficient for marriage. God has assigned the roles of headship and submission to specific genders in marriage. In the next chapter we will examine the specific headship responsibilities of the husband and submission responsibilities of the wife. Here, we will merely set the stage for those discussions.

Read I Corinthians 11:3. It is important to remember that headship and submission were not God’s reaction to the Fall; as if God panicked. Headship and submission have their origin before the Fall. These roles are a portrait of the Trinity. Marriage reflects God’s glory as husband and wife lovingly and joyously live like God lives in the Trinity.

“When sin entered the world, it ruined the harmony of marriage not because it brought headship and submission into existence, but because it twisted man’s humble loving headship toward hostile domination in some men and lazy indifference in others. And it twisted woman’s intelligent, willing, happy, creative, articulate submission toward manipulative obsequiousness in some women and brazen insubordination in others. Sin didn’t create headship and submission; it ruined them and distorted them and made them ugly and destructive (p. 79).” John Piper in *This Momentary Marriage*

Read Mark 10:42-25. Much of the tension with the biblical teaching on headship and submission emerges from an unbiblical view of power, authority, or greatness. Every Christian is challenged to live for the purpose of blessing and serving others (Gen. 12:1-3; John 13:12-17; Phil. 2:5-11). If a couple is following the job description laid out here, then the wife will be hard-pressed to “out submit” her husband. She will also be safe and fulfilled when she submits to her husband.

“The husband-wife relationship is not a boss-employee, a commander-soldier, or a teacher-student relationship. It is a love relationship in which two adults become united as one. Within this union, one partner lovingly takes the lead and the other willingly and actively supports that lead (p. 23).” Alexander Strauch in *Men and Women Equal Yet Different*

Another rebuttal to obeying God’s teaching on gender roles (which is also raised against most every expression of uncomfortable obedience) is, “Won’t I lose what makes me unique? I don’t want to lose myself. Why did God make me with certain desires, passions, and abilities if I were not going to get to express them?” This is a fair question and reveals a common misunderstanding of how obedience to God changes us. C.S. Lewis answers this objection using the metaphor of how salt changes the flavor of food, which is true of our obedience to Christ in every area of life.

“Suppose a person who knew nothing about salt. You give him a pinch to taste and he experiences a particular strong, sharp taste. You then tell him that in your country people use salt in all their cookery. Might he not reply ‘In that case I suppose all your dishes taste exactly the same: because the taste of that stuff you have just given me is so strong that it will kill the taste of everything else.’ But you and I know that the real effect of salt is exactly the opposite. So far from killing the taste of the egg... and the cabbage, it actually brings it out. They do not show their real taste till you have added the salt...It is something like that with Christ and us. The more we get what we now call ‘ourselves’ out of the way and let Him take us over, the more truly ourselves we become. There is so much of Him that millions and millions of ‘little Christs,’ all different, will still be too few to express Him fully (p. 225).” C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*.

As you prepare to study the unique marital responsibilities of a husband and wife, ask yourself these questions, “As I obey God in area #1 of this job description, am I becoming more or less of the person I want to be and the person God made me to be? What about area #2? What about area #3?”

Chances are that it gets a little harder to answer “Yes” to each section. But, that is the challenge of living in community and friendship. The challenge is greater, but so are the blessings. Lose your life and you find it (Luke 9:23). Allow what you know and have experienced in areas 1-3 to give you confidence as you head into the next two chapters.

Chapter 5

The Unique Aspects of a Husband’s Job Description Understanding Servant-Leader, Protector, and Provider

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

- Christian leadership exists for the good of those being led; not the preferences of the leader.
- There is no such thing as a Christian leader who does not invest himself in knowing those being led.
- Family leadership is not a personality trait or skill set you’re born with. It is a responsibility given by God.
- The primary tool of Christian leadership is self-sacrifice and allowing others to follow you towards Christ.

Memorize: Ephesians 5:25-27 (ESV), “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.” As you memorize this passage reflect upon these key points:

- “Husbands” – This is a voluntary role which, once assumed, removes the choice to live covenant-free.
- “As Christ Loved (A.C.L.)” – A rupture to the A.C.L. commitment of a husband is devastating to marriage.
- “Sanctify Her” – Your first goal in marriage is to facilitate your wife becoming what God intended her to be.
- “Present... in Splendor” – Your second goal in marriage is to celebrate and affirm what God does with your wife.
- “To Himself” – Your third goal in marriage is to learn to personally delight and enjoy your godly wife.

Teaching Notes

“While the principle is clear – that the husband is to be the servant-leader and have ultimate responsibility and authority in the family – the Bible gives almost no details about how that is expressed in concrete behavior (p. 185)... What does this mean for us? It means that rigid culture gender roles have no Biblical warrant. Christians cannot make a scriptural case for masculine and feminine stereotypes... We must find ways to honor and express our gender roles, but the Bible allows for freedom in the particulars, while still upholding the obligatory nature of the principle (p. 186).” Tim Keller in *The Meaning of Marriage*

“The Bible does not permit men to be uninvolved, disinterested, intentionally deaf, or selfishly blind. Headship requires the husband actively (and graciously) to work for the physical and spiritual well-being of each person in the family. A husband’s passivity can lead to cycles of abuse. A common pattern in abusive marriages is long periods of male passivity interspersed with brief episodes of rage (p. 31)... Too often Christians try to summarize male headship in the home by simply saying the husband has ‘the last word’ or is the final authority in decision making. Be glad this abbreviation of responsibilities is not found in the phrases of Scripture because it can cause great damage (p. 69)... Biblical headship shifts the focus of husbanding from taking charge to taking responsibility. Being a godly husband is not so much asserting one’s will as submitting one’s prerogative to the good of another (p. 70).” Bryan Chappell in *Each for the Other*

“For most of Western history, the primary and most valued characteristic of manhood was self-mastery... A man who indulged in excessive eating, drinking, sleeping, or sex—who failed to ‘rule himself’—was considered unfit to rule his household.” Sara Lipton in “Those Manly Men of Yore” in *New York Times* (June 17, 2011).

“The reason I am using the title “Lionhearted and Lamblike” to refer to the Christian husband as head of his wife is because the husband is called to lead like Jesus who is the Lion of Judah (Rev. 5:5) and the Lamb of God (Rev. 5:6)—he was lionhearted and lamblike, strong and meek, tough and tender, aggressive and responsive, bold and broken-hearted. He sets the pattern for manhood (p. 74)... Leadership does not assume it is superior. It assumes it should take initiative (p. 89).” John Piper in *This Momentary Marriage*

Embedded Study

There are few things more pathetic than media portrayals of a husband/father—weak, incompetent, lazy, disinterested, selfish, juvenile, distant, uninvolved, pleasure-seeking, greedy, cold, and anything else that is the antithesis of Jesus. We laugh when we should cry. We are being desensitized to the abolition and abdication of manhood that is occurring all around us.

A true man is one who loves and leads his family well. Any married man who fails in loving or leading his family is less than masculine; regardless of strength, influence, income, intelligence, sexual prowess, or appearance. These attributes have become a counterfeit economy for masculinity, replacing the biblical ideal.

"Marriage was traditionally a place where males became truly masculine (p. 32)." Tim Keller in *The Meaning of Marriage*

In this chapter, we will look at the five key characteristics of a Christian husband. These are the gender-specific responsibilities for men that God adds to the gender-neutral responsibilities. These are God's assigned focal points for men to express the fruit of the Spirit and the one another commands in their marriage.

1. Servant Leader
2. Shepherd of the Family
3. Man of Understanding
4. Provider for the Family
5. Protector of the Family

Before we examine what Scripture calls men to do, take a moment to reflect on how you think about the role of husband. How would you define each of the following?

"Traditional" Husband: _____

Stereotypical Husband: _____

Husband Persona You Fear Being: _____

Ideal Husband: _____

"With great wisdom the Bible mandates no particular style, manner, or set of behaviors that alone qualify as biblical headship. In fact, there are probably as many legitimate expressions of headship as there are variations of personality. Biblical headship is simply a man's use of his God-given abilities and authority to ensure that love, justice, and mercy rule his home, even when fostering such qualities requires his own sacrifice (p. 79)." Bryan Chappell in *Each for the Other*

Servant Leader

Read Matthew 20:25-28. Male headship starts here. Any view of headship that does not grow from this soil is a weed, a distortion of God's design, and is undeserving of the label "Christian." Any attempt to express headship that does not resemble this passage is a sinful manipulation of God's Word, and if taught to children, receives Jesus' strongest rebuke (Matt. 18:6). This view of leadership is meant to protect husbands from the temptation to abuse the authority of headship.

While the role servant-leader is not defined by a personality type, a man's personality will often impact which side of this role he emphasizes. Where would you place yourself on the following progression?

Servant	Servant-Leader	Leader
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Servant: A servant-only husband merely funds, assists, and facilitates the desires of his household. The agenda for the family is created exclusively by the "wants" of each family member. Little moral or biblical instruction is given, consequences are not enforced, and pouting or guilt become his primary tools for influencing behavior. On this end of the spectrum the husband is more loved (usually in the form of appreciation which can devolve into entitlement) than respected.

A milder form of servant-only husbanding usually has higher moral standards but still does not initiate establishing a direction for the family. The husband helps members of his family reach their individual goals, but he does not lead by providing a vision to create unity amongst individual goals. The result is that a family becomes so divergently busy that they cease to function as a family and lose a common sense of identity.

Leader: A leader-only husband is typically a micro-manager who makes most of the decisions in his household and measures family members by how they respond to his directives. If the idol of the servant-only husband is his family (people pleasing), then the idol of the leader only husband is himself (mistaking his preferences for God’s will). On this end of the spectrum, the husband is more respected (usually in the form of fear which can devolve into dread) than loved.

A milder form of leader-only husbanding is the “Mr. Fix It” or “answer man” approach. This husband shares truth and gives direction but withholds himself (the opposite of I Thes. 2:8). The guiding question to any concern his family brings to him is, “What do you want me to do or say?” without first asking “How can I join you in this struggle or situation?” There is a distance between leader and those being led that is inconsistent with the incarnational example of husbanding set by Christ.

Absent: Some husbands are not on the scale, because they are either not at home or not engaged with their wife. This husband may be selfishly absent (doing what he likes best) or fearfully absent (afraid he’ll mess up if involved). Regardless of how or why a husband is absent, the best way for him to get involved is to focus on areas one through three of the husband’s job description. It is difficult, even unhealthy, to go directly from absent to leader. Decisions become arbitrary and the disjointedness makes for short-lived change. However, if the husband emphasizes personal character, friendship with his wife, and a functional approach to living, then servant-leadership will develop and be a blessing to his family.

Servant Leader: A balanced servant leader is highly invested in the dreams of his family. He is as committed to seeing his family’s aspirations become reality as he is his own. This commitment is tangibly expressed in time, energy, finances, private thought, conversation, and personal sacrifice. A balanced servant-leader is not merely orchestrating a collection of “me’s” but a family “we.” Therefore, the husband not only sets the example of investing in the aspirations of each family member, but also (a) examines how his family’s gifts and abilities complement one another, and with that assessment (b) calls on the family to follow his example by sacrificing for one another.

“Leadership means assuming responsibility for the relationship, being accountable to God and putting your wife’s needs above your own. It means making her load lighter, not heavier. It means helping her develop and utilize her gifts and abilities. It means loving her sacrificially (p. 1690).” Dennis Rainey (editor) in *Preparing for Marriage*

“As the leader of your household, you must first determine your personal and spiritual goals. What are your goals for your marriage? What are your educational and vocational goals? What are your ministry goals (p. 131)?” Stuart Scott in *The Exemplary Husband*

Examples of being a servant-leader:

- Accepting spiritual responsibility for his family.
- Regularly involving his wife in envisioning their future and anticipating upcoming seasons of life.
- Discussing household responsibilities with his wife and leading in sacrificial involvement.
- Discussing the family schedule and prioritizing to make sure it fairly represents each family member and is realistic.
- Being the first to sacrifice when life requires and doing so with a loving, joyful attitude.

Shepherd of the Family

Read I Timothy 3:1-7. This is not just a passage for pastors. It is a description of mature manhood and Christian leadership, which is a good aspiration for every man (v. 1). Notice how verses 2-3 correlate with areas one and two of a husband’s job description and verses 4-5 correlate with area three. Because the primary qualification for a pastor is how he manages his family, a husband should shepherd his family in similar ways to how a pastor shepherds a church.

As a shepherd of his family the theme verse for every husband should be I Corinthians 11:1, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.” The first rule of shepherding is to walk in the direction you want the sheep to go. It is both hypocritical and ineffective to do otherwise. Read Psalm 23 and John 10 and ask yourself the question, “What does it look like to be a godly and Christ-like shepherd for my family?”

Beyond being an example, being a shepherd involves the physical and spiritual protection and provision of one’s family. The chart below helps you see these various responsibilities.

	Provider	Protector
P H Y S I C A L	See Husband as “Provider for the Family” Below	See Husband as “Protector of the Family” Below
S P I R I T U A L	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prays for his family • Leads in family Bible study • Initiates church involvement • Initiates small group involvement • Find resources in areas of struggle or interest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leads in guarding the family’s schedule • Leads in selecting a healthy church • Invites and seeks answers to family’s questions • Address family’s areas of sin and temptation • Address areas of family conflict or bitterness

Other examples of how a husband serves as shepherd of his family:

- Invites his wife and children to really know him and his struggles to serve as a model of a growing disciple.
- Establishes, with his wife, the biblical values that will guide the family and finds ways to reinforce them.
- Initiates meaningful family traditions that teach and reinforce family values and identity.
- Encourages his wife and family to grow as individuals who know their unique place in God’s family and your family.

Man of Understanding

Read I Peter 3:7. Simply stated, if you won’t honor your wife by lovingly listening to her, God won’t listen to you. Your access to the strength necessary to do what God calls a husband to do will be blocked. God is that serious about husbands understanding their wives – because husbands represent God’s concern for the church to the world. Practically, it is impossible to fulfill the other aspects of headship when you are not continually learning your wife.

“As the apostle Paul concludes comments on marriage in the book of Ephesians, he reminds men to ‘love’ their wives, but he tells women to ‘respect’ their husbands (5:33). He seems to deal with each gender at its weak points (p. 134).” Bryan Chappell in *Each for the Other*

The mission of every husband is to be the Ph.D.-level expert on his wife. When God wants to bless, encourage, strengthen, instruct, or show His love to your wife, there should be no one more qualified for Him to use than you. As you seek to serve your wife, you need to know what is most meaningful to her. As you seek to shepherd your wife, you need to know her areas of gifting and struggle. As you seek to serve as provider, you need to know what is most important to her as you make financial decisions. As you seek to serve as protector, you need to know your wife’s fears and insecurities. A Christian husband must know (i.e., be continually learning) his wife!

“What should not elude husbands is that nurture of wives is a leadership responsibility. Biblical headship demands that husbands encourage, stimulate, and even shield the gifts and growth of their wives (p. 75).” Bryan Chappell in *Each for the Other*

Examples of being a man of understanding:

- Asking questions to understand your wife’s emotions and responses to events.
- Never mocking or dishonoring your wife’s emotions or weaknesses so you are a safe person to confide in.
- Listening attentively when your wife speaks.
- Knowing and acting upon how your wife best receives love.
- Observing what other people draw out in your wife.

- Paying attention to your wife’s schedule and life demands.
- Treating her with the same honor in public and private
- Anticipating challenges (situational and emotional) that your wife will face.

Provider for the Family

Read I Timothy 5:8. It is the moral obligation of a husband to make sure that his family has its necessary provisions. A wife should be able rest in the fact that the family’s needs will be met and the family’s resources will be managed wisely because of her husband’s servant leadership. While this passage refers primarily to caring for widowed or ailing parents, its implications are no less applicable to a husband’s primary household.

Does this mean a wife should not work? The husband providing for his family has no implication for whether his wife works. Based upon the husband’s provision the wife should be free not to work and, with the exception of short-term circumstances, the decision of whether a wife chooses to work should not be made on the basis of necessity.

Does this mean a husband should make more than his wife? If a family chooses for the wife to work, the husband-as-provider does not mean he must make more money than his wife. A husband should be secure enough, that the comparison of salaries does not affect him. The role of provider is a husband’s function, not his identity and definitely not a competition.

What about when a husband is going to school or unemployed? Unemployment is sometimes unavoidable and additional education is often advisable. During these times a wife may, by necessity, be “the primary bread winner” for the family. But, the husband should still take his role of provider seriously by working diligently at finding a job or completing school, working a part time job to contribute to the family budget, living frugally during this temporary arrangement, and still leading in the family’s financial management.

Examples of being the provider for the family:

- Initiating the creation of a family budget and ensuring it is monitored regardless of which spouse administrates it.
- Consulting his wife on all financial decisions.
- Providing for family’s basic living expenses (fixed and variable necessities) unless unemployed or in school.
- Ensuring that his family avoids unwise debt and that the family is aware of their financial situation.
- Protecting his family by having a will and sufficient insurance to care for them in case of his death.

Protector of the Family

Read Colossians 3:19. Scripture continually reminds us that the greatest dangers we face are not from the outside world, but from within. This is true in marriage as well. All dangers are relevant to husband-as-protector, but internal dangers are usually the most prevalent. When a husband is humble and self-aware enough to protect his wife from his expressions of harshness, his willingness and awareness to protect her from external dangers increases significantly.

Husband: Describe your track record in showing honor to women. _____

Physical Danger: While this is the rarest opportunity to protect, a wife should have no doubts that her husband would sacrifice his own safety and life if hers were in danger. This is usually a matter of character more than choice, because situational dangers rarely give advanced warning.

Relational Danger: Parents, children, employers, nor friends should be allowed to denigrate or manipulate a man’s wife without him engaging in a respectful but firm confrontation. While a wife may ask her husband not to speak in these circumstances, she should have every confidence that he would speak with self-control (I Tim. 3:3; 2 Tim. 2:24-26). A husband’s response in protecting his wife should not itself become a reason for her to fear.

Redemptive Safety: How a husband responds to his wife’s sin and non-moral failures is also part of his protective role. Shame and condemnation are not acceptable tools for a Christian husband to use. A wife should feel like she is interacting with Jesus when she talks to her husband. That is the whole point of Ephesians 5:25-33. When is this more relevant than when she fails?

“To love your wife when her failures cause you hurt, to cherish her at the very moment you believe that someone else could satisfy you more, is to be Christ to her (p. 56).” Bryan Chappell in *Each for the Other*

Atmosphere of Safety: A husband protects his family when he leads in establishing a positive, uplifting tone for his household. Protecting is about more than how we respond to danger or failure. Protection also includes creating an atmosphere of rest and encouragement that strengthens one’s family between times of danger or failure.

“The more I have thought about those three facets of headship—leadership, protection, and provision—the more it seems to me that they really resolve into one thing with two expressions. Leadership is the one thing, and protection and provision are the two expressions (p. 84).” John Piper in *This Momentary Marriage*

Examples of being the protector of the family:

- Being the example of saying “I was wrong. Will you forgive me?” to his family and modeling patient repentance.
- Being quick to forgive and evidencing a restored relationship when his family asks for forgiveness.
- Following through with his commitments to his wife to create an atmosphere of predictability and safety.
- Telling his wife what he likes about her to eliminate ways for insecurity to enter her thoughts and emotions.
- Honoring his wife often in public so that no one can assume dishonor is an acceptable response to his wife.

Conclusion

What summarizes these five headship responsibilities of a husband? Ephesians 5:25, “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” Servant-leading, shepherding, understanding, providing, and protecting are different angles of considering what it means to love your wife like Jesus loves the church.

“The primary resource God supplies for headship is sacrifice – ours and his (p. 68)... We lead most clearly, most effectively, most authoritatively, and most like Christ when we live most sacrificially... There the husband takes the lead in dying to self to fulfill Christ’s calling and reflect his glory. The head of the home is Christ’s representative to the family. Thus he orders his life with the understanding that the path of Christian leadership is always the way of the cross (p. 85).” Bryan Chappell in *Each for the Other*

“If authority is going to serve God’s purpose in our relationships, then we must anchor all of our understanding in the foundation that Jesus has laid: Authority exists for the benefit of those who live under it (p. 200).” Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*

The danger of discussing the role of a husband in terms of a job description is that it comes across as a to-do list instead of a person to-be. Remember, being a husband is not a skill set to master, but Christ-likeness to embrace. When we forget this we start keeping track of our “streak” of how long we’ve “been good.”

This leads to pride (“My streak is longer than my spouse’s streak”) or despair (“I’ll never be able to keep this up”). We are a good husband in the same way that we are a good Christian – moment by moment dependence upon Christ and His grace. The law (or, in this case, job description) is meant to remind us of our dependence upon Christ, not train us to be independent from Christ.

Husbands, you lead your family not only by what you do, but by whose strength you do it in.

Chapter 6

The Unique Aspects of a Wife’s Job Description Highly-Competent, Well-Suited Helper-Lover

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

- Both the husband (head) and wife (submitting) are playing “the Jesus role” in their marriage.
- A wife expresses as much strength in submitting to her husband as he does gracious wisdom in leading his family.
- The home a wife manages impacts more generations than anything a husband manages outside the home.
- The glory of a wife and the glory of husband are the same – the unique ways they reflect the character of Christ.

Memorize: Ephesians 5:22-24 (ESV), “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.” As you memorize this passage reflect upon these key points:

- “Submit” – Define this word in light of the passage instead of defining this passage by your response to this word.
- “To your own husbands” – This passage is not about the value of men-women, but functioning within a family.
- “As Christ is the head” – More women may embrace Christianity because they are made to be in the church-role.
- “As the church” – Read how Jesus’ sees and treats His church to understand God’s intention (Rev. 21).
- “In everything” – This does not apply to immoral actions and should not be frequently needed but is the standard.

Teaching Notes

“Modern Western readers immediately focus on (and often bristle at) the word ‘submit,’ because for us it touches the controversial issue of gender roles. But to start arguing about that is a mistake that will be fatal to any true grasp of Paul’s introductory point. He is declaring that everything he is about to say about marriage assumes that the parties are being filled with God’s Spirit. Only if you have learned to serve others by the power of the Holy Spirit will you have the power to face the challenges of marriage (p. 50-51).” Tim Keller in *The Meaning of Marriage*

“God did not make marriages with a cookie cutter, and the ways in which wives may support, complement, and complete their spouses are usually open to a lifetime of discovery. But the realization that Christ intends for each wife to represent him—to be his hands and heart—for her husband is the key discovery that revolutionizes women’s perceptions of their purposes in marriage (p. 105).” Bryan Chappell in *Each for the Other*

“We see that the submissive wife—far from being the weak-willed women our culture portrays—is actually a model of inner strength. By God’s grace, she has conquered this opposition within her own heart. It is actually weakness on display when a wife is not submissive; she is only caving in to her natural inclination to usurp authority and demand her own way. That doesn’t take any effort at all (p. 140).” Carolyn Mahaney in *Feminine Appeal*

“As women become more assertive in the marriage relationship, many men have become increasingly passive in their homes. Women then become less respectful of their husbands, and husbands in turn show less love to their wives (p. 167).” Dennis Rainey (editor) in *Preparing for Marriage*

“God’s will for every Christian wife is that her most important ministry be to her husband (p. 4)... She will also show respect on a daily basis when he is just an everyday, ordinary person. If your husband is in this category (as are most husbands), God wants you to be grateful for him and his ordinary job, looks, not-so-eloquent speaking ability, etc. (p. 110).” Martha Peace in *The Excellent Wife*

“We simply can’t have our cake and eat it, too. We can’t insist on running the show and then expect men to be proactive, take initiative, and be ‘spiritual leaders’... You must be willing to let him fail—believing that ultimately, your security is not in your husband but in a sovereign God who is not going to fail you (p. 154).” Nancy Leigh DeMoss in *Lies Women Believe*

Embedded Study

There is so much debate over what a wife is not, that it often feels like we’ve lost a passion for who a wife is. Our time is spent debating and defending instead of celebrating. We often talk about wives as if they were subjects instead of people – the Holy Spirit may be the only person who is treated comparably.

Being a wife is one of the most challenging roles in life. She is asked by God to respond to a fallen person as the church responds to Christ. Talk about a Mission Impossible-esque assignment (this notebook may self-destruct 15 seconds after you finish reading it). Beyond this, she is given the task of managing the organization that has served as the foundation for human civilization since the onset of time – the home. No organization impacts history and generations more than the family unit, yet she pulls off the task with no formal training beyond the consultation of her predecessors (Titus 2:3-5).

Let it be said clearly, there is nothing second class or junior varsity about being a wife. But still, what does it mean to be a wife? In this chapter we will look at the five key characteristics of a Christian wife. These are the gender-specific responsibilities for women that God adds to the gender-neutral responsibilities of marriage.

1. Well-Suited Helper
2. Submissive to Her Husband
3. Woman of Competence
4. Enthusiastic Lover
5. Overseer of Her Home

Before we examine what Scripture calls wives to do, take a moment to reflect on how you think about the role of wife. How would you define each of the following?

“Traditional” Wife: _____

Stereotypical Wife: _____

Wife Persona You Fear Being: _____

Ideal Wife: _____

Well-Suited Helper

Read Genesis 2:18. The first description of woman in Scripture describes her as “a helper.” The Hebrew word is stronger than our English word and can be more fully translated “well-suited helper.” This same word is frequently used about God (Psalm 10:14, 28:7, 54:3-4, 72:12, 86:17; John 14:26; Hebrews 13:6), so it cannot mean “having a lesser role” or “being of less importance.” It carries the meaning of “being on the same team” with “an essential role to play.” Man could not accomplish what God intended without woman. Both genders were necessary to fill the earth with God’s image and glory. Gender was essential for humanity to display the image of God-as-Trinity; there needed to be difference that could be bound in love—ultimately, husband-wife-child.

“The opposite of being a helper is being a competitor (p. 174).” Dennis Rainey (editor) in *Preparing for Marriage*

As a well-suited helper, a wife finds her purpose in what advances the best interest of her family. Her marriage and her family is her team, and she does not conceive of personal success in a way that is a detriment to them. In the same way that a husband is called to die to self in his servant-leadership, a wife is called to die to self in her well-suited helper role.

Is she called to help her husband or God? In marriage she is called to help her husband as they strive for God’s will. This is often where the helper role can become distorted. A wife may wrongly think it is her role to help God by molding her husband towards her will (i.e., ideal) for him. When this happens, “helping” hurts.

“When a wife is preoccupied with trying to correct her husband’s faults and flaws, she is taking responsibility God never intended her to have, and she will likely end up frustrated and resentful toward her husband and perhaps even toward God. She may also limit God from doing what He wants to do in changing her husband (p. 140).” Nancy Leigh DeMoss in *Lies Women Believe*

Is helping her husband all that a wife can/should do? No, but nothing that a wife does should take away from her ability to be a well-suited helper for her husband. Similarly, not one aspect of the husband’s job description should be all he does, but nothing he does outside his job description should detract from those primary roles that God assigns.

Who gets to decide what “helping” entails? Answering this question requires both spouses to fully embrace areas one through three of their job description. This “helping” requires a mature character, healthy friendship, and functional approach to life. There is no one-size-fits-all answer to this question. When couples try to answer this question without taking the rest of the job description seriously they experience the kind of stereotyping, abuses of authority, and confusion that can often make biblical teaching gender roles in marriage unpopular.

Examples of being a well-suited helper:

- Knowing your husband’s interests, dreams, fears, strengths, and weaknesses without idolizing or shaming them.
- Being trustworthy and dependable in the things you say and do.
- Expressing gratitude for your husband and the ways God blesses your family.
- Facing sacrifices and challenges without pouting, punishing, or becoming discontent.
- Avoiding the temptation to coerce your husband into decisions he does not believe are wise or timely.

Submissive to Her Husband

Read I Peter 3:1-7. If “helper” is an identity “submission” is the activity this identity produces. John Piper defines submission as, “The divine calling of a wife to honor and affirm her husband’s leadership and help carry it through according to her gifts (p. 80; *This Momentary Marriage*).” We see in this passage that submission is the God-ordained way for a wife to influence her husband. Rather than using sex (I Cor. 7:1-5) or beauty (v. 3), a wife is called to display a godly character (v. 4) and entrust herself to her husband (v. 1). This precious gift is to be seen by her husband (v. 2) and treated with the honor it deserves (v. 7). Scripture acknowledges that this is frightening (v. 6), but promises that as a wife entrusts herself to God in this way He will provide sufficient grace to face these fears.

“Satan knows that if we could see the Truth about biblical submission—one of the most liberating principles in all of God’s Word—we would joyfully embrace it. He cannot afford to let us choose the pathway of submission, for when we do, he is stripped of his authority and rendered powerless in our lives and in the lives of those we love (p. 146).” Nancy Leigh DeMoss in *Lies Women Believe*

From I Peter 3:1-6 John Piper identifies six things submission is not (p 99-101; *This Momentary Marriage*; bold text only).

1. **Submission does not mean agreeing with everything your husband says.** If a wife was required to agree with everything her husband said, this passage would be irrelevant. In this passage, Peter is affirming and encouraging women who chose Christianity even when their husband resisted the faith.
2. **Submission does not mean leaving your brain or your will at the wedding altar.** Peter calls on women to think – he wants them to discern when their husbands have “disobeyed the word.” This requires critical and independent thinking.
3. **Submission does not mean avoiding every effort to change a husband.** Peter gives counsel on the best and God-ordained way for women to change their husbands. The ultimate aim of the passage is that disobedient husbands would become God-honoring, Christ-like husbands.
4. **Submission does not mean putting the will of the husband before the will of Christ.** It is encouraging that Peter used the example of Sarah, the wife of Abraham. Peter commends her highly even though there are times when she expressed extreme absence of faith (laughing at God’s promises in Gen. 18:12) and advising adultery to try to coerce the fulfillment of God’s promises (Gen. 16). Sarah is an example of a godly wife, because she learned from these failures to keep Christ ahead of her husband; not because she never failed.
5. **Submission does not mean that a wife gets her personal, spiritual strength primarily through her husband.** Sarah put her hope in God (v. 5) and this is what gave her strength and calmed her fears (v. 6). She was able to submit to her husband because she was not relying on Abraham for what only God could do.
6. **Submission does not mean that a wife is to act out of fear.** Submission is not a code word for saying a wife should be perfect. Often both headship and submission are discussed in such idealistic language that the real, in-process people who fill these roles feel overwhelmed.

If submission is not these six things, then there will be times when wives are right and free to disagree with their husbands. Hopefully, the joint pursuit in areas one through three of the husband and wife job descriptions reduces the frequency of these interactions, but they will always be needed. John Piper provides four criteria which allow disagreement to be expressed within submission (p. 102; *This Momentary Marriage*; modified and adapted; bold text only).

1. **Husbands, unlike Christ, are fallible and ought to admit it.** Dissent should be invited by a Christian husband. A good leader wants to hear outside perspectives during the deliberation process of a decision. In the seminar “Decision Making” we will outline an approach to decision making that ensures there is a clearly defined and adequate time for this interaction whenever situations allow.
2. **Husbands ought to want their wives to be excited about family decisions.** The point of Christian leadership is not power or freedom but service and blessing. Unless forced by time constraints or other circumstantial variables, a decision for which there is not unity should be delayed.
3. **Communicate in a way that clearly endorses his leadership and affirms his role as head.** When speaking to her husband, submission affects the tone of communication more than the content. When speaking to others (i.e., parents, children, friends, etc...), submission affects tone and content. When a wife disagrees with her husband she should not use sarcasm, exaggeration, or frame her questions in a way that makes him seem foolish. If she strongly disagrees with her husband, it is wise for her to verbally affirm her support of him as she expresses her concern with his idea or choice.
4. **Be clear that when the conversation is finished you will defer to the decision your husband believes is best.** Submission is more than an attitude of respectful civility that should be expected between any two people. In the absence of an agreed upon way to decide differences, disagreements become battles, positions are phrased like biased political ads, and empathetic listening is competitive disadvantage. God’s design is that a husband, as servant-leader, has the responsibility to make decisions when there is marital gridlock. However, this should not be mistaken for God requiring a husband to always choose his own preference.

How far does “in everything” (Eph. 5:24) apply? This question was raised in a political debate when Michelle Bachmann, a female candidate for nomination for president and committed Christian who believes in submission was asked, “As president of the United States would you submit to your husband in this role?” The question was raised because in a public statement Mrs. Bachmann said she chose a career she was not interested in out of submission to her husband.

This question is instructive for helping us think through the extent of a wife’s submission to her husband. The following is a modified excerpt from a blog post on this subject from www.bradhambrick.com. It is included as a block quote because of the change to a first person, testimonial style of writing.

Disagree About Career Choice: I disagree with Michelle Bachmann’s application of submission to her husband in the choice to study tax law. In my opinion, this over extends the jurisdiction of submission. Choosing the field of work for one’s wife is not what it means for a husband to lead his family.

My wife has been a full-time teacher, tennis coach, full-time mother, part-time financial coach, and considered taking up refinishing antique furniture. The only role that submission has played in those decisions is in determining whether our family was in a position where those transitions were wise and feasible during that season of life. My role was to lead our family, not rule my wife.

Our initial conversations were about the priorities by which we wanted to guide our family (i.e., standard of living, how to educate our children, time we would have together as a couple, etc...) and the things my wife finds most fulfilling (i.e., skills, interests, life goals, etc...). Once we agreed on the priorities of our family, and I was aware of the things she found most fulfilling, our shared goal was to find the best possible match – submission was only relevant if we disagreed on the feasibility and timing of this type of decision.

Irrelevant to White House: The question about submission and the presidency was a bad question. It would be the equivalent of asking, “Would you obey the speed limit of a school zone while driving on the interstate?” Submission is a relational structure that applies to the husband-wife relationship and not outside that relationship.

When my wife was a teacher, we sometimes talked about the misbehavior of her students. Submission did not require that she utilize each of my classroom management suggestions. Once we made a family decision that her teaching was a good choice for our family, my role as her husband to her as a teacher became one of love and support, not leadership or oversight of her educational responsibilities.

The seminar "Decision Making" will contain more application of how headship and submission relate to major decisions and day-to-day living as a married couple. Hopefully, this example allows you to begin to see how each of the four areas in our job descriptions work together.

Examples of being submissive to her husband:

- Showing confidence in her husband's decisions and striving to make them succeed.
- Encouraging her husband, especially when his decisions fail or go differently than expected.
- Building loyalty and respect from their children towards her husband.
- Speaking words of dissent without casting doubt on her husband's role as leader.
- Unless asked to do something immoral, honoring her husband's requests and living within their agreements.

Woman of Competence

Read Proverbs 31. Scripture does more than value women (v. 10). It celebrates women's competence. In poetic affirmation, this passage spotlights women's ability to work hard (v. 13-15), make wise business decisions (v. 16, 18), be strong (v. 17), be generous (v. 20), anticipate the future (v. 21), make those around her better (v. 23), be brave (v. 25), be wise (v. 26), and be more than pretty face (v. 30). God's expects that those who know her should praise her for all that He has equipped her to do (v. 31). Scripture is clear: there is nothing a man does that she could not do; just as Jesus' submission to the Father does not make Him any less God, powerful, wise, or worthy of praise.

Is there anything, that because of her gender, you believe a woman should not do? _____

The only "yes" answers that Scripture gives to this question are headship roles in the church and family. Church and family are meant to mirror or proclaim God to the world. Therefore, these institutions are structured with a submission-amongst-equals style to imitate the Trinity. If we limit what women are "allowed" to do outside of these settings, then we are going beyond Scripture.

In your marriage, what are the wife's skills, passions, and ambitions that need to be celebrated and let loose? _____

Examples of being a woman of competence:

- Knowing and being confident in her abilities, spiritual gifts, and life dreams.
- Making decisions in her spheres of influence and in areas she has her husband's blessing within the home.
- Managing the family's resources with excellence as mutually agreed upon with her husband.
- Continuously seeking to use her life to advance God's kingdom and bless her family.

Enthusiastic Lover

Read Solomon 5:10-6:3, 7:9-13, 8:10, 14. It may be hard to believe this intensely romantic, highly aroused writing is in the Bible. Some find it even harder to read these to be the divinely inspired words of a wife to her husband. God wants a wife to be as passionate towards her husband as the church is for Christ.

Is this just about men "needing" sex? Read these passages again and see if that is what it sounds like. Does it seem like she is resigned to her "wifely duties"? Love is worth celebrating. God gave a unique celebration for marital, covenant love. Celebrating love is a way to honor the marriage.

But men do want sex more, right? Often, yes. Always, no. Stereotypes are not necessarily true for a given marriage and are not the essence of "biblical manhood" or "biblical womanhood." Scripture does seem to speak to the general weaknesses of men and women; calling us to remember the things we naturally forget – men to be understanding and women to be enthusiastic lovers. But Scripture never concedes to an aspect of fallen humanity that is not good. So we can rest in the fact that if Scripture prescribes something for marriage, it is God's design and good for both husband and wife.

Examples of being an enthusiastic lover:

- Verbally praise and affirm her husband.
- Keeping her inner and outer self healthy and attractive.
- Initiating and enjoying sex.
- Responding to his flirtation as she would to a complement.

Overseer of Her Home

Read Titus 2:3-5. Our difficulty in embracing this passage is often correlated with our valuing the workplace over home. We view one as important, the other as boring; one as valuable, the other as expendable. God’s call on both husband-fathers and wife-mothers necessitate a high view of home and family. When we realize that home is the most influential place in the world, we will view this responsibility as a high honor. When our family life reveals that we value outward success more than our families, we discredit what the Bible has to say about life (v. 5).

Does this mean a wife must not work outside the home? No. It means that what a wife does outside the home should not be viewed as more valuable or receive more energy than what she does inside the home. Proverbs 31 is clear about the ability and opportunities for women. Titus 2 is talking about the priorities that should govern our lives. The application of a wife as overseer of her home will vary based upon many factors but that does not mean it can be minimized or dismissed.

Does this refer to certain household chores or responsibilities? No. The Bible has no category for “women’s work” beyond bearing children. Just as a wife’s career does not violate the husband’s role as provider, a husband helping out around the house does not violate a wife’s role as overseer of her home.

What does it mean then? The passage references three things. First, wives should love their husbands well (v. 4). Based upon the tone of the passage, this references encouragement in his roles as servant-leader, provider, shepherd, and protector of the family. Second, wives should love their children well (v. 4). Generally, if a husband is serving as the primary provider, the wife will have more hours per week with the children. Her love—equal parts affection and discipline—will be a major shaping influence on their lives and set the tone for the home. Third, wives are to make the home a warm, orderly place (v. 5). There should be a sense of predictability about what the family will experience in the home because of the wife’s role. This has incredible value for the well-being of every family member, wife included.

Examples of being the overseer of her home:

- Making the home a safe and enjoyable place of refuge for every member of her family
- Being content with the family’s possessions and modeling contentment for the children
- Ensuring the possible systems are in place to provide predictability within the home
- Enforcing the family’s values and disciplining when needed as decided upon with her husband.

Conclusion

Both a husband and wife should be able to say, “What I do at home is the most important and satisfying part of my life.” Until we do, the sacrifices of being a Christ-like servant-leader and Christ-like submissive-helper will seem like a “raw deal.” Both husband and wife need to hear a warning against the empty promises of personal significance.

“Grasping for power or recognition is natural. Servanthood is supernatural. So many women are missing out on the supernatural today because they are caught up in the ‘search for significance.’ Ironically, the more they search for it, the less satisfied they feel. Why? Significance is found in giving your life away, not in selfishly trying to find personal happiness (p. 182).” Gary and Betsy Ricucci as quoted in *Sacred Marriage* by Gary Thomas

We will only find what God wants to give us in marriage when we want what God designed marriage to be – a place of mutual joy through mutual sacrifice as we live for something bigger than “me” and to celebrate something bigger than “we.” When we finally embrace this as the only way to find the joy we seek we will realize that Luke 9:23-24 really is the foundation of everything we ever wanted, “If anyone would come after [Jesus], let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.”

Appendix A

Dates from the Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage “Foundations” 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.

Dream Date

Preparation: Complete the “Future Dreams and Fears” exercise from chapter two. Give your sheet to your spouse 2-3 days before the actual date. Read over your spouse's sheet. Create a list of questions and a list of ways you can invest in his/her dreams.

Activity: Pick an activity or location that represents one of your dreams. It is best if the setting / activity is conducive to conversation. Example: If your dream is going back to school, go for a walk at a college campus. If your dream is to write book, get coffee at a bookstore. If your dream is to start a business, then plan a date in a place related to the type of business. If your dream is your first grandchild, then walk around a toy store.

During the date, take turns talking through your “Future Dreams and Fears” sheets. Ask your spouse the questions you wrote out beforehand. Listen well to your spouse's answers. Initially, don't get caught up in planning or logistics. Join the enthusiasm of your spouse for their dream. Share ways you thought you might invest in your spouse's dream.

Ending: This date should be ended with a time of prayer for one another's dreams and fears. If you can think of a special place that would make this prayer more memorable, go there. You might also consider whether there is a trinket you could purchase to symbolize your dream. Having a shadow box in your home that has trinkets from major events in your marriage and future dreams is a great way to reinforce your marriage story.

Follow Up: Keep your “Future Dreams and Fears” sheets and post them in a place you frequent (i.e., the bathroom mirror, where you have your quiet time, at the breakfast table, etc...). Use this as a reminder to pray for your spouse regularly and to show interest in your spouse by asking questions about these things.

Goal for Date: On this date, you want to capture the power of Matthew 6:21, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also,” to unify your marriage. Treasure does not have to be money. Treasure is merely those things we place the most value on which is always connected to our dreams and fears. By putting these on paper, talking openly about them, praying for them regularly, and following up with each other you will use the power of shared dreams and fears to knit your lives and stories together as a married couple.

Covenant Renewal Date

Preparation: Before the date, have your quiet time or personal Bible study in Ephesians 5:22-33. As a part of this time, review the charge, pledge, and vows from your marriage ceremony. If you don't have a copy from your wedding, use the samples provided in chapter three. Highlight the aspects that you realize you've begun to neglect with the passage of time.

Activity: Pick an activity that reminds you of your wedding and honeymoon (i.e., eating at a Mexican restaurant if you went to Mexico on your honeymoon). Flip through photos of your wedding and honeymoon. Find something that is an activity that reminds you of those memories. It is great to do this date around your anniversary.

During your date, talk about the stories and memories that came to mind as you reviewed pieces of the wedding and looked through the pictures. Reflect on what you thought life would be like and the actual path God has taken you on. Allow this part of the date to be fun and playful.

Ending: Go to a special place in your marriage (i.e., where you got engaged, the church where you were married, the place you first met, a place with a significant marker for your relationship, etc...). Have the husband reread aloud the charge and pledge. Then recite your vows to one another and re-place your wedding bands on each other's hand as you do. Afterwards, share the things you think you have neglected, and share how you plan to honor the marriage covenant by recommitting to them. End by praying together for the grace and strength to honor the marriage covenant “until death do you part.”

Follow Up: Create the habit of regularly holding up your hand to highlight your wedding band and saying, “I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine (Solomon 6:3).” Often, we only say, “I love you,” to our spouse in the same way we say it to our children or parents. This unique expression between husband and wife can affirm and remind you that there is something unique and extra to marital, covenant love.

If you're resistant only because you think this sounds cheesy, get over yourself (typed in love, with a smile) and remind your spouse of the covenant you made that is bigger than either of you.

Goal for Date: This date is to rescue marriage from the mundane. Anything we participate in regularly runs the risk of being viewed as “common.” This carries with it the strong temptation to neglect. We must remind ourselves not to view our marriage as “ordinary” and the rest of life as “exciting.” This date should impress upon you that marriage is “special” and “sacred” while everything else is just “the rest of life.”

Know Your Role Date

Preparation: Review your job description from chapter three. It should have notes on it from when you went through this study. Take some time to compare where you were then with where you are now. Where have you seen growth? Where have you seen regression? Look particularly at the “My Spouse's Desire” column in areas two and four.

Assess how you are doing in your God-given responsibilities in the ways that are most meaningful to your spouse. Pick one or two areas that will be your focal point for growth in the coming weeks.

Activity: Pick an activity that highlights an area you are striving to grow in that is special to your spouse. If you are a husband wanting to grow as “Shepherd of the Family,” you may go to a bookstore and pick out a marriage or family devotional with your wife. If you are a wife wanting to grow as “Well-Suited Helper,” you might plan a date around things you know would be encouraging for your husband.

Ending: End the date with an opportunity to talk; the setting doesn't need to have particular significance. The husband should lead by sharing his self-assessment of where he is, how he's grown, and areas of needed growth as a husband (using the job description). The husband should then invite his wife to share her thoughts on where he is, how he's grown, and areas of desired growth as a husband.

Then the wife should share her self-assessment and invite her husband's assessment. Based upon this conversation, both husband and wife should pick an area of growth to focus on and get input from their spouse about how this would be best accomplished.

Follow Up: Preferably, each spouse would share their growth goal with one or members of their small group. This prevents the spouse who would be blessed by this growth from the awkward position of also serving as accountability for this growth. It also allows the couple's marital enrichment to become “contagious” in their circle of Christian community.

Goal for Date: This date is about authentic vulnerability and encouragement. It creates an opportunity to assess how the marriage compares to God's ideal. Talking about areas of growth when it is not triggered by a negative event is very healthy for a marriage. Allowing a marital date to move you towards more authentic Christian community protects the marriage from carrying the burden of being the church for each of you.

Appendix B

Small Group Accountability Questions From the "Foundations" 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

- How are we letting the mundane-ness of everyday life lead us to neglect our marriages?
- What are we avoiding doing that would bless our marriages because it's hard or unnatural?
- With what are we being selfish that may be deteriorating our marriages?
- For what do we need to repent to our spouse but we are resisting?

Chapter 2

- Where have we seen the themes of the gospel in our marriages this week/month?
- What specifically are we praying for our spouses about this week/month?
- How have we invested time and energy into learning our spouse this week/month?
- When do we avoid being weak in front of our spouse and how is it affecting our marriages?

Chapter 3

- What little things have we begun to view as big things and how is it affecting our marriages?
- How have we viewed marriage as a 50-50% relationship instead of a 100-100% covenant?
- What aspect of covenant do we need to refocus upon: receive, leave, cleave, or being one flesh?
- What wedding vow (i.e., sickness and health, good time and bad, etc...) have we begun to neglect in our marriage?

Chapter 4

- Which of the fruit of the spirit are we neglecting and how it is affecting our marriages?
- Which of the New Testament one another commands are we neglecting and how is it affecting our marriages?
- What part of life do we not have a functional plan for and how is it affecting our marriages?

Chapter 5 and 6

- How have we done at playing the Christ-role (husband: servant-leader; wife: submissive) in our marriages?
- How are we doing at [pick one of the given gender specific functions of a husband/wife]?

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

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.