

PRE-ENGAGEMENT COUNSELING



== **W O R K B O O K** ==

CAMPUS OUTREACH BIRMINGHAM



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PREFACE

This workbook is meant to be used for a couple that has been seriously dating and is now considering engagement and marriage. It is ideal to go through this book before a ring is bought, a church is booked or a father is asked the big question, "May I marry your daughter?" It can be used in different times or ways, but it's best to use this before the whole process of being engaged even starts.

It's also ideal to have at least one married mentor walk through this booklet with you. The best way is to have a married couple you trust and respect meet with you a handful of times to discuss the content of this booklet as well as our answers to the questions in each section. This whole process can typically be done in roughly a month. Sometimes it may go a little quicker. Sometimes it may go a little longer. Some of that depends on how often you can meet. I would recommend trying to cover a couple of lessons each time you meet.

All parties involved (the dating couple and the married mentor(s)) should read one chapter at a time. The dating couple should answer the question or questions that follow. Then they should all meet together to discuss the chapter as well as the answers.

The dating couple should also start meeting together at least once a week to have a "spiritual date" so to speak. The purpose is to make sure each other is reading the chapter for that week and taking it seriously. It's great to pray together during this time.

Pre-engagement is a season where the gloves come off. No question is off limits. When you buy a house, it

is a huge investment. You typically pay a professional to inspect the house, to crawl around in the basement to make sure the foundation isn't cracked and there are no termites etc...

Getting married is a much bigger investment than buying a house. Take it seriously. It is the second most important decision you ever make in your life. It's a lifelong commitment.

Some people ask, "Won't this ruin the surprise?" Not necessarily. I've done this with dozens of couples and almost all of them were still able to maintain surprise about when and how they popped the big question. But even if it ruins the surprise that is a small price to pay to make sure you are marrying the right person at the right time in the right way. Getting engaged should be something that fills us with joy. It should also make us very sober minded. Don't enter into this commitment lightly or half-heartedly.

INTRODUCTION

One of the best things my wife and I did while dating was pre-engagement counseling. Many are unfamiliar with this concept but it can be beneficial. The distinctions below are from common wisdom and obviously not Biblical mandates. Some of these concepts would ideally be fulfilled by godly parents, but with the breakdown of the family, fewer children are raised in homes where they will get wise counsel to help choose a spouse.

Why

Divorce has become more prevalent and accepted in our society. For that reason it makes sense that we should take extra precautions to prevent bad marriages. I had a friend who got divorced. He later said, "I knew we weren't supposed to be married while we were engaged. But too much money had already been spent on the ceremony and reception. Invitations had gone out. It would've been too embarrassing and hard to break the engagement." This story is a great example of why pre-engagement counseling can be such a helpful thing.

How's this any different than pre-marriage counseling?

Pre-engagement counseling should ideally focus on answering two main questions. Should the couple in question get married? If so, when should they ideally do so? Pre-marriage counseling should come after

engagement and focuses on how to be married. How to deal with sex, money, conflict, in-laws, etc. Obviously there is often some overlap. Better safe than sorry. Better too much counseling than not enough.

When

I tell couples who are dating to start pre-engagement counseling once they both reach a place where they think *I'm in love and ready to get married*. This whole concept is built off multiple Proverbs (12:15; 13:10; 19:20) that counsel us to seek counsel. One of the major topics in Proverbs is choosing a godly spouse. It stands to reason that this decision, one of the most important of our lives, should be saturated in godly counsel.

Who

It's best to find an older wiser couple that knows both of them well. This is often not possible. The second best option is an older, wiser couple that knows at least one of you well. This can be godly parents or a pastor, elder, mentor, etc. It could be done by one person, but it's ideal to have a married couple.

What

The first thing that should be done is to hear both of the dating couples' testimonies. The Bible teaches that a Christian shouldn't marry a non-Christian. If one person is a Christian and the other isn't, they obviously shouldn't be married. It's amazing how many Christians can 'fall for' someone who may be moral but isn't a Christ follower.

Secondly, questions should be asked to see how spiritually mature they are. Are they pursuing Christ more than they are pursuing each other? Are they serious

about fighting sin? Do they look to Christ for ultimate fulfillment and not to each other?

Clarify if both have a Biblical picture of marriage, the role of husbands and wives, and the seriousness of the vows they want to take (Genesis 1:25-31, 2:15-25, Ephesians 5:21-33). Biblical passages on how divorce should only be sought as a last resort in rare situations should be discussed (Matthew 19:3-12, 1 Corinthians 7:15). It's helpful for the married couple to share honest stories about the hardships of marriage.

It's important to ask questions about their families of origin. This helps everyone better understand the assumptions and desires they are bringing into marriage and how differing expectations may clash. If the woman's mom was a stay at home mom, she may desire and expect the same for herself. If the man's mother worked a career, he may want his wife to do the same.

We tell couples that pre-engagement is really a conversation between them that we are facilitating. No question is unacceptable. The couple should tell each other about their past sexual history. It's not wise to go into graphic detail but they should be free to ask any question.

We also ask the couples to tell us about each other's weaknesses. If they can't really share anything about the other person that bothers them, this is a sure sign that they have on "love goggles" and aren't in any state of mind to make a life-long commitment.

How Long

The process may last a few weeks to a few months depending on the needs. Most meetings should be all four people together. It's best to have at least one meeting where the men meet alone and the women meet alone. In this meeting any concerns can be brought up that someone may not feel comfortable sharing with the whole group.

Ending

Sometimes couples should be advised to wait and mature more before engagement. Other times couples may need to hear that they shouldn't be married. When everything looks good, I usually tell the guy alone so that he can retain some degree of surprise in popping the question.

My Story

My wife and I had known each other for years and had been dating for months when we both thought we were ready to marry. I got advice from my parents. My wife lived with a mentor and her family after college. We asked that couple to do pre-engagement. We had some hard conversations with them about marriage but I'm glad we did. My parents and the other couple agreed we should get married.

Our first year of marriage was hard. One thought God used to strengthen both of us was, *This wasn't our*

decision alone. We weren't two young emotional kids deciding to marry alone. Four of the godliest, wisest people we know signed off on this. They weren't emotionally invested like we were. They were objective. This truth gave us a lot of hope that helped us turn a corner and pull out of a seemingly dead end. Pre-engagement counseling has been and can be a huge help to dating and married couples.

4. Why do you want to do pre-engagement counseling?

5. Do you have any fears or concerns about doing pre-engagement counseling?

6. Have you discussed these fears or concerns with your significant other?

ONE: TESTIMONIES

Before people knew about marriage or even about one another, they knew about God. Adam and Eve both met God before they met each other. Marriage was meant to be the most important relationship between two humans. But it was never meant to be the most important relationship a human has.

The first priority for every person, male and female, is their relationship with God. Or at least it should be. It is the most important relationship in your life whether you believe in God or not. Even if you ignore him, your relationship, or lack thereof, will be the most consequential relationship of your life.

Furthermore, so much of marriage and dating is about learning to love one another well. God is the author of love. To learn to love well, we must first study the way God has loved us.

Put God before Marriage

Seeing your relationship with God as the most important relationship of your life has at least three implications for your dating and marriage life. First, we should all focus on our relationship with God before we focus on a relationship with a boyfriend or girlfriend. Focus on getting to know God before you focus on getting to know a potential mate.

I heard someone say, 'Focus on becoming the right person before finding the right person.' The best way to become the right person to marry is to focus on your walk with God. God is ultimately the one that can best prepare you for dating and marriage.

The most important foundation for a great dating relationship isn't the shape of your body or the color of your hair. It's not the coolness of your personality or the quickness of your wit. Spend more time in your Bible than in the gym or in front of the mirror. Lay an eternal foundation for this important relationship.

Spend time focusing on your character, godliness and spiritual growth. Develop your soul. Spend time with God.

Set time aside each day to read your Bible, maybe just a chapter a day. Pray, maybe just for a few minutes each day. Pray about your dating life and future potential marriage.

Go to church. Listen to others teach the Bible. Surround yourself with good Christian friends whom you can talk openly and honestly with about all your life, including your love life.

This is so important for many reasons. Dating and marriage can be very hard, even when done well. They don't typically work out well for the spiritually immature. To date and marry with wisdom takes spiritual strength and fortitude that most people lack today. Do yourself a favor. Start now and begin preparing the depths of your soul to handle the strain of marriage. You can't do this overnight or last minute. That attempt will often backfire. Furthermore, all people including atheists are meant to have the deepest needs of their souls met by God. This can only happen through a prioritized relationship with Him. This takes time. Learn to really depend on God through each and every area of your life.

If your deepest needs and desires aren't being progressively met by God, you'll go into marriage at a deficit. You won't be nearly as prepared as you might think you are. You'll be hyper needy and dependent. No one wants to be married to someone like that for very long. You are setting yourself up for failure.

If God isn't at the center of your life, meeting your needs, you will go into marriage with unrealistic expectations. Your demeanor will be demanding. You will crush your mate with overwhelming, unending desires. It won't be pretty.

If your mate doesn't have God at the center of their life, they'll do the same to you. You will essentially be two ticks with no dogs. Eventually, you'll run out of recycled blood. It won't last long. You'll eat each other alive. You may be in such a relationship right now. The demands may not be spoken, but you know what I'm talking about. You can feel the pressure. If you're in this kind of subtly toxic relationship, run for your lives. Barring a supernatural miracle, it won't get better in marriage. It'll only get worse and more suffocating. Please hear me. My heart's desire is that you have a happy and healthy marriage. With Christ, that really is possible. Without Him, it's a fantasy. Start now by spending more time getting to know Christ than you do anyone else in your life.

God has created us with good desires for things like satisfaction, significance, security, friends, acceptance and love. None of these things are bad in and of themselves. They are bad when we try to find them apart from God's ways and timing.

A relationship without God at the center will leave two people bitter and exhausted. You'll be bitter that your mate couldn't meet your desires and didn't live up to all of your dreams. They'll be exhausted from trying. They'll also be mad and hurt that you had such unrelenting demands on them. You'll feel the same way towards them. You'll eventually harden your hearts to one another whether you actually break up or not. You will both feel immense disappointment, disillusionment, confusion and pain. It's not worth it!

Make Sure They Put God Before You

Make sure whoever you date is pursuing God more than they are pursuing you. It's ideal to know this before the first date (even if you have to Facebook stalk someone to find out). But that's not always possible. You have to be sure of this before you move to engagement and marriage.

If you don't know, this should be your main goal in the relationship. Figure out if they love God more than you. That's more important than the size of his biceps or the sound of her laugh.

It's not wrong to want to marry a girl with blond hair. It's not sin to want to marry a guy that drives a cool car. But those things should be so low on the priority list that they're barely worth mentioning.

Your main priority must be 'I want to marry someone who's godly!' Yes, you should want to marry someone who loves you. That's obvious to most of us. But what's most important often isn't as obvious. You should mainly

want to marry someone who loves Christ more than they love you!

Do they love Christ more than they love you? Do they see and admit their sinfulness? Are they humble? Are they repentant?

Do they understand the gospel? Do they delight in the mercy of God? Does God's kindness motivate them to obey? These are the types of crucial questions that ought to dominate your mind about the person you are considering marrying, not how much money they make or how smart they are.

Keeping Christ at the Center

Lastly, make sure you keep Christ at the center. This is more easily said than done. I've known many strong Christians that started dating, fell in love and quickly put Christ on the back burner.

Falling in love (or in like) can be like falling into the path of a strong magnetic beam. It can be distracting and disturbing in a good way. But we can lose our focus on the Giver of all good gifts and rather become too fixated and fascinated with one of His gifts. Don't let this happen to you.

It's sometimes easy to pursue Christ in singleness well but to lose that focus in dating and marriage. As all of our emotions and hormones start to flutter, our focus can subtly shift. This might happen overnight or over months, but the result is the same. This is dangerous for all the reasons we've already discussed.

When my wife and I were dating and engaged, we struggled with this. We were both very serious about our faith but early in our relationship, we found we were both somewhat infatuated with one another. We wanted to spend every waking moment with each other. This wasn't realistic, but we did try to spend as much of our free time together as was possible.

My wife had a great idea to address this problem. She suggested that we should each commit to not spending time with one another, face to face or on the phone, until we'd both spent time first with God. This was very helpful for us and it might be for you as well.

Now, there's no verse that says you have to do this. 'Thou shalt read Thy Bible before the big date' isn't in 2nd Hezekiah. So, don't turn this into a legalistic 'have to'. It is just a suggested application.

I will say, if we make it a habit of thinking about Biblical principles but never figuring out a way to apply them, then we are in danger of being hearers of the Word only and not doers. This will leave us worse than if we were just ignorant of the Bible in many ways. Prayerfully figure out how you can apply these truths in your life.

My wife and I didn't always do this. When we did, it wasn't a guarantee that we'd never fight that night. Every time one of us missed our Bible reading for the day, it's not like we got into scandalous sin that night.

But there was something very practical about tangibly saying with our time and priorities 'Christ is more important to me than you are.' I do believe it helped

lay a great foundation for our dating and married relationship. Give it a try and see what you think.

Conclusion

Your relationship with God is more important than your relationship with anyone else, even a spouse. Do you really believe that? Does your life show that you believe that? It should.

Put Christ before your significant other. Only, there's one clear problem with this. You can easily interact physically with your boyfriend or girlfriend. You can't see, touch or hear Christ as simply and easily.

Still, the Bible tells us that if we are in Christ we have seen Christ with the eyes of our heart, the eyes of faith. Therefore, we must be all the more intentional to set the eyes of our hearts on Him constantly, repeatedly. We must lead ourselves to read, study, pray, listen and hear His voice through the words of the Bible.

Please prioritize Christ over a spouse and certainly over a potential spouse. He is your Creator. He will be the Savior of your soul if you will surrender to Him and trust Him.

Remember, Jesus prioritized you. He pursued you. He left the safety and security of heaven to come to earth to suffer and die in our place. It would have been easier and simpler for Him to stay in heaven and let us perish.

He literally loved us to death. He pursued us through death and hell. It cost Him dearly, but it was worth it. Pursue Him. It'll cost you, but it'll always be worth it!

4. What have been the major ways Christ has changed your life recently?

5. What does your relationship with Christ look like on a daily basis right now?

6. What's the main area you need to grow in spiritually right now?

TWO: SPIRITUAL DATE

My wife and I met with a couple for pre-marriage counseling. The man asked, "How can I be an expert on women?" I said, "Only God can do that. Just be an expert on your wife." My wife said, "Even your one wife will change at times!"

"Men and women are created differently in every cell of their bodies."¹ It doesn't take long to realize this truth. Many boyfriends and husbands feel lost in trying to apply 1 Peter 3:7. Peter gives women six verses of instruction. The man gets only one. Some would say women are just deeper than men.

This is an excellent summary of God's instruction to husbands about marriage. Live with understanding! Many husbands feel they want to and try to understand their wives but often fail. Why is this?

Part of it is pride. Peter says men have been made with more physical strength than women in general. For example men on average have 30% more upper body strength than women. But any strength can lead to arrogance that tends to look down on those weaker or different than us. Peter is instructing men to be patient and gentle with any and all differences that show up between them and their wives. This applies to all arenas of life.

Once my wife and I had an argument. I later vented to a friend about our misunderstanding. He asked, "Basically you want your wife to communicate like you?" "Yes!" I answered emphatically. "So you want to be married to a man?" he prodded.

1. James Dobson, *Love for a Lifetime* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books), 41.

I understood the point made through the friendly jab. I had chosen to marry this woman specifically because she was so different than me in many ways. I should enjoy all the differences rather than trying to conform her to my image.

Proverbs 20:5 is true of all people because we are made in God's image. There is more to us than meets the eye. This verse seems doubly true of women. But, if we are men of understanding we should be able to draw out the depths of others' hearts, including our girlfriends' and wives'. Practically, how can we best do this?

1 Peter 3:7 also speaks of a husband's prayer life. Does this mainly refer to a husband praying for his wife or with his wife? Maybe it means both. In my life, I have found a strong link between praying with and for my wife and understanding the depths of her heart.

Maybe the one most important thing any husband can do is pray with and for his wife. The same would be true of a man preparing to propose to a woman. I am shocked at how many godly couples do not regularly pray with one another. The burden lies on the man to make this happen as the head of the marriage.

My wife and I started this in pre-engagement and it was great for us. We would go to a public place like a chapel to pray so that we could have spiritual intimacy but not physical intimacy! Once married, we got out of this habit.

Early in marriage we ran into problems; my stubbornness and abrasiveness and her insecurity. It took us 4 years to find a way that worked well. Now it is one of the consistent highlights of our week.

We gave up on the practice of daily prayer together. My wife often goes to bed before me, so we often found ourselves rushed, offering a five second prayer before she dozed off. We decided to aim for quality over quantity.

Our practice is to meet for breakfast one morning a week. This works for our schedule, but it may not for others. Find your best time. Over coffee we catch up at a heart level. It's a spiritual date. The goal is to be open and honest with each other about the deepest things going on in our lives, especially where we feel the weakest. I jokingly call it "my weekly weakness report." We ask each other questions such as "How's your walk with God? How are you feeling about our kids? Are you mad at me about anything etc...?".

When we are done we go outside and sit in the car and pray together for about ten minutes. It is nothing supernatural, but I often feel like I'm getting a deep glimpse into my wife's soul. I'm not aware of anything that has contributed more to a healthy marriage than this weekly prayer time. It is not the only way that I pursue my wife, but it may be the main way.

This prayer time also makes it easier and more natural to bring up spiritual conversation with her anywhere and anytime. We usually end up praying a couple of other times throughout the week as something comes up. The weekly spiritual date sets the thermostat for the rest of our relationship in many ways.

I was counseling another couple whose marriage was in crisis. I asked both what was the one main thing they

could do to help fix their marriage. The wife responded quickly, "I need to pray out loud in front of my husband more, I rarely do. In most ways I seem like I have it all together, but when I pray I fall apart. I question God. I cry and scream. It's the real me. I don't want my husband to see me like that." Praying together with raw honesty is the most intimate thing we can do, in some ways, more intimate than sex. (That's why unmarried couples should be so careful in applying this.)

I often feel like my wife has layers of her heart that go deeper than mine. The only way that I can begin to truly understand her is to pray for God to give me insight but then also to pray with her. Listening to her pray has been life changing for our marriage and my understanding.

In praying together, I am reminded at once how alike we are and how different we are. We are so different in the ways we think, feel and process. But we are so similar in that we are both desperate sinners with no hope if we are left to ourselves. We have no strength except that given to us. Our only hope in this life and the next is ultimately that Christ has chosen to live with us in an understanding, compassionate, patient and gentle way. The more that I see and experience that grace afresh side by side with my wife, the more I am able to practice that same grace towards her, even when I don't fully understand her. Honor her by pursuing her regularly in prayer.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Have you ever prayed with your significant other before? Why or why not?

2. If so, where and when did you do it? If not, where and when might be the best time to do it?

3. What would be the most ideal time for y'all to meet weekly to talk and pray?

4. What do you think of the idea of having a spiritual date each week?

5. Are there any reasons you wouldn't want to have a spiritual date each week?

6. Take time to talk and plan a regular weekly time you can meet and discuss this workbook and pray together during pre-engagement counseling.

THREE: WHY DO YOU WANT TO MARRY?

Marriage is God's idea: one man and one woman joined for life. There have been different ways to choose a spouse over the centuries. Our culture largely leaves it up to each individual to make this choice.

There are dangers in choosing a mate on your own. For now, I want to focus on what factors should influence your choice. The first priority must be their spiritual maturity.

First

2 Corinthians 6:14-16 teaches that a Christian must not be joined to a non-Christian. A clear implication is that a Christian should only marry another Christian. At worst it would be sin to marry an unbeliever. At best it would be incredibly stupid. How can you be one with Christ and also one with someone who rejects Christ? It's virtually impossible to be loyal to both.

Don't do missionary dating. It rarely works. It often backfires, dragging the believer away from Christ. Sometimes a so-called believer can end up leaving the faith entirely in pursuit of their new love.

Marrying another Christian ought to be obvious. I want us to consider something past this. Imagine a man has two different women he is dating. Both are solid Christians. Both obviously love the Lord and His word. Both are members in good standing of great churches. Both spur this man on to love and good deeds. All three are of marrying age and maturity. He likes both. They both like him. What's he to do? How's he to choose?

It is possible to over "spiritualize" this decision. Just because Christian maturity should be the main factor

in consideration of finding a mate doesn't mean it has to be the only factor. At some point in dating, you'll probably have to move past the "spiritual" components and criteria. Most people don't finally choose a spouse based solely on who could memorize the most Bible verses.

When God made Eve, the Bible tells us He fashioned her. He crafted her to be a perfect fit for man. She was his counterpart, his completer. She was an equal peer who was different in all the right ways. Their bodies literally fit together.

When Adam saw her, he delighted in her. You would have too. Remember, up until this point he's only been hanging out with dolphins and orangutans. Those are both lovely animals, but they quickly pale in comparison to a woman.

He'd been asleep. He woke up, saw Eve and greatly rejoiced. The first recorded human language is Adam singing over or writing poetry to his newfound wife. Ideally, you shouldn't marry out of mere duty. You should be excited about marriage in general and the person you are going to marry specifically. This is one advantage modern dating has over arranged marriages.

You have a choice. Most people using this book don't have to get married. If you choose to marry, you should certainly choose to marry a Christian. Make sure you're on the same life journey they are on. Otherwise, you'll likely eventually part ways.

But if that issue is settled in your heart and mind, then

there is a second step. Make sure you choose someone that you are going to enjoy journeying with. Life is hard. Marriage is hard. Stack the deck in your favor. Make it as easy as possible for yourself. What do I mean? Ideally, marry your best friend.

Second

A good dating process should be about trying to find the person of the opposite sex whom you enjoy the most. Most of marriage is about doing normal life together. It's not about sex and romance. Best friendship is the cake of marriage. Sex and romance is the icing. Now, I love tons of icing on my cake. But man doesn't live by icing alone. If that's all you eat, you'll eventually get sick and die. You need the substance of the bread.

Much of your time in marriage will be consumed with cleaning house, going to work and parenting kids. It won't center around candle light dinners and passionate nights in bed. Best friendship will win the day in the many mundane moments of tedious boredom life and marriage can bring.

In the normal monotony of life, you'll want to be doing it with your best friend. More than once, one of our kids has been sick in the middle of the night and thrown up all over the carpet. As my wife and I take turns nursing the child and cleaning the carpet at 3:00 am, I've turned to her and said, "There's no one in the world I'd rather scrub puke up with than you!" It's not exactly a Hallmark Card but it's true!

First, choose a Christian. Second, choose your best friend. Then what comes third? Honestly, anything you want as long as it's not sinful.

Third

It would not be wrong to pray, "Oh God I'd love to marry a Christian girl who's my best friend who also has blond hair!" It's not sin to pray, "Father, if it be Thy Will, I'd really like to marry a man who's godly and loves me but also has a fun job where we can travel a lot." The key is that these things really must be third and a distant third.

Nothing should trump their Christian growth as the primary desire of your heart. Best friendship really should be second. After that, you fill in the blank.

Physical Appearance

In this context I'm often asked how much physical attraction should be a factor. If it truly is the third factor on your list, and a distant third, then it's totally fine. Seriously.

Our sinful culture has made physical appearance way too important. Many people make it almost everything. I heard an actor say one time that a girl for him had to have the two H's: Hotness and a sense of humor. High standards. No wonder so many in Hollywood divorce so frequently.

The problem is that oftentimes in a response to our culture's hyper exaltation of sexual attraction, the church swings the pendulum far in the other direction. If the

culture of the world is in the ditch on the left side of the road, much of Christian culture is in the ditch on the right side as an exaggerated response. We shouldn't make our standards as a reaction to sin's extremes. Rather, we should let the Bible inform our ideas.

Beauty is not a bad thing. God invented beauty. St. Augustine taught that Satan couldn't create any new pleasures. He could only take good pleasures God had created and twist and pervert them. He has certainly done that with beauty and sexuality.

God wanted men to be attracted to women and vice versa. If you aren't attracted to the opposite sex, that's a problem. That's not the way God originally created us to be. Beauty in and of itself is not a sinful thing. It can be used in sinful ways when it's valued too much, when it's valued more than godliness.

Song of Solomon is a book in the Bible that celebrates physical attraction and sexual pleasure in the context of marriage. The first couple of chapters seem to refer to the courtship phase of the relationship before the honeymoon. Physical desire and attraction for one another was definitely part of the equation.

He refers to her more than once as "My beautiful one." Nature makes this plain. The Bible affirms it. You should ideally date and marry someone you are attracted to. That just shouldn't be the main thing.

Some Christians still put far too much emphasis on this issue. Many guys are looking to marry a literal model. I've wanted to say to a couple of guys like this, "Go look

in the mirror. Models typically marry other models. It's not looking good for you."

It's not wrong to pray and look for someone who you enjoy looking at. You're probably going to be looking at them for a long time. But hold this desire loosely with an open hand.

Be careful that you don't slip into a demanding spirit. Far too many guys (and increasingly girls) have been exposed to pornography over and over. It has radically reshaped our expectations in what a spouse has looked like.

Much of what we see these days on the cover of the magazines has been airbrushed. We can easily develop unrealistic expectations of what a date should look like. When doing this, you're setting yourself up for disappointment.

My pastor likes to say, "Gravity wins." We are all going to sag after a while. I've been helping my son shop for a car. I've emphasized practical things like low mileage. All the while, I know having a cool looking car is important, especially for a 16 year old boy buying his first car.

I can honestly say how the car looks is third on my list. I care first about how well it runs, secondly about how cheap it is, and third, and a distant third, about how it looks. Meaning, compared to how well it runs, I ALMOST don't care how cool it looks.

It's not the same for him. He knows low mileage is important but he really wants it to look cool. We landed

on a great car for him, but not before he had to say no to a Lexus or two.

In searching for a spouse, don't undervalue attractiveness. But please don't overvalue it. Put most of your time and energy into finding a godly best friend. Once you start to get into that ballpark, then you can start thinking about how cute he is. I'm not saying it doesn't matter at all. It certainly doesn't matter most.

Should you ever marry someone you aren't attracted to at all? There's no verse that says you can't do this. It's not ideal, but neither is it sin.

If I was talking to a 21 year old that seemed too desperate to marry the first Christian boy that liked her, I'd probably say she should at least consider whether she thinks he is handsome or not. If I was talking to a 40 year old who really wants to be married and has a chance after virtually no chances, I would say physical appearance isn't as big of a deal. At the end of the day, we each have to make choices based on the Bible and common sense about what we think God wants us to do and what we think will be best for us.

God invented beauty. It's not wrong to see beauty, acknowledge it and enjoy it. It's not wrong to want to marry someone who's beautiful to you. I want my daughter to marry a man one day who thinks she's beautiful. If a man came asking to marry her and said he didn't find her attractive at all I would have serious concern. This is part of the way God designed marriage. When Adam sings over Eve, he seems as though he is filled with passion, delight and desire. This is the way it's meant to be.

On the other hand, if my son was discussing marrying a woman and all he talked about was her face, her body, her legs, I'd be deeply concerned. We can't let our love of beauty blind us to the deeper beauty of the soul. Spiritual beauty is so much more important than physical beauty in the long run.

Isaiah 53:2 seems to indicate that the Lord Jesus Christ was not a physically attractive man. But if you are saved, you are pledged one day to ultimately be married to Him, the true lover of your soul. But He does have a real beauty. The splendor of His holy character is His true attractiveness.

You can't read the gospels and not be drawn to this man. You can't read His words and not be awed and attracted. You can't see His love and justice side by side and not be smitten.

On the cross we see His greatest glory when He was at His physical worst. He had been beaten to a pulp. He hung naked and bleeding, gasping for air. But in the marred appearance, the greatest beauty of all time showed through. His love for us became clear. It's not wrong to want to look across the room and like the way your spouse looks. That's totally normal. But the wisest thing you can do is make sure you find someone to live with who has been loved by this Savior and has that love and beauty growing in and spilling out of them.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Why do you want to get married at this time?

2. Why do you want to marry the person you are currently dating?

3. What do you like most about your significant other?

4. What bothers you most about your significant other?

FOUR: KNOW YOURSELF

Satan is the father of lies. He is wily and cunning in how he lies. He attacks where we least expect.

The first human friendship started great, but fell fast. Satan came to tempt Adam and Eve. Satan loves to drive a wedge between God and His people.

Satan attacked by addressing Eve rather than Adam. Adam had been made first and was to be the spiritual leader. (See 1 Corinthians 11:3, Ephesians 5:22-33, and 1 Timothy 2:12-14.)

Satan bypassed God's plan. The couple fell into the trap. Eve answered. Adam stayed silent and passive. He did not lead, guide and protect.

Eve responded pretty well. But Satan pressed the issue. His deception was at least two fold. He implied that God wasn't trustworthy. He also convinced them they needed something more than God had given. They were lacking. She took the bait. They both bought the lie and bit the fruit.

After she ate she gave the fruit to Adam. He ate as well. They both sinned. Satan used Eve to help tempt Adam. This reality will show up in your marriage and other close friendships as well. Satan knows that temptations are more powerful when they come through the ones we love and trust the most. He will use our spouse or parents or friends against us if he can.

Matthew Henry says, "It's the subtlety of Satan to send temptation to us by the unsuspected hands of our

dearest and best friends...We should learn to know the devil's voice when he speaks a saint."¹

Adam and Eve had been naked and unashamed but shame came crashing in. They broke God's law. They were now broken and sinful. They felt this and cringed.

Another goal of Satan is to drive a wedge between marriages and friendships. Nothing does this as quickly as when we sin against one another. Adam didn't protect Eve. Eve tempted Adam. Now they did not trust one another. They tried in their own strength to cover their shame. It didn't work. It never does.

The freedom they had enjoyed was gone. Trust was shattered. Where intimacy had reigned, now questions, concerns and suspicions loomed. Have you felt that in life? Most do at times.

Sin separates us from our family, friends and God. God, in mercy, came to pursue them in the garden. But they ran and hid, filled with sinful fear. So do we.

God began to question them. They turned on one another. Adam blamed Eve. Eve blamed Satan.

Satan can whisper lies into our minds. (See Acts 5:1-3, 9.) Satan lied to Ananias convincing him that it was a good idea to lie to the apostles and to God. His wife was also involved. She agreed with the idea. Satan probably used her to help influence Ananias to lie, or vice versa. Maybe he used each of them to convince the other one. It's

1. Matthew Henry, *The NIV Matthew Henry Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992) 88.

easier to justify sin when others are doing it.

Let me share an example. I have a friend who grew up wrestling. He remembers being in a match he was losing. His dad was screaming at him to do his best. As a child he was thinking, "I am doing my best. And it's just not good enough."

Satan loves to lie to us about God and about ourselves. He loves to make us feel like we need to hide behind our own fig leaf righteousness. He loves to remind us of our shame and our sin. See Zechariah 3:1.

My friend began to often feel like his best was never enough no matter what. This played out at home and in sports. Later it played out in his job situation. Today it plays out in his marriage.

Sometimes his wife complains about how much money he makes. He doesn't hear that as a simple complaint. It touches something deeper. A lie that has been branded onto his soul: "Your best is never enough." He feels condemned. Even if his wife just reminds him to take the trash out, it can strike a chord deep in his soul that makes him feel ashamed and defeated. It can lead to heated arguments. The wife may think they are talking about chores, but he is wrestling with deeper truth and lies. Have you ever felt that way? Has it ever seemed Satan was using your friend's words to twist the knife a little deeper into your heart?

I read an article years ago about how entrepreneurs struggle with depression. It stated, "An ugly mantra cycled through his head: He was letting down his

employees, his investors, his family.”² What ugly mantras cycle through your head? Have you ever thought maybe Satan is influencing them?

Take some time to read Job 1-2. Especially compare Job 2:3, 5 and 9. Job’s wife seems to mimic the language of Satan in the heavenly court. Somehow he influenced her as he went after Job. Is Satan ever using us to be his mouthpiece in some else’s life? Have you seen how Satan uses others to lie to you?

Read Matthew 16:21-23. Jesus realized that Peter unwittingly was being used by Satan to tempt him. We must constantly set our minds on the things of God so that we don’t become a stumbling block for a loved one. My wife and I got into an argument not too long ago. I thought it was all about miscommunication. Maybe she didn’t hear me or understand. Or maybe I hadn’t led well or communicated clearly.

But in the midst of it I realized something much deeper was happening. She didn’t feel valued by me. This was something she had felt from different people at different times going back to her childhood. She’d mainly felt it from her dad when he abandoned her. I was unwittingly being a pawn of Satan to make her feel unloved and unimportant.

Once I saw that, it instantly changed my perspective and communication. I apologized and started speaking to her heart and feelings, rather than to her logic only. I reaffirmed her of my love and of her great value to me. The problem cleared up quickly.

I used to play a game called Red Rover as a kid. A

3. *Fortune*, December 15, 2016, 68

group of kids would stand side by side with arms linked and say, "Red Rover, Red Rover, send Jo right over!" Jo would run as hard and as fast as he could and try to break through two kids who tried to keep their arms linked together. That's a good picture of marriage and friendships today in the church.

Satan wants to drive a wedge between you and God but also between you and your Christian friends. When conflict in marriage or friendship arises we naturally see our friend as the enemy. We want to protect ourselves and land the first verbal punch. We are quick to make assertions that accuse them and vindicate ourselves. This never works out well.

If we can begin to see every fight as Satan trying to sow seeds of discord between us, we can turn the tables on him. Like the kids in "Red Rover" we should lock arms with our friends and face the true enemy, sin and Satan. We should seek to listen and understand and gently speak the truth into the souls of one another.

Our goal ultimately should always be to remind one another that our fig leaf efforts of self-righteousness will never be enough. Our only hope is to look to the covering provided for us at the cross. If we lock arms together to fight Satan's lies, we will have a better chance of turning our eyes away from the faults of our friends and back to Calvary, where there is love, mercy, truth and grace to defeat Satan and sin, and to protect all our friendships, including marriage.

4. How can you use Biblical truth to correct these faulty beliefs in your mind?

5. What's the main lie you think your boyfriend or girlfriend is tempted to believe?

6. How can you speak the truth in love to him or her to help them not believe the lies anymore?

FIVE: LEAVING

Genesis 2:24 says a man should leave his parents and cleave (glue himself) to his wife. What does it mean for a man and woman to leave parents and be married? What are the practical implications? It means far more than just moving out of the house.

Before anyone is married the most important relationship in their life is with their parents, for better or worse. Even if their parents abandoned them at birth, this is still true. That relationship, or the lack thereof, will have a significant defining mark on their identity and sense of self-worth.

When we get married, this is all supposed to change. Our spouse is supposed to become the most important human relationship for us. This is hard for a couple of reasons.

Repenting

None of us have perfect parents. Our parents' good traits have impacted us as children, but so have their sins. This is true in even the best families.

I grew up in an incredibly loving and godly family. It's hard to imagine a better family to grow up in. Yet, my parents were still sinners.

One example is that when my dad would do something to hurt my mom, her typical response was to not speak to him for a day or so. I would ask my dad what was wrong. He would respond, "I'm not sure. I've hurt your mom. I'm not sure how. She'll tell me in a day or so."

She would. They would make up and move on and all was well. In the grand scheme of things, this is a small infraction. Yet, even as a teenager I knew this wasn't the Biblical way to handle conflict.

Subconsciously, I made a vow of sorts. 'I'll never let my wife do that to me.' At first glance this can seem like godly resolve. Yet it wasn't. It was a form of man-made self-righteousness and self-sufficiency.

Years later I married. We would have explosive fights that would end in her crying and leaving the room. Then I would see my sin and begin to repent.

Instantly, I wanted to pursue her. I would go find her and say some version of 'I've sinned. I'm sorry. You repent. I'll forgive you. We can reconcile.'

Her typical response: "My emotions aren't a light switch. You were screaming at me ten seconds ago and now you want to act like a spiritual leader?!"

Mine: "I'm trying to obey Ephesians 4 and not let the sun go down on our anger. You aren't." Implication: I'm more righteous than you. So huh!

This didn't make for a great marriage. We ended up fighting about how we fought. We spiraled down from there. I literally thought it was 99% her fault.

We met with a wiser couple who asked me about my parents' style of conflict. I told him. He asked my wife, "Did you hear that? That's why he is so aggressive to settle conflict so quickly."

I'd never made that connection before. Quickly it all became clear. By God's grace I repented, and that was a crucial step in our marriage beginning to heal.

The point is this: When I repented of that subconscious vow I'd made as a teenager, a breakthrough occurred. That was a huge step for me actually and practically 'leaving' my parents. I was leaving the sinful influence of their pattern of conflict.

There were a lot of great things my parents taught me that were Biblical and shouldn't be left because of that. But the danger is we all see some sinful examples from even the best parents. If we follow our parents' sinful example, it will obviously produce sinful patterns in our own marriages.

What may not be as obvious is that if we try to correct the pattern, we often over-correct. We swing the pendulum to the opposite side and develop a new pattern (like I did) that wasn't Biblical either. We run from one ditch just to crash in the ditch on the other side of the road.

We must not set the pattern for our marriage based on a reaction to our parents' marriage. This is a form of not really 'leaving' well. Rather, we should set our marriage patterns as much as possible on the foundation of the Bible alone.

Prioritizing

The second way to leave may not be as deep but is just as important. When you are a single person, your family

of origin is your first family so to speak. Once you are married that is no longer true.

Once married your spouse becomes your first family. Extended family, family of origin, and in-laws are all distant seconds. This often becomes the clearest when you're planning where to spend the holidays.

His family lives in Georgia and wants to see you Christmas Eve night. Her family lives in Tennessee and wants to see you Christmas morning no matter what. This is virtually impossible. Or at least it'll make your marriage (your first family) miserable trying to please everyone. Yes there are practical ways to compromise (such as switching years etc...) but there's a more important principle.

The second families don't really get a vote. They can ask to see you on a certain day or time. But the first family makes the ultimate decision and it is final.

After we had our second child, my wife and I really wanted to start spending Christmas day at home with just our immediate family. My wife was more passionate about setting our own traditions than I was, but I was definitely on board.

That very year my parents decided to take the whole family skiing. They were going to pay for everything. Skiing is expensive. I love skiing. I was young, in ministry with two kids and could not afford to take our family skiing in Colorado. This was the gift of a lifetime!

One problem. They wanted to go over Christmas. I asked my wife if she wanted to make an exception. She said no.

My temptation was to call my dad and say, "The old ball and chain here says no." I was smart enough to know not to do that. I called and said, "We would love to go, but if we go we'd have to be back by Christmas Eve. I know that's a hassle. If it can't work we understand, y'all just go without us."

I was kind, grateful, respectful etc... But the point was clear. The decision was made by the first family. There was no real discussion or negotiation. And my parents were great, respected the decision and worked it out so we could fly back early.

I often encourage couples. If you each are on the same page with Jesus and with each other, you'll be fine. You can survive any storm, even angry in-laws during the holidays.

Conclusion

Jesus is one with His Father. Out of great love for us, He was willing to leave His Father to come to earth, suffer, die and secure a bride for Himself, the church. Following His pattern, we must prioritize our spouse above all human relationships, even our parents, even when it hurts.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What were the main ways your parents sinned against you?

2. What were the main ways your parents sinned against one another?

3. How do you think Satan may have lied to you through those experiences?

4. What examples from your parents do you want to replicate in your marriage?

5. What examples from your parents do you not want to replicate?

6. What would over-correcting look like if you fell into that error?

SIX: WOUNDING AND HEALING

My wife and I's first three years of marriage were hard. We spent the first year and a half digging a hole. We hit rock bottom. With God's help, it then took us another year and a half to dig our way out.

It was painful digging the hole for a year and a half. It was also hard rebuilding trust for another year and a half. But the second year and a half was filled with hope and optimism. There was light at the end of the tunnel.

There were many problems in our marriage early on. My wife dealt with a lot of insecurity. I had a lot of pride. She tended to be hyper sensitive. I was often insensitive. She was often paranoid about what I was doing and why. I was usually self-righteous, feeling and saying *How dare you question me!*

It was a perfect storm. We were a match made in Hades. On day 6 of our marriage in Cancun, she locked herself in the bathroom crying. I was clueless. The honeymoon was over and we were literally still on our honeymoon.

God used many things to save our marriage. We prayed. Other older couples invested in us. We both had a lot to repent of and we haven't arrived yet. But the last 18+ years have been a lot better than the first three. I'll mention two of the things that practically helped us the most.

Understanding the Wounds

When I first met my wife, she had a strong personality. She seemed very confident. She seemed sure of herself in a natural way.

When we began to fight, I saw more of her tender side. I didn't always appreciate it. In fact, I saw it as weakness.

At first I didn't understand, but then reality began to dawn. My wife grew up in a non-Christian, broken home. Her parents divorced when she was three years old. She never remembers them living together.

Her dad stayed somewhat involved in her life until she was about 12. Then at the age where a little girl probably needs her daddy more than ever, he just dropped out. He became too busy or too lazy to show up.

She actually decided she wanted to live with him. She took the painful risk of telling her mom. Her dad said no. He rejected her.

He quit coming to her softball games. He quit paying child support. He didn't come to escort her the night she won homecoming queen.

Her mom remarried twice. Neither step dad was much of a dad either. Neither of those marriages lasted.

The most important men in her life had dug a crater in her heart. It took years to dig. It was deep. Marriage to me wasn't helping early on. My sins against her may have been small by comparison, but they still hurt deeply. My anger triggered memories of men who had treated her as unimportant.

The most important men in her life had hurt her deeply. I was now the most important man. But I was really just deepening the hurt.

One night it finally dawned on me. She didn't trust men. She didn't trust me. Her distrust towards me seemed out of proportion to my sin against her. It was. But it was also understandable why she felt that way when I understood her history.

Men in her life had dug a crater in her heart. Now I was digging further. I had to become an agent of change. In reality only Christ could change her and me. Only Christ could fill the crater in her heart. But practically speaking, I was going to be the main shovel He was going to use.

Being a shovel isn't glamorous. It's hard work. It's long work. But this was a work that was worth it.

I was going to have to be patient. I was going to have to grow in tenderness. I begged God to make me gentler. Thankfully He did.

Learning to Trust Again

How do you trust someone after they've broken that trust? How do you trust someone when they've hurt you repeatedly? How do you trust again when you've been wounded so deeply?

These were the questions my wife was wrestling with early in our marriage. She may not have stated them this way. But this was her daily battle.

We had many fights early on. At least one yelling match a week the first year or so. We could both get loud and angry. We could both say hurtful things. But I was an

expert in using my words in cruel ways to expose her weakness.

In my sinful pride, I wanted to protect my own sense of self-righteousness. I would lash out so that she would feel like she was the main one at fault. Unfortunately, I was good at it. I did a lot of damage emotionally.

One time we had an exceptional fight. She probably didn't speak to me for a day or two afterwards. God broke and humbled me. I was at least trying to repent and apologize.

She had had it. She was psychologically done. She was withdrawn and cold. Understandably so.

She later told me she was praying. She said the prayer went essentially like this: 'Lord, I know I have to forgive Olan. I am a Christian. You've forgiven me. You command me to forgive. But I don't want to be hurt again. If you'll promise me that I'll never be hurt again, then I will forgive Olan.'

She said that it seemed as if God spoke to her in her mind, 'That's not the way it works. You will be hurt again. You just have to trust me and obey.'

The Risk of Forgiveness

All marriages will have wounds. These wounds are often built upon wounds that were already in place from earlier relationships. We will hurt each other because we are both sinners.

We must forgive one another. Trying to love one another without forgiveness is like trying to run an engine without oil in it. Eventually, it'll burn up and break down.

But forgiveness is always a risk. Choosing to forgive a sinner means opening yourself up to be hurt again. But it's worth it.

The greatest man that ever lived was willing to forgive even His worst enemies. He was betrayed and hurt and abandoned by His closest friends in His greatest moment of need. On the cross, bearing His people's sins, He was abandoned and hurt by His Father. It was terrible news for Him. But it is great news for us.

Because God rejected Jesus on the cross in our place, He will never reject us if we trust in Christ. Christ trusted the Father and yet He was hurt. But His trust in the Father enabled Him to forgive others.

Look at Christ. Look to the Father. Trust their goodness. Trust Christ's suffering for you. See His love, mercy and forgiveness. Choose to trust Him and take the risky step of forgiving others as He has forgiven you. This will bring great healing to your heart wounds and power to your marriage.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What were the major wounds you received in your soul growing up?

2. How did Satan lie to you in those wounds?

3. How does conflict with your significant other bring those bad memories back up?

4. When do you feel the most triggered in your dating relationship? Why do you think that is?

5. Have you ever confronted the people from your past who wounded you the most?

6. Have you ever forgiven the people from your past who wounded you the most? Why or why not?

SEVEN: CONFLICT

Conflict will arise in any human relationship eventually, especially in dating and marriage. The Bible gives great guidance on how to handle it. The sooner we can learn to regularly apply Biblical principles to our conflict the better. Doing so teaches us how to fight fair and thus hurt one another much less.

In a healthy relationship there will still be pain and hardship, but it should be easier to handle. The wounds should not go as deep and thus heal quicker and easier. God gives us all we need to handle the pain of relational conflict.

All marriages are made up of two sinners. Therefore, even the best marriages have conflict. How should Christians navigate dealing with the sin in their own lives as it runs into the sin in their spouse's lives?

Overview

God calls us to rebuke one another in love when we see sin in their lives. By rebuke I mean to confront someone for wrong doing with the hopes they will change. I am primarily addressing the idea of spouses addressing one another about sin. Yet these principles apply more broadly. (Addressing conflict with non-Christians may be messier.)

What to Rebuke Someone For

If you can overlook a sin and forget it, do so. See Proverbs 19:11. God overlooks many of our sins. He never brings them up and our intimacy with Him continues. When we can follow His example we should.

This may apply to something small such as your roommate eating your leftovers even though you asked them not to. It's not a big deal. You never bring it up.

The key to applying this principle well is to not try and be more spiritual than you are. When I was first married, I was determined to be the godliest one in our marriage. That may sound holy at first glance but it was driven by pride. So if my wife hurt me with her words I would "overlook" it. In reality I was stuffing it. The volcano may lie silent awhile. Eventually it will blow. I had not really forgiven her.

We might have a fake peace for weeks or months at a time, but once the volcano blew it was ugly and worse than if we had handled issues case by case. If you wait too long to address issues, it becomes nearly impossible to remember the details clearly. If you can't even agree on what actually happened, the situation can feel hopeless.

My litmus test has become: "If I'm still bothered by it the next day, I have not overlooked it and need to bring it up." Keeping short accounts is always better than lying to yourself and others. Don't pretend to overlook if you can't.

Secondly, try to only rebuke people for sin. There are some things you may not like that are more about preferences and personality differences that don't rise to the level of sin. Maybe your spouse is occasionally five minutes late. Maybe you are a Nazi about always being 15 minutes early. Ask, "Does the Bible clearly call this sin?"

Always try and assume the best. This is a great way to apply 1 Corinthians 13:7. Christians are meant to be discerning and certainly should not believe and trust all that we ever hear. But when we are unsure, we should lean in and try to assume the best about others. Think of others' motives the way you want someone to think of yours.

If you get to a place where it seems or feels impossible to assume the best anymore, don't swing the pendulum to the other side. Don't start assuming the worst. (We often do this.) Rather, ask them. Approach them in love and humility and ask them why they are so often late etc...

My wife would sometimes say that though my words were good and trustworthy, my body language, facial expressions and tone of voice weren't so great. Those things made it hard to trust and assume the best. That's understandable. Those things matter. In those incidents it was best for my wife to humbly and gently say something like "I'm trying to assume the best, but it's really hard right now. Can I ask a couple of clarifying questions about why you said that in the way you did etc..." Those types of questions usually invited me to respond in humility as well and not in anger and defensiveness.

When To Rebuke

When should you speak up? There are at least four times. There may be others.

First, if you think someone your spouse is mad at or hurt by you, you should initiate a conversation. Matthew 5:23-24 says it is our responsibility to pursue someone if we know someone has something against us. This is not the Western way. We tell ourselves, "If I'm fine and he has a problem with me, that's his problem! The ball's in his court to move first!" But Jesus teaches something better. Love should guide us to leave a worship service and go see this person, even if we must travel a great distance to try and reconcile. But often a phone call will do.

Second, if a brother (or sister) sins against you and you can't overlook it, you should go and rebuke them. That's the clear teaching of Matthew 18:15. Are you obeying this?

A third time you may need to rebuke someone is if two others are in conflict. Imagine John has already obeyed Matthew 18:15 and seen no repentance in Samantha. If you see the same sin in Samantha's life, you probably should go with John to rebuke Samantha. Especially if John asks you to. This is one reason it's important to live in Christian community, so that you have someone to invite into your marriage if the two of you get stuck in an argument and can't move forward alone.

Fourthly, if you see another stuck in a pattern of sin, you should pursue them in love. Their sin may not impact you at all directly. But if you see someone stuck in repeated sin that you have victory over, God may be calling you to pursue your Christian family member who is struggling. See Galatians 6:1-2.

How To Rebuke

Once you've decided the rebuke needs to happen, how do you go about it? The first and main thing to do is pray. Pray before, during and after the rebuke. Pray for wisdom, patience, love, grace, boldness. Pray for softness of heart, brokenness, contrition and life change. Second, Matthew 7:1-5 teaches that it is always best to deal with your own sin before you seek to address others. This ought to be a pattern in our life. Dealing with sin helps prepare me to deal with others. This is especially true if I am in conflict with the person I am going to rebuke.

Tim Keller says we often make a caricature of others in their sin. We exaggerate their sinful parts and minimize their good parts. We do the reverse with ourselves, trying to make ourselves look better than we are. Even when we are going to rebuke someone that has not sinned against us personally, it is still good to check our own hearts first. Is there any pride or condescension in my attitude that may negatively flavor the words I'm about to say? This also prepares us to be humble in confrontation.

Third, practice Ephesians 4:15-17. Say the hardest things in the softest ways. Don't back off the hard truth they need. Say it in the gentlest way that has the best chance of gaining a hearing. A mentor once told me, "Say what you mean, mean what you say, don't be mean when you say it."

The goal is reconciliation, unity and maturity. The goal should rarely be to get something off your chest. That's

usually self-centered. Help others grow up in Christ. God loves it when we love one another! Psalm 133.

Partially this means being sensitive to when and where you rebuke. A busy Starbucks isn't the best place for a tough rebuke. When your husband is walking out the door on the way to work isn't the best time to rebuke. Be wise and gracious in choosing a place to lovingly confront.

Ephesians 4:29 teaches that all our words should be helpful. The ultimate litmus test of what to say is "Will it help build them up?" If you think your words will hurt more than help, keep them to yourself.

This doesn't mean only saying nice things. Jesus said many harsh things to the self-righteous. Sometimes that is what it takes to dislodge someone from their sin.

Go into the rebuke hoping they'll repent. Be ready to forgive, eager to reconcile, yearning to show grace, and offering to forget it all if they will repent! Read Ephesians 4:32 and think of how much Christ has forgiven you!

If you go in with the attitude, "I'm going to confront and if they repent, then I'll think about forgiveness," then how will you ever know if they repented enough? How can you be sure it's deep or real enough? In a sense you'll make them work for your forgiveness, and that's not going to work.

Christ didn't do that for us! Hallelujah He didn't or we would still be in our sins! Rebuke others out of the overflow of Christ's love to you.

Chastened Critics

My wife and I have been married over 20 years and we are still figuring it out. One of the problems we all have is that we tend to have blind spots towards our own sin. Furthermore we tend to make peace treaties with our own sin because, to some degree, we think we are finding some benefit in our sin.

The problem is our sin usually hurts our spouse. Our spouse's sin hurts us. Thus, we often become more passionate about attacking the sin in our spouse more than we are about attacking our own sin.

Early in marriage when my wife and I would fight, it seemed we were both trying to land a verbal jab first. I wanted to say something that convicted her of her sin before she could say something to convict me of my sin. On the other hand, she wanted to point out my flaws before she wanted to admit her own flaws.

This is a deadly cycle that can lead to walls going up emotionally. We feel we must protect ourselves from the person we are supposed to be naked and unashamed with in every area of life. Handling conflict this way destroys intimacy at every level.

Many interpret Matthew 7 to avoid confrontation in marriage at all costs. "Only God can judge." This is a grave misreading.

Study the Bible's teaching on judgement. It is clear. There is a good judgement and bad judgement (John 7:24). Good judgement is constructive criticism. The

goal is to help and bless the person. Love drives this judgement. Your spouse needs this judgement from you.

Evil judgement is condescending condemnation. The goal is to hurt and burden. For me, often the goal is simply to win an argument or to protect myself. Vengeance is the motive. No one needs this judgement from you, certainly not your spouse.

Christ exhorts us to judge righteously. But how can we? When we desire to lovingly confront, self-righteous condescension lies close at hand. Constructive criticism builds marriages. Condescending condemnation destroys.

When I am in a heated argument with my wife, my indwelling sin wants to speak first and listen later. In the flesh, I tend to focus on her wrongs before I will admit mine. If we both do this, there is no hope. Christ teaches us a better way.

Be Gracious

Always be gracious. Literally be filled with grace. We will be judged by God. All of us want grace at final judgement. Show such grace to others, especially your spouse.

Why are you going to rebuke your spouse? Do you genuinely hope they will repent? Or do you want to get something off your chest?

Check your motives. Are you going filled with mercy ready to forgive? Or are you excited to expose their

failures? Don't be eager to catch him or her in sin. We often are that way when we've been hurt or if we think they sinned against us.

If there has been a pattern of lobbing verbal bombs at one another in your marriage, you will not be able to change the atmosphere of your marriage overnight. Be patient. Be prayerful. Beg God's mercy to soften both of your hearts towards one another.

Be Generous

If you do not know, assume their motives are well intended. Don't judge the secret things of their heart that you can't see. This can lead to much sin.

If my wife's actions seem to point to evil motives, I try to ask and not assume, "Why did you do that?" Most are very quick to read into body language, tone of voice and facial expressions. Sometimes our assumptions are right. But not always. Give the common courtesy you would want extended to you. So much of rebuking well means loving them the way you want to be loved.

Even when you do clearly see sin in your spouse's life, still be gracious. If I catch her in a lie my heart tends to jump to conclusions. "She is a liar!" Technically I am right. Anyone who lies is a liar. But haven't I told at least a lie or two in my life, (actually many more)?

We have an amazing capacity to define others by their sin while we conveniently define sin out of our lives as much as possible. "Yes, I have told an occasional, white lie. But she lies constantly!" Judge others as you judge yourself.

Be Gentle

Be gentle. Be humble in hard feedback. Jesus was a carpenter and probably dealt with sawdust getting in His eyes. If you have a speck of dust in your eyes, think about how cautious and tender you are, how slow and deliberate, to softly lift the piece of dirt out of our most sensitive organ. You don't rush in, knife in hand.

How can I be appropriately humble when speaking to my loved one about her sin? Be thorough in dealing with my own. Do you deal with your sin as aggressively as you desire to deal with your spouse's? Few do.

Imagine you and your spouse are in a car when a tree falls through the windshield. You actually have a small branch lodged in your left eye. Somehow you still have the wherewithal to notice your husband has a small shard of glass in his eye. You may say as genuinely as possible, "Let me help you with that."

Your husband will instinctively bat your hand away saying something like, "What's wrong with you? You've got timber sticking out of your face. How can you help me with something so small with something so massive blocking your vision?!"

Before you protest, Jesus isn't trying to say your sin is always the bigger sin. Even if both people's sin in a conflict is exactly 50%, the speck in my eye ought to look much bigger because it is so much closer to me. I have more direct responsibility for and influence over my sin. Therefore that should, in general, be my first move, towards my own sin.

I had a friend who was addicted to pornography to the point that his wife had asked him to move out for a while. He was stubborn and hard hearted in his sin, refusing to get help. I was going to confront him.

I spent many hours thinking and praying before I went. When I did go, I was able to go in strength and love simultaneously. I was bold and aggressive but also humble and gentle. How?

Years before that I had dealt with pornography personally. I felt the reality of "Save the grace of God, there go I." I said, "I get it. I totally understand where you are and how hard this is. But I'm coming after you in love like I would want you to do for me if the roles were reversed."

I was gentle in trying to get the sin out of his life because I knew from experience of dealing with my sin how awkward and painful it is. Go into a rebuke as though you are going into surgery. Be gentle, but also aggressive.

Be Chastened

My marriage really started to grow and change when my wife and I began to try and confess our sin before we attacked the other. Before we raced to accuse first. Now by grace, the pattern became more of a race to the cross, a race to repent first. Obviously it's not a competition. But our attitude should be to deeply deal with my own sin before seeking to address it in someone else's life. It takes time and lots of internal work with Christ for this pattern to change.

The best preparation for rebuking others is to have a life pattern of aggressively dealing with your own sin whenever you see it. This will naturally make us gracious, generous and gentle. Be a chastened critic. Be as aggressive as you can be in dealing with your own log, partially in preparation for when Christ calls you to deal with others. When my wife and I have both done this well and consistently, it has vastly changed the tenor of our whole marriage and certainly our conflicts and communication.

The greatest chastened critic of all is Christ. He had no sin to be humiliated for, but He was shamed for ours, His sinful bride. He is the great husband of our souls who's passionate about our holiness but sympathetic about our sin. He speaks the hardest truths to us, but always in the softest ways. Speak the truth to your spouse in love as He continually does to us in His Word.

HOW GOD SAVED MY MARRIAGE

The Fights

Very early in our marriage my wife and I began to fight a lot. My wife became increasingly emotional and hypersensitive. I became increasingly cold and insensitive. As I said earlier, we had a shouting match almost every day about something.

Typically I could catch myself and turn my emotions off. I would wait for my wife to say something that was slightly irrational in my opinion, and I would pounce like a lion going for the kill. She would usually leave in anger. I would get convicted and pursue her.

I would quickly try to reconcile, going to find her and admitting to the one or two things I had done wrong. "I probably raised my voice a little."

Then I would proceed to list the 7-8 things she had done wrong. "You were selfish and angry and... I repent of my two sins. Now you repent of your 8. Then we can forgive each other and move on."

Her typical response; an enraged: "My emotions aren't a light switch! I can't just instantly forgive!" To me, she was dodging her responsibility to repent and forgive.

My response: "I'm trying not to let the sun go down on anger. But you are still sinning." We spiraled downward.

Turning Point

After a year of this pattern, we were both sick of our marriage. We had both said, "I don't believe in divorce, but if I did I'd be out of here."

One night she said, "Before we were married I was confident. I liked myself and thought most people liked me. After a year of marriage to you, I feel I have lost all self-esteem."

For the first time, I got a glimpse of how Pharisaical I had been. In my attempts to be a godly husband, I had not washed her with the water of the word. Rather, I had viciously attacked her in her weakness using the word like a swift sword of justice. I also downplayed my sin. It clicked that night.

Breakthrough

In Matthew 7 Jesus instructs us to focus on the sin in our own lives before trying to help others. Even if your spouse is 99% wrong and you are only 1% wrong (I often felt that way with my wife), you should always treat your sin as the bigger sin, the sin that is closer to you and that you have more responsibility for.

If my wife and I had a speck of dust in our eyes, the speck in my eye would look larger because it is closer to me. Ignoring our own sin to focus on the others is like having a plank of wood in your eye. A lot of the plank is self-righteousness. We compare our sin to others, thinking they are evil and we aren't so bad.

This passage finally came home to me in a deeply personal way. I said to my wife, "All I've done is criticize and rebuke you. So for the next year I promise to not bring up any of your sin or faults. If you ask me a question, I'll answer it honestly. But I will only initiate talking about my sin. I will listen to all you have to say to me. Any sin I see in you I will just pray about."

I've made a lot of vows in my life and have broken most of them. But by God's grace I mostly kept this one. I may have broken it once or twice.

Over the next few months, we would get into an argument. As soon as I caught myself, I would shut my mouth and listen to all she had to say. I didn't attack her. I would agree about all I had done wrong.

It was hard. Internally I was often boiling. But when the largely one sided fight was over, I would go pray. I would start out complaining and telling God all that was wrong with her and how He needed to change her. But it's hard to pray a lot about your spouse's sin and not mention yours. So I prayed more about my own sin. I started to soften, break, and be humbled by how much God was constantly forgiving me. Focusing more on how radical the mercy of Christ was for me that flowed from the cross began to truly change me.

It became easier to listen to my wife, easier to be compassionate, easier to admit my sin. After maybe four months of this pattern as she rebuked me one day, I was admitting she was right. She stopped mid-sentence. She said, "You know, this isn't all your fault. I've sinned too."

It probably took over a year to work through our baggage and get some counseling as well. But the tenor of our marriage changed. For the first year or so, we had been in a race to attack the other. We wanted to score the most points by landing the best rebuke on the other. We wanted to win the argument.

Now for the last 18 years or so, by God's grace, we typically race to see who can repent first. Rather than focusing on the other person's speck of sin first, we usually try to focus on our own plank of sin first. This does many great things for our marriage.

We become more humble because we are more aware of our own sin. We become more gracious because we are so much more aware of how much Christ is constantly forgiving us. We are much more gentle because we

realize how tender it can be to get sin out of our own eye, and we want to be much more careful and patient in trying to help get it out of someone else's eye.

By God's grace we rarely fight anymore. When things come up, we are usually quick to repent. Christ, His Word and His mercy truly saved our marriage.

1. What is the typical conflict you and your significant other tend to have repeatedly?

2. Do you tend to run to or away from conflict? Why is that?

3. What is the biggest sin that you bring to your conflict?

4. What is the biggest sin that your significant other brings to your conflict?

5. What's the major thing you need to practically change to fight fair?

6. What's the main thing you wish your significant other would practically change about their style of conflict?

EIGHT: SHAME

Naked and Unashamed

Men and women are made in God's image, meaning we all have an inherent sense of glory that isn't our own. It is the reflection of the glory of God. We commonly speak of this today as a sense of self-worth or self-respect.

The moon has no brilliance of its own. It's a cold rock. But when the beauty of the sunshine reflects off the moon, it's stunning.

When people first sinned the image of God was shattered. Our inner sense of glory was broken. But we are still born with a sense that we were made for something more. Internally, we know God has a grand design for us.

The gap between what we were made to be and what we are leads to shame. Most of us start to experience shame early in life when we become convicted of our sin or when someone else sins against us. Guilt is a feeling of "I've done wrong." Shame goes deeper. It says, "I am wrong. Something is wrong with me." Shame wreaks havoc in marriages.

The Bible portrays the first marriage as "naked and unashamed." They had nothing to hide and nothing to fear. They had nothing to hide from one another in any way, physically, morally, mentally, emotionally, psychologically. They were totally free to be themselves. They trusted one another. There was a deep sense of peace and rest with one another. They were comfortable in their own skin. They didn't fear being hurt by one another.

Covering Up

It did not last long. When Adam and Eve chose to rebel against God's word, shame immediately followed. Their first response was to cover up. We've all been doing that ever since.

The longer we live the more we sin and the more we are sinned against. Our sense of shame grows. Left to ourselves our self-confidence and self-esteem shrinks.

All human friendships but especially marriages thrive on intimacy, on letting our spouse in. I heard a preacher once say, "Intimacy means 'In to me see.'" To the degree we are hiding from our spouse, our marriage will suffer. To the degree we feel we must protect ourselves from our spouse, intimacy will diminish. Practically what does this look like today?

Adam and Eve used fig leaves to cover themselves. We are much more sophisticated today. Think of the worst sin you ever committed in your life or maybe the worst time you were ever sinned against. What did you feel as soon as the sin was over? What was your immediate response?

Most would say that we wanted to hide. We wanted to cover ourselves. We didn't want anyone to know what we had done or what had been done to us.

Even if no one knows about our worst deeds, we do. The guilt and shame haunt us. We feel spiritually dirty, marred and disfigured. Shame literally means to be disgraced, dishonored. We've lost the warmth of the

smile of God because of our sin. This impacts us more deeply than we know.

The normal response is to fill our lives with good works to make ourselves look better and to make ourselves feel better. It doesn't work well and it never lasts long. But still we try.

Think of many of our cultural slogans that point to the reality of this grand cover up: "Never let them see you sweat!" "Keep a stiff upper lip!" "Always put your best foot forward!" "Keep calm and carry on." "Whatever doesn't kill me makes me stronger!"

We are slow to admit weakness. We are reluctant to tell how we've been hurt. We rarely discuss our deepest fears and insecurities with anyone, even our spouses.

It Starts In Dating

On a first date we dress up. Our hair will look immaculate. We make sure we smell good. (There's nothing wrong with this. I'm all for brushing your hair and wearing deodorant.) But the danger is that all of this conspires to put our best foot forward, to paint ourselves in the most positive light.

It's not just our outward appearance. It's also how we try to portray our inward character. We probably won't discuss our deepest, darkest secret on the first date, nor should we. But it's so easy to establish a pattern of not being real with one another.

I recently counseled a man who had been dumped by his girlfriend when she learned some of his secret sin. He wanted her back. But, even after years of dating, there was still much he had not told her about his addiction to porn and his doubts about God. He said, "The whole time we dated, I painted a picture of the ideal man I wanted to be and she needed me to be. But that's not who I am." To differing degrees we all do this.

Fig Leaf Righteousness

What are the good works that you wear like a protective mask? What are the good things in your life that you tend to boast in? Where do you tend to find your sense of self-confidence and worth? Those things aren't bad things in themselves. They are bad if they hide the real you from your spouse.

Men tend to build their fig leaf righteousness out of what they do, who they are at work. This often leads to workaholics who justify themselves by how much they provide for the family. "I know I'm gone a lot, but look at the new car I bought you!"

It's much easier some days to show up at work, do your job and get paid. Coming home and trying to love a wife is messy, complicated and confusing. Loving a woman well is never efficient and simple the way men love things to be. Loving a woman well is a risky venture for men's pride. It'll expose your weaknesses and shortcomings quickly.

Women tend to build their self-protective covering through who they are relationally in the home and

beyond. Women will pride themselves on leading the PTA club, having the cleanest house for her family, the best Instagram post and making time to serve at church as well. There's nothing wrong with these things. There is something wrong with hiding in these things rather than being honest with your husband about how hard life is.

These are not absolute rules for how we build our fig leaf righteousness, but they are normal patterns. Men have deep relationships with family members and others. Women often work full time jobs and compete in the workplace as men do. But in general men tend to find their identity more tied up in their work whereas women tend to find their identity more in their relationships.

Intimacy

When is the last time you were brutally honest about the worst and hardest parts of your life with your mate? True intimacy comes when both can share openly and freely about their fears, hurts and insecurities. But all of our self-righteousness conspires to prevent us from ever spiritually disrobing and allowing ourselves to do this.

The best intimacy comes when we can drop our self-protective strategies and share all our fears and insecurities with one another. It's hard to have great sex if you keep all your clothes on. It's harder to really know, love and enjoy one another emotionally, mentally and spiritually if we constantly put our best foot forward with one another and never let one another all the way in.

The reality is the masks we wear never work. Even if we convince others of how great we are, we never convince

ourselves. They never take the shame away. There's only one place to truly get rid of shame.

Killing Shame

Christ had no shame of His own. He lived a sinless life. At the end of His life He was stripped naked and hung on a cross bearing the curse for our sin and shame. He later rose victorious leaving all shame behind.

When we look to Christ for salvation and rest in His finished work, our true sense of glory can be restored. The warmth of the Father's smile returns. I can have a right sense of confidence and worth, in Christ.

When I experience this reality in the depths of my soul, it frees me to be able to be open and honest about the remaining weakness and sin in my life. I don't have to run and hide. I don't have to lie and cover up. I don't have to pretend to be someone I'm not.

The best intimacy in marriage flows from intimacy with Christ. When Christ sees me in my sin yet still loves and saves me, I am free to be weak and needy in front of others. When I let my guard all the way down with my mate, there's the opportunity to return to the garden in part, to experience in a fresh way the reality of being naked and unashamed at all levels.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What's the main area of life you tend to feel shame in? Why is that?
2. What's the main way you try to protect yourself from pain and embarrassment in life?
3. Is there anything you're hiding from your boyfriend or girlfriend? If so what?

4. What's keeping you from sharing that with them now?

5. What would it look and feel like if you were truly resting in the finished work of Christ as a refuge for your life and identity?

6. Read Colossians 3:1-4 and summarize the meaning below.

NINE: GENDER

Men and women are equally image bearers of God. Man is not a better image bearer than woman. Woman is not a better image bearer than man. And yet there are unique ways that a man and woman can reflect God's image in a richer, more vivid way when they come together in marriage.

There are ways that men and women who are not married can work, minister and serve together in church and family and reflect the fullness of God more clearly. But this unique reflection of God's image in man and woman together is best seen in marriage. Looking at a man and woman together both made in God's image tell us that God is both tough and tender. He is courageous and compassionate. He is a leader and yet a servant. Part of God's glory is best seen when two of His attributes that can almost seem to contradict each other at times, are placed together side by side. Marriage is one of the best pictures of this.

Wives Tell us Something of Christ

John 5:17-19, 30; 10:30, and I Corinthians 11:3 show us there is diversity and equality in the Trinity. God the Father and God the Son are equal in power and glory. They are of the same substance. Christians have confessed these truths for hundreds of years. The Nicene Creed states, "We believe in one God the Father...and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made."

The Bible also teaches that Christ voluntarily took a role of service to the Father though. This is the clearest in the incarnation. Paul goes as far in 1 Corinthians 11:3 to say that God the Father is the head of God the Son. So what are the implications of this for dating and marriage?

There is a sense in which when man and woman marry they are reflecting an aspect of the Trinity. Genesis 1:26 does not give us the full blown clear doctrine of the Trinity by any stretch of the imagination. But at a minimum it certainly points to the possibility of this doctrine. If you believe (as Christians do) that there is only one God, but He actually exists in three unique persons, how would you illustrate or explain that?

Maybe the best living parable would be to create a world that was very dependent on the notion of one man and one woman becoming one flesh to spread the image of God around the globe. There is a sense that when a man and a woman marry, a husband is reflecting something about the Father in his headship role and the wife is reflecting something about the Son in her submissive role.

Husbands Tell us Something of Christ

There is another way to think about how a married couple reflects something unique about God. In Ephesians 5 Paul explains marriage in light of the gospel. He paints the picture of the husband playing the role of Christ and the wife playing the role of the church.

There are many ways that either of these passages can be abused or ignored. Many husbands in their sin would

rather be passive than have to bear the heavy burden of leadership. Other sinful men like to use their leadership role for their own self-centered gratification and abuse the role God's given them. Many men may first hear Ephesians 5 and start pumping their fist and saying, "Yes! This means I get to always hold the remote control and choose where we eat on date night." If that is your first response, let me say in love, you have woefully missed the point God is trying to make for many reasons.

Notice that in Ephesians 5:22-33 Paul rarely if at all focused on Christ as Lord (though of course Christ is Lord of the church.) Rather he primarily focuses on Christ as Savior, as a sacrificing servant for His beloved bride. Men, does that describe your heart towards your wife or wife to be?

Objections

Some women may have some objections to the Biblical portrayal of gender roles in marriage. These are certainly understandable as many men, even in the church, have taken advantage of the Biblical teaching in ways that have resulted in terrible abuse. But we must be careful to not throw the baby out with the bath water. Just because someone, or a billion someone's, misapplied a passage repeatedly, we are not warranted to discount, misconstrue or ignore God's clear commands.

Many might understandably say that wives are given a heavier burden than husbands are, but I would disagree. Husbands are called to sacrificially lay down their lives for their wives as Christ did for His people. Correctly understood, this is at least as heavy of a burden as having to submit to a husband.

Secondly, many might object, "Why do wives have to submit to husbands? Why can't it be the other way around?" At the end of the day, we don't know for sure. God has not told us. This is a place for great faith and humility to let God's word preside over us and not attempt to preside over it with a contemptuous attitude.

Lastly, maybe the greatest objection is that many women might say, "Well Jesus had to submit to Father God who is sinless and perfect. I have to submit to my husband who is a big sinner ('and a moron' some might be tempted to think)." I understand your point. You are right that Jesus submitted to His sinless Father and your husband is not near as trustworthy a leader.

Regardless of what you may be going through, the Lord Jesus Christ had the hardest and heaviest submission to bear of all time. I don't know who all may read this and what terrible pain, trauma or abuse you may be going through. If there is real abuse, authorities such as the church and the police should be brought in.

But the greater reality is that Christ fully submitting to the Father meant a literal hell on earth for Him that none of us can ever fully understand. Christ willingly submitted to go to the cross and bear the sins and wrath for all of those that would ever trust in Him. An infinite amount of wrath was poured out on Him so that we could be forgiven and cleansed by His life, death and resurrection. Because He was humble and faithful to do this, He has now been hyper-exalted and given the "name above every name." (Philippians 2:5-11) What sort of proper exaltation awaits godly wives who faithfully submit to their husbands?

Conclusion

1 Corinthians 10:31. Whether you eat, drink, date or get married, do it all for the glory of God. Ultimately your dating and marriage isn't about you nor your mate, but ultimately about Christ and His glory. The husband has the high honor and privilege of glorifying Christ as being the sacrificial servant to His wife. The wife has the high honor and privilege of glorifying Christ by being the submissive servant to her husband. If man and wife are both primarily focused on glorifying Christ in the ways God has called them to, they will have a happy, and Biblically successful marriage in the long run.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Men, are you excited about laying down your life for your wife for the glory of Christ one day? Why or why not?

2. Women, are you prepared to submit to and serve your husband for the glory of Christ as God?

3. What do you think will be hardest about your gender role in marriage?

4. What do you think will be hardest for your mate?

5. Once married, how do you plan to make important decisions that you can't agree on no matter how hard you try? (For instance, if the husband thinks homeschooling is best and the wife is opposed to it.)

6. How can meditating on the gospel picture of marriage help you serve and submit?

TEN: LUST

"Be killing sin or it will be killing you."- John Owen

I found this quote to be true in the battle with sexual lust. God invented sex. He loves sex (Genesis 2:18-25). God commands husbands to delight in their wives' breasts (Proverbs 5:19) and had an entire book of the Bible written about sexual pleasure and passion that never even mentions God or having kids directly (Song of Solomon).

Sex is Great

Sex, like fire, is one of the most powerful things in the universe. When fire is kept in the fireplace, it does wonderful things for people: warms a house, provides light, cooks food and looks beautiful. Sex in marriage can and should produce intimacy, pleasure, children and beauty.

Sex is Dangerous

Fire outside the fireplace is destructive, possibly burning down your house and consuming human life. Sex outside marriage is destructive and ruins intimacy with God and others. Sex is not the worst sin, yet 1 Corinthians 6:18 teaches that sexual sin is unique. It can't literally mean all other sins are "outside the body." Other sins like gluttony, drunkenness, etc... are in our body. But John Calvin says sexual sin "leaves a stain impressed upon the body...not impressed upon it from other sins." Sex was meant to bind us emotionally, physically, mentally, psychologically and even spiritually to our spouse. It has that same power outside of marriage to bind us to the wrong people, things or experiences. Praise God,

Christ's blood is even more powerful. But don't let that truth drive you to sinfully play with fire.

If you eat too much pizza and drink a little too much beer one time, the consequences will usually be small. However, if you have a five minute sexual encounter with someone you aren't married to, you could get an STD for life, lose your marriage and your job. The consequences of sexual sin are often greater and harder to dismiss.

Definition

Any way you attempt to give or receive sexual pleasure outside of heterosexual marriage is sin. See Ephesians 5:3 and 1 Timothy 5:1-2. Paul, tells Timothy, the young single pastor to treat other single women in his church with all purity. (A married person can sin by depriving their spouse of sex or idolizing sex in marriage etc... We won't cover that here.) Sexual sin includes reading or watching things or people (other than your spouse) that arouse you, any type of intentional physical contact with someone other than your spouse for sexual pleasure, masturbation and even lustful thoughts about sex with someone other than your spouse (including a boyfriend or girlfriend.) See Matthew 5:27-28.

Paul tells us to flee sexual temptation (1 Corinthians 6:18, 2 Timothy 2:22). I have a sinful desire to get as close to the line of sin to hopefully enjoy a little sinful pleasure with no consequences. It never works that way. We all reap whatever we sow.

Jesus says to remove from our lives as much as possible anything that causes us to stumble (Matthew 5:29-30).

God did not call us to leave the world and live in caves (1 Corinthians 5:9-10). Practically, what should this look like in a world with so much sexual temptation at our electronic fingertips? The answer will be different for different people with different temptations.

My Story

Porn was a frequent part of my life from fifth to ninth grade. It continued to be an issue at times for years after that. During those early years, I often stayed awake alone late at night hoping to find something sexually explicit on TV.

God started changing my life in high school and there's been a lot of growth since then. I've been married for twenty one years to a gorgeous woman, and for the most part, we've had a very happy and healthy marriage in every way. I'm 40 years old and have been in ministry for over 20 years. Yet lustful temptations haven't left. I must take Paul's command to flee, and Jesus's warning to "pluck out the eye" as seriously today as I did in high school and college.

Technology brings many wonderful possibilities to our lives but also new ways to sin. I believe James Dobson said in reference to porn, "What used to be almost impossible to find is now almost impossible to avoid." This feels true.

Practical Steps

I have a computer at home and one at work. Both have Covenant Eyes reporting software on them that sends a

weekly report to my wife and a couple of good friends. They see all I see. I don't have a web browser on my iPhone. I only have two apps. These apps have no way for me to get to the internet.

We have satellite TV with every channel blocked that might have scandalous material. My wife has the passcodes for the restrictions code for our TV, my phone, my kids' phones, the PlayStation, the Xbox and her laptop. I don't trust myself in this area.

I also try to never stay up at night after 11 to watch TV alone. I usually just watch the news. But I find if I stay up late at night alone watching TV, it brings up too many old memories from high school and leads to lustful thoughts.

These steps in my life make about a 95% improvement in fighting against lust. Sometimes I might feel frustrated when someone texts me a web link and I can't open it on my phone. But it is a small price to pay.

Dating and Engagement

Why do I share all this? Many think that the closer they get to marriage or the further they get into it, lust will merely go away. This is not true. We must remain vigilant to fight.

Dating and engagement are one of, if not the worst time to be tempted with sexual lust. We often rationalize, "We love each other. We are going to get married. What's the big deal?"

When my wife and I were considering engagement we struggled considerably. The best advice we got was from my dad. He said, "Don't be alone together. Go eat, to a movie, to a park etc... But don't be alone at her apartment etc..."

At first it seemed extremely insane. But it was simple, and it worked. It was hard but not complicated.

When we stuck to this we were very pure in our physical interactions. (We did make out in a movie theater once.) When we started to break the rule, at first, nothing happened. But after a few nights, we'd end up cuddling on the couch and it wouldn't end well.

Practically, we loved each other and wanted to spend tons of time together but we had to be wise. If we were at her apartment and her roommates were not going to be, we left and went to a Waffle House. Sitting in a Waffle House from 10pm to 1am wasn't the most romantic experience. It was often us and some fat truck driver smoking a pack of cigarettes. But we never made out in Waffle House. We did talk a lot more without temptation to take our clothes off. In those late nights, we really got to know each other better in a great way.

When we were lazy and stayed in to watch a movie alone, things often went too far. I'd drive home mad at her and mad at myself. It didn't bring us closer. It actually pushed us apart.

The Main Step

Lust is mainly about a promise of false joy. The real key to winning this war is meditating on Scripture to see the

glory of Christ in the gospel (2 Corinthians 3:18). As I really worship and enjoy Christ and His sacrificial, saving love for me I'm progressively, though not fully, freed from the competing pleasure sexual sin falsely promises. Most people will need serious boundaries to fight well. But boundaries alone will never win the battle. We must ultimately have such love for Christ and intimacy with Christ that He supernaturally changes us from the inside out. We need Him to make us enjoy spiritual fellowship with Him, more than we enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sexual sin.

Sexual sin in all its forms brings powerful shame. But the blood of Christ and the promises of God are much more powerful. "Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more." (Romans 5:20) True freedom from sexual sin starts with confessing your sin to Christ and trusting His promise to fully cleanse you (1 John 1:9).

Reading this chapter may bring many sinful memories and thus much shame to mind. As you repent, allow the mercy of God to wash over you afresh. In light of that, be gracious with yourself. I do not mean to give yourself a pass moving forward with sin. We should hate, murder and seek to fight our sin in all it's forms. But we should not mentally beat ourselves up over past sins.

As you and your boyfriend or girlfriend discuss this chapter and your past sexual sins, do so in light of the gospel. Be quick to give mercy for past offenses, just as Christ does to His people. And then, by His love and mercy, be motivated to go and sin no more.

4. What's the one main practical thing you can do to fight lust in your dating relationship?

5. What's the one main thing you wish your significant other would do to help you fight?

6. What's the one main thing you can do spiritually to help you fight lust right now?

Patience for Marriage

God invented marriage. It was 100% His idea. Doing it His way is vital to success. Doing it in His timing is almost as important. Even if you are a strong Christian and find a great Christian to marry, you can rush the process and do much damage.

Imagine a young child who had never had swimming lessons. If his first experience with swimming is in the stormy ocean the child might be scarred for life, even if he survives the swim. He might be terrified to swim for the rest of his life. This can happen if you jump into marriage too quickly as well.

Don't Complain

When God first made Adam, Eve had not been made yet. Adam was alone. We don't know how long this situation lasted. We do know there's no record of Adam ever complaining. He trusted God. He trusted His plans and timing. Do we?

Waiting on God's timing in any area, but especially in the area of dating, can be extremely difficult. There's much to learn from the Genesis account to aid us in this task. First, don't complain.

I do not mean that we have to be stoic and act as though we do not care. There's a godly way to be dissatisfied. And if we feel that way we should be honest about it.

You don't have to share your deepest pain with a stranger on the street. But you should share it with

your closest friends and certainly with God. Philippians 4:6 teaches us literally to pray about all things. In fact, honest prayer is one of the best remedies for sinful complaining and worrying.

What's the Difference?

What's the difference between righteous, honest venting and sinful complaining? For now, let's just focus on talking to God rather than talking to other people. But some of the same principles will apply to human conversations as well. For example, it's never sin to be honest.

So, if you are desperate to be married, tell God how you feel. Be honest. Even if there is sin in your heart, He knows it is there. You might as well talk about it. Oftentimes the best way to remedy a complaining and angry heart is to pour it out to God and let Him comfort you.

Righteous venting involves being honest about our dissatisfaction with our circumstances. But it does not ruin our trust in God. You might pray like this: 'Father, I really want to be married now. But I trust you. I trust your timing. It's hard. But I am not angry. I know you have good plans for me. Help my heart stay content in your ways and means.'

Sinful complaining doesn't really trust God. It moves from dissatisfaction into anger and despair. 'This isn't right! It's not fair! You owe me better! Where are you? Why won't you hear me and answer and give me what I want? Don't you even care?' At its root is a foundation

of a demanding and deserving spirit. It forgets that God owes us nothing but wrath. In His grace He chooses to give us many good gifts, such as marriage.

What's amazing in Genesis 2 is that Adam never complained. He never said, "There's a boy and girl rhino and a boy and girl gorilla but I don't have a girl! This isn't fair! What did I do to deserve this? What's wrong with you God?!"

He was silent. He trusted. God was the one who said it wasn't good for man to be alone. This is still one of the most amazing verses in the whole Bible to me. There's a part of me that still half expects God to say, "Man is alone in the world but He has me. He can have a 24 hour Bible study with me every day. What more does He want or need?"

God is a generous and lavish God who loves to give good gifts to His kids. He had a wonderful surprise for Adam. Adam patiently waited. God said, "Adam, take a nap buddy. When you wake up, I've got a huge surprise for you." Adam woke up very happy. Mankind has never been the same since.

God wanted Adam to have a peer, a best friend, an equal to run the world with. God's plans are better than our plans. God's timing is always better than ours. In this area of dating we often feel like God is too slow in His provision for us. We could read Genesis 2 and wonder why God didn't make Adam and Eve at exactly the same time. Maybe God was preparing us to learn how to wait, to be patient with Him.

So much of godliness is about patience and contentment. It's about trusting God's wisdom over your own. So much of this is fleshed out in timing. How do you do with waiting for things in life that you really want? I don't do so well. God's never in a hurry. I always feel like I'm in a hurry. Rather, we should trust God. Trust His plan and timing for your life.

Wait for the Right Time to Start

One practical application from this is to not get into a serious committed dating relationship until you are seriously ready to move towards marriage. In general, it is best not to get into committed relationships until it's a real possibility that you could leave your parents soon and be married. This has to do with physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and financial maturity. Some of those may be subjective and hard to define. But some are clear. Physical maturity is pretty clear. A three year old isn't ready for marriage physically, a 23 year old is.

Financial maturity may be the next clearest. Especially for the man. Ideally he needs to at least have a job in sight. He needs to be prepared to care for and provide for a wife. Please notice I said 'Ideally.' We live in a fallen world where this is not always possible. Often a woman may have a full time job while her husband is in med school. It is best for the man to see his role as the provider and be moving in that direction.

When a man comes to ask for my daughter's hand in marriage, there'll be three main things that I will want to know about him. First, how much does he know and love Jesus? Second, how much does he know and love my daughter? Third, does he have a job and can he provide?

Conclusion

This is ultimately about trust. The deepest root of all of our sin is doubting God's goodness. It is some form of unbelief in the promises and character of God.

All righteousness starts with true faith. The best example of all time is the Lord Jesus Christ. Think about Him in the garden of Gethsemane.

He knew the plan of salvation before He came to earth. But as a human staring at the idea of drinking hell for His people, He began to tremble. He looked desperately for any legitimate way out.

He said He was sorrowful to the point of death. He never sinned. But however close you can come to fear and worry and not sin, He was there.

His potential fear was much worse than ours. We face being put off from our favorite guy or girl for a while. He faced being cut off from His Father with Whom He'd had eternal perfect fellowship.

How did He persevere and fight and obey and never give into worry? He prayed. 'Father, if there's any other way. But not My will but Thine.' This is the essence of true faith. I trust you even if you're killing me.

We may do this in the short run, but what about when the wait goes on for months and years and seems unending? How can we be patient and still wait and trust God? Adam had it easy in paradise. We're in this sinful, fallen, broken world. But so was Christ.

He willingly came here to suffer for us. The greatest suffering was when He was on the cross and the Father poured His wrath out on Him. The Father turned His face of blessing away.

The Lord Jesus cried out, 'My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?!' He didn't even call Him Father because He was not experiencing Him as Father at that point. He was experiencing Him as the angry Judge you and I deserve to meet.

There's no indication Christ knew how long His agony on the cross would last. Maybe that waiting and not knowing is what drove Him to scream out in such agony? Even worse; there was no answer from above. Christ hung His head and died in our place.

When you are tired, frustrated and sick of waiting on God to come through for you, remember: He already has come through for you in the biggest way in Christ on the cross. Christ is not just our example of a patient sufferer. He is much more. He is the Savior of our soul when we trust in Him.

If we are trusting Christ to take care of our biggest need (getting us out of eternal damnation), shouldn't we be able to trust Him with all our much smaller needs including the 'need' for marriage? We must learn to pray 'Not my will but Thine. Not my timing, but Yours.'

Look away from your own wisdom and intuition. Look to God's history of providing for you. Look most importantly at His eternal provision of the cross. Rest. Trust. Obey. Wait patiently. Be content. Don't complain.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Do you think this is the right time for you to get married? Why or why not?

2. If you could set the timeline, when would you want to get engaged? When would you want to get married?

3. What's the main thing you need to mature in before marriage?

4. What's the main thing your significant other needs to mature in before marriage?

5. What will it take for each of you to grow in these ways?

6. What's the main thing God has done in your life through this pre-engagement process?



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