



MARRIAGE CARE

REDEEMING THE REALITIES OF MARRIAGE

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WEEK ONE: ORIENTATION - WHAT TO EXPECT & HOW TO GET VALUE



WELCOME

We are excited you are joining us in Marriage Care as we seek Jesus to bring glory and redemption in and through our marriages! The hope is this would be a time you can understand God's intention and design for marriage and connect with Him on a deeper level. Hopefully, this program will help you understand your spouse better while being cared for by your church family. Ultimately, we pray areas of your marriage will be redeemed by the power of the Gospel.

WORKBOOK, SYLLABUS, REQUIREMENTS

This workbook is meant to be a guide for you to grow closer to God and your spouse as you learn together and discuss what each of your expectations and dreams are for marriage. This workbook includes assignments that are meant to function as a launching pad for discussion with your spouse throughout the week and on the evening of our group sessions. Much of the content is based on Paul Tripp's book, Marriage, and any page references refer to that book.

WEEKLY FLOW

As you will see below, Marriage Care is divided into seven weekly Tuesday evening sessions starting at 7:00 pm and ending at 9:00. Each week, there will be a "large group" session where we will all be together for teaching/equipping, and a "small group" session for more in-depth personal sharing and counsel. The small group remains together for all 7 weeks. The weekly flow and themes:

Week 1 – Welcome and Orientation

- Overview of what to expect, overview of what is needed on your part for success
- Testimony from leaders or people who have been through the course and found it helpful for redeeming their marriage
- Initial goal setting
- Break into assigned small groups. Meet your leaders and fellow group members and share a short description of your hopes and personal stories

Week 2 – Theme - "Roots of a Good Marriage"

- Come having completed homework assignment pages 7-12
- Upon arrival - 15 minutes of private time with your spouse to talk through a Conversation Primer appropriate for that week's content
- Large Group Teaching and Video on that week's theme (notes outline in your workbook)
- Small Group discussion - sharing and counsel

Week 3 – Theme – "The Kingdom of Self." - homework assignment pages 16-27

Same as previous week – Conversation Primer, Large Group Teaching, Small Group discussion - sharing and counsel. This flow continues in following weeks.



Week 4 – Theme – “The DNA of Sin is Selfishness”- homework assignment pages 30-38

Week 5 – Theme – “Time and Treasure”- homework assignment pages 42-48

Week 6 – Theme – “Cultivating Love”- homework assignment pages 52-59

Week 7 – Theme – “Moving Forward in Love.”- homework assignment pages 63-69

Conversation Primer, Large Group teaching, Small Group discussion

Personal commitments for change.

REQUIREMENTS

- Please be on time to each session.
- Please read your weekly assignments each week prior to the dates they are listed.
- Spend time with your spouse discussing the homework.
- Please come prepared to discuss your answers to the homework and engage in discussion, as this class is intended to benefit both your marriage and the marriage of others.
- Please respect those in your small groups by keeping all information shared confidential, creating a safe place to share.

NOTES



WEEK TWO: ROOTS OF A GOOD MARRIAGE

Gospel Commitment:

We will give ourselves to a regular lifestyle of confession and forgiveness.



WEEK 2 DAY 1: ON YOUR OWN

Connecting Real Life to God's Word

²²Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. ²⁴Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. ²⁵Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. ²⁸In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, ³⁰because we are members of his body. ³¹"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." ³²This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. ³³However, let each of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

Ephesians 5: 22-33

Application:

Over the next week, at the end of each of your assignments, you will be given the opportunity to take the following Gospel truth and put it into action in your marriage. We ask that you take the time to create new, godly habits related to these truths. By the Lord's grace and through the power of the Gospel, you will be able to put old, sinful habits to death for the glory of God and the good of your marriage.

Reflection

1. What do you desire to see changed in your marriage?
2. How can you apply this truth specifically in your situation? How could it transform you and your marriage?
3. Based on what you see in this passage, what is God's desire for you and your marriage?



WEEK 2: DAY 2 - TOGETHER

Create a Life Map

All of us have sinful hearts, but none of us are only sinful hearts. We are physically embodied, socially embedded people. To say that another way, all of us have a story. Some experts would say that about 80% of conflict in marriage is sourced in something other than our spouse. We bring baggage into all of our relationships, and our stories inform how we trust, fight with, love and treat those with whom we are closest.

In helping to categorize our story, consider making a life map. What are some of the things you have experienced that have impacted you most? How have the events of your life affected what you believe about yourself, others and God? Take a look back before marriage began, and think through what moments have most shaped you into who you are. Try to think of 5 moments, what the emotions were that you felt when those events happened, and what your interpretation of that event was. If you need more space to write more, feel free to write them down in a journal.

Here's an example.

Event: *I was blindsided with a break up four separate times in dating.*

Emotion: *Sadness, shame, rejection, frustration, disappointment, loss of trust, grief.*

Interpretation: *All women are not to be trusted, and will devastate you sooner or later.*

This type of interpretation will completely change your marriage! Knowing not just your story, but how you interpret your story, will help your spouse to understand you more deeply. Write some things down and then share them with each other. **These can be positive or negative.**

Event: _____

Emotion: _____

Interpretation: _____



WEEK 2: DAY 3 - ON YOUR OWN

What Did You Expect?

We all come to marriage with unrealistic expectations that ultimately can lead to disappointment. First, part of the problem is the way we use Scripture. We mistakenly treat the Bible as if it were arranged by topic” (p. 16). But to use the Bible like an encyclopedia would be to use it un-biblically, apart from God’s intended design and purpose. You cannot simply look up “marriage” in the index and find everything you need there. “We cannot understand what the Bible has to say about marriage by looking only at the marriage passages, because there is a vast amount of biblical information about marriage not found in the marriage passages” (p. 16).

The second source of disappointment is the fact that the initial feelings of romance blind us against seriously looking into the demands of marriage. “It is tough to get yourself to want to take a hard and honest look at reality. Those [difficult] things that every couple will face someday.” (p. 17). Navigating married life is an exercise in living in the already and not-yet. What do we mean by that? This is the world in which we have already received so many of the blessings of God’s redemption and salvation, but are not yet experiencing the fullness of the restoration He promises. We want things to be perfect and problem-free, just like they were when we first got married.

We need to invest in the principle of prepared spontaneity, taking “in what the Bible says about God, ourselves, life, sin and the surrounding world...” When we do, we will be ready to deal spontaneously with unexpected problems.

The three principles to key in on are, **one, we are conducting our marriages in a fallen world. Two, all married people are married to sinners. And three, God is faithful, powerful, and willing to work on our behalf.**

First, our marriage takes place in a fallen world. “Most of us have a personal happiness paradigm,” but “God has a personal holiness paradigm.” He “will willingly interrupt or compromise your momentary happiness in order to accomplish one more step in the process of rescue, [holiness] and transformation, which He is unshakably committed to” (p. 22-23). This means there will be times when you won’t get what you want from your spouse, but God has allowed this so that He can kill selfishness in you and take your eyes off yourself. Once this happens, you can become more holy and a servant to those around you.

Second, in this fallen world we “don’t get to be married to someone perfect...” In fact, most marital troubles are not the result of intentional or personal wrongdoing. “There will be moments of jealousy, bitterness, and conflict. You will not avoid this, because you are a sinner married to a sinner” (p. 23).

Third, God is faithful, powerful, and willing to help in our struggles. We can be both realistic and hopeful. “Realistic expectations are not about hope without honesty, and they are not about honesty without hope. Realism is found at the intersection of unabashed honesty and uncompromising hope. God’s Word and God’s grace make both possible in your marriage” (p. 26). Being realistic means that we anticipate being sinned against and we hope not to be saved by our spouse, but instead by our Savior.



READING REFLECTION: Take your time. Give this some thought. Write down your answers.

1. What in your life (not necessarily marriage), during the last few months, was an expectation you were counting on that did not come to fruition?
2. What are two expectations you had for marriage that did not turn out the way you thought they would?
3. Are there moments you become angry at your spouse for not meeting your expectations? How could this be different than actually being sinned against?
4. What do you think “marriage in a fallen world” means? How does this statement impact how you think about your marriage and your spouse?
5. What is grace? What evidence have you seen of God’s grace in your life?

Scripture for the week:

“Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,”
Ephesians 5:25



WEEK 2: DAY 4 - TOGETHER

Reason to Continue

At some point, all marriages reach a season of struggle and all have the potential to become something we didn't intend them to be. Romance alone will not get us through the difficulties and hardships. "You need something deeper than shared interests and mutual attraction. You need something more than marital survival skills" (p. 32). What then is it that produces marriages of Biblical love, unity, and understanding? This type of marriage is not rooted in romance; it is rooted in worship.

"Worship is first your identity before it is ever your activity. You are a worshiper, so everything you think, desire, choose, do, or say is shaped by worship" (p. 33). In worship, we invest our worth, value, hope and inner sense of well-being to something. "You either get these things vertically (from the Creator), or you look to get them horizontally (from the creation)." To seek hope, significance, affirmation, and peace apart from God is idolatry. "No marriage will be unaffected when the people in the marriage are seeking to get from their spouse what they were only ever meant to get from [their] Creator" (p. 34). The solution to our marital woes is not found horizontally, but vertically. This is the restoration of rightly ordered worship.

Consider the ten commandments: it is only when we obey the first four commands (having to do with the worship of God) that we will abide by the last six commands (having to do with love for our neighbor). The ability to love others is the outflow of loving God. Lasting, persevering, other-centered living does not flow out of romantic attraction, or personalities and lifestyle similarities. It is only when I live in a celebratory and restful worship of God that I am free to serve and celebrate another. (p.36).

So we ask ourselves, what does a marriage rooted in the worship of God look like? First, we recall Paul's words in Galatians 5:14, "The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" "It is only when I love God above all else that I will ever love my neighbor as myself (p. 36).

First, a marriage of love, unity, and understanding will flow out of daily worship of God as Creator. "When you look at your spouse and see the Creator's glory, then you feel blessed by the ways [they are] different" (p. 37).

Second, a marriage of love, unity, and understanding will flow out of daily worship of God as sovereign. "When you begin to celebrate the sovereignty of God, and how He formed you and brought you and your spouse together for his glory and your good, you quit being irritated by your differences and start celebrating how your life has been enhanced by them" (p. 39). Their introversion or extroversion, their intellectual or emotional leanings, and their structured or less structured personality are God's means of sanctifying you.

Lastly, a marriage of love, unity, and understanding will flow out of daily worship of God as Savior. "Worshiping God as Savior also means that you find joy in being part of the work of grace that God is unrelentingly committed to doing in your spouse's life" (p. 39). "As long as He is Creator, as long as He is sovereign, and as long as He is the Savior, you have reason to get up in the morning and love one another, even though you aren't yet what He created you to be." (p. 40)



READING REFLECTION: Take your time. Give this some thought. Write down your answers. Pray for God to make clear how you should answer.

1. How would you currently rate your relationship with God on a 1-10 scale (10 being great)? Is there evidence to back up your rating (reading, praying, solitude)?
2. Where do you normally go to obtain your hope, personal value, affirmation, and peace? Here's another way to ask that, what does your mind normally drift towards? When you're upset, sad, or frustrated, where do you turn?
3. How would you currently rate your "joy" on a 1-10 scale?
4. Could you describe your marriage as one of love, unity, and understanding? Why or why not?
5. In what ways is God using your spouse to make you holy?

Scripture for the week:

"Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,"
Ephesians 5:25



WEEK TWO CONVERSATION PRIMER

Arrive at Stonegate by 7:00, find a quiet place to talk, and spend 15 minutes together discussing the following. Be in the large group gathering by 7:15.

THE PAIN CYCLE

This exercise is designed to help you understand why you think and act in conflict, and to also understand how your spouse thinks and acts. If we can understand one another, we can diffuse moments of conflict instead of making them worse. Answer these questions and discuss them together and with your group tonight.

When in conflict with someone, what do you typically feel? Circle up to three words from the list below.

Unloved	Failure
Inadequate	Alone
Powerless	Unwanted
Vulnerable	Insecure
Unworthy	Worthless
Unacceptable	Disconnected
Out of control	Not good enough
Invalidated	Unknown
Insignificant	Defective
Hopeless	Not measuring up
Unsafe	Unsettled

What behaviors do you normally do when you're in conflict?

Blame others	Hide information
Perfectionist	Discouraging
Drugs/Alcohol	Manipulate
Rage	Get dramatic
Negative	Threatening
Defensive	Withdraw to pout
Numb-out	Withdraw to defend
Angry	Act selfish
Anxious	Hold grudges
Judging	Isolate
Impulsive	Intellectualize
Sarcastic	Minimize
Inconsolable	Retaliatory
Demanding	Fault finding
Watch porn	Controlling
Arrogant	Withdraw to avoid
Catastrophizing	Withdraw to punish
Critical	Shame self Irresponsible
Avoid issues	Disrespectful
Aggressive	Escape
Whine/needy Nagging	

When we choose behavior like this, we are believing an untrue narrative. When you choose these behaviors, what are you believing about yourself? What are you believing about God? What are you believing about your spouse? How can you choose to believe what's true? What is actually true?



WEEK THREE: THE KINGDOM OF SELF

Gospel Commitment:

We will make spiritual growth a priority and change our daily agenda.



WEEK 3: DAY 1 - ON YOUR OWN

Read Luke 6: 27-36

Love Your Enemies

27 "But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, **28** bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. **29** To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. **30** Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. **31** And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them. **32** "If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. **33** And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. **34** And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. **35** But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. **36** Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

Application:

Over the next week, at the end of each of your assignments, you will be given the opportunity to take the following Gospel truth and put it into action in your marriage. We ask that you take the time to create new, godly habits related to these truths. By the Lord's grace and through the power of the Gospel, you will be able to put old, sinful habits to death for the glory of God and the good of your marriage.

Reflection

How can you apply this truth specifically in your situation? How could it transform you and your marriage? Pray and ask God to step into your life, forgive you of your sin and create new change in you. Write down your prayers on the next page.

Use this space to write down your prayers



WEEK 3 - DAY 2 - TOGETHER

Gwen and Barry - (Excerpt from Chapter 3 of “Marriage” by Paul Tripp)

Gwen had always carried her dream with her like a precious jewel in a velvet bag. At twelve years old she would leaf through her mother’s home magazines and imagine her future home and family. By the time Gwen went to college, she knew what kind of home and family she wanted. She wasn’t just hoping that she would be happy; she knew what would make her happy. Gwen wasn’t aware of it but she didn’t really date men in college; no, she shopped for a man. She was looking for that special man who would help her realize her dream. So, the more she got to know Barry, the more she was attracted to him. Gwen really did think she was falling in love with Barry, and he loved the fact that she was crazy about him.

It was a quick courtship. Neither Gwen nor Barry wanted anything to get in the way of their developing union. The wedding between their junior and senior years of college was exciting and beautiful. They really did seem like the perfect couple. Gwen was vibrant and relational, and Barry was administrative and analytical; they seemed to complement each other perfectly. Gwen couldn’t believe it. She remembered the scrapbook she had made as a little girl. She was about to live what she had pasted on the pages!

Getting pregnant right away wasn’t part of Gwen’s dream, but so many other things had fallen into place so perfectly that she took it in stride. It bothered her that she wouldn’t graduate with Barry, but she knew there would be a time in the future when she would finish her studies. Barry wasn’t prepared for the pressure of a full-time job and full-time school, but he knew he had to make it work. They were both shocked to learn that Gwen was carrying twins. Gwen was overwhelmed at the thought of her instant family, but she couldn’t tell Barry. There simply wasn’t time in his busy schedule to listen to her worry and complaints. They both settled into separate daily routines, as Gwen tried to convince herself that she was still taking steps toward living her dream.

There were no pictures in Gwen’s girlhood scrapbook of colicky twins, a small house, heavy school loans, or a poorly paying, entry-level job. Gwen tried not to be depressed, but she was. Their house had no yard whatsoever, and the interior was so small that it seemed to be cluttered all the time. Life seemed to be no more than get up in the morning, work all day, go to bed, get up in the morning, and do it all over again. But Gwen’s disappointment was deeper than her physical surroundings and busy schedule. She was disappointed with Barry.

The way he looked at life had been so helpful during their courtship; now it tended to irritate Gwen more than it interested her. It seemed that Barry was perennially dissatisfied with the disorganization of their life together. He constantly complained about how messy the house was, and he was always telling Gwen how she could be more efficient. To Gwen he seemed cold, distant, and constantly just a few steps from anger.

Barry was struggling as well. Gwen seemed more interested in talking for hours on the phone than she did in taking care of their daughters and the home. He was tired of seeing the woman he thought was as beautiful as they get now living in sweats and looking as though she had just gotten



up. He knew it was unkind to think these things, but he did. It seemed that Gwen seldom had dinner ready when he got home and never seemed able to get the girls in bed in a timely manner.

Gwen silently wondered where the man who had attracted her had gone. Barry could dress any way he wanted to at work, and he did. He had no time for working out and seemed often to eat on the fly, so he had put on some pounds. He surely wasn't as responsive or as solicitous as he had been in courtship. It became harder and harder for Gwen to convince herself that she was living any part of her dream. The facts were the facts, and Gwen couldn't escape them. Life was hard, and it was going to stay that way for a while.

At first, Gwen and Barry hunkered down together and tried to make things work, but that didn't last very long. Gwen was very disappointed at what her life had become and hurt at how Barry treated her. Barry was frustrated that in all his attempts to help Gwen, she simply didn't want to change. The silent unhappiness both of them felt didn't remain silent for very long. It started with little comments meant to inflict guilt and little statements that were meant to register dissatisfaction. But before long, Gwen and Barry were in a pattern of regular arguments. They both had a lot to say, and neither one seemed willing to listen. The more they argued, the more their negative view of one another and their life together grew. Neither one will ever forget the night when Gwen said it. It had been a long time coming, but it was hard to move beyond actually being said.

She blurted the words out at the end of an evening when Barry had come home late, even though he knew the twins were sick and Gwen was exhausted. "I think I made a big mistake, Barry. Every day I find it harder not to regret that we ever got married." It cut Barry like a knife. She knew how hard he worked for her; she knew all the things he had given up for her, and this was the thanks she gave him!

The next day it was hard for Barry to come home from work. It was hard to face living with someone who didn't really want to be with him. It was hard for Gwen too; her dream had become a nightmare, and she didn't know what to do.

A Deeper Battle

Poor Gwen and Barry—so hurt, so confused, and so wanting to turn the clock back, but they didn't know what was going on, and that was the problem. It's hard to fix something you don't understand, and it's even harder to fix it when you think your problem is really the other person. As Barry drove to work the next day, he rehearsed to himself all the good things he had done for Gwen. The deck had made their small house a little more livable. The vacation, which they really couldn't afford, had brought some needed sanity to Gwen's frenetic life with the twins. His willingness to work from home all Fridays had complicated his work life, but he was willing to do it for Gwen. He couldn't believe the way she had been acting, and it was even harder to believe she had said those things!

Gwen was stung too. She spent most of the next day in a bit of an emotional daze. Yes, she did some laundry and took care of the twins' needs, but she really wasn't there. When she spilled her coffee, she began to cry and had trouble stopping. It wasn't supposed to be this way! Life with Barry was all she had ever wanted. She could accept the unplanned pregnancy. She could accept the small house. She could accept Barry's long hours. But his coldness and constant irritation were things she



never thought she would be dealing with. She just couldn't make sense of it. Maybe he was regretting that he had married her. Maybe he was having an affair. Maybe he was wanting out and didn't know how to tell her. Her mind raced and her heart broke, but she didn't know what to do.

Sadly, many couples have arrived at that point. Yes, the details are different, but they've arrived there nonetheless. The sweetness has evaporated from their marriage. Friendship has faded away. The person they courted doesn't seem to be the person they are now living with. There is distance, coldness, impatience and conflict that weren't there in the beginning. Sometimes a couple will settle for cold war, sometimes they will settle into marital *détente*, and sometimes they will nip at one another as if they are looking for any opportunity to express their dissatisfaction. Sometimes it becomes an all-out war. Sometimes couples hide behind their business. Sadly, many couples just walk away, never fully understanding what happened to the relationship that once brought them so much joy.

There are few couples that understand the one thing they need to understand in order for lasting change to take place in their marriage. They think their battle is with the other, or they think the circumstances in which they find themselves are what need to change. But here is the reality: *all of the horizontal battles are the fruit of a deeper war*. The most important war, the one that needs to be won, is not the war they are having with each other, but a war that wages within them individually. Real change is all about winning this war.

Attraction or Love?

The way to begin to understand this deeper war is to look at the beginning of couples' courtship and marriage. Considering the beginning of the relationship between Gwen and Barry will help us here. Let me suggest something that will upset some of you, and then I will explain. Perhaps, from the very beginning, what Gwen and Barry thought was love was not actually love. Now, to help you understand this possibility, I have to take you on a bit of a biblical tour.

I have written before about what 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 says about the fundamental nature of sin, but I think it is particularly helpful here. The passage reads, "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (NIV). The apostle Paul summarizes here what sin does to all of us. Sin turns us in on ourselves. Sin makes us shrink our lives to the narrow confines of our little self-defined world. Sin causes us to shrink our focus, motivation, and concern to the size of our own wants, needs, and feelings. Sin causes all of us to be way too self-aware and self-important. Sin causes us to be offended most by offenses against us and to be concerned most for what concerns us. Sin causes us to dream selfish dreams and to plan self-oriented plans. Because of sin, we really do love us, and we have a wonderful plan for our own lives!

What all this means is that *sin is essentially antisocial*. We don't really have time to love our spouse, in the purest sense of what that means, because we are too busy loving ourselves. What we actually want is for our spouse to love us as much as we love ourselves, and if our spouse is willing to



do that, we will have a wonderful relationship. So we try to co-opt our spouse into a willing submission to the plans and purposes of our claustrophobic kingdom of one.

But there is more. Because sin is antisocial, it tends to dehumanize the people in our lives. No longer are they objects of our willing affection. No, they quit being the people we find joy in loving. Rather, they get reduced to one of two things. They are either vehicles to help us get what we want or obstacles in the way of what we want. When your wife is meeting the demands of your wants, needs, and feelings, you are quite excited about her, and you treat her with affection. But when she becomes an obstacle in the way of your wants, needs, and feelings, you have a hard time hiding your disappointment, impatience, and irritation.

This is where another eloquent biblical observation comes in. It is that we are kingdom-oriented people. We always live in the service of one of two kingdoms. We live in the service of the small, personal happiness agenda of the kingdom of self, or we live in service of the huge, origin-to-destiny agenda of the kingdom of God. When we live for the kingdom of self, our decisions, thoughts, plans, actions, and words are directed by personal desire. We know what we want, where we want it, why we want it, how we want it, when we want it, and who we would prefer to deliver it. Our relationships are shaped by an infrastructure of subtle expectations and silent demands. We know what we want from people and how to get it from them. We seek to surround ourselves with people who will serve our kingdom purposes, and we evaluate them not from the perspective of the laws of God's kingdom but from the perspective of the laws of our kingdom.

Think about Gwen. She was not angry that Barry had broken the laws of God's kingdom. She was not grieved that he was in the way of what God wanted to accomplish in and through her marriage. No, Gwen was hurt and angry because Barry had broken the laws of her kingdom. This side of heaven, there is a constant war being fought in all our hearts between the kingdom of self and the kingdom of God. Every battle you have with other people is the result of that deeper war. When you are losing this war, you live for yourself, and invariably, it ends in conflict with your husband or wife.

Perhaps these two perspectives tell us much more about the beginning of Gwen and Barry's relationship than we tend to think. Maybe what they thought was love was not really love at all, but something very different, masquerading as love. Remember, Gwen had had specific marriage and family dreams for most of her life. Although she did not realize it, Gwen was searching for the one man who would be the missing piece to the puzzle that was her dream for her life. Barry seemed to be that piece, and she wouldn't even have to bend any of his tabs to make him fit. From day one she was powerfully attracted to Barry. She couldn't wait to see him the next time. She loves his quirky text messages. It made her happy to imagine him in the middle of her marital daydreams. She hung on every word as they began to talk about a future together. Gwen knew months before he asked that she would say yes to his proposal. She was convinced that she was deeply in love for the very first time.

Barry hadn't dated much, so it was hard not to like the attention Gwen gave him. The silly e-cards were not his style, but they were so Gwen. She listened to him. She respected his opinion. She enjoyed his company. What was not to like? The more Barry was around Gwen, the more he was attracted to her. He loved that she would pick him up at midnight from his after-class job. He would



laugh at how specific her dreams about their future were, but he kind of liked it. It seemed logical that they should get married. He could marry Gwen and still be himself. He would get his dream and Gwen's too. The whole thing was very attractive.

On the surface it all seemed wonderful, but perhaps that was the problem. There was no doubt that Gwen and Barry were very attracted to one another and that this attraction had produced strong affection. That in itself was a wonderful thing. The question is, however, whether what they were experiencing was love. Could it be that Gwen was not attracted to Barry because she loved Barry, but because she loved Gwen? Could it be that her attraction was much more self-oriented than she knew? What felt like love may actually have been excitement, that this man she had gotten to know seemed to fit nicely into the dream she had always had for her life.

I have counseled many soon-to-be-married couples just like Barry and Gwen. They were so excited to be together that it was hard for me to get enough of their attention to actually help prepare them for marriage. Together they were convinced that they would never have any problems. Together they were persuaded that nothing would ever get in the way of the feelings they had for one another. Together they were convinced that they were a perfect match. They would sit on my couch, holding hands and looking at one another with glazed eyes, while I tried my best to warn them that they were flawed people marrying a flawed person. But it was always hard for them to take me seriously.

The self-orientation of sin can produce a powerful attraction to another person, but that attraction should not be confused with love, because that attraction cannot do what love will do when the reasons for the attraction die. And the death of the dream happens to every couple. None of us gets our dream in the way that we dream it, because none of us is writing our own story. God, in his love, writes a better story than we could ever write for ourselves. He has a better dream than the one we conceive. He knows much better than we do what is best for us. He will take us places that we never intended to go because, in doing so, we become more of what he re-created us in Christ to be.

Could it be that as Gwen and Barry begin to face the harsh reality of the death of their individual and shared dreams, they are not struggling to love one another but are being given the opportunity to love one another more than ever before? It is when attraction wanes, flaws show, and the dream dies that real love has its best opportunity to germinate and grow. For Gwen and Barry, this sad and disillusioning moment is not the end of it all, but the beginning of something wonderful. We could argue that God now has them right where he wants them. They are no longer attracted to one another out of self-centered desire. They are no longer holding onto their dream, because it has melted away before their very eyes. They are hurt and frightened because what had fueled their relationship is gone, and they don't know what to do. But this is not a defeat; this is an opportunity to exit the small space of the kingdom of self and to begin to enjoy the beauty and benefits of the kingdom of God. What appears to be love may not be love, and when God reveals that it is a very good thing. What happened to Gwen and Barry did not happen because God was absent from their marriage. No, it happened precisely because God was present and was rescuing them from themselves and giving them what they could not produce on their own.

Gwen and Barry's marriage did not die; the selfish dream did, and when it did, real, sturdy, satisfying, other-centered, God-honoring, perseverant love began to grow. Their life together doesn't



look anything like the dream they once had, but they love one another more than ever, and they are very thankful that God wanted something better for them than they wanted for themselves.

READING REFLECTION: Take your time. Give this some thought. Write down your answers. Pray for God to make clear how you should answer.

1. What expectations do you have in your marriage that are showing themselves as misguided love? Don't be discouraged. We all have these.
2. Paul Tripp talks about God having them right where He wants them now, realizing that their individual dreams are now dead. They now have the opportunity to love the way God wants them to love. How does this settle with you? Have you experienced this in any way?
3. Spend some time in silence, solitude and prayer before Jesus. Ask Him to show you what He wants from you. What is He showing you?

Scripture of the Week: "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful." - Luke 6:36



WEEK 3 - DAY 3 - ON YOUR OWN

Whose Kingdom?

This week opens with the story of Gwen and Barry, whose romance story starts from their youth up until marriage. When their relationship hopes do not go as planned things quickly degenerate into patterns of discontent, disrespect, and resentment. Unfortunately, we tend to think the real problem with our marriage is our spouse. But “it’s hard to fix something when you think the problem is the other person. All of the horizontal battles are the fruit of a deeper war.”

Paul reveals in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15, “those who live [lives transformed by the gospel] should no longer live for themselves but for Him who died for them and was raised again.” This tells us something incredibly important about sin.

Sin turns us in on ourselves. Sin makes us shrink our lives to the narrow confines of our little self- defined world. Sin causes us to shrink our focus, motivation, and concern to the size of our personal wants, needs, and feelings. Sin causes all of us to be way too self-aware and self-important. Sin causes us to be offended most by offenses against us and to be concerned most for what affects us. Sin causes us to dream selfish dreams and to plan self-oriented plans. Because of sin, we really do love ourselves and think we have a wonderful plan for our own lives! Everyone else is just a means of getting there or are in the way. (p. 47)

Sin is fundamentally antisocial and dehumanizing. It reduces people to two things. They are either vehicles to help us get what we want or obstacles in the way of what we want. When your wife is meeting the demands of your wants, needs, and feelings, you are quite excited about her, and you treat her with affection, but when she becomes an obstacle in the way of your wants, needs, and feelings, you have a hard time hiding your disappointment, impatience, and irritation. (p. 47)

We live our lives for a particular kingdom and a specific agenda. “We live in service of the small, personal happiness agenda of the kingdom of self, or we live in service...of the kingdom of God” (p. 48). This changes the dynamics of our relationships, shaping them by “subtle expectations and silent demands” (p. 48). This brings us back to the difficulties between Gwen and Barry.

Could it be that Gwen was attracted to Barry not because she loved Barry, but because she loved Gwen? Could it be that her attraction was much more self-oriented than she knew? What felt like love may actually have been excitement that this man she had gotten to know seemed to fit nicely into the dream she had always had for her life (p. 49).

Our kingdom agenda inevitably draws us to other people, but that attraction should not be confused with love. “That attraction cannot do what love will do when the reasons for the attraction die” (p. 49). Thankfully, God is writing a better story for us than we would write ourselves. “He knows much better than we do what is best for us. He will take us places that we never intended to go because, in doing so, we become more of what He re-created us in Christ to be” (p. 50).

READING REFLECTION: Take your time. Give this some thought. Write down your answers. Pray for God to make clear how you should answer.



1. What aspects of Gwen and Barry's story resonate with you the most?
2. How do you tend to blame the problems in your marriage on your spouse? How would your spouse answer this question for you?
3. When we say 'the focus needs to be placed on God's kingdom,' what does this mean? How would this look in your marriage?
4. How have you focused too much on your own needs, feelings, and interests and not on God's desires for you to serve your spouse?
5. What are some dysfunctions in your marriage you never expected to see? Are there dysfunctions personally you can own and confess to the Lord and your spouse?

Scripture of the Week: "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful." - Luke 6:36



WEEK 3 - DAY 4 - TOGETHER

The Cart Before the Horse

Through marriage, God seeks to transform us through a relationship that gives rise to hurt, disappointment, conflict, and heartache. But why is *this* arrangement, the union of two sinners covenantally united for life, God's way? "Wouldn't it have been much easier if God had worked it out so that we would be fully sanctified, then married?" (p. 51). Surely, there had to be an easier, more pleasant way. We are all tempted to think this way. We are drawn to order, predictability, comfort, ease, pleasure, appreciation, fun, and personal happiness. "We struggle with God's plan because, at street level, we don't really want what God wants. We want what we want, and we want Him to deliver it. But that is not the plan. You see, God didn't give us His grace to make our kingdoms work; He gave us His grace to invite us to a much, much better kingdom." (p. 51)

If you think for a moment about the times you find yourself angry, it is highly likely your anger seldom comes out of a zeal for the plans, purposes, values, and calling of the kingdom of God. When you are hurt, angry, or disappointed with your husband or wife, it is not because you are concerned with whether he or she has broken the laws of God's kingdom. No, you are most often angry because your spouse has violated the laws of your kingdom (p. 51).

But God is good and wise. "His grace purposes to expose and free you from your bondage of you. His grace is meant to bring you to the end of yourself so you will finally begin to place your identity, your meaning and purpose, and your inner sense of well-being in Him. So He places you in a comprehensive relationship with another flawed person, and He places that relationship right in the middle of a very broken world. To add to this, He designs circumstances for you that you would have never designed for yourself. All this is meant to bring you to the end of yourself, because that is where true righteousness begins. He wants you to give up. He wants you to abandon your dream." (p. 51).

"When the war between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of self, which rages in all of our hearts, is not being won, then we enter marriage driven by little-kingdom purposes. The problem is that our spouse does the same thing. So, it will just be a matter of time before the carnage begins as our little kingdoms of one collide." (p. 52).

What does this practically mean? It means the trouble you face in your marriage is not evidence of the failure of grace. No, those troubles are grace, because they push us to a point where we see we need God.

It is only when a husband and wife each live in a purposeful and joyful allegiance to the kingdom of God their marriage can be a place of unity, understanding, and love. Once here, we are now free from the debilitating anxieties of our own wants, needs, and feelings-fulfillment agenda of the kingdom of self.

A NOTE ON RIGHTEOUS ANGER

There are times where your anger can match the heart of the Lord. Righteous Anger is when we see that things are not the way God meant them to be. When we see injustice, or when we are sinned against. Often in these moments what starts off as righteous anger turns to sinful anger. It turns into



sinful anger when we waver from trusting that vengeance is God's (Romans 12:19), to taking matters into our own hands. We do this out of impatience with God's plan, lack of trust that God will bring justice, or that God is a loving Father. In moments where you are sinned against, allow your righteous anger to fuel trust in God. Let go of the gavel and give it the Lord. He is the one true Judge who extends undeserved mercy and righteous wrath (James 4:11-12).

READING REFLECTION: Take your time. Give this some thought. Write down your answers. Pray for God to make clear how you should answer.

1. In what ways are you living for your little kingdom in your marriage?
2. In light of your answer to the question above, spend some time repenting to the Lord. Repentance is a turning away from sin, and turning to our merciful God. Repentance plays itself out in doing what God calls good (Psalm 37:27). How practically should your repentance show itself in your marriage?
3. Share your answers to question number one and two with your spouse. Repent to your spouse, as necessary, and pray for each other.
4. Pick two questions from your assignments this week to talk about with your spouse.

Use this space to write down your prayers



WEEK THREE CONVERSATION PRIMER

Arrive at Stonegate by 7:00, find a quiet place to talk, and spend 15 minutes together discussing the following. Be in the large group gathering by 7:15.

DAY BY DAY

It is crazy how quickly life passes us by. Before we know it, our kids are talking, driving, graduating, marrying and starting their own families. Time goes so fast. Even though time flies by, we are always making thousands of small, daily choices that have eternal significance.

We are all culture creators

I have a trash can in my kitchen that serves as the primary disposal for all of our house's trash. Every two days or so, I have to empty that bag and put in a new one. Sometimes I am amazed at how the trash piles up. Most of us have this same experience.

There are two significant observations to consider from this illustration:

- 1.) A full bag of garbage is a combination of multiple moments over time that result in a large collection of trash.
- 2.) If I don't take that trash out every couple days, our kitchen will no longer be an appealing place to spend time.

Likewise, marriages rarely ever fail due to a singular moment or choice. We do little things and make little decisions every day that create a culture whether we mean to or not. That culture can be a place of safety and vibrancy, or of staleness, danger and apathy. Sometimes it is really hard to see ourselves clearly. Here is a great question to discuss with your spouse.

What are some small choices that I make over and over again in moments that are creating a destructive culture in my home? Are there things I do that you can point out to me?

Resentment and bitterness in our spouse may be the product of sin you've done against them that they've internalized. Hopefully, this question will help to provide some insight for you into what kind of culture you are producing in your home and family.

NOTE ON CONFESSION AND REPENTANCE

It is so easy to get defensive in these moments and want to explain why we did what we did. Don't let this time turn into an argument. Please take this moment to be receptive and humble. Apologize where you need to apologize and confess where you need to confess. Ask for forgiveness and grant it generously.



WEEK FOUR: THE DNA OF SIN IS SELFISHNESS

Gospel Commitment:

We will work together to build a sturdy bond of trust.



WEEK 4: DAY 1 - ON YOUR OWN

Read Galatians 3:25-4:7

25 But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, **26** for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. **27** For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. **28** There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. **29** And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

1 I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, **2** but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. **3** In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. **4** But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, **5** to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. **6** And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" **7** So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

Application:

Over the next week, at the end of each of your assignments, you will be given the opportunity to take the following Gospel truth and put it into action in your marriage. We ask that you take the time to create new, godly habits related to these truths. By the Lord's grace and through the power of the Gospel, you will be able to put old, sinful habits to death for the glory of God and the good of your marriage.

Week Three Gospel Truth:

God invites us into His family, having done all the work needed for us. I cannot earn God's kindness and adoption. Because of this, I am free to give generously to my spouse, expecting no payment in return.

Reflection

How can you apply this truth specifically in your situation? How could it transform you and your marriage? Pray and ask God to step into your life, forgive you of your sin and create new change in you.

Use this space to write down your prayers



WEEK 4: DAY 2 - TOGETHER

Pulling Weeds

Marriage is like an exercise in long-term gardening. Jeremiah 1:10 uses this imagery where God says that change always has two sides to it: destruction and construction. A garden must be tended well for growth to occur. Constant weeding and planting needs to take place. In marriage, we need zeal, both destructive and constructive. We have to actively go after those weeds that endanger the health of our marriage. For that intensity to be most effective, we need to know what “weeds” on which to set our targets.

Selfishness. “Perhaps nothing is more destructive in marriage” than selfishness (p. 105). “Nothing works in life (let alone in marriage) when the human community is comprised of a bunch of self-appointed, little sovereigns seeking to set up their own little kingdoms” (p. 105). This weed is so deadly because it corrupts everything. “Selfishness is like liquid clay; it will shape itself to the contours of whatever vessel it is poured into” (p. 106).

Busyness. This weed usually is well hidden. “Too many of us are doing marriage on the fly. Marriage, too often, is what we do in between all the other things we are doing that really determine the content and pace of our schedules” (p. 106). Marriage suffers not so much because of meanness, abuse, or cruelty, but by spouses who live life as roommates. So, why are we so busy? Our pursuit of material pleasures takes our time, attention, and energy away from the most crucial relationship in all of life - God. Materialism, the pursuit of stuff, has heavily influenced our Western culture. The truth is “almost all of us are living beyond our means in some way” (p. 107)..

Inattention. “Many marriages get to an unhealthy place simply because they have been neglected. Sadly, many of us are better at responding to a crisis than we are at working on prevention” (p. 107). Frequently, inattention starts shortly after the pursuit of courtship is over. “I don’t have to pay attention to you anymore because I know I have you” (p. 108). Healthy marriages thrive because they never stop working at it!

Self-righteousness. When you are approached with a criticism or concern, do you ever redirect the conversation, working to convince the other that you’re not the only sinner in the room? How active is your “inner lawyer,” internally arguing in your defense, even at the moment your spouse is speaking? “You’ll have no trouble identifying the weaknesses and failures of your spouse, but you won’t see yours with equal clarity.” (p. 127) We tend to not see ourselves accurately and should be thankful to God that He has placed us next to someone who helps us to see ourselves with greater accuracy.

Fear. “You and I are probably more motivated by fear than we think. Fear is most often not an experience of trembling dread.” (p. 109) It can be something far more typical. Perhaps you spend too much time thinking about the what-ifs. The fear of failure will often cause us to avoid issues and allow these issues to grow and fester, which can lead to anger and bitterness.

Laziness. Our marital laziness is rooted in self-love. “It is the ability to take ourselves off the hook. It is the willingness to permit ourselves not to do things we know we should do.” It is always both self-focused and self-excusing. It is undisciplined and unmotivated. It permits us to be passive when decisive and loving action is needed. This weed ultimately “leads to disappointment,



discouragement, discontentment, and future trouble. In a fallen world, very few things are corrected by inaction” (p. 112).

“You don’t have to be afraid of examining your marriage, no matter how weedy it may be, because God meets you in your difficulty with his amazing grace” (p. 112).

READING REFLECTION: Take your time. Give this some thought. Write down your answers. Pray for God to make clear how you should answer.

1. Which of the weeds presented (Selfishness, Busyness, Inattention, Self-righteousness, Fear, and Laziness) feels like it has the biggest and strongest root system in your heart? Why do you think you struggle with this weed in particular? Or in other words, why do you think its root system is as deep as it is?
2. What are you treasuring or worshiping in your heart that leads you to this behavior? What effects have these weeds had on your marriage?
3. Are there things in your life right now taking higher priority than your relationship with God? If so, what are these things and how could you steward your time differently to rightly prioritize God and your marriage?

Scripture of the Week:

4 But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, **5** to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. **6** And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" **7** So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. - **Galatians 4:4-7**

Week Four Gospel Truth:

God invites us into His family, having done all the work needed for us. I cannot earn God's kindness to me. Because of this, I am free to give generously to my spouse, expecting no payment in return. (Galatians 3:25-4:7)



WEEK 4: DAY 3 - ON YOUR OWN

Planting Seeds

We have to move beyond merely identifying the weeds of our relationships. We need to reflect on what God wants us to put in their place. The best place to start is with Paul's words about the fruit of the spirit found in Galatians 5:13-26.

You cannot escape the influence of what you do and say on the person you live with and on your relationship to him or her. Paul says, "If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out, or you will be destroyed by each other" (v. 15). By God's design, He has made you a person of influence in the life of your spouse. For good or bad, this is always the case within marriage.

When we "live by the Spirit [we] will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature," Paul writes (v. 16). Although it is hard at times to feel this way, our deepest marital battle is the one we wage against sin. In 1 Corinthians 5:15 we read, "And He died for all, that those who live *should no longer live for themselves* but for Him who died for them and was raised again." The DNA of sin is selfishness. "It makes us all focused on and driven by our wants, needs, and feelings" (p. 118).

In truth, we will perpetually wander around in blindness and confusion until we grasp that our struggles in marriage stem from something fundamentally sinister and positively destructive to relationships. That something is not something 'out there.' It lives within us. "Selfishness is first a condition of the heart before it is ever a set of choices, words, and behaviors" (p. 119).

Selfishness means we tend to reduce people to a *means*. Consider how self-interest can shape a marriage. If you are allowing your wants, needs, and feelings to be the driving force of your relationship, not only will you not say no to the right things, but you will work to get your spouse to try and meet your expectations. This means that the basic style of our actions, reactions, and responses to our spouse is *manipulation*. I don't mean a preplanned, deliberate swindling of the other person. It won't be that obvious. Instead it will be in ways in which you will be unaware unless you are closely paying attention. You will work to get your spouse to participate in what you want, to deliver what you are convinced you need, and to submit to what you feel.

How does this manipulation function? The three most familiar tools of marriage manipulation are *threat*, *payment*, and *guilt*. "There is much more manipulation going on in our marriages than we tend to think. The very nature of manipulation is that it is propelled by love of self, not love for the other" (p. 120).

The great pressure point in our marriage is not the imperfection of your spouse, but rather, the sin that lurks in the recesses of your heart. This is one weed we must commit to pulling, again and again, replacing it with the good seeds of a healthy relationship. Galatians 5:1-14 teaches us how we are to fight. "Serve one another in love" (v. 13), and, "The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" Marital conflict doesn't primarily start from a lack of love towards our spouse. It starts with a lack of love towards God. We are so busy in our idolatrous kingdom-building project that "we are too distracted to notice all the opportunities to love that every day gives us, and too busy making sure that we are loved to do anything about these opportunities, even if we noticed them" (p. 121). Making progress in planting good seeds towards your spouse



comes from a fruitful relationship with God. The Holy Spirit is the one who produces this fruit (Galatians 5) to be used to love our spouse.

By focusing on God, He moves us from manipulation to ministry within our marriage, asking God to strengthen us by his grace to *love* as we are called to love. He gives us eyes to see where we can serve our spouse instead of using them. By focusing on God, we are able to plant joy. Joy looks “for reasons to be thankful. It means being better at counting your blessings than you are at calculating your complaints” (p. 124). By focusing on God, we are able to cultivate *peace*, working to restore our relationship. This means working for the good of your spouse, instead of always trying to appease your desires. By focusing on God, we are able to plant *kindness*, looking out for the benefit of our spouse, cherishing them as God expects us to do. By focusing on God, we are able to sow *faithfulness*, which begins with our thoughts and desires. We remain on task, loving our spouse as we promised when we first publicly made our vows before God. By focusing on God, we disseminate *gentleness*, meaning we are careful not to hurt or damage our spouse in the way we relate to and handle them. It is not rooted in weakness, but rather in quiet confidence in God’s power. By focusing on God, we sow *self-control*, denying not our spouse, but ourselves. True control knows that retaliation never leads to reconciliation. “Self-control means you simply won’t give yourself permission to get down and dirty” (p. 126).

If we want to break through the hard soil of wrong patterns and cultivate unity, understanding, and love, we must fight daily, not with our spouse, but against our inner self-deception. “Hope for your marriage is not to be found in your spouse. No, it is to be found in that third invisible Person, who has made Himself part of your union” (p. 129). In Him, we have everything we need (2 Pet 1:3) to break through the hard soil, plant good seeds, and grow them.

How successful are we in our love for our spouse? “The sexual relationship is a good barometer for every couple. The character and quality of the marriage relationship will determine the character and quality of their sexual union” (p. 130). Hurts and disappointments aren’t kept out of the marriage bed. The fix for sexual dysfunction isn’t coming from a course in anatomy; instead we need a theology lesson. We need worship realignment away from ourselves and towards God.

Hope for our marriage cannot be rooted in mere technique or principles alone. Hope comes when we recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit living inside us.

READING REFLECTION: Take your time. Give this some thought. Write down your answers. Pray for God to make clear how you should answer.

1. Do you find it easier to examine and blame your spouse's heart more than you do your own? Why do you think that is?



2. When we say “yes” to someone in marriage we are saying “no” to a hundred other things. What is God calling you to say “no” to in marriage that you have said “yes” to at the expense of your spouse?

3. The three most common tactics for getting what we want are *threat, manipulation and guilt*. Have any of these become a common thread in your marriage?

4. How do you think the Gospel can replace the desire to threaten, manipulate, and/or guilt your spouse into meeting your expectations?

5. What are three ways that you can serve your spouse this week?

6. Our sexual intimacy can be a good barometer of how well we are doing in pulling weeds and planting good seeds in our marriage. This being true, how would you describe your sexual intimacy currently?

Scripture of the Week:

4 But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, **5** to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. **6** And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" **7** So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. - **Galatians 4:4-7**

Week Four Gospel Truth:

God invites us into His family, having done all the work needed for us. I cannot earn God's kindness to me. Because of this, I am free to give generously to my spouse, expecting no payment in return. (Galatians 3:25-4:7)

How does this apply for you today?



WEEK 4: DAY 4 - TOGETHER

CONNECTING REAL LIFE TO GOD'S WORD

5 Thus says the LORD:

“Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the LORD.

6 He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come.

He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land.

7 “Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD.

8 He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.”

9 The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?

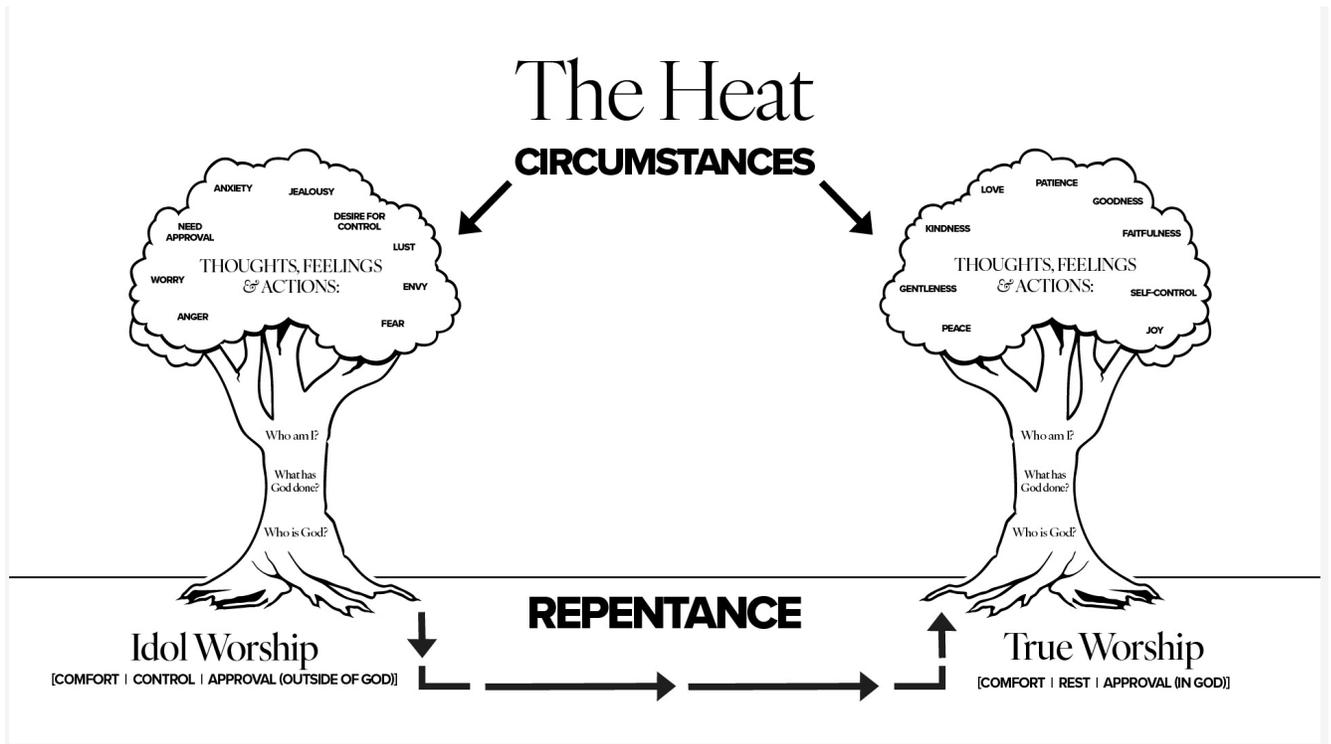
10 “I the LORD search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds.” - **Jeremiah 17:5-10**

Q: What do you feel that God is trying to show you through this passage?

Consider Your Heart

On the next page is an example of a tree and its fruit. One rooted in worshiping creation (left) and one rooted in God (right). Applying this passage to your life, how do you see yourself bearing fruit? How do you bear fruit in your marriage? Use the graphic below to consider what kind of fruit you produce. What are the narratives playing in your head? What are you placing your ultimate hope in?





- 1.) Consider the trees above. Which "fruits" do you find growing most often out of your heart?
- 2.) Consider the inner narratives presented in the trunk of the tree. What do those inner narratives say in your head? How would you answer the three questions in the trunk if you are honest?
- 3.) When you consider the sources of your bad fruit, what area of idol worship do you see connecting to your life most?
- 4.) How have you seen Jesus change this in you historically?



WEEK FOUR CONVERSATION PRIMER

Arrive at Stonegate by 7:00, find a quiet place to talk, and spend 15 minutes together discussing the following. Be in the large group gathering by 7:15.

CREATING SAFE PATHWAYS

Create a safe place by giving your spouse an avenue for honesty. Ask them questions and allow them to be straightforward with you. This is meant to help you to create a culture where your wife/husband feels safe telling you difficult things.

Talk with your spouse

Sometimes it is really hard to see ourselves clearly. Here is a great question to discuss with your spouse. In many ways, they can see us better than we can see ourselves. Careful, it may hurt a little. This is meant to make you feel vulnerable and open yourself to critique.

Ask this question:

What is it like on the other side of me? What is it like to live with me? How do I make you feel in general?

Do you feel safe? Loved? Cherished? Respected? Valued? Silenced? Manipulated? Belittled? Honored?

If you have some difficulty answering honestly, pray together for the right words to say.

NOTE ON CONFESSION AND REPENTANCE

It is so easy to get defensive in these moments and want to explain why we did what we did. Don't let this time turn into an argument. Please take this moment to be receptive and humble. Apologize where you need to apologize and confess where you need to confess. Ask for forgiveness and grant it generously.



WEEK FIVE: TIME AND TREASURE

Gospel Commitment:

We will commit to building a relationship of love.



WEEK 5: DAY 1 - TOGETHER

Read Matthew 18:23-35

23 "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. **24** When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. **25** And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. **26** So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' **27** And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. **28** But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe!' **29** So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' **30** He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. **31** When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. **32** Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. **33** And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' **34** And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers until he should pay all his debt. **35** So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

Application:

Over the next week, at the end of each of your assignments, you will be given the opportunity to take the following Gospel truth and put it into action in your marriage. We ask that you take the time to create new, godly habits related to these truths. By the Lord's grace and through the power of the Gospel, you will be able to put old, sinful habits to death for the glory of God and the good of your marriage.

Week Five Gospel Truth:

Grudge - a persistent feeling of ill will or resentment resulting from a past insult or injury. *God has forgiven my insurmountable debt. Because of this, I am able to forgive the debts that others owe to me and give up the right to hold onto grudges.*

Reflection

How can you apply this truth specifically in your situation? How could it transform you and your marriage?



WEEK 5: DAY 2 - ON YOUR OWN

Coming Clean: Confession

“No change takes place in a marriage that does not begin with confession” (p. 72). This is difficult to overestimate. Confession is the doorway to growth and change in marriage. For true change, an accurate diagnosis of our marital problems must precede an effective cure. Thankfully, God graciously provides the means through His Word. *It is a grace to know right from wrong, and it is a grace to understand the concept of indwelling sin.*

How does this touch upon marriage? One of our greatest temptations in marriage “is to believe that our greatest problems exist outside us rather than inside us” (p. 73). But in truth, we all carry around within ourselves our own “personal Judas who will betray [us] again and again” (p. 74). For this reason, *it is a grace to have a properly functioning conscience.* “Change always begins with being dissatisfied, and personal dissatisfaction always begins with a conscience that is sensitive to wrong” done against us (p. 74).

A heart of true confession and repentance is one that continually sees God’s loving scalpel patiently working to save us from ourselves. Confession acknowledges our weakness. When we see our weakness, we become less critical of our spouse’s shortcomings. The result of looking through this lens is grace. *God’s grace protects us from our own self-righteousness.* It positively decimates self-righteousness because it deepens our sense of need and also shows our spouse who we really are. “Grace faces us with our poverty and weakness” (p. 76). The truth is, there are not many things that prevent change in a marriage like a distorted view of ourselves. Confession provides clarity of self. Here is what happens:

Because a husband is convinced that he is righteous and his wife is not righteous, he doesn’t feel the need to look at or examine himself. This leaves him with only one conclusion: the problems in the marriage are his wife’s fault. So, he watches her all the more hyper-vigilantly, and because she is less than a perfect person, he collects more and more “evidence” to support his view of the marriage struggles. Many married people are like the Pharisee in the temple who thanked God that he was not like the other sinners around him. They need the grace of an accurate self-assessment. Few things prevent change in marriage more than a distorted sense of self. Few things are more needed than eyes to see ourselves with clarity and accuracy.

Moreover, *it is a grace to be willing to listen and consider criticism.* “Healthy relationships have two essential character qualities. First is the humility of approachability. The second is the courage of loving honesty” (p. 77). Our spouse can be used as the Lord’s mirror of exposure and correction. Admittedly, for those who see themselves truly and without defense, this is very humbling. And so God’s grace reaches us here as well.

It is a grace not to be paralyzed by regret. “As we face regret, we bask in forgiveness and then turn to live in a new way, embracing the power that is ours as children of God” (p. 78).

It is a grace to know that we can face our wrongs because Christ has carried our guilt and shame.

Through the work of Christ we can rest assured, knowing that we can stare at problems in the face with both hope and courage.



A lifestyle of confession and repentance shows itself in the daily habit of loving honesty, avoiding excuses, admitting wrongs, examining ourselves, greeting confession and encouragement, patience, perseverance, and gentleness in the face of wrongdoing. "When the shadow of the cross hangs over our marriage, we live and relate differently" (p. 83).

READING REFLECTION: Take your time. Give this some thought. Write down your answers. Pray for God to make clear how you should answer.

1. *Romans 2:4, "Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?"* Take some time to ask God, in his kindness, to reveal to you things you need to confess to Him and to your spouse and turn from towards Jesus.

2. What does confession look like in your relationship with God? Do you regularly engage in confession with your spouse? Spend some time with God confessing the things above to Him and then confess them to your spouse.

Week Five Gospel Truth:

God has forgiven my insurmountable debt. Because of this, I am able to forgive the debts that others owe to me and give up the right to hold onto grudges. (Matthew 18:23-35)
How does this apply for you today?



WEEK 5: DAY 3 - ON YOUR OWN

Canceling Debts

Debt cancellation is an essential ingredient for a healthy marriage. Tripp writes, “I cannot think of a more essential ingredient in marriage than forgiveness” (p. 85-86). Apart from forgiveness, marriages deteriorate into dislike, disrespect, and selfishness. In time “each selfish act followed by a bitter response damages affection and unity. This can become a relationally destructive and exhausting pattern, building up walls of defense.” When these patterns of sin are not met with patterns of confession, repentance, and forgiveness all we have left is a “compilation of the wrongs of the other” (p. 87).

We should identify stages in every marriage that can foster un-forgiveness. First, there is *immaturity and failure*. “Most enter their marriages quite young, naïve, and immature’ and as a result, make mistakes and cause pain unknowingly. Recognizing these stages can be jolting to a person who believes that marriage is ultimately about building their [personal] kingdom. “In their surprise and hurt, [people] give way to accusation, blame, judgment, and punishment rather than to honest confrontation, confession, and forgiveness” (p. 88). Then, we *fall into comfortable but destructive patterns*. Unspoken desires, resentments, and confessions weaken the bond between a married couple and only increase the distance between them. With this distance comes *establishing defenses*, and we are tempted to believe that the best defense is an offense. The “combination of self-righteousness (convincing ourselves that we are not the problem) and accusation (telling our spouse that he or she is the problem)” are toxic to the true relationship (p. 88).

Furthermore, we allow ourselves to *nurture dislike*. We meditate on those things we see as broken in the other “rather than celebrating the good God has done in and through him or her, [as we do this our] perspective becomes increasingly negative” (p. 89). This is exhausting, and so we *become overwhelmed*. We “walk on eggshells, wondering when the next bomb will drop and shatter what little peace you have left” (p. 89). Who can avoid weariness and discouragement from the daily need to defend oneself? The spiral continues with *envy of other couples*, wondering “what it would be like to be married to that other woman or that other man. It’s tempting to doubt God’s love and wisdom when you feel that you have been singled out for difficulties that others aren’t facing” (p. 89). These fantasies cause us to *look for a way of escape internally*. “At first, it’s just the unrealistic daydreams of the tired, but it becomes more than that.” Before we know it, our marriage has “rusted into brokenness by the daily rain of the little drops of unforgiveness” (p. 90).

Why not just forgive? Debt is power. “Holding onto our spouse’s wrongs gives us the upper hand in our relationship” (p. 90) After all we have had to put up with, “all our spouse’s wrongs against us, he or she *owes us*. “It is very tempting to ascend to God’s throne and to make ourselves judge” (p. 92). However, God wants more for us. Though forgiveness comes at a cost, its harvest is a thing of beauty.

“Often, forgiveness is a process, not an event. Forgiveness requires humility, compassion, trust, self-control, sacrifice and even remembering. Forgiveness is the fertile soil in which unity in marriage grows” (p. 93).



READING REFLECTION: Take your time. Give this some thought. Write down your answers. Pray for God to make clear how you should answer.

1. Genesis 2:25, “And the man and his wife were both naked and not ashamed.” This verse is not just about physical nakedness. There should be nothing hidden in your heart that is not shared with your spouse (struggles, weakness, fears, ambitions, etc.). When you consider your most prevalent sin struggle or weakness, what percentage of that struggle would you say your spouse knows?
2. What has Jesus done so that you can be free to share everything with your spouse?
3. Have you made your marriage a safe place so your spouse can confess and be open about their struggles with you?
4. How is God calling you towards canceling the debts of your spouse? Why is this so difficult to do?

Week Five Gospel Truth:

God has forgiven my insurmountable debt. Because of this, I am able to forgive the debts that others owe to me and give up the right to hold onto grudges. (Matthew 18:23-35)

How does this apply for you today?



WEEK 5: DAY 4 - TOGETHER

What is Forgiveness?

Debt cancellation is forgiveness. “Forgiveness is a *vertical commitment* that is followed by a *horizontal transaction*.” This means that we address the hurts and betrayals of marital sin in light of our commitment to God. “Forgiveness begins by giving the offense to the Lord.” This means “you do not carry the wrong with you (bitterness), and that you do not treat the other in light of the wrong (judgment). You entrust yourself to God’s mercy and justice” (p. 92). This is a gospel-rooted trust and the extension of grace. You “respond to your spouse with the same grace that you have been given [by Jesus]” (p. 92).

The reason you must start with giving the offense to God is so when you come to your spouse, you begin with the right attitude (grace) and the right goal (reconciliation). Understanding the forgiveness that has been extended to you from God, allows you to be free from the root of bitterness and from the hurts and wounds of others. Because God has placed the judgment that you deserve on His Son, you are then free to extend that same forgiveness instead of condemnation and judgment. Through the good news of Jesus and the power of the Spirit we are able to express this in a way that is kind, patient, loving, humble, and encouraging.

Also, to ignore or suppress sin done against us and by us is unloving and damaging to any marriage spiritually. It is not loving to our spouse to act as though what is not okay is okay. Ignoring sin can give off the appearance of forgiveness, but is actually love of self and self preservation. “We do not want to put ourselves through something uncomfortable. When we fail to bring such things into the light, they fester in the dark of our own sinful heart, and the other does not benefit from the conviction and confession that would help [them] grow and change” (p. 93).

It is also important to extend forgiveness only when necessary. We must look through the lens of what the Bible calls sin. “You do not need to ask for forgiveness when you have done something out of human weakness, like forgetting.” Further, forgiveness is not demanded because of mere personality differences or perspectives. “You do not have to ask forgiveness for attempting to do something and failing” (p. 94).

What are the demands of true forgiveness? Forgiveness requires *humility*. “When we stand in the center of our own universe with nothing more important to us than ourselves, we find nothing more offensive than a sin against us” (p. 95). It requires *compassion*. Are we touched by our spouse’s struggle with sin? Forgiveness demands *trust*. “Forgiveness is not so much an act of faith in your spouse as it is an act of faith in God. You believe that He will give you what you need to do what He has called you to do.” We must trust that there is a blessing on the other side of the hard work of forgiveness. It requires *self-control* and *sacrifice*. But it also requires *remembering*. “Perhaps a lifestyle of unforgiveness is rooted in the sin of forgetfulness. We forget that there is not a day in our lives that we do not need to be forgiven” (p. 97). We forget that “God never mocks our weakness, never finds joy in throwing our failures in our face, never threatens to turn his back on us, and never makes us buy our way back into his favor” (p. 97).

The harvest of forgiveness includes *appreciation, affection, and patience*. “Forgiveness is the fertile soil in which unity in marriage grows...You no longer try to build your own little marriage



kingdom. No, you now, together, live for God's kingdom. You now live with the same set of expectations and rules" (p. 98).

READING REFLECTION: Take your time. Give this some thought. Write down your answers. Pray for God to make clear how you should answer.

1. Do you tend to be a peace-faker (act like there is no problem and repress frustration), or a peace-breaker (always bring up the issue in a hostile way)?

2. Ken Sande summarizes four promises that Christians make when they forgive:
 - 1.) *I will not dwell on this incident.*
 - 2.) *I will not bring up this incident again and use it against you.*
 - 3.) *I will not talk to others about this incident.*
 - 4.) *I will not let any incident stand between us or hinder our personal relationship.*

Is there anything you need to do or say to your spouse in order to fulfill this call as a believer? (Important note: these four steps are not advocating denial, but only weaponizing of the past. Keyword: "use it against you")

3. Are there any frustrations you hold in your heart towards your spouse that are not actually sin?

4. In Week 5 - Day 2, you wrote down some things that you need to confess to God and your spouse. Now is a great time to share those things and ask for forgiveness. What do you need to confess? **(Don't allow confession to create conflict. Anticipate being hurt and take time to extend grace and forgiveness.)**

Week Five Gospel Truth:

God has forgiven my insurmountable debt. Because of this, I am able to forgive the debts that others owe to me and give up the right to hold onto grudges. (Matthew 18:23-35)

How does this apply for you today?



WEEK FIVE: CONVERSATION PRIMER

Arrive at Stonegate by 7:00, find a quiet place to talk, and spend 15 minutes together discussing the following. Be in the large group gathering by 7:15.

BUSYNESS

Jesus, in the parable of the soils of Luke 8, tells us that there is a soil that has thorns in it. When the sower sowed seeds in that soil, the plant grew up and was choked by the thorns that grew up around it. When he explains the parable, he refers to the thorns as “the cares and riches and pleasures of life” that choke the seed, which is the Word of God. The idea here is that a fruitful, godly life can be threatened and choked by cares and pleasures of the world. In the same way that our relationship with God can experience this, so can our marriage. Busyness is a tell-tale sign not just of mismanaged time, but also treasure priorities. What we love will get our time and attention.

Ask these questions:

Does it seem like our marriage matters to me?

Are we doing too much?

Are we chasing the wrong things?

How do our rhythms need to change?

NOTE ON CONFESSION AND REPENTANCE

It is so easy to get defensive in these moments and want to explain why we did what we did. Don't let this time turn into an argument. Please take this moment to be receptive and humble. Apologize where you need to apologize and confess where you need to confess. Ask for forgiveness and grant it generously.



WEEK SIX: CULTIVATING LOVE

Gospel Commitment:

We will deal with our differences with appreciation and grace.



WEEK 6: DAY 1 - ON YOUR OWN

Read Luke 18: 9-14

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: **10** "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. **11** The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. **12** I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' **13** But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' **14** I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

1. Would your spouse identify you with the pharisee or the tax collector in this parable? Do you create a culture of grace or self-righteousness in your home? Would your spouse say you have a superiority or an inferiority complex?
2. How do you compare yourself to your spouse or look down on your spouse?
3. We understand that forgiveness is messy and never easy. But sometimes we withhold it because it gives us control, or sense of entitlement to not change personally. Is there anything you need to forgive your spouse for?

Application:

Over the next week, at the end of each of your assignments, you will be given the opportunity to take the following Gospel truth and put it into action in your marriage. We ask that you take the time to create new, godly habits related to these truths. By the Lord's grace and through the power of the Gospel, you will be able to put old, sinful habits to death for the glory of God and the good of your marriage.

Week Six Gospel Truth:

Knowing we are all imperfect sinners saved by grace, I have freedom not to compare myself to or look down on my spouse.



WEEK 6: DAY 2 - TOGETHER

Ready, Willing, and Waiting

“Love is willing self-sacrifice for the good of another that *does not require reciprocation or that the person being loved is deserving*” (p. 189). In fact, love does its best work when the other person is undeserving. True love is exemplified in 1 John 4 in the self-giving of Jesus for His people. “These words carry a rich content of many things, but one of the things surely meant by these words is that true love doesn't best grow out of the soil of duty”. (p. 189) There is never a day in your marriage when you will not be called to be willing. There is never a day in your marriage when some personal sacrifice is not needed.

True love is *cruciform* love (*cruci* = “cross” and *form* = “in the shape of”); 1 John 4:11 says, “Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” When it comes to love, the cross of Jesus Christ is our ultimate example. We are called to love as Christ loved us...sacrificially. But this is not an abstract sentiment; *cruciform love takes action*. “Love is being willing to have your life complicated by the needs and struggles of your husband or wife without impatience or anger.” It actively fights “the temptation to be critical and judgmental...while looking for ways to encourage and praise” (p. 191). Love daily makes the “commitment to resist the needless moments of conflict that come from pointing out and responding to minor offenses” (p.191-192). Self-sacrificial marital love is honest and humbly approachable in times of misunderstanding, and is more committed to unity and love than to winning, accusing, or being right”. Furthermore, it owns its failures and sin, resisting “the temptation to offer an excuse or shift the blame” (p. 192).

Real love, when confronted by our spouse, is willing to examine itself, “rather than rising to your defense or shifting the focus.” “Real love “is a daily commitment to grow in love so that the love you offer to your husband or wife is increasingly selfless, mature, and patient” (p. 192). It does not repay evil for evil, but looks for “concrete and specific ways to overcome evil with good” (p. 193). A person driven by Biblical love is “a good student of [their] spouse, looking for [their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs so that in some way you can remove [their] burden.” It means “being willing to invest the time necessary to discuss, examine, and understand the problems that you face as a couple, staying on task until the problem is removed or you have agreed upon a strategy of response” (p. 194). It grants forgiveness when requested. It values trust and faithfulness. Love is kind and gentle, “even in moments of disagreement, refusing to attack your spouse’s character or assault his or her intelligence” (p. 195).

Love doesn’t flatter, lie, manipulate, or deceive to control. A truly loving spouse does not look to their partner for their source of “identity, meaning and purpose, or inner sense of well-being” (p. 196). “Love is the willingness to have less free time, less sleep, and a busier schedule in order to be faithful to what God has called you to be and to do as a husband or a wife.” It rejects selfish instincts, and promotes “real unity, functional understanding, and active love” (p. 197). It treats the other with appreciation, respect, and grace. It is willing to make costly sacrifices without looking for reciprocation (p. 198).



“Love is daily admitting to yourself, your spouse, and God that you are not able to love this way without God’s protecting, providing, forgiving, rescuing, and delivering grace” (p. 201). Finally, “love is a specific commitment of the heart to a specific person that causes you to give yourself to a specific lifestyle of care” that has that specific person in mind potentially at great cost to you (p. 201). That is a love that is *cruciform*.

READING REFLECTION: Take your time. Give this some thought. Write down your answers. Pray for God to make clear how you should answer.

1. Where do you see yourself needing to be more trustworthy in marriage?

2. Take a look at the four different aspects of the *cruciform* definition of love. Love that is willing self-sacrifice for the good of another does not require reciprocation or that the person being loved is deserving. Take some time to define each aspect and ask yourself what area you need to focus on.
 - a. Love is willing -
 - b. Love is self sacrifice -
 - c. For the good of another -
 - d. That does not require reciprocation or that the person is deserving -

3. Love is often willing to overlook flaws and weaknesses in order to praise the good things in someone. What are some things about your spouse you are thankful for? Write them out and make time to tell your spouse these things this week.

4. Would you say you are more committed in marriage to winning or to unity? Why do you think this is? Remember, do not confuse unity with fake peace and non-confrontation. These are two different things!

5. When your spouse brings up an issue they have with you, how do you normally respond?

6. Do you do things for your spouse in order to have them return the favor? Do you get angry when you feel you aren’t receiving anything for what you do? How does what Jesus has done help us to not expect anything in return for our kindness towards our spouse?



Scripture of the week:

For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”
Luke 18:14

Week Six Gospel Truth:

Knowing we are all imperfect sinners saved by grace, I have freedom not to compare myself to or look down on my spouse. (Luke 18:9-14).

How does this apply for you today?



WEEK 6: DAY 3 - ON YOUR OWN

Before Dark

There are seven steps that will work to strengthen the unity, understanding, and love of your marriage and also help you work through your differences.

First, we have to *face the reality* that Scripture places before us. The Bible doesn't sugarcoat our world. "Scripture is brutally honest" and yet, still, "on the other hand, the Bible is the most hopeful and encouraging book you could ever read" (p. 122-123). Biblical realism allows us to "face [our] differences with honesty and hope even on days when those differences seem huge, and unity seems distant."

Second, we must *deal honestly with anger*. "One of the most important steps in dealing with your differences is to admit to, and own, the things that are going on in your heart" (p. 223). By the standards of our little kingdoms, where our plans are the ultimate standard for how things should go, God's timing feels incredibly slow. When you live for your own kingdom, frustration is inevitable. We have to be honest with God, our spouse, and ourselves and own up to the moments when we just aren't getting our way and we aren't happy about it.

Third, we must commit to *communicating in ways that are wholesome*. "It is possible to never raise your voice, never use a curse word, and never call [your spouse] an unkind name, yet still to be proud, unkind, unwilling to change and more worried about what you want than what the other needs. Wholesome communication is "other-focused and other-directed" (p. 225). Unity-strengthening communication is *edifying*; it builds up. Being different than our spouse is not our main problem. Responding sinfully to our differences is the problem.

Fourth, we must *run to our resources*. "The community of help that God has designed for you is the church" (p. 227). People are one of the primary ways in which God speaks truth to us! We should take advantage of the ministry of the church. We receive spiritual nourishment and sustenance through the reading and preaching of God's Word. Secondly, our relationships thrive through inclusion in small groups of believers. Be open with others. Be honest with others. Be receptive to others. In this way, God is uniquely present with us.

Fifth, we must *resist the lies of the enemy*. Satan will whisper two deadly lies into your ears. The first lie is, "It's not your fault." He wants you to believe you are okay. He wants you to believe you don't need to grow and change. "The enemy of your soul and your marriage will whisper this in your ear as well: "You don't have enough [of what it takes to sustain your marriage.] He will tempt you to give in and give up. He will tempt you to run and hide." (p. 227, 228) The reality is, we don't have what it takes, but there is hope! Jesus will give us everything we need if we are willing to ask and receive it. "We must be wise and alert, good soldiers in the war that is being fought for control of our hearts" (p. 228).

Sixth, we need to *create something new*, striving for a daily commitment to cooperation. Commitment to a union that is so beautifully woven together that the only term that could be used for it is "one flesh." (p. 228) Are you living two separate lives? Does it feel like you are on different teams? There is a reason why God calls married people into a union of one flesh. It takes intentional



effort and saying “no” to your preferences to have a healthy, love-filled marriage. It is a beautiful thing when you have two people who are committed to sacrificial service to their spouse. This is a daily commitment that we must renew as often as we can.

Seventh, we must *humbly admit our ongoing struggle*. It does not stop. We have to be okay with falling short. We have to be willing to give grace in moments of weakness. However, this takes work and does not come easy. We will never become grace graduates.

READING REFLECTION: Take your time. Give this some thought. Write down your answers. Pray for God to make clear how you should answer.

1. Is it harder for you to receive grace or give grace? How can what Jesus sacrificed for you help you to move towards forgiveness?
2. Have you been honest about the frustration and anger you harbor against your spouse?
3. Can you see ways your communication has not been others-focused, but instead selfish and self-focused?
4. In times of trouble, have you and your spouse run to community or towards isolation? Why do you think that is?

Scripture of the week:

For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”
Luke 18:14

Week Six Gospel Truth:

Knowing we are all imperfect sinners saved by grace, I have freedom not to compare myself to or look down on my spouse. (Luke 18:9-14).

How does this apply for you today?



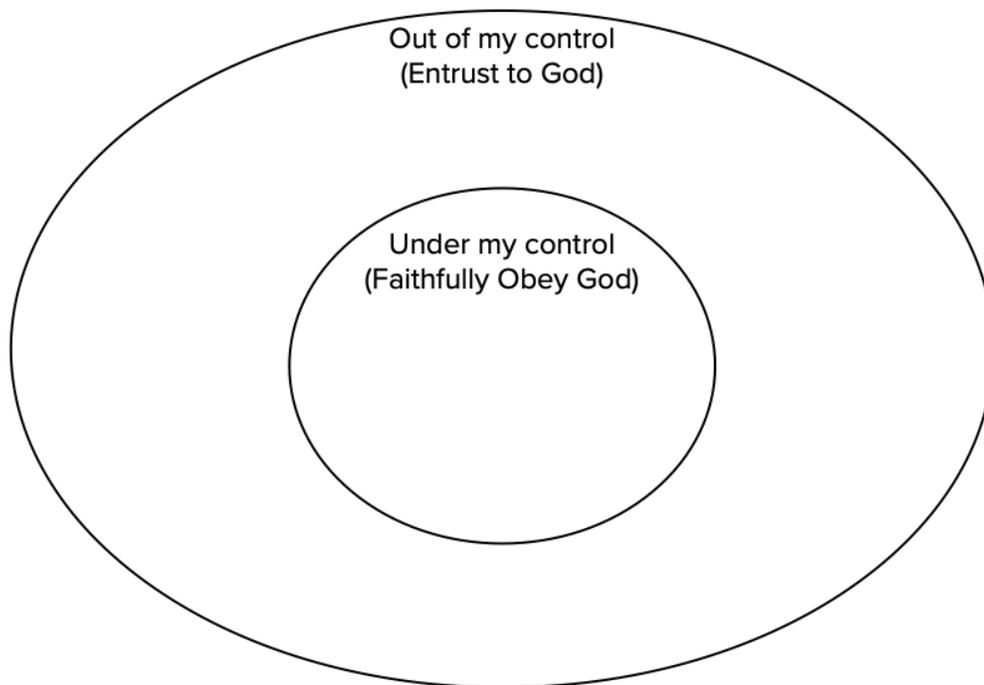
WEEK 6: DAY 4 - TOGETHER

Control

Control can hold us hostage in marriage. Sometimes, we have to leave things up to our spouse, or leave them up to God. For example, it is not my job to control what my spouse does when I am at work. This is their job and in the hands of God. When I try to steal control away, I can damage my relationship with God and with those I love. When we try to control things that are not ours to control, we can crush our spouse with guilt, shame, threat and manipulation.

Take a moment to consider, what are the things we try to control that are ours to control? What are the things we try to control that are not ours to control? Consider these things. Fill in the diagram below.

- Sickness
- Job loss
- Spouse's mental health
- Spouse's relationship with God
- My relationship with God
- My responses
- My spouse's responses to me
- Salvation of my kids



WEEK SIX CONVERSATION PRIMER

Arrive at Stonegate by 7:00, find a quiet place to talk, and spend 15 minutes together discussing the following. Be in the large group gathering by 7:15.

Create a safe place by giving your spouse an avenue for honesty. Ask them questions and allow them to be straightforward with you. This is meant to help you to create a culture where your wife/husband feels safe telling you difficult things.

Thankfulness: Love Begins with Humility

16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. **17** And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. **Colossians 3: 16-17**

Talk with your spouse

We've given you a lot of hard truths to think through in our first four weeks. Let's take a moment and give thanks! Take a few minutes and write down as many things about your spouse as you can and share these with them. Write them down before you share. Don't sit there and ponder! These don't have to be complete thoughts. Just prompts to help you share them.

Was it difficult to think of more than five? Why or why not?

How did you feel about the things your spouse shared?



WEEK SEVEN: MOVING FORWARD IN LOVE

Gospel Commitment:
We will work to protect our marriage.



WEEK 7: DAY 2 - ON YOUR OWN

All You Need is Love

Sadly, many marriages are loveless. In fact, we can say that there is something of a love drought in marriages. When it comes to love, we have two problems. First, there are many things we call love that simply do not rise to the level of how God defines love and we lack a clear definition of what love is. Second, many couples would say they have a pretty normal marriage, but this is because what should be abnormal to them has become so regular it's a "new normal". Their problem is not that they are disappointed with their marriage, but they "are all too satisfied with something that falls way short of what God designed a marriage to be". (p.168)

Many of us become comfortable in our marriages settling for sinful and destructive lifestyles even though it feels and appears harmless. We become all too good at getting along, making do, and hoping for the best. We unknowingly settle for less than what God has designed for us in marriage. "When we do this, we don't look for help and we don't work for change. Rather than fixing what is broken, we have learned to live with it as if it's not [broken]." (p. 170)

It's not always easy to see how we are living outside of God's design. These are some indicators of how this could be playing out in your marriage. Ask God to open your eyes to things you may have become blind to.

1.) *Disunity* is the kind of self-love that hates difference... that makes you impatient... that makes you want your own way... that makes winning more attractive than unity" (p. 171)."Unity happens when love intersects with difference." Unity is not the product of sameness; our differences are something that reflect God's glory in creation. As our sovereign Creator, "He chooses to bring different people into intimate relationship with one another for His honor and their good."

2.) *Misunderstanding* is the brand of self-love "that makes you more committed to *what you understand* than to understanding your spouse...it causes you not to listen well" (p. 171). It keeps you from viewing your spouse's words, perspectives, desires, and opinions as valuable. It causes you to be so filled with what you think and know that you have little room for your spouse's thoughts. Love values the words of the other person and celebrates the process of understanding the other person as much as the result.

3.) *Separation* chokes real love. Many couples are comfortable with a relational "cold war", turning their marriage away from loving pursuit into mere coexistence. They live together, but yet live separately, becoming masters at giving one another space and studiously avoiding any topic that might take them down a path towards potential conflict. Love is willing to make the painful sacrifice that togetherness can demand. "*Is your marriage more a picture of cohabitation than it is a relationship?*" (p.172)

4.) *Physical dysfunction* brings guilt-ridden, obligatory sex into the marriage and lacks the true intimacy that God intends for us to have. What happens in the bedroom is often an indicator of what is happening in the rest of the marriage. "What diverts and destroys physical sexuality is a lack of love." (p. 173) If your relationship isn't a daily act of love, there is little chance that sex will be. "Love



sees sex as an act and celebration of the relationship between self-sacrifice [and affection] that the marriage is all about.” (p. 173)

5.) *Conflict* also threatens active love. “When you love someone, you are willing to overlook minor weaknesses, irritations, and offenses, because you do not want anything to interrupt your life together. When you love someone, you are willing to forgive, serve, wait, listen, consider, examine your motives, and make personal sacrifices - all things that create and build peace in a relationship. “*If conflict between you and your spouse does not cause you grief, what is being exposed is a failure to love.*” (p. 174)

When you commit to examining the quality of love in your marriage, it is important to realize that counterfeit love wears convincing masks. Counterfeit love can be disguised in physical attraction, emotional connection, cultural continuity, or even a spiritual connection, but all of these things can be self-love wearing the mask of true love. Are you attracted to someone because they are easy and enjoyable to be with and the relationship is effortless? It can be easy to convince ourselves we are experiencing love simply because we love the ease and enjoyment of a relationship.

What about you? Could there be a love drought in your marriage? Is it possible that self-love has been masquerading as true love? We need to step back and recommit ourselves to true love. Perhaps God will use this to “ignite new desire and a renewed commitment to change. Perhaps this will begin a process of redeeming the realities of your marriage”.

1. Often we use people for our own benefit; this is not true love, but self love. Can you identify evidence of this in your marriage?
2. Disunity: Differences between you and your spouse are not inherently sinful, but actually God given, and by design. In what ways does your spouse reflect the image of God that may be different than how you reflect the image of God? How can you celebrate these differences?
3. Misunderstanding: Do you often feel misunderstood or unheard in your marriage? Evaluate yourself. Would your spouse characterize you as an engaged listener with intention to understand?
4. Separation: In marriage God calls us to live as one. How have you created separate worlds in your home that have caused distance to form between you and your spouse?



Scripture of the Week:

²⁰Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Week Seven Gospel Truth:

Jesus gave everything in order to reconcile us with God. Because of this, we are able to reconcile with our spouse, even when the worst happens. (2 Corinthians 5:17-21) How can you apply this truth today?



WEEK 7: DAY 3 - TOGETHER

Amazing Grace

The powerful and gracious hand of God is the driving force behind our marriages. No one plans to struggle in marriage, but we all do. People don't think differences between them and their spouse will in some way bring them to the end of themselves, but such differences always do. This is where it is vital to understand that the story of the Bible is the only thing that can make sense out of the story of your life and your marriage.

The biblical story begins with the Creator; this world and everything in it is a constant display of the creative artistry of God. If you stop and think about all of the differences in creation...the colors, the textures, the sounds...these differences are all a display of his incredible creativity. Here we realize, “everything that makes up your husband—what he looks like, his innate gifts, and his particular personality—came out of the mind of an incredibly creative designer” (p. 209). God creates sameness, but He also delights in difference. “Unity in marriage is not the result of sameness.” Instead, “unity is, rather, the result of what a husband and wife do in the face of the inevitable differences that exist in the lives of every married couple” (p. 210).

Here are the implications that we find in the creation narrative. First, we learn to *celebrate our Creator*. “The more you look at your spouse and see the imprint of God’s fingers and are amazed, the more you will be able to resist the temptation to try to remake him or her in your own image” (p. 210). We will see our differences as a celebration of God's creativity, as well as an opportunity to deal with your differences in a way that builds a sturdy bond of unity.

Second, since God shapes us all in specific and unique ways, we should respond to differences with both appreciation and respect. How we respond to those differences says “more about your relationship with God than...about your relationship with your husband or wife” (p. 211).

Finally, it is good to “admit where these differences challenge you to grow.” These differences both reflect God’s glory and expose our own deficiencies (p. 212).

We learn from Acts 17:24-27 that God is intimately involved in the details of our lives. He is in absolute control. “He has a purpose for the situations and locations in which He places us.” “So, this means that marriage, the world’s most long-term and comprehensive relationship, is taking place in the middle of sanctification, the world’s most important unfinished process” and also that God means to use every part of it, both good and bad (p. 214). This covenant bond is a primary tool for personal change and growth. God uses three main “tools of difference” to reveal and change our hearts (p. 216).

First, there are differences in “personal hardwiring” planted in us from God. This would include introversion or extroversion, shyness or boldness in personality, emotional or intellectual demeanor, etc.

Second, there are personal differences, viewpoints, and instincts. Some people come to beliefs quickly while others take more time. Likewise, our family histories shape the patterns we think are “the ways things are done”. That is until we live with another person who does things differently.

Third, there are differences that stem from sin and weakness. “Change begins when we see these differences as grace rather than obstructions of grace.” (p. 216)



It is so important to remember these three things are not to be perceived as potholes to be avoided on the road to a good marriage, but rather as effective instruments of change in the hands of a loving, wise, & faithful Redeemer. He is worth trusting, even in those moments when it is hard for us to trust one another. Why is this true? Because, no matter what the motives of our spouse may be, our Savior is up to something good.

When you are tired and uncomfortable because you have been called to live with someone who is not like you, what you tell yourself in that moment is very important. It is in this moment that you must preach to yourself the theology of uncomfortable grace (Romans 5, James 1, & 1 Peter 1), remembering that we are called to trust our Creator in these moments, knowing that He will use it all for our good. "Remember that when you resist, you are not first resisting your husband or wife; you are resisting God." (p. 217)

Again, we are not alone. God is with us in the struggle. "Not only has God determined the situations and relationships in which you will live, but He is with you in them." (p. 217) It really is a gorgeous plan; in your marriage God will take you where you never thought you would go in order to give you what you could not achieve on your own." (p. 217).

READING REFLECTION: Take your time. Give this some thought. Write down your answers. Pray for God to make clear how you should answer.

- Next, we are going to take a quiz on our individual wirings and how we specifically receive love. Go online to this website and take the quiz together:

<https://www.5lovelanguages.com/profile/couples/>

Are your results surprising? How do they differ from what you thought about yourself?

- In what ways have both results opened up your eyes to the needs of your spouse? How can this help you more effectively serve them?

Scripture of the Week:

²⁰Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Week Seven Gospel Truth:

Jesus gave everything in order to reconcile us with God. Because of this, we are able to reconcile with our spouse, even when the worst happens. (2 Corinthians 5:17-21)

How can you apply this truth today?



WEEK 7: DAY 4 - TOGETHER

Eyes Wide Open

Marriages weaken when couples quit living as one and begin “living separately together.” There is a sometimes subtle, yet dramatic difference between standing together as one to fight the things that threaten your marriage and standing separately, while keeping a record of the things the other does that makes the marriage difficult for you.

“Standing together is an act of relational commitment; standing separately is a posture of self-preservation and survival. Standing together strengthens a marriage; standing separately weakens it. Standing together draws you closer together as you learn to protect yourself from your weaknesses; standing separately tears you apart as weaknesses morph into accusations and judgements. Standing together makes you growingly aware and merciful in the face of struggle; standing separately causes you to be impatient and intolerant of your spouse's struggle. Standing together leads you to seek God together; standing separately causes you to seek escape separately. Standing together leads you to hope; standing separately reinforces your despair.” (p. 234)

“[God] intended marital hardship to drive you to His grace and, as it does, to cause you to grow and mature together. He also ordained these changes in you, and your marriage, to be a process and not an event” (p. 237). Instead of seeing this process as a grace from God to grow and change us, we do everything we can to escape the difficulties of marriage. The great threat here is coasting rather than doing the work that marriage requires. “Things go wrong when couples think they have reached the point when they can retire from their marital work and chill out, lie back, and slide.” It comes on in numerous forms and we are susceptible to them all.

What does it look like to coast? It begins with *visual lethargy*, which is blindness caused by familiarity and routine. Just as we eventually forget road markers on the familiar route to the office, we can forget to invest in our marriage. As the years roll on we lose focus, and with lack of focus comes lack of intentionality. We quit paying attention, and quit noticing things that need our attention. And because we quit noticing, we also quit working on the things that needed work (p. 240). Marriages thrive due to a commitment to healthy habits, and coasting happens when we are *inconsistent in our habits*. The greater the inconsistency, the easier it is for the marriage to feel like it is plagued with an insurmountable set of problems. When this happens it is easy to feel overwhelmed with the thought of continuing onward.

Laziness is another sign of relational coasting. The culture is plagued by lazy marriages. “[People] want good marriages, but they just don’t want to do the daily work necessary to keep them healthy” (p. 243). Ironically, the very opposite, *impatience*, can be a sign of coasting. “When I resist the processes that make a marriage beautiful and demand things in an instant, I am not resisting marriage or resisting my wife; no, I am resisting God” (p. 243). “God’s goal is that your marriage would be a major tool in His wise and loving hands to rescue you from claustrophobic self-worship and form you into a person who lives for nothing smaller than His kingdom, His righteousness, and His glory” (p. 244). We are also not pressing forward when we *respond in discouragement*. “We will struggle at



moments with disappointment, and we will wonder if things will ever get better, and the fear of things staying the same will grip us.” Where do we turn for hope? “Well, you don’t get it from your husband or wife. No, you get it from the third person in your marriage, the person we are tempted to forget” (p. 245). God Himself is that third party.

Lastly, we must not dine with the Enemy. “When you quit paying attention, let go of good habits, allow yourself to be lazy and impatient, and respond in discouragement, you are inviting the Devil into your marriage to do his nasty work of deceit, division, and destruction” (p. 246). We must be watchful. We must learn the importance of being committed to watch and pray no matter how good things get. And we must learn to respond in hope no matter how bad things get. We can push forward because we are never alone (p. 247).

READING REFLECTION: Take your time. Give this some thought. Write down your answers. Pray for God to make clear how you should answer.

1. How have you allowed routine and laziness to lead you towards neglect and coasting in your marriage? Do you see that leading towards "living separately together"? If so, take some time to confess that to the Lord, then confess and repent to your spouse.
2. Do you ever feel overwhelmed with everything wrong in your marriage? How can you pray about this?
3. Do you tend to get lazy when it comes to change in marriage or do you tend to get hopeless when it comes to change?
4. How can Jesus be a help to you moving forward?



WEEK SEVEN: CONVERSATION PRIMER

Arrive at Stonegate by 7:00, find a quiet place to talk, and spend 15 minutes together discussing the following. Be in the large group gathering by 7:15.

Moving Forward: Next Steps

Let's take a moment to think through what is next for you. We have not reached the finish line. If anything, this is the next chapter and a new starting line. The real questions are: What are your next steps? What are you going to commit to doing differently to bless your marriage?

Consider these powerful gospel commitments as an action summary for you:

COMMITMENT 1

We will give ourselves to a regular lifestyle of confession and forgiveness.

COMMITMENT 2

We will make growth and change our daily agenda.

COMMITMENT 3

We will work together to build a sturdy bond of trust.

COMMITMENT 4

We will commit to building a relationship of love.

COMMITMENT 5

We will deal with our differences with appreciation and grace.

COMMITMENT 6

We will work to protect our marriage.



Habits in Your Life?

What are three sinful habits that need to be put to death in you? (Romans 6:12-14)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

What are three righteous habits that you need the Lord to grow in you?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Accountability:

- If you are in a Home Group, invite the leaders or a trusted Group friend into your marriage. Who is that person? If you aren't in a Group, which one will you join?
- Invite your Group leader, mentor couple or trusted friend into your struggle. Ask them to help hold you accountable to break these old habits and create these new ones. Spend time also inviting your spouse into this with you. They are here to help you carry your burdens! Will you promise to touch base with one or both of these people once per month?

We pray that this program has served you well. Take the opportunity to set up at least one meeting with your mentor couple to process through the things you have learned. Grab dinner or coffee and talk with them about what it looks like to move forward.

We are so grateful that God brought you into this class! We pray for real change, restoration and reconciliation. Ask God to help you move forward in repentance.

Please feel free to email us if you have any additional needs. We would love to serve you!
care@stonegate.church

Benediction:

¹⁴For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. - Ephesians 3:14-19



ADDITIONAL READING AND REFLECTION

Day by Day

Repentance and reconciliation are not meant to be an infrequent event in a marriage, but a lifestyle. For the health and strength of marriage, we must have a “little-moment approach.” (p. 57-58). Each little moment we make choices that determine the long-term health and unity of our marriage. We must think and act strategically. Without this approach, we fight for our own way, complain about the other’s foibles and weaknesses, and fail to seize opportunities for encouragement. Why does such inattention take root? “There is an epidemic of marital laziness among us,” and this laziness is rooted in sinful self-centeredness (p. 59).

As we approach repentance and reconciliation as a lifestyle, we come to realize our daily need to be reconciled to God and one another intentionally. This repentant reconciliation lifestyle is fundamentally rooted in three wisdom perspectives.

First, we must live in our marriages with a harvest mentality. We read in Gal. 6:7, “Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.” “Every day you harvest relational plants that have come from the seeds of words and actions that you previously planted” (p. 63). A careless word spoken today can hurt for a long time. A thoughtful act of sacrifice can encourage for years to come.

Second, you must live with an investment mentality. “Every treasure you set your heart on and actively seek will give you some kind of return; how is the return on those investments shaping my marriage?” The things that we will ultimately rule how we treat our spouse. Do we love our beauty? We will resent them when they don’t find us attractive. Do we love our house? We will grow bitter when they don’t keep it clean just the way we want.

Third, you must live with a grace mentality. “The laws, principles, and perspectives of Scripture provide the best standard ever for our marriages to quest for. They can reveal our wrongs and failures, but they have no capacity whatsoever to deliver us from them. For that, we need the daily grace that only Jesus can give us.” (p. 64)

Iron sharpening iron is God’s way. He establishes beauty by putting things that are different next to each other. Isn’t this exactly what God does in marriage? He puts very different people next to each other. This is how He establishes the beauty of marriage. The moon would not be so striking if it hung in a white sky; in the same way, the stunning beauty of a marriage is when two very different people learn to celebrate and benefit from their differences.

When we deeply believe this about God’s plan, we are freed to see the difficulties of marriage “not so much as hassles to be endured but as opportunities to enter into an even deeper experience of the rescuing, transforming, forgiving, empowering grace of the one who died for us and is always with us” (p. 64).

And so we cultivate daily commitments of reconciliation. Do we give ourselves to a regular lifestyle of repentance, confession, and forgiveness? Do we come clean and deal honestly with our sin, weakness, and failure? Do we prioritize growth and change on our agenda? Do we work together with



our spouse to make a sturdy bond of trust, committing to building a relationship of love? Do we deal with our differences with both appreciation and grace? Do we work to protect our marriage?

READING REFLECTION: Take your time. Give this some thought. Write down your answers. Pray for God to make clear how you should answer.

1. Consider the little day by day moments in your marriage. What impact do you think they have had on your long-term health and unity in your relationship? What things need more of your attention?
2. If the way you treat your spouse was considered a seed, what do you think the harvest would produce?
3. What does it mean to live with a grace mentality? Why is it so important?
4. **If iron sharpens iron, that means none of us are perfectly honed and sharpened without another. In what ways are you seeing God sharpening you by way of your spouse?**
5. How do you see God using the difficulties in your marriage to grow you and your spouse closer to each other and to Him?

