
MARRIAGE PREP 101

GETTING READY FOR THE BIG DAY

MIKE MAZZALONGO

bibletalk^{.TV}

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14998 E. Reno
Choctaw, Oklahoma 73020

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CHAPTER 1

DESPERATELY SEEKING SOMEONE

FINDING MR./MS. RIGHT

For a large number of people in our society, finding someone to share their lives with is becoming increasingly difficult. Communication technology has enabled us to stay in touch with more of our friends and colleagues but that same digital connection has also isolated us to the point that the development of interpersonal relationships built on physical presence and interaction has become the exception and not the rule. People today share all kinds of personal details about their lives online to a thousand viewers, but that kind of transparency is rarely parlayed into actually building an intimate relationship with one person, a person that might become a suitable marriage partner in the future.

Another obstacle to finding a mate is the fast pace of life in today's American society. Many young adults are pursuing careers while upgrading their skills with part-time school or training. This leaves little opportunity for the time consuming task of cultivating a meaningful relationship that may lead to the commitment of marriage. In addition to this there is the

false expectation of how one "ought" to be living by a certain age (i.e. young couples mistakenly think that they should have a standard of living equal to their parents while they are in their twenties not realizing that their parents have probably struggled for many years in order to live as they do now). This false expectation has forced young couples to delay marriage until after college is completed or careers are in gear, and families are begun when women are in their late twenties, thirties and beyond.

We no longer live in closely-knit families surrounded by familiar communities where friendships, dating and marriage are a natural part of the lifestyle. For example, your cousin would introduce you to a friend or you dated your brother's buddy. Today, people are increasingly insulated in their personal cocoons. They are emotionally self-sufficient, connected to the world by their digital devices and see family only at Thanksgiving. As I mentioned before, young men and women do not have the natural network of family and neighbors that once facilitated the meeting of eligible and known partners (i.e. someone in your family or neighborhood circle knew your new boyfriend's family, background and reputation). Today, contacts are manufactured in singles' bars, singles' weekends or singles' groups at church. It is often difficult to meet someone in a natural, non-threatening way. Add all of this to the general misunderstanding that both men and women have concerning their defined roles in marriage (i.e. you don't know what to look for in a spouse if you don't understand what the role of a man or woman should be in marriage). What you end up with is a generation of single people desperate in their search for someone, but never quite sure where to look or what that someone should be like.

As Christians we are blessed because God provides His word to guide not only the married but the unmarried in their search for happiness. With this in mind, let's review some helpful guidelines that single people and unmarrieds (divorced or widowed) can follow in their successful search for a spouse.

1. Don't be Desperate

One of the most anxious times in our lives is when we want to be married but we are not. She wants to settle down and start a family. He is lonely and wants to share his life with someone. She sees her friends getting married and feels that she is being left behind. He is having trouble dealing with his sexual desires. She has a mother who is always dropping hints as to why she can't find a good man. For those seeking a mate all these little things seem to say, "Everybody in the whole world is married except me!"

Desperation leads people to do some pretty foolish things. For example:

- You will make the decision that marriage must not be for you, and in order to save yourself the disappointment you will stop being available and consequently be tempted to let yourself go emotionally and physically.
- You will compromise your morals in order to move a relationship forward. Some use sex, others abandon core beliefs or make promises they do not intend to keep, just to become part of the "married ones."
- You will marry someone you do not really love, but out of desperation to be settled, commit to a lifetime of marriage anyways.

The dictionary defines the word desperate as, "a state of recklessness caused by desire." In other words, we do foolish things because we have no hope. I can understand a person, who is not a Christian, putting their hope for happiness in a marriage partner, but as Christians we need to realize that our hope lies with Jesus Christ, not the institution of marriage.

⁵For You are my hope;

O Lord God, You are my confidence from my youth.
⁶By You I have been sustained from my birth;
You are He who took me from my mother's womb;
My praise is continually of You.
- Psalms 71:5-6

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus according to the
commandment of God our Savior, and of Christ
Jesus, who is our hope,
- I Timothy 1:1

We become desperate when we put our hope for satisfaction, joy or peace in anything other than Christ. Marriage fulfills basic human needs, but the things we absolutely need for happiness (joy, peace of mind, confidence before death, wisdom, self-control), these things are provided through Christ, not marriage.

Paul talks about this kind of stress (desperation) in I Corinthians 7:32-33:

³²But I want you to be free from concern. One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord; ³³but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife,

Notice that the concern is experienced by those who marry, not those who remain single. Being single is not easy, but being married is not somehow easier. If you are desperate to get married it is usually a sign that marriage is not what you need at that moment.

2. Know What You are Looking For

The problem with desperation is that it blinds us. We do not see clearly what is real, we only see what we want to see. If you are going to find someone, it helps to know what you are looking for. Knowing this usually saves time and energy by eliminating people and situations that do not meet your requirements. In choosing a partner, it is good to know what the parameters are. Some things are negotiable and differ from person to person, but in order to have the best opportunity to succeed in marriage here are a few things that should be non-negotiable for a single Christian person seeking a mate:

A - Do Not Marry a Non-Christian

Do not be bound together with unbelievers...
- II Corinthians 6:14^a

In this passage Paul is warning the Corinthians not to abandon Christ's teachings for pagan ones. Do not be (tied to) yoked with unbelievers in their teachings and practices. The passage does not talk about marriage directly, but it can be applied to the marriage relationship nevertheless.

In my experience I have seen that when Christians marry non-Christians, in most cases (not all), they either lose their faith or become ineffective spiritually and their marriage suffers as a consequence. This is because a Christian's goal is to please God and serve others in Christ's name. This creates conflict if their partner's goals are not the same. Christian singles need to make the effort to network with other Christians because if you never associate with other believers, chances are you will not find one to marry either.

B - Marry for Love Not Lust

³For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; ⁴that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, ⁵not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God;
- I Thessalonians 4:3-5

Today, most movies present the normal dating scenario in the following way: boy meets girl, they have sex, they begin to discuss marriage. Non-Christians are led by their passions and not by God. Disciples of Jesus Christ do not become involved with someone based on lust. They should choose someone that loves and respects them, and who they can love and respect in return. When choosing for love, examine the kind of love your partner has, not just the kind of body they possess:

1. Do they love God? Someone who loves God will know how to love you. You know that they love God if they are not ashamed of Jesus and strive to obey Him.
2. Do you love what you know about this person? A worthy partner is one who possesses certain characteristics that you learn about with time, things like honesty, humor, gentleness, generosity, mercy, etc. You do not have to have sex with someone to find these things out. If these are the things that attract you then this love is real and can last a lifetime.
3. Does the other person love you? The root cause of most divorce is selfishness, not adultery. The major cause of most arguments is, "whose needs are going to be met first?" It is easy to see if your partner really loves you, just examine carefully if he or she is more interested in satisfying your needs or their own.

Marry for love because it is the only thing that taxes and old age cannot take away from you.

Summary

Marriage offers security, comfort, pleasure, family, challenge for growth, opportunity for service and lifetime friendship. It is a worthy life and I sympathize with those who desire it and have not yet realized this goal. But in your searching remember: keep your hope for happiness firmly fixed on Jesus and you will be satisfied whether you marry or not; do not commit your life to someone who is not committed to Christ first and you second (if you are not second to God you will not have a first rate marriage); remember that you are on God's timetable, not your own. Don't make the mistake of trying to rush Him.

Finally, singles need to realize that the first step to finding the right partner is to become the right kind of partner yourself. This is something we will talk about later on in this book.

CHAPTER 2

MATURE ENOUGH FOR MARRIAGE

ROMANCE VS. LOVE

The very first thing that couples need to know if they want to have a loving marriage is the difference between romance and love. Romance is the idealized version of what we want someone to look like, act and how they will treat us. Love is a commitment to make another's welfare equal to our own and the personal discipline to maintain that commitment. The place to see romance is in Hollywood movies. Love, on the other hand, is seen at hospitals as one spouse cares for another over a long period of time.

Of course, every marriage needs romance but romance alone cannot make a marriage last a lifetime, only love can do this. Here are a few reasons why this is so.

Romance Produces Wrong Expectations

In previous times men and women consciously prepared themselves for marriage. Women saved what they needed to

begin a home and were specifically trained in caring for a husband and family. Men assumed that they would support a family at some point therefore they worked and trained with this in mind. Marriage and family were goals in themselves, not simply appendages to a career. Most marriages were arranged and there was not much dating or contact until the couple was actually married and living together.

Consequently, their love grew out of the shared experience of having a home and raising a family. Today, we prepare for marriage by idealizing our future mate. We work on our image/look and seek a similar or matching image. Once we have found our ideal, then we learn to live together.

The difference between the two methods is that two centuries ago people knew how to live together but learned how to love. Today, we search to fall in love according to a romantic ideal and then learn how to live together. One method begins with very little emotional investment and grows with knowledge and patience. The modern method, on the other hand, begins with a large emotional investment coupled with high expectations and then must adapt to a lessor reality. This is what happens when long term relationships are based only on romance.

Romance Demands Perfection

The intensity of our feelings in romance are produced by the idealistic way we view our beloved. We are filled with a fantastic feeling about this person but suffer terribly when this feeling drops, even a little. You see, romance is not about building something, it is about maintaining an ideal we have created about someone. When the feeling stops or slows down, we look for someone else to give us that feeling again.

Romance Emphasizes the Wrong Things

Romance looks for the spark, the flash, the fire and will often reject a potential partner who may be emotionally, socially

and spiritually suitable but does not live up to our romantic ideal. Romance is nourished mainly by physical intimacy. Romance searches for a partner that looks and feels good, but often ignores issues of character, adaptability and comfort, all things which make long term relationships actually work.

Romance Does Not Take Advice

Romantic couples feel they do not need the benefit of counseling, teaching or guidance because what they feel is what is important. In doing this they miss out on critical and objective information that can often help them avoid marital disaster.

Romance vs. Love

The other component, often missing in a relationship, is love. We talk about love but usually confuse it with romance. There are many emotions we feel when we are involved with someone, but here is the definition of true love: true love is a commitment to make another's welfare equal to one's own and the discipline to maintain that commitment.

Note the two major elements in love:

A Commitment to Consider Someone Else's Welfare Equal to My Own

This is the highest form of human love. When people marry, they do not just promise to be each other's spouse and be faithful, they promise to love. The promise/commitment is to do this whether the other person is ill or well, rich or poor, lovable or unlovable. When you marry, you are taking on the responsibility to care for someone else as well as you care for yourself.

The other element is...

Discipline

We do not promise self-discipline but we will need self-discipline if we are to carry out our promise to love. My commitment to make the other person's welfare equal to my own requires me to control my own selfish impulses. Here are some typical examples of loving self-discipline: a) I promised to pick her up at 10:00 PM but the game is into overtime and it is 9:45 PM - what does love do?; b) I love her/him, but a new good looking woman/man at the office is giving me signals, and I feel attracted - what does love do?; c) I am tired, she is tired, the baby is crying and it is 3:00 AM - what does love do?

Psychologists tell us that some people are unable to love, not because they do not feel attracted to others, but because they lack the self-control and discipline that it takes to care for another's welfare like their own.

Building on Love

Relationships that build on the basis of love can look forward to a lifetime of love as their experience. Here is how this works:

establish the commitment to make another's welfare equal to our own as the foundation of our relationship, then add other elements that make this relationship unique and enjoyable.

When this kind of love is the foundation, it becomes a joy to add other layers of interest and mutual service as the years go by (physical attraction, admiration, common interests and goals, etc.). If something else is at the base of a relationship, it cannot and will not support the difficulties and complexities of a lifetime lived as a couple.

Knowing You Are Ready

The one question most asked in counseling younger people about marriage is, "When do I know I am ready/mature enough for a committed relationship or marriage?" Each person is different and there are no easy answers, but there are certain signs that indicate if you or someone else is mature enough to go ahead with a serious relationship like marriage. Here are a few:

1. Self-Control

Can I make myself do what I should and not do what I should not? If neither partner assumes responsibility for setting or keeping limits in behavior, the couple will experience difficulty with each other and society as well. The ideal is that both partners have self-control so that each partner benefits from the other. However, when it is always the same partner that has to set limits and maintain control, you have a parent/child relationship not a marriage.

If you or your partner has not yet taken control of your lives, morals and responsibilities, you are not ready.

2. Personal Happiness

Ask yourself, "Am I happy in the state that I am in as a single person?" If you cannot be happy as a single person, chances are that you will not be happy in marriage either. Many people think that marriage will bring them happiness. Marriage does not bring happiness, it is an opportunity for one person to bring happiness to another. Unhappy people do not become happy because they marry. Hollywood and romance novels promote this idea and many are disappointed by it. If you are a happy single person and willing to make someone else happy with you in marriage, go ahead, you are ready.

3. Values

Another question to ask is, "Do I really know what I believe and what is important to me?" Many relationships do not work out in the long term because people do not yet know who they are or what they want to be. When they do find out, many times they realize that what and who they want to be are not compatible with the partner they now have. Make sure you are thinking and sharing with your partner what your hopes and dreams are for yourself so that you are both on the same track in the future.

4. Emotional Stability

How well do I control my feelings? Wide mood swings or extreme emotions over small matters are a sign of two problems:

1. Low self-esteem: Wild mood changes are a sign of a fragile esteem.
2. Immaturity: Immature people do not think, they simply react without reasoning or restraint.

It is difficult living with someone whose mood you cannot measure, or who uses their moods to establish control over the other. If your moods control you, marriage will only aggravate the problem, be careful.

5. Relationship with Parents

Ask yourself, "Have I developed a good adult relationship with my parents?" Young people learn to relate to others by relating to parents. For example, a person overly dependent on parents will have difficulty adapting to a partnership in marriage; a person rebelling against parents will bring

problems into the marriage that need/should have been solved with the parents.

A mature person is not tied to his/her parents but rather honors them by the way they live and manage their own independent lives.

Summary

These are some of the things to consider when trying to understand if you are mature enough for a serious relationship including marriage.

Perhaps, after reading this, some of you might be feeling pretty good about your relationship, and what has been said confirms that you are on the right track as far as marriage is concerned. Others may be thinking, "I am not ready, what am I going to do now?" Just realize that if you have chosen to read this material you have demonstrated the most important quality necessary in having a successful relationship: the willingness to learn.

Hopefully in the chapters to come you will learn and apply some important principles that will enable you and your partner to be in love for life.

CHAPTER 3

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A MAN

In this section I would like to talk about the types of things to look for in a man when considering marriage.

You see, it is to everyone's advantage to find a good man to marry because:

- For his own family he will be the one responsible for establishing the spiritual and moral level in the family and thus bring honor or shame to his parents and extended family.
- For his in-laws, he will be the one who will be responsible for the support, protection and leadership of their daughter and future grandchildren.
- For his future wife, he will be the father of her children and his quality of character will determine if Mother's Day, Father's Day and every other day will be times of happiness and thanksgiving, or ones of regret.
- For his Lord, he will either be a channel of blessing to his family or an obstacle to Christ's presence in their home.

It is extremely important, therefore, to find the right man to marry because there is so much that will depend on him for so many people, including the Lord. Of course, you will never find the right man if you do not know what you are looking for, or if you listen to the world and what it promotes as an ideal.

The Modern Ideal

Before we review what to really look for in a man, let us list some of the more popular things the world sees as desirable in today's 21st century male.

Looks

By far, the number one feature is looks. People say this is not so (usually to avoid appearing superficial), but according to what people do, looks is number one. I do not mean any particular look (muscular look, preppy look, rocker look, skater look, rich look, east coast look, Gap look, whatever). The point is that the number one thing we are told is that you have to have a "look" or you need to have someone whose got a "look." Of course this is nothing new, men have cultivated whatever "look" they thought would be attractive to women and vice versa. The point I am making here is that in the world, finding a man that has the right look is extremely important.

Potential

We measure personal value in this country by how rich, famous or how skilled a person is. Again, we like to deny this because it sounds so shallow, but a quick look at both the print and electronic media that reflect our values reveals that this is true. We will sit through numerous award shows that simply gratify the swollen egos of celebrities because we are enthralled by fame. We have endless books with outlandish praise lavished on people who drive fast cars or draw

pictures. I am not saying that sports and art are not worthy of praise, what I am saying, is that we use movie stars and athletes as models for what humans ought to be. We value a person simply because they are famous. A sad example of this was Monica Lewinsky (the White House intern who had a sexual affair with then President Bill Clinton). She became famous for being immoral with someone who was famous, and continues to be a celebrity for this reason some 25 years later! Since most people lack the beauty or talent to become famous, we are encouraged to do so through the amassing of wealth and things.

What is desirable in all of this, therefore, is a man who has the potential to excel in one of these areas. We hope that the man we choose has, at least, a chance at being great, being rich, being famous or being successful. We love winners, in this nation, and a man who has what it takes to be one of these, this is the man to look for, a man with potential.

I suppose, in general terms, the world is really telling us to look for ...

A Post-Modern Man

Post-modernism is a fancy term that describes the attitudes and value system espoused by the ideal man of this age. Post-modern man is the absolute opposite of the "old fashioned" man and light years ahead of the modern man. The post-modern man is above all else:

- Tolerant: Does not judge anyone's lifestyle or actions.
- Secure: He likes himself and secure in his abilities.
- Balanced: He does not allow anything to overcome his sense of self, he is in control.

- Logical: Does not deal with questions that are not posed or answered by science and technology.
- Unisexual: The post-modern man cooperates with every effort to eliminate the differences between the sexes (whether it be social or biological).
- Areligious: The post-modern man is not against religion, he just does not see any role it can play in his life.

This cool, independent, flexible, worldly man is the one women are told to look for.

The Ideal Man

I could go on to describe what the world says the ideal man of this age is, but I think you get the overall picture.

Let me now describe an ideal man for every age. I could list a dozen characteristics but prefer to describe only four that can be seen, so that like the tip of an iceberg, the qualities that are visible suggest a solid base in the unseen regions.

Look for a Man Who is Honest

A false witness will perish, but the man who listens to the truth will speak forever.

- Proverbs 21:28

Honesty is the bedrock of any relationship whether it is with a spouse, a family, an employer, a friend, even with God. A man who is honest has an open heart to hear the gospel if he is an unbeliever. A Christian man who is honest is teachable and more able to grow in spiritual things, and he is also more

likely to repent when wrong. One of the reasons that it is good not to marry too quickly is that it sometimes takes awhile to see if a man is truly honest.

One of the best ways to determine this is to see if he tells the truth in little things. If he is not truthful in small things, chances are he will not be truthful when it comes to larger issues as well. Look for a man who loves truth and who demands it from you as well.

Look for a Man Who is Kind

What is desirable in a man is his kindness
- Proverbs 19:22

Kindness is the doing of good for others, the focusing on another's needs instead of our own. Nothing is more beautiful and admirable in a man than a kind nature. Kindness lifts a man up from among other men who tend to be selfish and self-centered. Kindness identifies a man as a channel of God's blessings and God's character. Kindness is a window into the inner working of a man's soul, his true nature.

Women ought not to be fooled by looks or muscles, fancy clothes or a car. All of these things can hide or dress up a selfish sinner. But a man who is kind, regardless of his appearance or wealth, will know how to make someone else happy and satisfied in every area of life. Make sure you look for a man who is kind (in his speech, actions, attitude) not just someone who gives compliments or gifts to win favor. There is a difference. The player, who uses kindness as a device, is looking to receive something in return; the truly kind man, however, acts out of his nature. You really can tell the difference because the kind man is that way with everyone, the hypocrite is that way when he wants something from you.

Look for a Man Who can Forgive

Jesus said, "Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy" (Matthew 5:7). They say that there are only two sure things in life: death and taxes. However, there is another negative thing that we can be sure of and that is failure. It is a sure thing that no matter how sincere and how hard we try, we will make mistakes, we will mess up, we will say and do things (terrible things at times) that we regret. And when this happens, oh how wonderful to have a man (or dad, or friend, or whoever) who can forgive and encourage us.

A man who can forgive is one who probably has a good view of himself and his own faults. He is usually not too anxious to accuse or judge another. A man with a forgiving spirit has probably needed forgiveness in his life and received it, and understands how fragile and vulnerable a person feels when they fail or make a mistake.

We fool ourselves when we look for the "perfect" mate and think we have hit the jackpot when we find a man who seems perfect. But people who look or aspire to perfection are usually driven by fear and poor self-esteem, they hate themselves when they make mistakes and are pretty demanding of others as well.

Look for a man who is merciful to himself and when the time comes, and it will, he will show mercy towards you and the ones you love.

Look for a Man Who is Pious

The word piety comes from French and Latin root words which mean devoted. In a secular sense it means to give the proper respect and devotion due to parents, family, spouse or a cause, etc. In a Christian sense it refers to one who is devoted to the things of God, to His people and to His worship in faithfulness. For example, it was said of Jesus that God heard His prayers because of His piety (Hebrews 5:7).

The post-modern man is devoted only in the secular sense to himself (his look, his success), his interests (sports, leisure), his future (family stability, his retirement). Look for a man who has spiritual piety, who is devoted to the people, the work and the things of God. Men are called upon by God to be the spiritual and moral leaders in their families. How will they lead if they are not even interested in the things of God? A pious man is a complete man, a man who has the true potential for happiness and a full life. His devotion to God inspires confidence as to his purity, faithfulness and direction in life. We often say to our children, look for a partner who will help you, not hinder you, from going to heaven. A pious man is devoted to the type of things that lead one to heaven. If that is where you want to go, follow him and he will lead you there.

Summary

Sometimes when you are seeking a course of action regarding the repair of your car or a health issue, you ask the mechanic or the doctor, "What would you do in this situation?" We figure that if they would do it for themselves, the advice they give is at least sincere. I write these things because my wife and I have taught our own daughters to search for:

- A man who knows the truth and who can tell the truth, even under pressure, even when it will cost him something.
- A man who is good and kind naturally.
- A man who is full of mercy and tenderness.
- A man who wants to do what is right, what God wants him to do.

These men are still out there. Some are tall, some are poor, some are of a different culture, some love the outdoors, some are comfortable with cars or computers or tools or tractors or books. Regardless of the outward container, these sincere,

good hearted, merciful, spiritual men continue to be available!
So let us pray that our daughters and sisters and others who
are looking for a husband will look for this kind of man and,
Lord willing, find him.

CHAPTER 4

TOP TEN MARRIAGE MYTHS

When reading about marriage or hearing others discuss this subject it is amazing to note how much of the information on this important topic is false or misguided. In our day and age, marriage, especially the Christian concept of marriage, is greatly misunderstood.

In this chapter, therefore, we will examine a few of the more common misconceptions about marriage, and then review the original and correct description of this relationship contained in the Bible.

Our society has come up with many strange ideas about marriage. In her book entitled, "*Married People: Staying Together in the Age of Divorce*", Francine Klagsbrun outlines ten of the worst myths that many people accept as true concerning marriage. Of course, her myths are found among mostly non-Christian couples, but these ideas, nevertheless, influence a majority of people in our society.

#10 - Living Together Before Marriage Helps the Relationship

Now remember, Francine Klagsbrun is not a Christian writer, and yet in her research she sees this common, seemingly harmless argument as a myth and ultimately dangerous for the good health of a marriage. She comments that the living together experience does not improve the chances of a successful relationship. Oh, some of these relationships succeed to a point, or they succeed in spite of this arrangement, but not because of it. The easy attitude of temporary commitment is often transferred to the marriage itself, when or if this actually occurs. The author claims that couples who live together before marriage are at a greater risk of divorce than those who wait to be married before living together.

We can quote Scriptures (I Corinthians 6:9) that condemn this practice, but it is a real eye-opener when even non-Christian counsellors warn of the negative impact that these type of living arrangements can have on a long term relationship.

#9 - Have an Affair in Order to Breathe New Life into Your Marriage

How many times have you seen this as a theme in a movie or book? "I'll cause my partner to be jealous and hurt, and this will make them love me more." Of course, in marriage, solutions to problems never come from outside the relationship, especially immoral and hurtful solutions. No one is ever provoked to love more by being hurt and humiliated.

Christians would not consider this for obvious reasons, but many others do and suffer for it.

#8 - Be Prepared for Sex to Get Boring

It is ironic to note that people actually believe this about sex in marriage but manage to enjoy their bowling hobby for forty years. This myth promotes the fear of commitment among men and discouragement for women. People think, "Why get married if sex will get boring? Why do my best if my sex life will not be fulfilling in the end?" This attitude can become a self-fulfilling prophecy in a couple's marriage if they maintain this type of faulty thinking about sex.

The truth is that when you work at it you can expect sex to become more exciting, fulfilling and creative as the partners become comfortable and confident of each other's love and loyalty. Sex remains a vital part of a couple's marriage if they are determined to keep their romance and sex lives active and renewed.

#7 - Keep Your Independence

This idea is especially popular today among both men and women who do not want to lose their sense of independence, even if they are married. However, becoming dependent is an important component of a successful marriage. Too much independence in a marriage leaves one feeling unneeded or unimportant. The goal is to become lovingly dependent without becoming co-dependent, which is a form of slavery.

#6 - If Your Spouse Really Loves You, He/She Will Know What You Want/Need

This idea is true for those who are mind readers. Too many people see the test of true love as their partner's ability to discern what they want or need. This is unrealistic and unfair. In successful marriages the partners usually take great care in patiently explaining and reinforcing what they want and need to feel loved and happy.

#5 - Keep Peace at All Costs

There are many who spend most of their married lives avoiding an argument or a "scene." They would rather live quietly than honestly. Such an approach is basically dishonest and produces resentment. A willingness to acknowledge conflict, failure or unhappiness is the first step to improving a relationship.

This next myth is the opposite...

#4 - Always Say What is on Your Mind

It is good to be honest but not when your frankness or openness is simply an excuse for destructive criticism. In any relationship tenderness and tact should always accompany openness and honesty.

#3 - You can Change Your Partner

You can, if they want to change. When I am doing a marriage-prep course with engaged couples I tell them to turn and look at their partners. While they are looking at each other I say, "You better be happy and love what you are now looking at because this is pretty much what you are going to end up with." An angry, jealous boyfriend will become an angry, jealous husband. A lazy and dishonest girlfriend will have the same faults as a wife. Marriage challenges you to change and grow but does not automatically make you a better person or turn your partner into the person you want them to be.

#2 - A Baby will Bring You Closer

Here is a rule of thumb about babies: having children will magnify everything good or bad about your relationship. Babies create stress on the happiest of marriages and usually cause casual relationships to end. You cannot always plan for

babies but you can prepare for them by cultivating strong and committed relationships.

#1 - Love is All You Need

Love is important. However, sensual type love is only one of the many ingredients needed to have a happy marriage. In order to create a marriage where the partners will love one another for life you also need a strong dose of commitment, maturity and sacrifice. Being attracted to one another is easy; creating a lifetime bond is what requires effort.

Now that we have dealt with the myths, let us examine God's original plan for marriage. This design is the oldest and most successful, and is described in several passages throughout the Bible. For Christians, therefore, this biblical design is the blueprint they can use to both build a successful marriage and troubleshoot their relationship when there are problems.

Elements of the Original Design - Genesis 2:18-24

When examining God's plan for marriage contained in the Bible, you will notice that there are two elements or features in His basic design:

The People Involved - Genesis 2:18-22

¹⁸Then the Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him." ¹⁹Out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name. ²⁰The man gave names to all the

cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field, but for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him.

Notice that after man was created he realized from his understanding of the world around him that he was different in nature to the animals he shared the earth with; he was not an animal. He also noted that he was unique and alone.

²¹So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. ²²The Lord God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man.

God creates another human being suitable for partnership with Adam. God purposefully fashions a person like Adam in nature but different in composition: Woman. The term used to describe her is "help meet" which comes from two words; "help/Azar" (to surround, protect) and "meet" (corresponding to man).

Man is created in the image and glory of God; woman is created in the image and glory of man (I Corinthians 11:7). In the pre-sin world of Adam and Eve there was no conflict or misunderstanding of God's order of creation. Both Adam and Eve were glorious in the eyes of one another.

After the advent of sin, however, God had to impose order to avoid sexual anarchy and destruction. Because of sinfulness, the unregenerated man and woman saw only weakness in one another, not glory. In sinful man and woman there would now be the effort to exploit and dominate each other rather than cleave and unite as per God's original command.

For this reason, we go back to God's original design for marriage in order to establish the framework that will support a lifetime loving relationship. This requires that we form a marriage unit with only one man and one woman. There are many marriage styles permitted and promoted in this world. For example, group marriages (one man and many women), open marriages (each partner free to form sexual unions with others), same-sex marriages (two men or two women), common-law marriages (no marriage contract recognized by law). All of these styles may be permitted in one society or another, but they do not conform to God's original design for marriage described in the Bible.

The first element or feature in God's design for marriage, therefore, is one man and one woman who are legally committed to live as husband and wife for life.

The Covenant - Genesis 2:23-24

The other feature in God's design for marriage is that it always contains a covenant. Verses 23-24 provide the details contained in the original marriage covenant/contract.

²³The man said, "This is now bone of my bones, And flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, Because she was taken out of Man."

Respect and honor. A woman is equal in nature and value to man.

^{24a}For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife;

A change in priorities and responsibilities which will lead to a new commitment agreed upon by both parties.

^{24b}and they shall become one flesh.

The marriage union is exclusive.

In this way Adam and Eve expressed their marriage vows to the only "legal authority" possible at that time, God Himself. God and the angels were also the witnesses of this contract/covenant between Adam and Eve.

What constitutes a marriage between a man and a woman is the covenant/contract/promise that they have made to one another. Therefore, what makes a man and woman married is not sex, it is the covenant. Otherwise, you would be married to everyone you have ever had sex with. For Adam and Eve it was a spoken covenant before God. In our society it is the exchange of vows and a written contract before a representative of the government (clergyman, judge, etc.). Every society has some form of this covenant-making that seals a marriage commitment between a man and woman.

A couple can share a house, sexual intimacy and a joint bank account, but if there is no covenant, there is no marriage according to God's design. In His plan for marriage set forth in the Bible there are two basic elements:

1. A man and a woman who freely choose to enter into marriage with one another.
2. A legal covenant/contract laying out the terms of their agreement to marry.

Why this Design?

Aside from the fact that this is God's design, the plan is fairly simple to understand, but in its simplicity it manages to serve all of our complex needs.

The Design Serves Us Emotionally

Man needs companionship (Genesis 2:18). Men and women were not created to be alone. This was not God's purpose. The Bible says that those who live the single life and do so without problems are able to accomplish this because God has given them a special gift (I Corinthians 7:7), and you do not need to believe in God to have this. Even though the single life is possible, since many live and honor God with their single life, married life is the one we are designed for and encouraged to pursue whenever possible.

He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor from the Lord.
- Proverbs 18:22

The Design Serves Us Physically

Within marriage the powerful human sex drive is channeled into a wonderful and meaningful experience. We share love, given and received in the most dynamic and mysteriously wonderful way possible. We are comforted without words. We enjoy pleasure without guilt. While alone, the sex drive within us remains unfulfilled. When expressed within marriage, however, it has the ability to build our relationship and create something healthy and meaningful.

Sex within marriage creates family which serves not only ourselves but society as well. Family fulfills our need to belong, our need to be with others. All of these things are provided within marriage without guilt or shame because the

covenant that created the commitment for life came before the sexual intimacy. People's sex lives within marriage are often in trouble because they violate this principle. Not only preachers, but many counsellors tell us that the biggest problem with sex inside of marriage is that there was and continues to be sex outside of marriage.

The Design Serves Us Spiritually

Marriage serves us spiritually by helping us to carry out various ministries given to us by God. In Genesis 1:28a, Adam and Eve served God by managing the Garden. The true objective of marriage is not simply paying off the mortgage, educating the kids or retiring in security. God created marriage so that men and women within this union could render honor and service to Him while accomplishing these other things.

CHAPTER 5

NOW THAT WE ARE TOGETHER

So far I have made the point that in order to be ready for marriage we need to know the difference between romance and love. Romance is the ideal we have of what our partner should look and act like. Romance usually disappoints because we start with an impossible ideal and have to adjust to reality. Love, on the other hand, is the commitment to make our partner's welfare equal to our own, and the discipline to keep that commitment. Unlike romance, love begins with reality and builds to an ideal relationship.

Another point to remember is that people who are ready for a serious relationship have reached a maturity level that is demonstrated in several ways. For example, they have developed a measure of self-control. This is important because in building a long term relationship like marriage, self-control is indispensable. People ready for marriage are generally happy and satisfied with their lives because getting married may increase one's happiness, but it will not transform an unhappy person into a happy one. A successful marriage usually has two people who know and share each other's values. You are ready for marriage if you are emotionally stable. People who cannot control their emotions

as single people rarely have happy marriages because their emotional swings often put too much pressure on their partners and their relationships.

I also said that someone is ready for a long term relationship when they have been able to establish a good adult to adult relationship with their own parents. Unresolved issues with parents are usually dragged into marriage and create problems there. One last point to note is that the willingness to learn is the single most important quality in determining if we are ready to commit to marriage or not. Are we ready to learn, to adapt, to change in order to enter into a serious and committed relationship? If we are, then we are ready.

In this chapter I want to describe some of the changes that take place after we become legally married.

The Wedding Day

When it comes to marriage there are two things that all of us have in common:

1. **We all want happy marriages.** Nobody goes into marriage with the hope that they will be miserable. No one says, "I cannot wait for the fighting to begin." Despite the many failed marriages that we see around us, everyone goes into marriage hoping for the best.
2. **We all experience change after the wedding day.** Even though we know and understand this, sometimes we are not ready for the changes that will occur. Usually we learn that happiness and change are related.

This being said, I would like to review some of the changes that take place once we enter a marriage relationship. If we accept and adapt to these changes, we will have taken the first steps in creating a happy marriage for life.

Things that Change

Before we actually marry there is so much effort spent on the ceremony itself that there is sometimes a let down after the big day. Once married, many say to themselves, "Now that we are married, what is supposed to happen? Should I be different? Where do I go emotionally from here?"

I tell engaged couples that the ceremony on the wedding day is not the substance of what is actually taking place when we marry, only the symbolic moment when the real changes begin. These changes are better understood if we use the word "metamorphosis" (a term that describes the kind of radical change that takes place when, for example, a caterpillar is transformed into a butterfly). At marriage, therefore, we go beyond simple changes like taking on a new name or a change of address, and actually undergo a transformation (metamorphosis) that changes who we are.

With this in mind, let us examine the metamorphosis that takes place on the day you say, "I do."

1. A New Legal Status Begins

In marriage we enter into a legal and binding contract with precise conditions to live with another as husband or wife. This contract carries special privileges for the couple (property and succession rights; family protection; income tax advantages; social recognition as legally married). This contract is also required and recognized by God (Romans 13:7). Laws of government concerning marriage are ordained by God. If we are married before the state according to its law and custom, we are also married before God. Conversely, if we forgo the legal element in our relationship (e.g. co-habitate, common-law, live together) and the state does not consider our relationship a legal marriage, then neither does God (Mark 12:17).

The first change that takes place, therefore, is legal in nature. On the wedding day we have a new legal status as married people.

2. A New Relationship Begins

‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’.

- Matthew 19:5

On our wedding day, when we exchange the vows of marriage, it is the beginning of an exclusive, permanent relationship with our partner. This is what sets marriage apart from every other relationship: exclusivity (we are not "one flesh" with anyone else), and permanence (permanence is not promised to anyone else).

Whatever relationship existed before or whatever happened before is annulled by what is happening now. If you are a single or an unmarried person and willingly enter into marriage, this new relationship takes precedence over all other human connections. On the wedding day two people forge a permanent and exclusive relationship with each other, something they will not have with anyone else until death.

3. A New Identity Begins

Jesus said, "... For this reason a man will cleave to his wife..." (Matthew 19:5). Before we marry we are known or referred to as the son of, or daughter of, or relative to such and such. On the wedding day our identity is no longer linked to our parents or exclusively to ourselves, but rather to our partner.

This is not a popular idea today in a society where self-expression, self-development and the pursuit of personal independence within the couple are promoted vigorously. We need to realize that these concepts work against what marriage was initially created to achieve: a life-experience where two individuals are brought together to form one complete identity; a life of interaction, integration and interdependence.

When I marry, therefore, I no longer consider only myself when thinking about my hopes, my dreams or my needs. The change of identity that takes place at marriage requires me to acknowledge that I now have a new identity that includes my spouse, and these things have become "our" hopes and dreams. The change in identity also means that others must now think of me in new terms as well. When you think of me now, you should be considering my wife in addition to myself because she is now part of my new and complete identity.

So many marriages suffer because the partners refuse to take on their new identities as married people, or others refuse to accept that the old person has changed. There are fewer problems with in-laws, old boyfriends/girlfriends and buddies when we identify and insist on being identified in this new way.

4. A New Role Begins

When we take our vows there is also a change in the role that we will now play in life. We are no longer simply brother, friend, daughter, but take on the role of husband or wife. The Bible explains clearly the roles that both man and woman are to fulfill in marriage. Unfortunately, these instructions have been misrepresented and misinterpreted over the centuries.

²²Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³For the husband is the head of the wife, as

Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body.²⁴ But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything.

²⁵Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her,²⁶ so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,²⁷ that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless.²⁸ So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself;
- Ephesians 5:22-28

Many men have incorrectly used this passage to justify their unjust repression and mistreatment of their own wives and women in general. Women, in certain instances, have used it to justify the argument that Paul was a misogynist and the Bible as irrelevant for today's woman. It is important, therefore, to look carefully at what the passage actually says:

Paul instructs men to treat their wives as Christ treated the church. In reading the gospels we see that Jesus cared, served, fed, protected and encouraged the church. He even washed the Apostles' feet (when was the last time you washed your wife's feet?). He died to save the church, even after the church (made up of the Apostles at the time) abandoned Him in the garden. He is faithful until death no matter what.

The Apostle also tells wives to treat their husbands as the church responds to Christ: with love, respect, service, eager to obey and please. We know that many members of the early church suffered and died in order to remain faithful to their Lord.

Marriage, Paul says, is the attempt to create here on earth, between a man and a woman, the mystical union that exists between Christ and the church in heaven. It is the earthly attempt to preview a heavenly reality. We can invent new roles and attitudes for marriage according to our own design, but we will not produce the heavenly model that we are called upon to create in doing so.

The thing we have to realize about these biblical roles for husbands and wives within marriage is that they go against our basic human/sinful natures: husbands are not naturally disposed to sacrificing themselves and making their wives their number one priority; wives are not naturally disposed to submitting to their husbands. These God-given roles must be learned and achieved through patience and the grace that God gives us through Christ.

5. A New Family Begins

²⁴ For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.
- Genesis 2:24

In Genesis we see that the joining of the two partners in marriage created a new family unit. This does not mean that there is no love or bonding that remains with parents, but there is now a new priority. Many marriages fail because one or both partners refuse to establish their spouse as the priority over mom and dad. When you marry you are creating a new family unit to which you are pledging your first loyalty for the rest of your life (one of the reasons why parents cry at weddings... there goes my baby).

Summary

Once we become Mr. and Mrs. we need to understand and expect the changes that take place because we have chosen to marry:

1. **Legal change:** A new legal status within society is established.
2. **Relationship change:** A new exclusive, permanent relationship has begun.
3. **Identity change:** We are no longer one, but two in one.
4. **Role change:** We now begin to play the role of husband or wife, eventually father or mother, etc.
5. **Family change:** We create a new family unit and a new priority.

Marriage according to God's plan is satisfying, challenging and life changing.

Exercise

Both spouses write the answers to the following questions on a sheet of paper. Do not show your spouse your answers.

- Three things that remained the same after you were married.
- Three things that changed after this time.
- One thing that surprised you.

Have a conversation about your relationship. Share and discuss your list of changes with your partner. See which ones need to be changed back, which ones are good, etc.

CHAPTER 6

HOW TO CREATE A HAPPY MARRIAGE

No matter what culture you belong to, what religion you believe, what society, level of wealth or era you live in, one thing common to all people is that they want to be happy, especially in their marriages. Christians want this, Jews want this, Muslims want this, black, white, yellow or red people all want to be happy in their marriages. I have never heard a new bride or groom rub their hands together and say, "I cannot wait for the divorce to happen." Even if your son or daughter marries the sorriest loser, the worst match possible in your eyes, what do parents end up saying anyways? "I hope they will be happy."

Why do we want so desperately to be happy in marriage?

- Because this relationship has the power to make us extremely happy or extremely sad (it affects everything else).
- Because we often measure our success in life by how well we succeed in our marriages (we use marriage as a way to give ourselves value).

- Because we do not receive many chances to get it right. Some do not get any (ask middle-age divorced women how difficult it is to find someone).
- There is so much pressure on us to succeed (parents, children, our religious beliefs, society in general, our work/career), everybody is hurt or disappointed if we fail.
- Many want to duplicate the happiness and level of contentment that they saw in their parent's or grandparent's marriages (they see this as an ideal they wish to fulfill in their own lives).
- They want to be happy in marriage because they have been unhappy growing up; unhappy as single persons; perhaps unhappy in a previous marriage (they want to experience something they have missed out on and hope marriage will supply it).
- Finally, because they have been told that they will be happy and should be happy when they marry the one they love (there is a great expectation of happiness in marriage).

And for all this expectation and hope of happiness in marriage, there is the sad reality that many couples do not attain the prize they so covet when they say, "I do." According to a survey done of couples here in North America trying to determine the level of success in marriage, the following picture emerged:

- 50% said that they could not resolve issues and ended up divorcing.
- 25% acknowledged that their marriage was based on convenience (i.e. the kids/no choice/too proud/family or religious pressure kept them together).

- 15% of respondents said that they were generally satisfied with their marriage.
- 10% answered the survey by saying that they were very happy and they would not change a thing.

Although 100% of people want a happy marriage, the actual number of people who accomplish this is far lower. Of course, this particular survey did not focus on Christian marriages where I suspect the numbers may be different. In any case, I believe that God wants everyone to have successful marriages, especially Christians.

Now, in a previous section we talked about the changes that take place when you go from being single or dating or even engaged, to being legally married:

1. A new legal status begins. You have a new union recognized by law and society. Marriage is the highest commitment a couple can make before God and society.
2. A new relationship begins. You are now part of an exclusive, lifetime partnership.
3. A new identity begins. You will be referred to as a couple from now on.
4. A new role begins. You will now take on responsibilities that you did not have previously (husband, father, etc.).
5. A new family begins. You leave your original family in order to begin a new one which will take precedence over previous affiliations.

When people marry and organize a wedding ceremony and all the associated activities, what they are doing is symbolizing with vows, rings, prayers and celebrations all the

changes that are about to take place as they marry, and the anticipation of the happiness they will experience as a result of these changes.

You see, this new, exclusive, lifetime commitment that brings a new role, identity and family, this is the source of the happiness that all seek in marriage. When people are unhappy in marriage, it is in these areas that the root of their problems lie. For example, there may be doubt or a violation of the exclusivity of one's relationship, or a wavering as to the length and quality of one's commitment, and this causes anxiety or sorrow. Perhaps one or both partners are confused about their married identities or the roles they are to play, and begin to reject these and in doing so create conflict. Perhaps the burden of family is frightening or too heavy and this produces hesitation, conflict or doubt. Then there may be some physical, emotional or spiritual changes in one of the partners that has caused an imbalance in the relationship. Whatever the cause for the unhappiness, the solution can usually be found by going back to the basics of what originally created the marital happiness in the first place and examine what has changed or stopped functioning there.

Let's face it, an exclusive lifetime commitment to an imperfect person by an another imperfect person is not an easy thing to accomplish. Because a commitment of this sort is so challenging, couples need to make a constant effort to maintain and improve their relationship. The secret that successful couples who have been happily married for a long time know is that marriages can and do get better with time. Unfortunately, a popular misconception is that there is happiness in marriage, but it is only temporary. Many people think that the best time in a marriage is at the beginning: great sex, excitement, discovery, all new adventures in life. Some envy the Hollywood stars who have the fame and money to repeat this "honeymoon" period every few years. They marry, have a great two to three years together, get divorced and start the cycle over again with someone new.

This has given people the impression that the time immediately following the wedding is when a marriage is at its best. After this point it only goes downhill. Such thinking is unfortunate and sets couples up for low expectations and eventual failure. We need to understand that marriages, by design, have to improve from where they begin (no matter how happy one feels during these first few months or years) or else they will die. When couples realize that the wedding day is the start, not the high point in their marriage, they then have the right view of the challenge that is before them.

With these things in mind, I'd like to offer four things that couples are required to work on in the day to day task of building a happy marriage that lasts a lifetime.

Creating Happiness

Everyone receives a basic supply of happiness when they marry. The problem is that many people think that they can live off of their initial deposit of happiness given at the time of their wedding. Most of this basic happiness is generated by romantic love, which is composed of three elements:

Sexual Attraction

This is what usually draws us to one another in the first place and sustains our relationship for the first few years.

Similar Interests

The couple loves to ski, dance, go to movies, drink, hang-out, promote ideas, politics, share religious faith and produce babies. These engage and fill our time with each other as we begin.

Idealism

The other person fulfills our ideals about what is good, beautiful or a match for ourselves.

Eventually, however, most couples learn that if they do not build on these things, they will not be able to sustain the "feeling" of happiness that their marriage provided at the start. In order to build happiness, couples need to work on four basic things. I call them the four A's of a successful marriage.

A - #1 - Agape (The Bible Word for Love)

Not just feelings or emotions (like soap operas) but the kind of love necessary to produce successful marriages. What the Bible calls "agape" love that is adapted to the marriage relationship. Agape is the Greek word for love used in the New Testament. It is a word used to describe the type of sacrificial love that God has for us and asks us to have for one another in Christ.

Definition: agape love is a disciplined commitment towards the well-being of another (in this case, our marriage partner). Let us analyze this kind of love from this definition.

Commitment

A conscious choice to commit ourselves to another permanently. When each partner knows that this is the basis of the relationship, they are free to be themselves, to show their weaknesses, to be completely truthful without the fear that the other will run off at the first sign of trouble. What constitutes marriage (in every society) is the commitment, not the sex act. What makes you married is the fact that you have committed yourselves to live as husband and wife, not just the idea that you have moved in together.

Discipline

Discipline/self-control is necessary if we are to realize the goals of our commitment; necessary to overcome sexual temptation that occurs in every marriage; necessary to be kind, patient and forgiving when doing so is not easy or appreciated. Love needs discipline in order to stay focused.

Well-Being of Partner

The main objective of marriage is not to acquire a house, or car, to raise children, or to please our parents. The main objective for each in marriage is maintaining the well-being of our partners. When this is the objective, these other activities fall into their right order.

So, a disciplined commitment towards the well-being of our partners equals love in marriage. Without this kind of love, marriages cannot succeed (they may last but they do not succeed). The objective is to succeed and be happy in marriage, not simply make it last for fifty years. With agape/love, marriage is never long enough, and there is never enough time to be with your beloved partner.

Crafting, improving, becoming more skilled at and having this agape type love for our partner is the actual "work" in creating happiness in marriage. The more each partner improves in the art of agape type love for their spouse, the greater happiness is actually created. We work at improving our ability to love in this way and the direct result is growing happiness in the relationship. It is not more money, freedom, mobility or success that has the power to create lasting marital happiness, it is more agape type love for one another that is directly connected to the increase and maintenance of marital happiness.

A - #2 - Attraction

By attraction, I mean sexual attraction. A good sex life (when health and circumstances permit) is a sign and a necessity for happiness and success in marriage. God created sex for the pleasure and comfort of the married couple as well as for the purpose of procreation. This means that even after we have had our children, there remains a divine reason for sex (Genesis 1-2).

Sex is a powerful force and when it is expressed within marriage it becomes an act of love, faith and deeper commitment between the partners. From this act children are born, a sign that sex is good because human life comes as a result of it. Something that is basically a physical drive on its own becomes a precious and creative force within the confines of marriage. When unleashed outside of marriage, however, it often produces outcomes that cause sorrow and shame. The objective, of course, is how to maintain the activity and desire for sex within marriage over a long period of time. Here are a few suggestions:

1. Believe God when He tells you that the pleasure that comes from sex is good. (Genesis 2:25 - "Naked and not ashamed.") So many people have poor sex because they feel guilty and unspiritual when experiencing the many facets of sex with their spouses. This is often the result of improper teaching about the freedom married people have to express their sexual personalities within the intimate bounds of marriage. If one is taught that sex is basically dirty and only tolerated by God within marriage, this person will not likely be able to overcome their basic discomfort with sex even when they are married. I often tell young couples that just being married does not make them experts in the area of sexual relations. Couples should seek to improve not only their understanding of human sexuality but also their ability to experience the great

potential for pleasure and satisfaction possible from this gift of God to married couples.

2. Make the other's well-being your major objective within your marriage, especially in your sex life. Sexual feelings are stimulated by kindness, faithfulness, tenderness, generosity, humility and other giving virtues. When we work on these things first, then physical contact is desirable. Who wants physical contact with a selfish, rude, impatient person, even if they have a nice body? Jesus says that impure sex and adultery begins in the heart; that is also true for legitimate sex within marriage, it also begins in one's heart.
3. Be available. There is nothing more encouraging or desirable than a willing partner. Not just willing to have sex, but willing to please. Psychologists have discovered that a man's sex drive goes down when he feels assured that his wife is willing to please him. Women are always afraid that there will be no end to a husband's sexual demands if they always give in. However, it has been found that when a man is less anxious about this, his needs balance out at a lower level. When this happens, women are less nervous, can relax more and usually end up desiring sexual intimacy more often. God knew this principle from the start and Paul's teaching reflects this idea in I Corinthians 7:3-4. We cannot always be equally disposed to have sex (couples do not always feel like it at the same time), that is what causes the tension, but that tension can be used for good if we are always disposed to please our partner ("I do not always feel like having sex, but I always want to please you"). When we say no, we are saying that you cannot have what is yours, which contradicts what Paul teaches concerning this issue in I Corinthians 7:4.

³The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. ⁴The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.

- I Corinthians 7:3-4

We maintain sexual attraction in marriage by realizing that God is pleased when we give ourselves to our partner without restrictions or negotiations. Maintaining sexual attraction helps build a successful marriage.

A - #3 - Appreciation

The greatest weakness in men is their lack of appreciation for what being a woman, wife and mother is all about. Of course, I believe women suffer from the same lack of appreciation about men. The difference is that women think they know men because they know what they want. But most women fail to understand the difference between what men are and what men want. These two are not the same.

By appreciation I do not mean thank-you cards, gifts or flowers on Mother's Day. I do not mean actually saying, "Thank-you" to each other. By appreciation I mean understanding what each other's roles and responsibilities are and how these things affect you as a person. For example, in Christian homes the Bible teaches us that men and women have different roles. Ephesians 5:22-24 tells us that men are to be the head of their wives and women are to be in submission to their husbands (submission is a military term meaning, "to place oneself under"). A marriage succeeds when the husband works at being the head of the woman with her cooperation, and the wife works at submitting to her husband with the same understanding and cooperation.

A woman needs to understand the responsibility and pressure that a man is under to fulfill his role (or the anxiety at the thought that he is not). She also needs to help him fulfill his role as leader because not all men are natural leaders. Women's big mistake is that they take over instead of helping him develop and grow into the family leadership role that has been assigned to him by God. Men's mistake is that they cop-out and let women do it. The reverse is true for women. Men need to understand how hard it is to assume the submissive position because it is not a natural one and society ridicules women who do so. When we appreciate (understand) the challenges faced by our partner in fulfilling his or her God given role in marriage, we develop the respect for one another that builds the admiration, loyalty and empathy so necessary to create a successful marriage and the happiness that comes from this success.

A - #4 - Aid

If no one ever sinned, every marriage would be successful. However, because we are weak and subject to failure we need to seek God's help often. We need His divine help to understand each other, help raise the children, help to manage our money, help to strengthen us through sickness, sin, and all of the trials that we must undergo in marriage. In I Corinthians 7:10 Paul encourages couples to back away from each other for a short time so that they can focus exclusively on prayer concerning their relationship!

Many people would rather live in misery than ask for help. This is called pride. Sometimes we need to ask our partner for help, real help in dealing with physical, emotional or spiritual problems. Sometimes the couple needs outside help to get through a tough moment. There is Farm-aid, Flood-aid, etc. sometimes we need marriage-aid. We should never be ashamed or afraid to reach out to a brother or sister in Christ, family member, minister, counsellor or other person we trust with our need. Christian couples need to care enough about

their relationships that they will seek help when they are in trouble. You know that you may need outside help for your marriage when you are no longer able to cope or resolve the situation by yourselves.

The successful marriage is not too proud to ask for help, and you know you need help when you cannot make each other happy anymore.

Summary

Of course, this is not an exhaustive list, but when couples work at the four things just mentioned, they are directly building the happiness that all married people desire in their relationships. Once again the four "A's" of a happy marriage:

1. Agape: Our purpose is the well-being of the other. This is the number one priority in marriage.
2. Attraction: Giving our bodies to each other willingly.
3. Appreciation: Understanding what our partner's role is in our marriage and helping them fulfill it.
4. Aid: Not too proud to ask for help when we can no longer help ourselves.

Next to salvation in Jesus Christ, the most precious favor God gives to man is a loving partner (Proverbs 18:22).

CHAPTER 7

WHAT MAKES A MARRIAGE CHRISTIAN?

In the previous chapter I focused on four things every marriage needs to practice in order to improve:

1. Agape love: A disciplined commitment to see to the well-being of our partner.
2. Attraction: Maintaining the sexual spark that keeps the joy and excitement in the relationship alive.
3. Appreciation: The constant effort to understand what the partner experiences as a wife or husband.
4. Aid: Mutual assistance in rough times, or the humility and wisdom to seek outside help when our marriage is in trouble.

Agape love, attraction, appreciation and mutual aid are the four areas to examine and build up if we want to create a happy marriage.

In this section we will look at the process of transforming an ordinary marriage into a Christian marriage.

God's Plan for Marriage - Genesis 2:18-25

Sometimes couples who are not members of the church ask me to perform their wedding. In many cases they have never attended worship services, they do not read the Bible and have no convictions about Jesus Christ, but despite these things, would still like to have a "church" wedding. I believe that their true desire is to have a spiritual element or blessing from God for their union. I suspect that the reason for this is that some folks have been raised to believe that churches or holy men (like priests or ministers) are the ones that legitimize their marriages, and a "church" wedding serves as a kind of marital seal of approval from God.

The truth, however, is that marriages are acceptable in God's eyes if they are entered into consciously and legally. The ceremonies may differ from country to country, but these elements are always present. If this were not so, every Hindu, Muslim or non-believer would be living in adultery, since none of these were married in a Christian church. Therefore, if a marriage is entered into consensually and legally by a man and a woman, it is acceptable before God.

As Christians, however, we not only search that our marriages be consensual and legal, we also want to create the type of marriages that reflect the will and purpose of our Lord Jesus Christ. For this to be so, we need to build our marriages according to His Word in which we find the ideal for marriage. You see, being married inside a church building is not what makes your marriage a godly one; it is the building of your marriage according to God's plan that makes your marriage godly, and in accordance with His plan.

In the initial chapter of the first book of the Bible, God gives us the three basic elements in His plan for marriage in general (Genesis 2:18-25).

1. Knowledge of Self

¹⁸Then the Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him." ¹⁹Out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name. ²⁰The man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field, but for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him.

- Genesis 2:18-20

Notice Adam's experience and knowledge mentioned in these verses. He recognized that he was alone and incomplete in this state. Note also that God did not create woman immediately, He gave Adam time to know himself, his surroundings and his sense of aloneness before providing him with a partner. I mention this because the basic teaching in the Bible about self-knowledge and marriage is echoed by marriage counselors today. They tell us that the best time to marry is when we have reached a certain ideal level of both social and emotional preparedness (knowledge). Let me explain:

- **Social Readiness** - You are socially ready for marriage when you have some idea of what you want and where you want to go in life. You are socially ready when you have formulated some of your own convictions about things, and when you have learned to function within society independently. In other words, you may love and respect your parents but you are now taking care of yourself by yourself.
- **Emotional Readiness** - You are emotionally ready for marriage when you recognize your own need for

marriage. Marriage is not what your parents want, not what your beloved wants, but what you want for yourself. In other words, you are emotionally ready for marriage when you are prepared to stop being alone. This is important because some people want to marry but they continue to live and think as single people. You are emotionally ready when you are prepared to make a full and lifetime commitment to another person. This means that you are the one who is ready and willing to do it. If you have to be talked into marriage by your partner, your family or friends, you are not ready emotionally.

What often happens is that you have two people and four variables that are not in sync. For example, he is ready socially but not emotionally (e.g. has a good job and apartment but still depends on his parents to motivate him to do what's right or set life priorities); she is ready emotionally but not socially (e.g. ready for a life commitment and children but hasn't finished school and lives with and financially dependent on parents). The match does not light because one or more of the variables are not in place. The ideal situation for committing to marriage is that each partner is both socially and emotionally ready.

Back in Genesis chapter two we saw that Adam was ready socially because he knew his position and role in life, and he was emotionally ready because he understood that he needed and wanted a partner to complete this life. In His majesty and wisdom God created woman who was exquisitely made physically, socially and emotionally, to perfectly compliment Adam.

In God's plan for marriage, the partners know themselves and know their position within God's creation. In addition to this, they are ready and willing to leave their single status in order to enter into the lifetime commitment of marriage.

2. Knowledge of our Partner

²¹So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. ²²The Lord God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. ²³The man said, "This is now bone of my bones, And flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, Because she was taken out of Man."

- Genesis 2:21-23

I am not sure about the idea of having one partner especially created for another one. I think Adam and Eve were the only people like this. I do know, however, that marriage was designed to include only one man and one woman at a time. Not men with men or women with women. Not three women with one man, etc., just one woman with one man. This being said, I know that the goal for this one man and one woman combination is that they together become only one unit, and the best way to reach this goal is through the knowledge of the person we intend to marry.

In every society the road from being single to being married is different. There are pre-arranged marriages, long courtship and engagements, family introductions, pen pals and internet correspondence that leads to marriage. In the end, however, the thing we want to do is get to know the other person so we can draw closer to them. This is an important part of the marriage sequence because it is through this process that we establish not only a material contract (marriage license, vows, dowries in some countries) but it is during this process of gaining knowledge about the other that we establish an emotional contract with them as well.

Two people who know their environment and who know themselves need to spend time learning to know each other

as well. It is during this effort to know each other that the couple lays down the groundwork for their unity or "oneness."

The problem that confronts many people in this regard is that they are bombarded with the notion that having sex is the only and best way to really know someone else. The truth, however, is that engaging in sex before the commitment to marry usually hampers us in the effort to really know the other person. Sex was designed by God to accomplish many things. For example:

- Confirm our commitment ("we belong together")
- Express loyalty ("I am yours")
- Surrender self ("I am all yours")
- Establish family
- Emotional comfort (comfort without words)
- Provide for physical pleasure, intimate enjoyment, play

We are not usually ready to do all of these things with someone we do not know very well, therefore, when we engage in sex before marriage it usually is not much more than physical gratification that eventually becomes emotionally and spiritually confusing and painful. There are much better and less risky ways to actually know someone.

Adam was ready socially and emotionally, and God fashioned for him a perfectly matched partner. In the pre-sin world of the Garden, Adam immediately recognized the suitability of God's final act of creation: Eve. In other words, Adam knew her completely and she knew him in the same way. These two were ready for the commitment because they knew each other in perfect wisdom and understanding as only ones who were without sin could intimately know another.

We, therefore, should take special care in getting to know our prospective mates because unlike Adam and Eve, we are marrying weak and sinful people. Knowing their strengths and weaknesses enables us to go into a marriage commitment with our eyes wide open.

3. Unity

We know ourselves, we know the other person and we now need to know what we are getting into when we marry. Marriage is the uniting of two people into a lifetime relationship that only death can legitimately end. Most of us are aware that marriage involves a ceremony, a legal contract and a personal promise or commitment. These are the things that accompany, legitimize or sanction a marriage in society and in God's eyes. This is why living together is not marriage. Co-habitation does not reach the level of commitment that is achieved when one actually marries, and is thus not considered marriage before God.

When you say, "I do" what you are saying is, "I promise to live with you as your spouse until I die." This is a high and noble promise to make but one that is very difficult for weak and sinful people to keep, so in verses 24-25 the Lord gives us three important rules to follow in order to help us fulfill our promise to remain united for a lifetime.

²⁴For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. ²⁵And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

- Genesis 2:24-25

Rule #1 - Separate to Unite

You need to leave parents if you are to cleave to your spouse (cleave means glued to). The commitment in marriage is to be

glued to your partner, not your parents or buddies or work-mates. When you decide to marry, the decision is to make your partner the priority over family, friends, hobbies, work or anything else for that matter. You cannot have unity in marriage without making your spouse the number one priority in your life.

Rule #2 - Permanence is Permanent

When you become "one flesh," there is no room for any other flesh. In the "one flesh" relationship the couple does not necessarily think or act alike. One flesh means that both partners are absolutely committed to the union they are both a part of. In marriage, you do not give up identity, but you do give up independence. There is always room for personal growth and development in marriage, but it is always pursued in the context (and not in opposition to) a unifying relationship. Personal fulfillment is counterproductive if it compromises the intimacy and priority of your marriage partner. Life has many stages, and marriage is designed to bring two people together through each of life's marker points, both happy and sad.

Rule #3 - Intimacy Must be Without Fear

The final verse says that they were naked and unashamed. The word naked here does not simply describe people without clothing. It means that they were laid bare before each other. Adam and Eve were totally honest, and expressed their feelings openly and without fear. They had no reservations about their sexuality because they were without sin and completely transparent with one another. God created sexual intimacy and placed it last (not first) on a foundation made from: a) knowledge of self, b) knowledge of the other and c) commitment to unity.

When these elements are placed in this order, the union formed will reflect the design that God intended for marriage, and it will have a great opportunity to be a happy one.

Following this plan does not make one's marriage uniquely Christian because many people of all religions or no religion have followed this plan and succeeded in having a happy, fulfilling marriage. In this we see God's goodness and mercy. He blesses, even those who do not confess Christ, with good marriages if they somehow follow His plan.

Christ Centered

Now, we know that these elements also form the basis for Christian marriage because Jesus, in Matthew 19:3-6, confirms that His disciples should follow these same instructions. The element that transforms a marriage based on the original model in Genesis, to one that is Christian in nature, however, is the commitment of both partners to Jesus Christ as the Lord of their marriage. In other words, when two Christians base their marriage on the biblical model, then this is a Christian marriage. It is not just about getting married in the church building.

Let's finish the chapter by asking the same question as before but now posing it to two people who want to create a Christian marriage when they wed.

Knowledge of Self

As a Christian, when it comes to the knowledge of self the question I ask myself is, "Am I a sincere Christian?" You will never know who you are meant to be, or do, until this issue is resolved. Being a disciple or not being a disciple of Jesus will affect every other decision in your life.

Knowledge of Partner

Before beginning the process of uniting with another person, the key question to ask is, "Is this person I am uniting myself to a sincere Christian?" People foolishly relegate the religious

issues to the back burner thinking that love will conquer all. They find out that it is difficult to love and serve the Lord when married to a person who does not believe, does not care or agree about religion, the Bible or Christ. Better to ask this first and avoid disappointment later.

Unity

Once we are married and tracing the course of our lives together, the third question that needs to be asked is, "Are we devoting our marriage and all it produces to Christ?" Christ is not only part of one's marriage (e.g. we devote one hour to Him on Sunday mornings). For the marriage to be Christian, Jesus has to be the Lord of that marriage and all that goes on in it.

Marriages without Christ can succeed in this world in that they satisfy the partners, but only Christian marriages succeed in satisfying God. And, marriages without Christ can last an entire lifetime in this world, but only Christian marriages succeed in transporting the partners out of this world and into the next.

After all of this information some are surely thinking, "What if my experience with marriage has not lived up to these ideals?" Many people have failed in marriage because of divorce, or they have just lived together, or they have had children without being married or before they were married. "What about us?" is a question these may be thinking.

My answer to you is, "Welcome to the club." You belong to the majority! You are among people who have sinned or failed at marriage, or done things completely out of order when compared to God's plan. The good news is that you can begin to create a Christian marriage out of what you have now, whatever that is. Here's how this can be done:

1. Begin with your own conversion or recommitment to Christ through baptism or restoration (Mark 16:15-16; Acts 2:37-38; I John 1:7-9).
2. Encourage your spouse to do the same.
3. Whether alone or with your spouse, do what is necessary to bring your union into line with God's plan for marriage.
4. Rededicate your marriage, all of it, to Christ through prayer.

Making an effort to preserve a biblical marriage or creating a better marriage is not always easy, but God provides the plan, Christ provides the grace, and the church can provide the help and encouragement you will need to succeed.

CHAPTER 8

KEEPING LOVE ALIVE AND FINDING IT AGAIN WHEN YOU LOSE IT

I want to review the important changes that take place when you go from dating, engaged, even living together, to being legally married:

1. A new legal status begins. Your union is officially recognized as the highest form of commitment between a man and a woman because you have formally legalized it with a contract.
2. A new relationship begins. Marriage is unique in that within this framework you have created an exclusive and permanent relationship, different from any other, including friends and family.
3. A new identity begins. You will now be identified and considered as part of a marriage unit.
4. A new role begins. As husband or wife you will begin to function in a new role within the marriage.

5. A new family begins. The act of marriage creates a new family unit which will take precedence over every other group or family you have been part of in the past.

These are some of the important changes that take place when we marry (aside from where we will live, etc.). The quick point I want to make by repeating these is that if we know, accept and are willing to adapt to these changes, our transition from single to married life will be more successful.

After several years of married life some couples experience boredom and loss of love for one another. This chapter will address this issue and lay out a strategy to recapture a love that may be lost for a certain period.

Keeping Love Alive

Most of the time when people talk about the experience of love they are talking about a feeling. That warm, happy, content and excited feeling we experience when in contact with our partner. As the years go by some couples lose that feeling and often have strange ways of trying to rekindle the flame of love. For example, they will try to make their spouses jealous, thinking that this will move them to once again take interest in the relationship. Some will attempt different approaches to sex, drop hints that they should make an appointment with a marriage counselor or even give their partner the "silent treatment" hoping that this type of torture will get the other's attention.

What many do not understand is that the feeling of love is not created by demands, sex or manipulation. The feeling of love that a person has is largely created and maintained through the use of loving communication. The thing that produced love within us in the first place was the communication of love by our partner. When our love weakens or diminishes, the first place to look for a solution, therefore, is in the area of

personal communication with our mate. You see, love is moved from one person to another through communication. Not always, but in many cases, the love problem is really a communication problem.

In my experience providing pastoral counseling for couples dealing with marriage problems, I have seen people who have the capacity to love, who want to love, who need love but do not communicate well, and for this reason have love problems. I sincerely believe that in most marriages the best way to increase love or to find it when it is gone, is to find better ways to communicate with each other about our love.

The Language of Love

What holds a marriage together is love. The tool that transfers love, builds love and maintains love is communication. Communication is to love as blood is to life. "Better an open rebuke than love that is concealed" (Proverbs 27:5). In this passage Solomon is saying that arguing and disagreeing are better than no communication at all, since the couple is at least communicating. Non-communicated love is and feels the same as no love.

When I say that communication is the language of love, I am not just talking about verbal communication. In our media culture we put a lot of emphasis on oral communication and think that if it is not said verbally (so we can see and hear it), then for some reason or other it has not been properly communicated.

In his book, *The Language of Love*, Gary Smalley says that the language of love can be communicated in many ways, not only through the use of words. He mentions the following types of love languages:

1. **Words:** Expressions of appreciation, loyalty, affection, love, admiration, attraction, etc. (using the words of love).
2. **Gifts:** Tokens of love and appreciation (things you buy or make for special occasions or specifically for your loved one).
3. **Actions:** Things done to please and comfort the other, the home, the family, care of the other's possessions, etc.
4. **Time:** Paying attention, giving a generous quantity of time, focused listening, watching, etc.
5. **Physical Affection:** Touching, holding, non-sexual affection, sexual intimacy.

According to Smalley, one of these is our primary language for love and is the hot button that satisfies and assures us that we are truly loved. Usually when love dies it is because we are no longer sure that we love or are loved. We can express or receive love in all of these ways, but one of the languages is the primary manner that convinces us that we are loved. If love is not expressed in this way we will not feel loved, no matter what else the other person says or does. In other words, if you talk to me in my language of love, then I will feel loved.

Examples of the language of love in action

The wife's hot button for knowing that she is loved is words. She needs poems, love notes, saying sweet things, compliments on her looks and confessions of desire. The repeated words of love are what convince her that she is loved. The husband, on the other hand, grew up in a house where his dad was the strong and silent type. No fancy words. He has grown up like his dad in this way but has learned to

say I love you through generous service: he fixes her car, he takes care of the house and he does a lot of repair work for her elderly parents. What tends to happen here is that she will not feel loved because he is not expressing it in the way she needs it expressed (she needs words, not a new muffler on her car). She will question his love and he will point out all the things he does for her, but she will not be satisfied because he is not speaking to her in her love language. This is how affairs begin, someone else discovers your love language and begins to speak it, and you let them because it satisfies your need to be loved.

There is an interesting feature about this language of love business. People tend to receive their love messages in the same way that they give these messages. Let us, therefore, go back to our couple and see how this would work in their situation. Remember, she receives love through words, so this is usually the way she gives it; and he gives through action/service, so this is usually how he receives or recognizes love as well. In a situation like this, she tells him that she loves him and expresses it with mushy birthday cards and efforts at talking about their relationship. However, she is not interested in hanging out in the garage with him or working on projects together. He needs to hear, "I love you" by her involvement with him in his interests and things. In the end, he feels smothered by her words and she feel rejected by his silence. Both are trying to love but each is missing the point, and the sad thing is that they do not even realize it!

Exercise

A helpful exercise to get couples into a serious and productive discussion about their relationship is to have each spouse write down what they believe their own and their spouse's love language is, and then share this information with one another.

Productive Communication

I have told you that some people want love, need love and desire to give love, but fail in love because they do not communicate it well. The answer for them is not to start loving, they are already trying to do that; nor is the answer to love differently. I do not think people can change their basic personality in order to accomplish this.

The answer, I believe, is to find better ways to communicate about loving so we will receive and give the love that is already in our hearts for the other. The way to do this is to make the communication itself more effective and productive.

Here are three ways that can help improve communication with anyone, but especially the type of communication that conveys your love for another:

Be Totally Honest

but speaking the truth in love...
- Ephesians 4:15

For communication to be productive you need to be honest, even if it is risky at times. Too often we end up saying what the other person wants to hear so we can get what we want. This works in the short term but is disastrous for long term relationships. The best example of this is when we compare the hierarchy of needs that men and women say that they want from each other. This survey shows what men and women acknowledge privately among themselves as their top five needs, but rarely acknowledge to each other for fear of ridicule or rejection.

Top Needs: Men

1. **Sexual Fulfillment:** It is number one because this is the way God created them. The natural production of seminal fluid in a man causes the constant need for gratification. It is the greatest single struggle each man must deal with in order to mature emotionally, socially and spiritually. Men will admit to other men that this is their primary need but rarely do so to their wives.
2. **Play Mate:** Men want their wives to be their buddies and friends.
3. **Attractive:** A wife's looks and demeanor either build up a man's pride or bring it down.
4. **Domestic Support:** Men say that they want to return to a quiet, clean and accepting home each day.
5. **Admiration:** Respect and encouragement. They want their wives to admire their work, achievements, style.

Top Needs: Women

1. **Affection:** Not necessarily sexual intimacy. Romance, cuddling, holding, tender words and touch.
2. **Attention:** Sharing his thoughts and soliciting hers in return. Really listening to her with feedback.
3. **Trust:** Her world, especially when there are children, is supported by him. She has to have confidence that she is his number one priority over the job, hobbies, buddies and family.
4. **Financial Security:** Enough to live on and provide for the family. Enough to give the children developmental advantages.
5. **Involvement:** Getting involved in home and family matters. Truly providing leadership. Home is not simply a "pit stop."

What the survey showed were things we kind of knew from experience and observation. Men are generally immature and more self-centered. They want attention and gratification, and are not always willing to give in exchange for these (they need coaching). Women are more high-minded and are usually willing to invest more into the marriage to make it work. However, they tend to ask for conflicting things. For example, they want financial security for their children which places a greater burden on the husband if he is the primary earner. At the same time they want him to be at home and more involved in home-life which requires time, time that may be needed at work. In their case, women need to understand that they cannot have it both ways.

Productive communication needs to be honest and also...

Clear

For communication to be productive it also needs to be clear. More arguments, divisions and hurt feelings come from communication that is simply unclear than from intended insults. Those who speak need to make sure that the hearer has indeed understood what was said and the meaning of it. The hearer needs to reassure the speaker that he has truly been understood. Our words and actions need to convey what we mean. If what you are doing or saying means, "I am truly sorry" and not just, "I'm tired of arguing" make sure that the other person knows this.

Practice good feedback methods. Say or do what you will but always make sure, through feedback, that the other person is understanding your words and intentions ("Tell me what I have just said").

Productive communication is honest, clear and...

Complete

We must tell the truth, express it clearly and tell it all. Some do not agree on this point, but when one area of discussion is taboo or one of the partners declares a problem or discussion off limits (don't go there), this creates frustration, resentment and a gradual closing down of the communication network between people. There is no greater joy or protection than a loving partner with whom we can share all of our hearts. It is not always easy, but productive communication requires:

1. **Mirroring:** Confirming that you have accurately heard what has been said.
2. **Validation:** Confirming that you can see the other's point of view, even if you do not agree.
3. **Empathy:** Confirming that the other person's feelings are valid even if you do not feel them as intensely as they do.

Assignment

If we want to regain and renew love, we begin by renewing productive communication with our partner.

Discuss each other's love language and how well you are communicating it.

Establish a quiet zone (no kids, tv, phones, computers) and do the couple's exercise sheet.

Once complete, take the time to share and discuss your answers.

Productive Communication Worksheet

1. List 3 things you like most and 3 things you dislike most about your partner.

LIKE

DISLIKE

2. Write down one thing you would like to change in your partner. One thing in yourself.

3. List 3 things you need, not want, from your partner.

4. Is there something about yourself that you would like to change but can't? If so, what?

5. List the following categories as they are important to you, beginning with the most important.

Education, Sex, Children, Security, Friends, Money, Home, Parents, Career, Religion

1. _____	6. _____
2. _____	7. _____
3. _____	8. _____
4. _____	9. _____
5. _____	10. _____

6. Name the most enjoyable or fun thing that you like to do.

7. What do you hope to get from reading this book?

8. If you were designing the perfect man or woman, list five necessary characteristics of that person in order of importance.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

9. Do you feel you can tell you partner everything?
Yes/No? _____

Why? _____

CHAPTER 9

THE BLESSINGS OF MARITAL FIDELITY

Recent data reveals that in the province of Quebec, Canada, where I was born and raised, there are more people who live together without being legally married than those who are married. In Quebec, one out of two legal marriages fail, and the number of children being raised by single parents is greater than the number who are being raised in a home with their own bio-parents. In Quebec, there are more children in daycare than there are in home care. I believe that a major reason for these statistics is the loss of respect for the role of sex and its exclusive presence only within marriage. I also believe that these numbers are fast becoming the norm for the broader society that we live in, so I would like to devote some time discussing the issue of fidelity in marriage.

I do not want to approach this from the usual negative perspective (i.e. no sex before marriage, do not cheat, do not divorce, etc.), since we have all heard these admonitions before. I prefer, instead, to focus on the wonderful blessings that come from remaining faithful to one's spouse.

Marital Fidelity

Now, before I talk about the blessings that come from being faithful in marriage, I would like to describe more in detail this idea of faithfulness. The marital fidelity that I am referring to in this chapter has three basic components:

1. Complete Fidelity

To bear the kind of fruit I am going to describe later, the faithfulness one aspires to in marriage must be complete. This faithfulness includes your mind, body, words and intentions.

Fidelity is like a fragrant oil that is reserved only for your partner. No one else gets to experience it in any way. Complete fidelity means that no one but your partner receives your tenderest looks, thoughts or touches, because no person is due or experiences what your spouse receives or experiences from and with you.

It is interesting that Valentine's Day uses the heart as its symbol for love because Jesus says that this is where everything begins, good and bad (Matthew 5:8; 28). In complete fidelity, a person tunes their heart to their spouse so that only they can give and receive signals from this source. There is no daydreaming about what love would be like with another. There is no sexual pleasure with anyone else, whether it be a fictional character in a book, a picture or movie that gives vicarious sexual thrills, or that "harmless" flirting that often goes on at our workplace. Complete fidelity means that you are totally devoted to your spouse in mind and body wherever you are and with whomever you happen to be.

2. Lifetime Fidelity

There is a trick question on some premarital questionnaires that engaged couples fill out when they go for counseling. It asks, "After you have tried everything to resolve your conflict, what will you do: Divorce or Separate?" It is amazing how many pick one of these two options instead of the third option which is not given: Keep trying because divorce is not an option. Some people go into marriage thinking, of course I will be faithful; unless my partner cheats, unless I fall in love with someone else, unless there is a divorce. This attitude is often the seed that grows to spoil the rest.

Fidelity is not fidelity unless the "no matter what" factor is in the initial marital commitment. Even if you change, I will be faithful; even if there is heartache, I will be faithful; even if you are not able to meet my needs, I will be faithful. The thing I want and pray for the most is the ability and strength to be faithful, and to be faithful until the end.

Paul says (Ephesians 5:32) that the similarity between the marriage relationship and the relationship between Christ and the church is a mystery. One thing we do know about these two relationships that is not hidden in mystery is the fact that the rewards assigned for each only go to those who are faithful until death.

So, for marital fidelity to be produced, you must have complete fidelity, lifetime fidelity, and...

3. Growing Fidelity

The first two components are where you want to be, the ideal and the goal, complete lifetime fidelity. Growing fidelity, however, is where most of us are at. The key is to recognize where in the small nooks and crannies of our lives that we are still unfaithful or still not given over to our loved one. Growing fidelity is nurtured by trials and tests that challenge our commitment to remain faithful, no matter what.

In Genesis 2:24 the Bible says that a man and a woman are to cleave or be fastened to one another for life. The glue that holds you together in marriage is faithfulness, and each time you grow in that faithfulness, the more secure your bond becomes.

Growing in complete fidelity with a view of remaining that way opens the door to a host of marvelous blessings, a few I would like to share with you now.

The Blessings of Marital Fidelity

A - Peace of Mind

No matter how much money or power you have, no matter how blessed you are with health and success, if you do not have peace of mind you cannot enjoy any of your other blessings. Marital fidelity is one of the chief factors that contributes to this state of mind. What great peace you have when you have no ugly secret between you and your spouse! What great peace exists in a home and family where everyone from the youngest child to the in-laws know that this man and woman are completely devoted to each other!

Have you ever noticed how pleasant it is to be around people who have marital fidelity? Do you know why that is? It is because they enjoy peace between themselves and that peace is palpable, you can feel it when you are near them. Marital fidelity produces a clear and easy conscience, and that state of mind yields the wonderful spiritual fruit of peace.

B - Mature Love

Teenagers think they know about love because they see so much sex on TV, movies and in music. Young marrieds think they know about love because they have a frantic sex life.

The only way to know about love, however, is to love somebody for a lifetime, then you will know about love, about its sexual excitement, about its sense of gratitude, about its humour and fun, about its tenderness and kindness and generosity and resiliency. Love someone for a lifetime and you will learn about sacrifice and forgiveness and yearning.

Marital fidelity creates an environment of security and trust which enables a person to be honest, transparent and vulnerable. There is no true love, no maturing love in a relationship without these things. I thought I loved my wife when I married her, I ached for her. But after 38 years that love has matured into a broad and beautiful life that envelops the two of us in a world that belongs exclusively to us and our family.

Today, people want love before they will commit to fidelity, and this is why they often fail. Love is born and nurtured within the boundaries of marital fidelity, and grows stronger only in proportion to the bonds that hold the couple within a faithful marriage.

Many years ago, on my birthday, Lise had to leave for Montreal to care for her ailing father. When I got home from the airport I found a card on my pillow. It read, "Someday, when we have been together for a very long time, we will turn out the lights and slow dance on the porch in our bathrobes. I will write you love notes in large print and tape them to the fridge. You will finish my stories, and I will borrow your glasses. We will wonder where the time went. And each night we will roll to the middle of our old bed, into one another's arms, where we will kiss and touch and dream the secret dreams that only lovers know." Only a faithful spouse can give and receive a card like this with joy.

C - Joy on Earth

I believe that God created marriage so we could taste the joys of heaven here on earth. Let's face it, no other state can make you feel so happy or so miserable. It can be heaven on earth or hell on earth, and the difference can usually be traced to fidelity and the degree of it you have and give.

Joy is that feeling of peaceful happiness that comes when you have what you want and you know that having it and enjoying it is right before God and man. Ever notice the happiness some older couples have? They may be past their childbearing years, there may be physical limitations, and yet there is joy in their voices and their eyes when they look and speak to each other. Have you ever wondered why that is? A lifetime of marital fidelity is certainly a basic component.

Of course, I do not mean perfect fidelity (although this is the goal). I'm referring to a lifetime of working at being faithful, this is the effort that brings the reward of freely experienced joy. I often work with couples who, for whatever reasons, have been through more than one marriage before persevering with one partner in a long term faithful marriage. They usually have many regrets, but the one that stands out the most is the regret of not having had the opportunity to give one's entire life to just this one person. Lifetime marital fidelity yields a shared joy that nothing can take away or diminish. Lifetime fidelity is a privilege and a joy, not a burden.

Summary

If I had the chance to speak to everyone in the nation about the subject of marriage, I would leave them with the following thoughts:

To the young I would say, "Remain sexually pure because this pleases God and remains the most precious gift you have to offer to your future spouse."

To the unmarried (for whatever reason) I would say, "Before you marry again, make sure that your future spouse loves God and is absolutely dedicated to the principle of marital fidelity."

Finally, to those who are married I would say, "Whatever state your marriage is in, and no matter how long you have been married, the first step in improving your relationship is by implementing and practicing the components of complete marital fidelity."

CHAPTER 10

EIGHT STEPS TO INTIMACY

This chapter draws mainly from "*The Song of Solomon*" and an interesting treatment of this Old Testament poetry by John Trent in his small book entitled "*Eight Steps to Intimacy*." Before we get into Solomon's life and times, however, a question about marriage and what it takes to succeed at it.

What keeps a marriage going and enables us to be in love for life is not a house, children, sex or money. What keeps a marriage alive and makes the relationship worth the effort is the intimacy experienced and shared by the couple. The word intimacy means to be close or familiar. In marriage, intimacy means to be close or familiar physically, emotionally and spiritually with our partner at a level that we do not have with any other human being. It is the essence of what we describe as falling or being in love. Intimacy encompasses the exhilarating feeling that comes when you discover how wonderful it is to be so close to another person. You want that feeling all of the time, so you marry. You marry in order to preserve the intimacy.

However, once you marry you become occupied establishing a home, driving the kids to daycare, getting ahead in your career, and staying so busy with life that you often forget and neglect to take care of the intimacy that brought you together in the first place. What happens in many cases is that the house gets paid off, the kids grow up and you get the promotion at work, but your marriage dries up because the intimacy that started it all is now gone.

Unfortunately, simply getting married does not preserve intimacy, it only acknowledges that you have it and provides a safe framework to pursue and build it. The work in marriage and the thing you need to build is not the house, the pension plan or a guaranteed college fund for the kids. The real work in marriage is keeping and building the level of intimacy you share with your partner so that the rest of life (good or bad) is worth while.

Developing Intimacy

Intimacy is not automatic. It does not just happen simply because you share the same house or apartment. It does not come with a marriage ceremony. Intimacy is a learned thing and cannot be contained or maintained without effort and practice. Total intimacy requires us to develop our relationship in three main areas.

1. Intellectual / Emotional Intimacy

Marital intimacy requires that the heads and hearts be close. We need to know what the other person thinks and feels, and they need to know what we think and feel in order to create and maintain intimacy. We build this intellectual and emotional intimacy by practicing open and honest communication with one another.

I mentioned this in a previous chapter. In order to build intellectual and emotional intimacy you need to say truthfully and kindly what is really on your mind and heart, not just what you think the other person wants to hear. You must also learn to listen patiently and be sure to understand what you have been told before you speak. All of this requires time, effort and humility (the ability to say I am sorry, or to say I forgive you).

2. Physical Intimacy

Just because we know how to have sex does not mean we have intimacy. Just because we have physical desire for our partner does not mean that our desire creates or maintains intimacy. Physical intimacy is not the same thing as sex, they are separate things but both necessary to perfect the other. Suffice to say that men and women see and experience physical intimacy in different ways and this is what causes many problems in marriage. For example, women need emotional intimacy in order to be free to enjoy sex. Men, on the other hand, need sex in order to experience emotional intimacy. This basic difference between men and women is one of the reasons why there is often conflict in a marriage over the issue of sex. Physical intimacy needs to be cultivated, and sexual activity is not the only method to cultivate that physical intimacy.

One thing to note, however, is that without emotional and intellectual intimacy, there cannot be satisfying physical and sexual intimacy.

A third and often neglected area that also needs cultivating for there to be complete intimacy within the couple is...

3. Spiritual Intimacy

To be completely one, familiar and close, there needs to be a shared spiritual life. Religious faith is important to a marriage

because without spiritual intimacy and interaction, it is hard to succeed in a relationship specifically designed and directed by God. Leaving God out of a marriage is like trying to play hockey without a rule book, referees or coaches. You can play, but you do not play well and there will be plenty of fights. Bringing God and His Word into our marriages gives our relationship a spiritual dimension, without which we can never feel complete, no matter how well we get along or how good the sex is.

Therefore, in order to create intimacy we need to cultivate it at the intellectual, emotional, physical and spiritual levels.

Eight Steps to Developing Intimacy

Among the books Solomon wrote, the Song of Solomon is the most beautiful in its praise and description of the love that exists between a man and a woman. The Song of Solomon is poetry and filled with imagery that can be looked at from various perspectives: a relationship between God and His people (Old Testament), a relationship between God and His church (New Testament), or a simple, intimate relationship between a man and a woman in love. For our purposes we will follow the third of these interpretive models.

Background information to help the reader understand the book:

- Written in poetic form so there is a lot of symbolism and imagery of nature.
- The book shifts suddenly from speaker to speaker which makes it difficult to follow at times.
- It has a variety of characters and speakers: a young bride (the Shulamite), the King himself (Solomon), and a chorus of palace ladies called the Daughters of Jerusalem.

- Many scholars think that the bride was Abishag (I Kings 1:3-4) the beautiful maiden chosen to care for David in his old age and then taken by Solomon as his wife after David died.

In the study of this poetry we can trace the eight steps the led to this couple's amazing sense of intimacy:

Step #1 - Strong Physical Attraction

“May he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!
For your love is better than wine.
- Song of Solomon 1:2

She is excited by the thought of his repeated kisses. In this, God reveals that strong physical attraction is a basic ingredient in the intimate bonding of people together in marriage. You can stay married without sex, but it is difficult to remain intimate without sex.

It is important to maintain and cultivate your sex life because it contributes directly to your sense of intimacy with your spouse. We will explore this subject more deeply in a chapter to come.

Step #2 - A Purified Character

“Your oils have a pleasing fragrance,
Your name is like purified oil;
Therefore the maidens love you.
- Song of Solomon 1:3

How do you get the "spark" back into a relationship after it has gone? At times we lose that special desire because of things like illness, age or separation for a reason over which we have no control. During these times we need to ask God to help us maintain our relationship despite the circumstances that challenge our intimate contact. There are other instances, however, when the loss of that special spark is due to character issues.

In this poem, God shows that the woman's passion for her beloved was based on his character, not just his looks. What is on the inside of a person often plays an important role in how we react to them on the outside. The Shulamite woman in the poem compares her man's character to purified oil. The idea being that his character was purified by God and his spiritual qualities of piety and meekness along with the social qualities of consideration and honesty were very pleasing to her.

It is hard to be intimate (spark) with someone who lacks character, who is addicted to something, who uses bad language, who cheats, is unkind, etc. Nothing is more attractive or builds intimacy like a godly character.

Step #3 - The Respect of Others

We see intimacy as something shared by two people. In verse two, however, the woman declares that her appreciation of him is heightened because others see in her man what she does (all the maidens agree with her concerning his character).

It is hard to fall in love and be intimate with an illusion, a front or an act. In marriage, our love and appreciation grow along with our desire for intimacy when the value of our partner is recognized by others in our family, community, etc. When what we see and love is confirmed as real and legitimate by others, it gives us confidence to pursue a deeper level of

intimacy. One reason why adultery rarely leads to intimacy is that everyone is against it and few confirm the relationship. This is the reason that the approval of our partner by our parents is so important to us, even today.

Step #4 - Biblical Balance

“Draw me after you and let us run together!
The king has brought me into his chambers.”
- Song of Solomon 1:4

The woman encourages her husband to take the lead. A struggle for power in the home is a true intimacy killer. Men often confuse spiritual leadership with control. Women reject the idea (of male spiritual leadership) because they have never experienced it or have experienced perverted forms of it (abuse).

The Bible, however, requires men to lead (not control or dominate) through service. They do this by anticipating and providing for the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of the home. When men fail at this it is usually because they think that providing the bulk of physical needs (if they are the primary or sole wage earner) entitles them to control everything. Control, however, kills intimacy because it suffocates it. Intimacy requires freedom (e.g. to think, share, express and explore) to flourish, and control is the antithesis of freedom in a relationship. Intimacy has no way of growing between two people when one partner seeks to control the other. In extreme cases the desire to control easily leads to abuse.

Women, on the other hand, must realize that submission is not natural, it is a gift that is offered and made possible by faith in God who gives the strength to accomplish it (i.e. my wife offers me her submission as a precious gift). The mistake

that women make is that they confuse leadership with control also, and they fight it, ridicule it or try to usurp it (throw it off).

You cannot be intimate with someone you resent or someone you are fighting with for control. Husbands are to lead their wives as Christ led the church (ready to sacrifice himself for her well-being), and wives are to submit to their husbands as the church submits to Christ (as an act of faith to God) Ephesians 5:22-33. This biblical formula for marriage leads to mutual respect, devotion and an intimacy pleasing and blessed by God.

Step #5 - Security in the Relationship

⁵“I am black but lovely,
O daughters of Jerusalem,
Like the tents of Kedar,
Like the curtains of Solomon.
⁶“Do not stare at me because I am swarthy,
For the sun has burned me.
My mother’s sons were angry with me;
They made me caretaker of the vineyards,
But I have not taken care of my own vineyard.
- Song of Solomon 1:5-6

Are you more secure in you relationship this year than you were before? Intimacy needs security to bloom. In verses 5-6, the woman feels insecure about the way she looks compared to the women at the royal court (she's a working girl with a suntan versus the white skin of the rich girls at the palace). Throughout the poem, however, we see how she grows in assurance concerning her beloved's love for her. For example, in 2:1 (*“I am the rose of Sharon, The lily of the valleys.”*) she feels better about herself using a term given to her by Solomon. In 2:16 (*“My beloved is mine, and I am his; He pastures his flock among the lilies”*), she expresses the

idea of possessiveness and assurance. Finally, in 7:10 (*"I am my beloved's, And his desire is for me"*) after they are married, she is secure in the fact that she is the only one he loves. The more your partner is secure, the more they open up; the more they open up and invest themselves, the greater the intimacy.

Step #6 - Give Praise

Someone will say, "How do I make my partner feel secure?" Answer: By the constant giving of praise. Solomon praises her over forty times in this book, seven times on their wedding night alone! Praise builds esteem, esteem builds security, and security enables a person to let the barriers down and be more intimate.

Step #7 - Continual Focus

In those days of no A/C or easy access to bathing, perfume was used abundantly. The point here is that like perfume that continually gives off a pleasant smell, the thought of her beloved was continually before her. It is not the big things that kill intimacy, it is the daily neglect of each other in little ways that destroys our closeness. Your marriage partner is the only person that you are committed to for life (no other associations are like this), so you must care for that person in ways that reflect and support your lifetime commitment.

The attention invested in this relationship should be constant. After all, you invest in retirement a little at a time in order to enjoy a benefit later on. In the same way, you should invest or focus your attention on your partner each day so you can always enjoy the benefits of intimacy throughout the life of your marriage. Jesus said, "Where your heart is, there will your treasure be also" (Matthew 6:21). If your spouse is your treasure, then your heart will be focused on them each day, and in doing so you will continue to reap the rewards of intimacy long after the honeymoon is over.

Step #8 - Spiritual Oneness

Total intimacy requires spiritual intimacy. In 1:17 the bride says to her husband, (*"The beams of our house are cedars, our rafters, cypress."*). In this passage she refers to each of their respective lives as houses built with the same materials. Cedar and cypress were the expensive woods used to build the temple at that time. Their house was their life together, it was built with the best materials which, in their case, were spiritual things like faith, worship and service to God.

You can have a good marriage without faith, many do. You can have a good marriage if only one partner is a Christian, many do. But only two equally committed believers can share the total intimacy (mind, body, spirit) that God intended marriage to have. Sometimes the only thing that will heal the hurts of the mind and body are the prayers of a believing heart.

The best way to create or recreate intimacy in a marriage is to begin with spiritual intimacy. When we can find each other in prayer and worship; when we can share our faith and knowledge of the Bible; when we can serve the Lord in some way together, we are establishing the building blocks of intimacy at every level. For a married couple, spiritual closeness leads to emotional and physical closeness because this is God's will for married people.

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'.

- Matthew 19:5

From the very beginning it was God's will that men and women would find complete intimacy in marriage.

CHAPTER 11

GREAT SEX FOR LIFE

In the previous chapter I said that the main task in marriage is not raising children, or paying off the mortgage, or setting up a retirement plan. I said that the main task in a successful marriage is maintaining the intimacy that caused you to marry in the first place. If you do not have intimacy/closeness in your marriage, it does not matter what you do have, the marriage will not be a happy or satisfying one.

One way to cultivate intimacy is to build closeness at the intellectual, emotional and especially the spiritual level. Another important way to create intimacy is through satisfying sex. Of course, like everything else, satisfying sexual intimacy is learned and must be maintained in order to grow. Just because you like or need sex does not mean you know how to produce intimacy through satisfying sex. Many couples have to learn or re-learn this because there is so much misinformation about sex.

The History of Sex

In order to separate truth from fiction, I would like to briefly review with you the history of sex from Adam until today, all in several paragraphs! Seriously though, if we had to list some

major false ideas about human sexuality throughout history it might look like this:

- **The Garden of Eden: They Had It Right** – Sex between Adam and Eve, two sinless people, is perfect and satisfying. After this, the lies begin.
- **After the Fall of Man: Sex is Complicated** – Sex becomes complicated, misunderstood and manipulated. For example, Jacob's two wives struggle to win their husband's affection and children.
- **The 4th Century: Sex is Sin** – Augustine begins to teach that Adam's sin is passed on from one generation to another in a physical way. This gives rise to the idea that the manner in which one generation created the next generation (sex) must be bad or sinful somehow.
- **The 17th Century: Sex is Dirty** – By the Middle Ages the idea that sex was basically evil had so taken hold that many women wore black, never referred to sex and were considered simply as objects of procreation. This attitude created the impression in people's minds that sex was dirty and only to be tolerated within marriage. Of course, people eventually revolted against this oppressive and false view, but as is often the case, they went to the other extreme.
- **The 20th Century: The Modern Ideas on Sex** – In the 18th to 19th century, puritanical ideas about sex were brought to North America, but by the 20th century, these were dramatically changed.
 - **1900-1960: Sex is fun** – Two world-wars changed attitudes. American music, movies and magazines showed sex as something that was fun. Hollywood, Rock'n'Roll and Playboy

set the tone for American sexual attitudes during these times.

- **1970: Sex is free** – The "hippy" generation promoted sexual freedom. Make love not war! The sexual revolution said, "Have sex with whoever you want, whenever you want, wherever you want."
- **1980: Sex is serious** – The boomers grew up and sex became a serious matter, only for the mature. Sex advice columns, sex therapists, etc. Studies about human sexuality abounded.
- **1990: Sex should be safe** – AIDS made people realize that some kinds of sex can lead to serious illness and death.
- **2000+: Sex is for yourself** – Sex is for the individual's pleasure. Porn, homosexuality and internet sex fed the individual person's unlimited desire for private sex.

Of course, all of these false ideas about sex have an element of truth to them, this is what makes them so believable and powerful. For example:

- **Sex is complicated:** True, but not so complicated that with proper communication and attitude two people cannot have satisfying sex for a lifetime.
- **Sex is sinful:** True, when outside of a marriage relationship, but acceptable and blessed by God within marriage (Hebrews 13:4).
- **Sex is dirty:** True, when used as pornography or the abuse of others, especially children. However, sex is clean, pure and beautiful when shared between a married couple (Genesis 2:25).

- **Sex is fun:** True, but again only fun and joyful when people who are married engage in it, otherwise it is only fun for the people involved, but not for God and the angels who witness it.
- **Sex is free:** True, but only free to those who are in an exclusive, lifetime relationship. Otherwise there is a price to pay. (Galatians 5:19-20)
- **Sex is serious:** Very true, but serious not in itself but in the sense that it is the physical sign that two people are committed to an exclusive, lifetime relationship.
- **Sex is safe:** True, but the safest sex is sex according to God's plan, not human concepts and trends.
- **Sex is for self:** True, sex is for the full revelation of the self to our partner without guilt, fear or shame.

Of course, there are many variations of these ideas, but the ones mentioned here are the major concepts through which people view their own sexuality. The same activity that has the power to bond, build and comfort within marriage is equally powerful to create negative things if done outside of marriage (guilt, shame, unwanted pregnancies, disease, etc.). The idea of seeing if people are sexually compatible before marriage so they can be sure is foolish because engaging in premarital sex without the security of a marriage commitment undermines the development of the couple's relationship before it matures. Sex outside of marriage is a sin, and it is a sin because it compromises the sex one should be enjoying within marriage.

There is another point of view about sex that I would like to share with you. One that more effectively contributes to good sex for life.

God's Idea of Sex

The true purpose for sex is not pleasure. Its central purpose is to promote the feeling of being loved and united to our mates. The pleasure is a spin-off benefit. You can obtain sex in a lot of ways and in great quantities, but to feel loved and unified through sex requires an understanding of why God created sex and how God would have us express our natural human sexuality.

Sex is Good

²⁷God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. ³¹God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.
- Genesis 1:27, 31

Throughout the Bible, God extolls the naturalness and beauty of human sexuality. Genesis 2:14-15 establishes the idea that married sex is without guilt or shame. It is sin that should cause guilt, not sex between a husband and wife (Hebrews 13:4). In the Song of Solomon 7:1-9, sex is portrayed as beautiful, exciting and passionate. In Proverbs 5:18-19, Solomon says that good sex is God's idea not man's. Satan is the one who has perverted sex into a sinful thing, but in its natural state it is a good and wonderful experience according to God.

Sex is for Marriage Only

You shall not commit adultery.
- Exodus 20:14

¹Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman. ²But because of immoralities, each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband.
- I Corinthians 7:1-2

God designed the activity of sex to be engaged in freely within the context of marriage. This is the basic teaching about sex in the Bible.

Sex is Unselfish Affection

²But because of immoralities, each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband. ³The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband.
- I Corinthians 7:2-3

The way to achieve satisfying sex within marriage is to focus on pleasing the other person, not self. When we have succeeded in doing this, we have succeeded (and have probably had good sex too). When we please the other we will be satisfied. That is how sex works.

For husbands, this means a shift of attention from the immediate need to consummate sexual desire, and focus on the needs of the wife to become aroused. For women this means a conscious effort to get into the "zone," to think about sex, to become sexualized so that she can truly respond to her husband's desire for her. Men want women to want sex, to get into it without it being a chore or a favor. Women, on the other hand, want men to want them and not just what they can get from them.

Marriage partners need to realize that the road to satisfying sex is different for both men and women but requires effort from both. For example, it does not come naturally for men to wait, to want just her, to want to please her. What is natural for them is to want release. On the other hand, it is not natural for women to zone in on sex because they are not visually stimulated and not motivated by release but rather by the need for intimacy and tenderness. Dr. Randy Eichner, OU Health Science Professor says, "Women view intimacy as a road to sex; men view sex as a road to intimacy." The frustrated man says, "You do not love me because you are not interested in sex." The discouraged woman says, "You do not love me because all you are interested in is sex." The key to satisfying sex is to understand and work with the natural differences between men and women, and avoid accusing each other of not caring.

Good sex requires a sacrifice by both partners. For example, a match must sacrifice some of its smooth surface against the roughness of the sandpaper, and the sandpaper must sacrifice some of its rough surface every time a match is struck if a flame is to emerge.

Sex is Uninterrupted

Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

- I Corinthians 7:5

Sex is meant to provide pleasure for all of married life. In marriage, sex is for life as love is for life. Paul, the Apostle, says that sex should be interrupted only by mutual consent, for reasons needing prayer (this could include disputes, illness, unavoidable separation - I Corinthians 7:5-6). When

separation happens we should pray to remain faithful, and separate for these purposes for only a short amount of time (sex is not a bargaining tool or a weapon).

Abraham and Sarah had sex in their late years. God blessed them with a good sex life into old age. Barring illness and incapacity, our intimate life should last and be developed throughout the life of our marriage. Unfortunately, there are reasons why this does not always happen. For example:

- Ignorance about sex or poor communication concerning this topic.
- Lack of imagination. Partners unwilling to be creative, to experiment or to discuss and search for ways to please the other.
- Habit. We get into routines (TV, work, sports, hobbies, childcare) that leave no time to develop intimacy or desire, which take time. If you make the effort, it is worth it. Good sex requires faith at times because you have to work your way into the feeling. Patience and kindness in this regard are often richly rewarded.
- Nothing kills sexual desire like sin. Lying, laziness, vulgarity, meanness, cheating, impurity, etc.; these kill the sex drive.

God created marriage to last a lifetime, therefore, sex within a marriage should last a lifetime as well. Happy couples report that their sex life grows more intense and satisfying as they grow older. This is possible if we use God's ideas and instructions for married love. Here is another practical way to improve sexual intimacy in marriage.

Communication is the Key

Sex therapists tell us that the biggest problem that couples have with sex is not the mechanics, frequency or even looks. The biggest problem with sex is communication. The main sex organ is the brain. The brain is the part of the body that controls feeling, desire and the feeling of pleasure. If the brain is not stimulated and sexualized, the other body parts cannot function properly.

The best way to stimulate the brain is to communicate. The best way to improve sexuality in a marriage is to learn how to communicate more effectively about sex. The way to have good sex for life is to continue to communicate about it for life. One major problem in many marriages is that there are things we wished our partners knew about us and about sex in general, but because of shame, guilt, fear, embarrassment, anger or ignorance, we cannot communicate about these things with them. We think they will guess, and when they do not, we remain unfulfilled sexually.

I am going to finish this chapter by listing some things that couples find hard to say for various reasons. Now, I do not do this to offend or embarrass, but rather to open up lines of communication between couples who find it difficult to communicate about sex. As you read these, note and share with your partner the ideas mentioned here that you may have found difficult to say to one another in the past.

1. *"Tell me how to please you. Guide me so I will know what to do in the future when we make love."* It is very difficult to know our partner's sexual likes and dislikes at times if they are not explained. There is no need to explain why something is pleasant or exciting, just that it is.
2. *"I want to make love just for fun."* Sometimes a brief sexual encounter without much foreplay or romance is

ok. We should not take sex too seriously. Sex should be fun and play at times.

3. *"Seeing your body excites me, do not hide it from me."* You partner's naked body is the only body you have a right to see in a sensual way. Do not deprive each other of that right and privilege. Ladies, do not let the movies and magazines take over your privilege so that the only nakedness your husband sees is in a magazine or movie and not that of his own wife. Men, the more you remain exclusively focused on your wife, the more she will be willing to share herself with you. The more your eyes wander the less valuable you make her out to be.
4. *"Do not force me to do what I cannot do yet."* Everyone develops sexually at a different rate, so you need to be patient with each other. It is fine to experiment, and good to be creative, but agree to do only what both accept to do, otherwise it is selfishness and can be abusive.
5. *"I wish you would initiate sex for a change. When you do, it makes me feel desirable."* Nothing kills the ego like always having to be the one to initiate sex or affection. Sometimes men would be less demanding of sex if they had more affection. Sometimes women would be more willing to have sex if men demonstrated more affection unrelated to sex.
6. *"Be kinder to me. When you are unkind it makes it harder for me to desire you."* As I have said, nothing kills intimacy, romance and sexual desire more than someone who is unkind, sarcastic, dishonest, abusive, self-centered, cheap or critical. Desire cannot grow in this type of environment.
7. *"Try to understand what stimulates me."*

- a) Women - Biological fact: A woman's sexual desire is linked to her cycle. Emotional fact: Emotional stimulation is necessary before physical stimulation. The best sex happens when the wife's emotional needs are taken care of on a daily basis. You cannot buy sex at the last minute with flowers and candy. Take time to allow passion to rise; express love and affection before, during and after lovemaking in order to experience a continuous and enjoyable sex life. Men need to understand that women are different, they are not simply men in women's bodies.
- b) Men - Biological fact: The accumulation of seminal fluid within men acts as an ongoing internal sexual stimulation. This condition is normal and does not make men sex addicts. It is God who created their sexuality in this way. Emotional fact: Men are visually stimulated. Wives need to take advantage of this characteristic in claiming for themselves the right and joy of giving their husbands the exclusive visual pleasure of their natural beauty. His body belongs to you and your body belongs to him, and wanting to see what belongs to him is healthy and sexually affirming (I Corinthians 7:4).

I have only given you seven things you might say to each other in order to get the dialogue going. What is important is that you talk to each other about your sexual selves, not for the purpose of having sex (listen-up men!) but for the purpose of understanding each other's sexual character. We need to tell each other honestly and tenderly what we need, what we feel, what we want, what we would like to try and what we are not sure of sexually. And we can do this without shame, fear or guilt because God Himself wants us to have satisfying sex,

since He created us as sexual beings with this capacity in the first place.

Great sex for life is possible if we follow the secure framework of an exclusive lifetime commitment of marriage. As a matter of fact, great sex for life is only possible within marriage because it is only within marriage that sex is blessed by God, its creator.

Finally, I would like to add that within marriage, all the mysteries about our own sexuality can be expressed and satisfied as well as made acceptable to ourselves, our partners and the God who loves us, even when we are completely naked before Him.

CHAPTER 12

THE BLESSINGS OF A LONG MARRIED LIFE

In this book we have discussed the various experiences that couples go through as they live out their lives as married people. We began with the early days of finding the right spouse and the excitement of the new marriage relationship. We continued with the issues of developing intimacy and solidifying our union. Finally, in this last chapter, I would like to share with you some of the priceless benefits awaiting those who remain together in Christ for a lifetime.

The Silver, Gold and Diamonds of Winter

Traditionally the most precious metals and stones have been silver, gold and diamonds. In our modern age these are being replaced by other costlier elements, but for the sake of this lesson I would like to label the three blessings of a long married life as silver, gold and diamonds.

The Silver of Married Life - Wholeness

Wholeness is the complete opposite of loneliness. It was the primary spiritual and emotional gift that God gave to Adam after he was created.

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him."

- Genesis 2:18

The gift of marriage is the gift of potential wholeness. You often hear people trying to express this idea when speaking of their spouse and their experience of marriage (i.e. he fulfills me; she makes me feel complete). Again, the Bible expresses this sentiment with its own special words in Genesis 2:24:

For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.

Note that the cleaving (being glued to) must be continual in order to produce the eventual result of having "one flesh" or "wholeness." Wholeness in a couple does not happen on the wedding day or in the honeymoon suite. Wholeness is the product of a lifetime of intimacy, a lifetime of dying to self in a thousand little ways, and a lifetime of mutual service and encouragement.

Some think that wholeness is about sexual fulfillment, but wholeness goes beyond the physical union married couples have. We become whole or one in mind, soul and body to the point that even others see the wholeness of our union. And what a precious thing wholeness is for the couple that experiences it!

Wholeness enables a couple to influence their families into second and third generations. How many families are anchored by the love and wholeness witnessed in an aged couple of grand or great-grandparents? Their wholeness is an ideal against which every other relationship in the family is measured. Their unity represents the center, the home and the security of family and what is right, true and good. Their wholeness is the shared treasure of that family.

Wholeness gives strength for adversity. In Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, Solomon refers to the bond of friendship, but his words could easily be applied to marriage as well.

⁹Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. ¹⁰For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up. ¹¹Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone? ¹²And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.
- Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Wholeness provides the kind of strength we need to deal with all the good and bad variables of life. For example, someone to rejoice with as well as someone with whom we can share sorrow. Joy is multiplied and sorrow is divided when we are whole.

Even death is better faced after living a life where we have been whole. There is less regret because we have known the ultimate experience that we, as humans, were meant to experience. As the British poet, Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote, "'Tis better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all."

In the end, all the songs of youthful love and all the movies and books with romantic themes appeal to that particular yearning that all people have to be whole. A lifetime of faithful partnership in marriage yields the precious silver of that wholeness that Hollywood and Madison Avenue only dream about.

The Golden Treasure of Married Life - Peacefulness

Peacefulness is the opposite of stress or anxiety. It is the most sought after state for the individual mind in our society. Drug companies sell billions of dollars worth of pills to calm our nerves and soothe our anxieties. Every year more book titles come out claiming to have found the way, the cure, the system, the diet or the exercises that will somehow bring us peace. But none of these things have been able to replace or improve upon the peacefulness that is produced by a lifetime of happy married living.

Marriage moves people into a constant flow of concessions and adjustments that promote the healthy minds and attitudes necessary to have peacefulness. In Philippians 4:7, Paul says that God's peace is the peace that surpasses understanding. God can and does calm our spirits through faith in Christ for reasons and in ways we do not always perceive. Marriage has this effect on us as well, except that we know and can describe the reasons. It is not beyond our understanding, it is within our grasp, and that is part of the pleasure of this peacefulness.

We are at peace because we have found a soulmate, and because of this there is no longer any searching. We are at peace because the adjustments and fine-tuning of our relationship have been completed and we can enjoy the ride. We are at peace because we have obeyed God's most basic command to establish a home and family, and remain faithful to that goal for a lifetime. We are at peace because we have

maintained the vows of sticking with our partner through thick and thin and as a result have been rewarded with the peace that comes from this. Being at peace with our partner also helps us be at peace with the rest of our family and society as well. Paul says, "So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another." (Romans 14:19).

Marriage is the basic framework for personal peace because it is within this relationship that we have a lifetime opportunity to edify (or build up) another person at close range. A constant effort to support, encourage, serve, forgive, satisfy, delight and share makes for a peaceful heart, mind and attitude.

The golden gift of peace is most often found in individuals who have been blessed with a long and happy marriage. For those who possess it, it is a constant joy and blessing that affects their homes, their families and all they come into contact with. For those who are younger, this treasure is a worthy goal to pursue through every stage of married life.

The Beautiful Diamond of Hopefulness

Hopefulness is the opposite of fear and discouragement. Regardless of the wholeness and peacefulness we experience in a lifetime relationship, there comes a time when that union is over. This is why the wedding vows say that the marriage is to last until death parts the couple. The diamond of hope is reserved for those who not only have maintained a lifelong union in marriage, but have also been united to Jesus Christ by faith and obedience as well.

Advanced age brings special problems and challenges. For example, there is the long illness of our partner or caring for a spouse while we ourselves are not well, there is the difficulty of placing our partner in a long-term care facility or even dealing with that ourselves. Added to these worries are the constant concern for our own children and their well-being. Of

course, there is always the reality that our lives are nearly at an end. These are just some of the problems facing elderly couples. However, these things are balanced with the very real hope that the best is yet to come when we finally see the Lord Jesus Christ, in the twinkling of an eye, after we die.

The diamond of hopefulness brings us great comfort in the knowledge that:

Separation is Not Forever

Christians only "sleep" the Bible says, because one day they will awaken at Jesus' return. In every scene where the Bible describes people who are in heaven, those people have retained their identities. For example, Jesus mentions Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as being in heaven, and as themselves there (Matthew 8:11).

The hope that we will see one another again is a sure one for a Christian couple and this expectation eases the many painful experiences that we encounter as we approach the end of physical life.

No More Suffering

The emotional, physical and spiritual drawbacks along with the limitations of this life will be eliminated in heaven. Where there is no sin, there is no suffering or death. Where there is no tempter, there is no temptation and consequently no struggle (Revelation 20:10 - Satan will be punished forever; 21:4 - no tears or pain in heaven).

Christians can look forward to a time when they will consciously have no pain, suffering or sin, and old age is the final stage before reaching this point. Couples united to Christ know that suffering and pain will one day be replaced with heavenly joy and a powerful new glorified body equipped for eternal life.

Perfect Oneness in Christ

The Bible tells us that marriage is only a reflection, only a preparation for the true relationship between Christ and the church that we are called to be a part of. Couples in Christ can look forward to perfect wholeness as they are made part of the Godhead sitting and ruling with Christ at the right hand of God (II Timothy 2:12). They can also anticipate perfect peace, because there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1). And lastly, married believers await perfect unity between themselves because no matter how good their married relationship was on earth, the type of relationship they will have as glorified saints in heaven will be even better.

Just like a diamond, given with great hope at the moment of engagement, that continues to shine throughout a lifetime and keeps its glitter even when the couple is old and grey. The diamond of hopefulness will also provide its beautiful sparkle and value for all those who put their faith in Christ Jesus. Even when the end comes, that hope and that promise will shine forth brightly beyond death and the grave.

I pray that the Lord blesses each person that has read this book with the joyful silver of married wholeness, the golden treasure of personal peace and the rare diamond of brightly shining hope as you remain faithful to Christ and your beloved.

EXERCISE:

CREATING A HAPPY MARRIAGE

1. Divide class into groups of four.
2. Carefully read the following passage concerning marriage.

¹⁵Then the Lord God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it. ¹⁶The Lord God commanded the man, saying, “From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; ¹⁷but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.”

¹⁸Then the Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.” ¹⁹Out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name. ²⁰The man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field, but for Adam there was not found a

helper suitable for him. ²¹So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. ²²The Lord God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. ²³The man said, "This is now bone of my bones, And flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, Because she was taken out of Man."

²⁴For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. ²⁵And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

- Genesis 2:15-25

1. Each group take five minutes to circle answers in the top section. Discuss within your group why you chose these answers (10 minutes).
2. Break down groups of four into pairs of two. Individually answer the questions in the second section. Discuss each answer with your partner.

Worksheet

Looking into the Scriptures

Read Genesis 2:15-25 and discuss

1. Of the many introductions in this chapter, which was the most important for Adam?
 - a. The Garden of Eden
 - b. The animals
 - c. Eve
 - d. The danger of death

2. Why do you think God said it was not good for Adam to be alone?
 - a. Two reflect God's image better than one
 - b. Adam was lonely
 - c. Animals make poor conversationalists
 - d. God created Adam to be with others

3. What was Adam doing when he named the animals?
 - a. Identifying and classifying them
 - b. Looking for a suitable mate
 - c. Imitating God
 - d. Getting to know creation

4. What did God mean when he described the woman as a "helper"?
 - a. The woman will reflect God's image to Adam
 - b. She will serve Adam
 - c. She will be a great partner
 - d. Man and woman will work together
 - e. She will be a source of strength

5. What happened when God made woman from his rib?

- a. God created intimacy
 - b. God created equality
 - c. God created partnership
 - d. God was running short of materials
6. What was Adam saying when he exclaimed, "This is now bone of my bones..."?
- a. "We are just alike."
 - b. "I do."
 - c. "At least I am not alone."
 - d. "Wow!"
 - e. "Out of me you are created."
7. Why were Adam and Eve naked and not ashamed?
- a. They were one flesh
 - b. They had not yet sinned
 - c. They did not have knowledge of good and evil
 - d. No one told them any different

My Own Story

1. If God created a perfect mate for me, he or she would be (choose 4):
- a) Outgoing
 - b) Wealthy
 - c) Shy

- d) Understanding
- e) Sturdy
- f) Kind
- g) Christian
- h) Delicate
- i) Thoughtful
- j) Witty
- k) Talkative
- l) Loving
- m) Intelligent
- n) Attractive
- o) Strong
- p) Innocent

2. As mate/prospective mate, I could be described as:

- a. Wow! Bone of my bones
- b. Missing a rib
- c. Too busy gardening
- d. Still naming the animals

3. Since it is not good for me to be alone, I will:

- a. Spend more time with my spouse
- b. Trust God for a partner
- c. Develop some close friendships
- d. Get a pet

4. To build up my helpmate, parents, children or one other significant friend in my life, I will:
 - a. Learn how to listen so that others will speak
 - b. Learn how to speak so that others will listen
 - c. Demonstrate more of my affections
 - d. Become more of a recreational partner
 - e. Keep myself physically attractive

Homework

Knowing what you now know about life and marriage, how would you change your wedding vows if you had another chance to repeat them to your spouse? After returning home, create a document containing these vows and share/discuss with your spouse.