



BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES FOR MARRIAGE

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counsel • self-study • teaching • cell group • life

MARRIAGES THAT SING

CHAPTER ONE

“Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain blessing. For ‘Whoever desires to love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit; let him seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil” (1 Peter 3:8-12, ESV).

THE MELODY OF GOOD RELATIONSHIP

Christian marriage counseling should always glisten with themes such as “unity”, “sympathy”, “brotherly love”, “tender heart”, “humble mind”, “bless” (as in blessing others), and “seek peace”. Most of the time, however, when counselees seek help for their marital problems, words such as these do not even register on their relational radar. Instead, couples become heavily fixated on their own agenda, and the majority of the time

the central component of that agenda is “self” rather than God. Counselees often enter the counseling process reflecting the personality of the highly skilled attorney who is prepared to make his or her case as to why he or she is not to blame for the marital discord. Phrases such as, “I am busy because she doesn’t meet my need for sex” or “I avoid him because he doesn’t meet my need for affirmation” abound in such settings. Instead of viewing counseling as a place in which they may search their own hearts for needed change, counselees often have as their focus the goal of convincing the counselor that the true problem resides in the heart (and behavior) of their spouse.

THE SPECK AND THE LOG

The first step in counseling couples that resemble this scenario is to follow the very wisdom of Jesus who said *“Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye” (Matthew 7:3-5, ESV).* To accomplish this, counselees must be willing to examine themselves (and all their fallibility) in reference to the perfect and all-knowing God. Therefore, the frame of



reference in examining one's "log" is God and His Word.

Paul, in particular, reminds believers to always function "in view of God's mercy" (Romans 12:1). This mindset requires a renewed agenda in which honoring God and loving others are central. As such, couples will seek to glorify God in the midst of marital conflict far above pursuing a perceived "felt need".

By following this path, the believer has the glorious option to set his or her mind "on things above not on things that are on earth" (Colossians 3:2). What does this entail? In part, it means seeking the will of God in one's marriage by pursuing "unity" over control, "sympathy" over selfishness, "brotherly love" over "felt needs", "tender heartedness" over hard heartedness, a "humble mind" over a sense of entitlement, and seeking to "bless" over and above receiving blessing.

RESEMBLING GOD IN THE PROCESS

While challenging, this is the very essence of true Christianity: that helpless humans are redeemed by the Redeemer, and as such enter the supernatural process of being made over into His likeness day by day, situation by situation, relationship by relationship. There is no such thing as a wasted conflict, trial, or hurt in marriage when one has his or her mind set on the eternal narrative of redemption. In actuality, the point of relational conflict becomes the context of divine change so long as one's mind is centered on the only agenda that truly matters, God's.

Therefore, during the initial stages of counseling, encourage counselees to

address their own "log" (rebellion against a holy God) before addressing the "specks" that are perceived to be in their spouses eyes (lack of attention, laziness, disrespect, etc.). Bring to mind the greater narrative of God's eternal plan of redemption in which only One, Jesus Christ, resides as the main character of the story.

Sin narrows the vision of life to a point where all that an individual can see is his or her own fallen perspective of things. The Bible opens the sphere of vision so much so that the perspective of the eternal God may be viewed, considered, and pursued as one is empowered by God's grace to do so. Once the "logs" of each spouse have genuinely been considered then a proper foundation will have been laid to work on the relational dynamics that are reinforcing division within the marriage. The key being, according to Jesus, relational reconciliation begins with an honest assessment of one's own faults, and a willingness to do something about it.

COUNSELING RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Listen carefully to the "case" being brought before you by couples. Draw counselees' attention to this dynamic. How does this reveal his and her motive for the counseling process (changing self or changing spouse)? What is revealed when the main priority of the session is to attack and prove wrong the other person?
2. Point counselees to Matthew 7:3-5, and give homework to identify their "log".
3. Walk each spouse through the process of repentance (see Luke 17).



4. Emphasize the eternal narrative of redemption in which glorifying God by imitating Jesus is most emphasized.
5. Highlight the themes of "unity", "sympathy", "brotherly love", "tender heart", "humble mind", "bless" (as in blessing others), and "seek peace". How can the couple begin to focus more on these objectives?

HUSBANDS: A HIGH CALL TO LOVE

CHAPTER TWO

Most couples who have been in church for any length of time may be familiar with Ephesians 5:25-27 which states, *"Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish"* (ESV, 2001). Powlison (2003) brings a profound element to interpreting this passage when he writes to all believers, including husbands, "More pointedly, when you think about the core of your identity, you are first and foremost *Wife*. You are one part of the body of Christ in union with her one Husband (Ephesians 5:25-32). Whether you are male or female, married or single, you are

Wife to Jesus Christ, called to fear Christ and live subject to him" (p. 62). Reading Ephesians in the context of this eternal reality illuminates a powerful truth from which men may find wonderful liberation: liberation from tyrannical, authoritarian, and domineering temptations as "spiritual head of the home". It provides a framework to equip husbands to reflect in leadership the true Husband to which all believers are subject and called to imitate.

CLEANSING AND SANCTIFYING HER

As Ephesians 5:25-27 reveals, the call of the biblical husband is not one of domination, nor is it one of effeminate passivity. Men are called to be lovers and leaders whose primary agendas surpass the sexual and the financial. Notice the objective of Christ-like love in this verse: "that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish." This agenda is not one contrived by the selfish lure of depravity, but is shaped by the very Husband of husbands. A man who seeks to honor Jesus first, seeks first to sanctify, cleanse, wash, present with splendor, and make holy the beloved wife God has given him. This desire should under-gird every action, every affectionate gesture, every word, every gift, every compliment, every sexual encounter, every celebration, every request, and every thought pertaining to his wife. He must always be mindful that both he and his wife are the Bride of Jesus, and that in every relational encounter he



has the honor of making more beautiful the Bride (his wife) whom Christ purchased with His own blood. As such, the centerpiece of loving "as Christ" is Christ.

MARRIAGE AS A WEDDING PREPARATION

The chief aim of "loving as Christ loves the church" far supercedes any "need" a husband may think he possesses, and runs counter to any contrived justification to relate to a woman as an authoritarian dictator. The ultimate aim of such love is found in reflecting the redemptive work of Christ in the life of another for the sake of Christ and the other. Marriage then becomes a season of preparation in which both husband and wife are made ready for the ultimate marriage supper of all time. It is a celebration at which time the Groom and the Bride will forever be united, and where there will be heard, "...the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, 'Hallelujah! For the Lord our God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure'..." (Revelation 19:6-8, ESV). Above all else, it is in preparation for this glorious encounter with the precious Lamb of God that husbands must, with a holy perseverance, seek to "love their wives".

COUNSELING RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Seek to provide husbands with the glory of this greater call when loving "as Christ". What does it mean to say,

"The centerpiece of loving 'as Christ' is Christ"? How might this impact one's motive to love another?

2. Ask husbands to complete the *Husband Assessment* which may be found at www.christiancounseling.com. Discuss the results.
3. Ask wives to rate their husband's on the *Husband Assessment* and discuss any differences found between the two.
4. Read over the *Portrait of a Godly Husband* that may be found at www.christiancounseling.com, and then discuss both the steps to becoming a godly husband (as cited in the portrait) as well as the hurdles that may create certain challenges.

**WIVES, SUBMIT AS UNTO
THE LORD**
CHAPTER THREE

Potentially one of the most countercultural passages in the Bible, Ephesians 5:22-23 says, "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior." The modern culture, highly influenced by feminist ideology, is often put off by these words written by the apostle Paul. Even those within the modern church, at times, have sought to rationalize this passage away by attributing it to being applicable only for the time in which it was written (Paul's day) or that Paul was simply reflecting a mutual



submission between husbands and wives as is reflected in his words found in Ephesians 5:21. Yet, such an interpretation falls far short of the beauty being expressed in these verses.

NOT A MUTUAL SUBMISSION

Paul wrote, "Wives, submit to your husbands, as to the Lord" (v. 22). How does Paul encourage wives to submit to their husbands? The passage clearly states, "as to the Lord". These four words completely nullify both rationalizations above. First, submitting to the Lord is not something exclusive to Paul's day. Just as women are called to submit to the Lord (today), so they are called to submit to their husbands (today). In so doing, they reflect the harmony and grace of creation as originally designed by God prior to the fall.

Additionally, "as to the Lord" designates a hierarchical design. In mankind's relationship to God ("as unto the Lord"), there is no such thing as mutual submission between Creator and created. Instead, there exists a very clear and obvious hierarchy. This is Paul's reference point when instructing wives. In essence, he is emphasizing the idea that, "Just as you submit to God, do the same in your relationship with your husbands." If wives seek to submit "as unto the Lord", the concept of mutual submission in this context becomes illogical and counter to Paul's instructions. However, to avoid an abusive concept of submission, it is important to develop a proper (and biblical) understand of the word at this point.

SUBMISSION IS NOT INFERIORITY

Wives must always be mindful of the fact that the call to submit is not a call to inferiority. It is not a call to insignificance before the Lord. On the contrary, it provides a most powerful context in which women are able to exemplify that for which they were created: to reflect in their own lives the person of the great Servant, Jesus Christ. Placing oneself in the position of submissive servant before God is NEVER a step downward. Quite opposite, it is the panicle of divine power.

Women are, without question, equal to men in God's design. God does not differentiate by gender (Galatians 3:28). So when wives intentionally place themselves in a submissive role in response to Jehovah, it is considered nothing less than worship and praise to Him. A powerful example of this is seen in John 13:12-16: *"When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, 'Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him."* Notice the words of Jesus. He emphasizes His position as "Teacher and Lord", yet he places himself willfully in a very subordinate position by washing the feet of his disciples. Did he become "less



than" or "inferior to" simply because he willfully placed himself in the subordinate position of a servant? Absolutely not! The same may be said of women when they willfully place themselves in a submissive role within marriage.

WASHING YOUR HUSBAND'S FEET

Wives have been given very specific instruction on the "how to" of "washing the feet" of their husbands. It is through submission and respect. There is no substitute for these commands. If women seek to love their husbands in every way imaginable except to submit and respect, they fall short of one of the highest calls God has placed upon their lives. If a wife resists this call, it is not primarily a reflection of her heart before her husband, but her heart before God. Someone might refute, "But you don't know how selfish my husband is. If he would 'love as Christ has loved the Church', I would be able to submit." While this is an understandable frustration, women who attempt such a justification for not submitting and respecting would do well to review the Example in John 13:15. Jesus, following the washing of his disciples feet, said, "For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you." Wives must remember that Jesus knew, the moment he tied the towel around his waist, (v.4) that the men whose feet he was about to wash would completely fail and even deny him in just a few short hours. He was completely conscious of the selfishness of every disciple. Yet in spite of this awareness, He, the Perfect One, washed their feet. Were

the disciples worthy to have their feet washed by the Messiah? No. Had they attained a level of spiritual maturity and perfection to the point they merited this profound act of humility by their Creator and Judge? No. Had they loved Jesus sufficiently to the point he now needed to reciprocate such love by serving them? No. Was Jesus "less than" because He served selfish sinners? No. Such is the model for women to follow whose husbands will never be worthy, will never emanate perfection, and who will never love them sufficiently. Jesus gave this sobering reality check: "Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him" (v.16). May these words ring out with stunning awareness to women of God, wives of sinners, who are called (and blessed) to imitate the Master in their attitudes and service towards the men God has providentially given them.

COUNSELING RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Make sure to outline a true biblical perspective of a wife's role within marriage. Avoid rationalized and distorted interpretations influenced by modern culture.
2. Ask wives to complete the *Wife Assessment* found at www.christiancounseling.com. Discuss areas of weakness.
3. Ask husbands to rate their wives on the same assessment. Compare answers and discuss any noticeable differences.



4. Read over and discuss *The Portrait of a Godly Wife* that may be found at www.christiancounseling.com.
5. If abuse is a factor in the marriage, provide counsel that will protect the wife. Teach them the principles of church discipline found in Matthew 18 when a brother is in sin. Silence from wives in such circumstances is not the answer. On the contrary, silence is the very opposite response purported by the Bible. See Matthew 18.

LOVE: AN UNFULFILLED NEED OR AN UNPAID DEBT

CHAPTER FOUR

For the past several decades Christians have been bombarded by the “mental health” establishment with the message that in order to love well, one must have his or her “need” for love adequately met. This secular hypothesis was posed by humanistic theorists decades ago, and the Church has often embraced it as if it emerged from the very Word of God. There have even been some within Christendom who have gone so far as to add to the two commands offered by Jesus to “Love God and others” with a third command to love yourself. (Luke 12:31) While the messages of “love tanks” and “love languages” have profoundly shaped the way believers view love within marriages, such counsel has done very little to squelch the rising divorce rate within the Church.

What has gone wrong? The message of “love needs” feels so accurate.

Anyone involved relationally with another individual can certainly attest to the fact that it is much easier to love when being loved (or having one’s “love tank” filled or one’s “love language” spoken). Yet, this view of love has led many within the Church far away from the Bible’s conceptualization of what biblical love truly exemplifies. Not to mention, it has created an expectation within marriage that has tragically left many couples discouraged and disillusioned. This being the case, it is noteworthy to briefly examine the Bible’s teachings on the topic.

LOVE AS A DEBT, NOT A NEED

Rather than framing love among believers as a “need” to be sought, Paul framed it as a “debt” to be paid. In Romans 13:8, Paul says, “Let no outstanding debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another...” (NIV). For the average human being (if not all human beings) this statement runs completely counter to the heart’s natural perception of things. To view love in relationship as something “I owe” versus something “I need” is staggering. Yet, it is precisely how Paul explained it. His exposition of love in I Corinthians 13 reinforces this view as it highlights the outward focus of true love in that it is “patient”, “kind”, “rejoices in truth”, “protects”, “trusts”, “hopes”, and “perseveres”.

These characteristics stand in stark contrast to what love is not: pride (I am the center of the universe, and my “needs” must be attended), rude (I will use and manipulate you to get what I want), and self-seeking (I will meet your “needs” so



you will meet my “needs” in return). Paul points couples to something much higher than what is typically viewed as love in modern culture. He points them to the eternal decrees spoken by Jesus: “Love God” and “love your neighbor”. These words to Paul were everlasting, and could never be satisfied to the point of no longer owing obedience to the One who spoke them. Every day, husbands and wives awaken as debtors owing their lives and love to the Author of these words, and His call to “Love your neighbor”! This is the perpetual debt of the believer. In light of this reality, reclining back in the easy chair of complacency and expectation is not an option for the Christian husband or wife. To do so would be to assume falsely that one’s debt to God’s command has been paid, and that now a surplus exists in which one is owed love by others. Such a mindset is false, and very closely resembles the worldview of the modern secular culture.

Christian spouses owe love to each other. Functioning from this frame of reference rearranges the entire premise of relationships, and provides a far superior basis on which lasting and joyful marriages may be built. The idea of the “love needs” run counter to such a paradigm. While this may sound extreme, consider the words of Jesus: *“But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you...If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even*

‘sinners’ do that” (Luke 6:27-28; 32-33, NIV).

Spouses *should* be receiving love from one another. This is the way of relationship. However, the question at hand is what is the primary focus: to give or to receive? Christians should ALWAYS pursue a mindset that giving love, regardless of the situation, is always a more noble and God-ordained call than falling prey to the cultural self-seeking view of “I need” before “I give”. Otherwise the idea of “love” begins to resemble that of the “sinner” more than the One who graciously came to redeem the sinner.

COUNSELING RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Highlight with counsees the divine imperative to love over and above being loved in relationships.
2. Point counsees to the book of Hosea. How does this story resemble God’s love for His children? What is the focus of the narrative: to give love or receive love? How might counsees apply the story of Hosea to their own lives and situations?
3. Read over the **Portrait of Biblical Love** that may be found at www.christiancounseling.com. Where is your counselee falling short? How may he or she apply the attributes of love found in this portrait?
4. Ask counsees to read and complete the **Love Evaluation** found at www.christiancounseling.com. Discuss their answers with them.
5. Do not overlook the pain that ensues when a spouse is NOT receiving love



from a husband or wife. While the focus of the believer is to give, it is only proper to acknowledge the extreme difficulty of being married to someone who does not offer love willingly and joyfully. Be wise in how you address this issue, seeking to avoid legalistic answers.

ADULTERY AND THE FUTILITY OF TRUSTING MAN

CHAPTER FIVE

Jeremiah 17:5-9 says, *"Thus says the LORD: 'Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the LORD. He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come. He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.' The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?"*

THE FORBIDDEN ROAD TO ADULTERY

Honesty is a very valuable commodity in relationship. Unfortunately, however, for the individual who counsels couples in marriage or pre-marriage, *dishonesty* in relationship is a common theme, thus providing the perfect context

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for bitterness, fear, confusion, and relational turmoil to thrive. Once dishonesty disrupts the bliss of relational calm, the scene often becomes turbulent and void of any visible love. This is especially so when dishonesty serves to pave the forbidden road to adultery.

Adultery is a disastrous reality that has plagued mankind from the beginning. For Christians, one of the most well known accounts of adultery recorded in Scripture is revealed in the story of King David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11). This tragic account, which highlights the downward spiral of God's beloved being consumed by the lust of his own heart, is but a reflection of an issue rampant within the Church today. When adultery taints the purity of the marriage covenant, the road to reconciliation is usually extremely arduous, especially for the spouse who is the victim of the adulterous act.

I CAN'T LOVE IF I DON'T TRUST

One of the most common arguments made by someone whose spouse has committed adultery is, "I forgive him, but how am I supposed to love him when I don't even trust him. Surely you don't expect me to love someone I can't trust" or "There is no such thing as love without trust." While a counselor must ALWAYS exhibit compassion for the one horrified by the betrayal of adultery, comments such as these must carefully and graciously be confronted by the truth of Scripture. Such a phrase, while understandable, is shaped more by a secular view of romance than the biblical view of love. Jeremiah, in the



passage above, actually discourages placing trust in “flesh” (or another person) pointing out that doing so ultimately destroys. Conversely, Jeremiah highlights that for the one who places his or her trust in God, blessings will abound, fruit will be born, and strength (as a tree) will be realized, even in spite of blazing heat and horrific drought (e.g., a spouse committing adultery, an unrepentant spouse, a neglectful spouse, a self-centered spouse, etc.). As a result, loving a spouse who has committed a gross sin is not drawn from trusting the spouse, but by trusting an all sovereign, loving, and sufficient God.

TRUSTING THE TRUSTWORTHY

Living as a tree planted by waters does not depend on building trust in a spouse, but by learning to trust God in spite of a spouse’s untrustworthiness. This is a taxing process indeed, but it is the biblical pathway to overcoming the pain and fear caused by adultery (when a spouse is genuinely repentant of the act). Of course, rebuilding honesty, demanding repentance on the part of the adulterer, implementing church discipline if necessary, and other pertinent issues related to the situation are important, but helping a hurting husband or wife learn the power found in trusting God is the only way to overcome the emotional shockwave sparked by adultery. The wise author of Proverbs says, “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding...Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your flesh, and refreshment to your bones” (Proverbs 3:5,

7-8, ESV). Being wise in one’s own eyes is to rely completely on one’s own view of things. However, God calls all believers to love (both Himself and others) when earthly perspective would warrant otherwise.

To love others well requires trusting Someone far superior than a fallen, sinful person, especially one who has already shown that he or she cannot be trusted. It demands trusting God to be a faithful Father in spite of the pain that may ensue by loving those who may not deserve it (i.e., Read the account of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, Matthew 26:39).

It is also worth noting that honesty and trust are two different things, though quite interrelated. Working towards an honest relationship is imperative, but trust for the believer belongs exclusively to almighty God who alone can bring forth beauty amidst the ruins of devastation (Jeremiah 17:7-8). If counselees seek to overcome the sins of others, they do not want to waste time in a futile pursuit of trusting in man, but must engage in the lifelong journey towards learning the all surpassing peace that comes from trusting God.

COUNSELING RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Make sure to listen to and have compassion for the deep and devastating pain of those who have experienced the betrayal of adultery by a spouse.
2. Always seek to include the offending spouse in the counseling process. To begin, take the couple through Luke 17:3-8 and teach them the steps of



biblical forgiveness and the importance of seeking forgiveness (rather than saying, "I'm sorry"). See *Steps to Forgiveness, Wrong, Been Wronged, and Psalm 51, Real Repentance* at www.christiancounseling.com. Do not hesitate to schedule 2 hours or more to walk the couple through the steps of rebuke, repentance, and forgiveness.

3. Always include the couple's pastor or elder in the process of reconciliation as he serves as their overseer and shepherd. If you are a pastor, make sure to actively disciple those sent to you by a counselor.
4. Go over *Are You a Tree or a Shrub* handout that may be found at www.christiancounseling.com. Differentiate trusting in (or putting faith in) others versus building an honest open relationship.
5. Make sure neither you nor the counselee abuse Matthew 5:31-32 as an automatic "green light" for divorce.
6. Read Matthew 26. What can the counselee learn from Christ's example of trusting the Father to the point of death?

POWER: A WORTHY PURSUIT IN MARRIAGE

CHAPTER SIX

One reason that counselees may be struggling in their marriages is because they are engaged in a power-struggle with

their spouse. One may think such a thing to be most unlikely, but it is an important thought to consider. If a spouse has offended or hurt his or her partner in any way, the natural inclination of the offended is going to be to protect him or herself from experiencing similar hurt in the future. This process often begins by exchanging a once vulnerable demeanor with a very guarded stance towards a spouse. Where the person once trusted his or her partner to love and cherish him or her "until death do you part", the dynamic between the two may now more accurately be characterized as adversarial. The sense of safety once experienced in the marriage may have mutated into guardedness, anger, doubt, fear, or even hatred.

To keep from being hurt by this new "adversary" or "competitor" a spouse may begin to utilize creative strategies of control. How? Well, he or she may choose to remain bitter, minimizing the potential for closeness, therefore preventing further hurt. She may yell at or criticize her spouse, attempting to force him to keep a safe distance. He may overtly avoid his spouse by staying out late, drinking alcohol, or sleeping in separate beds. Each may even participate in "passive-aggressive" behavior in order to convince him or herself that control in the marriage is being maintained. Such behavior displays itself by making agreements with a spouse then doing the very opposite because the person knows it will irritate his or her partner to no end. Husband's may comply with a wife's request to mow the lawn by saying, "Yes, honey, I'll mow the lawn tomorrow when I get home from work", but when tomorrow



comes, he chooses to go to the bar with his buddies. A wife may agree to have sex tomorrow only to come down with a "sudden cold" when bedtime arrives.

Each of these examples illustrates destructive attempts to maintain control (and power) in the marriage. They each exhibit desperate efforts to keep from being hurt by the one person he or she loves and chose to commit his or her life to. However, the only thing such strategies actually achieve in relationship is that they breed further isolation and contempt between spouses. For the one who refers to him or herself a child of God, a pursuit for an alternative power must be considered if any hope of reconciliation is to be realized.

PURSUING GODLY POWER

Who is an individual that might be characterized as the most powerful person who has ever lived: Alexander the Great, Winston Churchill, Bill Gates, Oprah Winfrey, Mohammad Ali, John F. Kennedy? While these individuals exhibit or exhibited a form of power in their own right, the most powerful person ever to live offered a very different power than these icons of history. His name was Jesus Christ, and while he held all the power of the universe in his hand, what he chose to exhibit before the watching world might surprise you. It is a power that brought ultimate reconciliation between God and man, and may be seen most clearly in his attitude. Philippians 2:5-8 describes it this way, *"Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count*

equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (ESV). It is in these words one finds the essence of true power as it pertains to relationships with others. And if true unity is desired, it is these words that must be adopted and mirrored by both husband and wife.

MAKE SELF NOTHING, AND GOD ALL

To reconcile God and man demanded profound sacrifice. Of course, couples are probably familiar with the death of Jesus and the literal sacrifice he became for the sins of mankind, but this was not the only sacrifice he made. Jesus, in choosing to loosen his grip on reigning with the Father in Heaven, chose to become a man, and in so doing, made himself *nothing*. He did not arrogantly stomp his foot demanding his "rights" in response to a rebellious people, instead, he chose to make an enormous sacrifice and was born in the likeness of his own creation (though he retained every bit of his deity). He chose to enter our space-time continuum, and therefore placed himself as a co-citizen of this planet. He left the splendor of Heaven, in which pain, sadness, and evil do not exist, and willingly entered a world plagued with curses: curses he too would experience as he witnessed sickness, deceit, false accusation, prejudice, selfishness, death, pain, and sorrow. Not only that, he even subjected himself to the world's fallen state



as he allowed death and pain to ravage his own mortal body. He had every right to “grasp” his place in heaven, but he chose to make himself nothing instead.

What “rights” are your counselees grasping in their lives and relationships? How does this give them a sense of power? Help them recognize that clinging to such rights is clinging to a false-power, and the life of God will not reign in their marital relationship. Help them seek to imitate Jesus by loosening their grips on their “rights”, and choose to cling to the will of God as they relate to their husbands or wives.

ADOPT THE NATURE OF A SERVANT

Jesus made himself nothing, and as such, became a servant of God to man. He was God in the flesh. He was deity in human form. Yet, as God, he chose to serve rather than demanding service from them. He had every right as the Holy One to require immediate worship once in his presence. This King of kings deserved complete adoration from all who surrounded him. But this was not his way. Instead, he loved, he served, he healed, and he comforted. At the end of his life, he evidenced this most clearly in that he washed the feet of his disciples, the very ones whose sins were compelling him to give his life upon the Cross.

What is your counselee’s priority in the marriage: to serve or be served? Relational conflict, offense, and pain tend to exacerbate the temptation to demand one’s way (power-struggle). However, it is noteworthy to consider whether or not it would honor God and each other if

spouses sought to serve rather than be served? Do your counselees exemplify the heart of Christ (the servant) in their thoughts, attitudes, and words towards one another? Do they do so as they work through disagreements in their marriages? If not, point them to the example of Jesus, and counsel them to seek his attitude when dealing with people who may hurt (even betray) them.

HUMBLE YOURSELF

Pride is often the greatest adversary of biblical change. To imitate Jesus demands a radical crucifixion of “self” (and the pride that ravages the soul). Jesus portrayed the physical embodiment of humility (the opposite of pride) in his coming to Earth to redeem his children. If counselees are seeking genuine God-like power, teach them to pray for humility. Assist them in seeking to walk humbly with their spouses rather than be driven by their prideful agendas to get their way. Sure, this will present a tension within them, but if they genuinely seek to exhibit true power in their marriages humility is an essential quality to pursue. It is the ultimate paradox of reflecting true power in the context of a chaotic and unjust marriage or relationship.

OBEDIENT UNTO DEATH

One characteristic of humility is being willing to obey God. Even when Jesus was under profound pressure, his example of obedience is staggering. The Bible points out that while Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane (anticipating



his crucifixion), he said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will" (Mark 14:36). As such, he was exemplifying a devout commitment to the will of his Father over and above his own desire to live.

As counselees consider this passionate prayer, they may ask themselves, "Am I willing to give up my will in this marriage for that of God's will?" Take time to consider with them whether or not they have given themselves over to the desires of their flesh, minimizing the will of God because the task of obedience seems overwhelming. If so, that is certainly understandable. However, they must be encouraged to use this time as an opportunity to reassess their values, and formulate an agenda that will bring honor and glory to God.

THE DRIVING FORCE: LOVE

What was motivating this divine exhibition of unorthodox power in Jesus? Very simply, it was his love for God and others. He proclaimed as a boy the necessity of being about his Father's business while here on Earth (Luke 2:49). And he certainly remained true to his word. No matter the circumstances in which he found himself, his pattern of living to please his Father always dominated. He even states in John 6:38, "For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me." It is easy to allow the temporal pleasures and conveniences of life to overshadow the genuine purpose for which we were created. However, it is in recognizing the highest purpose of the human experience

(to love God and others), that the true power of God is revealed. Success, strength, intelligence, and status all provide an illusion of power, but they fall short in comparison to the power illustrated by the life of Jesus. Unlike popular counterfeits of power, godly power is evidenced in one's love for God and others, therefore empowering the Christian (1) to make self nothing and God all, (2) to take the form of a servant in the midst of relationships, (3) to seek humility, and (4) to exhibit obedience unto the Lord under the most trying of circumstances. These qualities appear to the fallen nature as the antithesis of power. However, we must realize that power is most accurately illustrated in imitating the most powerful human who has ever stepped foot on planet Earth, namely Jesus Christ. A pursuit of power that excludes this truth is to participate in what Solomon referred to as "chasing after the wind" (Ecclesiastes 1:14).

If a counselee's spouse has hurt or offended him or her, or if they seem in constant conflict with one another, teach them God's grace to reflect the attitude of Jesus found in Philippians 2. It is this form of love (power) that ultimately reconciled God to his people, and it is the same type of love (power) that may reconcile couples in conflict. Whereas people are tempted to "stand their ground" until they get their way, it will not be long until they discover that the ground on which they stand is shifting sand. It is unstable.

On the other hand, if people stand on the firm foundation of the Bible, the storms of conflict may rain down upon them, but the foundation will prove to be secure and sufficient to weather the storm.



COUNSELOR RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Read *Philippians 2:5-8*.** Has your counsees' concepts of power reflected the power exhibited by Jesus in these passages? If not, reassess help them reassess their views of power. Help them write out a new mission statement for themselves using this verse.
2. **Read *Mark 10:42-45*.** In God's kingdom, what must a person do in order to be considered great? How can counsees apply this to marriage?
3. **Read *2 Timothy 3:16*.** What does this passage say will equip people for training in righteousness and every good work?
4. As mentioned in the article above, often the pursuit of power is prompted by a demand for justice. Ask counsees: How have you been hurt by your spouse? How have you responded with an attitude of justice (or wanting to get even)?
5. **Help counsees make a list of 5 ways they can serve their spouse this week.** Have them commit to implementing this list no matter what their spouse may or may not do in the coming days.

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