

# Building a Lasting Marriage

Restoring God's Design for Relationships

## LESSONS 1 - 3



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# Course Introduction

*Building a Lasting Marriage* is written to encourage you to follow God's design for your marriage, a design that was lovingly created by the God and Father who loves you and knows what is best for you. You can be sure that His plans are for your good and that He wants to bless you as you seek to obey Him.

Marriage is under attack today because many people in Western countries attempt to redefine it or to question its value as an institution of society. This course presents the view that, from the creation, marriage was instituted by God as the union of one man and one woman for a lifetime, and that its value is timeless because it serves as a reflection of God's love and commitment to His people.

Statistics indicate that many couples struggle to build a marriage that will last, that they lack understanding of God's blueprint for marriage, as well as instruction in the godly character that is essential to hold two people together as a couple in marriage. Perhaps you are very aware of the biblical teaching on marriage, but you may be encouraged by the examples of couples who have built a strong marriage and by practical suggestions of ways to apply what you know in the context of your own marriage.

Those who embark on such a study do so because they desire to pursue God's paths, even in the very personal area of marriage, where it is often difficult to admit that we struggle and that we need help. Regardless of the state of your marriage, there is hope. By the grace of God and with His help, we can rebuild a marriage that seems to be falling apart. If you are starting out as a married couple, this study can help you to begin on the right course, to build a marriage that will last for a lifetime. Whatever the state of your marriage, as you begin this study, may you feel God's pleasure as you pursue the goal you have set, the goal of building a stronger marriage that will ultimately bring honor and praise to His name.

## Course Description

This course seeks to provide a biblically based understanding of key subjects that are essential in the life of every believer who wants to build a strong marriage. One of the goals of participating in such a course is to develop a stronger, more intimate relationship with your spouse and to learn ways of relating to one another that are pleasing to God. In each lesson you will study biblical passages that deal with

marriage and gain helpful insights, as well as practical suggestions on how to apply biblical principles to your marriage.

The first lessons focus on the biblical teaching regarding marriage—looking at God’s design for marriage, the results of the fall on marriages, and ways of restoring God’s design. These lessons will look at the importance of making your marriage the primary focus of your love and allegiance, and explore some practical implications of that. They will examine what it means to be united to your spouse in a “one flesh” union and consider ways to build greater intimacy in your relationship.

Dealing with unfulfilled needs and expectations in marriage also will be considered, as well as biblical teaching on accepting your spouse. We will examine biblical teaching directed at both wives and husbands, and consider the practical applications of this teaching. We will also look at practical suggestions on improving your communication as a couple and consider how to deal with the conflicts that arise in every marriage. Lesson 8 will focus on three anchors that are essential to making marriage last for a lifetime.

Two final lessons address key issues common to many people. The topic of singleness is considered in Lesson 9. The advantages of remaining single are discussed, along with practical counsel for living as a single person. This lesson may also be helpful to those who are considering whether to marry. Lesson 10 looks at the topic of living in an unequal partnership with an unbeliever and gives practical counsel and encouragement to those in this situation.

### **Contributions to Developing Character**

This course is really about Christian character: about putting into practice the things you say you believe, as you interact on a daily basis with your spouse, who sees you at your best and at your worst. Each lesson in this course includes questions to encourage you to examine your life as you reflect on God’s Word, to make godly choices, and to consider ways in which you honor or dishonor God by your actions and attitudes toward your mate. Christian character is an outworking of your relationship with Christ, and this course encourages you to grow closer to Him and to deepen your dependence on Him, which will have its outworking in your relationships.

### **Contributions to Servant Leadership**

*Building a Lasting Marriage* calls you to a closer relationship with Jesus Christ and to a life of relationship with your spouse that reflects that relationship with Christ. The focus is on loving and serving your spouse, as Christ loved and served the church, with a sacrificial love that is other-focused rather than self-focused. As you grow in Christlike character, the result will be an increasing desire to serve others; and this kind of servant leadership must begin at home.



## Contributions to Developing Relationships

This course also encourages you to think about the importance of your marriage and to take steps to strengthen and build your relationship with your spouse, recognizing that your marriage is a picture of Christ's relationship to the Church, the people He chose for Himself.

Practical teaching is provided in the area of developing your relationship with your spouse, as well as in opportunities to reflect on your own behavior and attitudes and to interact with your mate. Personal Reflections are designed to encourage you to consider the effects of your choices and behavior on your spouse and on your relationship, and to develop in the areas of loving and serving your spouse. Specific skills are presented in some areas, such as communication and conflict resolution, to help you grow in these areas.

## Course Objectives

When you have completed this course, you will be able to:

1. Experience a renewed desire to build your relationship with your spouse, relying on God to help you to love and serve your mate.
2. Explain the biblical teaching on Christian marriage, the results of the fall on Christian marriage, and the hope of restoring God's design for Christian marriages.
3. Discuss the implications of focusing your primary love and loyalty on your spouse and the consequences of failing to do so.
4. Outline a plan to build greater intimacy in your marriage by applying biblical teaching to your situation.
5. Evaluate your improvement in communication and listening skills and in exercising greater self-control in conflict situations.
6. Explain the biblical definitions of love, forbearance, and forgiveness.
7. Evaluate how you have grown in Christian character during your time of studying these lessons.
8. Explain the biblical teaching on singleness and on marriage to an unbeliever, and some positive ways of responding to these situations.

## Course Outline

Lesson 1: Understanding God's Design for Marriage

Lesson 2: Love and Loyalty—Our Focus

Lesson 3: Two Shall Become One

Lesson 4: Reflecting Christ and the Church—The Roles of Husband and Wife

Lesson 5: Expectations and Acceptance

Lesson 6: Communication—The Key to Intimacy

Lesson 7: Dealing with Conflict

Lesson 8: Anchoring Your Marriage

Lesson 9: The Gift of Singleness

Lesson 10: Living in an Unequal Partnership

### **Contributions to the Total Curriculum**

*Building a Lasting Marriage* is planned to enhance and build on the foundational courses of the Entrust curriculum, courses that are designed to train leaders in key areas essential for Christian maturity and ministry. The course presents biblical teaching and the opportunity to grow in relational skills, and it suggests practical applications that are essential for every Christian who seeks to honor God in marriage. Married life can never be separated from a life of service to God. You cannot neglect those to whom you have committed yourself for a lifetime and at the same time please God in your ministry. All of life is sacred, and God wants to use marriage to reflect His glory to the world around us, a world that is sadly in need of models of godly Christian families.

This course will enable you to become more competent in the areas of leadership and discipling. You will gain skills in communication and conflict resolution that are essential for discipling and leading others.

### **Student Instructions**

In order to benefit most from your study of this material, you should plan to work through the lessons in the order they are presented. In other words, you are encouraged to work through the course systematically rather than choosing a topic in the middle of the course as a place to begin.

Before you begin Lesson 1, we suggest you acquire a notebook. This will become your *Life and Ministry Notebook* for recording a variety of insights for your own life and for ministering to others. You will use this notebook to write your responses to Assignments and other questions in the lessons. It is also a place where you can record your thoughts from the Personal Reflections, as well as any questions or problems you encounter in the course.

You should allow yourself a minimum of two to three hours of study time to complete each lesson. This will include doing the required reading and completing the Assignments and Personal Reflections.

## Course Design

The course objectives listed above summarize the most important things you will learn as you do the lessons. Study these objectives carefully and refer to them periodically as you work your way through the course.

Since most individuals taking this course are extremely busy people, we have designed each lesson with clearly defined steps for easy reference. Also, if you study the Course Objectives and Lesson Objectives, you will know from the start on which topics to spend the most time.

## Lesson Design

Several standard components are built into each lesson to facilitate your study and develop your skills and character. They are explained below so that you may recognize and use them to full advantage:

1. **Lesson Objectives** are provided to help you identify the most crucial parts of each lesson. They guide you in the effective use of your study time and will be used by your group leader for class discussion.
2. **Lesson Outlines** provide an overview of the sections of each lesson. In this way you can anticipate the flow and sequence of the various topics to be covered before you begin your study.
3. **Repetition and review** are woven into the course to help you learn new concepts.
4. **Assignments** offer you the opportunity to interact with the material being covered. Whenever you see this icon, stop and record what is required in your *Life and Ministry Notebook*.
5. **Personal Reflections** stimulate you to think more deeply about material covered and about life and ministry. These are an important part of your growth. Paul says we are “transformed by the renewing of our mind” (Rom 12:2). Whenever you see this icon, please respond to the Personal Reflections. Recording your thoughts in a notebook can be a valuable way of seeing how God is at work in changing the way you think.
6. **Adorations** arise from the lesson content related to the Person and work of God. They encourage you to respond to what God is saying to you as you study, to thank Him and to praise Him. Whenever you see this icon, pause from your study to respond to God.
7. **Appendices** offer resources and useful reference materials that may be of benefit to you both in the course and in your marriage. These are placed at the end of the workbook.

## Materials Needed

To work through this course, you will need a **Bible**, a copy of this **workbook**, and your **Life and Ministry Notebook** for all written work. Unless otherwise noted, all the Scripture references and Scripture quotations in this workbook are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB).

## Icons



**Assignment:** a question or study that focuses on course content. Written responses are required and are to be recorded in your *Life and Ministry Notebook*.



**Personal Reflection:** an instruction to reflect on scriptural truths or character traits or both as they relate to one's walk with God. The focus is on personal application. A written response may be requested.



**Adoration:** an instruction to worship the Lord with reference to course content. The focus is on God. No written response is required.

## **Understanding God’s Design for Marriage**

Nick and Maria have been married for seven years, but they are disappointed in their marriage. They were expecting to grow in their love for each other and to experience increasing closeness in their relationship, but that has not happened. Instead, they sense a growing distance between them. With two small children, their lives revolve around responsibilities at home and at work. Nick’s temper often flares when he is tired, and Maria has become increasingly critical of him, pointing out his mistakes and shortcomings. They wonder if they made a mistake in getting married, and both have asked themselves if life would be better if they divorced.

### **Lesson Outline**

- A Perfect World—Shattered
- The Broken Template
- Recognizing Our Sinful Patterns
- Restoring God’s Design
  - God’s Purposes for Marriage
  - The Deeper Significance of Marriage
  - The Permanence of Marriage
- God’s Design under Attack
- The Big Question

### **Lesson Objectives**

When you have completed this lesson, you will be able to:

1. Explain God’s design for marriage, including His purposes for marriage and the deeper significance of marriage.
2. Describe the ways in which the fall of Adam and Eve affected relationships in marriage.

3. Enumerate some of the ways in which God's design is under attack in modern society.
4. Evaluate your life in terms of the sinful patterns you have brought into your own marriage.
5. Assess your willingness to apply the truths in this lesson and to set a priority on restoring God's design in your own marriage.

### **A Perfect World—Shattered**

“In the beginning God created . . .” The wonderful works of God's creation are on display for us to admire every day—light and darkness, oceans and skies, the incredible diversity of the plant and animal kingdom. As God created the plants, the sun, moon, and stars, the swarms of living creatures on land and in the sea, He looked upon His created work and saw that it was good.

But the crowning work of God's creation was yet to come. In Genesis 2 we read that God created the first man out of the dust of the ground and breathed the breath of life into him. God then took the man and placed him in the Garden of Eden to care for it. Adam was given an ideal place to live and meaningful work—authority and responsibility to care for the earth, for every living creature that God had created on land and in the sea. His life lay before him, and it was perfect. There was just one thing missing. Adam was alone, and God saw that it was not good for him to be alone.

In Genesis 2 we read that God gave Adam the job of naming all the living creatures. As He paraded the animals before Adam, Adam observed that every other creature had a mate, but there was no companion for Adam. God then lovingly provided the life partner that Adam was missing. While Adam slept, God took one of his ribs and created a woman from Adam's own body, a being perfectly suited to him. Like a father bringing his daughter to her betrothed husband, God brought the woman to Adam when he awoke. We sense Adam's excitement and pleasure in his reaction to the perfect, delightful, wonderful creature that came from his own body. God's provision was perfectly designed to complement Adam. Creation was complete with this final act of forming the first man and first woman. Genesis 1:27 says, “God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”

In creating the woman, God said that He would give Adam a “helper suitable” for him. The word “suitable” means “corresponding (to him),” or “appropriate (to him).” Adam's life partner would complement him physically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually. After describing the creation of the woman, Moses, under divine

inspiration, added this commentary in Genesis 2:24, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.”

From the beginning of creation, marriage was a significant part of God’s design—a design that fit His purposes, and a design that brought blessing and satisfaction to the beloved man and woman created in His own image. Like all that He had created, God’s design for marriage was perfect, delightful, and fulfilling, with no shadow of disappointment on the horizon. Adam and Eve would work together as a team, caring for the plants and animals, and caring for one another, expressing their love to God and living in close relationship with Him.

For a time Adam and Eve enjoyed the perfect marriage; they were two whole, complete, loving, perfect beings who would share the work and the wonder of Eden. They were able to love, able to give, able to be completely open with one another. They were safe and secure with God and each other. Their needs, physical and emotional, were fully provided. They were naked, not just physically, but emotionally and spiritually, completely open to one another. There were no barriers in their relationship. They experienced no misunderstandings, no mistrust, no competition, no power struggles, no guilt, no vengeance, no harsh words, no fear, no need to hide.

Sadly, Adam and Eve did not live happily ever after in this state of bliss. If they had, you would not be studying this course! Their story did not have a happy ending. Satan approached the woman, in the form of a serpent, and tempted her to eat the fruit of the one forbidden tree that God had placed in the Garden. Eve’s first mistake was listening to Satan; then, she engaged in conversation with him. He planted doubt in her mind regarding what God had said and twisted God’s words to make it sound as if God was withholding something good from her. The fruit looked delicious and beautiful, and the serpent told her it would make her as wise as God. Believing Satan’s lies, she reached out, took the fruit and ate it. Adam, too, disobeyed and ate of the forbidden fruit. This disobedience we call the fall.

At that moment in time, all of life changed. In choosing to disobey God, Adam and Eve declared their independence from Him. They turned away from the perfect life that God had offered them. Their relationship with Him was broken, and their relationship to one another was also broken. Immediate barriers were erected between them.



Every day in human history—and every person who has ever lived—has been deeply affected by that day, by that choice. God’s perfect plan for uniting man and woman as one flesh has also been affected. The two human beings who now come together in marriage are deeply flawed. Immediately after the fall, we see the change.



Read Genesis 3:6-24.

1. Whom did Adam blame for what had happened? Whom did Eve blame?
2. What patterns began immediately?
3. What consequences did Adam and Eve face as a result of sin?
4. How do these consequences affect marriages today?

Adam and Eve faced some immediate consequences, such as having to leave the beautiful garden home they had enjoyed, never to return. There were also internal consequences; their very nature changed. While they did not physically die until some years later, they died spiritually. In the Genesis account we can see evidence that this change took place immediately: They became selfish, began to put their own needs first, and started to criticize one another. They no longer had mutual respect and trust for one another. Earlier they were both naked and unashamed, knowing that they were completely accepted by the other. Now their nakedness brought shame and the end of openness and honesty in their relationship. They tried to clothe themselves in an effort to cover their nakedness. We see the origin of self-centered behavior—hypocrisy and self-justification.

Other long-range consequences were also soon obvious. Imagine their sorrow when the first child born to them after their disobedience became a murderer, killing their beloved second son, Abel. In a moment of hatred and jealousy, these first parents lost two sons. Sin altered everything in their world. Jealousy, hatred, strife, rage, murder, self-centeredness, anger, shame, hiding, lying, denying—all these



entered the ideal world God had created. There were no longer any pure motives. The world was ravaged by sin. The resulting scars would affect every generation to come.

When you receive an invitation to a wedding, you think of the joyful celebration that takes place as two individuals commit themselves to one another for a lifetime. You think of the potential for a couple to grow together, love, share and give to each other. Yet the reality is that there will be no perfect marriage characterized by total oneness such as God designed in the beginning of creation. Once they are married, couples are often surprised because the intimacy and sharing they had hoped for in marriage is limited or even absent. They are disappointed that their inner needs are not met by their partner.

Ever since the day of Adam and Eve's choice, God's perfect plan for marriage has been deeply etched with pain brought about by sinful behavior. We will never experience the ideal marriage Adam and Eve knew before the fall because the man and woman who enter into marriage are each deeply flawed human beings. Something is wrong inside us that affects the way we relate to one another. Sin has distorted the way we think, the way we feel, the way we act.

### **The Broken Template**

The Genesis account explains that God's design for marriage was deeply affected by the fall. The perfect template for marriage was broken by the first husband and wife. Since that day, every person born into the world is born into a family that is tainted by sin. There are no perfect parents. Whether or not our parents are Christians, all families experience the taint of sin. "We are all products of parents who were sinners, just as our children will be. We must realize that imperfect parents always cause some degree of pain to their children. The baton that is passed from one generation to the next is always at least a little disfigured, a little scarred."<sup>1</sup> The broken template will be reflected in every marriage. Often we carry the same patterns we experienced as children into our marriage, or we go to the opposite extreme.

Barbara's parents argued frequently, raising their voices and using name-calling and swearing. Barbara learned early to keep her feelings to herself, lest she find herself the object of her parents' anger. As an adult she finds it difficult to express any emotions, and she withdraws and avoids all conflict. These habits have created distance in her relationship with her husband.

James comes from a home where his mother was highly controlling. His father tried to keep the peace in their home by saying little. As an adult, James finds himself seeking to control his wife in inappropriate ways, by shouting, demanding, and even resorting on occasion to violence. These patterns have not brought about a close relationship but have created mistrust and disrespect in their family.

Many of us move into marriage without giving much thought to what we have learned about it from our own family. What have we seen modeled? Were our role models positive or negative? How did those models affect us?

We each have been influenced by the home we grew up in—our attitudes, values, behavior, and ways of communicating have all been affected by our upbringing. Children who grow up in a home where their parents have a strong relationship generally have a greater sense of security and a better role model to follow when they marry, but there will still be some sinful patterns that they have not dealt with. If you grew up in a home with only one parent, there will be some distinct gaps in your experience since you have not seen two adults interacting, dealing with conflict, and working through problems.

Our parents' model often greatly influences our thoughts about marriage, and even our expectations of what marriage will be like. "After marriage we tend to act married in the way we saw marriage lived out."<sup>2</sup> Considering the influences of our home-life while growing up can be helpful in leading us to recognize our own sinful patterns. If you are contemplating marriage, it is important to realize the effect that your own home has had on shaping you, and the effect your future spouse's family has had in shaping him or her.

Some of us grew up in homes where our parents were good role models. We grew up in a loving, responsible family, and we saw what it looks like to care for others, to give sacrificially, to reach out, to nurture and encourage, to speak kindly and tactfully. Families like this are striving to live according to God's design for marriage. Yet even those who grow up in caring Christian families will bring sinful patterns to marriage. All families struggle with the heritage of sin; we make selfish choices; we are not mature in some areas. In the end, we are focused on getting what we want.

Many people come from homes where they have not experienced a loving father or mother or learned to care for others and treat them with kindness. Many people also come to marriage looking for someone to make them whole, to fill in the gaps that they experienced as a child. Some people come to marriage looking primarily to receive, rather than to give to someone else. When we have not experienced a loving family, we will likely bring destructive patterns to our marriage.



Write down your thoughts on the following questions:

1. How did your parents reflect God's design for marriage?
2. Were they warm and nurturing, providing order and discipline?
3. What aspects of your parents' relationship do you respect or admire?
4. Have you thanked them?



1. In what ways did your parents reflect the broken template? Were they too busy, absent, or too rigid?
2. What characteristics of your parents' relationship would you want to avoid?
3. Have you forgiven your parents for hurts you experienced because of their fallen nature?



1. What patterns do you have that are similar to your parents' patterns?
2. What patterns do you have that are different from the ones you saw growing up?
3. In what ways would it be helpful to get to know your partner's parents and family before you marry?
4. How could you learn the ways this family relates to each other?

We may not make the same mistakes our parents made, but we can be sure we will make mistakes of our own—in our marriage and in our child rearing. Even with our best efforts to do things right, we will find that our sin nature continues to influence us.

### **Recognizing Our Sinful Patterns**

As a result of sin's entrance into the world, every man and woman is born with a sin nature, a tendency to sin. In addition to that, we each choose to sin. Not only do we grow up in families affected by sin, but from the time we are children, we begin to develop our own sinful habits and patterns. Left to ourselves, we will take these sinful patterns into marriage. As a result, we will come to marriage with gaps, with holes, with areas where we are immature, selfish, or needy.

These sinful patterns will hurt and possibly even destroy our marriages, unless we are willing to allow God to change us and to restore us to live in dependence on Him.

The first step in curbing sinful patterns in your life is recognizing them. Strategies and techniques to improve your marriage will not help unless you see your own sinful patterns, have a desire to change, and rely on God's power to help.



1. If you are married, what negative patterns or habits do you think you may have brought to your own marriage?
2. How have these habits affected your marriage?
3. Consider Adam and Eve's responses to one another after the fall. How do habits of blaming, shaming, lying, self-justification, or hypocrisy appear in your marriage?
4. How can God help you to change some of your negative patterns?



1. If you are not married, what negative patterns have you observed in other people's marriages?
2. Are any of these negative patterns cultural in origin?
3. How could you counsel couples to change these patterns?



Are you willing to let go of these sinful habits in order to see change and growth in your relationships? If not, consider why you might be choosing to hold on to these habits.

### Restoring God's Design

We were created by a perfect God to live a perfect life, in harmony with our Creator, with others, and with nature. That basic truth may explain the deep longings we have for a perfect world. One of those longings is the longing for close, intimate relationship.



1. What do you long for in marriage?
2. What do you think would bring you the greatest joy in marriage?
3. Write down some of your thoughts.

Common answers to the questions in Assignment 7 include a desire to be loved and to love, to be accepted and understood, to belong, to make a valuable contribution

to someone in life, to have children. Most of us have a desire for a close, intimate relationship with someone who will love and accept us as we are. Not only do we long for relationship, we cannot thrive without it. Studies show that infants deprived of loving nurturing and touch will become handicapped or even die, even though all their basic physical needs are met. Even as adults, when we feel unloved, when no one cares enough to attend to our needs, we wither on the inside.

The things we long for are good things, things that God created us to enjoy: love, trust, security, purpose, closeness, tenderness. Yet as the Genesis account explained, we are a fallen people, prone to sin and selfishness. We need to be rescued from ourselves. As a sinful person, is there any hope of creating a whole and healthy relationship with another person?

The good news of the gospel makes it possible. God sent a Savior to set us free from sin. Change has been made possible by Jesus Christ, who died on the cross to bear the penalty of our sin, so that we can be restored to a relationship with God. We can be reconciled to God through Christ, as we trust Him as Savior and receive His offer of forgiveness. The relationship with God that was broken can be restored because God has made a way for us to come to Him. Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me” (Jn 14:6). In John 1:12 we read, “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become the children of God, even to those who believed in His Name.”

Not only can we be reconciled to God, we can be reconciled to one another. God has given us the power to love with His love, and He has given grace to transform us. Though our sinful habits are deeply rooted, and we are essentially selfish people, we are given the power to change. The Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead lives in us and sets us free from bondage to our old sinful patterns (Rom 8:1-11). If the Holy Spirit is powerful enough to raise Jesus from the dead, He is powerful enough to change us and to show us how to love our spouses.

As we see our sinful patterns and their consequences, as we desire to change, and as we rely on the Holy Spirit to help us, our marriages can become places of safety, trust, and love.

God is the One who designed us and who designed marriage. As a result of the fall, we are deeply flawed, yet God did not articulate a new plan to take the place of His original plan for marriage. He created us for relationship with Him and with one another, and He created the partnership of marriage as the primary way of fulfilling our need for relationship.

While the fall changed the marital relationship forever, God’s ideal for marriage as articulated in Genesis 1-2 nonetheless continued to set the standard for the responsibilities and roles of husbands and wives toward each other in the subsequent history of humanity.<sup>3</sup>

God has given us the design, and He has given us a guidebook to help as we build a relationship together. What is wrong with us cannot be fixed unless we are willing to do it God's way. If we are willing to trust that our Creator knows what is best for us, there is hope to build and restore our relationships.



Take time to thank God for His wonderful provision of the partnership of marriage, and for making it possible through Christ for you to experience His restored design in your own marriage.

As we explore God's design for marriage and commit ourselves to following the guidelines He has set out for us, we come closer to the image of God and to restoring the original design for marriage. The next section looks at that design.

### **God's Purposes for Marriage**

Why did God design marriage? What purposes does it serve? In the first two chapters of Genesis we find several reasons for the creation of this special marriage relationship between a man and a woman. The first purpose is found in Genesis 1:26-27.



Read Genesis 1:26-27. What purposes for marriage do you see in these verses?

This passage says that God made man in His own image. By the use of plural pronouns, Genesis 1:26 suggests that God is relational: "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness." Communion and relationship exist between the Persons of the Godhead. One aspect of being in God's image is the desire and ability to relate to others. As the Persons of the Trinity have a relationship with one another, so humans created in God's image were designed to desire and to enjoy relationships with others.

After God created man, He recognized that because of the way man was designed, it was not good for him to be alone (Gen 2:18). Man's need for relationship was part of his design. God therefore fulfilled this need by making a helper suitable to him, woman.



Read Genesis 1:28 and 2:18, 21-24. What other purposes for marriage do you find in these passages?

God's design for marriage is that it reflect His image through the most intimate of human relationships, that it provide the means for the propagation of the human race, and that marriage provide a complementary, permanent companion for life.

Marriage is the most intimate of all human relationships, uniting a man and a woman in a bond that God calls "one flesh." What does it mean for man and woman to become "one flesh"? "While 'one flesh' suggests sexual intercourse and normally procreation, at its very heart the concept entails the establishment of a new kinship relationship between two previously unrelated individuals by the most intimate of human bonds."<sup>4</sup>

### The Deeper Significance of Marriage

Marriage has been defined as the union of two people for a lifetime. This in itself is a beautiful and meaningful definition, yet the Bible declares that there is even greater significance and value in marriage.



Read Ephesians 5:22-33. What significance does this passage give to marriage?

The New Testament reveals a greater significance in God's design for marriage. Marriage is a sacred covenant before God between two people who pledge their love and loyalty to one another, a covenant that reflects Christ's covenant to the church. Marriage is thus a picture of God's covenant commitments to His people; and His commitments are permanent.

Marriage points to Christ's covenant with the church. Christ is described as a bridegroom coming for His bride. He paid for His bride with His own blood and formed an indissoluble union with her. He loves her with an everlasting love and forgives her sins completely. He promises to never leave or forsake His bride, to protect and provide for her. Ultimately, marriage exists to bring glory and honor to God by presenting a picture of Christ and His church. "Marriage exists to display the merciful covenant-keeping love of Christ and the faithfulness of His bride."<sup>5</sup>

Seen in this light, it is clear that divorce and adultery misrepresent Christ's covenant love for the church, since Christ never breaks His covenant with His people even when they are unfaithful to Him.<sup>6</sup> Divorce therefore denies the ultimate

significance of marriage and reflects a false picture of God. God’s design for marriage is for two people to be bound by a covenant to be faithful to their spouse for a lifetime and to live out a life of love, forgiveness, and grace in the closest possible relationship in the human sphere.

“Staying married, therefore, is not mainly about staying in love. It is about keeping covenant,” says pastor and author John Piper.<sup>7</sup> Rather than giving up on our marriages, God wants us to reflect Jesus Christ in our firm commitment to each other and in the way we treat each other.



If marriage is a picture of Christ and the church, what kind of picture is your marriage displaying?

How can we reflect Jesus Christ to our spouses, given the extent of the damage resulting from the fall? The answer to this question is suggested as early as Genesis 3:21, where we read that God made clothes to cover the nakedness of Adam and Eve. Piper reflects on this act:

Negatively, he (God) is saying: You are not what you were, and you are not what you ought to be. The chasm between what you are and what you ought to be is huge. Covering yourself with clothing is a right response to this—not to conceal it, but to confess it. Henceforth, you shall wear clothing, not to conceal that you are not what you should be, but to confess that you are not what you should be.<sup>8</sup>

When God clothed Adam and Eve with animal skins, it was “not only a witness to the glory we lost and a confession that we are not what we should be, but it is also a testimony that God Himself would one day make us what we should be.”<sup>9</sup> He would cover our shame and clothe us with the perfect righteousness of Christ. Our clothing is thus not only a picture of our past and present failure but of the reality of Christ’s saving work for us and our future glory.<sup>10</sup>

Although we are deeply flawed by sin, God has provided a covering for us, the blood of Jesus Christ His Son.



Read Romans 3:21-26 and 2 Corinthians 5:21. What do you learn from these passages about righteousness?

God transfers the righteousness of His Son to those who believe in Him as Savior. In other words, God declares that the believer is righteous in His sight.



God not only gives every believer the righteousness of Christ, He gives every believer the power of the Holy Spirit within to make it possible to overcome the power of sin. Through the Holy Spirit in us God makes it possible to love, to give, to sacrifice ourselves for the good of others. When we learn to live and love following the example of Christ, others begin to see Christ in us.

Even when relationships have been badly damaged, we can rebuild the broken walls, restore the broken relationships, and renew our love for one another.



Read Philippians 4:13 and 2 Peter 1:3-4. What resources does the Christian have for living the Christian life?

If we are followers of Jesus Christ, we cannot excuse ourselves on the basis of lack of resources, for God has given us what we need to act in love and kindness toward our spouses. We have to be willing to make a commitment to do all that God calls us to do to treat our spouses in loving ways and rely on Him to give us what we need: strength, courage, love, comfort, understanding, forgiveness, and hope.

If you commit yourself to your spouse for a lifetime and seek to reflect God's covenant love in your marriage, you will see God at work, changing you, making you more like Christ. It will require humbling yourself repeatedly. It will require reminding yourself that as you seek to love and serve your spouse, you are seeking to please God. It will require deep dependence on God. Ultimately, this choice will bring honor to God and reflect His faithfulness. "God gets glory when two very different and very imperfect people forge a life of faithfulness in the furnace of affliction by relying on Christ."<sup>11</sup>



What thoughts were new to you in this section on the significance of marriage? How has your thinking been challenged?

### **The Permanence of Marriage**

Marriage is intended to be a permanent commitment that mirrors the commitment of God to His people. Both partners make a solemn promise or pledge, before God and to their marriage partner, to be faithful for a lifetime. Even admitting the possibility of divorce will hinder efforts to build a good marriage.



Read Genesis 1:27 and 2:23-24.

1. Summarize what these passages say.
2. Explain what Jesus added to the Genesis account in Matthew 19:3-6 and Mark 10:2-12.

Notice that Jesus attributes the words of Moses to God, “Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?’” Jesus affirmed the permanence of marriage, adding the words, “What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.” He considered marriage a sacred and permanent bond between a man and a woman who have been united by God Himself.

During Jesus’ time, divorce had become a common practice in Israel. And although the seventh commandment said, “You shall not commit adultery,” adultery was also common. The Pharisees had come to Jesus with a question about divorce, with the purpose of testing Jesus. Their question reflected the popular arguments of the day regarding the occasions when it might be lawful for a man to divorce his wife. Moses gave regulations for the practice of divorce, limiting the causes to uncleanness and indecency or immorality (see Deut 24:1-4). Moses referred to cases of incest, harlotry, or habitual sexual promiscuity. The Jewish rabbis in Jesus’ day twisted the word “uncleanness” to mean any minor fault. If a wife burned the soup or failed to please her husband in any small way, it might be considered grounds for divorce, according to these false teachers.

In His reply, Jesus returned to the original design for marriage described in the Genesis account. Using the words, “what God has joined together,” Jesus indicated that God Himself has joined a husband and wife. From His viewpoint, marriage is an indissoluble divine union not to be annulled by any human agency. Death should be the only means by which this union is broken.

In many cultures divorce has become common, and people assume that it is reasonable to end a marriage that does not seem to be working well. Yet God says that He hates divorce (Mal 2:15-16). What makes divorce so terrible in God’s eyes is not only that it involves breaking the covenant between a man and a woman, but it involves misrepresenting Christ and His covenant to all believers. The church is the bride of Christ, and Christ will never leave His wife. He will always keep His covenant with us; He is faithful even when we are faithless. When we keep our covenant pledge to our spouses, we portray this truth about Jesus Christ to the world around us.

## God's Design under Attack

The Creator's design for marriage states that "A man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." Marriage was designed to be a covenant relationship between one man and one woman. This is clearly the only possible definition of marriage, as the man and woman were commanded to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Gen 1:28). Same-sex intercourse cannot possibly lead to bearing children. Even the animals were created male and female, each after its kind (Gen 1:21, 24-25).

Marriage was also designed as an exclusive relationship. For this reason, Jesus treated sexual immorality by a married person (Matt 19:9), including even lustful thoughts (Matt 5:27-30), as a serious breach. For this reason, too, premarital sex is illegitimate, since it violates the exclusive nature of one's future marriage. Some of these ideas are labeled harsh, unrealistic, or old-fashioned, yet they are God's thoughts, expressed with His concern for your well-being. Many people think that love and judgment are mutually exclusive, that if you love people you will never say anything that will make them uncomfortable. Yet Jesus did not hesitate to speak out against sin. In His great love for people He wanted them to know the truths that would set them free to live in obedience to God and in loving relationship with one another.

Jesus affirmed God's design for marriage to be a lifelong, monogamous relationship, a sacred bond between a man and a woman. With the prevalence of divorce today, you might well ask, "Does God's design still work? Is it outdated? Are there other options for lifestyles?"

When you look at the history of God's people in the Old Testament, you immediately see that God's ideal of marriage was often perverted by sin. Practices such as polygamy, adultery, homosexuality, and divorce began within just a few generations of the fall.

The seventh commandment forbids adultery (Exod 20:14), and under Jewish law premarital sex was also either punishable by death or the couple was expected to marry (see Deut 22:23-29; Exod 22:16). Polygamy was a departure from God's plan that led to jealousy, favoritism, and competition. You see the effects of this sin in the polygamous marriages of Jacob (Gen 29:30-34; 30:14-16) and Elkanah (1 Sam 1:4-8).

Israel's kings were commanded not to take many wives, lest these wives turn their heart away from God (Deut 17:17). Breaking that command led to incest and murder in David's family. Solomon's marriage to many foreign wives was what led him to turn away from God (1 Kgs 11:4). Marrying a spouse who does not love the Lord is a danger that God warned against in both the Old Testament and in the New Testament (Deut 7:1-4; 2 Cor 6:14).

Incest was clearly prohibited for God's people (Lev 18:6-18). One of David's own sons broke this command and brought death, disharmony, and long-lasting consequences to David's household (2 Sam 13).

Homosexuality developed as an aberrant behavior in rebellion against God's design. God forbade a man to sleep with another male as with a woman, describing it as an abomination (Lev 18:22). In the period of the law, homosexuality was a sin punishable by death (Lev 20:13). The cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were brought under judgment, in part, by the sin of homosexuality practiced by many of their inhabitants (Gen 19:1-29<sup>12</sup>). In the New Testament, Paul repeatedly speaks of homosexuality as a sinful practice, one of the undesirable moral consequences of the sin of rejecting God (Rom 1:24-27; 1 Cor 6:9 -10).

Today, homosexuality is often viewed as part of God's design and defended by those who insist on the right to express every sexual preference. Yet God's creation of Eve demonstrates that His plan for marriage was for it to be a monogamous, heterosexual relationship. God made only one suitable helper for man, and she was female.<sup>13</sup>



1. What standards are prevalent in your culture on the issues of homosexuality, polygamy, adultery, and premarital sex?
2. What changes have you seen in values concerning marriage during the last twenty years?

The institution of marriage, as designed by God, is under attack and is being steadily eroded by many forces in society. In some societies marriage is no longer defined as the union of one man and one woman; relationships between two men or two women are referred to as marriage, showing the decline in values that reflect understanding of God's ways. In many countries people go from spouse to spouse, in what one author calls "serial polygamy."<sup>14</sup> In some places couples no longer feel a need to get married but live together freely outside the bounds of marriage. Young people coming from broken homes often fear the commitment that marriage requires, or do not have the relational skills that it takes to build a lasting marriage.

In a world that values what feels good and that has no standard of objective truth to turn to, God's standards shine like diamonds on a dark background. His standards seem harsh to many people, yet the Creator knows that they were designed for our good. They were designed to reflect His own love and faithfulness to us. They have stood the test of time, and God promises that those who follow His ways will be blessed.

## The Big Question

We have seen that God is the grand designer of marriage and that He created it for our good and for His glory. His design is the only one that will bring blessing to us; when we wander from that design, we will experience sorrow and loss. As we seek to reflect the covenant love of Christ for His church in our marriages, we will experience God's strengthening and His blessing. We will learn what it means to depend on Him. We will learn what it means to truly love our spouses, with a love that is willing to sacrifice for the good of our spouses and for the sake of keeping our covenant.



Think back to Nick and Maria at the beginning of this lesson. In the midst of an unhappy relationship, it seems to them that they need to get out of their relationship in order to preserve their own lives.

1. Would they really be happier apart from each other? Why or why not?
2. What would it take for them to hold on to their marriage and begin to work at making it into a union that would glorify God and bring greater security and fulfillment to both of them? What choices do they need to make?



As you consider the topic of marriage, the big question is what matters most to you. Do you value your marriage enough to work at it, to make it a priority in your life? Above all, do you value pleasing God? Are you willing to obey Him and seek to restore His design in your marriage?

Elisabeth Elliot writes, "One who loves Him does what He says, cost what it may."<sup>15</sup> Obedience will cost you, but God's Word makes it clear that whatever it costs, God will repay you many times over, not only in this life, but in the life to come.



Take some time to talk to the Lord and to seek His help and counsel for your marriage. Ask Him to help you make choices that will strengthen the bond you have with your spouse.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Bill Hybels, *Interactions Small Group Series: Building Real Intimacy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 17.

<sup>2</sup> John and Agnes Sturt, *Mentoring for Marriage* (Auckland, New Zealand: DayStar Publications Trust, 2004), 29.

<sup>3</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger, *God, Marriage and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 38.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>5</sup> John Piper, *This Momentary Marriage* (Nottingham, England: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 38.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>12</sup> See also Judg 19:1-21:25; 1 Kgs 14:24; 15:12; 22:46; 2 Kgs 23:7.

<sup>13</sup> Elisabeth Elliot, *What God Has Joined* (Westchester, IL: Good News, 1983).

<sup>14</sup> Dan Allender and Tremper Longman III, *Intimate Allies* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1995), 216.

<sup>15</sup> Elliot.

## Love and Loyalty—Our Focus

Jerry and Hannah had another fight this week; once again, it was about Jerry's mother. This time his mother criticized the way Hannah was handling the children. She interfered in front of the children to undermine what Hannah had told the two boys to do. Hannah feels that Jerry lets his mother tell them what to do as a couple. She thinks that Jerry never stands up to his mother. Jerry listens to Hannah's complaints, but he does not confront his mother. Hannah thinks he is still under his mother's control and does not support her as his wife. Consequently, this problem comes up over and over.

### Lesson Outline

Leaving: Establishing a New Primary Allegiance  
    The Basis for Intimacy  
    Relationships between Parents and Adult Children  
    Honor and Support of Parents  
    The Challenge of Living with Parents  
Cleaving: Creating an Indissoluble Bond  
    The Barrier to Intimacy  
    Ways to Build Intimacy  
Applying the Concepts of Leaving and Cleaving

### Lesson Objectives

When you have completed this lesson, you will be able to:

1. Explain the necessity of leaving and cleaving in order to build a strong marriage.
2. List principles to guide the relationship between grown children and their parents.
3. Apply the concepts of leaving and cleaving to your marriage.
4. Describe the barrier to intimacy and propose ways of building greater intimacy in marriage.

## Leaving: Establishing a New Primary Allegiance

When God created marriage, His design was for a man to leave His father and mother and be united to his wife, that the two of them might become one flesh.



Read Genesis 2:20-24.

1. What do you think it means to leave your father and mother?
2. To be united (cleave) to your spouse?
3. To become one flesh?

When a man marries, he often moves away from his parental home and sets up a new home with his spouse. In Abraham's day a son usually worked for his father and remained on his father's land for a lifetime. Therefore, when Abraham's son Isaac married, he pitched his tent right next door. But this does not mean that he and his wife Rebekah did not set up a household of their own. It seems clear that "leaving father and mother" does not primarily refer to a geographical change.

**"Leaving" means shifting the focus of devotion from parents to spouse as the primary object of love and loyalty.** When a man and woman marry, they are entering the most intimate relationship that can exist between two people. From the opening pages of Genesis, God provided principles that would set that new relationship apart so that it could thrive and grow.

Prior to marriage, the closest relationship which most people experience is the relationship they have with their parents, a relationship that is designed to be characterized by love and obedience. At a Christian wedding ceremony, the husband and wife, as well as the parents and other witnesses, are made aware that this man and this woman now have **a new primary allegiance to each other**. The couple vow that their commitment is first of all to God and then to one another. This is the beginning of the biblical process of leaving one's parents and transferring the primary focus of devotion to one's spouse. When we marry we begin an entirely new family that must set its own course and establish its own values and purpose.

**From the beginning God set forth the principle that our spouse should take the place of priority in our lives when we marry.** We should set our marriages in the place of priority, second only to our relationship with God. "Whatever is important to you in this life should be less important than your marriage."<sup>1</sup>

Often that is not the case. It is easy for us to establish other priorities—jobs, children, sports, television, even church work—that take precedence over marriage and often cause our spouses to question our love and loyalty. One of the things that



often continues to take precedence in our lives is our relationship with our parents. A husband may continue to do what his parents want; a wife may be too attached to her parents.

### **The Basis for Intimacy**

The failure to shift one's loyalty from parents to spouse is a key issue in many marriages. Conflict often arises when one partner has not truly shifted the focus of devotion to his or her spouse. Particularly in the early years of marriage, when both partners are insecure, partners will naturally tend to cling to the old loyalties to their parents. Yet doing this will prevent intimacy from growing. **“Leaving is the ground for establishing the kind of intimacy that weaves two separate persons into a tapestry of beauty.”**<sup>2</sup> Intimacy cannot happen unless husbands and wives let go of their original loyalties to their original family.

**Failure to leave parents in this sense results in an inability to be united to one's spouse.** Many marriages struggle with the issue of how to relate to one or both sets of parents. Husbands and wives want to show respect and honor to their parents but may find it difficult to establish clear priorities and to set boundaries to protect their new bond. If you want to see deepening love and closeness in your marriage, it is essential that you establish the relationship with your spouse as a priority. Additionally, you may need to set some boundaries to protect it.

### **Relationships between Parents and Adult Children**

Leaving your parents means that you are no longer dependent on them or under their authority. It does not mean that the relationship ends or that love is diminished. Parents of grown children will continue to love, support, and encourage their children, but they need to release them as adults and allow them to make their own decisions.

Unfortunately, some parents find it very difficult to let go of their grown children and to move into the role of relating to them as adults. Parents need to gear the training of their child toward ultimate independence. Parents should be thinking about releasing their children gradually as they mature, so that they might become independent people. As they mature, they should be given more responsibilities and privileges, and the amount of control the parents exercise should be gradually decreased. Older children particularly resist what they perceive as lectures from their parents; advice needs to be offered sparingly and succinctly, as a suggestion to be considered.

When a child reaches adulthood, the parents need to release their control and step back, allowing their child to make his or her own decisions and mistakes. Of course, they can offer a bit of advice here and there, but only when it is asked for. The role

changes, as the parent of an adult child, to one of support and encouragement. Parents should always be available to listen, to encourage, and to express love, but they are no longer in a position to dictate, demand, or control; nor should they attempt to manipulate or use guilt to get what they want.



Think back to the time when you were seeking to establish yourself as independent from your parents.

1. What were some of the struggles you experienced during that time?
2. What might have made this experience easier for you and your parents?
3. Do you think that your parents raised you with the goal of becoming independent from them?



What issues come up in your marriage that have to do with making your spouse the focus of your love and loyalty? List these in your notebook and ask God to help you consider ways that you can approach these problems with a biblical perspective.



1. If you are a grown child whose parents still seek to control you, ask God to help you approach them in a respectful way; then plan a time when you will explain to them that you love them and appreciate their support and encouragement, but that as an adult you are ready to make your own decisions. Another option would be to write a short letter to them expressing these thoughts.
2. If you have grown children, can you think of ways in which you may have been trying to control them? List these in your notebook and spend some time in prayer before the Lord. Ask God to help you undo any damage you may have caused by seeking to control, rather than support, your grown child.
3. If you are single, how can you prepare for “leaving” your parents?

### **Honor and Support of Parents**

Leaving your parents and becoming united to your spouse does not negate or end the relationship you have had with your parents. That relationship simply changes to one of **mutual caring and support** between responsible adults.



Read Exodus 20:12 and Proverbs 6:20.

1. How can you carry out these commands as an adult child?
2. What does it mean to honor your parents?



Read 1 Timothy 5:4, 8. How do these verses add to your understanding of your responsibility as an adult child to your parents?



1. How can you honor your parents yet leave them in order to be united to your spouse?
2. What would that look like in your situation?
3. What changes might you need to make?

Sometimes parents make it difficult for a young person to “leave.” One of the main reasons young people fail to shift their devotion to their spouses is fear of hurting their parents. In some cultures parents continue to exercise control over the young couple. When parents try to maintain control and authority over their grown and married child, it often results in a situation where the grown child feels torn between the parents and his or her spouse.



Consider the following illustrations:

Nick grew up in a home where his mother focused all her love and attention on him. As an only child, he was her reason for living. His mother was overwhelmed

with sadness at the thought of losing him. She had come to depend on him emotionally. Nick recently married, and his new wife is increasingly unhappy with the amount of time and attention Nick gives to his mother, and with her mother-in-law's constant attempts to control and manipulate them.

Gail's father had always wanted to become a doctor. His own parents had not been able to afford the required education, and he had to begin earning money at an early age. Then he had a daughter of his own, and he did everything possible to give her a chance to become a doctor. He set aside money for many years and was thrilled when Gail began to study medicine. One day Gail returned from university and told her father that she hated the courses she was studying and that she felt she had no real desire or aptitude to pursue training as a doctor. She and her boyfriend wanted to marry, and she planned to leave university. Her father was deeply hurt and disappointed in her decision after all that he had invested in her future.



1. What would you say to Nick's mother?
2. To Nick?
3. To Gail?
4. To her father?



List three or four ways to deal with parents who are insecure, possessive, or use manipulation or guilt to try to control their adult children?



Are possessive parents a problem in your own marriage?

How have you dealt with it?

What boundaries do you need to set? Discuss this with your spouse, if possible.



Below are two hypothetical situations. Pick one and explain what you would do to try to resolve the problem. (Be prepared to role-play this situation in your group.)

1. Your spouse's parents help you out financially, but they also feel free to tell you what to do. You appreciate the money, but there seem to be conditions attached to it. You feel like they try to control your spouse, and that he or she often does what they want. Your spouse's parents expect you to visit frequently and always complain that they are neglected. You think you see them too often,

and that they control your spouse as if he or she were a child. Your spouse's parents drop in at any time, without calling in advance. They expect you to spend every holiday with them, although you would like to make other plans.

2. Your mother-in-law interferes when you and your spouse are disciplining your children. She tells you that you handle them wrong. Your spouse backs off and lets her take charge so as to avoid confronting her.

In His wisdom God knew that to build a strong marriage, both spouses need to be willing to “leave” their parents and to establish a marriage in which the spouse has primary love and loyalty, second only to love and loyalty to God. Your husband or wife needs to be assured of the first place of love and loyalty in your life.



Take time to have a talk with your spouse to discuss the issue of your primary love and loyalty. In a natural setting discuss the following questions:

- Do you have the assurance that you have the first place of love and affection in my life? Why or why not?
- Do you have assurance that if there were a conflict between you and my parents, my primary allegiance is to you? If not, how can I communicate this assurance to you?
- What are some of the areas in our marriage where you see a need to talk about the way we apply the principle of “leaving” parents? (Try to identify some of the areas where this issue has been a problem and choose one for discussion.)



If possible, have a talk with your parents if there are issues that concern you and your spouse. Explore the following questions:

- Do you believe that I respect and honor you?
- Do you feel sure I will never abandon you if you are in need?
- Do you understand that my primary loyalty is now to my wife/husband, and that we need to establish our own home, with our own priorities and boundaries?

If you are a single adult, use the first two questions for discussion with your parents.

## The Challenge of Living with Parents

Though the ideal situation for a newly-wed couple is to find a place to live separately from either set of parents, it is sometimes necessary for a young couple to live together with parents or in-laws. Positive aspects of extended families living together include the additional help and support afforded by grandparents or other relatives and the close relationships that can develop between generations.

On the other hand, problems can arise in living together, and it is common for those under this arrangement to experience added stress. Adjustments must be made in terms of physical and spatial arrangements, as well as in meshing different personalities so that each member will have his or her rightful place in the home, and the young couple will be able to establish their independence.

When several families must live together, everyone needs to demonstrate mutual respect for one another's habits and ways of doing things. Every woman, for example, has her own particular way of doing things in the kitchen, habits often learned from her own mother. The mother or mother-in-law who insists that her way is the only way is inviting conflict and resentment to enter the relationship. Parents or in-laws need to recognize the varying personalities, gifts, and abilities of their child and his or her spouse and refrain from having a critical spirit when the young family does things its own way. Criticism is always the beginning of an unhappy relationship within the extended family. Respect for other opinions and other ways of doing things is a basic requirement for healthy family living.

Lena lived with her husband's family for twenty-seven years. Her father-in-law made her life miserable. He did not think she was good enough to marry his son, and he let her know that frequently. In his latter years he became an invalid, and Lena was the one who cared for him. One day as she was shaving the old man, he told her that she meant as much to him as his own children. Astonished, she replied, "But you did not want me to marry Michael." He shrugged and said, "Oh, I didn't really know you then." Lena told this story with tears in her eyes. "Sadly, his praise came twenty-seven years too late for me," she said. In all those years she had experienced great sadness and resentment and had received very little emotional support from her husband, who had simply withdrawn and allowed her to endure the regular criticism of his father.

It can be very difficult to take a stand for your spouse if it means standing against a parent, yet the biblical teaching on leaving father and mother and cleaving to one's wife implies that the relationship with your spouse should take precedence over previous family ties. There will be times when a husband must stand with his wife against his own parents and support her in the situation in which they are forced to live.

The relationship between a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law seems particularly prone to problems. Many women seem to have a built-in distrust of their mother-in-law, perhaps fueled by the mother-in-law stories and jokes that are common in some cultures. Younger women may feel a sense of rivalry toward their husband's mother, particularly when he seems to be too attached to her. Some women feel insecure in their new role as a wife and feel a need to prove that they are competent. These feelings can create an awkward situation in which a husband feels that he must walk a tightrope between trying to be a dutiful son and being emotionally supportive of his wife.

A young woman needs to remind herself that by her years of teaching and training her mother-in-law helped to shape this man that she has come to love. She should have a very special place in his heart and also in his wife's, and gratitude is due her for raising him. Whatever shortcomings she may have, it is best if the daughter-in-law refrains from criticizing her to her husband. To do so is to try to divide him from one he is told to honor. Likewise, he should avoid criticizing her parents.

On the other side, every mother-in-law would do well to recognize the difficult task facing her daughter-in-law: learning a new role as wife. If the young woman is living in her husband's parents' home, the situation may be more difficult for her. She must interact with him and with them in a setting which may be very different from what she has known in her own home. Ways of doing things may be very different.

As the more mature woman, it is the mother-in-law's responsibility to graciously help her daughter-in-law feel at home. She needs to be sensitive and understanding, if the younger woman asserts her will in some areas, and allow her to do things her own way. As the younger woman's confidence builds and her insecurity lessens, deep mutual respect and friendship can develop. Think of the beautiful friendship that developed between Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi, a friendship that led Ruth to follow her mother-in-law to a foreign country and leave all that was familiar to her.

One frequent area of conflict when parents and grown children live together concerns child rearing. Since the grandparents have had more experience, they are often eager to be helpful in the care and training of their grandchildren. Their advice is usually well-meant. The problem arises when grandparents cross the line from being helpful to interfering. Interference can take many forms. Many parents find it distressing when grandparents interfere in the discipline of their children, attempting to discredit the parents, pampering the grandchildren, dismissing or contradicting the parents' discipline.

One important priority to set in your home is that when it comes to child rearing, the parents bear the ultimate responsibility. Establish the rule that if grandparents disagree with the parents' handling of their children, the matter will be discussed in private, not in front of the child. Ideally, the younger couple should meet with their

parents to discuss their wishes regarding the training and discipline of their children and to set up a few guidelines for working and living together. Periodic discussions to review the living situation and to clarify misunderstandings can create a better climate where resentment is not given a chance to grow.

Betty and Louis experienced a tough time when Betty's elderly mother moved in with them. Grandmother seemed determined to be the boss in her daughter's home, and each day brought new confrontations. She countermanded the parents' instructions to the children and interfered in their discipline. She opened their mail, criticized the children excessively, and turned every mealtime into a confrontation. Life became unbearable. Betty and Louis did not know how they could free their family from this pattern.

One day, after discovering their son in tears as a result of something grandmother had said, this couple realized that their children were being adversely affected by the situation at home. After much prayer and discussion, they recognized that they needed to set some rules for grandmother to adhere to if she wished to live with them. They chose only a few basic rules, spelling out what would not be tolerated. Grandmother was not to interfere in the children's training; she was not to discipline them, and she was not to criticize the children or speak negatively about them at the dinner table. Grandmother was given the plan; the children were also reminded to treat their grandmother with respect.

Establishing the plan was the easy part; enforcing it was more difficult. At mealtimes when grandmother insisted on discussing forbidden topics, Betty and Louis and the children got up and left the table. Grandmother ate quite a few meals alone before she began to get the idea. At first the peace in the home was forced, but eventually genuine peace began to return. Grandmother lived with their family for fifteen years and learned to adjust to family living and boundaries in her daughter's home. In her later years the grandson and granddaughter she had so often criticized became the source of great pride and joy to her.

This is one way a Christian family found to apply biblical principles to their living situation, establishing their own home with their priorities and boundaries. Whatever the situation you may find yourself in, there is a way to approach that situation that will honor God, protect your values, and convey love and respect to other family members.



1. If you live in an extended-family situation, what can you do to follow God's design for you to establish the priority of your own marriage in such a setting?
2. If this is not your situation, what advice would you give to a newly married couple about living with parents?



## Cleaving: Creating an Indissoluble Bond

In Lesson 1 we saw that God is the author of the desire for relationship. One aspect of God is that He is a personal being; the three Persons of the Trinity enjoy relationship with one another. God also enjoys relationship with His creation. After creating Adam and Eve, God enjoyed a daily walk with them in the Garden every evening. Have you ever wondered what they talked about? Can you imagine God asking them about their day, their activities, their discoveries? God enjoys relationship, and He designed you for relationship. The desire you have for closeness to your spouse is a God-given desire, a legitimate desire. God designed you to experience deep intimacy, security, and satisfaction in your relationship with your spouse.

In describing the relationship between a man and a woman, Moses uses the verb “to cleave” (Gen 2:24). What is cleaving and what are some of the attitudes and actions that must be present if cleaving is to take place? The word “cleave” means “to adhere,” “to stick to,” “to bond or cling to,” “to be attached by some strong tie.” The word is used in its literal sense of the bonding or adherence of one substance to another (see 2 Sam 23:10; Job 19:20; Ps 137:6). Figuratively, it refers to loyalty, affection, and commitment to someone.<sup>3</sup>



Read Ruth 1:1-14. We read in verse 14 that Ruth “clung” to Naomi when her mother-in-law was preparing to leave. “Clung” has the same meaning as “cleave” in Genesis 2:24.

1. What do you learn about cleaving from the story of Ruth and Naomi?
2. After Ruth made this initial choice, what did it look like on a daily basis?
3. What aspects of Ruth’s character make her a person well-prepared for marriage?

In Deuteronomy 10:20 we find the words “You shall fear the LORD your God; you shall serve Him and cling to Him.” Just as we are to cling to God, we are to stick like glue to our spouse, to be “welded together so that we cannot be separated without damage to both of us”<sup>4</sup> (see also Deut 11:22; 13:4; 30:20).

Cleaving involves whole-hearted commitment and loyalty to your spouse. **When you cleave to your spouse, you commit yourself to knowing your partner intimately over a lifetime, establishing a powerful bond between husband and wife.**

Your commitment to your spouse is total: physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. Often we state this commitment to one another on the day of the wedding but fail to pursue it later on in marriage. Cleaving is an active, pursuing love that seeks closeness to the one who is loved. If you desire greater closeness with your spouse, make it a habit to ask yourself what will draw you closer or drive you apart.<sup>5</sup> Whatever draws you together should be pursued. Whatever puts distance between you should be avoided.

In order to build a strong marriage that will reflect God's glory, the husband must cleave to his wife and the wife to her husband. Many marital disasters stem from a failure to cleave to one's spouse.

### **The Barrier to Intimacy**

What hinders us from cleaving to our mates, from being united with them closely in a relationship characterized by commitment, loyalty, and affection?

Billy Graham has said that the greatest enemy of marriage is selfishness.<sup>6</sup> Until we each are willing to set aside our personal rights and demands, we cannot really cling to our spouse. Our sin nature proves alive and well in a marriage context, where sacrifice and selfless giving are so often called for. Often one or both partners are emotionally immature; they have not learned to give sacrificially.

In many countries the values of society run counter to biblical values. The values of society around us may tell us to look out for ourselves, to go after the things that will meet our needs, to satisfy ourselves. Children who grow up in a culture or family with such values may seek to marry someone who will fulfill their needs. They will be deeply disappointed in marriage when their partner falls short of meeting those needs. If we see life as focusing on us, it will be difficult for us to reach out to serve others.

The basic problem that hinders us from really cleaving to our mates is self-centeredness. When we are focused on ourselves, on getting our needs met, the result will be that we use or manipulate people to get them to meet our needs. We become takers rather than givers. In marriages like this, one spouse may feel used or manipulated and emotional intimacy will not grow. Our partner cannot feel safe when our focus is on ourselves. Without emotional intimacy, physical intimacy will not be as rewarding, and spiritual intimacy will be superficial at best. So we can see that selfishness hinders intimacy on many levels.

Christian psychologist Larry Crabb suggests that we change the goals we have for our relationship, seeking to serve our partner and minister to him or her, rather than seeking to get our partner to meet our needs.<sup>7</sup> **For genuine intimacy to grow in our relationship, we need to move from self-centeredness to other-centeredness.** This is a lifetime process, and two people in marriage can help each other grow toward this

as they build each other up and affirm the steps the other takes in the right direction. A good marriage is one in which the wife concentrates on meeting her husband's needs, and the husband concentrates on meeting his wife's needs. That combination is one which builds and strengthens the bond of marriage. A selfless relationship of mutual giving to each other is the goal of marriage.

As Christ came to serve rather than to be served, so we as believers can set aside our needs and seek to serve the one we love. As we do so, we are living in obedience to the Lord and restoring His design for marriage.



List some ways people use or manipulate another person to get their own needs met.



1. What needs does your spouse have that you are aware of?
2. How can you show him or her that you have a desire to meet those needs?



Can you see any ways in which you may be using your spouse to get your own needs met? If your relationship involves this kind of manipulation, what steps can you take to change this? Identify what you want to work on with the help of the Holy Spirit in the next month. At the end of the month, evaluate your own behavior and choices. What changes have you seen?



As you reflect on Christ's example of serving others, thank God that He has given you the resources you need to serve your spouse. Ask Him to help you to be obedient to His Word and to seek to restore His design in your marriage.

### Ways to Build Intimacy

In addition to changing the focus from having our needs met to serving our spouses, we can take positive steps that can lead to greater closeness in marriage. We can focus on creating intimacy by building on the things that draw us closer together and avoiding the things that draw us apart.

Intimacy can grow as we share each other's world. We can become closer as we share in some of the following areas:

**Intellectual:** Sharing the world of ideas. Couples can deepen intimacy by reading a book together, discussing ideas, or talking together about plans for various events.

**Recreational:** Sharing the world of play. Couples can deepen intimacy by relaxing together or having fun together.

**Work:** Sharing work or service. Couples can deepen intimacy by being involved in projects or tasks together: working for a common goal.

**Spiritual:** Sharing a common faith, common spiritual values, goals, and interests. Couples can deepen intimacy by praying together, reading God's Word together, or talking about their spiritual values and goals.

The more areas we share, the deeper our involvement in each other's lives, the greater the potential is for intimacy.

Often couples decide to separate or divorce when they feel they no longer have anything in common. Yet at the time they married, they felt otherwise. Early in marriage you can begin to build intimacy by strengthening the areas where you do have common interests and developing an interest in the other's world. Take an interest in his work, or her hobbies. Many do this when they are getting to know each other, but later the pretense of being interested in the other's hobby or passion may be dropped.

For example, earlier in their marriage, Sandra never shared her husband's interest in sports; but as the years passed, she began to see how important this was to her husband. She started to make an effort to watch soccer or tennis matches with him and to learn the rules of play. Now they can share this interest and have conversations on subjects her husband cares about.

If you have little in common, you can search for new areas to share together or develop an interest in your spouse's passions. You can show interest in the things that interest your spouse and make time together every week for a shared activity. As a married couple, you can seek to build or rebuild the intimacy that God designed you for by spending time together and sharing one another's lives.



1. How did you imagine intimacy in your marriage before you married?
2. What steps can you take to build greater intimacy?
3. How can you find or develop one or two areas of common interest?

One part of your life will have limited access for your spouse if he or she is not a believer. Sharing on the spiritual level will be limited, although you can discuss questions that cause you to examine your values and priorities together. The potential for greater closeness exists between a husband and wife who share a common faith and similar spiritual values and goals, yet even many Christian couples do not experience substantial oneness at this deepest level. (See Lesson 10 for a fuller treatment of this topic.)

Tania is married to a Muslim man, and she became a Christian eight years ago. Her husband practices his religion with great devotion, and the two of them often have discussions on the differences between Christianity and Islam and on the values of each. Her husband has told her frequently that he has seen positive changes in her in the past several years; and at other times he has challenged her to be a better Christian. They have an open dialogue about their faith, not attacking each other, but treating each other with mutual respect. Tania prays fervently that her husband will come to know Christ through her behavior and her witness as a Christian, and she is thankful for the close and intimate relationship the two of them enjoy, in spite of their differences.



If you do not share a common faith or have common spiritual values and goals, list three or four ways for you to encourage your spouse without preaching/lecturing/nagging. What questions or topics can you discuss that might encourage greater intimacy at this level?

### **Applying the Concepts of Leaving and Cleaving**

We have looked at two biblical concepts that are essential to building a strong marriage. First, we saw the importance of leaving our family of origin and transferring our primary devotion to our spouse as the object of our love and loyalty. We have also looked at the significance of “cleaving” to our spouse in a bond of commitment that will last for a lifetime.

These concepts are valuable, but they will make little difference if they remain on the page or in your store of knowledge but are not applied. It takes time and effort to take these concepts and begin to apply them to your own marriage. As circumstances arise, you need to remind yourself of these concepts and make a conscious effort to incorporate these truths into your responses and your choices.

There may be times when your spouse is not willing to work at a better relationship, and it seems as if all the effort in the relationship is coming from you.

When times are tough, the glue that will continue to hold you together is your commitment to your spouse and to God Himself. In His presence you made a commitment to your spouse for a lifetime, for better or for worse. As you seek His help, He will give you the strength to make your spouse your priority, the object of your love and loyalty. He will show you how to respond to your spouse and how to encourage your spouse toward greater intimacy.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ed Wheat, *Love Life for Every Married Couple* (Basingstoke, UK: Marshall Morgan and Scott, 1987), 28.

<sup>2</sup> Dan Allender and Tremper Longman III, *Intimate Allies* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1995), 219; emphasis added.

<sup>3</sup> Earl S. Kalland, “dabaq,” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 1:177-78.

<sup>4</sup> Wheat, 30.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>6</sup> Lee Strobel and Leslie Strobel, *Surviving a Spiritual Mismatch in Marriage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 70.

<sup>7</sup> Lawrence J. Crabb, Jr., *The Marriage Builder* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 48.





## Two Shall Become One

Margaret is deeply disappointed with her marriage. Her husband seems to have no romantic interest in her at all. Before they were married, he was very romantic; but after just a few years, he stopped being affectionate. Their sex life is almost nonexistent. The longings she has to be held and touched are overpowering at times. The thought of living like this for the next thirty years seems too much to bear. She finds herself more and more depressed when she thinks about the future together with her husband. He has a stable job and provides for their family, but they do not seem to connect as a couple on many levels.

### Lesson Outline

- Wholeness in Marriage
- Characteristics of Whole People
  - Kindness
  - Honesty
  - Selflessness
  - Loyalty
  - Trust
  - Respect
- Physical Intimacy in Marriage
  - Biblical Teaching on Sex
  - Attitudes toward Sex
  - The Enjoyment of Sex within Marriage
- Sexual Response
  - Hindrances to Intimacy
  - Phases of Sexual Response

### Lesson Objectives

When you have completed this lesson, you will be able to:

1. Discern whether you look to your spouse or to the Lord to meet your innermost needs.

2. List the characteristics of whole, mature people and evaluate areas for growth in your own life.
3. Discuss the biblical teaching on sex, within and outside of marriage.
4. Evaluate the formation of your attitudes toward sex and identify any wrong attitudes you may have which can hinder you in this area.
5. Assess hindrances to intimacy in your own marriage and discuss ways to overcome these hindrances.
6. Ascertain your willingness to make choices that can lead to greater intimacy in your marriage.

### Wholeness in Marriage

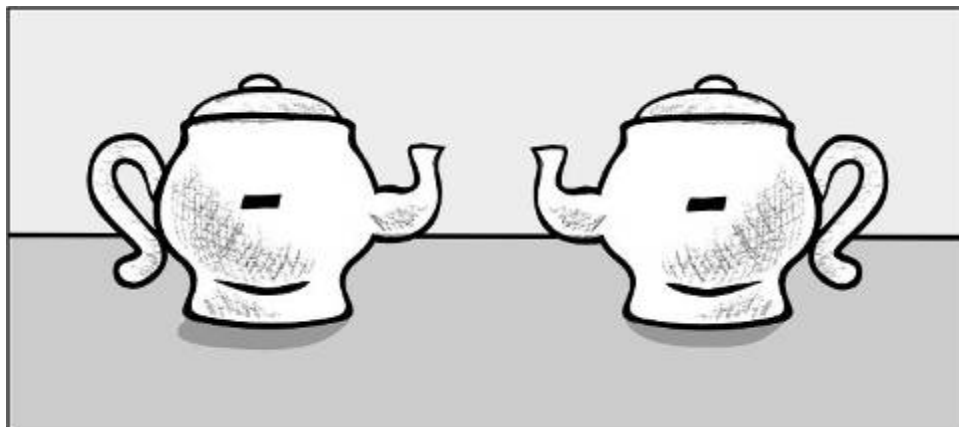
In the Genesis account of the creation of woman, Moses wrote, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh” (Gen 2:24). **Becoming one flesh implies the total joining of two persons—involving a unity at the physical level, the emotional level, and the spiritual level.** Out of His love for those He created, God designed marriage to be a fulfilling relationship between two whole people.

We saw in Lesson 1 that the entrance of sin into the world has caused all of us to be deeply flawed persons who bring sinful patterns into our marriages. Yet the good news of the gospel provides us with the resources we need to restore God’s design and to move toward becoming whole, mature people. Our sin nature will continue to plague us, causing us to revert to our old sinful actions and responses at times, but with the strength of the Lord we can see transformation and growth toward maturity, toward becoming a whole person.

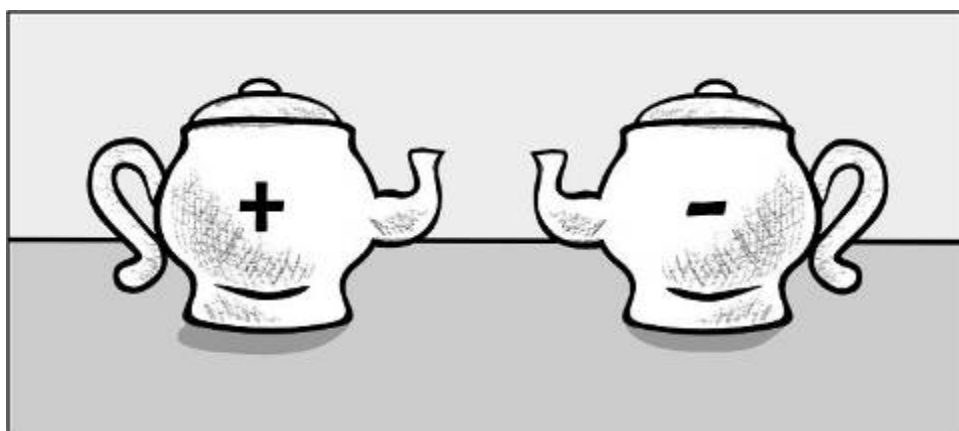
A whole person is not a perfect person but one who is growing in all areas of life: physically, emotionally, intellectually, socially, and spiritually. There was only one perfect person, and because He was fully human, even He experienced growth. In Luke 2:52 we read: “And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.” We see the balance in Jesus’ life as He grew in wisdom (intellectual and emotional growth), stature (physical growth), favor with God (spiritual growth), and favor with men (social growth).

There may be a difference in the level of growth toward maturity in a husband and wife. **If one marriage partner is not a whole person, exhibiting balance in these areas, the other cannot make up for the deficiencies.** If both partners are emotionally and spiritually immature, there will inevitably be problems in the marriage because both came to marriage with a deficit; they are not whole people capable of loving and giving to their partner.

We might use the example of two teapots. When both partners come to marriage with immature patterns and have not learned to love and give sacrificially, they are like two empty teapots. There is no one “to pour out tea” in this marriage.



In a good marriage both partners are whole people, and each has something to pour out to the other. In some marriages one partner is more mature and able to pour out more tea, while the other has not yet learned to love and give sacrificially. Of course, all of us will experience times when the teapot is empty, when our inner resources have run dry. When one teapot is empty, however, the other partner may still be able to pour out some tea.



**Each partner in a marriage must take responsibility for his or her own growth toward maturity and wholeness.** One of the first steps is learning to look to God to meet our innermost needs, rather than expecting our partners to do this. God does not intend for us to have all of our personal needs met by our spouses. Because we are fallen creatures, we will never be able to give of ourselves perfectly to our spouses. We must depend on God and look to Him to supply our needs. In God we can know that we are truly loved and accepted and that our lives have purpose and meaning.



1. Read Psalm 73:25-26. How would you describe Asaph's relationship with the Lord?
2. Read Psalm 16:1-2, 7, 8, 11, and 18:1-3. What do you note about David's relationship with the Lord?

Asaph and David learned to turn to God to replenish their inner resources. We each replenish our supply of "tea" in a marriage by removing the lid and allowing God to refill us with strength and love for our mate.

Too often we look to our partners to meet our needs for love, security, or purpose, and we wait for them to satisfy those needs before we give of ourselves. If our needs are not met, we may back away, attack, or become cold, angry, or argumentative. In other words, our love for our spouse depends on his or her love for us. Fear and insecurity characterize such a relationship; we hold back, waiting for our spouse to love us first. Instead, God wants us to turn to Him to receive the resources we need to reach out to our spouse and respond in mature and loving ways.



Evaluate your life in terms of your dependence on the Lord to meet your innermost needs and to replenish your inner resources. Write down three or four specific ways you have (or have not) depended on the Lord. How close is your relationship with the Lord? How have you mistakenly depended on your spouse to meet these needs?

## Characteristics of Whole People

It is often said that "**marriage is not about finding the right partner; it is about becoming the right partner.**"<sup>1</sup> What are some characteristics or ingredients essential to becoming a whole person who is able to contribute to a good marriage? There are six key character traits: kindness, honesty, selflessness, loyalty, trust, and respect.

### Kindness

Many verses in the Bible speak of kindness, yet how often do you hear a sermon on the subject? The Old Testament, for example, is full of passages describing God's love and kindness for His people.<sup>2</sup> His love is a love that never changes. His kindness endures forever. And He consistently demonstrates that true lovingkindness is displayed in action, is bountiful and giving, and is a heart-love characterized by compassion. **Kindness is "love as a commitment of the will."**<sup>3</sup>

When you pledge to love your spouse at the wedding ceremony, you are pledging to commit yourself to act kindly toward that person. **Kindness is an attribute that flows from being other-centered.** A kind person has a pleasant nature, is forbearing and sympathetic. One who is kind steps forward to help others and often puts their interests before his or her own.

Often a person is kind toward the prospective spouse before marriage, but kindness can easily evaporate between a married couple, particularly when there are unresolved hurts. Insults, cutting remarks, neglect, and growing resentment can all cause kindness to disappear. Yet God commands His children to be kind to one another.



Read Ephesians 2:7, 4:32, Galatians 5:22-23, and 2 Peter 1:7, and answer the following questions:

1. How is your kindness linked to God's kindness?
2. How kind are you toward your spouse?
3. Do you treat your partner with the same kindness you did before you were married? Why or why not?
4. What can you do this week to show kindness to your mate?

## Honesty

To be honest is to be truthful, just, free from deception, authentic. Honesty is a fundamental quality in good relationships. It is difficult to trust a partner who is not honest. There is no place for deceit or for masks in an intimate relationship. **When you are not honest with your partner, you create distance and limit your intimacy.** Marriage should be a place where you can speak the truth, but in love (Eph 4:15), rather than in a harsh and uncaring way. You should be able to share your innermost fears and hurts with your spouse, without fear of ridicule or rejection.



1. Do you generally “speak the truth in love” in your relationship?
2. What factors tend to keep you from being honest with your mate?
3. What masks have you developed?
4. Does your partner generally “speak the truth in love” with you?
5. What choices can you make that would encourage your spouse to do so?

## Selflessness

A whole person is one who is not focused on himself or herself, but who focuses on the welfare of the other person. Such a person is a giver—one who is willing to give time, show compassion, put the other’s interests first.



Read Romans 12:10 and Philippians 2:1-4, and write down how Paul describes a selfless person. What would selflessness look like in a marriage?

## Loyalty

Loyalty is part of what is meant by “cleaving” to one another. **Loyalty means being faithful to the other person, no matter what.** It means being there to support your spouse. Without loyalty to one another, there will be insecurity in the relationship. There may also be constant fighting as you vie for your own concerns, your own needs, your own territory, your own rights. A loyal person is one you can depend on; he or she will be consistent. You can face difficult times together as a couple when you are certain of the other’s loyalty to you.



1. Based on the above definition, how loyal are you to your spouse?
2. Do you feel secure in the loyalty of your mate to you? Why or why not?

## Trust

Trust means to lean on, to be confident in, to depend on. Trust is an essential ingredient of all human relationships. Studies show that trust needs to be developed in the first year of life, as a baby learns that mother and father’s care, or that of another caregiver, can be counted on. When early caregivers are not available or are untrustworthy, the world becomes an insecure place for the child, who may struggle to trust others later on.

In marriage, trust is a two-way street. Both partners must feel secure in the love of the other. Trust also has to be earned. When you trust someone, you are secure in the relationship, knowing that you have no cause to fear that person. Trust can be diminished or violated in many ways: through deceit, unfaithfulness, lying or betraying a confidence, belittling, or ignoring a partner’s needs.

The good news is that trust can be rebuilt. When spouses are willing to apologize for the hurt they have caused, willing to ask forgiveness, willing to seek

reconciliation and act in ways that show the partner they can be trusted, the relationship can be rebuilt.



1. How have you built trust in your relationship with your spouse?
2. How has trust been eroded or violated?
3. What can you do to rebuild?

## Respect

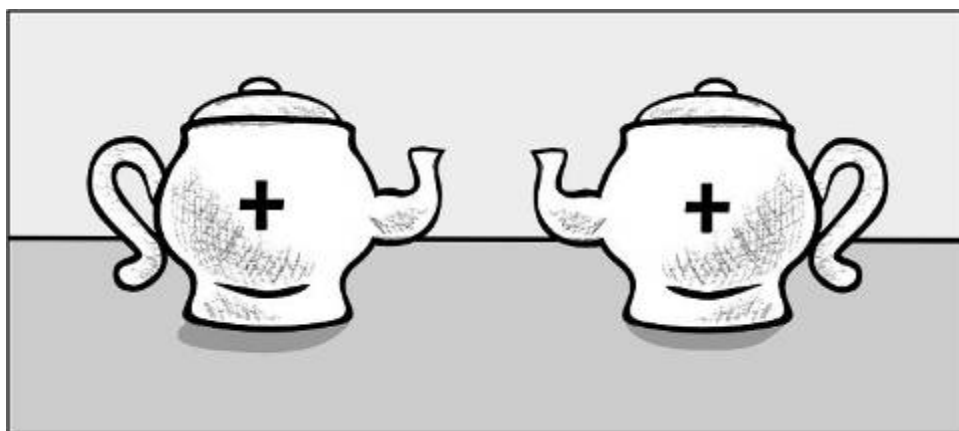
To respect someone is to hold that person in high or special regard. When you respect your spouse, you value and acknowledge his or her worth and qualities; you show honor, esteem, and consideration to that person. Without respect for your spouse, you are likely to put him or her down in an effort to make you feel better about yourself. Habits such as sarcasm, criticizing, and nagging undermine respect in a relationship.



Read Ephesians 5:33 and 1 Peter 3:7.

1. What do you note in these admonitions to husbands and wives?
2. In what ways do you show high regard for your spouse?

Most husbands and wives will struggle in one or more of the areas described above. Only as you rely on God's help will you find strength to treat your spouse with kindness and respect, to be loyal no matter how your mate acts toward you, to become a trustworthy partner, to give of yourself without expecting in return. The more "whole" you become, the more you will be able to pour out these characteristics to your partner and to replenish yourself in God when you are empty.





Do you see yourself as a whole person or as one who is growing toward wholeness? Review the six areas above. Which of these areas are strong points for you? In which areas do you recognize a need for continued growth? Are you willing to ask God to help you develop in those areas? Write a prayer of commitment to seek God's help this month in order to grow in those areas. At the end of the month, look back over your behavior and choices, evaluate your growth toward maturity, and renew your commitment.

### Physical Intimacy in Marriage

When two partners come together as “whole” people, committed to serving one another and meeting the other's needs, physical intimacy in marriage will bring greater fulfillment. When you are united as a couple at the emotional and spiritual level, sexual intimacy will bring not only physical pleasure, but rich meaning for each person as an outgrowth of your close personal relationship. **Caring deeply for and about each other is the greatest preparation for a satisfying sexual encounter.** A fulfilling sexual relationship involves not only your bodies but your minds, your emotions, your spirit: all that you are.

Couples who are having problems in other areas of their relationship will usually have trouble with physical intimacy as well. If a couple is able to break down barriers in other areas of the relationship, it will often result in greater physical intimacy in marriage.

### Biblical Teaching on Sex

The Bible speaks openly about the sexual relationship. Sexuality was part of God's original design in creation as He brought together one man and one woman to share this most intimate bond. Sex was not the result of the fall: it was given to Adam and Eve before they sinned. From those opening chapters in Genesis, and all the way through the New Testament, the Bible speaks of the beauty of the sexual union of a husband and wife.

The teaching of the Bible is that sex in marriage is something wonderful. The author of the letter to the Hebrews states that, “Marriage is to be held in honor among all, and the marriage bed [referring to sexual intercourse]<sup>4</sup> is to be undefiled” (Heb 13:4). The Bible affirms sexual intercourse as a positive expression of true marital love. Note, however, that the author's emphasis is sex in the context of marriage. When expressed properly within the God-given limits of mutually committed love in marriage, sex is a wonderful, honorable thing. In contrast, he states at the end of the verse that those who are immoral and engage in adultery will be judged by God. Sex



outside the bounds of marriage is clearly prohibited in the Bible. The Ten Commandments contain two that emphasize God’s view of the sanctity of marriage: “You shall not commit adultery” and “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife.” (See Appendix B for more on the subject of adultery.)

In spite of the Bible’s emphasis on the beauty of the sexual relationship in marriage, a healthy attitude toward sex is seldom taught in churches. Many avoid the subject completely, with the result that young people often get their ideas and values about sex from television, films, magazines, or friends. In advertising, sex is used to sell everything from cars to detergent. In some cultures a high number of young people have sexual experiences before marriage. Biblical teaching on sex has not been provided. Too often churches are silent on this subject.

### **Attitudes toward Sex**

While the Bible teaches that sexual love within the bounds of marriage is something beautiful, many people struggle with negative attitudes toward sex. In marriage both partners need to be comfortable with their own sexuality in order to be free to give themselves to each other without reservation.

Each person approaches marriage and the sexual union with a background of information and attitudes toward sexuality. The sources of those views and attitudes toward sexuality are many: parents, peers, media, books, magazines, and so forth. While we may have had biblical teaching on sexuality, our values are often heavily influenced by the views of others around us.



1. Did your parents talk about sexual matters at home?
2. Was the conversation natural or was the tone one of embarrassment?
3. What sex education did you receive from your parents?
4. Were you able to ask questions about sex, puberty, menstruation, and get satisfactory answers?
5. What information/attitudes did you pick up from others?
6. If you attended church growing up, what attitudes did you pick up there about sex?
7. How comfortable would you say you are with your own sexuality?
8. In what way, if at all, has your culture influenced your attitudes toward sex?

Some of your attitudes toward sex may be conclusions drawn from the way sex has been portrayed to you through your parents, through television, or through observing others. For example, in a healthy relationship between a husband and wife, there will be displays of tenderness, affection, and physical touch. If you grew up in a family where physical touch and expressions of love were not evident, it may influence the way you express love and, ultimately, how intimate you are willing to be. Some families have no culture of physical touch or expressions of affection. If you come from such a family and marry a partner who has a family culture of hugs and affectionate gestures, it will be likely that your partner feels starved for these gestures.



1. Did you receive appropriate physical touch or other outward expressions of love in your family?
2. Did you observe loving gestures or affection between your parents?
3. How do you think your family culture has influenced you in this area?
4. How do you think your social culture has influenced you?

Often people have developed beliefs or attitudes about sex that may hinder them from freely expressing love through sexual intercourse with their spouses. Consider some of the following common attitudes or impressions:

Sex is dirty and wrong.

Sex is to be endured but not enjoyed.

Sex before marriage ensures that a couple will be compatible.

Sex is only for the purpose of having children.

Sex comes naturally. You do not need to know anything beforehand or prepare in any way for a sexual relationship.

Sex outside of marriage is permissible and exciting.

Sex is purely physical and has little to do with the mind, emotions, or spirit.

Other: \_\_\_\_\_.

A bit of background from church history may help you to understand the reason that some people have come to view sex as dirty. The early church was heavily influenced by Greek thought, particularly that of Plato, who taught that the spirit is essentially good but physical matter is evil. Under this influence, some of the leaders in the early church concluded that the body is evil, and the human spirit is imprisoned by the body, waiting for release at death to find its full expression. Therefore bodily

functions like sex, and even pleasure itself, became suspect. The Stoics taught that all pleasure should be avoided in order to develop the soul's full potential.

Jerome, who translated the Latin Vulgate, Chrysostom, the Archbishop of Constantinople, Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, and Augustine were all influenced by Greek philosophy. Thus, some of the church fathers taught that sexual intercourse was necessary for procreation but sinful for the purpose of satisfying desire. By the Middle Ages this thinking had led to the teaching that extolled celibacy and rejected sex. Sex, even in marriage, was considered sinful, except for purposes of procreation.<sup>5</sup>

When Martin Luther translated the Bible into the German language, people began to read it for themselves, and they saw that it did not support those teachings on sex. Luther himself married, as did other Reformers. In Protestant churches celibacy was no longer exalted above marriage, nor was sex considered shameful in marriage. Yet teaching was still lacking on the purpose of sex to strengthen the bond of companionship in marriage.<sup>6</sup>

In the Victorian period a double standard arose, with chastity being expected of women but not of men. Women were taught to endure sex to please their husbands but to show no pleasure in it. Today many of these attitudes have been rejected, but some remnants of them remain and have been passed down from one generation to the next.

Your attitude toward sex may be colored by some of the influences described above. In addition, your attitude toward sex may be colored by personal feelings of guilt.

Henry became a Christian a few years ago. He had sex with several girls before marriage, and he admitted it to his wife before they married. Now she finds herself worrying that he will compare her to his previous girlfriends. Although Henry was sexually active as a young man, he finds himself reserved with his wife. And although they have been married for five years, they do not really feel comfortable with each other in the bedroom.

In today's world many people have experienced premarital sex, and in some cultures the belief is common that it is best to have sex before marriage to know if you are "compatible" in this area. Guilt over past sexual encounters can hinder sexual pleasure in marriage. As we saw above, the writer of Hebrews urges believers to protect the marriage bed from all sinful defilements (Heb 13:4). Perhaps you have had sexual experiences before marriage or outside the bounds of marriage. You may have had sex with your wife or husband before you married. It is common for couples who had a passionate physical relationship before marriage to be disappointed after marriage with their sexual relationship.

God offers forgiveness for sexual sins and wants to free us from the guilt that we carry. He wants us to step into freedom and to experience His cleansing in the area of our sexual life.



1. Can you identify any negative thoughts you have regarding sex?
2. Considering the list of common attitudes toward sex above, write down some of your own thinking on sex.
3. How have these attitudes or ideas influenced your sexual life?
4. Have you had negative or unpleasant sexual experiences that may have influenced your attitudes toward sex?
5. Read 1 Timothy 4:1-5. What does Paul teach about marriage in this passage?



Take time to talk to the Lord, now or at the conclusion of this lesson, and confess any sinful sexual encounters you have had. Ask God to teach you His ways and to change your attitudes toward sex. Ask God for healing in this area if you have had negative experiences that have damaged you.

### **The Enjoyment of Sex within Marriage**

The Bible speaks of “knowing” someone in a sexual sense and of “knowing” someone in a relational sense. Related to the first usage, we read in Genesis 4:1 that “Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived.” In the New Testament, Joseph is described as taking Mary as his wife, yet he “knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son” (Matt 1:24-25).

Concerning the relational sense, Amos 3:2 says, “You only have I known of all the families of the earth.”<sup>7</sup> And in the New Testament, Jesus says, “This is eternal life, that they might know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (Jn 17:3). This knowledge is not mere head knowledge but a close, personal, relational knowledge.

**The enjoyment of sex in marriage depends on both intimate physical knowledge of the other as well as a tender, intimate, personal knowledge.** Sexuality and spirituality are closely linked. “Sex is intended to deepen the experience of intimacy and of knowing one another in marriage, as two people abandon themselves to each other through the surrender of their bodies.”<sup>8</sup> Knowing

each other in this way results in oneness—two people become one in body, soul, and spirit. “That is why divorce has such a devastating effect. Not two people are left, but two fractions of one.”<sup>9</sup>

In the New Testament, the mystery of becoming one flesh is used to depict an even deeper mystery, that of the relationship between Jesus Christ and the church, His bride. In Ephesians 5:31-32 we see that the relationship between husband and wife is intended to be so close, so intimate, so permanent, so deep and pure in its love, that it is a picture of Christ’s love for His church. In contrast to a negative view of sex as something sordid or dirty, the biblical view of sex is not only positive but also spiritual in nature.



1. Read 1 Corinthians 7:2-5 and summarize Paul’s teaching in these verses written to Christians at Corinth.
2. Why do couples need to make sexual intercourse a priority in their lives?

Notice that Paul does not encourage husbands or wives to seize or demand sexual gratification, but he urges both to be ready to give their bodies when the other wants sex. This passage assumes that both partners are able to communicate their desires; it assumes a closeness between partners that makes each aware of the other’s needs; it assumes a commitment to give of oneself to meet the partner’s needs.

Paul adds that we ward off Satan by having sufficient sexual intercourse. We are not to abstain from sex too long but to come together soon “so that Satan will gain no foothold.” Apart from illness or inability to have sex, intercourse should be a regular part of each married couple’s experience. Paul urges married couples not to deprive each other in this area, except by mutual consent for a limited period of time. Husbands and wives are commanded to enjoy each other’s bodies!

**Meeting each other’s needs by sexual union strengthens the cords of love and trust that bind a couple together.** Sexual pleasure in marriage brings healing, comfort, and relaxation to both partners. Intimacy grows as we trust one another with one of our most precious possessions, our bodies. Regular enjoyment of one another in this way protects against sexual temptation outside marriage.

If your goal in marriage is to give to your spouse, this extends to the sexual relationship also, where you should seek to give satisfaction to the other person. A happy and fulfilling sexual relationship depends on each partner aiming to give satisfaction to the other. You need to be sensitive to your spouse’s needs and wants, rather than demanding that your own needs be met.



Read Proverbs 5:15-23.

1. What counsel does the writer give his son?
2. What metaphor does he use for the sexual relationship?
3. What blessings are available to the one who follows this counsel?
4. What results can be expected for those who lack discipline in this area?

It seems clear from passages like this that God intended married couples to delight in each other (v. 19) and to find comfort, relaxation, and fulfillment of their needs in a deep and satisfying relationship to their spouse.

**A biblical love song.** One of the neglected books of the Old Testament is The Song of Solomon, a love song describing the physical intimacy and longings of a marriage. While many view the song primarily as an allegory of God's love for Israel and Christ's love for His bride, the church, the song is a picture of idealized married love as God intended it.<sup>10</sup> The writer extols the pleasures of sexual love in marriage. Many preachers, however, have been reluctant to interpret this book as an expression of marital love because of a misplaced belief that God would never talk about sex so openly or allow a book about sex (even sex in marriage) in the canon of Scripture.

The song covers the period of courtship, the wedding night, and the marriage relationship of the couple, using sensitive, romantic language. The partners describe their love for one another with visual, tactile, and sensory images of fruit, gardens, animals, and perfumes. It appears that both partners take turns initiating the lovemaking; a joyous pattern of mutual response is recorded. As they grow in "knowing" each other, this familiarity brings deeper love and deeper sensitivity to each other's needs.



Read the conversation between the two lovers described in The Song of Solomon, chapter 7. How do they describe their physical relationship?

Reading the song, we may blush, but we sense the beauty of a sexual relationship between a couple united in body and soul by God. God has given us this relationship for our enjoyment.



By contrast, the book of Proverbs describes a man being enticed by a prostitute. Read Proverbs 7:6-27.

1. What are the enticements?

2. What results from giving in to them?

Paul also talks about the result of uniting oneself to a prostitute. Read 1 Corinthians 6:15-20.

3. What arguments does Paul present in this passage?

It is clear from the Corinthian passage that any sexual union produces a bonding between the two people. We cannot simply walk away from such casual encounters without deep personal wounds, whether we acknowledge them or not. The Bible clearly states that sex is a pleasure to be reserved for marriage and is to be expressed within the bounds of a lifelong commitment to our spouses.

Both singles and those who are married may face strong temptations in this area. Desire can seem overwhelming at times, and opportunities present themselves to satisfy our sexual urges outside marriage. We need to set clear standards and not put ourselves in situations where it would be easy to lose self-control. God's Word gives the assurance that if God allows us to live with unfulfilled sexual desires, He will provide strength to help us resist temptation and to find deeper fulfillment in Him (1 Cor 10:13).

## Sexual Response

Once we have established a healthy biblical understanding of sexuality and have dealt with some of our negative assumptions about sex, we can learn how to love our partners sexually, focusing on what would please our partners. One of the most common complaints of women is that their husbands never give them attention, except when they want to have sex. Conversely, men often complain that their wives are unresponsive to them.

One important thing to understand is that women generally view sex as a part of a total relationship. When a woman is asked to respond sexually without receiving other expressions of love and affection, she feels that her husband is using her. This often creates resentment and certainly does not lead to greater responsiveness in a woman. A wise husband understands his wife's need for love and affection and provides a secure, loving, and affectionate relationship that also forms the background for sexual intimacy.

If creating a sense of affection and security is important to a woman in a sexual relationship, what is important to a man is to feel that his wife is responsive to him. Most women do not understand how important, both physically and psychologically, the sexual relationship is to a man. Few women appreciate the fact that their avoidance of sex, or their lack of response, will affect their entire marriage in a negative way. This unresponsiveness or rejection may undermine a man's sense of

well-being. It often results in the dimming of other areas of the relationship, like the emotional and the spiritual. A wise wife understands these needs in her husband and learns to respond to them.

**Real sexual intimacy does not occur only at times of intercourse.** Times of talking together, snuggling close on the couch or in bed, working together or praying together—all these actions contribute to the closeness of the relationship. All contribute to lovemaking. God has designed us as whole human beings, and we cannot separate emotional and spiritual intimacy from sexual intimacy in marriage.

### **Hindrances to Intimacy**

Because sexual intimacy is so important to build and unite a couple, when it is disappointing or absent, there is enormous potential for the destruction of the marriage. Following are nine factors that can hinder the growth of sexual intimacy in marriage.

**The habit of criticism.** Many couples freely criticize each other in the hope of bringing about improvements in the other's behavior or appearance. They may fall into the unconscious habit of criticism—constant harping that is woven into their daily interactions with their spouse. This is not an environment in which intimacy can flourish. Have you ever heard a married couple speaking to each other in public, using words that are negative and critical, and tones of voice that are attacking? We find it distasteful to listen to them, but too often we can fall into similar habits with our spouses.

If you are prone to criticizing, you can do something about it. Stop and listen to yourself. Hear the way you speak to each other. On your part, decide to refrain totally from criticism, no matter how much you want to say something or how much you want to retaliate for something your spouse said. Instead, replace those critical words with positive words of praise and encouragement. Choosing to change your behavior in this one area can sometimes reverse the whole tone of a relationship.

Natalie thought it was impossible for her to stop saying negative things to her husband. Then an older friend challenged her to just stop. “Just stop?” she asked. “Yes,” her mentor said. “Think about it. When you are in the middle of shouting or criticizing him, if the telephone rings, what do you do?” Natalie realized that she would pick up the phone and answer it in a completely different tone of voice than she was using with her husband. She could stop! She realized she was making a choice to display anger and to criticize.

**Bottled-up anger and resentment.** Anger and hostility, no matter how veiled or repressed, will kill intimacy. The sexual relationship will always mirror the larger context of your life, “almost always serving as a barometer of the total relationship



between you and your partner. . . . Negative feelings in a marriage will often show up first in a couple's sex life."<sup>11</sup>

Sometimes, while a couple seems bored with each other or lack emotion in their marriage, actually underneath the surface there may be a volcano of rage and resentment that is never openly expressed. This happens when a couple fails to resolve problems and issues as they arise. Sometimes they will opt for a strained politeness, refusing to deal with the cause of tension. They may pretend that the clash never happened, but the bad feelings are still there. The problem is still there, too, waiting to trouble them another day. Bottled-up anger will often lead to coldness and lack of interest in sex. Couples need to learn to deal with issues as they come up, and they need to follow Paul's admonition not to let the sun go down on their anger (Eph 4:26).

**Failure to communicate.** Intimacy cannot grow without communication—sharing on both the verbal and nonverbal levels. In many marriages partners have little communication beyond the superficial level. They may be uncomfortable talking about emotions, or they may not know how to resolve conflict that may arise from communicating on a deeper level. Most people can learn to improve in the area of communicating if they really want to. Communication requires a willingness to be vulnerable, to try to put into words what one is feeling. It also requires skills in listening. Lesson 6 will provide some helpful encouragement in the area of improving communication.

**Lack of trust.** Mutual trust is one of the essentials of intimacy. It takes time and care to build this trust between partners. When trust is lacking, it is difficult for partners to open up freely to their spouses. Many factors influence the level of trust. Sometimes one spouse never learned to trust and consequently is not comfortable with intimate sharing. Some people shrink from deep emotional involvement because they have been hurt by close relationships. The pain that lingers from these experiences can be healed and replaced by a whole new pattern of finding pleasure in emotional closeness. This takes time and loving patience on the part of the mate, who must woo and win the other's confidence. It can and must be done if the two are ever to enjoy an intimate relationship.

**Anxiety about one's physical appearance.** A negative perception of one's body often inhibits sexual intimacy. Free sexual interaction cannot be enjoyed when a person is embarrassed about his or her body and seeks to keep it covered at all times. Some people feel unlovable because they perceive some aspect of their body to be ugly, and they are convinced that their partner has the same negative feelings toward their appearance. Our natural sexual responses are inhibited when we concentrate on our physical imperfections, rather than on erotic and pleasurable thoughts. Focusing on physical appearance can inhibit us from freely expressing ourselves sexually.

Society has set up false standards for beauty that cause many people to feel dissatisfied with their physical appearance. Comparing yourself with the artificial world of actors and models, for example, will only lead you to disparage your own body, rather than to enjoy it as God intended. To improve intimacy, you can express appreciation for your mate's body and resist the temptation to criticize or tease.

If you feel dissatisfied with your physical appearance, remind yourself of the words of Psalm 139:14, "I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; wonderful are your works, and my soul knows it very well." You need to take care of your body and develop a positive attitude toward what God has given you and the way He has made you.

**Predictable, mechanical sex.** Sex that is as routine and mechanical as brushing one's teeth can be an indicator that emotional closeness is limited. A man can have a sexual experience that lasts a scant two minutes, but he is cheating both himself and his wife of the pleasurable lovemaking that brings closeness.

In modern life, couples are often too tired to give their best to each other or to take the time to give pleasure to one another. Sex can lose its appeal when it becomes mechanical, hurried, lacking in spontaneity. You plan for many other events in life, so why not plan ahead for a leisurely, uninterrupted sexual encounter? You can arrange a romantic setting and give enough time for sex to be an enjoyable, pleasurable experience. Avoid dull routine in your sex life; you can vary the time, the place, the position, and the approach for sex. Marriages are revived by variety and renewed expectation.

**An absence of nonsexual physical touching.** To enjoy intimacy with your spouse is to be in touch. This means physical touch, as well as the ways you touch emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually. Partners need physical touch of an affectionate, nonsexual nature in order to retain the feeling of being in love. Emotional and sexual intimacy cannot grow unless you touch: gently, sensitively, freely, without fear of rebuff. Intimacy requires cuddling, snuggling, sitting close to each other, holding hands, and kissing as a part of your daily life. Too often in marriage, couples use touch only as a sexual signal, but sex can never meet all of their needs for physical contact and affection.

**Too much television/computer time.** Television and computer time are passive activities; people who are too wrapped up in these activities often have neither the motivation nor the energy to develop an intimate relationship. Many spouses do not realize how much time is consumed by these activities. It can become a source of real friction when one partner stays up late to watch television, avoiding snuggling and sex. It takes self-control to turn off the television or the computer and choose to spend time with your spouse.

**Unrealistic expectations.** Unrealistic expectations can hinder the enjoyment of sexual experiences with your spouse. Many couples admit to feeling disappointed at their first sexual encounter on their wedding night or their experiences of sex together in their first years of marriage.

The wedding of a couple who have waited and kept themselves pure until marriage is an occasion that pictures the union of Jesus Christ with His bride, the church, when she will be presented to Him in all her purity, having been cleansed from all sin by His sacrifice.

While both partners look forward to this day with great anticipation and excitement, the first sexual encounter is just the beginning of their lives together. It should be a time of great tenderness, of exploring one another's bodies for the first time, of wonder and enjoyment.

Often, if the wedding festivities have lasted all day, or even longer in some cultures, both partners may be exhausted. In addition, they are often nervous or anxious about this "first time" together. Expectations of maximum sexual performance will only add to the disappointment. Sex does not generally start out with maximum ratings. It gets better with practice and with a caring attitude that desires to learn how to please the partner.

It is important to understand that the difficulties you experience at this stage are usually due to lack of information and to hopes too high for the moment you have been anticipating. Romantic literature often implies that sexual response is automatic, but it takes time to establish a truly good sex relationship.

Unrealistic expectations can continue to cause disappointment and frustration for couples, particularly when one partner expects every sexual encounter to be a perfect experience. Our goal should be to please our partner and enjoy the variety of ways that may take place.



1. Which of the above nine hindrances tend to be a problem in your marriage?
2. What other hindrances to a good sexual relationship can you think of?
3. How does each of these hindrances affect you and your spouse?
4. What can you do to remove them?

### Phases of Sexual Response

Another hindrance to a good sexual relationship can be inadequate understanding of the way our bodies are designed to work. Sometimes partners find themselves

discouraged by a lack of responsiveness on the part of their spouses, or by a sense of ineptitude in the area of sexuality. It can be helpful to understand the phases involved in the act of intercourse since God has created our bodies to enjoy this pleasurable experience.

A number of studies have explored the human sexual response. One of the most well-known was conducted by Masters and Johnson.<sup>12</sup> Researchers studied couples and described the delicate processes that take place between a man and a woman as they engage in sexual foreplay and intercourse. The phases of sexual response can be summarized as follows:

**The Arousal Phase.** This phase, also called foreplay, is the period of sexual stimulation in which arousal takes place. The time of foreplay is a time to enjoy each other's bodies, engaging in relaxed love-play such as holding each other, kissing, caressing, and fondling each other. Caressing each other should never be hurried; there should be a gradual build-up and intensifying of pleasurable sensations. Once stimulation begins, it should continue in an ever-increasing intensity, building to a climax.

In general, women were shown to take longer to be aroused and to become prepared for intercourse. Studies showed that it takes more time for a woman's lower pelvic region and the outer part of her vagina to become engorged by blood. This engorgement is necessary before the vagina becomes properly lubricated, ensuring pleasant and pain-free intercourse. As the excitement phase progresses, both partners experience more rapid breathing, pulse, and blood pressure.

When men hurry through this stage, their spouse is not adequately aroused or prepared and may not experience sexual release or full enjoyment. Sex without adequate foreplay may even be painful for the woman due to inadequate lubrication, resulting in negative feelings toward the act of sex.

Touch is an important part of this phase, as excitement builds that leads toward intercourse. Someone has said that the largest sexual organ in the body is the skin; pleasurable responses result from caressing many parts of the body, from the face and neck, the arms, legs, as well as the more obvious erogenous zones. The result of spending adequate time in foreplay is more fulfilling intercourse for both partners. Couples should take time to discover each other and learn together what each enjoys. Communicate gently what pleases, what feels good, or what may be uncomfortable.

**The Plateau Stage.** In this phase of sexual response, the sex organs are fully prepared. Ideally, both partners are fully aroused, poised and waiting for the peak of sexual pleasure. If the man can prolong the arousal phase for ten to twenty minutes or more, a much more overwhelming orgasm will result, and the act of intercourse will be more pleasurable for the woman who is fully aroused. Gentle caressing of the genitalia will increase sexual excitement in this plateau stage. Increase of arousal will

come from manual play at and alongside the clitoris more often than from placing fingers in the vagina. Soft touching and kissing of the wife's breasts and nipple area also increase her excitement.

As excitement continues to rise, the wife's clitoris swells and the labia minora at the entrance of the vagina become enlarged. In general, both partners will experience an increased pulse rate and tensing of muscles in the chest, abdomen, and buttocks. As the wife communicates the level of her sexual excitement, the husband can learn to control the timing of his response.

**Orgasm.** In this phase, sensations reach a peak of pleasure, and involuntary contractions of the pelvic muscles take place. A man's orgasm is complete when he has expelled the semen. The wife's orgasm consists of a series of rhythmic contractions of the muscles of the lower vagina. She can increase the intensity of the physical sensations by adding her own pelvic movements to his. The climax is a high point of feeling that is often described as ecstasy.

Men can generally have only one orgasm without a rest, whereas women sometimes experience multiple orgasms. The orgasm of the husband and wife may take place simultaneously or one after the other. As soon as the husband finishes ejaculation, he should immediately begin to stimulate his wife's clitoris manually so that she can enjoy her orgasm. At times the woman may enjoy sexual intercourse with her partner without needing an orgasm, but it should be the natural desire of the husband to please her in this way.

**Relaxation.** During this phase following orgasm, the sexual organs return to their normal state. This generally happens faster for men than for women, who take longer to return to normal. Women enjoy being held during this resolution phase (when they may also experience another orgasm), so it is important for men not to "switch off," turn over, and go to sleep. A satisfactory resolution phase is a time of peace and relaxation, lying in each other's arms and enjoying each other's presence. Some want to remain close to each other, kissing and stroking. In the relaxed afterglow, it is appropriate to compliment each other as lovers or thank the other for a beautiful experience. Some Christians find themselves wanting to pray together when intercourse is completed, as they relax in each other's arms. A sense of wholeness and of worship of the God who gave this great gift seems totally fitting.

**Preparation for sex.** In addition to the phases described above that take place during the act of intercourse, there is another phase we might call preparation for sex. For most women, preparation for sexual love begins at breakfast—with the kind words, loving attitudes, and respectful communication between husband and wife. It is difficult for most wives, and some husbands, to become sexually excited at the end of a day filled with quarreling or a day during which tenderness and kindness have been lacking.

For a woman, sexual responsiveness is generally tied to her husband's behavior throughout the day, to acts of tenderness, kindness, gentleness, helpfulness—the many small ways a man shows he cares about her. Men also respond to kindness and respect on the part of their wives. The way that we speak to and interact with our spouses will greatly influence the closeness of our sexual relationship. We need to treat each other with respect and caring.

The quality of the relationship plays a huge part in the responsiveness of the partners. We treat our spouses with kindness, caring, and respect when we are getting to know them, but later in marriage we often neglect these habits and ways of showing love. These little acts that show we love our spouses are closely tied in to their sexual response.



1. How would you evaluate your level of satisfaction regarding your sexual relationship with your spouse?
2. What problems, if any, are you experiencing in this area?
3. Discuss them with your mate and, if need be, with a trusted friend or counselor who can provide help.<sup>13</sup>

Lovemaking, then, is not just the act of sexual intercourse between a man and a woman. It is much, much more. Lovemaking means enjoying each other, spending time together, taking walks, sitting together, holding hands, snuggling close as you sleep, praying together. “Real sexual intimacy links marriage partners with strong strands of caring that are deeply emotional, mental—even spiritual—and also intensely physical.”<sup>14</sup>

In order for the sexual union to reach its God-intended fulfillment, it must take place in the context of a relationship characterized by other expressions of love and affection. Lovers take time to build and to renew their relationship. The more you seek to please your spouse, the more he or she will want to please you. As you seek to please your mate, you are seeking to please and obey the Lord and are giving a love-offering to Him.



As you think back over the material presented in this lesson, what steps can you take to help you grow in intimacy with your partner? What choices can you personally make to move in the direction of greater maturity and to see increased expressions of love and affection in your marriage?



Ask God to help you as you seek to implement the choices you want to make and to replenish you when your resources are running dry, so that you will have renewed love and a renewed desire to express love to your spouse.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> E.g., see Graham & Wanda Ashby, [http://www.gaministry.co.nz/Marriage\\_Matters\\_Presentation\\_Notes.pdf](http://www.gaministry.co.nz/Marriage_Matters_Presentation_Notes.pdf), accessed October 25, 2010. Other websites have the same expression or concept.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Pss 136; 100:5; 106:1; 107:1; 138:8; Jer 33:11. The Hebrew word *chesed*, which occurs in these verses, as well as in many others, can be translated: lovingkindness, kindness, mercy, love, or faithfulness.

<sup>3</sup> J. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999), 384; emphasis added.

<sup>4</sup> The Greek word translated “marriage bed” is *koite*. In Lk 11:7 it simply means “bed.” In this context, because the bed is the place where sexual intercourse usually takes place, *koite* is taken to refer to “sexual intercourse.”

<sup>5</sup> John and Agnes Sturt, *Mentoring for Marriage* (Auckland, New Zealand: DayStar, 2004), 130.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>7</sup> All three references (Gen 4:1; Matt 1:24-25; Amos 3:2) are from the King James Version.

<sup>8</sup> Sturt, 147.

<sup>9</sup> Ed Wheat, *Love Life for Every Married Couple* (Basingstoke, UK: Marshall Morgan and Scott, 1987), 32.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph C. Dillow, *Solomon on Sex* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1977), 9.

<sup>11</sup> Wheat, 69.

<sup>12</sup> William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson, *The Human Sexual Response* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1966).

<sup>13</sup> Two resources in the area of sexual problems are Ed Wheat and Gaye Wheat, *Intended for Pleasure: Sex Techniques and Sexual Fulfillment in Christian Marriage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, 2010) and Tim and Beverly La Haye, *The Act of Marriage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976).

<sup>14</sup> Wheat and Wheat, 136.

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