Marriage Partnership

Quarterly Series

Biblical Marriage 101

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LEADER'S GUIDE FOR STUDY 1

Learning to Appreciate Our Spouse

How can we train ourselves to value our spouse?

It is easy to focus on the aggravations, annoyances, and behaviors that frustrate or anger us in marriage. This can cause us to lose sight of the significant gifts of kindness and service our spouse gives us every day. If our attitude is critical or negative, we will miss much of the joy of married life. Rachael Philips, in her article for MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP, suggests we should learn to appreciate the "daily behind-the-scenes good deeds of unsung spouses."

Why is it easier to criticize than encourage our spouse? How does negativity and criticism damage a marriage? How can a heart of appreciation deepen and strengthen a marriage? This study will explore how to train our hearts and minds to be thankful for our spouse.

Lesson #1

Scripture:
Ruth 2:4–20, 4:13–17; 2 Corinthians 10:3–5; Galatians 5:13–26; Ephesians 4:25–5:2; Philippians 2:1–11; 1 Thessalonians 5:12–18

Based on:
"It's the Little Things That Count," by Rachael Phillips, MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP, Fall 2003, Vol. 20, No. 3, Page 46

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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Prior to the class, provide for each person the article "It's the Little Things That Count" from MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP magazine (included at the end of this study).



We live in a culture that places heavy emphasis on individual rights. This can lead to an all-about-me attitude. Popular phrases such as "I did it my way" and "look out for number one" add to the cultural belief that our main concern in life should be to do what is best for me. Scripture challenges this thinking. God's Word tells us to think of others' needs as more important than our own. When we do this, in God's grace and power, we will have a life of contentment and joy that far surpasses the world's view of happiness.

A life of service for Christ begins at home. When we learn to love our spouse through serving, thinking of his or her needs before our own, we set the cornerstone for a solid marriage. Along with this, we learn to recognize the service and kindness our spouse offers us daily. These might include small, but significant, favors such as the garbage being taken out, beds made, lawn mowed, and bills paid. Appreciation helps us guard against an easily developed attitude of criticism. A heart of humility, service, and gratitude will strengthen any marriage, providing an antidote to self-centeredness.

Discussion starters:

[Q] How does our culture contribute to an attitude of self-centeredness? How has this attitude of self-focus affected marriage and family in our country?

[Q] Think about today's television programs that focus on marriage. How do spouses treat each other? How are the attitudes portrayed beneficial or harmful to marriage? How do they compare/contrast with Scripture, which tells us to be thankful and dwell on things that are admirable, pure, lovely, and praiseworthy (Phil. 4:8)?

[Q] How does your spouse respond when you are negative or critical? How about when you are thankful and appreciative?

[Q] Why is serving others and thinking of others' needs as more important than our own so difficult?

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PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: Mutual respect and admiration are the results of godly character and sacrificial love in marriage.

Read Ruth 2:4–20 and 4:13–17. Rachael Phillips said Boaz was "a wealthy, powerful man who honored faith and virtue in Ruth." Boaz demonstrated deep humility in his diligent, detailed, and sacrificial care for Ruth. Others recognized his godly character, including Naomi.

Ruth responded to Boaz with respect, gratitude, and humility. These were reflections of her kindness and sacrificial love for her mother-in-law, Naomi, and her willingness to give up everything to follow the Lord. Her noble character deepened Boaz's respect for her.

Ruth and Boaz are examples of how a husband and wife should relate to each other. They demonstrated godly character and sacrificial love. Out of these qualities came a mutual respect and admiration that deepened their relationship.

[Q] How did Boaz respond to Ruth's needs? Consider specific details about how he cared for her physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Why do you think he responded this way? What character qualities did Boaz exhibit which showed he walked with God?

[Q] Ruth responded to Boaz with a heart of gratitude and respect. Why is it important for us to respect our spouse? What does respect look like in practical terms? How can a heart of gratitude change a marriage?

[Q] How do you care for your spouse physically, emotionally, and spiritually? Why does diligent care take sacrifice? Which area(s) of sacrificial care do you struggle to provide for your spouse? Why are these areas difficult?

Teaching point two: When our marriage is a reflection of Christ's love, sacrifice, service, and humility, God is glorified and we are unified.

Read Ephesians 4:25–5:2 and Philippians 2:1–11. God is glorified when believers are likeminded in love, spirit, and purpose. This unity of believers should begin in our marriage. To achieve this unity, we must humble ourselves and have an attitude like Christ who took on the role of a servant. Paul warned us in Philippians to do nothing out of vain conceit, but instead to look out for the interests of others. When we do this, we glorify God.

If our hearts are blameless and pure, we will not be caught up in complaining or arguing with our spouse (Phil.2:14). The words that come out of our mouth are a reflection of what is in our heart. We must learn to speak truthfully to each other without unwholesome, unkind words. Our speech should edify and encourage our spouse and benefit those who hear us. When we are unkind with our words, we grieve the Holy Spirit.

When we love our spouse with the sacrificial love of Christ and set aside our own desires out of reverence for Christ, we will be recognized as children of God in the middle of a depraved generation. When we reflect Christ's love, we shine like stars in the universe as we hold out the Word of life. We do not want our marriage to mar our testimony for Christ, making all we labor for useless; instead, we want our marriage to be an example of God's love, bringing joy to those around us.

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[Q] God created each of us with unique personalities and talents. How can we be likeminded despite our personality differences? Do you think it's possible, in light of Scripture, for married people to be incompatible or without hope of unity? Explain your answer.

[Q] Paul tells us in Philippians to do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. How can these damage a marriage? Give some examples.

[Q] How can our speech damage our marriage? Our testimony for Christ? Why does Paul warn against complaining and arguing? How should we respond instead of complaining and arguing?

[Q] Why is it important to deal with anger and conflict in a timely manner? How can we be angry without sinning? How can we speak truthfully and kindly at the same time?

[Q] Does unity in marriage mean you never disagree? Explain your answer. How can married people disagree and still be in unity?

Teaching point three: We have the power, in the Holy Spirit, to destroy the strongholds in our marriage that produce destructive attitudes and behaviors.

Read 2 Corinthians 10:3–5 and Galatians 5:13–26. We have divine power to demolish strongholds. Strongholds are fortresses that are difficult to penetrate; however, they must be broken down to win the battle in a war. In marriage, these strongholds can be bad habits that are firmly fixed into our personality. God gives us the power, through the Holy Spirit, to demolish anything that sets itself up against the knowledge of God. He gives us the power to take our thoughts captive and make them obedient to Christ.

Sin, including bad attitudes which lead to behaviors that are destructive to self and others, begins in our thoughts. To break down the strongholds that destroy marriage, we must stop negative and critical thinking, and replace them with God's words and thoughts that are pure, admirable, and praiseworthy. Instead of thinking negatively about our spouse, we need to dwell on the kind, beneficial, and helpful things that he or she does. God gives us the power to serve each other in love. This keeps us from indulging ourselves in the sinful nature, which includes dissentions, factions, discord, and fits of rage. If we love our spouse as we love ourselves, our attitude will reflect the love of Christ in our marriage.

[Q] Galatians 5:13 warns us not to use our freedom to indulge our sinful nature, but to serve one another in love. How are we tempted to use our freedom to indulge our sinful nature in the marriage relationship? How can we use our freedom in Christ to lovingly serve each other in our marriage?

[Q] How might we bite and devour each other in marriage? How does this destroy us? How can we stop this type of behavior?

[Q] What inner battle is revealed in these passages? How do we fight the desire to please ourselves first?

[Q] How does conceit lead to provoking and envying each other? How does this apply to marriage?

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[Q] Paul lists acts of the sinful nature in Galatians 5:19. Which of these do you struggle with the most in your marriage? When we are tempted to display our sinful nature, we need to ask God to replace that behavior with the fruit of the Spirit that Paul outlines in Galatians 5:22. How does the fruit of the Spirit counteract the sinful nature? What does it mean to live by the Spirit?

Teaching point four: An attitude of respect, appreciation, and thanksgiving for our spouse pleases God and strengthens our marriage.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:12–18. Paul admonished us to respect those who work hard in the Lord. While this passage is generally applied to leadership in the church, it can apply to marriage as well. We need to respect our spouse and be grateful for all the work he or she does to invest in our marriage, family, and God's kingdom.

A heart of gratitude flows from a joyful spirit. This makes it easier to live in peace and to be patient with our spouse, even when we are wronged. Instead of a critical spirit that lists off all of our spouse's imperfections, our mind should be set on ways to edify and encourage. In order to do this, we must be in continual prayer, giving thanks in all circumstances, not just when things are going our way. When we have an attitude of respect and appreciation for our spouse, our joy will overflow into our marriage relationship.

[Q] Why is it important to respect those who work hard among us? What does it mean to "hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work"? How can this relate to marriage?

[Q] How does a thankful heart help us respect and admire our spouse? How does it help us with patience? How does it help us live in peace with each other?

[Q] How are joy, prayer, and giving thanks related? What role does each play in marriage?

[Q] How is it possible to be thankful in all circumstances? How does it apply to everyday life? For what circumstances in marriage is it hard for you to be thankful?

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

Dr. Gary Chapman, in his book *The Five Love Languages* (Moody Publishers, 1992), says there are five ways people give and receive love. These are: quality time, words of encouragement, gifts, acts of service, and physical touch. While we need to receive love through all five of these channels, Chapman believes we have one or two primary ways we give and receive love. When we identify our spouse's primary love language(s), we are able to serve in a way that will make him/her feel loved. It will also help us recognize how our spouse shows us love in ways we may have previously discounted.

[Q] Of the five love languages listed above, which do you think is your primary love language? Why?

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[Q] Which of the five love languages does your spouse primarily use to show you love? Give some practical examples that support this. Considering how your spouse shows you love using the five love languages, what do you think is your spouse's primary love language?

[Q] What happens in our marriage if we do not recognize that our spouse is showing us love?

[Q] How can recognizing these love languages help us appreciate the small favors our spouse does for us?

Optional Activities

- Read Gary Chapman's book *The Five Love Languages* and discuss its implications with your spouse.
- Create a chart with five columns using the five love languages as headings. Under each column list ways your spouse shows you love. Be specific and detailed. List ways you can love/serve your spouse using these same categories as guides.
- Thank your spouse every day for at least three things he or she does that you have previously taken for granted or overlooked.

—Study prepared by Julie Kloster, speaker and freelance writer

Additional Resources

Christian Bible Studies
-Marriage and Opposite-Sex Friends
-Sex and the Christian Couple
-Successful Relationships Course
-When It's Hard to Love

The Five Love Languages, Gary Chapman (Moody Publishers, 1992; ISBN 1881273156)

His Needs, Her Needs—15th Anniversary Edition, Willard F. Harley, Jr. (Baker, 2001; ISBN 0800717880)

Love for a Lifetime: Building a Marriage That Will Go the Distance, Updated Edition, Dr. James Dobson (Multnomah Publishers Inc., 2004; ISBN 1590520874)

Love & Respect: The Love She Most Desires, The Respect He Desperately Needs, Dr. Emerson Eggerichs (Integrity Publishers, 2004; ISBN 1591451876)

The New Freedom of Forgiveness, Revised and Expanded, David Augsburger (Moody Publishers, 2000; ISBN 0802432921)

Sacred Marriage: What if God designed marriage to make us holy more than to make us happy?, Gary Thomas (Zondervan Corp.,2002; ISBN 0310242827)

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📖 *What Every Man Wants in a Woman, What Every Woman Wants in a Man; Heart's Desires, Heart's Delights,* John Hagee & Dianna Hagee (Strang Communications, 2005; ISBN 1591855578)

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ARTICLE

It's the Little Things That Count

Nobody notices those behind-the-scenes good deeds of unsung spouses—until now.

By Rachael Phillips, for the study, "Learning to Appreciate Our Spouse"



The ring of evil green lights glimmered through midnight blackness from the ceiling of the hotel room.

I held my breath, not daring to move a muscle. One minute. Two. An hour. An eternity. Finally, I could bear it no more. I gently nudged my husband, Steve, who'd been lost in peaceful slumber.

"Mygwtzx... ?" he mumbled, then turned over and drifted off again.

In terror, I elbowed him harder.

"What the—?" Steve half rose from his pillow.

"Shhhh! Quiet! They'll hear you!"

"Who will hear me?"

I trembled. "The Communists," I said.

Complete silence. Then, "Why would the Communists listen to us sleep?"

"I don't know. But look at those green lights! I know they're listening."

The bedside lamp went on. With spiky hair and incredulous glare, Steve resembled an indignant triceratops roused from his sleep. But he explained calmly that the evil green lights indicated the presence of the hotel's sprinkler system, and no, they had nothing to do with the Communists, voyeuristic or otherwise. I'd been dreaming.

After 27 years, Steve's an old hand at dealing with my temporary night psychoses. He's scared off screaming fighter jets that buzzed through our small midwestern neighborhood (in actuality, snowplows). When nightly thumps and bumps convinced me an army of burglars coveted our obsolete VCR and ancient TV, his courage knew no bounds. When pink-raincoat-clad people carrying a black coffin followed me on a mad chase through ghostly hallways (a combination of too many old Doris Day movies

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and PBS Mystery programs), he dispelled them with a single thrust of razor-sharp logic.

Although Steve doesn't remember including this service in his wedding vows (I think it falls somewhere under "for worse"), he's never once hinted about having me committed.

Surely this unequivocally qualifies him for an Unsung Spouse Award.

Unlike the Oscars, these unique awards aren't given to the gifted and the beautiful on television before huge audiences of unnaturally thin and gorgeous people in scanty clothing. Instead, only the winner's spouse and God witness the Unsung Spouse Awards ceremonies, which celebrate the unnoticed and unappreciated heroes and heroines of marriage. Even the spouse doesn't show up at times! But in unseen timeless reality, thousands of angels raise their wings in salute to these masters of meekness. Music and rainbow laser lights explode from every side as God himself applauds and high-fives the champions, which include:

The woman who maintains regular correspondence with her in-laws, as her husband hasn't yet discovered the inventions of e-mail, telephone, ink pen, or paper.

The man whose wife believes cars run on gasoline fumes. He fills her tank and charges her cellphone batteries so hatchet murderers won't find her stranded along the freeway at 11 p.m.

The woman who buys, wraps, and delivers Christmas presents for her husband's employees, his parents, his siblings, his children, and him, yet makes a big deal of his single late-Christmas Eve purchase for her.

The hi-tech Knight in Shining Armor who protects his family from Internet spam, viruses, hackers, porn mongers, and other cyber villains. Even if his wife calls him at work, weeping because she deleted all their financial programs and 20 years' worth of his golf-score records, he talks her through recovery steps over the phone. He doesn't mention firing her, although the thought occurs to him.

The pastor's wife who listens with a smile as other churchwomen tell her how wonderful her husband is.

Best of the Bible's Unsung

Surprisingly, the Unsung Spouse Awards have existed for centuries. If we read between the lines, abundant examples leap from the pages of the Bible, including these unsung spouses from the Old Testament:

Mrs. Noah. She took a yearlong cruise with her husband, sons, and daughters-in-law, caring for Noah's personal zoo, including lions, tigers, and bears—oh, my!—as

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well as snakes, mosquitoes, and tarantulas—OH, MY! (Why God found the latter indispensable will be one of my questions when I get to heaven.)

The unnamed wives of Shem, Ham, and Japheth. For years, these women hardly saw their husbands, who spent every spare moment with their father, Noah, building a huge boat in a desert. These women supported their husbands and accompanied their rather strange father-in-law on a long, questionable voyage. Their faith saved their lives and those of future descendants—including ours. No doubt God bestowed a special blessing on these wives, and plans a grand prize for their eternal future—which probably isn't a free cruise.

Sarah, the Mae West of the Old Testament. Her husband, Abraham, tried to pass her off as his sister to protect his own skin. Twice. She let him live. (Give Abraham credit, though, for living with a 90-year-old pregnant woman.)

Hannah's husband, Elkanah. He wasn't Mr. Sensitive in regard to their blended family and her low self-esteem because she lacked children. But when Hannah determined to give their miracle child, Samuel, to God's service, Elkanah supported her decision, an unusual reaction in a patriarchal system that valued, above all, its sons.

Boaz. A wealthy, powerful man who honored faith and virtue in Ruth. He ultimately married her, though she was a foreigner—an anathema to a respectable Jewish man. Neither he nor his heirs have sued because Ruth's name is stamped on the Old Testament book rather than his. At least, not yet.

Lappidoth and Shallum, the respective husbands of the judge Deborah and the prophetess Huldah. I can't recall hearing a sermon preached on either of these men. Yet, despite their lack of positive press, they ring true. Lappidoth did not object to his wife's running off to battle with General Barak, a timid Don Knotts-style soldier who refused to go to war without Deborah's presence. And we find no evidence Shallum interfered with his wife's ministry, although she sometimes made politically-incorrect statements.

Hosea, the patient, forgiving prophet. He should receive highest honors, as his wife had far more guy friends than girl friends.

And what about these New Testament spouses? The unnamed wives of the disciples, who kept the home fires burning while their husbands followed the young revolutionary named Jesus around Palestine for three years. Likewise, husbands such as Clopas and Cuza, the spouses of Mary and Joanna, dealt with the unrest and downright danger their women faced, not to mention juicy rumors that no doubt surrounded them, as they followed Jesus.

After exploring the Unsung Spouses' Roll Call of Faith throughout the Bible, my own position as Chief Guardian of the Toilet Paper Spindle seems less demeaning,

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while my husband's role as Great (and Only) Changer of Light Bulbs grows in importance. After all, Jesus always noticed seemingly little things about people. Cups of cold water, sparrows, snotty-nosed kids, and blind beggars all interested him. He recognized extravagant love housed in brown-paper packages, such as the lunch of fish and bread the little boy gave up. Like the widow who gave her pennies to God.

Jesus also admires married love that wears baby drool, shovels snow before daylight, heats and reheats dinner, and actually reads the insurance policy. In his eyes, the first are last and the last are first. All who take cold showers—not because of a raging libido, but because someone else hogs the hot water—stand in God's Unsung Spouse Awards line.

And near the head of that line, receiving a movie star's adulation, is my husband, Steve, in beige cardigan and sensible shoes—my mighty Defender Against the Communists.

Rachael Phillips, author of Billy Sunday *(Barbour Press), lives with her family in Indiana.*

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LEADER'S GUIDE FOR STUDY 2

When Money Comes Between Us

Solving marital conflict over money.

It is a well-known fact that opposites attract—and sometimes even marry! Most married couples, at one time or another, have disagreed about money issues, and these differing views create stress. Using the MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP article, "More Than Just Money," this study will attempt to answer questions such as: What lies behind our disagreements about money? Can a spender find happiness with a saver? And how can we resolve monetary conflicts?

Lesson #2

Scripture:
Genesis 2:24; Matthew 6:21, 24–33; Philippians 2:3, 4:19; 1 Timothy 6:6–10; Hebrews 13:5

Based on:
"More Than Just Money," by Suzanne Woods Fisher, MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP, Spring 2003, Vol. 20, No. 1, Page 54

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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Prior to the class, provide for each person the article "More Than Just Money" from MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP magazine (included at the end of this study).



Read 1Timothy 6:6–10, which shows what God says we need (food and clothing) to be content. At times, our perspective is off. We are bombarded daily with the world's views concerning what we need. Actually, all advertisements are geared toward making us discontent. Advertisers cannot sell us something without first getting us to see our need for it. And if that isn't enough, we live next door to the Joneses and sometimes feel the need to keep up.

Larry Burkett and Rick Osborne spoke about contentment in their book *Financial Parenting*: "Paul was content even when he was in need. That's because God was his 'enough.' The secret is that our contentment is to spring from our relationship with and trust in God." The Scriptures agree with this in Hebrews 13:5.

There is an account of a little girl who stood up to recite part of the 23rd Psalm. She said, "The Lord is my shepherd, and that's all I want" and sat down. If only those words could be true of us.

Discussion starters:

[Q] Share what you were taught as a child about money.

[Q] Share about a time in your marriage when you and your husband disagreed about a purchase. How did you resolve it?

[Q] Are you a saver or a spender? Are you married to a saver or a spender? What obstacles have you had to overcome with your differences?

[Q] Share an unnecessary item you have purchased and what influenced your decision to purchase it.

[Q] If money were no object, what would you buy?

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: We look at money differently.

Suzanne Woods tells us, "Marital conflicts arise not because of money itself, but because of a couple's differing emotions about money." Money is one of the major conflicts married couples face. Perhaps that's because we all need it, work hard for it, and practically speaking, really like having it.

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Read Genesis 2:24. God explains how two separate people unite and become one. The hard part is the becoming. Two unique individuals come together with separate ideas of doing things from their respective families. Differences make it interesting most days. Sometimes money differences mask control issues—the one who makes the money has the power. One spouse could dictate what should be spent, saved, and so forth.

Marita Littauer and Chuck Noon tell us what they did to remove the control issues that money could present. "We have a bookkeeper who pays all our bills from a joint checking account. She then tells us how much each of us needs to contribute to that account. By having a third party involved, I am not telling Chuck what to do and he is not telling me what to do. Control does not become the issue" (*Love Extravagantly*, Bethany House, 2001).

[Q] Name some area in your marriage other than finances where you and your husband are complete opposites. How has this created conflict?

[Q] Share your ideas of having a third party involved regarding finances. What challenges might this sort of an arrangement present?

[Q] What were your early experiences concerning money? What were you taught about saving and spending when you were a child?

[Q] Have you ever changed your mind about purchasing something? What were your reasons?

Teaching point two: We can accept our differences.

Woods says, "Spousal differences in 'money personalities' are God given. Left unchecked, these differences can spell trouble—or they can be a couple's greatest asset in money management if they understand and respect each other's wiring." She goes on to say, "Your differing money personalities don't have to be fatal to your marriage. It's what you do with those differences that determines the success or failure of a marriage."

Accepting differences is key to conflicts of any sort. If we see our views as right and wrong instead of different, we are apt to have conflict. This can be a hard concept to comprehend. We often think there is my way, or the wrong way. God is faithful to show us when our pride gets in the way.

Read Philippians 2:3. If we consider our mates better than ourselves, even if we don't agree, we will be in a teachable place. Accepting another person gives them freedom to be who they were made to be. In an environment where people accept one another, real communication can happen.

One way to understand our differences is to use numbers. Ask your spouse to assign a number to something he or she wants to purchase. Such as, on a scale of 1–10 where 10 is the highest, how important is this purchase to you? In this way numbers can show us what our words fail to do. This idea can also help in confirming some purchase choices. At the very least, when I understand how important something is to my spouse, I can affirm him or her even if I don't agree.

[Q] Name a difference between you and your spouse that was difficult for you to accept. How did you come to accept it?

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[Q] Have you been guilty of saying "it doesn't matter" when someone asked you to choose something? How might the number system be used in that same situation to help you?

[Q] Finish this statement: When it comes to buying _____, I just can't get enough.

[Q] Is it easier to spend money on yourself or someone else? Have you always been that way?

[Q] Name something about your spouse that actually drew you to him or her, but eventually lost its charm. How can you regain the enjoyment of that quality?

Teaching point three: God owns everything.

Most people have sung the lyrics "He's got the whole world in his hands." Sunday after Sunday we've learned God is the Creator of absolutely everything.

Read Matthew 6:24–33. God tells us not to worry about any of our needs. One of God's names is Jehovah Jireh, which means the Lord will provide. But, at times we act as though we don't know where our next meal is coming from. God lovingly asks us to look at the sparrows, one of his smallest creations. He knows when even a sparrow falls, reminding us we are even more valuable than these tiny creatures. All that remains is for us to believe what he says. If God is the Creator of the universe and has promised to provide for us, we need to just rest in his Word. As we read in Philippians 4:19, if we have a true need, it will be met.

Reread 1Timothy 6:7. Not only does God own everything, but when we leave this earth anything we have acquired remains here. Sometimes people live as if this world is all there is. Years ago there was a bumper sticker that read, "He who has the most toys wins." Sadly, some live as if this were true.

[Q] Name one time that God provided for you in a special way. What was so unique about this time? Explain how this provision affected your faith.

[Q] Mention a time when you ran ahead of God, not waiting for his provision. How did this affect you the next time you had a need?

[Q] Name something you didn't need, but God still provided. Share how you felt when you received it.

[Q] Think of another bumper sticker to reflect society's view about money. Think of one that would reflect God's view.

Teaching point four: We can serve either God or money.

People who live for the here and now don't realize they are serving money. And yet, when the dollar becomes the "almighty buck," money is what we're serving. It is also possible to have very little money and still be serving it, for it can still occupy our minds and hearts so that we are worshiping it.

Read Matthew 6:21. God is interested in our hearts. We can say with our mouths we love God, and yet our hearts could be devoted to money. Our God is a jealous God who deserves our worship—all of it. It is either one or the other; we can't serve both.

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If we are determined to serve God, then we can go to his Word, and he will show us how to be good stewards of what he has entrusted to us. He will help us put money in the right perspective, so it's not too important to us. God can teach us with any tool he chooses. Sometimes, he uses our finances to teach us contentment, self-control, patience, how to give, and how to trust him. Money itself isn't the problem, unless it's on a throne.

[Q] Can you share a time when money was too important to you? How did you discover this? What did you do to change?

[Q] What is one of the best lessons God has taught you, using money as his tool?

[Q] How can God use money to teach us self-control? In what ways does society work against this valuable lesson?

[Q] Have you ever visited someone from another culture? Compare or contrast their views about money with ours as Americans.

[Q] What one area concerning money would you like to grow in? What steps can you take to make that happen?

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

Money. It's something we need, and yet, something some live without. It has come between people, revealed what was in people, and actually been the source of broken relationships. A friend of mine who is a nurse told me she once saw family members fighting about their mother's money right there in the woman's hospital room!

Money is powerful. But it can also be used for good. Money can help meet people's needs. It can be used to bless people. It can further the kingdom of God. It all comes down to perspective. If we share the world's perspective, money becomes something we strive for and chase after. If we share God's perspective, money is something we can use, not worship. God can help us have his perspective as we live in this world.

It is certain money doesn't have to come between us. God can give us his wisdom for any conflict we may have. If we do find ourselves in conflict, we can get financial counseling or look into Crown Financial Ministries, a Bible-based ministry dedicated to helping people learn about God's perspective with finances. We can speak to a pastor or to a friend when we struggle with our finances. When you married, it was to come together as one unit with God as the center. As we look to him, he will show us how to find the right perspective, helping us solve conflict and grow together, becoming one as he designed us to be.

[Q] Do you think it is easier to worship God if we have little money or a lot of money? Give reasons for your answer.

[Q] We read in Matthew 6:21, "Where our treasure is, there will our hearts be also." Where is your treasure right now?

[Q] Explain how you can be worshiping money even if you don't have very much.

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[Q] Do you think it matters who does the financial bookkeeping in a marriage? What should the determining factor be?

[Q] What do you think a married couple should do when they do not agree about the amount they give to the Lord?

—Study by Anne Peterson, a published poet and speaker, who is a regular contributor to Christian Bible Studies and an ongoing student of God's Word.

Additional Resources

- Christian Bible Studies
  -A Biblical Perspective on Money
  -Prosperity and Faith
  -A Look at Things
  -Successful Relationships Course
  -When It's Hard to Love

- *The Book of Marriage: The Wisest Answers to the Toughest Question,* edited by Dana Mack & David Blankenhorn (Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001; ISBN 0802838960)

- *First Comes Love Then Comes Money: Easy Steps to Resolving the #1 Conflict in Marriage,* Roger Gibson (New Leaf Press, 1998; ISBN 089221418X)

- *Handbook for Married Couples*, Alice Fryling (InterVarsity Press, 1984; ISBN 0877849234)

- *Money Before Marriage,* Larry Burkett (Moody Publishers, 1996; ISBN 0802463894)

- *11 Reasons Families Succeed*, Richard & Rita Tate (Hensley Publishing, 2002; ISBN 1563220814)

- *Resolving Conflict in Marriage,* Darrell Hines (Whitaker House; ISBN 0883687291)

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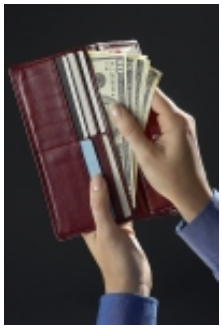
Marriage Partnership
Quarterly Series

ARTICLE

More Than Just Money

Finances alone don't help or harm your marriage. But your attitudes about money make a big difference.

By Suzanne Woods Fisher, for the study, "When Money Comes Between Us"



Most of us have strong feelings about money. Those feelings are actually based on our unique money personalities—the way we're wired, the influences of our parents, and/or our past experiences with money or employment. And those personalities play a significant role in marriage.

Some people hoard money, while others are carelessly generous. Some are responsible about financial tasks, others avoid them. Some invest conservatively, others take great risks, and still others are afraid to deal with money at all. These deeply ingrained feelings and behaviors can make it hard to be rational about money, which can cause a strain on a marriage.

For example, take Bryan and Teri Smith. They're facing a serious marital crisis, in great part because of a clash of different money personalities. Their deepest needs, masked by money issues, continue to collide and paralyze each other from making progress into a healthier, happier marriage.

Bryan likes to feel significant. He excels in his work and wants to show off his success. Bryan and Teri live in a beautiful house in an exclusive part of town and drive a luxury vehicle. What most people don't know is that Bryan rents their home for an exorbitant amount and leases his car. But to Bryan, the costs are worth it. He's able to have the lifestyle he wants and not feel deprived.

Teri, on the other hand, appreciates the luxury, but has a stronger need for security. She'd prefer to own a home, but they'd have to move to a more affordable neighborhood, and she doesn't want to uproot their children from the local school. So they continue to live a flashy lifestyle—with no savings for the future, which creates anxiety and stress for her.

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God-Given Differences

Marital conflicts arise not because of money itself, but because of a couple's differing *emotions* about money. The Bible supports this: "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Timothy 6:10). Behavioral psychologists agree that the two most basic human needs, beyond food and shelter, are for security and significance. These differences, although basically non-economic in nature, tend to work themselves out in economic terms.

One partner's need for significance drives him to acquire, often by debt, thus threatening the other partner's high need for security. Such is the case with Bryan and Teri.

Ironically, spousal differences in "money personalities" are God-given. Left unchecked, these differences can spell trouble—or they can be a couple's greatest asset in money management if they understand and respect each other's wiring. That wiring comes not only from God, but also from each spouse's background.

In *'Til Debt Do Us Part*, author Julie Ann Barnhill makes this clear in a chapter titled, "The Crowded Altar." Barnhill notes that there are more than two people at the altar during a wedding. She writes:

Propelling our actions and thoughts are patterns of behavior that we learned (both consciously and subconsciously) from our parents during our childhood and early adult years. Indeed, we are the sum total of various parts of our past. And that total adds up to some pretty interesting results in regard to money and marriage. All sorts of emotional needs and frustrations can build within a marital relationship when individual personality and its effect on our spending and money attitude aren't addressed.

That's just what happened in Barnhill's marriage. She and her husband, Rick, were faithful Christians who even attended marriage retreats. But a few years ago, they almost called it quits after ten years of marriage, three kids, and staggering bills. Julie Ann, a self-confessed compulsive spender, and Rick, a thrifty saver, were nearing bankruptcy and divorce. "When I was growing up," Julie Ann recalls, "my mom and I would shop—and Mom would say, 'You don't need to mention to Dad how much money your prom dress cost.' It was a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy. I took that pattern right into my marriage. My husband had the same approach toward money as my dad. I'd tell him, 'I've got it covered. Don't worry.' And he wouldn't. Until we finally hit rock bottom."

Julie Ann says many of the problems resulted from her upbringing. "I was never given a budget as a child; I was never told no. And I carried that into my marriage. So when Rick and I started to have financial problems, I really thought I'd just married the wrong person! For us, it took hitting rock bottom. I think the turning point came

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when I realized we could lose this marriage over money. I felt such an overwhelming sadness. But we felt stuck in an endless cycle."

As the Barnhills fought to save their marriage, they focused on the core of their problems. "Our problems were rooted in denying the truth, in lying to each other, in even deceiving myself," she admits. "In our case, with each lie I spoke, I was destroying trust and intimacy with Rick. And with each unrealistic expectation that he refused to budge on, our marriage suffered the consequences."

Overcoming the Differences

"Often," says Barnhill, "the personality issues that become roadblocks to our communication as husband and wife were at one time the very things that attracted us to each other."

But opposites attract for a reason. Couples are drawn to each other's strengths, and they usually can see only the positive aspects of their partner. But each strength has a corresponding weakness that will appear sooner or later. Just ask Kim Salch.

"I've always loved my husband's crazy sense of fun and generosity," Kim says. "Now those qualities drive *me* crazy. He buys odd things from all over the world. We have what I call a 'UTS' (Ugly Thing Shelf) for his collections."

A once endearing quality had become a source of friction. But God can use opposites in a marriage to balance the extremes, writes financial counselor Joe Shoecraft. "If husband and wife are identical in nature, undoubtedly the decisions will be unbalanced. Thus, a saver balances a spender. Unfortunately, learning how to balance this relationship can be difficult. What I see is that usually one personality will try to dominate the other."

What to do, then? First, recognize that "different" isn't inferior. God designed and placed different gifts and abilities in your marriage. Seeing your spouses' differences as a God-given blessing to create balance in your home, rather than an obstacle to your happiness, can transform your marriage.

Second, ask God to help you develop a healthy money personality—even by showing you where your attitudes have been unhealthy or sinful. That's what Julie Ann Barnhill did. "It wasn't until I called my deeds sinful—my selfishness and careless spending—that I sensed a softening in my heart toward Rick," she says. "Once I confessed, 'God, I want to think differently about money and stuff,' I recognized my weakness and embraced it. God gently reminded me, 'Without me you can do nothing.' We're a mess. But with God we're made right."

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Accountability, Not Accountants

For the Barnhills, a lack of financial savvy combined with little or no communication proved almost disastrous to their marriage. But both were willing to take the right steps toward healing—and fiscal wisdom.

Julie Ann sought out inexpensive counseling from a local charity to learn basic financial skills and to improve communication with Rick. "I had to learn how to become a truth teller," she says. "The other day Rick asked me how much something cost, and then asked to see the receipt to confirm it. It's an accountability issue for both of us."

Meanwhile, Rick has taken on the job of being the family's money manager, even taking classes to learn more about long-range plans.

Today, Julie Ann says she's no longer a "chronic financial loser," as she puts it. And she says she and Rick are enjoying the kind of marriage they'd always hoped for.

"God's been so faithful to us," she says. "We certainly had repercussions from our years of financial mismanagement, but we didn't have to declare bankruptcy or head to divorce court. Even at our worst point, I discovered God's blessings never stop."

If you think your marriage might be suffering because of stress over money issues, don't hesitate to seek help. Turn to your church, trusted friends, recommended counselors, or a credit counseling service.

Don't be embarrassed to seek counseling from a professional. Many couples will need outside help to get on the right track. Seeking counsel for marriage and financial problems should be as normal as seeking medical help for medical problems.

Your differing money personalities don't have to be fatal to your marriage. It's what you do with those differences that determines the success or failure of a marriage. With good counsel, a strategic plan, mutual accountability, and prayer, you can experience the freedom of financial wisdom and enjoy the marriage God intended you to have.

Suzanne Woods Fisher, an author and contributing editor to CHRISTIAN PARENTING TODAY, lives with her family in California.

MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP, Spring 2003, Vol. 20, No. 1, Page 54

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Where to Find Help

If you're in a financial crisis, or just need some good fiscal advice, there are dozens of Christian books, including Julie Ann Barnhill's '*Til Debt Do Us Part* (Harvest House), on the topic of money management. Check out your local Christian bookstore, or go to www.christianbook.com.

Here are some other good resources:

- Crown Financial Ministries (www.crown.org)
- Christian Financial Ministries (www.good-steward.org, 678-797-9444)
- Myvesta (www.myvesta.org, 800-MYVESTA)
- Consumer Credit Counseling Service (www.cccs.org, 888-577-2227)
- Debt Relief Clearinghouse (888-4DEBT-HELP)

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Marriage Partnership

Quarterly Series

LEADER'S GUIDE FOR STUDY 3

Faith as the Marriage Glue

What does God really add to a marriage?

Far too many marriages fail, and, according to most statistics, Christian unions fare little better than average. Yet Tim and Popie Stafford hold that including God in the marital equation makes a big difference. As they write in "A Firm Foundation," "faith helps a marriage endure and grow," and "faith is the glue that holds us together." Unfortunately, it's easier to agree with those statements than to put them into practice.

Adding God to husband and wife does make the foundation for a strong marriage, but the process is not as simple as adding water to sand and cement to make concrete. What are God's goals for marriage? What role does he play in developing healthy husbands and wives? Most important, how can Christians draw on God's resources to build solid families? These are the questions we'll explore in this study.

Lesson #3

Scripture:
Ecclesiastes 3:11; Matthew 19:3–6; Galatians 5:22–23; Ephesians 5:22–33; Philippians 1:4–6, 3:12–14; Hebrews 10:24–25; James 1:2–4

Based on:
"A Firm Foundation," by Tim and Popie Stafford, MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP. Summer 2004, Vol. 21, No. 2, Page 31

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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Prior to the class, provide for each person the article "A Firm Foundation" from MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP magazine (included at the end of this study).



While issues like gay marriage and domestic-partner benefits elicit strong statements from America's faith communities, divorce has become so common that it scarcely raises an eyebrow. In 2004 the Barna Group found that about half of Baby Boomers have undergone at least one divorce, compared with just one-third of their parents' and grandparents' generations. Boomers' children are on pace to match or exceed the divorce rate of their parents.

In many ways, it seems that Christians have given up the fight against divorce. Across generations, the divorce rate for born-again Christians is identical to the rate for non-Christians (35 percent). Only tiny differences emerge when researchers factor in divorces that occurred before people became Christians and Christians' comparatively low rate of cohabitation. Even in attitude, Christians reflect the rest of the culture. Just one-fourth of Christians who responded to the Barna survey strongly agreed with the statement, "When a couple gets divorced without one of them having committed adultery, they are committing a sin." Over half of the Christians rejected the statement, despite its biblical basis.

Hollywood superstar Brad Pitt, speaking to *GQ* about his divorce from Jennifer Aniston after four and a half years of marriage, pretty much summed up the American view: "The thing that I don't understand is looking at this as a failure. It's talked about like it failed; I guess because it wasn't flawless. I embrace the messiness of life. I find it so beautiful, actually. The idea that marriage has to be for all time, that I don't understand."

Discussion starters:

[Q] Do you know people who would agree with Brad Pitt? What are some other statements you have heard people use to defend, or even celebrate, divorce?

[Q] When was the last time a leader at your church addressed divorce? What was the context, and what did the leader say?

[Q] Do Barna's statistics jibe with what you observe in your circle of friends and acquaintances? If not, what might account for the difference?

[Q] Are you surprised at average Christians' attitudes and actions regarding divorce? Why or why not?

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PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: God advocates marriage.

The Staffords write, "God is unreservedly on your side, not in some abstract and theoretical sense, but in earthy, deeply practical ways. He doesn't wait to see how marriage works out. He works for your marriage." Read similar ideas in Matthew 19:3–6, Ephesians 5:22–33, and Philippians 1:4–6.

[Q] At your wedding, or at other weddings you have attended, how was God's support invoked? If you have attended weddings where such support was absent, what (if anything) was substituted?

[Q] By quoting Genesis, Jesus links God's view of marriage to God's role as Creator. What does this link tell us about the nature and importance of marriage? Is it possible to accept God's view of marriage without believing in him as Creator?

[Q] How is the union of husband and wife similar to that of Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:22–33)? How are the unions different?

[Q] Philippians 1:6 is not specifically about marriage, but it seems to apply. How can marriage be a "good work" begun by God? What confidence can Christian couples take from the knowledge that God will carry their marriages "on to completion"?

[Q] Roman Catholics view marriage as a sacrament, like Communion and baptism, through which God imparts grace to his people. Protestant Reformers abandoned this view and largely ceded regulation of marriage to civil authorities, though Protestants retained a role for the church in blessing marriages. This might seem a trifling difference, but, according to Barna, Roman Catholics divorce at a much lower rate than Protestants (25 percent versus 39 percent). Do you think Roman Catholic doctrine and divorce statistics are related? Without altering their doctrine, how might Protestants promote the seriousness and holiness of marriage?

Teaching point two: God disciples you through your marriage.

God doesn't just want marriages to succeed—he wants to form faithful disciples in the process. Improvement in one area almost always leads to improvement in the other ... eventually. The Staffords acknowledge that sometimes a spouse must tell God, "I trust you to do what you need to do with my partner. Take the time you need: I give it to you." Read Ecclesiastes 3:11, Philippians 3:12–14, and James 1:2–4, which communicate the virtues of patience and perseverance.

[Q] According to these verses, what elements contribute to positive change in the life of a believer?

[Q] If you are married, what is one change you have noted in yourself since your wedding day? If you are not married, what is one way your mother or father (or another spiritual mentor) changed over the course of their marriage?

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[Q] Is it harder to wait for change in yourself or to wait for change in another person? Which sort of change is easier for you to identify? Which are you more faithful in praying for?

[Q] Think about the fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22–23. How do greater measures of each of these spiritual qualities make someone a better spouse? Which quality could you use extra work on?

Teaching point three: Keeping God central to your marriage takes effort.

It's crucial for Christian couples to recognize God's perspective on marriage, but, the Staffords write, "To make faith a pillar in your marriage takes more than perspective." They suggest taking the concrete steps of worshiping together, finding a community of faith, and praying as a couple. The Bible never lays out such a detailed plan for successful marriage, but the writer to the Hebrews gives similar advice to a young church in Hebrews 10:24–25.

[Q] How does sharing the experience of worship strengthen a marriage? What happens to a marriage when this element is missing?

[Q] How is Christian fellowship different from mere socializing? How can Christian fellowship grow a marriage?

[Q] Some churches divide congregations by "age and stage," while others encourage mixing demographics. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each approach? Whichever approach your church uses, how might you (and your spouse) reap some of the benefits of the other style?

[Q] Why do many couples struggle to pray together? What are the rewards of persevering in this struggle?

[Q] What are some other ways couples can "spur one another on toward love and good deeds" (Hebrews 10:24)?

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

The first quotation following the Staffords' article, from Jack Mayhall, uses an architectural metaphor for marriage: "God is still in the business of creating marriages. He desires to be the foundation stone of each union. Most marriages are based on nothing; it isn't surprising that many collapse. But it's never too late with God." This metaphor can help couples assess the strength of their relationships, identify trouble spots, attend to "routine maintenance," and plan for future growth.

[Q] If a Christian mentor were to evaluate your marriage in each of the categories of this study (sharing God's perspective, understanding God's role, and practicing spiritual disciplines), where might the firm spots and weak spots be?

[Q] Using the rooms of a house to represent areas of married life (the bedroom for sexual intimacy, the office for finances, and so on), which room of your house needs work? How

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can a godly perspective on that area help? How might you seek God's assistance? What spiritual disciplines might be useful?

[Q] How could some "showrooms" in your house be made even better?

[Q] How can you prepare your "house" now for changes and challenges ahead?

—Study prepared by Elesha Coffman, former managing editor of CHRISTIAN HISTORY.

Additional Resources

- ChristianBibleStudies.com
  -Learning to Appreciate Our Spouse
  -When Money Comes Between Us
  -Marriage and Opposite-Sex Friends
  -Sex and the Christian Couple
  -When It's Hard to Love
  -Successful Relationships Course
- *Becoming Soul Mates*, Les Parrott (Zondervan, 1998; ISBN 0310200148)
- "Born Again Christians Just As Likely to Divorce As Are Non-Christians," http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdateNarrow&BarnaUpdateID=170
- *The Complete Marriage Book,* Drs. David Stoop and Jan Stoop (Baker, 2005; ISBN 080073047X)
- *Marriage Takes More Than Love,* Carole Mayhall (Nav Press, 1996; ISBN 0891099468)
- *Never Mind the Joneses: Building Core Christian Values in a Way That Fits Your Family*, Tim Stafford (InterVarsity Press, 2004; ISBN 0830832017)

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Marriage Partnership
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ARTICLE

A Firm Foundation

With God in control, your marriage can thrive.

By Tim and Popie Stafford, for the study, "Faith as the Marriage Glue"



A good marriage isn't necessarily an easy marriage. Take, for example, our friends Dan and Debbie. They fell desperately in love during high school and got married in college. The intoxication of young love was intense, but so was the hangover when infatuation wore off. Both came from divorced parents, so they had few good role models of happy marriages. Both were stubborn and willful. Lots of days they just didn't like each other and wondered whether they should be married at all. So many members of their extended families had divorced that failure was almost expected. They felt quite alone.

Yet today, 25 years later, Dan and Debbie make one of the best marriages we know. Their differences complement each other. They encourage and strengthen many others through their hospitality and outreach.

"Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve ... but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:15).

How did they make it? The answer has to do with faith. During their high school years both had come to trust in Jesus Christ. In fact, their faith drew them together in that intoxicating love. Through their struggles, they lost the intoxication but not the faith. They held on to the conviction that God loved them. They believed God wanted them to persist—and they were deeply committed to following God. That gave them the extra strength they needed. They came out tested and strong.

When we see people struggling in their marriage, this is our message, before any other: God is for you as a married couple. Too often your friends and family aren't sure. When they recognize the depth of your differences, they may stand back and wait to see if you self-destruct.

God is unreservedly on your side, not in some abstract and theoretical sense, but in earthy, deeply practical ways. He doesn't wait to see how marriage works out. He works for your marriage.

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When Jesus was asked about divorce, he didn't speak to the legalities. Nor did he offer advice on how to overcome problems. His response went directly to God: "Haven't you read in your Bible that the Creator originally made man and woman for each other, male and female. . . Because God created this organic union of the two sexes, no one should desecrate his art by cutting them apart" (Matthew 19:4, 6, *The Message*).

An important corollary is this: God is working on your spouse. Sooner or later every married person comes to the traumatic realization that his or her mate has character flaws. We don't mean bad habits, such as leaving wet towels on the bathroom floor. If your spouse can't be trusted to tell the truth, or shows an uncontrollable temper, or reacts with fear and rigidity to change, those are character flaws. You probably have limited leverage to change them. Those flaws are well defended!

However, you aren't the only one involved. God is working on your spouse. (He's also working on you.) Sometimes your job is simply to trust God's pace of change. Tell God, "I trust you to do what you need to do with my partner. Take the time you need: I give it to you."

When marriage partners have that kind of faith, they learn to accept each other. They don't have to like each other's character defects. Nor should they ignore them. (If your spouse abuses you or has problems with alcohol, for example, intervention is essential.) Accepting each other means you accept Jesus as the person in charge of your partner's life. If Jesus is willing to work patiently with such material—and to love it despite the obvious flaws—you can be willing to do the same. Such faith helps a marriage endure and grow.

Making Faith Work for Your Marriage

So far we've talked about faith as a way of looking at the world—a perspective that brings God into your understanding of reality. To make faith a pillar in your marriage takes more than perspective, though. Some practical steps are necessary.

Find a church where you can worship together. How basic can you get? Yet some marriages fail to settle this fundamental point. If you don't attend church, or if you sit in different pews on Sunday morning, you'll have a hard time building your marriage on faith. Likewise, if you're in the same building but one partner is mentally out-to-lunch, your "spiritual unity" will be fractured.

Some neighborhood friends of ours used to faithfully attend a nearby church. We thought they were happy there until one day Beth stopped us in the street. "What do I have to do," she asked, "if I want to go to your church?"

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It came out that her husband, Peter, had attended her church for years but never really liked it. Recently, some events had completely alienated him. He swore he was done attending. Worse, their children followed his lead and wanted to stay home too.

It was difficult for Beth to stop attending her church. She realized, though, that her family needed a church they all could appreciate. Though she agonized over leaving the church traditions she'd grown up with, the traditions she loved, Beth began attending our church with Peter. Soon the whole family became involved. They never miss a service. Beth has come to love our church deeply. She has no regrets, because she loves going to church with her whole family.

The point is not that our particular church is wonderful. The same thing has happened with some families leaving our church. While we regret losing them, we understand their need. To build your marriage on faith, you need to worship together. Church provides a common starting point for everything you do—and especially for your life of faith together.

Find a community of faith for you as a couple. This isn't the same as finding a place to worship together. A "fellowship" group or a Bible study often supply such support. You need people who, like God, are for you as a married couple—people who know you both well, who interact with you frequently, and who believe in you as a unit.

Early in our marriage, we had a Bible study with a collection of singles and married couples from several different churches. We met in our apartment, and not all the meetings were fabulous or inspiring. Some people who came had deep problems, and sometimes those threatened to dominate the group. Nevertheless, that group came to know us intimately, and they shared their lives with us. They believed in us! As a married couple, we grew closer in faith through that small, struggling community.

Pray together. For many couples, this is difficult advice. They can't explain what the problem is—after all, they're not shy about sleeping together—but when they try to pray they feel awkward.

Prayer is a deeply intimate exercise, with great personal vulnerability. Every couple needs to find a way that's comfortable to them. Charlie Shedd, a wise counselor, used to advise couples to pray silently while holding hands, and then tell each other what they'd prayed. We've known couples who could only pray together reading from a prayer book. Whatever works!

Sometimes couples have such an idealistic conception of what family prayer should be, it keeps them from praying. We're grateful we haven't suffered from such high standards. For us, prayer is usually a few minutes at the beginning of the day, done "on the fly." Nevertheless prayer is a connection point for our day. It reminds us our faith is the glue that holds us together.

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God made your marriage. He put you together. He isn't a God who goes halfway. He doesn't give up on something he's started. God is for your marriage. Get a grip on that, and it will make a strong pillar for your marriage.

—Popie Stafford is a marriage and family therapist. Tim Stafford, senior writer for CHRISTIANITY TODAY, *is author of* Never Mind the Joneses: Building Core Values in a Way that Fits Your Family *(InterVarsity Press).*

Building and Rebuilding

God is still in the business of creating marriages. He desires to be the foundation stone of each union. Most marriages are based on nothing; it isn't surprising that many collapse. But it's never too late with God. At any point, if we turn over our lives and our marriages to him, he will become the foundation, the builder, and the rebuilder, if that's necessary, of that home. Even the broken pieces of our lives can be mended and repaired if we let God be God in every area of our human relationships.

—Jack Mayhall, Marriage Takes More than Love *(NavPress)*

Marriage Mission

Love does not consist in gazing at each other but in looking outward in the same direction.

—Antoine de Saint-Exupery

Going Back to the Garden

How does the reality of Christ within your personal life affect your marriage? Most people answer that question by saying, "Well, we have a Christian marriage because we're both Christians." Or, "We go to church together." But when they go on to describe what happens between them, there is nothing evident that makes their marriage uniquely Christian.

What makes a marriage Christian is that we as a couple are seeking to restore what was lost back in Genesis. We become whole people again through the work of Christ, and our marriage becomes fully what it was designed to be—a complete, satisfying union of two people before God. In a marriage that is growing spiritually, both partners make the choice regularly to confront not only the shame, defensiveness, and fear that any two people are going to encounter in an intimate relationship, but also the brokenness in their relationship with God.

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In a marriage that is Christian, we are to seek to restore that spiritual intimacy with God, together as well as individually. Although we can't go back to the Garden, we can recapture within our new life in Christ some of the marital joy that was originally experienced through intimacy with God.

—*Dr. David Stoop,* Seeking God Together *(Tyndale)*

A Biblical Mystery

Those who follow Christ have a much better chance at accomplishing the Bible's odd mathematics of marriage, of making two become one. Why? Because such people bring an expectation of gradual growth to their marriage. They expect time to act as their friend as they live together. Such a mind-set not only carries them past unexpected setbacks, but also gives them an assurance that added years of maturing can only better their current condition.

—*David Mains,* Living, Loving, Leading *(Multnomah)*

"A Firm Foundation," by Tim and Popie Stafford, MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP.
Summer 2004, Vol. 21, No. 2, Page 31

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Marriage Partnership

Quarterly Series

LEADER'S GUIDE FOR STUDY 4

Glorify God Together: A Marriage of Purpose

How can our marriage be in one accord, so that with one heart and voice we glorify God?

A marriage centered on Christ is specifically focused on glorifying God, according to Rick Warren in his article entitled "The Purpose-Driven Marriage," written for MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP. Our main purpose in marriage should be much greater than fulfilling our own wants and needs or even the wants and needs of our spouse. Our main purpose in marriage should be to focus on being of the same mind, according to Jesus, so that with one accord and one voice we glorify God.

In this study, we will ask: Why did God give us the institution of marriage? What is the purpose of marriage? How can our marriage bring glory to God? How can the marriage relationship help make us holy?

Lesson #4

Scripture:
Genesis 2:18–25; Acts 2:42–47; Romans 12; Colossians 3:1–19, 4:2–6; 2 Timothy 4:1–5

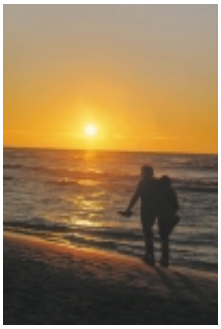
Based on:
"The Purpose-Driven Marriage," by Rick Warren, MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP, Summer 2004, Vol. 21, No. 2, Page 26

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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue



Note to leader: Prior to the class, provide for each person the article "The Purpose Driven Marriage" from MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP magazine (included at the end of this study).

Our culture portrays the main purpose of marriage as contributing to our personal happiness. If a person is not happy in marriage, then marriage is no longer fulfilling its purpose and divorce becomes an option. Scripture, however, tells us God hates divorce.

Gary Thomas, in his book *Sacred Marriage* (Zondervan, 2002), says that the purpose of marriage is beyond happiness, sexual expression, the bearing of children, companionship, mutual care and provision, or anything else. Thomas believes the purpose of marriage is more about making us holy than making us happy. When we focus on pleasing God in marriage, instead of pleasing ourselves, marriage becomes an institution that aids in the process of sanctification, making us more like Christ. Rick Warren says in this type of marriage, "We remain committed to each other because we remain committed to Christ and his work within us." Glorifying God, not personal fulfillment, then becomes the main purpose in marriage.

Discussion starters:

[Q] Consider romance novels, chick flicks, and current magazine articles on marriage. How does our culture view marriage? What does our culture tell us is the purpose of marriage?

[Q] What does our culture think brings about marital fulfillment? What is the difference between a marriage based on romance and a marriage based on commitment?

[Q] What do you see as the purpose(s) of marriage? How can knowing your purpose(s) in marriage help your marriage relationship?

[Q] How can the marriage relationship help to make us holy? How can the marriage relationship glorify God?

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: The marriage relationship teaches us to have authentic and intimate fellowship and a strong sense of community with all believers.

Read Genesis 2:18–25 and Acts 2:42–47. God created Adam and Eve to have intimate and authentic fellowship with each other. According to Genesis, in a marriage relationship man and woman become one flesh. This implies a depth of relationship that can only be shared between a husband and wife. Rick Warren says marriage should be a place where we open up to each other and share our hurts, reveal our feelings, confess our failures, disclose our doubts, admit our fears, acknowledge our weaknesses, and ask each other for help and prayer.

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When we learn to have this depth of fellowship with our spouse, our marriage becomes a foundation to teach us how to love others. Marriage can be a support to develop the type of community described in the book of Acts. Our home becomes a place of hospitality and warmth that invites fellowship beyond the superficial level. The joy, love, and depth of relationship shared in marriage spills out to the community of believers allowing for fellowship that is glad, sincere, and full of praise to God above.

[Q] In Genesis 2:18 God said it was not good for man to be alone. What does this imply about our need for fellowship? Does this mean all people should marry? Explain your answer.

[Q] What is authentic fellowship? Does authentic fellowship aid in our spiritual and emotional growth? If yes, how?

[Q] How can depth of fellowship add to the health and growth of a church? What keeps us from having depth of fellowship in our marriage relationship? In the body of Christ?

[Q] What is necessary in marriage to have depth of intimacy? What role do trust, time, and prayer have in a relationship that admits doubts, fears, and weaknesses?

[Q] How can marriage teach us to love others with Christ's love? How can we use what we learn in marriage to aid in the fellowship of believers?

[Q] How can a husband and wife work together to create an atmosphere in their home that is welcoming to others? To encourage depth of relationship with the fellowship of believers?

Teaching point two: God uses the marriage relationship to make us more like Christ.

Read Colossians 3:1–19. When our hearts are set on things above, not on earthly things, our lives will be a reflection of Christ and his love. Practical aspects of holy living will then represent our lives. Our earthly nature, whose characteristics include sexual immorality, impurity, lust, greed, lying, evil desires, anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language, is put to death. The virtues of the new nature, which are love, peace, thankfulness, forgiveness, compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, replace them.

These virtues of the new nature must be present in our marriage. When we focus on loving our spouse with the love of Christ, these virtues will be practiced daily, chiseling us more and more into Christ's image and binding us together in unity. When we let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts and homes, our marriage will be a relationship where we admonish each other in the wisdom and words of Christ with sincere hearts and reverence for God. Worship will become an integral part of our marriage relationship as we focus on glorifying God together. When we work at our marriage relationship with all of our heart, serving our spouse as we would serve Christ, our marriage relationship will be used as a tool to shape us into Christ's image, and we will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward.

[Q] How do the characteristics of the old nature affect the marriage relationship? How do we put to death the characteristics of the earthly nature?

[Q] After Paul lists the characteristics of the old nature, he warns believers not to lie to each other. How does lying affect a marriage relationship?

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[Q] Paul reminds us in Colossians that we are God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved. How does this knowledge help us to clothe ourselves with the virtues of the new nature? Which of these virtues is most difficult for you? Why?

[Q] Do you agree with Gary Thomas that marriage was designed to make us holy more than to make us happy? Why or why not?

[Q] How does God use marriage to chisel away our old nature? Share how the Lord is using your marriage to change you more into the image of Christ.

Teaching point three: God uses the marriage relationship to train us to honor and serve others above ourselves.

Read Romans 12. Honoring our spouse's needs before our own and having a desire to serve him/her out of love and devotion is essential to a healthy marriage. This same attitude of service learned in marriage can be used by God to train us to serve others. God uses experiences, including pain and suffering in our lives and in our marriages, to help others. Rick Warren says, "God doesn't just use our strengths; he uses our weaknesses, and even our failures." God can use what we learn in marriage, including the difficult times, to teach us to serve humbly, sacrificially, and effectively.

God has a purpose for us in our own generation. He planned in advance the work he has for each of us to do. In marriage we can work together for God's glory. We can blend the talents, abilities, and personality traits that he has given to each of us to serve others and to further his kingdom. Our marriage can then be a union that has a purpose to serve others. Our home can be a place of true hospitality where we serve and share with those in need. Out of this sense of purpose we will use our time, resources, and energy to serve others for God's glory.

[Q] Romans 12:1 says offering our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, is a spiritual act of worship. How can serving our spouse be an act of worship to God? How can serving our spouse train us to serve others?

[Q] Share with your group one way God has used something difficult in your marriage to help others.

[Q] Paul warns us in Romans to not think of ourselves more highly than we ought. He then reminds us that we each have different gifts and different functions in the body of Christ. How can pride make serving our spouse difficult?

[Q] How does God use our different gifts to strengthen our marriage? How might differing gifts cause contention in marriage? How can we blend our talents, abilities, and gifts to serve God and others?

[Q] According to Romans 12:9–21, how should we love and serve the people around us, including our spouse?

[Q] How should knowing your marriage has a purpose (to serve and glorify God) strengthen your marriage? How should it affect your relationship with your spouse? Your daily decisions?

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[Q] What are some practical ways you and your spouse can minister together?

Teaching point four: Marriage may give us a partner to help spread the gospel of Christ.

Read 2 Timothy 4:1–5 and Colossians 4:2–6. We are to go into the entire world and preach the gospel. Marriage may give us a partner to accomplish this charge in our lives. Together we can do the work of an evangelist. Together we can pray for open doors for the message to proclaim Christ. We can sharpen each other so that our message is clear and our conversations are full of grace and salt. We can hold each other accountable to make the most of each opportunity and to know how to share our faith in every season of our lives and marriage. We have a partner to encourage us to keep our head in all situations and to help us endure hardships related to sharing the gospel. Together we can share the Word of Life with those around us, so they can be saved and God will be glorified.

[Q] What are some practical ways you and your spouse can be a witness in your neighborhood? Consider ways to reach out to your neighbors in community, fellowship, hospitality, and service.

[Q] What are some practical ways you and your spouse can reach your community for Christ? Consider programs that are already in place such as homeless shelters, tutoring programs, or pregnancy centers.

[Q] What are some practical ways you and your spouse can reach foreign countries with the gospel, either by going yourself or by sending others?

[Q] What role does prayer have in spreading the gospel?

[Q] What does Paul mean when he says to make the most of every opportunity? What does it mean for our conversations to be "full of grace" and "seasoned with salt"?

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

Marriage allows us the opportunity to glorify God with one heart and voice. Together we learn to have authentic and intimate fellowship, share in ministry to other believers, and spread the gospel of Christ. In the process, we become more like Christ.

[Q] How should knowing our purpose in marriage affect our daily activities? How should it affect the way we treat our spouse? How should knowing our purpose in marriage help us with the ministries and mission God has given us?

[Q] How can your marriage relationship be used to develop authentic fellowship with those you know? How can it be used to serve other believers? How can it be used to share the gospel of Christ?

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[Q] How can your marriage relationship be used to make you more like Christ? What should this look like practically? What characteristics did Christ exhibit that should be present in your marriage?

[Q] How can you incorporate prayer into your marriage relationship to further the gospel of Christ?

Optional Activities

Plan date nights with your spouse on a weekly basis to give you time to develop authentic fellowship. Make it a point to share your hurts, feelings, doubts, fears, and weaknesses, in addition to your joys.

Spend time in prayer with your spouse every day. Pray for each other and for your ministry together. Pray for opportunities to share the gospel.

Open your home on a regular basis to the community of believers for fellowship, and offer hospitality to those in need.

Consider a short-term mission trip, or sponsor and pray for others who are in missions.

Discuss with your spouse practical ways you can serve your family, neighborhood, community, and world; and then do it!

—Study prepared by Julie Kloster, speaker and freelance writer.

Additional Resources

ChristianBibleStudies.com
-Learning to Appreciate Our Spouse
-When Money Comes Between Us
-Marriage and Opposite-Sex Friends
-Sex and the Christian Couple
-When It's Hard to Love
-Successful Relationships Course

Community: Building Relationships Within God's Family, Bill Hybels (Zondervan Corp, 2005; ISBN0310265916)

Like Your Neighbor? Doing Everyday Evangelism on Common Ground, Stephen W. Sorenson (Intervarsity Press, 2005; ISBN 0830832645)

Love For a Lifetime: Building a Marriage That Will Go the Distance, Updated Edition, Dr. James Dobson (Multnomah Publishers Inc., 2004; ISBN 1590520874)

Sacred Marriage: What If God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy, Gary Thomas (Zondervan Corp., 2002; ISBN 0310242827)

The Communion of Saints: Living in Fellowship with the People of God, Philip Graham Ryken (P & R Publishing, 2001; ISBN 0875525075)

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- *The Purpose Driven Life,* Rick Warren (Zondervan Corp., 2002; ISBN 0310205719)
- *101 Ways to Reach Your Community,* Steve Sjogren (Nav Press, 2001; ISBN 1576832201)

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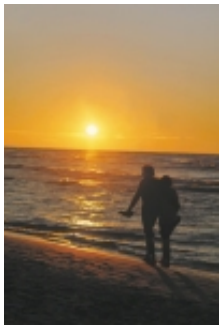
Marriage Partnership
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ARTICLE

The Purpose-Driven Marriage

Use these five biblical purposes to give direction to your marriage.

By Rick Warren, for the study, "Glorify God Together: A Marriage of Purpose "



I suppose you'd expect a man who's been married 30 years to a beautiful, intelligent woman to be able to share with you the intimate secrets to having a perfect marriage.

But I'm going to disappoint you! That's because my wife and I don't have a perfect marriage. Kay is without a doubt my best friend, and we have a wonderful relationship—but as far as a perfect marriage, well, there's no such thing.

"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church" (Ephesians 5:31–32).

What Kay and I do have is a marriage centered on Christ, specifically focused on glorifying God. We remain committed to each other because we remain committed to Christ and his work within us.

No Easy Road

After three decades in ministry, I've noticed that it's not unusual for couples to float through their first year or two of marriage in a love-blinded bliss.

But, frankly, that didn't happen for Kay and me. Our first two years together were the most difficult. In fact, we were ready to throw in the towel. If we both hadn't been committed to Jesus Christ and we both hadn't agreed that divorce was not an option, we wouldn't have stayed together. It was simply too difficult.

Kay even said that in those first few years of marriage, she often wished that one of two things would happen: either she'd be widowed, or God would change his mind and say divorce was now okay!

Since then, we've met many couples who were convinced their marital struggles meant there was no hope for healing. We can say from experience that's not true; there's always hope!

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Part of the difficulty for Kay and me is that we were virtual strangers when we got married, but we began finding out things about each other immediately—like the fact that apart from our love for God, we were about as opposite in nature as two people could be.

We viewed life from two different angles and argued over just about everything. I remember Kay's father sat us down the night before we were married and said, "There are five areas where marriages usually have conflict: money, sex, in-laws, children, and communication."

He proved to be prophetic: Kay and I went five for five! We fought over every single one of those items.

Not only did we disagree over those things, we couldn't even agree about how to disagree! Kay is an intense person who needs to talk. My preferred method of dealing with problems was just to walk away. That was a volatile combination!

The single factor that kept us married in those early years was that we agreed on one thing: divorce would never be an option for us. You can't leave the door open even a little bit, or eventually one of you will try to escape.

Because we knew we were in it for the long haul, we were forced to accept each other's differences. What else were we going to do?

Slowly, over time, God helped us not only to accept our differences, but to appreciate them. Through the process we learned that any successful marriage is built upon the biblical truth that God designed each of us with five purposes in mind: worship, fellowship, discipleship, ministry, and missions.

In other words, until you realize you were placed here for God's purposes, then your life—and your marriage—will be difficult, complicated, and exhausting. But once you understand God's plan, your life—and your marriage—take on new meaning.

And once you and your spouse both get this—when both of you are living purpose-driven lives—then guess what happens?

Your marriage becomes a purpose-driven marriage!

Balancing Biblical Purposes

Here are the five biblical purposes you should keep balanced in your marriage:

1. You and your spouse were both planned for God's pleasure. How would your marriage immediately change if you understood deeply that your spouse was created for God's pleasure? Or if your spouse understood deeply that you were planned for God's pleasure?

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A man once asked Jesus, "What's the most important commandment?" Jesus replied, "I can summarize the entire Bible in two statements: Love God, and love other people!" (Matthew 22:36-39). That includes your spouse.

Life is about relationships, not achievements. First and foremost, it's about developing a relationship with God that will last forever—we call that worship. You also worship God when you love and sacrifice for your spouse (just read through Romans 12 with a view of what its applications would mean to your marriage).

Any time you give pleasure to God, you're worshiping him, and the Bible teaches that loving your spouse—the mate God gave you for a lifetime—brings pleasure to him.

2. You and your spouse were formed for God's family. God made an incredible promise about the gathering of even just two believers: "For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst" (Matthew 18:20, NASB).

So if both you and your spouse are believers, God is already in your marriage working to transform the two of you into a purpose-driven family unit! Isn't that incredibly great news?

But Jesus wants us to love real people—not ideal people—and your marriage is a lab for learning how to love like Jesus loves.

It seems funny now, but one conflict between Kay and me in marriage was over the really trivial issue of soap! For me, a hot steamy shower is a spiritual experience—right up there with eating fresh cinnamon rolls. I also happen to be a person who gets bored quickly, so I like variety; I don't want to use the same kind of soap all the time.

One day I told Kay we needed some different kinds of soap. But I said it in a way that sounded as though our marriage was a failure because we used the same kind of soap all the time. Three or four months later at Christmas, to "get back at me," she wrapped and placed 27 different bars of soap under the tree!

My point is that within marriage, God has created an opportunity for us to develop a true intimacy and authenticity with another human being. God wants for you and your spouse to go beyond the superficial chit-chat that is, unfortunately, so common in many marriages.

To go this deep requires genuine, heart-to-heart, gut-level sharing, where you and your spouse get honest about who you are and what's happening in your lives. This happens when you both open up to each other and share your hurts, reveal your feelings, confess your failures, disclose your doubts, admit your fears, acknowledge your weaknesses, and ask each other for help and prayer.

3. You and your spouse were both created to become like Christ. As I mentioned, marriage is a laboratory for developing God's love in you. He'll use your spouse to build his values, attitudes, morals, and character within you.

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Once you understand this, a lot of what happens within your marriage will begin to make more sense. When you start to ask, "Why is this happening to me?" The answer is—to make you more like Jesus!

In fact, the Bible teaches that God builds certain qualities within our lives by putting us in situations that make it difficult to show these qualities. In other words, for God to teach you real love, he'll put you around some unlovely people. For God to teach you real joy, he'll allow you to go through times of grief. To learn inner peace and patience, he'll allow storms of chaos and stressful situations in your life that test your patience and teach you to trust him.

In his book *Sacred Marriage,* our friend Gary Thomas makes the case that marriage was not meant to make you happy; it was meant to make you holy. That was an eye-opener for Kay and me. It made such sense. If God's purpose for each of our lives is to make us look more like Jesus, what better tool could he use than the marriage relationship?

Who better for God to use to chisel you than the person you live with seven days a week? When the difficult times come, you just have to realize you're being worked on! God is using each of you to shape the other person more and more into the image of Jesus.

4. You and your spouse were both shaped for serving God. The Bible says, "God has made us what we are. In Christ Jesus, God has made us to do good works, which God planned in advance for us to live our lives doing" (Ephesians 2:10, NCV).

We serve God by serving others, and we serve God by serving our spouse. God shapes us for service through a variety of methods, including our spiritual gifts, our passions, our abilities, our personality, and our experiences.

In fact, God will use the difficulties in your marriage to shape you into an effective minister to others. Who could better help the parents of a Down syndrome child than other parents with a Down syndrome child? Who could better help somebody recover from the pain of an addiction, a business failure, or a prodigal child than a couple who has been through these things and emerged with godly insights?

Could it be that the part of your marriage you regret or resent most—that which you've wanted to hide or forget—is the very thing God wants to use as your ministry to help and encourage others sharing the same struggle? God doesn't just use our strengths; he uses our weaknesses, and even our failures!

5. You and your spouse were both made for a mission. Your marriage not only involves ministry, it also involves mission. Your ministry is to believers and your mission is to non-believers—allowing God to use your marriage as a means for telling others about his love.

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This may take many forms, from being a witness in your neighborhood to going overseas on mission trips together. The fact is, if you want God's blessing on your marriage, then you must care about what God cares about most. What is that? He wants his lost children found! He wants everyone to know him and his purposes for their lives.

If you want to see how much God cares about the people around you, just look at the Cross. With outstretched arms, Jesus says, "I love them this much!"

Marriage is a life-long process designed to teach you to see the needs of another person as more important than your own. It's a difficult transition because it's not natural. It's not natural for me to look at life from Kay's point of view, and it's not natural for her to look at life from my point of view.

To think this way requires an intentional shift that can be made only through the power of God in your life. As you and your spouse make that shift, your marriage will become more and more purpose-driven—focused on the needs of others and balancing the purposes of worship, fellowship, discipleship, service, and missions.

The reward is greater than anything you could ever imagine. I've often thought what would have happened—or not happened—had Kay and I thrown in the towel many years ago. There would be no Saddleback Church, no purpose-driven ministry, and no "Purpose-Driven Life"!

God's plan for you and your spouse—for your marriage—is wider and deeper than anything in your wildest, craziest dreams. May our heavenly Father help you to catch this vision as you chase it into the future.

Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church in Southern California, is best-selling author of The Purpose-Driven Life *(Zondervan).*

Selfish Transformation

The real transforming work of marriage is the twenty-four-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week commitment. This is the crucible that grinds and shapes us into the character of Jesus Christ... Marriage calls us to an entirely new and selfless life... Any situation that calls me to confront my selfishness has enormous spiritual value.

—*Gary Thomas,* Sacred Marriage *(Zondervan)*

Through Heaven's Eyes

You may ask how you can see your spouse as God does. This perspective comes only from prayer. Concern for my wife's spiritual journey leads me to pray regularly

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for her, asking that I will be able to discern the Spirit's presence and activity in her life and thereby support, never obstruct, the Spirit. The more I pray for her, the more I see her as God sees her—through eyes of love and concern for her spiritual growth.

—*David G. Benner,* Sacred Companions *(InterVarsity Press)*

Pleasing to God?

If I believe the primary purpose of marriage is to model God's love, I will enter this relationship and maintain it with an entirely new motivation, one hinted at by Paul: "So we make it our goal to please him" (2 Corinthians 5:9).

For the Christian, the first question we should ask ourselves when doing anything is, "Will this be pleasing to Jesus Christ?"

The first purpose in marriage—beyond happiness, sexual expression, the bearing of children, companionship, mutual care and provision, or anything else—is to please God.

The challenge, of course, is that it is utterly selfless living; rather than asking, "What will make me happy?" we are told that we must ask, "What will make God happy?"

—*Gary Thomas,* Sacred Marriage *(Zondervan)*

Time After Time

Becoming married takes time. It doesn't happen on the wedding day. The wedding is only the beginning of a relationship that can be expected to endure and grow. What happens is that over time God's grace becomes visible in the marriage relationship. It becomes visible and real to the married couple, of course, but in a wonderful way it also becomes visible to the people who are touched by the relationship, to family and friends, to neighbors and fellow church members.

—*Douglas J. Brouwer,* Beyond "I Do" *(Eerdmans)*

In the Image of God

When was the last time you looked at your mate watching TV, maybe with a beer in his hand, and thought, He is made in the image and likeness of God?

When was the last time you sat across the dinner table and didn't stare down into your plate, but into the eyes of someone reflecting the image and likeness of God?

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When was the last time you pressed warmly against your mate, knowing she is made in the image and likeness of God—and not just a body there for your amusement?

What a difference a divine image can make in a marriage. When you begin to relate as males and females according to your super-natural image, you move past the popular illusions and begin to pay attention to what is essential, spiritual, eternal, and even holy about your mate. Hanging bellies, thinning hair, or sagging breasts no longer become your standard for your mate. Your perspective changes from carnal to spiritual: you cease to see your mate as just an object whose sole purpose is to attract you or satisfy you.

When you begin to see your mate as the image and likeness of God, your marriage, no matter how exiled, will instantly realign to God's order. After all, how can you disregard the image and likeness of God? Can you really justify impoliteness or cruelty to the image and likeness of God? Is it possible not to find something beautiful or handsome in the image and likeness of God—regardless of what someone actually looks like? How could anyone, in good conscience, cheat on the image and likeness of God?

In fact, devotion, respect, kindness, caring, consideration, adoration, honesty, nurturing, chivalry, trustworthiness, truthfulness—a list as infinite as the Infinite One—are the only ways to treat the image and likeness of God.

When you correctly view your mate—not according to the warped, twisted, politically correct, fly-by-night, and faddish standards of a fallen world—but as God created that person to be, you set your marriage on the high road.

—*Michael Shevack,* Adam & Eve: Marriage Secrets from the Garden of Eden *(Paulist Press)*

"The Purpose-Driven Marriage," by Rick Warren, MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP, Summer 2004, Vol. 21, No. 2, Page 26

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LEADER'S GUIDE FOR STUDY 5

Your Spouse—Friend or Foe?

Don't let your differences divide you.

"What's wrong?" you're asked, and you quietly respond, "Nothing." But something is wrong. Our inability to deal with differences creates the perfect environment for resentment to grow, choking out any chance of intimacy. We foolishly think, *Why should I say what's wrong? If my spouse loved me, he or she would know.*

This study will ask: What are some of the important components of a good marriage? Should all conflict be dealt with? How can we ensure we will have a lifelong relationship? What part does forgiveness play in our marriage?

Lesson #5

Scripture:
Genesis 2:18; Romans 12:17; Ephesians 4:26, 32; Philippians 2:1–4; Colossians 3:13; 1 Peter 3:8

Based on:
"Handling Hidden Differences," by Jim Killam, MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP, Spring 2003, Vol. 20, No. 1, Page 44

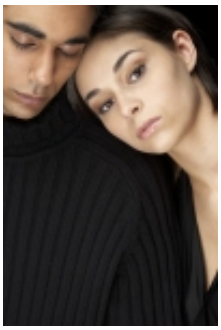
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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Prior to the class, provide for each person the article "Handling Hidden Differences" from MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP magazine (included at the end of this study).



Have you ever watched an elderly couple that exudes harmony? Whether they are chatting away or sitting quietly, you sense a spirit of calmness that didn't evolve in just a year or two. Other times you see couples who don't look like they're even together, but instead are just occupying adjoining spaces. All of us who have walked down a wedding aisle will end up like one of these couples. Will our later years reflect marriages where friendships were established and nourished, or will we quietly share a house, a name, and some history?

Some couples, after years of living together, decide to part ways once the children leave home. Many times one partner is left wondering what went wrong. Too often there are no apparent warning signs, just silent resignation. Sometimes one party is offended and decides to bury the offense, thinking it will just go away. Instead it takes root and grows into a list of reasons to justify his or her anger.

Discussion starters:

[Q] Mention some ways you and your spouse differ. Are these differences challenging or endearing to you? To your spouse?

[Q] Mention a difference you and your spouse have had which is becoming less of a difference. Who is the one changing?

[Q] Name one way you would like to become more like your spouse.

[Q] When you watched television as a young person, was there a television family you wanted to emulate? Why?

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: Befriend your mate.

In the MP interview on marriage, Gary Chapman said, "One of the reasons we're still married is that we vigilantly maintain a friendship. We make sure we have a consistent weekly date night. When I talk with people who are going through their second half of marriage and experiencing such a difficult change when their kids are gone, I notice they didn't protect their friendship with each other."

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We often see our spouses as being in a different category than our friends. Sadly, we often treat our friends with more honor than our spouses. If anything, we should treat them better than our friends.

In a friendship there is open communication, honesty, and if there is a disagreement both parties are open to working it out. The same should be said about our marriages. God calls marriage the picture of Christ and his church. We are to value and cherish our marriages so when the world looks at us, they are getting a look at what God had in mind when he told Adam in Genesis 2:18, "It is not good for man to be alone." To ensure our golden years will be spent next to our lifelong friend, we need to invest in that relationship.

[Q] What are some of the barriers people face when they try to invest in their marriages? Do you find the world around you supportive of marriage?

[Q] What kind of a marriage did your parents have? How similar is yours?

[Q] Are you and your spouse close friends or simply roommates? What would it take to cultivate a friendship with your mate?

[Q] Have you had a positive role model for your marriage? If so, what characteristics did you observe in that relationship?

[Q] What is one area you could work on to improve your friendship with your spouse? Do you think your spouse considers you one of his/her closest friends? Why or why not?

Teaching point two: Accept your differences.

Our differences can cause stress in our marriage if we don't make a valiant attempt to accept those differences. The problem comes when we don't see them as differences, but instead look at our mate as though he or she is doing the wrong thing. It can be something small, which initially is just an irritation. But little by little the irritation grows into an aggravation. And if that aggravation is not dealt with, it grows larger still. We'd do well to see our differences with eyes full of grace—to see our differences as something that gives variety instead of annoyance.

Give your spouse freedom to be the person God made him or her. This is especially difficult when the differences seem vast. One temptation is to belittle your spouse when his or her views seem opposed to yours.

Belittling is the exact opposite of what God asks us to do. In the interview, Gary Chapman said, "One partner is saying, directly or indirectly, 'My opinion is superior to yours. I'm more educated. I'm the better here. So don't you get it? Follow my directions because you're inferior to me.'" It is possible to disagree, but we need to do it in a loving way. We can do this by respecting our mate, regardless of whether we agree with the point of view offered.

Read Philippians 2:1–4.

[Q] What do these verses tell us about accepting our differences?

[Q] Mention one area where you and your spouse were complete opposites, and how you found a compromise.

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[Q] If you have children, what message are you sending to them when you choose not to accept your mate's differences?

[Q] How can we show our spouses respect when we don't agree with their ideas?

[Q] What do you think incompatibility means in view of this study?

Teaching point three: Deal with conflict.

Conflict with people is one of the hardest things in life. Who was it that said, "I love humanity, it's people I can't stand"? Let's be honest; what we don't like is people disagreeing with us. And yet, without conflict there is no growth.

Read Colossians 3:13. We wouldn't be instructed to bear with one another unless there was a predisposition to go against that. For some reason we start viewing our ideas and views as part of who we are; consequently, when our ideas are rejected, we take it personally. Marriage offers many opportunities for us to learn about conflict.

Read Romans 12:17. One temptation we face is repaying what someone dishes out. If someone is crabby to us, we want to be crabby back. But God asks us to honor each other (1 Cor. 12:26), which is not what we had in mind. We feel as if we are doing well to ignore the person. And yet, God is interested in changing our hearts.

Read 1 Peter 3:8. God wants us to show brotherly love, even to our mates. By doing so we honor them.

At times our differences are blatantly visible in the way we deal with conflict. One spouse may want to talk about the issue right away, while the other may need time to process everything. In the interview Gary Smalley said, "Arguments frequently spiral out of control, with each exchange becoming nastier than the last. Tempers flare and hurtful words are hurled back and forth. When either of you recognizes an argument is beginning to escalate, then call a time-out. Don't resume the argument until you've both calmed down and can acknowledge each other's opinions, concerns, and expectations."

Having a plan in place before there is a conflict can be extremely helpful. Then it won't catch you off guard when hurtful arrows have already been shot.

[Q] In the interview with Gary and Norma Smalley, they share about times a third party was called in to help solve a conflict. How this could be helpful?

[Q] Is there ever a time it would be beneficial to refrain from solving a conflict?

[Q] Read Ephesians 4:26. What do you think this verse means?

[Q] Is it possible to solve a conflict when only one party is willing? What can be done in this case?

[Q] Explain how a pro/con list could be helpful in solving a conflict. Share another suggestion that might aid in this area.

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Teaching point four: Forgive fully.

Many times we say we forgive, but we don't forgive fully. We say the words, go through the motions, and then store the rest for later when we can bring it up.

Read Ephesians 4:32. God forgave us completely, never keeping score. Forgiveness is something God calls us to do. We don't wait until we feel like forgiving; we ask God to give us the ability to forgive our offender. It is especially difficult when it's not a first-time offense; even so, we are not off the hook. God requires us to forgive. It is helpful to remember that we did not deserve forgiveness, and yet God forgave us. Just as in God's forgiveness to us, it does not mean we condone the wrong. Instead, we decide not to hold this offense against our spouse now or in the future.

Tony Evans, in his book *Get Serious,* said, " There are two extremes in dealing with broken relationships. One is to skip what happened; try to ignore it. The other is to hold a grudge and ruin your spiritual life. A faithful disciple chooses forgiveness and reconciliation—the way of the cross." Just think where we would be if Jesus had decided he didn't feel like forgiving us. Forgiveness is a choice, one that God can enable us to make. The more we become like Jesus, the more forgiving we will be.

[Q] Share a time you had difficulty in forgiving your spouse. Share something *you* did that required forgiveness.

[Q] Name two things that make forgiveness hard.

[Q] Do you believe when you forgive someone it means you will also forget about the offense? Explain your answer.

[Q] Besides Jesus, tell about someone in the Bible who clearly demonstrated forgiveness. Recall an example of someone who did not forgive.

[Q] Do you know of any marriages that ended when their last child moved out of the house? What were the circumstances surrounding their breakup?

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

We've looked at the different components of a marriage: friendship, acceptance, facing conflict, and granting forgiveness. Only God can enable us to be the kind of spouse our mate needs. The number of divorces in the country is rising, and many children now live in homes with one parent. More than ever we need to seek God's help in our relationships. God wants our marriages to succeed. Loving families stand out in a lonely world without hope. We can befriend our mate, accept our differences, face conflict head on, and offer forgiveness. Our commitment to our mate shows our commitment to our Maker. After all, marriage was God's idea.

[Q] Out of the four components in a healthy marriage, which area do you need work on? How will you pursue this?

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[Q] Sometimes when a couple divorces, it is dealt with as an isolated situation, and yet we are told we are a body. In what ways has someone else's divorce affected you and your spouse?

[Q] Do you agree our commitment to our mate shows our commitment to God? Why or why not?

[Q] Do you think our spouse can feel loved if he is not respected? Which do you think a man craves more, love or respect? What about a woman? Explain.

—Study by Anne Peterson, a published poet and speaker, who is a regular contributor to Christian Bible Studies and an ongoing student of God's Word.

Additional Resources

Christian Bible Studies
-Learning to Appreciate Our Spouse
-Faith as the Marriage Glue
-Glorify God Together: Marriage with Purpose
-When Money Comes Between Us
-Marriage and Opposite-Sex Friends
-Sex and the Christian Couple
-When It's Hard to Love
-Successful Relationships Course

Healing the Hurt in Your Marriage, Dr. Gary & Barbara Rosberg (Tyndale House, 2004; ISBN 1589971043)

Marriage: Building Real Intimacy, Bill Hybels (Zondervan Corp., 2005; ISBN 0310265894)

One Flame, Gary Smalley (Tyndale House, 2002; ISBN 0842365648)

The Other Side of Love: Handling Anger in a Godly Way, Gary Chapman (Moody Publishers, 1999; ISBN 0802467776)

Reclaiming Intimacy, Heather Jamison (Kregel Publications, 2001; ISBN 0825429404)

Staying in Love for a Lifetime, David Stoop & Jan Stoop (Gospel Light, 2003; ISBN 0830735062)

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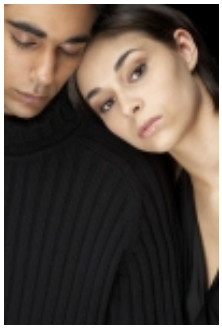
Marriage Partnership
Quarterly Series

ARTICLE

Handling Hidden Differences

The way you resolve your tensions now can build a better marriage for years to come.

By Jim Killam, for the study, "Your Spouse—Friend or Foe?"



For a young, insanely busy couple, the idea of marriage and family life one day slowing down sounds attractive. Someday, you tell yourselves, we'll have time to take long walks and have long talks.

Wait a minute. We'll have time to take long walks and have long talks?! That could mean ...

Yup. All those uncomfortable conversations, those squabbles you didn't bother to resolve over the years, might show up again.

All those times she ran up the credit card bill without telling you ... and then you never really talked it out? His preoccupation with sports on TV when you needed help with the kids ... but you got tired of fighting about it? If either of you got angry about something—1 time or 100 times—and then didn't resolve it with your spouse, guess what? That anger is still there—in the form of a time bomb, with the clock set for the second half of your marriage.

To find out how couples at any stage of marriage can defuse those time bombs, MP talked with the experts among experts: Gary and Norma Smalley. Gary's one of America's best-known authors and speakers on marriage and family relationships. His numerous books—including *Making Love Last Forever*—and videos about marriage have touched millions of couples. He and Norma also founded the Smalley Relationship Center in their hometown of Branson, Missouri, both as a base for their worldwide ministry and as a counseling and research center. Much of what Gary and Norma say about making a marriage work comes from the ups and downs of their own 38-year marriage. Here's what they had to say.

MP: They say that the longer two people are married, the more alike they become. Has that been true for the two of you?

Gary: We have the kind of personality differences that make the experts say it's impossible for us to work together. Norma is detailed, organized, and tense, and I'm just the opposite. The experts who work for us now, who do the personality tests, say

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there's no way on earth we should even be married or stay married, and we'll never be able to work together. So it's been only by the grace of God that we're still together.

Norma: One of the reasons we're still married is that we vigilantly maintain a friendship. We make sure we have a consistent weekly date night. When I talk with people who are going through their second half of marriage and experiencing such a difficult change when their kids are gone, I notice they didn't protect their friendship with each other.

MP: They've been so busy they didn't work at growing their marriage over the years?

Norma: Right. With some couples I've known, I've thought, Wow, why are you getting divorced? If you've made it for 15 or 20 years, can't you hang on? Well, in the second half of marriage, especially when the nest is empty, unresolved anger will probably surface. Let's say a husband and a wife both have a tendency to withdraw. They've just swept things under the carpet and moved on. Then, all of a sudden, the kids are gone and now all that "stuff" surfaces because they have more time to focus on it.

MP: Are there warning signs for couples who might unknowingly be planting seeds for those kinds of problems?

Gary: There are four reasons—I call them relationship germs—that cause more than 90 percent of divorce in America: withdrawing, escalating, belittling, and developing negative beliefs. They all have to do with negotiating your differences. All four of those relationship germs produce anger. So if you monitor anger every day, and clear it up, you stay emotionally out of the dark and more connected with each other.

I didn't know about these four relationship germs until Norma and I had been married more than 30 years. So I can look back over our marriage and realize, Wow, we were caught in those four things lots of times. But the way we negotiated our differences kept us out of those four relationship germs that could have killed our satisfaction, our love, and our marriage.

MP: How did you negotiate your differences?

Gary: Way back, starting about five or six years into our marriage, when we'd get stressed out and have a major disagreement, Norma and I would take a piece of paper and draw a line down the middle. On one side, we would list all the reasons we ought to do this thing, such as buy a new car. On the other side, we'd list all the reasons we shouldn't. Then after we had all the facts down, we'd look at the list and say, "You

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know what? This makes sense. What do you say we do this?" And we were able to come to an agreement, one way or the other, and move forward.

MP: What else has helped you handle conflict?

Norma: About 20 years ago, we were in a couples' small group through our church. That was probably the greatest thing for us. We'd learned some skills trial-and-error, but when we got into a small group, we worked specifically on marriage skills.

Later in our marriage, when we moved to Branson, we created what we call a "9-1-1 group." This is a more intensive group than a couples' small group. For us, a 9-1-1 group consists of three couple friends—all mature Christians—whom we really could trust and say anything to. When we'd have a problem we couldn't resolve, we'd call this group in.

MP: For example?

Gary: One time, about 17 years into our marriage, we were negotiating our will, to distribute things to our children if we were ever, say, killed in a plane crash. I disagreed totally with what Norma wanted to do. And we could never talk about it because we offended each other. Norma would say, "I won't sign that. That's it." And I'd say, "Well, we have to do something."

Norma: That was probably the first time I really stood firm with him over something I believed in.

MP: So what happened?

Gary: We decided to discuss it with our 9-1-1 group. The morning we were scheduled to meet with them, I said something really stupid to her. I said, "I'm embarrassed for you today." And Norma said, "What do you mean?" I said, "They're going to hear your thinking on this issue and they're going to know it's faulty and that I'm right."

When we got there, we did the sheet of paper with the line down the middle. We both wrote all our reasons we thought this was what we should do, and why we didn't agree with each other's ideas. The group listened—it's kind of like a grand jury. Then they gave their opinions. After we were finished, the solution was closer to her ideas than mine.

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Norma: No, admit that they were all mine. (Laughter.)

Gary: Pretty close. But I listened to the group, saw the logic in their opinions and in Norma's, and I agreed with the solution. After I agreed, Norma became nervous, because she thought I would lecture her on the way home, saying, "I can't believe we're doing what you wanted to do." But I explained, even during the meeting, that I liked their advice and I agreed.

That was a lesson that taught us to respect each other's opinions. We might totally disagree. I didn't have to like what she said or her solution. But I had to listen, understand, and consider it in the negotiation process. That way, we would both be comfortable with the solution.

In marriage, the way two become one is that you take your disagreements, your different opinions about an issue, and you weave them together into a solution. It's like blending two colors. I'm blue, Norma is yellow. And we get green solutions.

MP: How can you reach a point where you're comfortable bringing others into those negotiations?

Norma: I understand there may be some insecurity, the feeling you don't want others to see your marriage weaknesses. Gary and I felt that way. But I think we would have avoided some hurt and angry feelings if early in our marriage we would have brought friends, whom we both trusted and felt good about, into our confidence. One thing that helps is to recognize those friends want to see your marriage succeed. But at first, it can be a scary proposition.

Gary: It also helps to look at what the Bible says about bringing in a third party. Proverbs 15:22 says that "plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed." There's safety in a multitude of counselors.

MP: What can a couple do to protect their spiritual relationship down the road?

Gary: It goes back to anger. Norma and I have grown spiritually at different rates and different times over the years, but we've discovered a big factor in protecting our spiritual relationship: If you don't regulate and manage your anger, that's what will kill your spiritual life—as well as your marriage.

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MP: So what should we do with that anger?

Gary: The way we've managed our anger is to look for it, to recognize it in each other and ask, "How are you doing? What's up? What have I done? What has your boss done? What have the kids done?" Norma and I are always talking about our level of anger. That keeps us in check.

MP: That seems like a good relief valve, to keep the pressure from building.

Gary: It is. You never bury anger dead; you always bury it alive. And then it grows tentacles. The apostle Paul tells us to get anger out of our life before the sun goes down, because it gives Satan an advantage in our life (Ephesians 4:26-27). Anger moves you into darkness. And when you're in darkness, you're not growing spiritually, and you're not growing emotionally toward each other; you're tempted in a dark world.

MP: So let's say my wife and I see one or two of those four warning signs you mentioned earlier. What do we do?

Norma: Get involved in a small group. Early in our marriage, Gary and I were involved in church ministry in Waco, Texas. We'd learned about the importance of small groups and started our first small group. But I was also expected to be at everything at church, which caused me to feel overwhelmed with all the good things I should be doing. At the same time, I knew my children had to be a priority. That was tough to stay committed to all these things I thought I should be doing. Yet that small group was important to my marriage.

Gary: You get two major things in a small group. First, you get accountability—friends who will ask, "How's your marriage this week? You said at the beginning of our small group that you two wanted to grow in this specific area. How are you doing?" That's so valuable, because if you're not working on it, you have to say, "We're doing terribly."

The second thing is, you're getting support. You get energy. You get the flesh of other people hugging you and praying for you. You get the knowledge that they're there for you, applauding and cheering for you. That's so important.

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Four Marriage Germs

Often hidden during the early years, these "germs," produced by our differences, can cause swelling anger, long-term pain, and ultimately, can become destructive to your marriage.

1. Withdrawing. One or both partners consistently retreat from conflict rather than deal with it. Big issues are left unresolved. Withdrawing from an argument only magnifies its potential for destruction later.

Antidote: Deal with conflict head-on, that same day. But allow for a short time of withdrawal if it helps make you more comfortable when you confront the issue. Talk more. Listen more. Ask each other for forgiveness.

2. Escalating. Arguments frequently spiral out of control, with each exchange becoming nastier than the last. Tempers flare and hurtful words are hurled back and forth.

Antidote: When either of you recognizes that an argument is beginning to escalate, call a time-out. Don't resume the argument until you've both calmed down and can acknowledge each other's opinions, concerns, and expectations.

3. Belittling. Scripture says we should think of others as more valuable than ourselves (Philippians 2:3). Belittling is the opposite. One partner is saying, directly or indirectly, "My opinion is superior to yours. I'm more educated. I'm the better here. So don't you get it? Follow my directions, because you're inferior to me."

Antidote: Listen to your partner's concerns, values, and beliefs. Let him know you value what he says, even if you don't agree.

4. Developing negative beliefs. One partner consistently thinks the other's motives are more negative than they really are. Such as: "She's trying to bankrupt us," or "He's a mean person." Then when you don't talk about it, that belief grows. You begin to spot evidence within your mate to support that belief, even if it isn't true.

Antidote: Guard your conversations against things your mate could take negatively—especially if they become a pattern. On the other end, keep an eye out for evidence that disproves your opinion.

—J.K.

Jim Killam, an MP regular contributor, teaches journalism at Northern Illinois University.

"Handling Hidden Differences," by Jim Killam, MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP, Spring 2003, Vol. 20, No. 1, Page 44

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Marriage Partnership

Quarterly Series

LEADER'S GUIDE FOR STUDY 6

Romantic Sexuality

True romance follows God's design for marriage and for us as created beings.

Romance isn't a tough concept to sell. It's fun. It makes us feel good. It helps us forget, at least for a little while, the hassles of work, the stresses of rearing children, and the drudgery of everyday life. It brings couples closer. Despite all of this, though, romance often falls to the bottom of spouses' priority lists.

Several factors contribute to the sensual shortfall, including lack of time, low energy, unresolved conflicts, and poor communication. But another element might be missing for many couples as well—a godly perspective on sexuality. Why did God create us male and female? What does it mean for the two to become one flesh? How does the union of bodies nurture the soul? We'll begin to explore each of these questions in this study.

Lesson #6

Scripture:
Genesis 2:18–25; Leviticus 18:6–30; Song of Songs 1:1–4; Matthew 19:3–6, 8–9; Romans 7:1–3; 1 Corinthians 6:12–20, 7:3–5; Ephesians 5:22–33; Hebrews 13:4

Based on:
"The Romance Factor," by Twanda R. Smith, MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP, Summer 2004, Vol. 21, No. 2, Page 22

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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Prior to the class, provide for each person the article "The Romance Factor" from MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP magazine (included at the end of this study).



As it does on so many subjects, Hollywood broadcasts an image of romance that bears little resemblance to reality. Movies and TV shows celebrate singleness, depicting bachelors and bachelorettes enjoying wild flings with countless exciting partners. This lifestyle continues until someone makes the fatal mistake of entering a committed relationship (even if that commitment is usually just "moving in together"). Exhilaration gives way to a stifling sense of confinement, which can only be broken by moving out and moving on.

In reality, numerous surveys demonstrate that married people have sex more often than singles and express more satisfaction with their sex lives and their lives in general. Those supposedly "desperate housewives" are actually, as a category, the most fulfilled sector of American society. This doesn't mean that all of their needs are met, of course. Nearly everyone craves more love and intimacy. The mismatch of image and reality just means that far too many people are looking for love in all the wrong places.

Discussion starters:

[Q] Think of some movies and TV programs that promote unhealthy perspectives on romance. Can you think of any that present an accurate, positive picture?

[Q] Why do you think romantic movies and programs are so popular, even among people who might disagree with the values they embrace?

[Q] Can you imagine a romantic movie based on your life? Would anyone watch it? Why or why not?

[Q] In 19th-century philosopher Soren Kierkegaard's book *Either/Or*, a married man writes to a promiscuous bachelor, "I must also protest when, in portraying marital monotony, you say the like isn't found even in nature. That indeed is very true, but monotony is just the thing that can express something beautiful, and mankind can to that extent be proud of being its inventor. Thus in music an even tempo may have much beauty and great effect." Is this a fair assessment of marriage? In what ways can the "even tempo" of marriage be a good thing? In what ways can it become overwhelming?

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PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: Sexuality is an integral component of God's creation.

Read Genesis 2:18–25 and Matthew 19:3–6. Though these passages are well known—or maybe because they are so familiar—it is easy to miss their importance. Sexuality did not issue from the Fall, it was not an afterthought or a mistake, and Jesus was not too holy to mention it. Sex matters to God.

[Q] What are some misperceptions of sexuality within the Christian community? What are some misperceptions of the Christian view of sex held outside the community?

[Q] Not all creatures reproduce sexually. Why do you think God chose this method for the perpetuation of the human race?

[Q] Why is it significant that Adam and Eve felt no shame about their nakedness?

[Q] A few early biblical commentators, influenced by body-hating Greek philosophies, suggested that Adam and Eve lacked physical bodies until after the Fall, when God "made garments of skin" for them (Genesis 3:21). What are some problems with this interpretation?

[Q] The Genesis account of creation is the foundation for traditional Jewish and Christian teachings on sexuality. How do alternate creation accounts, from science or from other religions, result in different views of sexuality? What are the appeals of these alternate views? Though often touted as being more liberated, what burdens and limitations do they impose on people?

Teaching point two: God's design for sexuality means that becoming one flesh is not optional.

Few Christians still believe that married sex should be infrequent, passionless, and only oriented toward producing children. Unfortunately, according to Barna Group research, relatively few American Christians still believe that sex outside of marriage is never acceptable, or that adultery constitutes the only biblically sanctioned reason for divorce. Read these Scriptures which represent a balanced Christian perspective which upholds both freedom and boundaries: Leviticus 18:6–30, Matthew 19:8–9, Romans 7:1–3, 1 Corinthians 6:12–20 and 7:3–5, and Hebrews 13:4.

[Q] Which aspects of Christian teaching on sexuality get more attention, the freedom or the boundaries? Why?

[Q] What purpose did the restrictions of Leviticus 18 serve in the Israelite community? What purposes do such restrictions serve today?

[Q] How do biblical rules for divorce and remarriage reinforce the sanctity of the marriage bed? Conversely, how does America's culture of easy divorce create unrealistic expectations for sexual fulfillment?

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[Q] The mutual fulfillment advocated in 1 Corinthians 7:3–5 ran counter to Roman culture, in which wives had no rights over their own bodies and husbands were not expected to remain faithful. What messages from contemporary American culture undermine the kind of relationship Paul advocates? What other factors make mutual sexual submission difficult?

[Q] Hebrews 13:4 clearly condemns adultery, but it might have even more to say about married sexuality. For example, *The Message* renders the first part of the verse, "Honor marriage, and guard the sacredness of sexual intimacy between wife and husband." Besides remaining faithful, what does it take to "guard the sacredness of sexual intimacy"?

Teaching point three: In relationships, as in individuals, the physical and the spiritual work together to create wholeness.

Twanda R. Smith's advice in "The Romance Factor" is guaranteed to brighten eyes and quicken pulses, but an infusion of sensuality could have more profound effects. There is a tendency in the modern West to compartmentalize life—we exercise for the health of our bodies, read for the health of our minds, and pray for the health of our souls. By contrast, the early and medieval church believed in *psychosomatic unity*, the idea that body, mind, and soul always work together toward godliness or sinfulness. Christians from these eras were more apt to make connections between physical acts (even sex) and spiritual realities. We see hints of this perspective in Ephesians 5:22–33.

[Q] What are some areas of life where you can observe particularly close interaction of body, mind, and soul? Have you ever made a special effort to combine experiences, like praying while walking through a labyrinth or getting up from your chair and stretching to clear your head?

[Q] How can sex bring a husband and wife together on levels beyond the physical? What happens when a couple is in physical proximity but out of sync in other areas?

[Q] Is it strange to think of Christ relating to the church the way a husband relates to his bride? What does this metaphor tell us about God's ideals for marriage? About the experience of belonging to Christ's church?

[Q] What role does passion play in a marriage? What role should passion play in Christian life? Is it more difficult for you to sustain passion in one area than the other?

[Q] Seventeenth-century poet and pastor John Donne was a notorious profligate before his conversion. He ended his "Holy Sonnet 14," written as a prayer to God, "Take me to you, imprison me, for I, / Except you enthrall me, never shall be free, / Nor ever chaste, unless you ravish me." How do you interpret Donne's request? What had his early experiences taught him about love? What have your experiences of love taught you about relating to God?

[Q] Believe it or not, early Christian leaders loved to write and preach about Song of Songs. They interpreted the bridegroom (or "lover") as a Christ figure and the bride (or "beloved") as an archetypal Christian. Read Song of Songs 1:1–4 with this interpretation

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in mind. Does it make you think about yourself or about Christ in a new way? Can you imagine your pastor preaching on this passage? Why or why not?

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

It has been said that analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog—you might learn something, but neither the joke nor the frog will survive. Over-thinking sex can have the same effect. The purpose of cultivating a godly perspective on sexuality is not to clutter the bedroom with theology, but to help Christians take more joy in their bodies, their spouses, their marital duties, and maybe even their faith. In other words, Smith's "Romance Factor" is the *how*; this discussion contributes to the *why*.

[Q] How might husbands and wives recapture the freedom of Adam and Eve's shameless nakedness? What barriers stand in the way of this experience, and how might they be overcome?

[Q] Smith offers several suggestions for making the marriage bed more appealing. How can Christian spouses make it more pure?

[Q] What can you do to kindle more passion in all areas of your life?

[Q] Which of Smith's suggestions will you try first?

—Study prepared by Elesha Coffman,
former managing editor of CHRISTIAN HISTORY.

Additional Resources

Christian Bible Studies
-Learning to Appreciate Our Spouse
-Faith as the Marriage Glue
-Glorify God Together: Marriage with Purpose
-When Money Comes Between Us
-Marriage and Opposite-Sex Friends
-Sex and the Christian Couple
-When It's Hard to Love
-Successful Relationships Course

 *The Book of Romance,* Tommy Nelson (Thomas Nelson/W, 1998; ISBN 0785274715)

 "Born Again Christians Just As Likely to Divorce As Are Non-Christians," http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdateNarrow&BarnaUpdateID=170

 *An Enchanted Evening Game* (Time for Two, 1981; CBD Stock No: WW82001)

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📖 *His Needs, Her Needs for Parents: Keeping Romance Alive,* Willard F. Harley, Jr. (Baker, 2003; ISBN 080071833X)

💻 John Donne's Holy Sonnet 14, http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/donne/sonnet14.htm

📖 *Rekindling the Romance*, Dennis and Barbara Rainey (Thomas Nelson/W, 2004; ISBN 0785200010)

📖 *Simply Romantic Nights*, Dennis and Barbara Rainey (Familylife; ISBN 1572292628)

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Marriage Partnership
Quarterly Series

ARTICLE

The Romance Factor

Use all five senses to connect with your spouse.

By Twanda R. Smith, for the study, "Romantic Sexuality"



Remember when you and your spouse were dating? When dinner was consumed to the strains of soft music instead of to Sponge Bob? In the day-to-day busyness of married life, romance is often the first thing to go. Yet the "Romance Factor" can have a high impact on the success of your marriage.

The Romance Factor encompasses much more than just sex. It invokes the five senses: sight, smell, sound, taste, and touch. It's the emotional, spiritual, and physical connection between a husband and wife.

In my work as a romantic events planner and consultant, I discuss romantic preferences with a lot of husbands and wives. You might be surprised to hear that many men enjoy romance just as much as women!

Yet, many marriages neglect the Romance Factor. We're so busy with our children, houses, jobs, and church obligations, that we forget to reserve time just for our spouse. After a long day, we collapse into bed, exhausted. No time—or energy—for romance.

But with a little effort, romance can become second nature. While planning ahead is great, so is a spontaneous romantic evening. Try the following techniques, and see if you don't find yourself spending an unforgettable evening with the one you love.

The Sight of Romance

Start by making your bedroom a romantic sanctuary, where you can shut out the world and enter a paradise created for two. Sight plays a significant part in everyday life, so just imagine how important it is to romance. Many are attracted by the sight of their intended before they actually speak to them. So make your sanctuary a sight to behold.

You can do this by making just a few minor adjustments to the room. First, clear the clutter. If your bedroom is like most, it may have become a catchall for clothes, papers, books, and toys. Once you've achieved a clean room, change the lighting by adding candles—the more, the better. Choosing lower wattage light bulbs will give you

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a similar effect. The soft glow of candlelight will enhance the appearance of even the most ordinary room.

Next, spruce up the room with flowers and rose petals. Don't worry about creating a mess; concentrate on creating an oasis. Be careful not to overdo the flowers, though, since their fragrance can be overpowering. You may opt for artificial or silk flowers as a resourceful substitute.

You may even consider a few decorating tricks to enhance the bed. Drape sheer, richly colored fabrics across your headboard, over your window treatments, or hang them from the ceiling (with hooks from your local hardware store). You're going for exotic here, so the sky's the limit. Imagination plays a large part in how appealing your romantic oasis will be.

The Smell of Romance

Scent is an important component in the art of romance. Smell can be an excellent inlet to passion; it stimulates areas in the brain that affect the way we feel and react. Just think of the way you respond when you smell fresh bread baking. The aroma causes your taste buds to swell, your mouth to water, and your mind to wonder. Scent is a powerful instrument.

Aromatherapy is making quite an impact these days. Experiment with different fragrances to find which ones work best with you and your mate.

Some I've found to be particularly effective are vanilla, coconut, chocolate, lavender, and jasmine. Scented candles are excellent for stimulating two senses instead of one: sight and smell. Check out some of the aromatherapy stores in your area.

The Sound of Romance

Sound can mean music playing softly or the way you whisper your spouse's name. Speaking in low sexy tones is a definite turn-on for many men. The soft sound of a woman's voice in its natural God-given state can melt the strongest man's heart.

The music you choose is just as important. Whether it's soothing jazz or your favorite oldies but goodies, make it something you both enjoy. Music melts away the day's stresses and struggles. And music can also be the catalyst to another technique, touch. Music sets the stage for dancing, if your sanctuary is large enough. If not, just listening with your love can be stimulating.

The Taste of Romance

My grandmother used to say the best way to a man's heart was through his stomach. Boy, is that true. Sometimes nothing inspires a man more than a

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mouthwatering meal and sweet treats. Prepare a simple yet elegant meal for two or a tray of delectable mini desserts. Experiment with tropical, exotic tastes and don't forget the dark chocolate, which is said to be an effective aphrodisiac.

You don't have to be Betty Crocker in the kitchen. Many grocery stores have freshly prepared meals in the deli section. Even those chocolate-covered strawberries are readily available in the produce section. Your favorite restaurant is also a good place to provide meals on the go.

The Touch of Romance

This is the last and definitely the most powerful element in the Romance Factor. The bond of physical contact is one of God's most enduring senses. In the beginning of life, the touch of a mother to her newborn begins the human need for touch. We're created to crave this on a daily basis. A hug, a caress, or a kiss arouse the tiny blood vessels located just beneath the skin in our bodies. In a marriage, touch forms a connection between husband and wife. One way to use touch is through the art of massage. Try taking a massage class together or get a book on proper massage techniques. This will teach you about pressure points and areas of concentration for a romantic, relaxing evening.

Caution!

There's one important prerequisite to using the Romance Factor techniques: communication. Communicate honestly with your spouse to learn his or her wants and needs. Just ask. Sometimes, too, a little experimentation will reveal what each of you likes or dislikes. Then let the Romance Factor take your breath away.

Twanda R. Smith, owner of Romantic Moments, a romantic event-planning business, lives in Charlotte, North Carolina.

"The Romance Factor," by Twanda R. Smith, MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP, Summer 2004, Vol. 21, No. 2, Page 22.

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Marriage Partnership

Quarterly Series

LEADER'S GUIDE FOR STUDY 7

Overcome Obstacles to Communication

How to talk to your spouse.

Communication problems are as old as Adam and Eve. In this study we will explore what the Bible has to say about the obstacles to communication, what the solutions are, and how taking a biblical approach to communicating with your spouse can greatly enhance intimacy in the marriage relationship.

Lesson #7

Scripture:
Proverbs 10:19; 12:18; 15:23,28, 31–32; 17:28; 18:2,6,15,21; 21:23; 25:12; 29:20; Ephesians 4:22–5:2; Colossians 4:6; James 1:19; 3:1–12

Based on:
"Can We Talk? 7 Tips to Get Your Spouse to Open Up," by Elaine Creasman, MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP, Summer 2004

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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue



Note to leader: Prior to meeting, provide for each person the article "Can We Talk? 7 Tips to Get Your Spouse to Open Up" from MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP magazine (included at the end of this study).

In his book *The Intimate Marriage*, R. C. Sproul writes:

> Undoubtedly the problem of communication started a long time ago. It would not surprise me to learn that the first man to say, "My wife doesn't understand me," was Adam. It may all have started in the primordial garden when Adam asked Eve if she had eaten of the forbidden tree and Eve replied, "Tree? What tree?" The problem was compounded when God discovered their transgression and called Adam aside to interrogate him. … Anxiety increased by the minute until at last Adam emerged from the summit meeting that would decide human destiny. Breathlessly Eve rushed to her husband and gasped, "What did he say?" Adam shrugged his shoulders and said, "Oh, nothing!" Things have been going downhill ever since. (R. C. Sproul, *The Intimate Marriage,* P&R Publishing Co., p. 9)

We can smile as we read Sproul's account of the first breakdown in marital communication, but in reality communication is a problem for many couples.

Discussion Starters:

[Q] What do you see as the greatest obstacles to communication with your spouse?

[Q] What do you think good communication between spouses looks like?

[Q] What should be your goal in communication with your spouse? Does your spouse have the same goal?

Optional Activity: *Write down what you want out of communication with your spouse and compare notes with him or her.*

[Q] How important is verbal communication to intimacy in marriage? Explain your answer.

[Q] Is how couples speak to each other as important as what they say? Is listening as important is being heard? Is communication limited to words?

[Q] In the article "Can We Talk?," Creasman writes of how she and her husband talked for hours when they were dating and early in their marriage, but over time it changed. Has this been your experience as well? If so, why do you think it changed?

[Q] What kind of role models have you had for communication in marriage? How has this affected your marriage for better or for worse?

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PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: Time is probably the biggest obstacle to good communication between couples.

Time is likely the biggest obstacle to communication between a husband and wife. People today are busier than ever, and while on the surface nothing seems to be wrong, couples often will admit that they are functioning on "autopilot" where their spouses are concerned. Meaningful conversation takes a backseat to infant or toddler care, soccer practice and other activities involving older children, long hours at a job, church activities, volunteer work, and too much television. When a couple does talk, they often find themselves falling victim to the tyranny of the urgent, discussing pressing financial or family circumstances instead of what is important to bring them closer in their marriage.

Marriage and relationship author Gary Chapman says:

> For many couples, daily communication consists of the following scenario: Husband walks into the house. Wife walks into the house. Wife says to husband, "How did things go today, dear?" He responds, "Fine," as he turns on the TV to watch the evening news, or he heads for the backyard to mow the grass. Though they have been apart for eight to ten hours, cut off from each other, he summarizes their time apart with one word – *fine*. And the husband wonders why his wife complains that they no longer have intimacy in their marriage! One word is not an adequate summary of ten hours apart. We must learn to have daily communication times. (Gary Chapman, *Covenant Marriage,* Broadman & Holman Publishers, pp. 41-42)

[Q] Do you find yourself responding the same way that Chapman describes instead of taking time to have a real conversation with your spouse? What activities keep you and your spouse from having quality time alone to talk?

[Q] What is a likely scenario in your family after everyone gets home at the end of the day? How do your mornings begin? Does either time of day promote good communication with each other?

[Q] How would your relationship be different if you and your spouse made a conscious effort to plan time together for verbal communication?

[Q] What steps can you take to create a planned time each day to spend together in conversation? Write down specific times of day or evening plus activities that would encourage conversation, such as taking a walk together or going out for coffee. What would you hope to accomplish during this time?

[Q] In her article, Creasman suggests that sometimes shorter is better for effective conversation. Is it reasonable for you and your spouse to agree on spending a set amount of time together solely for conversation (15 minutes, a half hour, etc.) as a springboard for creating a habit of daily time together?

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[Q] Proverbs has much to say about the effect of words on one's health and emotions. Read the following verses and discuss how each applies to how you speak to your spouse:

- "Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing" (Proverbs 12:18).
- "An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up" (Proverbs 12:25).
- "He who guards his lips guards his life, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin" (Proverbs 13:3).
- "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Proverbs 15:1).
- "A happy heart makes the face cheerful, but heartache crushes the spirit" (Proverbs 15:13).
- "Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones" (Proverbs 16:24).
- "The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit" (Proverbs 18:21).

Teaching point two: Emotional withdrawal also contributes to lack of communication.

Another obstacle to verbal intimacy is emotional withdrawal or a desire to stay in a communication comfort zone. Often one spouse has checked out emotionally or doesn't feel safe discussing issues with his or her partner, perhaps because the spouse tends to jump to conclusions or react in anger without listening. It could be that over time it has become easier to avoid deep communication in favor of superficial conversation in an effort to avoid conflict. Creasman wrote about "conversation-stoppers" such as not listening, being a conversation hog, nagging, interrupting, passing judgment, and so on.

[Q] What "conversation-stoppers" are you guilty of? What steps can you take to avoid doing these things?

Optional Activity: *If you have couples in your group, provide the opportunity to discuss the following questions privately and to listen to what the other has to say without accusation or defensiveness: Are you open to hearing from your spouse what he or she thinks you are doing that inhibits effective communication? What are some possible solutions?*

[Q] Read Proverbs 10:19. What does this verse say about the value of listening more and speaking less? How does this apply to communication in marriage?

Read James 1:19.

[Q] How does being quick to listen and slow to speak also help avoid anger?

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[Q] How would communication with your spouse improve if each of you made an effort to put this Scripture into practice?

[Q] Discuss how practicing this verse would improve communication not only with your spouse but also with your children, other family members, co-workers, etc.

Read James 3:1–12.

[Q] What is the tongue compared to in verses 3–7?

[Q] Why is it important to bring the tongue under control? Why is it so difficult?

[Q] Verses 5 and 6 compare the tongue to a small spark that sets a whole forest on fire. What happens when a forest fire rages out of control? What is the result? How does this word picture apply to communication in marriage?

[Q] How can words set "the whole course of a life" on fire?

[Q] Read verses 9–12 again. Why are these things incompatible? How does this apply to how you speak to your spouse as a Christian?

Optional Activity: *Discuss with your spouse times when you have been guilty of causing hurt with your words. Take time to confess this to the Lord and to each other and seek forgiveness. (Note to leader: If time and space allow, have couples spend a few minutes alone together to do this. If not, then encourage them to do it privately at home.)*

Teaching point three: We can retrain ourselves to be better communicators.

Gary Smalley, noted marriage and relationship speaker and author, says:

> The quality of our communication affects every area of relationship we have. It even influences our physical health. Effective communication reduces occasions for anger to be buried inside. Learn how to be a better communicator and everyone wins.(Gary Smalley, *Making Love Last Forever,* Word Publishing, 1996, p.141)
>
> Read Ephesians 4:22–5:2.

[Q] What do verses 22–24 say needs to be done before we can become like God? How does this relate to how you communicate with your spouse?

[Q] Why is being made "new in the attitude of the mind" so important?

Optional Activity: *Bad habits must be replaced with good habits. Make two lists of what we are to put off and put on. Then, make a list or discuss what hindrances to communication you must "put off" and another of what you must "put on."*

[Q] Sometimes we listen better and speak more kindly to co-workers and people we don't know than to our own spouses. Do you see your spouse as not only your marriage partner but also your spiritual neighbor and fellow member of the body of Christ?

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[Q] Read again Ephesians 4:25–27. What kind of talk are we to avoid with each other? What kind of talk should we strive for?

[Q] What gives Satan a foothold (v. 26–27)? What happens in a relationship when Satan gains a foothold? How can you protect your marriage from this?

[Q] How can we grieve the Spirit with our words or how we speak to our spouses (v. 30)?

[Q] Who are we to imitate with our words? (5:1–2). Take a moment to reflect on how you can imitate Christ in your communication with your spouse.

Teaching point four: Scripture gives us the wisdom we need to learn how to communicate in our marriages.

The Lord is the creator of relationships and communication. We are not left without help, because the Bible has all the wisdom and advice we need. Scripture even describes our relationship to the Lord as that of a bridegroom seeking to spend time with his bride. Just as he longs for us to communicate with him intimately, he longs for us to have verbal intimacy with our spouses. Jesus related to people on a daily basis without breaking one commandment or saying anything that would not honor the Father, setting the example for all relationships, including marriage. Scripture has much to say about communication, and applying these basic truths to communication in marriage can lead to increased openness with your spouse.

[Q] Read Colossians 4:6. What does salt do for food? How does this apply to words? Discuss ways a spouse can create gracious conversation.

[Q] Read Ephesians 4:29. What would be an example of wholesome talk that could edify your spouse? What kind of outcome could you expect from words that build up your spouse and meet his or her needs? What effect would praise and positive speech have on your spouse?

[Q] Read Proverbs 15:23, 28; 17:28; 18:2, 6; 21:23; 29:20. What do these verses say about thinking before you speak or waiting to speak? What are the benefits of waiting for an appropriate time and place to discuss things with your spouse?

[Q] Read Proverbs 15:31–32; 18:15, 21; 25:12. What is the benefit of listening? How can you encourage your spouse to listen to you and reflect on what you have to say? Why is it more difficult to listen than to speak?

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

Communication isn't easy. It involves time, much effort, and the risk of opening oneself to rejection. The Lord sets the example for what marital communication should be in how he desires to communicate intimately with us. Just as he encourages us through his Word to come to him openly and without shame, so he wants us to have the same level of openness with our spouses. It is said that actions speak louder than words, but words need to speak love as well. Words have the power to build up or tear down.

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Smalley says in *Making Love Last Forever:*

> Why such a high priority on communication? Because good communication is the key to what all of us who marry basically want … to love and be loved. We want to share our lives with someone who loves us unconditionally. We want to grow old with a mate who has valued us, understood us, and helped us feel safe in sharing our deepest feelings and needs. We want to make love last forever. And this type of loving relationship is most often attained by couples who have learned how to reach the deepest levels of verbal intimacy. (Gary Smalley, *Making Love Last Forever,* Word Publishing, p.141)

Action Point: Through Scripture used in this study, the Lord reveals the following skills for communication: be slow to speak, be slow to anger, be quick to listen, be truthful in your speech, and use edifying words. Take each skill and discuss how you can apply it to improve communication with your spouse. End the study with prayer for each participant that they would seek the Lord's wisdom in their communication and actively apply what they have learned.

—Study by Cindy Baum, a married mom of four and freelance writer from Indiana.

Additional Resources

- ChristianBibleStudies.com
  - -Learning to Appreciate Our Spouse
  - -Faith as the Marriage Glue
  - -Glorify God Together: Marriage with Purpose
  - -When Money Comes Between Us
  - -Marriage and Opposite-Sex Friends
  - -Sex and the Christian Couple
  - -When It's Hard to Love
  - -Successful Relationships Course

- *Boundaries in Marriage,* Dr. Henry Cloud, Dr. John Townsend (Zondervan Publishers, 2002; ISBN 0310243149)

- *Covenant Marriage,* Gary Chapman (Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003; ISBN 0310243149)

- *The Five Love Languages,* Gary Chapman (Moody Publishers; Reissue edition, 1996; ISBN 1881273156)

- *Focus on the Family Marriage Series* (Gospel Light Publishers and Focus on the Family)

- *The Intimate Marriage,* R. C. Sproul (P&R Publishing Co., 2003; ISBN 088650817)

- *Making Love Last Forever,* Gary Smalley (W Publishing, 1996; ISBN 084991194X) {or paperback, 1997; ISBN 0849940869}

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Marriage Partnership
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ARTICLE

Can We Talk?

7 tips to get your spouse to open up.

By Elaine Creasman, for the study, "Overcome Obstacles to Communication"



When we were dating and early in our marriage, Steve and I talked for hours, sometimes late into the night. As the years passed, however, he backed off. And when we did talk, we ended up arguing, or it seemed he tried to keep conversations superficial. I often wondered, *Why doesn't he talk to me anymore?*

Then I discovered, through trial and error, that I was engaging in conversation-stoppers such as being a bad listener, a conversation hog, and at times, a nag. So I began a quest to encourage meaningful communication with my husband once again. This is what I discovered.

There's an art to listening

"Honey, you never tell me how you feel," I'd repeatedly complained to Steve.

Finally, one day he started to. But as soon as he mentioned his first feeling about a conflict he was having with a relative, I blew it by blurting out, "You shouldn't feel that way."

"That's why I don't tell you how I feel," he said.

Conversation aborted.

I remember seeing a t-shirt once that read: "I'm talking, and I can't shut up." I couldn't help but think, *That's me.*

The apostle James says we need to be "quick to listen, slow to speak" (James 1:19). When I put this advice into practice and don't make quick judgments or think about what I want to say next, Steve opens up more freely.

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Letting him lead brings us closer

My dissatisfaction with our communication came not so much from the fact that Steve didn't want to talk, but that he didn't talk about what I wanted to discuss. Often I'd think mournfully, *My girlfriends think what I say is interesting; why doesn't my husband?*

He doesn't because he's not one of my girlfriends. Steve just can't get excited about hearing about people he doesn't know or about what happened at my women's Bible study like my girlfriends can.

But I still wanted to talk with him! In Ephesians 5:21, the apostle Paul says we are to "submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." Part of that submission for me means I adopt a "What do you want to talk about?" attitude. For instance, Steve loves sports. While I usually find sports boring, I love people, so I read about the lives of sports figures and tell Steve about what I've read.

He also enjoys reading the newspaper, so I try to read it as often as I can. We discuss the stories we read, which often leads to talking about how the stories relate to our lives.

I've also learned to let Steve decide when and where he wants to talk. While I crave face to face, intimate conversations, often he talks while he's doing tasks around the house or while we're on errands together. I've learned to say "yes" when he asks, "How would you like to help me with the yard work?" or "Will you go with me to the store?" because I know it will also include conversation.

When I started to let Steve take the conversation reins, I was amazed to find that now he talks more, especially about his frustrations. He then feels more comfortable to discuss what I want to. When I let Steve choose the topic, I get to know him better, and I feel closer to him.

He likes good news

I used to be quick to tell Steve when something was broken, when the kids misbehaved, or when I was facing an emotional crisis.

But focusing only on bad news in conversations is a downer, which is a definite conversation-stopper. If bad news must be told, a better way is to save it for an appropriate time, such as when Steve's not stressed or tired, and I'm no longer emotionally distraught over it.

Humor is a good way to keep things positive. Steve and I share comic strips, which often help start conversations about family matters. If I find a funny Dave Barry column in the paper, I share it with him. I try to remember to tell him jokes I've heard lately. Or we discuss the funny things that have happened to our children or pets.

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A funny movie can get us laughing and then talking. The other day I asked Steve, "What's the funniest movie you've ever seen?" Then we discussed lines from movies that made us laugh.

Most spouses like to talk if it's going to lead to laughter.

I can agree with him more often

I'm not sure why, but I used to argue about everything with Steve—even when we were on the same side of an issue! I just couldn't agree with him. One day I read Proverbs 21:19: "[It's] better to live in a desert than with a quarrelsome and ill-tempered wife." That was me. So I got alone in front of the mirror and practiced saying two words: "You're right." While they've been the most difficult to say, when I do, they've made a huge difference in the way Steve opens up to me. Another great phrase to use when talking with my spouse has been, "That's true," when he says something I agree with. I noticed those conversations last longer.

Shorter is better

Setting a time limit on conversations does wonders. "Honey, may I talk to you for 15 minutes?" takes the scariness out of those ominous "We need to talk" announcements.

If I'm talking about something heavy, many times Steve can't handle anything more than five minutes. I used to be hurt and convinced he didn't care about me when he'd say, "I've heard enough." Futilely, I'd try to press him to talk longer, with the wrong results. I've learned not to take it personally. He simply isn't able to process a lot of soul-baring at one time.

Depending on the topic, if I've tried to discuss something with him and he's been unresponsive, it helps to take such matters to a girlfriend first. Then I can better give the condensed, less emotional version and he's able to stay longer in the conversation with me.

He likes friendship, not mentoring

"I learn so much from you, but I can't stand it when you try to be my teacher," Steve said to me one day. That insight caused me to repent of spending too much time attempting to change or mother my husband. Questions that start with, "Why did you ...?" or "Why don't you ...?" remind him of his mother interrogating or nagging him.

Lately when I think of how I speak to my husband, I ask myself, *Would I say that to a close friend?* Often I realize I wouldn't.

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To praise is a blessing

I once heard someone say it takes 12 compliments to make up for one criticism. Recently I was challenged with these words: "People don't know how wonderful they are. Someone has to tell them." In marriage, that means I need to tell my spouse.

Yes, it's okay to tell my husband what bothers me—but I don't have to tell him a thousand times. When I can't seem to find anything to praise about Steve, it's because I've let unforgiveness creep in. It's time to repent.

Even if I don't approve of some of the things he does, there are always many more things to appreciate. Too often I'd take for granted that Steve's a caring father and an excellent provider and money manager. He's an expert at fixing things, and he forgives me quickly when I've blown it.

So I try genuinely to lavish on the praise. And I thank him for taking the time to talk to me—even if the conversation wasn't as long and deep as I'd wanted. These days Steve seeks me out for conversation, and I'm delighted that many times he's eager to talk. The most exciting is when Steve comes to me and asks, "Can we talk?"

Elaine Creasman, a freelance writer, lives in Florida.

"Can We Talk? 7 Tips to Get Your Spouse to Open Up," by Elaine Creasman,
MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP, Summer 2004

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Marriage Partnership

Quarterly Series

LEADER'S GUIDE FOR STUDY 8

Communicate Love to Your Spouse

How do we communicate love to our spouse in ways that are recognized and appreciated?

"I'm convinced there are only five languages of love. Each person uses all the languages, but really thrives on one," says Gary Chapman in his article for MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP magazine. These love languages are channels to communicate our love to our spouse. They require sacrificial effort, contemplative forethought, and purposeful demonstration. However, the results of successfully communicating our love are tender intimacy and a stronger marriage bond.

What does the Bible say about each of the love languages Chapman proposes? How did Jesus use these love languages to communicate his love to his followers? What heart issues affect how we communicate with our spouse?

Lesson #8

Scripture:
Genesis 32:6–21; 33:4–11; Song of Songs 1:15–2:6; Matthew 2:1–12; 4:23–5:2; 8:1–4; 12:34–36; 20:25–28; Ephesians 4:29–32

Based on:
"Language Lessons," by Gary Chapman, MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP, Spring 2004

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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Prior to meeting, provide for each person the article "Language Lessons" from MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP magazine (included at the end of this study).



Our culture generally portrays love as a waning and waxing emotion. The Bible, however, describes love as an action. 1 Corinthians 13, often described as "the love chapter," details actions that demonstrate love. Love is much more than an unpredictable emotion. It is a purposeful decision to care for another person. "Love is an active choice," Chapman says.

"Feeling loved is our deepest emotional need. When that need goes unmet, it weakens our love for our spouse," according to Chapman. For a marriage to be healthy and strong, each partner needs to be purposeful about demonstrating and communicating love to his spouse. We need to communicate our love in a way that our spouse will recognize. This requires us to know what is important to our spouse. The first step is to gather information by observing and listening to our spouse's requests and complaints. This information will help us to determine our spouse's primary love language. We can then develop a plan to persistently and consistently demonstrate our love to our spouse in a way that is recognized and appreciated.

Discussion starters:

[Q] Chapman lists the five love languages as: Words of Affirmation, Gifts, Acts of Service, Quality Time, and Physical Touch. Why is it important to communicate our love using all five of these languages? How do we determine and use our spouse's primary love language?

[Q] What happens to a marriage relationship when love is not being communicated?

[Q] Do you agree with Chapman that love is an active choice? Why or why not?

[Q] Assuming love is more of an action than an emotion, consider the following questions:

- What are we truly saying if we say we no longer love our spouse?
- How can we love a person even if we don't feel the emotion that we often associate with love?
- What is the relationship between the active choice to demonstrate love (1 Corinthians 13) and the emotion that we generally recognize as love?

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PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: Quality time and physical touch are essential components of a healthy marriage relationship.

Read Matthew 4:23–5:2 and 8:1–4. Jesus demonstrated his love for the multitudes by the time he spent with them. When he saw the multitudes following him, he knew they wanted his attention. He sat down on the mountainside among the people and cared for their needs. He listened to their hearts' cry, taught them how to live godly lives, and healed their diseases. One of those he healed was a leper who had been shunned by society and forbidden to touch another person for fear of communicating his disease. The leper bowed before Jesus and asked him to heal him. Jesus stretched out his hand and touched the leper, demonstrating his love for this abandoned, lonely, and shunned man through physical touch. Jesus used time and physical touch to heal not only the leper's wasted physical body, but his fragmented emotions and tormented soul.

[Q] What can be inferred from the fact that Jesus sat down among the people to talk to them? How did Jesus demonstrate his love for the multitudes by the time he spent with them?

[Q] Why does choosing to spend time with a person communicate love to him or her? How do you feel when your spouse intentionally desires to spend time with you? How do you feel when your spouse is too busy to spend time with you? How might these emotions be accentuated if your primary love language is "Quality Time"?

[Q] If your spouse's primary love language is "Quality Time," what are some practical ways you can express your love to him or her? What message do you send your spouse if you are too busy for him or her?

[Q] Why do you think Jesus touched the leper when he healed him? What does this tell you about Christ's love for this man? What do you think Jesus' touch meant to this man? How does physical touch communicate love?

[Q] What does physical touch convey to another person? Why is physical touch essential to a healthy marriage relationship? What happens to relationships when physical touch is neglected? Besides the sexual relationship, how might you be more intentional about including physical touch in your relationship with your spouse?

Teaching point two: Serving is a powerful demonstration of sacrificial love.

Read Matthew 20:25–28. Jesus demonstrated his immense, eternal love for us by dying for us even though we were vile, desperate sinners (Romans 5:8). This sacrificial act of serving—giving his life as a ransom for many—was the supreme act of love. Although he is God of the universe and King of Kings, Jesus left his home on high to come to earth to serve and save mankind. Just as Christ served us, he calls us to demonstrate our love for others through service. Jesus laid down his life for us, and he calls upon us to lay down our lives for others.

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Chapman believes serving is one of the five languages of love. It is a powerful tool to demonstrate love to our spouse. When we refuse to serve our spouse, we withhold love. Serving our spouse is an act of humility, which looks out for his interests above our own (Philippians 2:3–4).

[Q] How did Jesus demonstrate his love for us by serving us?

[Q] Jesus' ultimate act of service was when he laid down his life for us. How can we lay down our life for our spouse? What heart attitude does this require? What actions does it require?

[Q] Why do you think Jesus calls us to a life of service? How is serving our spouse an act of humility which demonstrates we are looking out for his or her interests as more important than our own?

[Q] 1 John 3:18 says to love not only in word, but also in action. List practical ways we can demonstrate our love for our spouse by serving him or her.

[Q] How do you feel when your spouse serves you?

[Q] What happens to a marriage relationship when each partner refuses to serve the other? Why is serving such a critical component of a healthy marriage relationship?

Teaching point three: Gifts are a symbol of our love for one another.

Read Genesis 32:6–21, 33:4–11 and Matthew 2:1–12. Esau and Jacob were warring twin brothers who had parted in enmity 20 years earlier (Genesis 31:38). At that time, Esau had been breathing murderous threats against Jacob (Genesis 27:41). Dreadfully unsure of his reception, Jacob was now returning to his brother. Desiring to find favor with Esau and hoping to appease any long-term root of bitter resentment or anger, Jacob sent generous gifts to his brother before he reunited with him. The gifts symbolized Jacob's changed heart, his hope for forgiveness and reconciliation, and his love for his estranged brother. The brothers reconciled with a tender embrace, weeping at the joy of their reunion and the sorrow of 20 years of relationship lost.

The magi also offered gifts as symbols of love and devotion. As part of their worship, they traveled from the East bearing gifts for their Savior. Their gifts were specific to the person of Christ and worthy of a king. Gold symbolized Christ's deity, frankincense his purity, and the myrrh was prophetic of his death. The gifts the magi offered were an outward symbol and offering of their deep joy and love for God.

[Q] Why did Jacob send gifts to Esau? What did Jacob hope would be the message behind the gifts? Do you think the gifts accomplished what Jacob had hoped? Do you think the gifts were important to the brothers' reconciliation? Why or why not?

[Q] What was Esau's response to Jacob's gifts? Why do you think he responded in this way? How might gifts appease another person and aid in reconciliation? Do you think this motive for giving is wise, or manipulative? Defend your position.

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[Q] What was the purpose of the gifts the Magi gave to Jesus? How did their gifts show that they had taken the time to consider what would be appropriate to give to Jesus? Is it important to individually select a gift as the Magi did, or is any gift sufficient? Defend your position.

[Q] List different reasons people give gifts to each other. How are the gifts given in each of these instances symbols of love? How do gifts symbolize our love for another person?

[Q] How might we use gifts to demonstrate our love for our spouse? If our spouse feels gifts are a demonstration of love, what message do we send him if we do not give him or her gifts very often? How can we give gifts that are not expensive? Give creative and practical examples.

Teaching point four: Use only words that are good for the edification (building up) of your spouse.

Read Matthew 12:34–36, Ephesians 4:29–32, and Song of Songs 1:15–2:6. The mouth speaks of what fills the heart. If our heart dwells on bitter resentment or uncontrolled anger, then the words we speak will be full of vicious attacks, slander, vengeful malice, and hurtful accusations. If our heart dwells on Christ as our model for love and forgiveness, our words will be tenderly gentle, kindhearted, and forgiving, with the heartfelt purpose of edifying and encouraging our spouse. The Bible warns us to not let any unwholesome word proceed from our mouth, for we will give account for every careless word we speak. Our purpose should be to bless our spouse with our words, paying close attention to the need of the moment, giving grace to our spouse through our words. If we bite and devour each other, we will be consumed by one another (Galatians 5:15), for harsh words stir up anger (Proverbs 15:1). However, a timely word that is full of tenderness and compassion is delightful (Proverbs 15:23). Just as Solomon and the Shulammite woman used "Words of Affirmation" to bless each other, let our hearts' desire be to bless our spouse with words that build up and encourage.

[Q] What "Words of Affirmation" did the lovers in Song of Songs use? How did their words communicate their love for each other? How did each of them respond to the encouragement of the other?

[Q] Why does our mouth speak of what fills our heart? Why is our speech a good barometer of our heart issues and our spiritual life?

[Q] Why is it seemingly easy to be careless with our speech when we are addressing our spouse? Based on the warning in Scripture that we will give an account for every careless word we speak, do you need to be more careful and purposeful with the words you direct at your spouse? Explain.

[Q] Why do you think our unwholesome, careless words grieve the Holy Spirit? What role should the Holy Spirit have in our battle to control our speech?

[Q] How can we give grace to our spouse through our words? How can you use "Words of Affirmation" to edify your spouse?

Optional Activity

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Have couples improvise a skit for each of the following scenarios, using the different characters below:

***Scenario one:** A wife has gone on a women's retreat for the weekend. While she is gone, her husband has cleaned the house for her return.*

***Scenario two:** A husband comes home exhausted and frustrated from a stressful situation at work.*

Use the following characters:

***Couple one:** A spouse that is encouraging and purposeful to choose words that edify his or her spouse according to the need of the moment.*

***Couple two:** A spouse that has a critical and negative speech pattern, because his or her heart is full of bitterness, anger, or an unforgiving attitude.*

***Couple three**: A spouse that does not acknowledge the situation either way. He or she is unobservant and caught up in a world of thought instead of living in the present.*

After the skits, answer the following questions:

[Q] *What emotional response did you have toward each skit? Why do you think you had this response? What impact do you think each of the responses portrayed in these skits would have on a person whose primary love language is "Words of Affirmation"?*

[Q] *Do you agree with Chapman that "Words of Affirmation" are an essential way to demonstrate our love toward our spouse? Explain your answer.*

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

"To be a successful lover, you have to communicate with and without words," Gary Chapman reminds us. Chapman's love languages are channels we can use to effectively communicate our love to our spouse. Effectively communicating our love is an active choice that will strengthen our marriage bond.

[Q] Which of the five love languages is the easiest method for you to show love? Why do you think it is the easiest? Which is the most difficult way for you to show love? Why?

[Q] Why do you think we most often show our love for others with our own primary love language? How should we change this pattern in order to effectively show love to our spouse?

Action Point: Working in groups of three or four, make lists of ten practical and creative ways to display love for each of the five love languages. Using this list as a springboard, make an intentional plan to be proactive in communicating your love to your spouse.

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Optional Activity

Keep a journal of requests and complaints that your spouse makes over a two-week period of time. Also, record ways your spouse demonstrates love to you. We usually show our love for others using our primary love language. Upon analysis of the information you have gathered, determine your spouse's primary love language. Finally, develop a plan to demonstrate your love for your spouse using his or her primary love language.

—Study prepared by Julie Kloster, speaker, freelance writer, and regular contributor to ChristianBibleStudies.com

Additional Resources

- ChristianBibleStudies.com
  - -Learning to Appreciate Our Spouse
  - -Faith as the Marriage Glue
  - -Glorify God Together: Marriage with Purpose
  - -When Money Comes Between Us
  - -Marriage and Opposite-Sex Friends
  - -Sex and the Christian Couple
  - -When It's Hard to Love
  - -Successful Relationships Course

- *Communication: Intimate Marriage Series,* Dan B. Allender, Tremper Longman III (InterVarsity Press, 2005; ISBN 0830821368)

- *Covenant Marriage: Building Communication and Intimacy,* Gary Chapman (Broadman & Holman, 2003; ISBN 0805425764)

- *Dr. Gary Chapman on the Marriage You've Always Wanted,* Gary Chapman (Moody Publishers, 2005; ISBN 0802487866)

- *The Five Love Languages,* Gary Chapman (Moody Publishers, 1992; ISBN 1881273156)

- *The Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate,* Gary Chapman (Moody Publishers; Reissue edition, 1996; ISBN 1881273156))

- *Improving Communication in Your Marriage Homebuilders Couples Series,* Group Publishing Inc. (Group Publishing, 2000; ISBN 0764422367)

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ARTICLE

Language Lessons

To be a successful lover, you have to communicate with and without words.

By Gary D. Chapman, for the study, "Communicate Love to Your Spouse"



"I'm desperate," Mark told me when he entered my office. "My wife told me she doesn't love me, and she wants me out of her life. I don't understand. I've been a good husband. We have a nice house and wonderful children. I love Suzanne: I tell her how beautiful and special she is. How can she throw away 17 years of marriage?"

"Has Suzanne ever complained to you?" I asked.

"She says we don't spend enough time together and that we don't talk. But my business is demanding, and when I get home I need down time."

I knew their problem: Suzanne's love language (the way she best understands and receives love) was Quality Time, and Mark hadn't spoken that language. His compliments weren't enough; Suzanne needed his time and attention.

Feeling loved is our deepest emotional need. When that need goes unmet, it weakens our love for our spouse. Then the negative behavior patterns we once overlooked begin to annoy us. That's why Suzanne could say, "I don't love you."

After 30 years of marriage counseling, I'm convinced there are only five languages of love. Each person uses all the languages, but really thrives on one. The better you speak your spouse's love language, the stronger your emotional love life will be. For those unfamiliar with love languages, here's a brief course:

Words of Affirmation. Proverbs 18:21 says, "The tongue has the power of life and death." This language uses words to honor and appreciate your spouse. "You look nice in that outfit." "Thanks for taking out the trash. I really appreciate all the hard work you do."

Gifts. A gift says, *She was thinking about me. Look what she got for me.* Gifts don't need to be expensive. Haven't we always said, "It's the thought that counts"? With gifts, it isn't what you give, but how often you give that communicates love.

Acts of Service. The Bible tells us to love not only in word but in action (1 John 3:18). Acts of service include: washing the car, walking the dog, changing the baby, or whatever needs doing.

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Quality Time. This means giving your spouse undivided attention. Maybe it's a picnic, a weekend away, or just muting the TV. The important thing is the two of you are focused on each other.

Physical Touch. We've long known the emotional power of physical touch. Holding hands; embracing; a back rub; even putting your hand on your mate's leg while you drive.

Revealing questions

So how do you discover your spouse's love language? Answer the following:

"How does my spouse most often express love to me?" If they give you words of affirmation, that may be their love language. They're giving you what they wish to receive.

"What does my spouse complain about most often?" Our complaints reveal our deepest desires. Suzanne complained, "We don't have time for each other. We don't talk." Quality Time was her love language.

"What does my spouse request most often?" If your spouse routinely asks, "Would you help me make the bed?" "Would you give the children a bath tonight?" then Acts of Service may be his or her primary love language.

You need three things to be a successful lover.

1. Information. What is your spouse's love language?

2. Will. Love is an active choice.

3. Frequency. Use your spouse's primary language to express love regularly.

It took Suzanne nine months of counseling to work through the hurt, neglect, and lack of empathy she felt from Mark. But eventually their marriage was reborn.

"If anyone told me I could have loving feelings for him again, I would have never believed it," Suzanne told me. "But I do. He's speaking my language," she said, smiling. Learn to speak your spouse's love language and you too can live with a smiling mate!

—Gary D. Chapman, Ph.D., a marriage and relationship expert and best-selling author of numerous books, including The Five Love Languages *(Moody) and* Covenant Marriage *(Broadman & Holman), lives in North Carolina.*

"Language Lessons," by Gary Chapman, MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP, Spring 2004

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LEADER'S GUIDE FOR STUDY 9

Avoid Miscommunication

How can we avoid the miscommunication traps that are so destructive in marriage?

Have you ever had one of those marital conflicts that leaves you completely befuddled, wondering, "What in the world was that all about?!" Perhaps it started with a stray comment about a pencil sharpener, an opinion about lasagna, or a remark about the weather. Then, before you knew it, you and your spouse were verbally duking it out like sworn enemies, glaring and discussing faults and feelings until the sun went down.

What really went wrong? Why is it so difficult to get along in marriage? Why do so many arguments start over seemingly silly things? How are we to live out our marriage vows in the midst of flawed communication efforts? What does it really mean to understand our partner's intent and seek understanding? Let's take a look.

Lesson #9

Scripture:
Matthew 20:20–28; Philippians 2:1–11; James 3:13–18

Based on:
"Avoiding Missteps and Misunderstandings," by Les and Leslie Parrott, CHRISTIANITY TODAY, Fall 2005

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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Prior to class, provide for each person the article "Avoiding Missteps and Misunderstandings" from CHRISTIANITY TODAY magazine (included at the end of this study).



For Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott, the art of marital communication is like a dance. We've all seen, in some shape or form, a mesmerizing dance in which a skilled couple performs in perfect harmony. But we've all also seen some less-than-perfect dances where toes are stepped on, smiles turn to grimaces, and the tempo is lost. Dances like these are pretty uncomfortable to watch. The same is true of communication in marriage. When it's done well, it's joyous. But when it's done poorly, it's a terrible thing to behold.

In a communication dance, we must first clarify the true content of our spouse's words. Second, we must seek to genuinely understand where our partner is coming from. This simple dance sounds easy until we face the music at the heart of the dance: a selfless attitude of Christ-like humility and servanthood. For self-focused sinners, it's tough not to stumble on these two points.

The things we argue about don't, in themselves, sabotage a marriage, but *something* along the way causes communication to veer off course, catapulting couples through the rough (yet sadly familiar) terrain of marital miscommunication. No couple is perfect—not even marriage experts Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott—and communication screw-ups are bound to take place. But as Christians, we can seek to honor God by heading off many of these communication missteps before they happen, by getting to the root of the problem and zeroing in on two important marriage principles.

Discussion starters:

[Q] What are some of the topics married couples usually quarrel over? Why are these the major issues?

In their article "Avoiding Missteps and Misunderstandings," Les and Leslie Parrott show us that we are not alone in failing to communicate by poking a little bit of fun at themselves. It's nice to be reminded that we can laugh about it!

[Q] If it's all right with your spouse, describe a recent communication breakdown in your own marriage.

[Q] From your perspective, what are the main reasons behind communication failures in marriage?

[Q] In what ways have you been successful in marital communication? In other words, what "tricks of the trade" have helped you navigate rough communication terrain?

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PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: The root of the problem is our focus on self.

When a problem rears its ugly head in our marriages or family lives, it's tempting to slap a Band-aid on it, going for the quick-fix solution of addressing the problem at the surface. But when we do that—when we content ourselves with a superficial understanding of the issue—the problem isn't really solved. It's a bit like trying to tackle dandelions in the backyard by pulling the leaves and flowers off each dandelion plant. It won't do a bit of good! Experience tells us that to eradicate the weeds, we must dig deep and get at their roots. Similarly, when we endeavor to address the issue of poor communication in marriage, it's a fatal error to focus merely on the words we say or the techniques we use to problem-solve. Long-lasting and effective change can only take place if we understand and go after the root of the issue: our tendency to focus on ourselves.

[Q] Read aloud the opening scenario offered by Les and Leslie Parrott in "Avoiding Missteps and Misunderstandings." What do you think might be some of the causes behind this miscommunication? Brainstorm together as many root causes as you can think of.

When James addressed the issue of church disorder in his epistle, he zeroed in on a Christian's real motives and heart condition. James's words can also give us unique insight into what can go wrong in marriage. Read James 3:13–18.

Leader's Note: *James sharply contrasts the two kinds of wisdom by emphasizing the fruit they produce. The first type of "wisdom" produces disorder, whereas the second promotes peace. Notice the contrasts: the devil and heaven; selfish ambition and consideration; envious and peace loving; evil and pure.*

[Q] In your opinion, what parts of this passage (James 3:13–18) can directly apply to marriage? What parts don't apply?

[Q] One root problem James points out for the church is "selfish ambition" (3:14). Think back to one of your recent marital communication breakdowns. Was the tendency to focus on yourself—your own thoughts and feelings—at the root of the miscommunication? Explain.

[Q] During marital conflict, it's easy to zero in on surface issues instead of tackling the root of the problem. How can we distinguish between surface symptoms and root problems in our communication conflicts?

Teaching point two: To avoid marital missteps, we should try to clarify what our spouse is really saying.

One of the more striking and enduring figures in literature is the central character in Dostoevsky's classic *The Brothers Karamozov*. What makes Alyosha, a novice monk, so captivating isn't that he's a strong, daring, triumphant superman. Instead, he's childlike, innocent, pure, unassuming, humble, and selfless. In every interaction throughout the story, he displays these characteristics, assuming the best about each person he interacts with. And as readers watch other characters dupe Alyosha and take advantage of his goodness, it's tempting to consider him rather foolish. But eventually the reader comes to realize that Alyosha is the true hero of the story—not in spite of his naïve innocence, but because of it.

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Unlike Alyosha, most of us must admit that our natural instinct—especially in seasons of marital stress—is to assume the worst about our partner instead of the best. As psychologist and professor John M. Gottman observes in his book *The Marriage Clinic* (W.W. Norton & Company, 1999):

Mind-reading is attributing thoughts and feelings or motives to the other person. Instead of asking what one's partner is feeling, people mind-read and assume they know what their partner is thinking and feeling—and this is dysfunctional.

When our spouse says something that rubs us the wrong way or that's simply unclear to us, we often resort to "mind-reading" and end up coming to some off-base conclusions.

The misunderstanding that results is the animal that devours countless marriages. The Parrotts warn that from misunderstanding, "isolation and loneliness are bound to creep in." Assumptions give way to arguments, arguments to isolation, and isolation to division. And before we know it, a marriage relationship can quickly feel like it's beyond repair. Amazingly, this dangerous cycle can be easily avoided by making one simple choice: putting forth the effort to assume the best and truly hear what our spouse is saying.

Optional Activity:

Invite group members to imagine a husband and wife sitting down together in the evening. When the wife asks her husband about his day, he responds, "It was fine—I don't really want to talk about it, okay?"

The wife could take this comment to mean many different things—positive, neutral, or negative. Pass out index cards and invite everyone to write down their ideas about what the husband might really be thinking. Then gather the cards and read each of the interpretations aloud. Ask group members what type of clarifying question the wife could ask to understand what her husband really means.

If you have time, repeat this exercise using the Parrotts' example at the start of the section "Step one: clarify content," which focuses on a statement a wife might make to her husband. After reviewing the possible meanings the group has come up with, read aloud the possible meanings suggested by Les and Leslie Parrott.

In their article, the Parrotts write, "A simple inquiry goes a long way to make sure you understand the message." Yet instead of asking simple clarifying questions, we often jump to conclusions about what our spouse means by what he or she says.

[Q] What are some of the assumptions we commonly make about what our spouse is saying? What is the nature of these assumptions?

Read Philippians 2:1–4. Paul emphasized the importance of like-mindedness and relational unity in his imperative statement, "look not only to your own interests" (2:4). When it comes to marital communication, we're naturally tempted to focus first on our own interests and how we feel. Instead, we can look out for our spouse's interests by putting in the effort to understand what he or she is really saying. Often that effort requires no more than asking a sincere and simple clarifying question.

Leader's Note: *In this passage, Paul addressed the problem of disunity within the church at Philippi. Philippians 2:2 reads, "[be] like minded" and "[be] one in spirit and purpose." Also, Paul targeted the attitude of division—"selfish ambition and vain conceit"—in the following*

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verse. You might want to point out how strikingly similar Paul's emphases here are to the main points of James 3:13–18.

[Q] Why is it important to clarify the real content of what your partner is saying to you? Why is this so difficult to do?

[Q] What should motivate us to try to clarify what our spouse is saying? What wrong motivations often hold us back from doing this?

Teaching point three: We should seek to understand our spouse before seeking to be understood.

After we try to clarify what our spouse is actually saying, we must next zero in on clarifying our partner's intent: what he or she really means. When they face marital conflict, Les and Leslie Parrott rely on one of Steven Covey's principles from *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* to keep them on track*: "*Seek to understand before being understood." Sounds easy, right? Not when we remember the root of most marital miscommunication: our unswerving tendency to focus on ourselves. Trying to authentically understand our spouse before attempting to prove *our* points, share *our* feelings, nurse *our* wounds, or defend *our* perspective requires both humility and servanthood. This isn't about employing a few handy marital communication techniques—this is about who we are at our core. Christ-like humility and servanthood are at the center of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. When a Christian seeks to understand his or her spouse before trying to be understood, it's a true portrait of service.

Read Philippians 2:5–11.

[Q] What stands out to you in this passage about Christ's humility?

[Q] What role does humility play in trying to truly understand your spouse? Share an example.

Read Matthew 20:20–28.

[Q] How does this passage contrast self-interest with an attitude of servanthood? How could this apply to marriage?

[Q] In what way is "seeking to understand before being understood" service-oriented?

[Q] Why is this step in the "dance" so difficult? In other words, why is it so tough to keep a humble, servanthood mindset in the heat of a marital miscommunication?

[Q] Whose marriage do you look up to? Describe how you've seen them express humility and servanthood in their communication with each other.

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

Both clarifying our partner's content and seeking to truly understand them are tall orders for any couple that desires a healthy marriage. These outward communication skills must spring

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from an inner heart of Christ-like humility and service. Though as Christians we should display these characteristics in every human relationship, they are especially poignant and powerful when they're applied to the intimate and beautiful relationship of marriage. After all, our human marriages are earthly symbols of God's "marriage" to his people. The challenge that still lies ahead is implementing these principles and qualities in our daily lives.

[Q] Which of the two steps—clarifying content or seeking to understand—do you find to be the most difficult? Why?

[Q] Which of the two steps we discussed do you think will be the most helpful for you in your marriage? Why?

[Q] What can you do to help yourself stay focused on these steps when you're in "the heat of the battle"?

Action Point: Invite group members to form pairs with their spouses. (If there are group members whose spouse is not present, have them form their own pairs or trios.) Direct group members to discuss this next question.

[Q] How would your children or close friends describe your marriage? How would you want to be remembered in this area of your life?

Optional Closing Activity: *Gather everyone back together and pass out three index cards to each person. God is often described in Scripture as a bridegroom to his people. Prompt participants to write one word on each card that describes God's bridegroom-like love for his people.*

Pass around a bowl for everyone to put their cards in; next, pass the bowl around again, directing everyone to take out three of the cards. After group members have read their cards aloud, ask, "How can we exemplify God's love for us in our earthly marital relationships?"

—Study prepared by David and Kelli Trujillo. David (a Bible and theology teacher) and Kelli (a writer and editor) write a column for GROUP magazine and are the authors of Jesus the Life-Changer.

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- *Making Your Love Last Forever*, H. Norman Wright (International Press, 1998; ISBN 0884862402)

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ARTICLE

Avoiding Missteps and Misunderstandings

How to listen before you leap (to the wrong conclusion).

By Les and Leslie Parrott, for the study, “Avoid Miscommunication”



“Does Jackson have sun in his eyes?”

This question was Leslie’s code—apparently—to tell me that I (Les) needed to pull the visor over our crying baby’s car seat.

“No, I think he’s just fussy,” I responded as I got into the driver’s seat and glanced at our son in the rearview mirror. “What are we having for dinner tonight?”

“Dinner! How can I talk about food when I can’t even hear myself think?”

Leslie unbuckled her seatbelt and climbed into the back seat to shield Jackson from even the *slightest* ray of light.

“If you wanted me to adjust his visor, why didn’t you just ask?”

“I did.”

“No,” I said with the confidence of a high-priced attorney. “You asked if the sunlight was bothering Jack.”

“Exactly. I asked you to make sure the sun wouldn’t bother him by pulling up the visor. Apparently I have to spell it out!”

“Not a bad idea,” I mumbled under my breath.

“What?” Leslie asked.

I started the car and put it into gear.

By now, our baby had stopped crying (I suppose that had something to do with the visor on his car seat), and Leslie and I both sat silently as I drove.

A couple minutes passed when Leslie uttered a single word: “Tacos.”

The conversational misstep

This conversation occurred yesterday on a carefree drive to a park. We were under no stress—other than a crying baby. Just a cheery little outing with our family—or so we thought. But why the hiccup in our communication?

Truth is, we know better than to let our conversation get tangled up with crossed wires. After all, we've been married for two decades. We counsel other couples. We give national marriage seminars. We have the tools. We know the techniques. We understand the dance steps.

The miscommunication was a tiny stumble on the dance floor of our day. It was quickly filed away as a minor blunder. Or was it?

Getting in sync

Studies have shown that these seemingly insignificant missteps in communication have an important effect. Each message that breaks down inscribes a note on your relationship: "My partner doesn't understand me." While it may not be conscious or articulated, it is felt. And when a couple suffers enough of these breakdowns, isolation and loneliness are bound to creep in.

On the other hand, when you and your mate are communicating well, there's an indelible inscription on your relationship that's priceless: "I am known and understood."

That feeling of being in sync, of speaking each other's language—fluently—is vital. Couples gauge the depth of their connection by the satisfaction of their conversations. It's an excellent barometer of our bond. Studies indicate that improving your communication increases the quality of your relationship more than anything else.

So what can you do to improve your communication dance? How can you avoid stepping on each other's toes? For us, it often comes down to what we call "the two-step": clarifying our partner's intent and seeking genuinely to understand.

Step one: clarify content

Consider this example. A wife says to her husband, "This house is a mess—and your mother is coming tomorrow."

What is she saying exactly? It may not be what you think. Consider these clarifications:

Husband: Sounds as if you think the house is a mess.

Wife: I just feel like a failure when I can't keep the house clean—and I know it's going to be like this until the boys are older.

Or *Husband:* You sound a little depressed, are you all right?

Wife: No, I'm upset that my boss won't give me tomorrow off. I have to work the entire time she's here.

Or *Husband:* Is my mom's visit stressing you out?

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Wife: Actually, I'm glad she'll be here. I just don't have the energy to vacuum.

Or *Husband:* Is the state of the house really bothering you?

Wife: I need your help so I'll feel comfortable when your mom shows up.

See how it works? A simple inquiry goes a long way to make sure you understand the message. It ensures you stay in step.

The husband could have easily jumped to a number of conclusions, thinking he knew exactly what his partner was saying: *She wants me to clean this room,* or *she wishes my mom wasn't dropping by,* or *she's feeling depressed.* And in each conclusion he may have been wrong. That's why this fundamental skill is so essential.

Step two: seek understanding

Not long ago on a flight from Denver to Seattle, we had a communication breakdown as we were trying to talk about laundry. It started when we were thumbing through a magazine and saw a photo of a super cool stackable washer and dryer depicted in a spotless laundry room.

"Why can't our laundry room look like that?" asked Les.

I (Leslie) felt my body stiffen. This wasn't the first time we'd covered this ground. Throughout our marriage we've tossed the chore of washing laundry back and forth. But recently it's been my responsibility, and with two little boys it was becoming more of a challenge.

"If you want to do the laundry now, be my guest," I snapped.

With that, we were off and running. If you were eavesdropping from the seat behind us, you would have never known that we were on our way home from giving a marriage seminar. We weren't even close to practicing what we preach. So we finally resorted to a strategy we developed for just such an occasion.

When stuck in a communication meltdown, we get out our "cheat sheet," which reminds us what's truly important in communication. It's only one sentence: "Seek to understand before being understood."

That's it. This simple thought, popularized by Stephen Covey in his book *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, changes our entire mindset and inevitably gets us back on track. It sounds simple, but it's profound. And it works. Once you try to understand your partner *before* you try to get him or her to understand you, your communication skills, no matter how rudimentary, take a quantum leap.

After thinking about that sentence, I relaxed my defensive posture and worked to understand Les's perspective. "You really value having an organized and orderly life. Sometimes I forget how much that means to you."

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I could barely believe the words were coming out of my mouth! Les recognized my sincerity and acknowledged the struggle to keep up with our growing family's requirements. Our entire conversation turned around. We were able to get back on track with a civilized and constructive dialogue.

So take it from a couple of very human relationship experts: Next time you find yourselves stepping on each other's toes in a conversational dance, practice the two-step: clarify content and seek understanding.

—Les and Leslie Parrott, MP regular contributors, teach at Seattle Pacific University and are authors of Love Talk *(Zondervan). Visit the Parrotts at www.RealRelationships.com.*

"Avoiding Missteps and Misunderstandings," by Les and Leslie Parrott, CHRISTIANITY TODAY, Fall 2005

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Marriage Partnership

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LEADER'S GUIDE FOR STUDY 10

Hurtful Words Start Inside

Where do hurtful words start, and how can they be stopped?

In a recent spy movie spoof, the hero, upon thawing out from decades in a cryogenic deep-freeze, realizes that he has no internal monologue—he's actually saying out loud every thought that crosses his mind. The movie plays this situation for laughs, as the hero makes inappropriate comments about women and global politics. For most of us, though, the airing of our inmost thoughts would be anything but funny. Some of those thoughts, assert marriage experts Les and Leslie Parrott, would be sweet; they're the compliments we never quite get around to giving our spouses. Many of the thoughts, however, would be ugly, full of criticism of ourselves and others. The Parrotts challenge husbands and wives to examine their self-talk and then work, with God's help, to clean it up. The Bible supports this project with a realistic assessment of the obstacles to, and rewards of, healthy communication.

Where do ugly thoughts come from? What can we do about them? How can helpful words undo the damage of hurtful ones? These are the questions we'll be asking and discussing in this study.

Lesson #10

Scripture:
Psalm 19; Romans 7:14–25; Philippians 4:4–9; James 1:19–26; 1 John 1:5–10

Based on:
"Talking to Yourself," by Les and Leslie Parrott, MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP, Fall 2004

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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Prior to the class, provide for each person the article "Talking to Yourself" from MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP magazine (included at the end of this study).



Adages about speech abound: Honesty is the best policy. If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all. It isn't healthy to bottle up your feelings. Silence is golden. No one likes a tattletale. Say what's on your mind. Talk is cheap. Everyone tells little white lies. Actions speak louder than words. Don't talk behind someone's back. Sometimes you just need to vent.

Some of these adages are more accurate than others. Even the useful adages can conflict. What if you honestly want to say something that isn't nice? Does grumbling about your home life to a friend qualify as healthy venting, or is it talking behind your spouse's back? If talk is cheap, does that mean we should have less of it, or that we should try to make our words more valuable? The stock advice swirling around our heads does not solve all of our communication conundrums, and might actually make matters worse.

Discussion starters:

[Q] Consider several of the adages above individually. In what circumstances might each be helpful? In what circumstances might each be wrong? When two adages conflict, how do you decide what to say (or not to say)?

[Q] Can you think of other speech-related advice? Where did you pick it up? Is it helpful?

[Q] Describe the tone of your inner voice. What celebrity or person in your life does it sound like? What are some of its favorite phrases?

Optional Activity: *Distribute pens or markers and blank sheets of paper to everyone in the group. Ask each person to make a pie chart of his or her daily speech. What percentage of the words used each day fall into the following categories: work speech, conversation with spouse, talking to children or other family members, conversation with friends, and spiritual speech (i.e. witnessing, group Bible study, praying aloud)? Within each of these categories, what percentage of each type of speech is uplifting?*

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: We cannot control every thought in our minds or every feeling in our hearts.

The Parrotts write, "Self-talk occurs without prior reflection or reasoning. Our brain instantly sees it as plausible and valid, even when it's not." This is why the solution to negative speech (and negative self-speech) is not, as some Eastern mysticism teaches, cleansing our minds of all

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impurities or suppressing all of our passions. The Bible teaches that fallen humanity cannot live up to this ideal. Read Romans 7:14–25 and 1 John 1:5–10.

[Q] What does it mean to be "sold as a slave to sin" (Romans 7:14)? Does this passage suggest that we are not responsible for sinful actions?

Leader's Note: *It doesn't excuse our sinful actions; it just recognizes that no matter how hard we try to conquer sin, we will still be sinful beings. See teaching point two.*

[Q] According to John, is sin a past or present condition for Christians? Does walking with God mean that we are completely purified from sin?

[Q] How does the conflict between darkness and light affect what we say to ourselves and others? Is there any validity to the old cartoon image of the angel on one shoulder and the devil on the other?

Teaching point two: Sinfulness is an explanation, not an excuse.

The sin nature, of which Paul and John wrote so dramatically, predisposes us to ugly thoughts, words, and actions. But Christians are not called to accept this condition without a fight. Protestant reformer Martin Luther once wrote, "Temptations, of course, cannot be avoided, but because we cannot prevent the birds from flying over our heads, there is no need that we should let them nest in our hair." In other words, while we cannot remove the stain of sin in this lifetime, there is much we can do to clean up our minds and our mouths. Read James 1:19–26, which contains many commands toward this end.

[Q] What does James instruct Christians *not* to do? What does he instruct them to do instead?

[Q] How do you understand the analogy in verses 23–24 of a man who looks in the mirror and then forgets what he looks like? How is hearing God's Word similar to, and different from, looking in a mirror?

[Q] What does it mean to keep a tight rein on your tongue (v. 26)? Why does an uncontrolled tongue render religion worthless?

[Q] Given the depth of sin described in Romans 7:14–25 and 1 John 1:5–10, is it possible to follow James's instructions and control the tongue? Why or why not?

Teaching point three: The best defense against hurtful words is a good offense.

Several of the Parrotts' suggestions for countering negative self-talk involve positive communication: pray, ask questions, counter your thoughts, speak positively, verbalize your thoughts. This advice recalls the famous sports motto: The best defense is a good offense. Read Philippians 4:4–9.

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[Q] How do joy and peace (Philippians 4:4, 7) change our minds and enable us to think higher thoughts? Where do joy and peace come from?

[Q] What kinds of things are noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy? What kinds of things would be the opposite of these? How can we train our minds to think more about good things and less about bad?

Read Psalm 19, which puts a different spin on speech and gives us even more to think about.

[Q] Who and what speak in this psalm? What do they say?

[Q] How are hidden faults (v. 12) different from willful sins (v. 13)? Is there a parallel here between self-talk and verbalized speech?

[Q] Do you have more trouble bringing the words of your mouth or the meditations of your heart (v. 14) in line with God's will? Why?

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

The Parrotts end their article, "Want to really make a positive change in this area? On paper identify the most common self-statements you use throughout the day. Next, write an alternative to each, countering it by turning the negative into a positive. ... This simple exercise can trigger a positive response the next time it's needed." As we've seen throughout this study, communication starts deep in our minds and then works its way out into positive or negative words. Only godly intervention at every stage of this process will ensure that your words build your marriage instead of tearing your spouse down.

[Q] What negative self-statements plague you? What sins do these statements reflect? How can you seek help in overcoming these sins?

[Q] Look back at James 1:19–26. Which command in this passage strikes you most forcefully? How can you put it into practice this week?

[Q] Think of your spouse's noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy characteristics. How can you encourage him or her in these godly traits?

Action Point: Close by giving each person in your group time to do what the Parrotts suggest: On paper identify the most common self-statements you use throughout the day. Next, write an alternative to each, countering it by turning the negative into a positive.

Optional Activity: *Close your meeting by praying Psalm 19:12b–14.*

—Study prepared by Elesha Coffman, former managing editor of CHRISTIAN HISTORY & BIOGRAPHY *magazine*

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- *The Bondage of the Will*, Martin Luther, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Revell, 1990; ISBN 0800753429)

- *Communication: Intimate Marriage Series,* Dan B. Allender and Tremper Longman III (InterVarsity Press, 2005; ISBN 0830821368)

- *Love Talk,* Les and Leslie Parrott (Zondervan, 2004; ISBN 0310245966)

- *Pillow Talk for Couples,* Les and Leslie Parrott (Thomas Nelson, 2002; ISBN 0849996627)

- *Talk Your Way to an Intimate Marriage,* Donald Harvey (Baker, 2000; ISBN 0800786742)

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Marriage Partnership
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ARTICLE

Talking to Yourself

It's not a sign you're losing your mind, but a means to a better marriage.

By Les and Leslie Parrott, for the study, "Hurtful Words Start Inside"



One of the world's longest marriages was celebrated recently. Lee Hoon-yo and Kim Bong-geum from South Korea celebrated their 82nd wedding anniversary. On their anniversary, the couple was given special gifts, including 182 roses ... and hearing aids.

After more than eight decades of marriage they were getting hearing aids! Guess they still wanted to be sure they wouldn't miss a word. Can you imagine the number of conversations this couple has had? In all that time, they must have touched on every conceivable topic a husband and wife could discuss.

But this amazing marriage got us thinking. Were Lee and Kim aware of the private dialogue they engaged in daily? Few couples are. Yet it's the most important discussion you ever have. Its words linger longer, are felt more deeply, and determine the closeness or distance you feel.

We're talking about the conversation you have with yourself—your relational self-talk.

The surprising things you say to yourself

Each of us holds an unending internal dialogue, which colors every experience in marriage. Self-talk occurs without prior reflection or reasoning. Our brain instantly sees it as plausible and valid, even when it's not. While these thoughts are rarely noticed, they continually shape our attitudes, actions, and outlook.

Imagine you slip a microchip into a computer and it tabulates everything you've thought about your spouse and your marriage.

Now imagine you and your partner sitting down to study it. What would you find?

First, you'd almost certainly be surprised by what you heard. You might find, for example, that you're giving your partner internal compliments he or she never hears. *I love it when she wears that dress. He's brilliant with the kids.* But you may also be

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shocked by how much negative commentary you quietly grumble. *He cares more about his car than me. She's so careless with our money.* This kind of self-talk sets up impossible standards and then tears down your spouse for not meeting them. In fact, according to some experts, as much as 77 percent of the average person's self-talk is negative. One negative thought can kill dozens of positive ones if it's expressed at the wrong moment. Imagine the impact this has on a marriage—how it ultimately hinders your connection with each other. That's why it's particularly valuable to monitor your inner voice in situations that elicit a negative tone.

Our friend Donna confessed this story to us. It was Friday night and Donna wanted her husband, Tim, to suggest a fun restaurant for dinner. *After all,* she thought, *we've both had a tough week at work. He'll realize I shouldn't make dinner tonight. We can take it easy and relax together.* "But I didn't say anything to him," Donna admitted, "because I thought, *He should initiate it. He should know."* Tim obviously didn't know because he didn't suggest going out to eat. So Donna angrily heated some leftovers, while she thought, *He only thinks about himself. He doesn't care about me.*

During the meal Donna sulked, and it only got worse when Tim didn't ask about her day. She said to herself, *If he really loved me, he'd want to find out how I'm doing.* She threw a pity party, and he didn't even notice. "I sat there feeling rejected and depressed. And I thought, *He's so selfish."* The rest of the evening Donna avoided Tim. Why? Because "a woman shouldn't have to ask her man to talk to her."

Improving your inner voice

If Donna had monitored her self-talk, she would have realized she was being her marriage's own worst enemy. While her goal was to connect with her mate, instead she punished him for not meeting her unspoken expectations. Think how her mood—and the evening—would have changed if she'd countered her negative self-talk with positive, rational thoughts: *I can't expect him to read my mind—he doesn't know I'd like to eat out.* Or*, Just because he doesn't initiate a conversation doesn't mean he's not interested in me.* Sure, it may take some mental muscle to conjure these thoughts, but aren't they more accurate?

Here are eight ways to improve your inner voice.

1. **Pray.** Negative relational self-talk steals our joy and destroys our relationships. We try to start every morning by praying the Bible back to God, using this simple prayer from 2 Corinthians 10:5: "Lord, help me take captive my every thought to make it obedient to Christ and pleasing to you." It's amazing how God answers that prayer by filling our minds with positive thoughts about each other.
2. **Take note of your self-talk.** Recognizing a problem is the first step toward solving it. So start listening to your thoughts. If you were to sum up all your

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self-talk statements, putting the negative ones on one side of the scale and the positive ones on the other, which would win out?

For five days, early in our marriage, I (Les) literally kept track of my internal dialogue. I carried a pad and pen to jot down what I was saying to myself. I was astounded by how negative my self-talk could be—how often I had critical thoughts about Leslie, myself, and our relationship.

3. **Identify the situation.** Cindy grew up watching her father always open doors for her mother. In fact, her mom would stay in the car until her dad opened the door for her. *That's how a man shows his wife he loves her*, Cindy thought. But when Cindy got married, her husband never considered such an "old fashioned notion." "That's why we have power locks," he'd joke. But a quiet voice inside Cindy's head would say, *If he really cherished me, he'd open my car door*. Small thoughts—that began to eat large holes in her actions toward him. Once she identified situations most likely to provoke an irrational internal conversation, she could proactively work on changing her attitude.

4. **Ask yourself some questions.** As you become more aware of what you're saying and when you're saying it, ask yourself: *Is this a rational thought? Is what I'm thinking really accurate? Is it negative? Is it spouse-condemning?* Once Cindy recognized the negativity in her self-talk each time her husband didn't open her car door, she realized it was contaminating their relationship. She could then say, *He didn't grow up in a home like mine, and it's unfair, even silly, for me to read motives into whether or not he opens my car door*.

5. **Counter your thoughts.** Say aloud: *My thoughts determine my feelings*. Once you own the fact that it's not what happens to you, but how you talk to yourself about what happens to you, then you set your mind on a positive track. You begin to live out what the apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians (4:8-9): "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things … and the God of peace will be with you." Countering your thoughts may take some time, so don't beat yourself up when you fail. Just stick with it.

6. **Speak the positive.** The best part of understanding your self-talk is realizing you control it. So make it positive. The best way to do this is to select an aspect of your partner's character you admire. For example, Les is one of the most organized people I (Leslie) know. Sometimes his desire to have everything in its place can get under my skin. Ever felt that way? The very thing I appreciate about him can become the thing that bugs me. But I can train my brain to say, "While this may irritate me right now, his self-discipline is something I value deeply." This kind of positive self-talk changes my

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perspective and makes life easier. By the way, I've found this is much easier to do when I'm not tired or hungry. So train your brain on a full stomach!

7. **Verbalize your thoughts.** If your self-talk is an irrational guessing game or a litmus test to determine if your spouse really loves you, give it up. There are no merit badges for mind reading, so you can't expect your spouse to do this. In Donna's case, when she worried Tim didn't care about her because he didn't suggest eating out, she could have verbalized her thoughts: "Tim, I've had a tough week. How about we go out to eat tonight and relax together?" That straightforward question could have changed their entire evening.

   If your relational self-talk is positive, all the more reason to tell your spouse. If you're thinking, *She looks great in that dress* or *I like the way he laughs at my jokes*—say it! You can never give too many compliments.

8. **Take action.** Want to really make a positive change in this area? On paper identify the most common self-statements you use throughout the day. Next, write an alternative to each, countering it by turning the negative into a positive. For example, counter, *She's always nagging me about my clothes on the floor,* with *She cares about making our home pleasant for us*. This simple exercise can trigger a positive response the next time it's needed.

By the way, if you have a negative self-statement *(my spouse is a slob)* that's difficult to counter, it may be because it's true (your spouse really is sloppy). That's when it's time to turn your self-talk into couple's talk and actually discuss the issue.

With a more reasonable internal dialogue, you won't hold your spouse to unvoiced expectations. You'll feel a new sense of empowerment in your marriage, almost immediately.

—Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott, mp regular contributors and authors of Love Talk (Zondervan), are cofounders of the Center for Relationship Development at Seattle Pacific University. Visit Les and Leslie at www.RealRelationships.com.

"Talking to Yourself," by Les and Leslie Parrott, MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP, Fall 2004

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LEADER'S GUIDE FOR STUDY 11

The Importance of Compromise

How do communication and self-sacrifice aid in compromise?

Seeking to know our spouse's preferences, and being willing to change in accord with those preferences, directs a marriage toward mutual compromise and greater intimacy, according to Eva Marie Everson in her article for MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP. Scripture tells us to think of others as more important than ourselves and to give up our own rights for the sake of peace. These principles have tremendous implications for the marriage relationship.

What role does communication play in compromise? Why is compromise often difficult? How does our attitude affect our communication and our desire to compromise? Why should we be concerned about our spouse's preferences? How do we humbly communicate our desires to our spouse?

Lesson #11

Scripture:
Genesis 13:5–18; Ruth 3:7–11; Romans 12:9–21; Philippians 2:3–8

Based on:
"Loaded Questions," by Eva Marie Everson, MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP, Summer 2004

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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Prior to the class, provide for each person the article "Loaded Questions" from MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP magazine (included at the end of this study).



"Look out for number one!" "I did it my way!" Self-indulgent statements like these are recurring themes in our culture. As Americans, we are encouraged to defend our rights and to be assertive in making sure our wishes are granted. Scripture, however, tells us to think of others as more important than ourselves, giving preference to one another in honor. We are told to do all that we can to be at peace with others. Either of these positions will have great impact upon communication and compromise in a relationship, including a marriage relationship. When married couples are focused on each spouse getting his or her own way, strife and frustration are inevitable. However, when each spouse is willing to give up his own interests for the sake of his partner, mutual compromise and marital harmony will result.

Eva Marie Everson encourages us to be intentional about our communication with our spouse. She suggests that we be purposeful in asking our spouse about his or her preferences. She believes this will bring about mutual compromise and greater intimacy in our marriage.

Discussion starters:

[Q] How does our culture's philosophy of "Look out for number one" differ from Scripture's command to "... in humility consider others better than yourselves" (Philippians 2:3)? Give specific examples of how each of these positions might positively or negatively affect a marriage relationship.

[Q] How do you think our culture's look-out-for-number-one philosophy originated? Why is this appealing to people? What are the results of this philosophy?

[Q] What are some typical areas of disagreement in marriage relationships? What attitudes often contribute to these disagreements? If you and your spouse are comfortable, share with your group some areas of regular disagreement.

[Q] In your opinion, what makes a marriage relationship solid? What produces intimacy in a marriage?

[Q] How do we learn to compromise with our spouse? What role does communication have in a healthy marriage relationship?

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PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: With humility of mind, let each of us regard one another as more important than him or herself.

Read Philippians 2:3–8. One can scarcely imagine that the God of the universe would give up his right to the eternal glories and magnificent beauties of heaven. Even more amazing is that he would come to this sin-scarred world to die in our place. Jesus humbly laid down his right to celebrated majesty, infinite riches, and majestic power for the sake of those whom he greatly loved. How gloriously divine his love for us must be, for Jesus to empty himself and become obedient to God the Father—even to the point of death on a cross.

God calls us to have the same sacrificial attitude of love that Jesus demonstrated. We are to do nothing out of selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind we are to regard one another as more important than ourselves. Paul reminded the Philippians to look out not only for their own interests, but also for the interests of others. For us to successfully do this, we must rely on God's sustaining grace for wisdom and strength of relationship. By abiding in fellowship with Christ, we will be able to fervently love each other deeply from the heart, which will result in the self-sacrificial love modeled by Christ.

[Q] What was the attitude of Christ that Paul encouraged the Philippians to imitate? How can we model this attitude? Give practical examples. How might we apply this to our marriage relationship?

[Q] What rights did Jesus give up? What motivated him to give them up?

[Q] What rights might we need to give up for the sake of our spouse? Does this mean we never get to have our own way? Explain.

[Q] How do selfishness and conceit affect our relationship with our spouse? What would happen to our marriage relationship if each of us did nothing from selfishness or conceit?

[Q] Everson suggests asking our spouse to communicate what areas he or she desires for us to change. How might this type of communication be an example of the attitude God wants us to exhibit toward each other?

[Q] How might Everson's suggestion be a practical way for us to look out not only for our own interests but also for the interests of our spouse? In what other practical ways can we look out for our spouse's interests? Does this mean we must do everything our spouse desires? If not, how do we balance our own interests with the interests of others?

[Q] How do you think we should respond if our spouse has unreasonable demands for us to change? How can we determine if the request is unreasonable or if our attitude is unbending?

[Q] Do you find it easy or difficult to look out for the interests of your spouse? Share your experience. What might assist you to love your spouse with the love of Christ?

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Teaching point two: Seek to know the desires of others and be willing to give up your own rights for the sake of peace.

Read Genesis 13:5–18. Strife had broken out between the herdsmen of Abram and the herdsmen of Lot, because the land where they were living could not sustain both groups. Abram took the initiative and addressed the contentious issue with Lot. He called Lot to remember that their eternal relationship and love for each other was far more important than any earthly material gain. Abram gave up his rights and allowed Lot to choose the area of land he desired. Lot saw the lush, green Jordan Valley and based his decision on personal gain. His greed, however, exposed him to the wicked culture of Sodom and Gomorrah and its eventual destruction by God. Abram's sacrifice, for the sake of brotherly peace and his love for Lot, resulted in God's abundant blessing. While Lot struggled with the evils of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abram enjoyed intimate fellowship with God.

[Q] How did Abram appeal to Lot for peace? Why do you think he cared about what Lot wanted? Why did Abram give up his own rights for the sake of peace with Lot?

[Q] What role did communication have in their treaty? What role did sacrifice have?

[Q] How can we follow Abram's example when there is strife in our marriage? What can we infer from this story about working through a disagreement? What can we infer about the need to sacrifice our own desires for the sake of peace in a marriage relationship? Should we always give up our own desires for the sake of peace? Explain your thoughts.

[Q] What blessing did Abram receive because of his sacrifice? What blessing do we receive when we sacrifice our own desires for the wishes of another?

Teaching point three: Humbly communicate your desires to one another, and be willing to change.

Read Ruth 3:7–11. In the middle of the night, Ruth secretly uncovered Boaz's feet and lay down, so he would wake up and notice her. She humbly communicated that she wanted something from Boaz, but waited for him to ask her about it before making her specific request. Boaz's response to Ruth's unassuming entreaty was a desire to please her. "I will do for you all you ask," Boaz promised Ruth.

Partners in marriage should follow the example of communication set forth by Ruth and Boaz. If we want something from our mate, we should approach him or her with humility and gentleness. We should communicate our desire to discuss the situation, and then wait until our spouse acknowledges that he or she is ready to listen to our request. If our spouse requests something of us, let our heart's desire be like Boaz's—to please our spouse in any way we are able.

[Q] How did Ruth demonstrate humility in making her request of Boaz? How did Boaz respond to Ruth? Why do you think he responded in this way?

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[Q] Based on this passage, what is a wise way to communicate our desires to our spouse? Why is it wise?

[Q] Based on this passage, what should our attitude be toward requests our spouse makes of us?

[Q] Everson recommends we ask our spouse what he or she would like us to change. How do you respond when your spouse requests that you change something? Does your spouse's approach affect how you feel about changing? (For example: a humble request vs. a pushy demand for change.) Share your experiences.

[Q] Should we change everything our spouse requests? If yes, why? If no, how do we decide what to change and what not to change?

[Q] Boaz's response to Ruth appears to be somewhat dependent upon her excellent character. How might our spouse's character affect our willingness to agree to his or her desires? How should we respond to our spouse if we cannot, in good conscience, honor his or her request?

[Q] Do you agree with Everson that ignoring or being unaware of even the minor preferences of our spouse can add tension to a marriage? Explain your answer.

[Q] What should we do if we ask our spouse to change something, but he or she refuses to change?

Teaching point four: Compromise by giving preference to one another in honor.

Read Romans 12:9–21. Paul reminded the Romans to be devoted to one another in love, giving preference to each other in honor. Certainly, this applies to the marriage relationship. When each spouse's desire is to honor the other's preferences, compromise will result. The Book of Romans tells us to do all that we can to have peace in our relationships. This desire for a peaceful relationship should be a driving theme in our marriages.

[Q] Everson suggests one way to be at peace with our spouse is to ask questions about his or her preferences. How does Everson's suggestion compare with what Paul told the Romans?

[Q] What attitudes and actions are outlined in this passage that would help us to honor our spouse's preferences?

[Q] Do you agree that compromise would result if both spouses honored the preferences of the other? Support your answer. What role does humility have in compromise (see Romans 12:16)?

[Q] What usually keeps couples from reaching a compromise? What role does communication have in compromise?

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[Q] Paul warned us to let our love be without hypocrisy. What might hypocritical love look like? What differentiates hypocritical love from genuine love?

[Q] Is it possible to do all that we can to promote peace and yet still struggle with strife in a marriage relationship? If yes, how should we deal with a marriage relationship that is still unhealthy?

Optional Activity: *Consider the following scenario and answer the questions that follow.*

Sally is home all day with three rambunctious boys, all of whom are under the age of five. She has little time for herself, and she is often frazzled by the end of the day. On most days, her husband, Dan, comes home to find her dressed in sweatpants and a baggy shirt. He wishes she would pay more attention to her appearance. Sally, on the other hand, wishes Dan would volunteer to spend more time with the children, so that she could have some time to herself.

[Q] *Should Sally and Dan communicate their wishes to each other? If yes, how should they do it? Give practical examples of dialogue. If no, how should they respond to their emotions?*

[Q] *How might Everson's method of asking your spouse about his or her preferences aid in this couple's communication and compromise?*

[Q] *Assuming Sally and Dan are aware of each other's feelings, how might they each consider the other person's preferences as more important than their own? What examples of compromise might arise from this type of attitude?*

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

Purposeful communication to discover our spouse's wishes aids our ability to give preference to him or her in honor. Considering our spouse's needs as more important than our own is the key to compromise and a healthy marriage relationship. When we apply these principles to our marriage, we will have greater intimacy and harmony with our spouse.

[Q] Have you ever asked your spouse if there was something he or she would like for you to change? Why or why not? How might this type of question improve communication in your marriage? How might it improve intimacy?

[Q] What part of this study was most helpful to you? Why?

Action Point: Ask each individual to list practical ways he or she could give preference to their spouse. Next to each of these, ask them to write how it would promote peace in their relationship.

—Study prepared by Julie Kloster, freelance writer, speaker, and regular contributor to ChristianBibleStudies.com.

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Additional Resources

- ChristianBibleStudies.com
  - -Learning to Appreciate Our Spouse
  - -Faith as the Marriage Glue
  - -Glorify God Together: Marriage with Purpose
  - -When Money Comes Between Us
  - -Marriage and Opposite-Sex Friends
  - -Sex and the Christian Couple
  - -When It's Hard to Love
  - -Successful Relationships Course

- *The Act of Marriage, Revised and Updated,* Tim LaHaye, Beverly LaHaye (Zondervan Corp., 1998; ISBN 0310211778)

- *For Men Only,* Shaunti Feldhahn (Multnomah Publishers, 2006; ISBN 1590525728)

- *For Women Only: What You Need to Know About the Inner Lives of Men,* Shaunti Feldhahn (Multnomah Publishers Inc., 2004; ISBN 1590523172)

- *Love and Respect: The Love She Most Desires, the Respect He Desperately Needs,* Dr. Emerson Eggerichs (Integrity Publishers, 2004; ISBN 1591451876)

- *Love for a Lifetime: Building a Marriage That Will Go the Distance, Updated Edition,* Dr. James Dobson (Multnomah Publishers Inc., 2004; ISBN 1590520874)

- *Romancing Your Wife: A Little Effort Can Spice Up Your Marriage,* Debra White Smith (Harvest House Publishers, 2005; ISBN 0736913017)

- *Sacred Marriage: What If God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy,* Gary Thomas (Zondervan Corp., 2002; ISBN 0310242827)

- *Talk Your Way to an Intimate Marriage,* Donald Harvey (Baker, 2000; ISBN 0800786742)

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Marriage Partnership
Quarterly Series

ARTICLE

Loaded Question

Asking it could make your marriage dynamite!

By Eva Marie Everson, for the study, "The Importance of Compromise"



With one question I opened Pandora's Box.

"What, if anything," I asked my husband, "could I change about me to make you happier?"

It wasn't that we were unhappy or that I perceived he was unhappy. But after nearly 25 years together, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to realize that while we may adjust to certain "things" about our spouses, we'd be happier if those things could change.

Hubby cut a sideward glance at me. "What?"

I smiled lovingly as I repeated the question. Surely, I thought, this isn't too difficult a question to answer.

"You're kidding me, right?"

"No," I replied. "I'm serious."

He thought for a few moments. "Nothing."

I frowned. "Are you lying?"

"Yes."

"I'm serious. It has to be something changeable, though. Just name one thing—"

"Just one?" He looked at me then, the twinkle in his eyes indicating there are a host of things he'd like to see changed. Ah, the truth comes out.

"One," I affirmed.

"Okay," he said. "I'm sick of seeing you wear those overall shorts every day."

My cute little overalls? I thought. Perfect for sitting at the computer and typing all day? "And with what, pray tell, shall I replace them? I'm not comfortable sitting in jeans all day," I argued. "Surely you don't expect me to dress as though I'm heading for a downtown office."

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"No. Just something besides those overalls."

I huffed. I loved my overalls! Still, I had asked—and this was something that was changeable. Suddenly I brightened. "This calls for shopping!" I declared.

It also called for compromise. I offered a simple solution:

I would wear the overall shorts while working (I own several pair, by the way), but would change into something a little more "fetching" when my husband returned home from work.

A few weeks later, I discovered an ironic thing had taken place. Previously, when my husband returned home from work, he'd take a shower and slip into something just perfect for bumming around. But with my change came his change; he became more attentive to his appearance for me. Rather than putting on some old shorts and a holey t-shirt, he put on a sports shirt and a pair of his dress shorts I'd pressed and hung in his closet. We've become quite the fashion statement in the privacy of our home, reminiscent of the days when we'd dated and were attempting to impress each other. And we found our marriage heading toward a new level—a better level—a level of mutual compromise and greater intimacy.

And all it took was a change of clothes!

Issuing the challenge

Several weeks later, while dining with some of our couple friends, my husband and I mentioned the question I'd asked and the changes that had come about. One couple, Ron and Dana, looked at each other with mischief in their eyes. "Honey," Ron said to his wife, "what would you like to see changed?"

"It has to be changeable," I interjected, excited to see another couple getting into the swing of things. "It can't be something like his mother, the color of his eyes, or his height. Nothing like that."

Dana thought for a moment, studying her husband. "I wish you'd listen to what I say from start to finish."

"That's fixable," I spoke up. "Why is that significant to you?"

"Because it says I'm important to him," Dana answered. "I'd feel more appreciated and understood."

I felt like a marriage counselor. "Ron," I asked, "what do you say? Can you do that?"

"Sure," Ron said. Now it was Ron's turn. At first he struggled, saying he loved Dana so much, he couldn't imagine anything about her he'd like to see changed. But as soon as I turned toward the next couple, he interrupted, "Well—sometimes I wish she

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wouldn't have so many little projects. It drives me crazy looking at all the stacks of stuff lying around the house."

Dana sighed. "It's called laundry, Ron," she informed him.

We all laughed. "But is it fixable?" I asked.

"Sure," Dana said. "I just didn't know it was so important."

Soon the other couples piped in. Some of the answers had us nearly rolling on the floor in amusement. One husband said he wouldn't mind his wife not giving him such a list of "to do" things, to which she replied, "But you look so lost without something to do!" When our laughter subsided, he added, "That's because I'm not sure how much time I have before you give me something to do."

Other requests were more poignant. "I wish," one wife said, "he'd follow through on what he says so I'll feel as though I matter."

Why ask the question?

In Romans 12:18 the apostle Paul writes: "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."

About two years ago my lower back began to bother me. After a visit to the doctor, the end result was this: according to my physician, my middle had gotten a little fluffy (which is why I love those overall shorts so much!). This was putting strain on my spine, which pretty much holds me together. (This, too, is changeable. I'm now walking three miles a day to reduce the fluff.)

The middle of things is awfully important, and so it is with the verse in Romans. "As far as it depends on you."

It's so easy to get comfortable with the "little irritations." They're like paper cuts. At first they sting and we're constantly aware of them. Eventually, however, we manage to continue doing whatever it is we do without noticing or even feeling the little slice in our flesh. But the cut remains, and infection can easily set in.

Infection isn't good; it leads to destruction of the body as a whole.

A friend of mine shared with me that when she and her husband were sitting in an airport (she was wearing her trademark jeans and t-shirt; he was dressed more sporty), he pointed to a well-dressed woman and said, "Now that's the way I'd like to see you dress."

My friend tells me she was floored. She had no idea that her cute little jeans weren't pleasing to him. Why? Because he'd never told her—and she'd never thought to ask.

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Should you try this at home ...

We've all seen the ads that read: Do Not Try This At Home. So you may think that about asking your spouse that little question. You may wonder, What would my spouse say if I asked the question, "What can I change—that's changeable—that would make you happier? My hairstyle? My choice of clothing? My keeping the toilet seat up or my attempt to control every free moment?"

Don't just sit there. Ask! But remember, this isn't an invitation to throw darts. This is an opportunity to grow more intimate as a couple, because in showing that you care about the "little things," you're telling your spouse that he or she is important.

It's also not a chance for you to say what you'd like to see changed. (My husband didn't ask me for months what he could change, and the one thing I requested didn't get changed—but I can live with that.)

This is an opportunity, a chance for things to be better "as far as it depends on you."

—*Eva Marie Everson is a speaker and author of such books as* True Love: Engaging Stories of Real Life Proposals *and* One True Vow: Love Stories of Faith & Commitment *(both Barbour Publishing).*

"Loaded Questions," by Eva Marie Everson, MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP, Summer 2004

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Marriage Partnership

Quarterly Series

LEADER'S GUIDE FOR STUDY 12

Grace Connects Men and Women

How can an ancient biblical concept—grace—transform marriage in the information age?

Forget Mars and Venus. Author Rhonda Rhea finds that men are computers, always processing data but not always giving feedback, while women are cell phones, forever seeking to give someone an earful of information. With such different communication modes, it's not surprising that husbands and wives often fail to connect. The solution is not more gadgets, but supernatural assistance from the one who created men, women, and the marriage bond between them. The universal language linking human computers and cell phones is grace.

What is grace? Where does it come from? What does it add to a marriage? These are the questions we'll be asking and discussing in this study.

Lesson #12

Scripture:
John 1:14–16; 2 Corinthians 12:7–10; Colossians 3:12–17; James 1:17; 4:1–10; 1 Peter 4:8–11

Based on:
"Men Are Computers, Women Are Cell Phones," by Rhonda Rhea, MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP, Winter 2003

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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue



Note to leader: Prior to the class, provide for each person the article "Men Are Computers, Women Are Cell Phones" from MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP magazine (included at the end of this study).

When Rhea advises disconnected couples to season their speech with grace, she uses a word whose meaning has thinned over the years. Today, the word grace conjures the poise of Audrey Hepburn, the fluid movement of a ballet dancer, or perhaps the reserved dignity of a Southern matriarch. All of these are graceful or gracious in their own way, but they are pale reflections of a quality originating with God himself. *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* defines grace as "an undeserved blessing freely bestowed on man by God," and calls it "a concept which is at the heart not only of Christian theology but also of all genuinely Christian experience." Another definition spells out grace as **G**od's **R**iches **A**t **C**hrist's **E**xpense. In other words, grace encompasses all of God's gifts to us (most importantly, the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ), and is the source of all the blessings we can give to each other. Actresses, dancers, and dignified ladies exhibit the trait we call "grace" to the extent that they are sure of what they possess (beauty, strength, material gifts) and willing to share those possessions with others. Christian husbands and wives exhibit grace as they draw on God's limitless bounty to bless one another. Communication blocks are washed away in this flood of goodness.

Discussion starters:

[Q] What do you think of the metaphor "men are computers and women are cell phones"? Can you think of other pairings to describe the differences between men and women?

Optional Activity: *Divide the group into men and women (or, for a single-sex group, divide in half). Ask each half to come up with a pairing, "Men are _____, women are _____." What gender differences do these pairings highlight?*

[Q] The article gives several examples of husbands and wives failing to communicate. When and where does communication frequently break down in your household? How do you feel during those breakdowns? Imagine yourself in that situation and complete the sentence, "If he/she would just _____, everything would be okay."

[Q] How would you define grace? What episode from the Bible, your own life, or from fiction (movies, novels, TV) best illustrates the concept for you?

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: Grace comes from God.

People can practice gracious movement and gracious speech, but practice will never make perfect, especially in tough situations. The grace required to welcome home a husband despite

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domestic chaos, to share frustrations without nagging, and to be completely honest with the person you face every day comes only from God. Fortunately, the floodgates are open. Read John 1:14–16, 2 Corinthians 12:7–10, and James 1:17.

[Q] What does it mean that Jesus was "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14)? What blessings do we receive from the fullness of his grace (v. 16)?

[Q] Why does Paul believe he has been given a thorn in his flesh (2 Corinthians 12:7)? Why is Paul, ultimately, grateful for it? What does it teach him about power and weakness?

Leader's Note: *No one knows the nature of Paul's thorn. Theologians over the centuries have suggested headaches, lusts, poor eyesight, stammering speech, and persecutors, among other things. The point is that we all have besetting weaknesses and that God's power shines even brighter because of them.*

[Q] How does the message of James 1:17 go against our self-help culture?

Teaching point two: You cannot give what you do not have.

Christian singer/songwriter David Wilcox wrote a song about marital struggles called "Break in the Cup." The lyrics read, in part:

> We cannot trade empty for empty
> We must go to the waterfall
> For there's a break in the cup that holds love,
> Inside us all.

In Wilcox's metaphor, the "break in the cup" is our fallen nature, and the "waterfall" is the source of all love and grace, God. The apostle James describes our situation in even bleaker language; read James 4:1–10.

[Q] James wrote his letter "To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations" (James 1:1), in other words, to God's own people. Does James's description of these people—by extension, us—as adulterous, covetous killers seem overly harsh? Why or why not?

[Q] What are James's prescriptions for dealing with our broken nature? How do these differ from the messages we get from contemporary culture?

[Q] In verse 2, James writes, "You do not have, because you do not ask God." What is it that we do not have because we fail to ask for it?

[Q] According to verse 3, what's the problem when we do ask God for things?

[Q] Imagine the scenario at the beginning of Rhea's article, a stressed-out mother waiting for her husband's arrival from work. Imagine, also, that the mother somehow finds 5 minutes to spend with this passage before her husband gets home. What in this passage will challenge her frustrated attitude? What in this passage will comfort her? Now reverse the situation—the husband reads these verses just before leaving work and is meditating on them as he drives home. What in this passage will challenge and comfort him?

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Teaching point three: Giving grace is a blessing in itself.

Rhea's six "couple-tested ideas" offer concrete solutions to husband-wife communication problems. There is much to be said for accepting godly advice, and putting these ideas into practice will likely smooth many marital rough spots. We must not forget, though, that the "break in the cup" mars all of our efforts to give and receive grace. The object of cultivating grace, then, is not just to improve our marriages, our spouses, or even ourselves. Even when grace doesn't appear to "fix" anything, it has eternal value. Read Colossians 3:12–17 and 1 Peter 4:8–11.

[Q] What would it look like for you to, in the words of Colossians 3:12, "clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience"?

[Q] In addition to "clothe," what other commands (verbs) appear in the Colossians passage? Why are Christians to do these things? Why are these actions especially helpful for husbands and wives?

[Q] Verse 17 indicates that words and deeds are both important parts of serving God. Which kind of service is harder for you? Do you have more trouble with gracious words or gracious deeds in your marriage? Why?

[Q] "Love covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8) is a familiar phrase. What does it mean to you?

[Q] Verse 11 does not end, "so that your life might go smoothly," but "so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ." How does gracious living contribute to the praise of God?

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

Americans upgrade their cell phones and computers every few years. When two pieces of electronic equipment are not compatible, it is usually easier to replace one than to dig out the manuals and try to reconcile the difference. (Anyone who has wasted an afternoon customizing, installing new drivers, or shopping for the right cable knows this frustration.) Christian husbands and wives, however, do not have this option. We cannot trade in our spouses when static arises. The only upgrade available is an infusion of grace, and it starts with us—not the other person.

[Q] Think back to Paul's thorn in the flesh (2 Corinthians 12:7). It represents the specific weaknesses with which each of us struggles. What is one of your communication weaknesses? How could God's power transform that weakness into a show of his strength?

[Q] How would conversations in your home be different if you took 1 Peter 4:11—"If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God"—seriously?

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Action Point: Ask each person to consider one concrete way they could show grace to their spouse today. Give them a few minutes to think about it, then close by praying that they'll have the courage to carry it out.

—Study prepared by Elesha Coffman, former managing editor of CHRISTIAN HISTORY & BIOGRAPHY magazine.

Additional Resources

- ChristianBibleStudies.com
  -Learning to Appreciate Our Spouse
  -Faith as the Marriage Glue
  -Glorify God Together: Marriage with Purpose
  -When Money Comes Between Us
  -Marriage and Opposite-Sex Friends
  -Sex and the Christian Couple
  -When It's Hard to Love
  -Successful Relationships Course

- *Amusing Grace*, Rhonda Rhea (Cook, 2003; ISBN 0781435323)

- *Grace for the Moment*, Max Lucado (Thomas Nelson, 2000; ISBN 0849956242)

- *Love for a Lifetime*, James Dobson (Multnomah, 2004; ISBN 1590520874)

- *Love That Lasts: When Marriage Meets Grace*, Gary Ricucci, Betsy Ricucci (Crossway, 2006; ISBN 1581347820)

- *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, Phillip Yancey (Zondervan, 2002; ISBN 0310245656)

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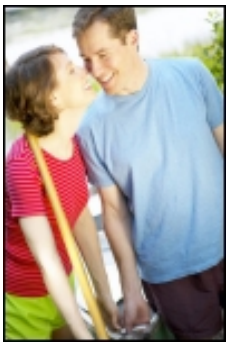
Marriage Partnership
Quarterly Series

ARTICLE

Men Are Computers, Women Are Cell Phones

Can we stay connected?

By Rhonda Rhea, for the study, "Grace Connects Men and Women"



"I don't know how we're going to sort out tonight's schedule," I gushed as my husband, Richie, came through the door. "You're late—and Andrew has a game an hour away. One of us has to get him there by 7:00. Jordan has a game here. Kaley is cheering at Jordan's game, but she also has a game right before his. And it's the same time as Andrew's away game. That's also the time Allie and Daniel are supposed to have practice at …"

I hadn't even gotten to the dinner dilemma part of my list, when I knew by Richie's wide-eyed, zombie stare that he'd shut down somewhere just after "You're late."

I've seen the look before.

How many other wives have seen their husbands processing information when suddenly their "screen saver" kicks on? My husband is able to process a lot of information. I know—I can dish it out in hefty chunks. There are times, however, when something seems to happen to his internal processor. Everything locks up and I feel as if I need to, well, reboot. It's as if I'm living with a computer!

Funny thing is, Richie tells me he's living with a cell phone.

The night he arrived home late, he'd had a long problem-filled day at work. He'd been looking forward to coming home, to his refuge where he could simply veg out and not have to think.

As he opened the front door, his peace bubble exploded into an outline of the evening's agenda. I'd been poised at the door, ready for the attack. Every word about every game and every place the kids had to be came at him nonstop.

Richie told me later that my actions were akin to settling into a comfy seat at a movie theater only to have his cell phone blast.

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I'm a "cell phone"? I thought. And I realized I can go off unexpectedly and sometimes at the most inopportune moments. I'm also faithful to keep "calling" until I'm answered. *Oh no!* I thought. *I am a cell phone!*

Different wiring

I don't know about that whole Mars/Venus thing, but I think I can safely say men and women certainly operate on different hardware. We're wired differently. To me, it seems as if men are computers and women are, well, cell phones. The computer's communication is most often a one-way communiqué. Cell phones, on the other hand, require two-party participation. They're all about communication.

Dr. James Dobson hits on the wiring problem in his book *Love for a Lifetime*. He writes: "Research makes it clear that little girls are blessed with greater linguistic ability than little boys, and it remains a lifelong talent. Simply stated, she talks more than he." Dobson suggests that God may have given Mrs. Cell Phone 50,000 words per day while Mr. Computer may average 25,000. By the time he's walking up the driveway to his relaxing safe place, he's most likely used 98 percent of his daily word store—he's practically in "sleep mode" already—that mode that's used after the screen saver's been on for a while. She, on the other hand, is ready to give him most of her 50,000—and she wants a similar number from him. But all she gets is a busy signal. How can we find common ground?

Getting connected

Cell phones and computers do have something in common. They both need a connection, just as husbands and wives need a connection. And isn't it interesting that techno-smart people are finding more and more ways computers and cell phones can work together to make life better? I was stuck at an airport recently and occupied myself by watching the lady next to me check her e-mail and send out a message or two—all on her cell phone!

Powerful connection can result in a powerful, productive, and satisfying marriage. Try these six couple-tested ideas to find your own techno-compromise. You can get connected—even in a technically challenged relationship.

1. Season your speech with grace. Sarah was at her wit's end. She tried talking to her husband, Jeff, but found him clamming up during almost every conversation. After hearing a sermon about kindness and the art of listening, Sarah did a communication evaluation on herself. She discovered she was dominating most of their conversations. She also noticed she was spending a big percentage of their talks crabbing at Jeff.

The sermon that impacted Sarah's speech included Colossians 4:6: "Let your conversation be always full of grace." She realized that to promote healthy

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communication in her marriage, she needed to get rid of the static—any unkind, graceless speech. She's working on incorporating more grace in her conversations and becoming a good listener as she works toward encouraging Jeff to share with her more openly.

2. Be open and honest. Angie's communication struggle was different. She couldn't figure out why her husband, Bill, didn't clue in to her signals. She thought he should be sensitive enough to pick up on hints for attention. When he didn't, her "silent treatment" response only complicated the communication glitches.

After Angie shared her disappointment with a mentor, she learned that computers can't process information they haven't been given. Instead of giving Bill the "Well, if you really understood me, you'd automatically know I need you to listen now" speech, she's working more on her ability to lovingly level with him.

3. Let your computer be a computer. Lynn spent the first three years of her marriage trying to remake her husband, Doug. Doug resented her motherly corrections and they argued at almost every encounter. When they decided to talk to a counselor, Lynn was sure he could whip Doug into shape. Was she surprised when the counselor hinted that she was a big part of the problem! The counselor encouraged her to let her husband be himself. She had essentially been trying to make a computer into a cell phone.

Lynn is learning instead to accept their differences, including what she once thought were Doug's "weaknesses." She's finding that some of the characteristics she'd been harping on as his weaknesses are actually some of the same ones she considered his strengths when they were dating. Lynn turned over a new leaf in her marriage when she decided to enjoy Doug "as is."

4. Make God your source of fulfillment. Sue had become a smotherer. If her husband, Mike, didn't hang on her every word and dote on her when they were together, she interpreted his inattention as indifference. So she pouted their time away. And Mike was wearing out.

After yet another evening of pouting, Sue finally called her mom for advice. Sue's mother said, "Husbands aren't meant to supply every emotional need. Only God can do that." Sue's mom told her she was putting a heavier load on Mike than a mate can handle. It was just too much for his mainframe to manage. Sue's mom reminded her that the Bible tells us to "Cast all your anxiety on [God], because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7).

Sue has seen her marriage become stronger and less frustrating as she has deepened her prayer life and her Bible study time, and strengthened her dependence on God. And she's finding great blessing in living in a virtually pout-free household!

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5. Make room for friendships. Sue also discovered she'd neglected her need for friendships with other women. She was thrilled when she discovered she could unload several thousand words on her mom or another interested friend (and let her friend unload a significant percentage of her 50,000 word store too). Sue found it was great not only to get another woman's take, but to give Mike a break. Since women have a greater need for conversation, Sue and her friends help each other out in the dialogue area—person to person and phone to phone.

6. Grow in Christ together. As Sarah and Jeff have worked on better techno-compromise, they've found that spending time praying and studying God's Word together builds conversation that really counts. They find they're both more ready to compromise and give to meet the needs of the other as they're aiming at becoming more like Christ.

What a great target for each of us—computers and cell phones alike. As we continually ask God to impact our marriages, we can become better talkers and better listeners, hearing him through his Word and prayer.

Can you hear him now? Good.

Rhonda Rhea, author of Amusing Grace (Cook Communications), lives with her family in Missouri.

"Men Are Computers, Women Are Cell Phones," by Rhonda Rhea, MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP, Winter 2003

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Marriage Partnership

Quarterly Series

LEADER'S GUIDE FOR STUDY 13

Sex and the Christian Couple

What's okay—and what's not—in a Christian marriage?

What does the Bible have to say about sex within marriage? Should we feel guilt over some of the things we do? How can we know what sexual activities are okay and what aren't?

Using MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP's article "Christian Sex Rules," we'll examine issues many Christians wonder about but seldom discuss regarding sex within marriage.

Note: This study is best used in a men's or women's group, or for a couple to read and discuss together.

Lesson #13

Scripture:
Genesis 2:19–25; 1 Corinthians 7:3–5; Ephesians 5:21–28; Philippians 4:8

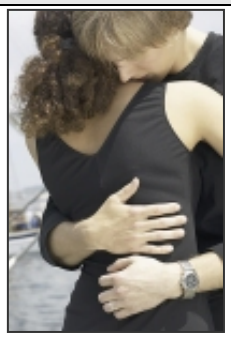
Based on:
"Christian Sex Rules," by Louis and Melissa McBurney, MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP, Spring 2001, Page 34

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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue



Note to leader: Prior to the study, provide for each person the article "Christian Sex Rules" from MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP magazine (included at the end of this study).

In the article "Christian Sex Rules," MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP columnists Melissa and Louis McBurney explore issues about sex that are seldom raised but often wondered about among Christian couples. Using the Bible, the McBurneys discuss guidelines for sexual activity, helping Christians determine what's pleasing to God and what's not.

Discussion starters:

[Q] If an engaged friend asked you for guidelines concerning sex within marriage, what would you say?

[Q] What concerns do you think Christians have about what is right or wrong in the bedroom?

[Q] How did you first learn about the nature and meaning of sex? What guidelines about sex do you consider important?

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

In the article "Christian Sex Rules," Melissa and Louis McBurney look carefully at what the Bible does and does not say about sex. They point out that although the Bible does speak specifically about a few issues, it does not give us a long list of do's and don'ts regarding sex within marriage.

The Bible does give us general principles for what is and is not appropriate sexual activity for Christians. We're going to examine together how those principles apply.

Teaching point one: God forbids a few particular sexual activities.

The Bible says little about sexual technique. However, the Bible does have a few prohibitions that are quite clear. Read the first two sections of the McBurneys' article, through the section titled "Exclusivity."

[Q] How did you react upon reading the first section of this article? What surprised you?

[Q] What particular sexual activities do the McBurneys and the Bible say are prohibited? Why do you think God forbids those activities?

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[Q] How do the McBurneys' views on God's prohibitions compare to those of our culture? To those of most Christians?

[Q] What messages does our culture send about multiple sexual partners? About other sexual activity forbidden in the Bible?

[Q] How does an exclusive sexual relationship benefit a man? How does it benefit a woman? Why is an exclusive sexual relationship so important?

[Q] In what ways is a marriage relationship damaged by extramarital sexual activity?

Teaching point two: God wants sexual activity to be mutually agreed upon and enjoyable.

Men and women have different desires and expectations concerning sex. That sometimes leads to conflict over acceptable sexual activity, even among Christians. Beyond what we've already studied, the Bible does not say much about what's acceptable and what's not. However, it does address how to handle such conflict. Skim the "Mutuality" and "Pleasurability" sections of the McBurneys' article.

Read together 1 Corinthians 7:3–5 and Ephesians 5:21–28. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul spells out the "mutually agreeable" principle presented by the McBurneys. Some people use the Ephesians 5 passage to promote a harsh, dictatorial authority role for the husband and a totally submissive role for the wife. When carried into the marriage bed, these attitudes affect the sexual relationship and sexual activity. People who promote such roles miss the point of verses 21 and 25, which suggest that husbands are to be willing to give up their very lives for their wives. When taken within context, Paul's admonitions here fit wonderfully with what we read in 1 Corinthians 7 about sex within the marriage relationship.

[Q] In what ways do differing emotional and sexual expectations between men and women create conflict in a marriage? How can that conflict be resolved?

[Q] How should the message of 1 Corinthians 7 and Ephesians 5 affect the way Christian couples approach sexual activity?

[Q] Where does submissiveness come into the sexual relationship? Does "mutually agreeable" mean "equally enjoyable"? What does it mean for a sexual activity to be mutually agreeable?

[Q] How do you react to the suggestion that sexual play should be enjoyable?

[Q] In what ways will demonstrating selfless love to one's spouse affect sexual activity in a Christian marriage?

Teaching point three: God desires that sex be complete and part of a healthy marriage relationship.

One of the misguided views promoted by today's culture is that good sex is often disconnected from a committed relationship. People tend to think they can meet someone, spend the evening

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with that person, and then hop into bed for a wonderful sexual experience with no strings attached. That simply is not true.

Skim the remaining sections of the MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP article. Then read Philippians 4:8. Though this passage doesn't speak directly to the issue of sex, it gives some guidelines for holy living that are readily applicable to sexual activity. Mutually agreed upon sex—shared with a loving marriage partner—can be described as noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable. Sexual activity outside of that context cannot.

[Q] Why do you think men enjoy pornography? How do you think pornography affects a man? How can a man's viewing of pornography damage his sexual relationship with his wife? How can it damage their marriage?

[Q] Why do you think women enjoy romance novels? How do you think romance novels affect a woman? How can a woman's reading of romance novels damage her sexual relationship with her husband? How can it damage their marriage?

[Q] How similar are the effects of pornography on men and romance novels on women? How are they different? How do certain television shows affect expectations within marriage? How does the principle of Philippians 4:8 apply to these behaviors?

[Q] What are the dangers of pornographic films, even when watched together by a couple?

[Q] How does the health of the general marriage relationship affect sex for a man? For a woman?

[Q] How does romantic activity affect sex for a man? For a woman? How can each gender show more understanding of the differences between the two of them in these areas?

Take a few minutes to reflect on Philippians 4:8 as it relates to sex within marriage. Remember, God created sex. If he designed it, the best expression of it must certainly be true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable.

[Q] How would the living out of that verse affect the sexual relationship within marriage? How would it affect romance? How would it affect other expressions of love?

Sexual play can be all of the things described in Philippians 4:8. But beyond pleasure—even beyond procreation—God has a further purpose for sex. Read Genesis 2:19–25. This passage describes the reasons God made two different sexes. He purposefully made men and women different, so that they could fit together and become one. Woman was made for man. Man was made for woman. In sexual union, they become one in a way not experienced in any other act.

[Q] What is the difference between sexual play and sexual intercourse? What's different about the effect of sexual intercourse?

[Q] How could the description of the sexual union in Genesis change a Christian's outlook on sex? How would a marriage be lacking if both partners were able to experience full sexual union, yet seldom did? What does this complete giving of oneself to the other signify?

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[Q] What is the significance of Genesis 2:25? What light do you think this passage might throw on God's view of a couple's sexual enjoyment of each other?

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

You may be thinking right now about something you want your spouse to change in light of this study. Reflect instead on how you might need to change some actions and attitudes to become more aligned with God's design for sex.

[Q] What did you learn about sexual activity from this study? What surprised you?

[Q] What might you be interested in doing romantically or sexually with your spouse that you'd hesitated to do before?

[Q] What activities that you've been doing, if any, do you feel you should not do in light of this study?

[Q] How might this study improve the sexual relationship in your marriage?

—Study by Paul Woods, a writer, editor, and pastor near Sturgis, Michigan.

Additional Resources

- *A Celebration of Sex: A Guide to Enjoying God's Gift of Sexual Intimacy*, Douglas E. Rosenau (Thomas Nelson, 2002; ISBN 0785264671)
- *The Gift of Sex: A Guide to Sexual Fulfillment*, Joyce Penner, Clifford L. Penner (W Publishing Group, 2003; ISBN 0849944155)
- *Intimate Issues: 21 Questions Christian Women Ask About Sex*, Linda Dillow (Waterbrook Press, 1999; ISBN 1578561493)
- *Making Love Meaningfully: The Purpose of Marital Intimacy*, Charles and Virginia Sell (Broadman & Holman, 2003; ISBN 0805427198)
- *Real Questions, Real Answers About Sex: The Complete Guide to Intimacy as God Intended*, Louis and Melissa McBurney (Zondervan, December 2004)
- *Sacred Sex: A Spiritual Celebration of Oneness in Marriage*, Tim Alan Gardner (Waterbrook Press, 2002; ISBN 1578564611); also available on DVD
- *Sheet Music*, Kevin Leman (Tyndale, 2003; ISBN 0842360247)
- www.christianitytoday.com/marriage: this web site has dozens of articles and columns on sex and marriage, including the MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP column, "Real Sex," by Louis and Melissa McBurney

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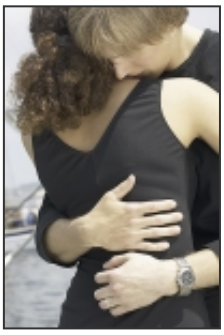
Quarterly Series

ARTICLE

Christian Sex Rules

A guide to what's allowed in the bedroom

By Louis and Melissa McBurney, for the study, "Sex and the Christian Couple"



When it comes to sex, most married Christians just do what works for them. If they have been blessed enough to have discovered something that brings satisfaction, pleasure, closeness, and climax, they most likely will continue that practice. However, some are plagued with guilt because they wonder if what they're doing is sinful.

MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP receives many, many questions from Christian couples who want to know what is and what is not okay to do sexually. Unfortunately, churches tend to ignore this issue, small groups usually don't talk about sex, and most Christian books deal with more "spiritual" ideas.

Wouldn't it be nice to have a list of sexual practices categorized by "sinful" or "okay"? Is there such a list? Would everyone agree with the list? Is there a solution to this dilemma?

We think the answers to those questions are: yes, no, no, and probably not—in that order. We'd really like to create such a list that could settle once and forever the niggling doubts about sexual practices. But that's not possible. Different communities of Christians have different understandings about sexual practices that are based on a few general biblical principles. No list would be accepted by all Christians. Still, we do want to provide some guidelines that we hope will help you enjoy the gift of your sexuality to the fullest. That's what we're convinced God wants for each of his children.

We doubt that God's surprised by the intensity of our sexual desire or of its fulfillment. Seeing us enjoy the passion and pleasure seems to fit with his creative nature. There are some definite boundaries, however, that were identified through his Word. These are established to protect and enhance the maximum enjoyment of the gift. We think it's like our giving our kids bicycles. We'd teach them the safety rules right away so they could delight in the ride without being run over by a car on a busy street.

First, we'd like to point out the obvious—the Bible is not a manual on sexual technique. We've heard some people say that Song of Solomon describes acceptable

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sexual positions and behavior. We see it as a poetic love song that clearly embraces the joy of sexual play. We don't think it is an attempt to outline any specific sexual practices.

Second, we want to emphasize again that there are some specific sexual behaviors that are forbidden in Scriptures. Adultery, that is having sexual intercourse with another person's spouse or a partner other than your own spouse, is a sin. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, deepens the importance of marital faithfulness by extending the prohibition of infidelity to include a lustful thought life as well as the physical act of intercourse. Looking into our minds and hearts is an important principle for safeguarding the delights of intimacy.

Scripture is also clear about the evil of fornication—premarital sexual intercourse—which most of our culture accepts as normal and irresistible. We see many couples suffering from the consequences of their early promiscuity. The "sexual freedom" of our time isn't free and usually carries some pretty heavy costs.

The Bible also lists other practices that are "abominations" to God (Le v. 18, Rom. 1:21-32, I Thess. 4:1-8, and I Cor. 6:12-20). These include homosexuality, bestiality, and incest.

And last, there is a vast array of possible sexual practices for married couples that are not mentioned at all in Scripture (we can find no reference to Internet pornography, vibrators, or videos). So, since we aren't likely to find a definitive answer, the best we can do is find the principles God has given us and apply them to the cultural setting we're living in. As we look for those you may not be surprised to find that we're not much different in the twenty-first century than how we have been since creation. We have the same anatomical equipment, the same physiologic hormones, the same mental capacity for lust and fantasy, and the same relational needs that have always driven men and women to seek sexual pleasure and intimacy. As Ecclesiastes says, "there is nothing new under the sun," except maybe the vast array of new toys.

Exclusivity

Many studies have confirmed what biblical commandments imply: becoming one flesh with one partner provides the best setting for satisfying sexual intimacy. Sex is neither a spectator sport for group indulgence nor an event to test a person's ability to score with multiple partners. Casual sex as a way to prove one's prowess or simply achieve physiologic relief of sexual tension only confirms that his or her ability to copulate is intact. Although providing some pleasure, it fails to meet the deeper need for intimacy that sex was designed to give.

A couple in a long-term committed relationship enters into a more secure and trusting territory with each sexual encounter. In that bed sex can truly become

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"making love" rather than just having sex. Multiple partners create mistrust, performance anxiety, and comparison evaluations that are barriers to the deepest levels of intimacy.

Mutuality

It is obvious to most couples early on that men and women are significantly different in their sexual interests and drives. Men usually have a desire for more frequent sex and greater variety in forms of sexual play. Women usually want more emotional connectedness through tender touch and conversation and prefer more consistent love-making technique. These differences often lead to tension over positions for intercourse, frequency of sex, and experimentation with different sources of stimulation.

This creates enormous opportunity for a couple to develop mutual submissiveness in their relationship. Each individual will have ways to show respect and give a meaningful gift of love to his or her mate. We feel that giving that respect to each other is a huge way to guide your choices of sexual play in the direction of genuinely mature love.

Doing only what is mutually agreeable sexually means that each partner will make sacrifices for the sake of intimacy. A wife may give herself more frequently or try a variety of sexual experiences that go beyond her comfort zone. A husband may relinquish some sexual fantasy or adjust his demands for intercourse twice a day just to show love to his mate. Those exercises in personal restraint are not easy, but help build the oneness of intimacy.

Specific behaviors that often fit this criteria are oral sex, rear-entry vaginal penetration, initiation of sexual activity, positions for intercourse, and mutual masturbation. We find no scriptural injunction against any of these or of frequency of intercourse. The Old Testament command of not having intercourse during a woman's menstrual period does seem to have the medical benefit of avoiding some infectious processes. Paul's admonition in 1 Corinthians not to withhold sex except by mutual consent seems to fit with this general principle of mutuality. It acknowledges the legitimacy of sexual desire and reinforces the boundary of sex within marriage.

Pleasurability

Sexual play should be enjoyable! If an activity you're doing doesn't bring enjoyment to both partners it will cause resentment and distance between you. That's not part of the design for "becoming one flesh." It may be that some forms of your sexual play create pain for one or both of you. That should be evaluated medically. If something is creating discomfort, it is probably treatable (such as vaginitis or painful erections). This can certainly produce barriers to intimacy.

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At times couples may want to explore the areas of sado-masochistic sex or bondage fantasies. We feel that these behaviors move sex out of the arena of selfless love into that of power or domination fantasies. In those neighborhoods sex becomes an invasive, controlling behavior in which one person is violated. That is a sexual perversion and is likely to create shame, humiliation, and ultimate devaluation of one (or both) partners. When domination is a necessary ingredient for sexual pleasure there tends to be development of tolerance to the level of excitation. Hence increasing levels of the stimulation are required for the same sense of gratification. This is seen in its extreme in pornography that includes rape and even murder as forms of sexual stimulation.

Relationality

Duh! You might think. *Well, of course, sexual intimacy includes a strong relational component.*

Unfortunately, that isn't necessarily so. One of the most destructive forces we're seeing these days is the increasing frequency of sexual addictive disorders. When having sexual release becomes an addiction driven to levels of compulsive behavior, the relationship with a marriage partner may be replaced with various stimuli that are essentially fantasy based. We have seen men deeply hooked on Internet pornography (or other forms). They are compulsively driven to increasing exposure to pornographic stimulation and masturbatory release of sexual tension. We have seen women equally hooked on romance novels or chat-room sex talk for sexual release. These disorders displace the relational dimension of sexuality.

Marital sex, if maintained at all, takes place mechanically with mental fantasies from the artificial relationships providing the only sexual stimulation. That robs marriage of the most crucial part of intimacy—the blend of relational and sexual connectedness.

The use of pornographic films from whatever source introduces this possible danger into your sexuality. Explicit sexual materials can provide sexual excitement and arousal, but that form of stimulation may erode your enjoyment of each other. Those images may also create a basic sense of dissatisfaction with yourselves since most couples don't maintain or ever achieve the sensual appearance of porn actors and models. The whole industry is based on illusions and those lies can lead to death of your relationship as well as your sexual satisfaction.

Perpetuating Genital Union

We delight in sexual playfulness and creative ways to pleasure one another, but unless it is not physically possible for a couple, we think nothing you do should completely replace genital union. The symbolism of having the embrace of vagina to

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penis and total giving of the erect penis to the welcoming vaginal canal is a recurring reminder that we were created for each other. The intimacy of that connectedness should awaken our most primitive desire for oneness. To enjoy sexual release in that most passionate form of embrace welds us into oneness like few other experiences.

Melissa and Louis McBurney, M.D., Real Sex columnists for MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP, are marriage therapists and co-founders of Marble Retreat in Marble, Colorado, where they counsel clergy couples.

"Christian Sex Rules," by Louis and Melissa McBurney, MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP, Spring 2001, Page 34

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