



PRACTICING —————

Grace in Marriage



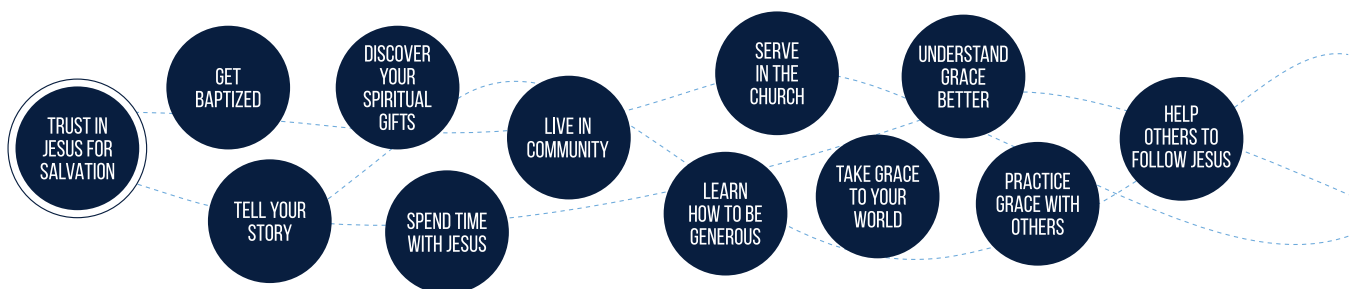
A FAITHPATH Resource
by Gavin Carrier

INTRODUCTION

A FAITHPATH Discipleship Resource

Most Christians know they are commanded to follow Jesus. But ask what this following or “discipleship” is and the answers are diverse and confused. Simply put, discipleship is following after Jesus. A disciple is a student, a learner. Jesus is the Master, the Teacher. Like the original twelve disciples of Jesus, we are called to sit with Jesus, learn from Him and emulate Him in our actions and values. Based on Biblical texts like Matthew 10:24-25 and Mark 3:13-14, here is our definition of discipleship: Discipleship is the lifelong pursuit of nearness and submission to Jesus, our Master, developing in ourselves Jesus’ character, values and mission.

Trusting in Jesus for salvation is just the beginning. All Christian discipleship starts there, but it definitely doesn’t end there. Faith in Jesus starts the lifelong journey of learning, receiving grace, exploring, giving, seeking, sharing and building faith and faithfulness. Of course, this journey is unfortunately littered with sin, struggle, suffering, temptation and trial. But by faith in Jesus, we do this with God, immersed in His grace, filled with His Spirit. This lifelong pursuit is unique for each individual. There will be no two discipleship paths that look alike. However, Jesus Himself and the rest of the New Testament clearly teach that every disciple will obey and explore the same things. There are specific elements to every discipleship path. Taking these two truths together, we have created a discipleship map called **FAITHPATH**.



The map includes twelve circles representing the twelve Biblical aspects of Christian discipleship. As a map, it cannot fully or faithfully represent all that is contained in each circle. But this is not the goal. **FAITHPATH** is designed to synthesize and organize all that the Bible says about following Jesus into a discernible map that can be used by a 7-year-old or a 97-year old. The map is intended to diagnose what aspects a disciple may have already explored, and more importantly, direct a disciple to aspects they have yet to explore. As a tool, there are three absolutely critical principles to **FAITHPATH**.

- First, there is only one starting point for discipleship: placing faith in Jesus Christ for salvation. Have you trusted in Jesus to save you from your sins?
- Second, after this initial step, there is no strict chronology or sequence to the rest of the aspects of discipleship, as we have already noted.
- Lastly, there is no complete mastery or graduation from most of the steps in the **FAITHPATH** map. Each circle represents a lifelong pursuit.

This specific study is a biblical exploration of one of the **FAITHPATH** circles: Practice Grace with Others.



The study you are reading is written for those that are married, about to be married, desiring to be married, or for those who disciple and mentor married couples. It combines the critical relationship of marriage with the critical call to discipleship. It is all about practicing grace inside a marriage. It is husband-level discipleship. It is wife-level discipleship.

FROM THE AUTHOR **Pastor Gavin Carrier**

I am excited that you have chosen to utilize this resource to explore all that God has for you in your marriage. As you will read and see in the pages that follow, I believe that God has bigger plans for your marriage than you might have imagined. The Scripture tells us in 1 John 4:8, “God is love”. Not only that He is loving, but that His very being defines to us and to our world what love is. If you want to experience love and know what it is, look at what God does - especially in the person of Jesus! It has always been God’s plan that we would be conformed more to His image (Romans 8:29; 1 Corinth 15:49). So, it follows that if God is love and we are to be conformed to His image, then we are to be conformed into loving people. In fact, Jesus tells us that learning to love others is the foundational mark of how others will know that we are His disciples (John 13:35). And our closest neighbor, to whom we should love like ourselves according to the two greatest commandments, is our spouse. This means that perhaps our greatest discipleship potential is sleeping next to us every night. This means that our greatest opportunity for growth in Christlikeness is by working at our marriage. This is why this study is so important, and why I wrote it. Working at your marriage means learning to love like God loves. Nothing will transform you and your walk with Jesus like learning to walk in harmony with your spouse.

My wife and I have been married 20 years, and I can honestly say that nobody has helped transform my life and walk with Christ more than Andrea. Our 20 years of marriage has become a redemption story for me as I watched, as a 5th grader, my own parents’ marriage of 17 years end in separation and then divorce. I remember the pain of those days and how I lacked a model of a working marriage as Andrea and I became a couple in 1999. My vow to the Lord was to do better, and I quickly realized that I needed His help to love the way He loves. With a lot of hard work, help from the Holy Spirit, and help from other godly people, our marriage has not only survived, but we have thrived! As a pastor and part of a marriage ministry called Re|Engage, I have had the privilege of having hundreds of couples let me into their challenging and often painful marriages. Almost always the couples are both good Christian people who know their Bibles, yet struggle to apply what they know from Scripture to their marriages. To know the Bible and not know how to get along with your spouse is truly a heartbreaking story. My passion is to help couples see themselves in Scripture, beginning with themselves and what they bring to their marriage. The hope is far

more than stopping a failure of a relationship. It is even more than helping two people learn to just tolerate each other and live “undivorced”. God meant for marriage to be an edifying, supporting, shaping, thoroughly enjoyable relationship that builds us up and does not tear us down. Your marriage is a picture to the world of the love of Christ in action. The goal in this study is to press on toward this end. Anything short of this means we don’t get to enjoy all that God has for us in our most intimate relationship. So hopefully my 20 years of marriage, some case wisdom with over 100 couples, insights from great authors, and even insights from my own painful background with my parents’ divorce can be used by the Lord and guided by Scripture to help you grow in your ability to love your spouse the way Christ loved you.

The design of this study is for you to have 3 READINGS PER WEEK (enough to occupy your thoughts without crowding your head with too many ideas at once!) There are QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION at the end of each reading. These are for your personal reflection and may ask you to share with your spouse as well. I didn’t give you 5 or 6 readings a week, because I wanted you to have more time for these reflection questions to be bouncing around in your head during the week. I would highly recommend you write down or journal your answers to these questions. After a week’s worth of readings, you will find GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS, which are built on the reflection questions. I cannot over-emphasize the importance of doing this study in a group setting and learning to openly talk about your challenges and struggles as a couple with other couples. It is the most freeing and beneficial way to do this study. In isolation, you do not receive the benefit of the feedback and accountability that community brings. Do this study out loud and in the light, with other couples, and you will benefit from it in greater ways than you can imagine. Also, each week has a practical ACTION ITEM. Doing these exercises are crucial to receiving the maximum benefit of this study. There are a total of 6 weeks of material (3 readings, reflection questions, group discussion questions, and action items) and the material builds on itself to explore the various aspects of God’s grace in our marriage: Our View of Marriage / What is a Grace-Based Marriage? / Pain and Trust / Grace Your Way Through Pain / Grace Beyond Gender / Grace Pursues, Endures, and Grows.

My prayer is that God will use these 6 weeks to begin to transform your heart and your mind, and therefore your marriage, to experience the amazing love and grace of God in your marriage. Enjoy!

SESSION ONE Our View of Marriage



THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURE ON MARRIAGE

What is marriage and what is love? These are big questions that need answers, especially if you are married, hope to be married, or want to be married again. The way you and I answer these questions and, consequently, how we feel about those answers, will shape our expectations of marriage. Those expectations will, in turn, drastically change the way we experience our marriage. When answering the questions of marriage and love, we must also ask: How much has our culture influenced our expectations, and how much has God's vision of marriage influenced it?

If we were fish, our culture would be the water we swim in everyday. Our culture is also shaped by the behavior of the fish around us; the current flows in one direction and the fish swim in certain directions in reaction to it. As fish, we are affected by the water and influenced by the behavior of the other fish. And despite our best efforts, the current of our culture has influenced us more deeply than we might have imagined. It slowly soaked into our minds and hearts and gave us a pair of tinted glasses through which we interpret our entire marriage.

I believe our culture is suffering from one big broken heart. The influence of that broken heart is that whenever we personally experience a painful moment in our marriage, we are bombarded with the pessimistic claims of our culture. In our pain, we may even begin to agree with our culture that perhaps there is something wrong with marriage in general. As a result, we are easily defeated, and our hope dwindles that our marriage can change for the better.

This great pessimism toward marriage is the current in which we swim, and it is easy to understand given the behavior of the fish swimming around us. It is a commonly held statistic that 50 percent of marriages fail (although I think this to be a misleading statistic and mostly untrue), and the other 50 percent must be miserable. Today, 60 percent of all births are to married couples, compared to 89 percent in 1970. The Singles culture is on the rise: 50 percent of people are married compared to 72 percent 40 years ago. More children have grown up in homes of divorced parents and have seen with their own eyes the ugliness and hatred that comes from relationships that have fallen apart. I am one of those children.

The pessimistic idea saturating our culture is this: If you choose marriage, the chances

of it being a good one are statistically unlikely. The proverbial deck is stacked against you, and maybe, just maybe, marriage doesn't work anymore. Tim Keller said people are lonely but still wary of marriage, so they "aim for something in the middle between marriage and sexual encounters – cohabitation with a sexual partner." Marriage is seen as merely an antiquated, needlessly confining, heartbreaking, over-complicated mess, and it is not to be trusted. It provides more harm than good.

A common response many have, in light of this pessimism, is that if marriage is indeed to be ventured into, it better come with a "satisfaction guarantee". After all, what would be the point if it is not fulfilling? Thus, we have attempted to become savvy in the way we select a mate, so as to avoid becoming a statistic. We harden our expectations of our spouse in order to doubly make sure we aren't disappointed. Will my mate complement my personal growth plans? Is the person I have chosen beautiful and successful, and do I feel good when he or she is with me? Are we compatible? (This sometimes means will my mate like what I like and demand very little change of me?) Should we first live together in a pseudo-commitment, in a try-before-you-buy type mentality? We have changed the purpose of marriage and we might not have noticed it. We walk into marriage determined to love what we receive from a person, rather than the person themselves. Our spouse's value is only as good as his or her ability to meet our needs or desires.

I love the illustration that Winston Smith gives in his book on marriage.

"In the kitchen of my counseling center where I work there used to be an old soda machine. I don't know how old the machine was.....but I noticed how beat up the machine was. It had no casters and couldn't be moved around, and it was too heavy to carry or drop, so how did it get all of those dents and scrapes? I realized that most of those dents weren't accidental; they were the result of human hands and fists, maybe even mine. What do you do when you put money into a vending machine and it doesn't give you what you have paid for? If you are like me, you give it a not-so-gentle swat hoping it will either digest your coins or free up whatever mechanism is keeping you from your soda. Within moments that machine can change from the beloved dispenser of a refreshing drink to a thief standing between me and what I crave. One minute it is the solution to my problems, the next minute the cause of them."

For our culture, many think the institution of marriage (perhaps our spouse as well) is just an old soda machine that is in the way of our refreshing drink. If we come to it at all, we come with hardened expectations that show themselves in the form of hurt and aggression towards our spouse in order to get what we want. Our marriage (or even our spouse), we reason, is only as good as its ability to pay out the love required.

The truth is, this attitude toward marriage is all around us; it is the culture we swim through. And try as you may, it is probably affecting the way you see your marriage. As you are reading this, I hope that you realize that the problem is not only “out there” in the culture, but it is “in here” in our hearts as well. As hard as it may be to admit, we may have been more affected by our culture than we want to acknowledge. We might have an attitude of the heart that warps God’s vision for love and marriage.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

1. Do you agree our culture is generally pessimistic towards marriage? Why or why not?
2. Do you think our culture’s expectations of marriage have affected your own expectations?
3. Did you relate to the soda machine illustration of marriage?



TWO MIRRORS – James 1:22-25; Ephesians 5:24-32

Why did I begin this marriage study with a discussion about the pessimism of our culture towards the institution of marriage? It is because I think we use the power of our expectations to change the way we interpret what happens to us in marriage. The lenses we look through to see life are extremely influential. Do our lenses distort the truth or clarify it? Do our lenses amplify pain or put it in perspective? Do our lenses allow us to fully recognize and embrace joy in our marriages, or do they leave us skeptical?

The Bible is interested in replacing the lens of our culture with two mirrors. These two mirrors, when used together, can give us a crystal clear picture about our marriage, ourselves, and our relationship to God that can radically change how we interpret and respond to our

marital realities. The first mirror is the Bible, but this mirror is often unclear because we are not looking to find ourselves in it.

James 1:22-25 says: *“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.”*

James tells us the Bible is only a good mirror if we are willing to look into it to see ourselves accurately. We may be familiar with Bible verses that refer to marriage, but that does not mean we are seeing ourselves and our marriage accurately in light of those passages. We literally have to see “what we look like” as we read the Bible, and unfortunately, many don’t recognize themselves. There are many reasons for this which we will cover in the course of this study. Ironically, we often have no trouble recognizing our spouses in Scripture. But the point of a mirror is not to reinforce our judgments toward our spouse; it is meant to show us ourselves. The usefulness of Scripture is tied to whether or not we can focus on what God’s Word is trying to speak to our own hearts. The Bible has much more to say about marriage than merely the verses that directly reference the marriage relationship. Hopefully over the course of this study, the verses you have to draw on for your marriage will increase. There is great benefit to the mirror if we learn to look intently into it. James is clear the result of using the Bible to see ourselves is that we will be “blessed in what [we] do.” Please note, he didn’t state the desired outcome is a certainty, but instead the result is a blessed state with God - despite the circumstances.

The importance of using God’s word to see ourselves and our marriage in a fresh light is paramount. The alternative is to react to whatever your spouse gives you based on instincts (often affected by culture), which in turn lead us back to the “soda machine” illustration. But realize this as well: you have a second mirror to help you see yourself clearly, and that is your marriage relationship itself. God intended our relationships to be the context for which we receive feedback on how we are growing to understand His love. Marriage is ideally the most intense context for personal feedback because of the commitment, intimacy, and vulnerability that comes with it. In marriage, there is no place to hide. In marriage, our commitment most closely resembles the type of commitment God himself has made to us.

In Ephesians 5:24ff the Apostle Paul gives instructions concerning marriage: “Now

as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.... Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.....they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church— for we are members of his body. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.”

While **Ephesians 5:22-33** has much to say about the many facets of marriage, the overriding concept is that marriage is supposed to be a mirror image of how God treats us in Christ. It is our flesh-and-blood chance to practice giving the same grace and love to our spouses that God has given to us. Our understanding of God’s love is demonstrated in how we respond to our spouses. The two are inextricably linked. As John puts it in his first letter: “We love because he first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen” (**1 John 4:19-20**). The mirror of marriage works like this: if you are struggling in your relationship with your spouse, you are probably facing relational struggles with God. Similarly, your struggle to respond graciously to your spouse will provide you insight into the height, width, and depth of God’s unwavering love for you.

The two mirrors of our marriage and the Bible work together to give us an honest feedback loop about ourselves. They provide us with clear direction toward God’s ultimate purpose of helping us learn to love the way He loved us in Christ. This higher purpose gives meaning to the commitment of marriage, gives us a reason to endure the pain of marriage, and releases us to fully give ourselves willingly in service to our spouses. If God is love, then our marriage is our greatest opportunity to learn the depth of that love and how it can transform us.

Through the course of this study, you will have the opportunity to receive feedback from these two mirrors: the Bible and the current state of your marriage. Are you ready to see yourself clearly and hear God’s invitation to grow in His love?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

1. When you hear advice on marriage from either the Bible or anywhere else, do you first think about what you need to learn or what your spouse needs to learn? Why? Prayerfully answer this asking for God's help to reveal your heart and any hardness that might be there.
2. Do you agree that God gave us marriage as a mirror to see ourselves and our relationship with Him more accurately? If it is true the Bible and our marriage are mirrors, then what do we see when we look into them? The Bible as a mirror reflects back to us a lot that we can use to learn about ourselves, but it also shows us God's vision and standard for marriage.

**GOD'S GRACE-BASED VISION AND OUR REALITY**

If it is true the Bible and our marriage are mirrors, then what do we see when we look into them? The Bible as a mirror reflects back to us a lot that we can use to learn about ourselves, but it also shows us God's vision and standard for marriage.

Contradictory to culture, the vision from Scripture is that marriage is not limiting, it is freeing. It is not constraining, it is growth stimulating. It is as concerned for our transformation into loving people as it is concerned for our receiving love. Marriage is intended to give us more than we wanted in a way we would have never expected. It is a place where we see the story of God's grace acted out between two lost people. Marriage is grace with skin on.

When the mirror of the Bible works well, a great vision of grace streams through. In marriage, our sin is more exposed due to our closeness and intimacy with another person. We cannot hide from our spouse, so our selfishness is revealed. And we experience first-hand the high cost of our selfishness and our spouse's selfishness toward us. Because we love someone and made ourselves vulnerable, the hurt and pain of sin runs deep. We wound and are wounded - sometimes over the course of years.

However, in God's plan through Christ, where sin and pain abound, grace abounds even more. God's love and commitment to us goes beyond merely responding to our behavior. He reaches out to us in forgiveness and love. His commitment to us trumps the pain our rebellion has caused Him. The relationship precedes His personal injury. In marriage, we have the

opportunity to both learn to give and receive this kind of love. To reach out to our spouse through pain. To experience a love not measured by what it receives. To not lower ourselves to the sin of our spouse in response, but raise ourselves to the Grace of our Savior. God's grace to us is both the pattern and provision we need.

Through God's grace, we are instantly redeemed and an ongoing transformation can begin. God's grace brings with it the possibility of growth and change. In our marriage, our gracious response is the only soil where real change and growth can happen. Pain cannot win; love must be restored for lasting change to take root. God's great vision for marriage is the gospel. Whenever we sin or are sinned against, we respond with grace, and our marriage is redeemed as we grow in our ability to love.

Does that describe your current marriage story? Unfortunately, instead of the gospel, many are seeing a different pattern as they look into the mirror of their marriage. You may see a sinful action, a sinful response, and, instead of redemption, a deterioration. With each passing day, distance and coldness are settling into your marriage. You may not fully understand all the forces at work, but you know things are unhealthy and could be healthier. This is a heartbreaking reality, but this reflection in the mirror of your marriage is meant to direct you back to God's original vision. Your pain can help you see yourself more clearly and respond more alertly. And if you're ready to look in the mirror, be prepared - it might not be what you expected, but I promise you, it will be much more than you hoped.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

1. Is your current marriage reality a picture of God's grace and redemption or is it a picture of sin and deterioration? After thinking about this question, spend some time in prayer listening for God's thoughts about this question.

DISCUSS AS A COUPLE AND THEN DISCUSS AS A SMALL GROUP:

1. What have you been praying and thinking about this week in light of the three points of reflection?
2. How is our culture's vision for marriage different from God's vision of marriage? Are there any similarities?

3. Do you feel like your personal feelings toward your marriage have been affected by our culture?
4. What can the current state of our marriage tell us about our relationship with God? (For example, do you tend to be irritable when your spouse requests things of you? Do you have trouble being vulnerable? Do you allow your spouse to influence you?)
5. What are the two mirrors, the Bible and your marriage, showing you right now about yourself?

ACTION ITEM:

Pray these 3 prayers repeatedly this week and share with your spouse anything you hear back from God: (1) Psalm 139:23-24 "Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; 24 And see if there be any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way." (2) God, reveal my next step toward my spouse. (3) God, thank you for giving me my spouse.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

SESSION TWO What Is A Grace-Based Marriage?



WHAT TYPE OF COVENANT IS YOUR MARRIAGE?

If the mirror of God's word tells us marriage is our opportunity to learn to love like He loves, then it is important to look into Scripture and get the full picture of how God loves. Whether we knew it or not, when we made our wedding vows we entered into a marriage covenant before God with our spouse. This emulates a pattern of the type of covenants God has entered into with people throughout the Bible. To understand what His vision is for our marriage and the nature of His love and grace that He invites us into, it is important to contrast two covenants in the Scripture: the covenant God made with Israel & Moses and the new covenant God offers everyone in Christ. God's new covenant was specifically made to be a "better" covenant with "better promises" (Heb 8:6). In the book of Hebrews, it specifically says the first covenant had "faults" and that is why a better one was needed. By giving us a new covenant in Christ, God makes the first covenant "obsolete" (v. 13). If we look closely at these covenants, we can see major differences that will help us in our marriage. Which covenant is your marriage built on, the law or God's grace? In order to decide, we have to look at both covenants. Let's begin by looking at the first.

Now while we cannot look at every verse, the heart of the first covenant and its terms God made with Israel are captured in **Deuteronomy 30:15ff**:

"See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed.... This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live..."

This is the covenant God made with the people and Moses on the other side of the red sea as they left Egypt and were freed from Pharaoh and his men. The passage above is a restatement of the terms of that covenant to a new generation of Israelites given as a reminder as they entered the Promised Land of Israel. Essentially, the covenant says if you obey the law, you will be blessed.

If you disobey the law, you will be cursed. God will treat us as we treat Him. He will respond to Israel's negative behavior with punishment and positive behavior with reward. For much of Israel's history, they often disobeyed, and according to the covenant, fell into a curse. Many of us live our marriages in this type of contract. I will only give love when I feel loved. I will only serve when I feel cared for. If I have been hurt by my spouse (especially unfairly), then it is only right to fight, "curse" back or respond with distance or silence. Loving behaviors are reciprocated; unloving behaviors are met by unloving responses. This is a works-based, law type marriage. While God may be able to righteously punish his people, humans cannot. Sin by one spouse is met often, not with a righteous response, but an equally sinful response of fight or flight. In turn, the relationship is lost. Whether with God or with people, the end result of this type of covenant ends in a cycle of cursing, which we need to be freed from.

Notice however, God's plan was always to move beyond this type of contract. Even in the Old Testament, God showed His consistent graciousness to Israel, despite the people's disobedience in verses like **Jeremiah 3:12**, *"Return, faithless Israel," declares the Lord, 'I will frown on you no longer, for I am faithful,' declares the Lord, 'I will not be angry forever.'"* Here we see God's desire is never to curse at the expense of the relationship. He always responded to Israel's faithlessness with His faithfulness. He always put the relationship, and our value, before His own wounds.

God puts His heart's desire of wanting to bless rather than curse into writing, when in **Jeremiah 31:31-34** He gives us a New Covenant: *"The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant.... It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the Lord. "This is the covenant I will make...." "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."*

The language of this covenant is what God has offered us in Jesus. It is a covenant based on forgiving responses to sinful behavior; there is no curse in this covenant. Woven throughout its language is God's desire to know us intimately and move toward us. His desire for a relationship pours forth in forgiveness rather than holding us accountable or even treating us fairly as we might deserve. The writer of Hebrews calls this a "better" arrangement, one full of "better promises." God of course, "demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were

still sinners, Christ died for us” (**Romans 5:8**). God, in the person of Christ, absorbs the curse himself, rather than take it out on us. He does this, as the text says, to demonstrate His love.

God desires for us to be in marriages based on grace, not works-based marriages. Marriages flourish when grace abounds. Our spouse can never earn our love, and we can never love our spouse perfectly as we should. If our marriage is based on only loving responses to loving works, then every failure of love will lead to cycles of sin and hurt that will lead to a deterioration of the marriage. But if our marriage is based on grace, we can look to God to heal the wounds inflicted by our spouse and learn to respond in loving ways just as God has done to us in Jesus.

The problem of pain is real (and we will look into that next week), but the response of grace is our only hope for our relationship with both God and with our spouse. When you walked the aisle to commit yourself to your spouse, the contract God invited you to is the New Covenant: grace-based marriage. That is the “better” promise you made to your spouse - the promise to love and give grace for better or for worse. You will often need that grace and so will your spouse. Are you ready to allow yourself to discover how to live within a better covenant? Are you glad God decided to live with us on the basis of forgiveness?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

1. Examine closely the covenants. Which covenant most often reflects your responses to your spouse: a covenant of works, full of blessing and cursing, or a covenant of grace?
2. Read **Matthew 18:21-35**. Prayerfully consider & celebrate the debt we have been forgiven and the wonderful nature of our New Covenant. Consider the parable and pray for insight from God as to how His forgiveness is meant to alter our response to the debts owed to us.



THE VALUE INHERENT IN GRACE

Grace can be foreign to our experience in our performance-based world. Our instincts tell us to protect or defend ourselves when we are hurt instead of offer grace and forgiveness. For many, they hear suggestions to be gracious as if they were being asked to merely tolerate negative behavior and work hard at having a stiff upper lip. But grace goes well beyond that. Grace infects and changes every aspect of how we feel towards our spouse in times of hurt and pain. Grace inherently sees value and works to restore the relationship, even when there is evidence to the contrary. Grace isn't interested in building a case against someone. It wants instead to build a case for someone.

Grace doesn't mean we have to be foolish and ignore negative behaviors. In fact, a graceful response may be to enter into conflict with your spouse (which we will get into later). Grace changes the equation of conflict because it transforms the way we approach it and helps the goal remain reconciliation. Even in conflict, grace is focused on the value of the relationship and the person. Gracious love “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (**1 Corinthians 13:7**).

Consider this paraphrase of an illustration from Pastor Jon Burke:

“Imagine walking down the road and you came upon a muddy place and there sticking out of the mud was a painting. You decide to stop and investigate further. As you look at the painting, you notice it is covered with mud and is entirely filthy. As you look closer, you notice that this painting has an inscription at the bottom that says, “Rembrandt”. At that point, you wouldn’t focus on the mud or treat it like mud. Your primary concern would not be the mud at all – though it would need to be removed. You’d be ecstatic to have something so valuable in your care. But if you tried to clean it up by yourself, you might damage it. So you would carefully bring this work of art to a master who could guide you and help you restore it to the condition originally intended. When people begin treating one another as God’s masterpiece waiting to be revealed, God’s grace grows in their lives and cleanses them.”

Is the focus of this story the mud or the masterpiece? There is no doubt we have been caught in muddy seasons of marriage. However, have we let our hurt shroud the view of the masterpiece? We may be able to relate to this illustration better if we think about our children. Is there anything our kids could do that would stop us from reaching out to them, hoping for the best, and loving them? Ironically, we struggle to see the same value in our spouse (with whom we made those cute kids!). Perhaps because we willingly took a role of servant to our children, it allows us to maintain a view of their value. Yet when God looks at us, He has always seen us as His children, despite our wandering or self-righteous ways (**Luke 15:11-32**). His love works hard to overcome our sin. He values us as His masterpiece, and therefore, that changes the way He deals with our mud. The mud mars the masterpiece, but we never lose sight of its value. When you value something, the focus is always on redeeming that value not discarding it. It's time we remove the mud from our marriages and uncover the masterpiece.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

1. When you look at your spouse, what mud is marring the masterpiece? Ask for God's help to see your spouse the way He does.
2. If God were making a list of why your spouse is a masterpiece, what do you think would be on there?



EVERYDAY GRACE

It is very natural for many to object at this point, saying, "What you are asking is impossible! You don't know what my spouse has done to me. I'm not Jesus!" This is a very understandable reaction. It demonstrates that our instincts of self-protection and our expectation to be loved are very powerful. To protect ourselves and to want to be loved are good and natural things, but they are not everything. It is possible to want them more than we want to respond to the Lord, and this is where we want to be careful. While it is true that we are in fact not Jesus, God does want us to become more and more like Him, responding to situations like He would. This is God's goal for our lives and our marriage.

In terms of your pain, there is no doubt that the difficulties and complexities of your marriage are unique and may be difficult for others to fully appreciate. But the Scripture tells

us that Jesus does fully understand. In the book of **Hebrews 5:7-8** it tells us that *“During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered.”* There is no more neglected, ignored, and offended person than God Himself. He encountered firsthand the rejection of His people. Jesus’ grace wasn’t a stiff upper lip response, but it came with desperate prayers and tears. God is asking us to walk a path with Him; one He has already walked. As part of his grace gift to you, you will never walk alone (**Heb. 2:7-8; Ro. 8:31-39**).

Loving your spouse with grace is not natural—it is super-natural and we will need God’s help along the way. We can run to God’s grace when we are wounded (**Psalms 34:18**). When we need kind words, God will be there (**1 Pet. 2:23-24; Ro. 12:17-21**). When we are feeling betrayed and let down by our spouses (**Psalms 55:12-14, 16**), God demonstrates He has walked in our shoes and stands with us. We do not need to be perfect, because God can use even our worst efforts and redeem them. God’s grace does not stop for you at the cross, but it is instead available every day to press into and lean on as you look for the heart and the strength to keep loving despite what you may be receiving.

Be watchful of your heart. It is easy to fall into the trap of demanding immediate change and perfection from your spouse, especially if you have experienced deep pain over the years. Under these circumstances, each new wound adds to the feelings of hopelessness. But there is great hope! God’s everyday-grace helps you see through the mud to the masterpiece. Also, you will begin to see God’s purpose for the pain as you see Him transforming you into the likeness of His son. As He sustains you, you can redeem your spouse’s worst efforts, believe the best of him or her and find hope in what’s to come. You can learn to love like Jesus more and more every day. You can do all this, and more, thanks to grace. Trust that God is at work in you and in your spouse even when you can’t see it.

In almost 20 years of marriage, I can attest that the redeemed marriage is better than starting over with something new. Another relationship isn’t the answer, because you will find the new person has mud too. I have seen beauty shine forth from my wife and me through each misunderstanding, argument, and difficulty. As I trust God in my marriage, I can see my mud washed away to reveal brighter, more vibrant colors. I am learning, often very slowly, to respond differently to my wife in the midst of difficult circumstances. Grace-based marriages don’t happen overnight. My wife and I are both learning to see the masterpiece just at the moments when the mud is the thickest, and we pick each other up. We have walked and continue to walk

the path toward loving each other with Grace. Consider these statistics: research from the Institute of American Values has shown that two-thirds of all unhappy marriages will become happy within five years if people stay married and don't get divorced. Your relationship is a process of grace and there is a masterpiece waiting to be restored.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION:

1. Ask God for whatever strength, insight, or help you need to return to a posture of value, hope, and love in your marriage. Continue this prayer throughout this study.

DISCUSS AS A COUPLE AND THEN DISCUSS AS A SMALL GROUP:

1. Do you feel like your response to your marriage is more characterized by law or grace? Do you feel you are more in need of grace or called on to give grace? Explain.
2. How have years of "mud" affected your view of the masterpiece of your spouse? How do you think people maintain the ability to look at and cherish their spouse despite hurtful moments?
3. Why is grace such a difficult way to respond to being hurt, offended, or disappointed? What are your personal concerns with responding to your spouse with grace?
4. How can we receive help from God to learn to respond to our spouses in love like He does?

ACTION ITEM:

Regardless of where you are in your marriage, create friendship moments this week with your spouse where problems and family logistics aren't discussed. Questions you could ask are: How did you feel loved this past week? What does your upcoming week look like? How would you feel most loved & encouraged in the days ahead? How can I pray for you this week? What is God teaching you right now? What do you wish you had more time to do? Share your answer to the question: If God were making a list of why your spouse is a masterpiece, what do you think would be on there?

SESSION THREE The Problem of Pain in a Sanctuary of Trust



THE PAIN IN OUR HEARTS

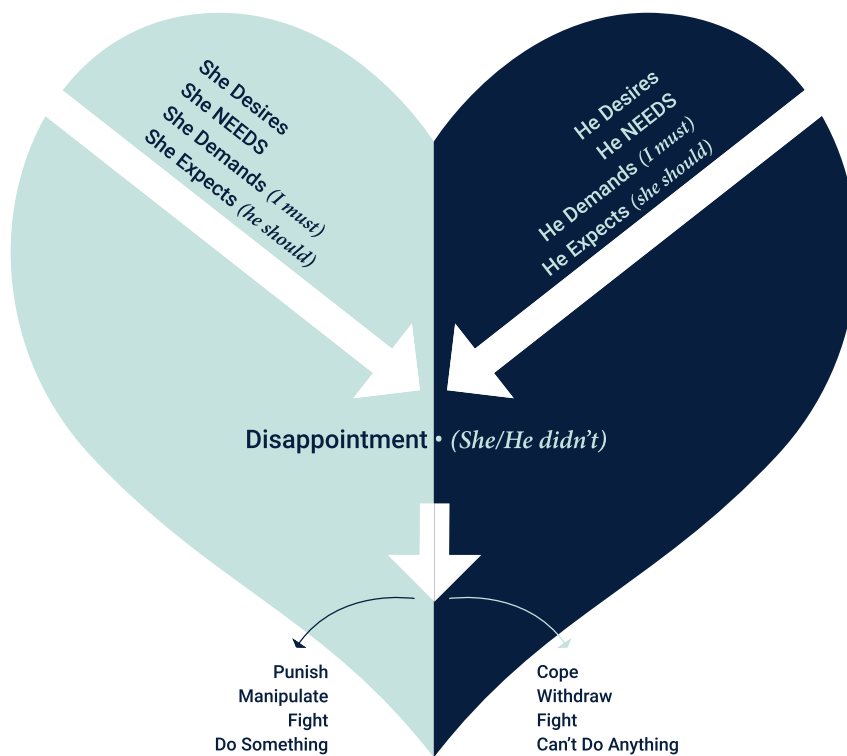
The idea of grace sounds wonderful because we all long to be loved unconditionally and receive acceptance beyond our mistakes. However, when we start discussing the idea of granting grace for our spouse's mistakes, it begins to get more sticky. When we have felt pain, been disappointed or felt wronged by our spouse, granting grace in response feels risky, unfair, and possibly even enabling or irresponsible. Should someone get away with treating their spouse that way? How will they ever change if they don't face any consequences for their actions? As these thoughts arise, consider perhaps this is your pain talking. Pain demands to be satisfied. Pain demands punishment of the offender. Pain cries for justice. Pain is focused on our protection and coping mechanisms, and not on the maintenance of the relationship. Allowing pain to control your emotions and responses will not result in reconciliation. Also realize, Grace is not the opposite of healthy communication and confrontation.

Marriage is often classified as "hard" because in a fully committed relationship, we become vulnerable. Then, when our spouse disappoints us, it hurts even worse. It's a lot like our families we grew up in. Because we love and trust them deeply, they can give us the greatest joy and cause us the greatest pain. Try as we may, we deeply care what they think. Marriage ups the ante of pain, while pushing us to have to think beyond ourselves. This process of truly loving another (and as discussed before, it is a process), can involve a lot of mistakes and selfish behavior along the way.

It is important to know where pain comes from. **James 4:1-4** says, *"What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures."* James explains that pain, and therefore fights, happen because of our wants and desires. We desperately want something, and we hope someone else will help us get it. James also says in **1:14-15**: *"But*

each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death." We need to look inside our hearts at the level of our own desires to understand where our pain is stemming from.

In my counseling program, Dr. Paul David Tripp shared concepts to show how our hearts work, which I turned into the following diagram. I have added the dimension of a spouse's heart in connection.



As James says, we want things or are really afraid of something (i.e. I want acceptance or I fear rejection, two sides of the same coin). We can desire both good things and bad things. However, even good things (if we want them too much) can become bad things when they control our interactions and responses to our spouses, rather than God. If we want something badly enough, we begin to think we need that particular thing and we demand to have it. Here is where our spouse comes in. We then expect, if our spouse loves us, the great need we feel will also be equally valued by our spouses. They will then help us to attain or meet that desire. If they don't, then we are hurt, offended, or feel let down. In short, we feel unloved and we experience hurt and pain. In this instinctual process, God is not consulted at all and we are left to react by dumping our feelings and fighting, or by stuffing our feelings and growing distant.

There is an underlying, inbred selfishness often present in our hearts. We feel loving toward those who meet our needs/wants in our way, and we feel less love for those who don't.

While our hearts are active in this way every single day of our lives, let me share with you a scene from my marriage. Once while in Athens, Greece, with my wife, Andrea, we encountered this type of conflict. We were having a wonderful time, but Andrea was more on edge than I realized. With recent ISIS activity and some nearby violent situations in Istanbul, where we had just flown through, she was more hesitant to explore around Athens. After dinner one evening, we decided to go for a walk. I desperately wanted to go see the Panathenaic Stadium where the first modern Olympics were hosted in 1896. It is the only stadium in the world completely made of marble. The route to the stadium was a bit of a trek and led through an area that felt a bit off the path. The sun began to set and Andrea was nervous. I didn't bother to find out how nervous or even ask about her discomfort because I was laser-focused on visiting the stadium. I had an entire conversation in my head where I reasoned that I was the more experienced traveler, my wife should trust me, and everything was going to be fine. I pushed ahead. She was truly scared and felt like I didn't care about her because I wasn't concerned about her fear. I was immediately offended because I felt like her fear was blocking my desire to see this particular site. Our desires collided. We wanted two different things. She was afraid, I wasn't. I wanted to see the stadium, she didn't care that much. The decision to pursue my wants while ignoring her fears hurt her at a time when we were supposed to be enjoying a romantic vacation. Our clash of desires led to a fight and we both ended up hurt because our hearts were controlled by what we each wanted. God was far from our thoughts. I know for me, I didn't slow down long enough to hear from God or understand my wife. Later that night I confessed to ignoring her fear rather than respecting it for the sake of my desire to see the stadium. She too, shared her dilemma of not wanting to keep me from seeing the things I wanted to see, but still feeling unsafe and knowing that her fear was somewhat irrational. We asked each other the best way to serve one another rather than ourselves in the future. The conversation was hard, but having a hot tub and a view of the Acropolis at night sure helped.

This example may seem small. But leave a bunch of these episodes unresolved over several years and the pain inflicted by someone you trust begins to harden your heart. Over time, you vow that in the next fight, you won't give in. When you reach the point where your fights end with someone winning and someone losing, you know your desires are controlling you and not God. In such a situation, no one wins, because the relationship loses. And pain and bitterness are just around the corner.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION:

1. The Bible is full of laments and people grieving about their pain, especially at the hands of people close to them (see **Ps. 55:12-14, 16, Isa. 53:1-6, Ezek. 34:1-6; Matt. 26:31-35**). It is important to face your pain, the sins that have happened to you and the sins you have committed (**Ps. 51**). Trace them back to their root desire/fear. Consider the places in your marriage where hurt lingers and where a particular episode has left your heart hard. What was it that you wanted so badly, in general or was it a specific response from your spouse that you were hoping for? Share your grief with God, and write down 2-3 things in a way that doesn't accuse your spouse. For example, when my spouse did _____, I felt _____.



THE DISHONESTY AND AGNOSTICISM OF PAIN

Pain assumes it's right. It has its own self-justifying nature. Feelings just happen, and pain often can't - and won't - be reasoned with. People who feel victimized want to keep the issue focused on the offender. To the one in pain, to even question the integrity of that pain is insulting. However, as we just read in the last reflection piece, our pain and disappointment may have come from desires that are taking control of us. Our desires want to claim we are the victims every time. Yet the truth is that in many situations we are not victims, we just didn't get what we wanted. And those are two separate things. It is possible that we have been truly sinned against, but the dishonesty of pain clouds the issue. We often assume when our desires haven't been met by our spouse then they are always in the wrong. It is important to process your pain and ask for God's help to sort through to the truth of it. Is my pain present because of a desire and an expectation that I have held onto selfishly? Have I been the victim of sinful behavior? Your feelings of hurt will be the same in each situation, and each type of hurt is important to God and should be important to your spouse. But God will have us respond in different ways to each type of hurt.

When we are sinned against, God is compassionate and supportive (**Ezek. 34:11-16**). When we are hurt at the level of some illegitimate desire or a desire that has taken too much control over us, God asks us to examine this and maybe challenge ourselves. He often

asks if we have a right to be angry or upset with someone and may challenge our sense of victimization (**Matt. 20:14-16; Lk. 15:28-32**). He does this in order to rescue us from the desire that has captured our hearts and, in turn, restore Himself as the leader of our hearts.

Pain also distorts the truth about our relationship. It tends to work in broad brush strokes and it paints an entire relationship with its brush. For example, perfectly happy couples can have an excellent or acceptable marriage for several years, but one negative incident can call into doubt the integrity of that happiness. As much as we claim that we are fair, when it comes to pain, we are more pain-averse than we are fair (especially if we have deep wounds from our past). If someone has wronged us, then we can instantly call into question the other person's intentions. But then there's grace. Grace is slow to anger and believes the best, while pain asks us to become skeptical and be on guard. As we go forward, we stay on guard by developing negative filters for our spouse's comments. We hear insults where there are none, subtle jabs where there may be innocent comments, and a sensitivity to statements we wouldn't mind others making. Pain puts us on the defensive and steels us for the next disappointment, which hurt reminds us will indeed come. Please note, some spouses really are suffering under tremendous sins of their spouses; in this situation, validation of your pain is necessary and confrontation of your spouse is important. For many others, their pain is just as real to them, but it is the more run-of-the-mill, daily pain that is grinding on them. It is important to fight against discouragement and resist the temptation to let pain color your entire marriage.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of pain is that it pushes us to agnosticism where God is driven out. Pain turns us inward on ourselves, and when we are hurt, we instinctively react in self-preserving ways. Often we act out on our own and take matters into our own hands. When we do this, God is not in control, instead our desires are in the driver's seat (a desire for respect, safety, loving protection, etc.). The shame of it is that we probably have suffered some ungodly sin at the hands of our spouse, but pain often drives God from our hearts and we often respond in equally ungodly ways. Sinners tend to react sinfully to being sinned against. Reaching out to trust God is the furthest thing from our minds in the heat of the moment. And so, spouses tend to get caught in cycles of sin and sinful responses, and the agnosticism of pain drives God out and pain begins to harden hearts and paint each other with its broad brush strokes.

It is a terrible thing to let pain win in your marriage and dictate your reactions to your spouse. We need to renounce its hold on us and return to God's leadership. He can lead us to

freedom from bitterness, and show us how love can help us heal from hurt and keep us from hurting each other further. How we have caused and been affected by pain is important. The way to greater love and intimacy involves healing these unresolved moments we may have allowed to harden our hearts.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION:

1. Think through how you answered the previous reflection. Have you allowed the painful times and disappointments to color your entire marriage? Perhaps it's just a cooling of your passion, sarcasm in your speech, a negative filter for your spouse's comments or more overt hostility. Pray that God reveals your heart to you. Confess to your spouse any lingering bitterness you are holding onto in light of the 2-3 hurtful moments you listed in the last reflection.



MISTAKE OWNERSHIP: A GREAT PLACE TO START

How can we heal from pain? When we have been mired in years of pain not dealt with, our ability to heal can feel like an uphill battle. This necessitates our full and careful attention. Scripture is clear on the importance of this when it says in **Hebrews 12:14-15**, *"Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled."* The way to heal is by no means simplistic, and, while there are commonalities, each marriage has its own unique path to healing. We will have more to say in the next section on how to graciously respond to pain, but there is an important and vital first step to healing any marriage.

If you have been the one who has caused hurt, the greatest thing you can do to help your spouse is to own your mistake and allow him or her the respect to be hurt. The invitation here is not to condition your confession and apology based on his or her response, but to own your actions regardless. Jesus underlines the importance of this when he says in **Matthew 5:22-24**: *"But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme*

court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell. Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering." See two things here: we are guilty of hurting someone else (notice it doesn't matter the circumstances), and we need to make it right quickly and reconcile (our spouse is even closer than a brother).

Let's explore a few tips on a getting your heart right and executing good communication when you are trying to make a healing apology. For serious hurts, be very thorough. Make sure you have thought through and are able to communicate the following seven things:

1. Address everyone involved. You may have embarrassed your spouse in public, at work, or in front of the kids and it is important to address anyone who was involved.
2. Avoid blame shifting. If your confession comes with any ifs, buts, or maybes, then you are not taking responsibility for your actions. Remember, your spouse may have influenced you and you may think you're merely responding, but you need to be in control of you.
3. Admit specifics. General apologies are fruitless. Make sure you say specifically what you did.
4. Describe your understanding of the hurt. This is crucial. Take the time to put yourself in your spouse's shoes and demonstrate you can articulate what he or she felt when you hurt them. For example, I know I embarrassed you when _____. I know you probably felt like I didn't care about your feelings at all when I _____.
5. Accept the consequences. Realize your hurt is putting your spouse in a bind where they want to respond negatively to you. They may respond with coldness, hostility and several other negative responses. Communicate that you will accept this behavior as part of the normal outcome of your actions.
6. Offer your plan for personal change and ask for their feedback. Communicate to your spouse how you will try to prevent these negative actions in the future without making false promises. Truly search your heart for what actions would demonstrate change, and ask your spouse if you are on the right track. It is important that this part is done in conversation with your spouse.

7. Ask your spouse, "Will you forgive me?" Try not to leave the conversation with an "I'm sorry." The hurt is theirs and it is not in your power to take it away with an "I" statement. Put yourself at their mercy.

I recommend using these seven steps for major injuries that are holding back your marriage. These steps are overkill for the daily disappointments, but, for the hurts that linger, they are extremely helpful. Using a few of these steps or a modified version may be helpful for the more day-to-day offenses. Each of the steps requires a great deal of humility because you put yourself at the mercy of another. This may be difficult for you to do when you feel there has been mutual hurt in the marriage. The point is to take responsibility for your behavior - regardless of your spouse's previous actions.

After you have taken responsibility, show more humility in waiting for the healing of your spouse (this is part of accepting the consequences). Here are a few helpful ways on how you can wait:

1. Listen without anxiety. It is important to listen to both negative and positive comments after hurting someone. However, while you listen you cannot take the comments personally or respond with more negative behaviors.
2. Remain Close & Interested. Allow them to feel stuck and give them time, don't demand immediate warm feelings to return. Remember, healing is a process.
3. Work on your "plan to change." Regardless of your spouse's lingering bitterness, trust God is at work even when it looks like He is not.
4. Continue to function. Invite your spouse to participate in regular life activities that don't require too much intimacy.

The greatest healing we can do in a relationship is to admit our mistakes. I hope in your home, "Will you forgive me?" is an often heard expression. Search your heart using the seven steps to confession to begin with verbal restitution for your mistakes. Follow that up with your best efforts at necessary changes (which is not always the same as giving your spouse everything they want). It is also important to show humility and respect for your spouse's feelings by using the four steps for allowing your spouse time to be hurt. Healing is a process that begins with the ownership of our mistakes.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION:

1. What mistakes do you need to own in order for your marriage to heal and grow? If you have received some answers from your spouse on the previous reflection concerning their confession of any bitterness, this is probably a good place to start. Write out your thoughts and prepare your heart using the seven steps of asking for forgiveness.

DISCUSS AS A COUPLE AND THEN DISCUSS AS A SMALL GROUP:

1. What did you personally learn about pain this week that impacted you?
2. What desires or fears tend to come up as points of conflict between you and your spouse?
3. Do you feel like there are any lingering effects from pain in your marriage that you are still working through?
4. Looking at the seven steps of confession and the four steps of humility, how has healing and forgiveness worked in your relationship? Have you seen the importance of any of these steps?
5. What discoveries, if any, did you make this week in terms of specific steps you need to take in order to deal with past hurts?

ACTION ITEM:

Follow through with the actions suggested in the Reflection Questions from this week. Confess any resentments and use the mistake ownership format to own your part when you have hurt your spouse.

SESSION FOUR Grace Your Way Through Pain



HEALTHY ONENESS

It is important to not only look at the pain in our relationship and own it, but it is also important to have a vision and model of what a healthy relationship looks like. In a word, a healthy marriage looks like “oneness.” Follow this chain of verses:

- **Genesis 2:24-25:** *“That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.”*
- **John 17:20-21:** *“Pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.”*
- **Ephesians 5:31-32:** *“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.”*
- **Philippians 2:1-4:** *“Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.”*

You will notice each verse above stresses a unity of oneness. This oneness is the goal in everyday Christian relationships as the verses in John and Philippians indicate. How much more so should oneness exist between a husband and wife? From the beginning, marriage was intended to be a companionship where spouses work together toward the same goals. Because of this, the best, most gracious response to pain is the response that brings you alongside your spouse to relate, empathize with and put his or her needs above your own. Scripture says it like this: “Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep” (**Romans 12:15**). When your spouse is in pain, you should feel that hurt too, especially when you are the source of it. How often do we wrongly receive joy when our spouse is hurt, and sometimes even feel a tinge of envy when our spouse is blessed (especially if we don’t think they deserve it). This is a failure of oneness. Instead, we should hurt together. Struggle together. Celebrate victory

together. We should cheer for each other. One the greatest graces you can give your spouse is a self-forgetfulness in the face of his or her emotions. Choosing to allow your spouse's emotions to affect you and influence you is a great step toward oneness. I am not talking about a wholesale adoption of your spouse's perspective, but a willingness to enter into his or her shoes and feel the world the way they do. Jesus exemplifies this type of oneness with us in the book of **Hebrews 2:14-18** *"Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same....He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God...For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted."* By sharing our perspective and walking in our shoes, Jesus becomes the merciful and faithful High Priest. As He becomes human, he understands us in a way He didn't before.

I will be the first to admit, I don't like to feel what Andrea is feeling, especially when I think it is something negative about me. However, if I listen long enough, I can usually relate to her hurt. And through God's grace, I can begin to stand in her shoes. I remember early in our marriage I hadn't yet adapted to the idea of oneness. While I was single, I was used to coming home whenever I wanted. While playing music with friends I could lose track of time and it didn't matter. One night, I stayed out until past midnight having a "jam session" and didn't bother to let Andrea know. She suddenly appeared in the doorway tired, scared, and angry. My first reaction was to go on the defensive and save face in front of my friend. When I stopped to take the time and listen to her frustration (it took nearly 24 hours for me to figure it out), I began to understand the importance of a simple phone call to let her know my whereabouts. I found myself desiring the same courtesy from her at times as well. I realize that I was still acting like a single man that night and I was not acting in unity with my wife. I have to admit, I have not always responded well to a confrontation. But this incident showed me the advantage of entering into my wife's emotion. Working toward oneness has been a lot more profitable than working toward defending my own honor or rights. As we consider gracious ways to respond to the pain of our spouse, perhaps we can begin with trying to relate to that pain rather than deny it, pass over, or dodge it. Let's listen long enough until we can be one with them; weeping and rejoicing together. This is oneness. This is how we connect to one another.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION:

1. How have you seen your spouse work toward oneness with you?
Where have you seen your spouse weep with you or have joy with you?



NEGATIVE SPEECH PATTERNS

Grace is necessary to begin healing pains in our marriage. Grace manifests itself in responding lovingly to our spouse, but also identifying, confessing, and putting a stop to negative patterns of speech. It is crucial to avoid being general about our negative patterns (“I am sometimes angry”), and more healing to be specific (“I know I criticize the way you discipline the kids”). In this section, we want to take a good look in the twin-mirrors of our marriage and the Bible and identify these hurtful patterns. It is often within the comfort of our home we tend to not guard our speech. One reason may be that we think the people in our home are “stuck” with us anyway, and thus, feel entitled to say exactly what we feel. But even our worst enemies deserve a measure of respect (they even deserve love, Jesus says, **Matthew 5:44**). The following hurtful speech patterns can cut people deeply and we should work to purge them from our marriages. Whatever our goals for using attacking speech with our spouse, **James 1:20** reminds us “*human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.*” Even if your cause is righteous, it cannot be achieved by unrighteous speech.

The following are negative speech patterns:

- **Criticism:** A complaint that attacks character or personality of our spouse. Compare the following two statements:
 - I am really frustrated that we didn’t clean the garage together. (*complaint*)
 - I can’t believe you didn’t care enough to set time aside to clean the garage with me. (*criticism*)
- **Contempt:** Sarcasm, cynicism, name calling, eye-rolling, mockery, and hostile humor; anything that conveys disgust. There may be threats or purposely provoking another to anger. This comes from long-term negative thoughts.

- **Appease:** This is not a move to strike against a spouse, but a move to end a conversation because of the general discomfort with arguments. The problem is that God's work is short-circuited and quiet resentment grows.
- **Defensive:** A natural response, yet when we defend ourselves it makes a counter accusation against your spouse. We often are communicating, "I am not the problem, you are." Defensive speech is not listening speech and usually escalates conflict.
- **Mind Reading:** Interpreting your spouse's words or actions in the worst possible way and assuming that people have 100 percent all good or all bad motives.
- **Stonewalling:** Not giving a person the courtesy of eye contact or any physical clue that you care. It is disengaging and conveys, "I will not be moved or influenced by you."
- **Concealment:** A form of contempt when we purposely hide thoughts, feelings, actions from our spouse. We quietly simmer at a distance in anger, rather than dealing with our problem.
- **Double Bind:** Putting people in no-win situations with words and actions.
 - Asking your spouse to be more open, and then getting angry when they are.
 - Saying you don't want to talk, but pouting or looking irritated in an obvious way to get attention.
- **Forcing Communication:** Baiting people into fights and not letting them walk away.
- **Exaggeration:** Using words like "always" and "never" to describe our spouse's mistakes. It's over-the-top character assassination to make a point. For example, accusing your spouse of never wanting to participate in activities you enjoy.
- **Minimize:** Telling someone her or she is over-reacting or being overly emotional. This demonstrates only that you don't understand and may communicate that you don't want to understand.
- **Trait names:** Using a behavior that has angered you and turning it into a label; trying to assign an identity to someone, such as, "You are a liar" (even though they may have lied only in this instance).
- **Shaming:** Taking past events a person feels vulnerable about and then using them in the heat of the fight against him or her. This is serious because God says we are forgiven, but when you shame someone you are saying, "You will always be guilty."

Each of these speech patterns causes hurt and leads to the hardening of hearts even further. Often is the case that in marriages disagreements will happen, and sadly the hurt is doubled by the way we choose to communicate. Our words influence our spouse. As **James 3:6** reminds us, “The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body.” Or as Paul puts it in **Ephesians 4:29**, “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up”. Let’s identify the places where we are violating our oneness with our spouse in the ways that we talk to each other.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION:

1. Read over the list above carefully and prayerfully. Do you see yourself in there? For each item on the list in which you relate, try to imagine what type of gracious response would promote oneness. Consider ways you can share your legitimate frustrations without using hurtful tactics.



GRACIOUS SPEECH IN YOUR MARRIAGE

As we strive toward oneness and learn to understand the perspective of our spouse, we will want to weep with them when they weep and rejoice with them when they rejoice. However, if they use a form of negative speech listed in the last reflection, we are equipped and called by God to respond with grace. Conflict is a difficult, but ultimately good, thing in a marriage. It can demonstrate our desire, and God’s desire, to do battle with sin in our lives and in our marriages. It is the opportunity we need to deal with issues that are working against our oneness. Conflict entered into with gracious speech will help us become more like Christ. The Apostle Paul sums up the spirit needed in conflict when he says in **Ephesians 4:2-3**: *“Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”*

Below is a gracious list that attempts to capture the Spirit of the words of **Ephesians 4:2-3**. Read through and take what you need:

“BE GENTLE”

- **Speak your hurt without accusations:** Being vulnerable about your hurt is good. However, watch making statements about what someone else did or didn't do; instead, remove the accusation and talk about what you feel. (When you did _____, I felt _____.) This allows us to talk about our hurt without needlessly attacking character or motives.
- **No venting:** It is not honest speech to share the absolute impassioned feelings of a moment. The Scriptures encourage us to be self-controlled people. **Proverbs 29:11** reminds us, *“A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back.”* Emotions should be shared, but not recklessly.
- **Don't assume, ask:** When in the heat of the moment, you may be tempted to read the motives of someone else. You may also be attempted to quickly solve their problems. Rather than accuse or give advice, ask another question. **Proverbs 18:13** says, *“If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame.”* Three servant-hearted questions you can use to clarify your spouse's emotions are: (1) What's going on?, (2) What were you hoping for or what were you afraid would happen?, (3) How can I help?

“BE HUMBLE”

- **Listen:** There is nothing more helpful in conflict than to take your time listening. In a very common marriage counseling tool, called the Speaker-Listener technique, couples are encouraged to first demonstrate understanding before responding. This means to ask clarifying questions and restate what you heard and the emotion that goes with it. Allow your spouse to verify you heard them right.
- **Release the need to be right:** Nothing helps the listening process more than when we stop trying to make a case for our position and start allowing ourselves to hear and listen to the other side. Humility is demonstrating we are willing to be teachable in terms of another person's perspective.
- **Validate emotions:** We have talked about weeping with those who weep, and rejoicing with those who rejoice. It is important to enter the emotions of another, because that demonstrates your personal involvement. Having someone share your emotions validates them, and in turn, makes you feel heard and understood. Scripture asks us to do this regardless of our gender.

“BE PATIENT & BEAR WITH”

- **Reassurance in the midst of conflict:** In the midst of conflict, one spouse, or both, may be wondering, “How serious is this?” To bear with your spouse, it is a great skill to learn to add reassuring comments into conflict, so that undue fear and offense surrounding the relationship doesn’t cloud the issues. Often times, I will tell my wife in the midst of conflict, “I love you, but I am just frustrated right now.” If you need space and time, make sure you communicate that the space isn’t about avoiding your spouse.
- **Kind distance:** Forcing a conversation is a type of negative speech. It is important to know when to quit an argument. We would not want to be too forceful in making people discuss things, especially when they are losing control or are very confused. We need to give our spouse time to process and heal if they ask for it. If you are in an argument with your spouse and you feel your temperature rising, rather than be tempted to say something ugly, you can choose the kind response of stopping the conversation for now. If you do this, be kind and tell your partner when you would like to pick the conversation up again later.
- **Continue to initiate at the appropriate pace:** Forgiveness and conflict are ongoing processes. While it is important to be kind and allow distance for healing, it is equally important to continue to initiate in the relationship. I call this continuing to “fish together.” Like a father and son who were estranged for many years but decide to go fishing together like they used to. As they fish, they begin to discover there is more to their relationship than hurt. Continue to “fish together” - find things to do together in common life. We don’t always heal in our relationships by dealing with the conflict every time we are with our spouse. Sometimes people who have been injured by each other over years rebuild their relationship by doing common things together that have nothing to do with dealing with the conflict. Continue to vulnerably share hopes, dreams, and desires. Pain is part of your story, but it is not the whole story. This reaffirms commitment in the midst of conflict.

This gracious list can significantly help your marriage. When there are major hurts, please return to the previous week’s reflection on the seven steps of forgiveness and four steps of humbly waiting. This week’s aim is to work grace into your daily interactions. If we work on gracious responses to hurt, we can keep issues from escalating into negative speech patterns. As **1 Peter 4:8** tells us, *“Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because*

love covers a multitude of sins." Our gracious speech responses can cover the negative speech of a spouse as we work to bear with each other. Good marriages learn to utilize gracious responses; not take offense but instead respond with love.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION:

1. Which of the items in this reflection do you need God's help with the most? Write them down and ask for your spouse, close friend, or small group to pray for you around these specific things.

DISCUSS AS A COUPLE AND THEN DISCUSS AS A SMALL GROUP:

1. How would you describe God's goal of oneness in your marriage? Where have you seen that oneness at work in your marriage?
2. How were you personally convicted as you read over the negative speech pattern list?
3. Which of the gracious responses are you most looking forward to trying out? Ask your spouse which one's they would love to receive.
4. How would you summarize how the model of God's grace should affect your day to day marriage communication?

ACTION ITEM:

Gently share with your spouse one negative speech pattern that hurts you the most. Tell them which gracious speech you desire the most. Write down what your spouse shares with you and ask someone in the group to pray for you and ask you about your follow through for the next few weeks.

SESSION FIVE Grace Beyond Gender



GENDER BIAS AND SCRIPTURAL CONFUSION

When it comes to marriage, the Bible contains several verses about the roles of husbands and wives. For instance, **Ephesians 5:22-33** is one of the more extended sections. In verse 22 it says, *“Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church.”* From this section and several others, the Bible is clear there are different roles for men and women, summarized often by the words leadership and submission. But beyond this general description, the Bible gives almost no concrete details on how these roles are to be expressed (this was most likely God’s design). We are then left with questions: Should wives work outside the home? How should the husband be involved in the children’s lives? Who decides how to discipline children? Should the husband cook & clean? Can the wife earn more money than the husband? Who should oversee the finances? What does a submissive wife look like? What type of leadership should the man exercise?

I know for myself, I typically assumed the answer to many of these questions. Growing up, my family modeled certain behaviors that gave me a sense of what was normal. I formed many desires, and therefore, expectations about what husbands and wives did and didn’t do. But Tim Keller gives us a word of caution here:

“Look carefully to see whether you are insisting that you do things exactly the way your parents did them. Maybe your family’s way of operating was wise in a particular regard, but you should only carry it into your new family if it makes sense to your spouse, too....When you marry, you commit to becoming a new decision-making unit and developing new patterns and ways of doing things.”

Our family backgrounds can become stereotypes and expectations that we carry into marriage and then become occasions for demands that we make on one another. The end result is often a lot of feelings of rejection, misunderstanding, and false accusations about failing to live up to our preconceived notions of submission or leadership. As I have gotten

older, I have been almost embarrassed for myself by the number of husbands and men I meet that cook (I think my wife is also embarrassed for me). I have hardly cooked in years and often make jokes about how my way of cooking is taking the family out for dinner. My dad never cooked either. I realize I have imported my family background into the words submission and leadership. But if the truth were told, I can't find a verse about women cooking. Added to all of this, my wife has told me she doesn't love to cook (although she willingly does it). Now that our kids are older, she is going back to work. What will I do? Should I insist the Bible wants her to cook for me and that is her role? Keller is wise to encourage us to hold our gender expectations lightly as we enter a "new decision-making unit."

We need to offer ourselves and our spouses grace here. There are so many books and stereotypes about the differences between men and women that we should face the truth: learning to love and understand the opposite sex is just plain hard. It goes well beyond cooking and daily duties into even emotional tendencies and capacities to think and reason. As Kathy Keller, Tim Keller's wife, writes, "Men tend to look down on women as they gather around the water cooler and snicker about female foibles. Women return the favor, skewering male pretensions and weaknesses....since the default mode of the human heart is self-justification, where we cannot understand the other sex we assume inferiority."

Perhaps what grace looks like in this aspect of marriage is to hold the idea of gender lightly. Rather than snicker at the other side, we should understand why God made us different. Grace looks like re-examining your preconceived notions of submission and leadership and becoming aware of your family's influence. Let's allow our spouses perspective on gender roles to influence our own take on things. Also, we can humbly look together with our spouse in Scripture to figure out the broad dimensions of submission and leadership. Then, together, we can figure out how we can work as a team and what roles make sense to make it a winning team. As we graciously embrace and work to understand the opposite sex, you will see how God makes a stronger, more unified team with the very different perspectives that men and women bring. You may even find that you have more in common with your opposite sex spouse than you ever imagined.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION:

1. What do you think are the proper roles for men and women in marriage? Where did your ideas come from? Think through how those ideas have translated into expectations and compare notes with your spouse.



A ONE-ANOTHER FOUNDATION TO BUILD ON

We will address in the next reflection together some guidance on defining leadership and submission for husbands and wives, but I wanted to give you a Biblical foundation that will hopefully help us cut through our gender biases. This is a foundation that sets up the spirit of the gender differences and the biblical commands that go with it.

As we think about our marriage, instead of thinking about what husbands and wives should or should not do, sometimes it is helpful to step back and look at the basics of what the Bible says should describe any Christian friendship. Whatever we find the Bible telling us for regular Christian relationships, should be twice as true for our marriage; it is the relationship where we forfeit self to become one with someone else. Looking at the general “one-anothering” of Scripture gives us a base line description of a good, loving friendship that serves to put into context any verses about husbands and wives. Whatever leadership in the home is, it should be done lovingly. Whatever submission in the home is, it should be governed by love. For many couples, thinking about how to be more loving is less confusing and less liable to be hijacked by our cultural notions of gender. The one-another passages of Scripture help us restore a foundation of love.

There are so many “one-another” passages that we necessarily scaled our set down for this reflection:

- **Be at peace** with one another (**Mk. 9:50**)
- Be of the **same mind** with one another (**Ro. 12:16, 15:5**)
- **Accept** one another (**Ro. 15:7**)
- **Be patient** with each other, making allowance for each other’s faults... (**Eph. 4:2**)

In these first few verses, we see that Christians should expect to work through their differences towards acceptance, which goes beyond merely tolerating one another. Men and women often fall short of acceptance and rather resign themselves to learning to live with their opposite gender-spouse’s “annoying tendencies”. The goal then is to put up with each other, not reach toward love and acceptance. Grace-based marriages keep pushing toward acceptance and look for the masterpiece through the mud. Men and women are called to patience in the face of differences, and God calls us to be of the same mind. Men may be from Mars and women from Venus, but we are asked to understand what is going on in each other’s heads no matter what

planet, country, family, or gender we came from. Peacefulness is not just for the submissive quiet wife, but for the husband as well.

- **Be kind, tender-hearted**, and forgiving to one another (**Eph. 4:32**)
- Bear with and **forgive one another** (**Col. 3:13**)
- **Seek good for one another**, and don't repay evil for evil (**1 Th. 5:15**)
- Through love, **serve** one another (**Gal. 5:13**)
- **Greet** one another with a kiss of love (**1 Pet. 5:14**)
- Give preference to one another in **honor** (**Ro. 12:10**)

Men, not just women, are asked to be kind and tender-hearted. Some men defend their straight forward harshness with the fact that they are men and women are too emotional to handle it. However, it may not be their masculinity that is at stake, but merely their preferences and desires that are ruling their heart. Men and women are both called to be tender-hearted, which is a quality not often associated with masculinity but found often in the character of the MAN, Jesus. Seek good for one another. What might that look like for a wife to seek her husband's good at work or for the family financially? Or for a husband to seek his wife's good in the home and with his children? Service isn't just for the submissive one, and honor is not just for the wife to do for the husband. The man's desire for respect is not always an egotistical thing, but is a normal desire of any Christian friendship. Greeting one another with a kiss of love is not solely the job of the stay at home mother when Dad comes home, but the men as well are asked to participate in a proper greeting. Whether both spouses work or only one, the first few moments of greeting one another at the end of a day can be a very important moment to demonstrate love.

- *Clothe yourselves in **humility** toward one another* (**1 Pe. 5:5**)
- ***Speak truth** to one another* (**Eph. 4:25**)
- ***Comfort one another** concerning the resurrection* (**1 Th. 4:18**)
- ***Encourage and build up one another*** (**1 Th. 5:11**)
- ***Pray for** one another* (**Jas. 5:16**)
- *Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you **teach and admonish one another*** (**Col. 3:16**)

Men are asked often to be the spiritual leader of their family, yet in every day Christian relationships either person can pray, teach and/or admonish. Submissiveness for women doesn't mean holding your tongue, when in normal relationships everyone is asked to lovingly speak the truth. What would humility look like when couples come together to make decisions about their family? Are wives only meant to be the supportive, cheerleader-types or are husbands asked to encourage and be supportive of their spouse as well?

- ***Don't grumble among one another (Jn. 6:43)***
- ***Husbands and wives: don't deprive one another of physical intimacy (1 Col. 7:5)***

Women aren't the only gender with nagging and grumbling tendencies. Men in Scripture grumble all the time under their authorities (just go to work with for a period of time and see!). Women may want sex and be deprived of it just as much as men might. If we were to go to some counseling sessions between men and women, you might see husbands who struggle in this area.

I think this is a fair sampling that hopefully helps you and I cut through any gender biases we might have. We probably don't have men and women issues as much as love and understanding issues. The most common "one-another" verse in the Bible is "Love one another" (Jn. 13:34, 15:12, 17; Ro. 13:8; 1 Th. 3:12, 4:9; 1 Pet. 1:22; 1 Jn. 3:11, 4:7, 11; 2 Jn. 5). Ask a couple to brainstorm what love is and you get words like kind, caring, encouraging, supportive, and gracious. Ask that same couple to brainstorm what are the roles of a husband and wife and you will often get completely different phrases like disciplining the children, cooking, providing, and making decisions. Because of our culture's influence, our thinking about marital roles degenerates into a list of duties and gets separated from loving behavior. But whatever role a husband and wife have and whatever tendencies a gender may or may not have, we should love to the level of a typical Christian friendship and beyond.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION:

1. What personal assumptions about marital roles or gender tendencies are challenged by reading through the Bible's base line of "one-another" loving relationships?



THE POWER OF GENDER ROLES

I hope that reading through the one another's helped you see that you and your spouse are more alike than you might think and are asked to do many of the same things according to Scripture. Yet despite our culture's pressure to erase gender distinctions, we do want to emphasize that God did make men and women different and there is power in that difference. In every passage where the Scriptures talk about the body of Christ, it talks about the strength that comes from a team full of different perspectives and functions. In fact, the unity of that team is what leads us to maturity; we don't ever win alone. Paul in **Ephesians 4:16** tells us *"the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love."* Even God as a Trinity works as a group of equals with different roles. An old Trinitarian formula is that everything in life comes from the Father, through the Son, and by the Holy Spirit. If the Body of Christ works as a collection of different parts working in unity as a reflection of the inner workings of God himself, then it is no surprise that in marriage God has powerfully brought together different perspectives and genders to be stronger together than apart.

While we have spent a lot of time talking about the power of a spouse to hurt us, the truth is also that our spouse has been given by God to influence and to heal us as well. As you look through the "one-anothers" of the last reflection, our spouses have the potential to influence us in a way no one else can. Just a simple comment from a spouse can leave you in ashes, but an encouraging comment can help you stand against the whole world. Our spouse has the ability to change our own narrative and give us confidence we didn't know we could have. Tim Keller writes, *"If the whole world says that you are ugly, but your spouse finds you beautiful, you feel beautiful."* This is a power that God gives others as **1 Peter 4:10** says, *"As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God."* I believe God gave us the opposite sex to make us stronger as a team. Part of the grace God wants to give me comes through my wife and He can use her in my life. I find that my wife has "rubbed off" on me. Her tenderness has honed my strength. Her ability to listen to other people encourages me to be sensitive to others and listen in a different way. Keller also writes, *"In a split second, I have the opportunity in situations to ask myself, 'Would my wife's typical reaction be more wise and appropriate than mine?' And I realize my repertoire of possible words and actions has been greatly expanded."*

This background helps us understand why, in every passage specifically related to

marriage in the Bible, the ideas of authority and submissiveness come up (**Eph. 5:22-33, Col. 3:18-19; and 1 Pet. 3:1-7**). The different roles lead to a better team.

For the men, leadership shouldn't be pressed into their usual CEO stereotypes. The type of leadership the Bible talks about is not about getting perks, good parking spots, the spotlight, money, and the traditional notions of power and privilege. Christ's version of authority is servant-hearted; He doesn't eliminate authority but redeems what authority should be about. In **Mark 10:42-45** Jesus said, *"You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."* The husband as head is not Lord of the Manor where the subjects live to benefit his desires. Rather, he leads in love and consideration of others, especially his wife (read **Ephesians 5:25-33** and count how many times it says "love"). His authority means he is responsible for the care of those under him. The authority is that of a shepherd, not a landlord. And before we desire to be this type of CEO, consider that the perk for Jesus' leadership was giving his life as a ransom to those who submitted to him.

For women, the word that summarizes the wife's role is always "submit." To many, this is a dirty word in marriage because of how it has been wrongly used to imply that wives are inferior, not capable, weaker, should stay quiet, etc. Submission is never meant to show weakness, as we see Christ's strength as he submits to the Father. Submission means being the ultimate team player with a healthy respect for the team leader. Submission never means withholding the truth, helpful critiques, or differences of opinions from your husband. As we saw in the previous section, we have an obligation to exhort, admonish, and speak the truth to one another. Respectful, but honest, communication is what anyone under leadership should provide; it is what good team players do. As wives think about what submission looks like for them, each wife should realize that everyone (even her husband) submits in life. Authority is an aspect of our lives in most relationships: with parents, at work, as citizens, etc. We tend to understand and appreciate its usefulness in these contexts and know how to rightly act under that authority, but sometimes wives struggle to come to grips with it in terms of their marriage. Even though wives are not asked to be the primary spouse responsible for leadership of the family, they are still asked to lead and make decisions as any good team member would. Submission just means not acting unilaterally.

My suggestion is to work through the roles of husband and wife in conversation with

one another. Whatever leadership means for the husband, it will always be in the context of love and be gentle, considerate, and encouraging. Whatever submission means for the wife, it will also be in the context of love and mean participatory, truthful, and a team mentality. The details of who does what are up to you and your spouse to work out together in a way that will work for your family. Be on guard that you are not merely importing your family backgrounds, and listen to the Lord and each other as you work it out. While in these last few reflections I have tried to bring more common ground and a team perspective to gender differences and roles, I do respect there are common patterns between men and women that we can learn from. We unfortunately do not have space to go into that in this study, but I highly recommend the books *For Men Only* and *For Women Only*. These books gather real life examples and quotes from couples that allow us to see our typical daily situations from the perspective of the other gender while avoiding generalized stereotypes that may be less helpful.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

1. If you are a husband, what does it look like to lead in a loving and sacrificial way? If you are a wife, what does it look like to lead in a loving and submissive, team centered way?
2. Think individually about your role and then come together as a couple and talk about how your family team is doing. What changes, if any, will you decide together to make in terms of the attitude of your team or the specific jobs that each spouse is primarily responsible for?

DISCUSS AS A COUPLE AND THEN DISCUSS AS A SMALL GROUP:

1. How was your idea of leadership and submission for husbands and wives challenged this week?
2. What example was set by your parents in terms leadership and submission?
3. Have you been able to allow the opposite gender to influence you? Do you feel like some of the struggles you may face in your marriage are related to gender differences?

4. What specific changes did you and your spouse consider in terms of how you think about or approach the roles of husband and wife?

ACTION ITEM:

Look at question 2 in the last reflection for this week. Share with your spouse any attitude or job adjustments you feel God is leading you to make.

SESSION SIX

Grace Pursues, Endures, and Grows



GRACE PURSUES

Grace is not merely about playing good defense and, therefore, working hard at dealing with pain and learning about forgiveness with our spouse. As foundational as that is, God's grace is active in His pursuit, blessing, and adoration of His people. God consistently pursues us in relationship. Consider the words of **Psalm 139:7-10**, *"Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast."* In **John 6:44**, Jesus states, *"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day."* The Apostle Paul adds in **2 Corinthians 5:19**, *"All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation."* It is hard to escape the fact that the grand story of the Bible is God's pursuit of His people. He has long suffered and worked toward restoring a relationship with His created people both to bless them with life in His presence and receive worship from them.

My wife and I decided to write our own vows for our wedding. While we are like most couples, not particularly having a clue as to the gravity of the words we were promising to each other, I believe we spoke some important words that day that have remained as motivating forces in our relationship. For me specifically, I promised Andrea that I would adore her. I remember intentionally making that part of my vow because I didn't want to stop at an obligatory commitment to our marriage in good times and bad. I wanted to say something in our vows about my daily pursuit of my wife. I wanted to give her consistent affection. I have always hoped that my wife would feel the affirmation of being "wanted" by her husband in every sense of the word. As time has marched on, I realize that I have to fight against creeping personal selfishness and outside forces that would distract me from the pursuit of my wife. I know that I pursued her plenty prior to our marriage, and I want to maintain a similar passion for my wife as time has gone on. I am aware that I am not always in control of my wife's feelings about being pursued, but I am responsible for my actions of pursuing, regardless if it is always noticed.

In much of the same way, God has maintained His passion and pursuit for us. He has pursued us across the pages of Scripture and through time, despite our negative responses to Him. As we saw in the verses above, he makes His presence **available** everywhere; he **pursues** us in relationship, and even attempts to **draw** us to himself. Each of these phrases could be instructive for us as spouses. What would it look like to be available to your spouse, emotionally and physically? Here I would want you to think down to the level of daily rhythms and to larger patterns of time where you decide to be alone with your spouse. On a daily level, being available to take or make phone calls to be in the presence of your spouse and share elements of your day is extremely important. We used to call each other all the time when we were dating, didn't we? In the evenings there is usually time for couples to be together, what is the quality of this time? For many couples, the quality of the time is diminished and disconnected because couples are distracted by some video screen, social media, or pursuit of separate hobbies. What would it look like for spouses to draw each other to themselves? Pursuing your spouse means wooing them. There are so many ways to say I love you and so many languages of love to speak, according to the popular *5 Love Languages* book by Gary Smalley. What form does your love take? Do you draw your spouse to you with expressions of love in the form of gifts, service, poetry, etc.? In the realm of larger patterns of relationship, and depending on what stage of life you are in, I think a positive suggestion is to have weekly alone times, a monthly date (minimum), and a yearly get-away where you get to pursue your spouse and focus solely on them.

One of my favorite sentences in the Bible is **Ephesians 1:8-9**: *"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us."* Paul's sentence takes place within the main idea that God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing. What I enjoy about these particular verses is the language that God "lavished" us with the "riches" of His Grace. It wasn't God's obligation to adore us and love us, rather it was his pleasure! A repeated phrase through this section of Ephesians is that God did all these things for us in Christ because it was His "pleasure" and according to his "will" or "desire." Whatever form the pursuit of our spouse takes, it should bring us great pleasure. There is great joy in adoring someone. Think about how good it feels to smother your children with hugs or see them returning from college after their first year. Consider the days when you couldn't wait for the next phone call, letter, or chance to send a gift to your spouse in the early parts of your relationship. Perhaps familiarity has bred contempt and rust has grown on the edges of your relationship. Time, misunderstanding, and hurt can sometimes influence

the flames of our pursuit of our spouse, but thank you, Lord, that it didn't alter God's desire to have a relationship with us. The choice of whether our flame of pursuit is extinguished is truly up to us. You may find that what fans the flame to pursue your spouse is the actual pursuit itself. Grace lavishes its riches on the object of its pursuit, and that doesn't change with time or worthiness.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION:

1. Reflect on your pursuing behavior toward your spouse in the early part of your dating or married relationship. Pray and ask God to inspire you to adore your spouse from the heart, removing any obstacles. What specifically can you add to your relationship with your spouse that would show lavish love and pursuit?



JEALOUSLY ENDURES

In an old U2 song called "Where the Streets Have No Name," lead singer Bono states several times, "Our love turns to rust" as he talks about the building and burning down of love. Is it true that love rusts? Is there an inevitable fading of love that we just can't fight like rust on metal? It may come as no surprise at this point, but I believe that this is not inevitable. Love can rust like anything else, if not maintained. However, if maintained, it can be kept in good condition and can be maintained with vibrancy and enthusiasm over the years. The apostle Paul reminds us in **1 Corinthians 13:13**, *"And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."* Love is meant to remain and be maintained. Love is the one constant of the universe. God's love has endured for us, and He invites us to endure with our spouse as well.

When you hear the word endure, I want you to hear the combination of obligatory commitment and maintenance of hope and enthusiasm. This combination is necessary. There are times in your marriage where you do respond to your spouse with obligation and strained kindness. Don't mistake this for pretending, but rather understand that this is a show of passion, hope, and enthusiasm for your marriage. In our me-guided, feel-first culture, some may scoff and say that obligatory love is not love at all. I think this couldn't be further from the

truth. Take any possession that you own: a car, a lawn mower, a wedding ring, an appliance, even your home, if you feel a sense of obligation to maintain the quality of that object, is that evidence of care or a lack of care? I may not like washing my car, but I do it because of the value I place on my vehicle. I am enthusiastic and hopeful about my car, so I look to maintain it and clean it, regardless of the feelings of not wanting to particularly go outside and wash it today. Maintenance is a demonstration that you hope the object of your maintenance endures. Those who restore things, do it with great love.

What makes our love rust and feel old? In a word, I would say **presumption**. Presumption is assuming our love is fine without any positive maintenance. I learned long ago that presumption over the long haul of our relationship feels a lot like neglect to Andrea. As a pastor, I am prone to shift my gaze outward to the problems and situations of the people of our congregation. Over the years, I have poured myself into serving others so much so that I had only leftovers for my family and my marriage. In fact, I presumed that everything was OK on the home front, and even presumed that my wife and kids would still maintain their energy and love for me, filling my tank when I came home. Love will rust under consistent neglect.

Depending on your view, it is very popular these days to cherish and hold up children as the highest good in our world. Often when children come into a marriage, the couples can presume upon their marriage and devote all of their energy and affection onto the children. Just like some spouses can get lost in a career, some marriages can get lost in the day-in-and-day-out shuffling of children. The marriage is presumed upon for the sake of adoring children; one relationship is prioritized over another. Yet, presumption over time feels a lot like neglect. When children leave home, spouses may look at each other like strangers and wonder why love has rusted.

Unquestioned routines are another source of rust. Many couples get in routines to deal with the pressures of life. These systems are set up for personal comfort and survival. Often the end result is scheduling their spouse right out of their lives. Work out schedules, golf dates, shopping sprees, and social media and technological obsessions have their place in life, but they can also become distractions to your marriage. While one spouse is pursuing their personal hobbies, the other spouse is often presumed upon to be there when the hobby is done and perhaps hold the family together in the meantime. Often, couples make trade-offs, and pass each other like ships in the night as one spouse comes home from his or her hobby in order to allow the other spouse to take his or her turn at enjoyment of a hobby. Every now

and then, make sure you stop and figure out what activities you and your spouse do together. If the word “together” is hard to find, rust may be growing.

Nothing will cause more rust in your marriage than unresolved issues. There is a reason why the Scriptures say “Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.” This verse is not an admonition to legalistic 24-hour conflict resolution as much as it is a warning that unresolved issues build walls of distance that cause love to rust. We have already written about forgiveness in an earlier part of this study to resolve issues; please use this material to keep bitterness out of your marriage. A regular check-up with your spouse to see if there are any scars in your relationship is a very healthy thing to do. Don’t look for hurt where there isn’t any, but watch out for the phrase, “I’m fine.” Even more so, if your spouse doesn’t want to talk about things, try to reassure them that you want to hear the truth without becoming defensive. Be persistent without forcing the conversation.

Work, kids, comfort hobbies and routines, and unresolved issues, all of these can lead to rust and require our attention. Rather than presuming our relationship is fine, we can combat rust and strengthen our marriage’s endurance by offering the Grace of Jealousy. In **Exodus 34:14**, God is speaking when he says, “Do not worship any other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.” In the Song of **Solomon 8:6-7** we read: *“Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave.”* This jealousy is not the unhealthy, obsessive and suspicious form, but the protective, passionate desire for uninterrupted oneness. Jealousy here means that you let nothing come between you and your spouse. Your commitment to love overcomes the outside forces and even works to keep them at bay. When you are jealous like this, you are intensely focused on your marriage and you strive for the attention of your spouse with great zeal. With children, remind yourselves that it was your love that created them in the first place. With work, continue to show your spouse that he or she is the priority. With unresolved issues, maintain the quality of your relationship by jealously resolving issues as soon as possible. Don’t leave your spouse’s heart hanging and uncertain. Don’t presume upon your relationship, jealously guard it and pursue it. Jealous love will endure as it is “as strong as death;” it will not rust.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION:

1. Where are you tempted to presume upon your spouse? Where do you see rust growing in your love? What relational patterns should change in order to jealously prioritize your spouse?



GRACE GROWS

Ultimately it is important for us to know where our marriage is headed. We should end where we began this study. I wrote at the beginning of this study that God intends our marriage to be a place where we get to learn to love like God loves us. As people in pursuit of God, we should always be growing in our understanding of God's love, as the apostle Paul tells us in **Ephesians 3:17-19**, *"And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge."* This prayer of Paul's is incredible because he is asking God to empower us to understand His love, something that surpasses knowledge. There is so much to know about God's love that we need His supernatural help to know it! For me, the knowledge of God's love that Paul is talking about is not a book knowledge or a fact to learn, but more an experiential knowledge that is only found through walking with God over time. Over time, in the highs and lows, God's love takes on dimension for us. As we grow in understanding the dimensions of God's love, then we also would expect our growth in the dimensions of our love for our spouse. This love, too, cannot be studied or read about, but only experienced. But what a thrill to know that as we grow in God's unbounded love, the love in our marriage can grow to the greatest depths.

What is missing from the goal of growing to love like Christ loved us? Did you notice? The goal is not to change my spouse according to my needs and desires; real love is not trying to fix your spouse into your image of the perfect mate. Also, it is not to stubbornly staying put in our lives in unbending ways demanding that others love us "unconditionally", sin and all. True love implies change and growth. God loves us *"even while we are sinners"* (**Romans 5:8**), but He loves us too much to leave us in a sinful state. As **Romans 8:29** says, *"For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son."* God, in His love, invites us and expects us to grow. He shines light into our lives to expose the pain and ugliness of sin. He invites us to higher forms of love. In our marriages then, we should expect not to bend to the will of our spouse's potentially selfish desires, but we should also expect to change based on their feedback. God will use our spouse, his or her hurts and frustrations with us, to get our attention and expose areas we should look at. These are the *"wounds from a friend that can be trusted"* (**Proverbs 27:6**). As your spouse speaks, realize you may be listening to *"one who speaks the very words of God"* (**1 Peter 4:11**). God may be using your spouse to "spur" you *"on toward love and good deeds"* (**Hebrew 10:24**). The greatest gift you can give your spouse is the

humility to accept the feedback you receive, not to be molded by their potentially self-serving desires, but more into Christ-likeness.

There is a loop to all this feedback in marriage as well - it goes both ways. God is using you to influence your spouse to grow in love, too. Marriage is influence, and it is meant to direct people toward Christ. This is the wonderful journey you are taking together with your spiritual best friend. You might be wondering why doesn't God just wave a magic wand and change us into more loving people the moment we get married. Why all this process and pain of relationship? I believe because love is only learned through the journey. One of the most annoyingly repetitive portions of Scripture is found in **Numbers 9:15-23**. It repeats over and over again how when the cloud of the presence of the Lord moved, then Israel moved. When it stopped, Israel stopped; on and on it goes. But notice, the Lord didn't just magically transport the Israelites from Egypt to the Promised Land. Only through the journey through the desert were the Israelites able to learn to depend on the Lord and follow His lead. They learned about trusting God, by trusting God. So it will be with your marriage. You will learn to love your spouse by loving your spouse. You will grow only through the journey. The journey is meant to change the depths of your love, and hopefully it will. It will challenge you and mature you. Once love takes root, your marriage will feel like the Promised Land you always hoped for.

A great question to ask is: what is my marriage producing in me and my spouse? What am I changing into? If you are on the right track in your marriage, then it should produce *"love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control"* (**Galatians 5:22-23**). These of course are the fruit of the Spirit, but they are also the fruit of a Christian marriage growing in the love of Christ. As you approach your marriage, hold with great respect your influence on your spouse. The ability to tear down or build up should not be held lightly. Also, buckle up! God wants to change you. Don't let your pride keep you from the glorious growth in love that God has for you through your spouse's feedback. I can truly say that I am a more Christ-like man because of my wife, Andrea. My prayer is that she is a more Christ-like woman because of God using me in her life. I am honestly scared and thrilled about the growth steps that God has next for me. I am glad He decided to let me take this journey with my best friend. What influence is your marriage having on you and your spouse?

"But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen." **2 Peter 3:18**.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION:

1. Do you embrace the idea that God wants to change you through your marriage?
What has your marriage produced in you to this point?

DISCUSS AS A COUPLE AND THEN DISCUSS AS A SMALL GROUP:

1. In what specific ways have you been inspired to pursue your spouse?
2. Are there any changes or adjustments you can make, as a couple, to jealously guard your relationship?
3. What has your marriage been producing in you and in your spouse? Are you encouraged by what is being produced or do you need a change?
4. What is one specific thing the Holy Spirit has convicted you of through the course of this study that you would invite your group members to pray for and hold you accountable to change?

ACTION ITEM:

Sit down with your spouse and come up with a plan for “us” time. Consider weekly friendship conversations, monthly dates, and a once a year get-away as a couple.

