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Part I: the meaning of marriage

Marriage points to something much bigger than a husband and a wife. Even the best marriage in the world, with all the joys and blessings that exist with it, serves to direct the focus to something greater. The Bible declares that God created marriage for Himself — to display Himself gloriously, beautifully, attractively, and delightfully.

The meaning of marriage is quite simple: God. God created earthly marriage to reflect His marriage to His people. God's covenant-keeping marriage with His elect people flows entirely from His grace and results exclusively for His glory.

So then, in what follows, I will simplify the above paragraph by highlighting a number of essential factors.

First, marriage is about GOD.

Marriage exists because God created it. God designed and fashioned marriage to suit His sovereign purposes and His supreme plan. Marriage, thus, is about God and His magnification, and His radiance, and His preeminence, and His power. Marriage cannot be divorced from God. Even non-Christians who have married other non-Christians have embarked upon a divinely-instituted relationship, that has divinely-glorious purposes. The creator of marriage is God. Since He created the institution of marriage, every earthly marriage should be pointing to God and His glory. Marriage, by definition, is a covenantal relationship. The permanent, lifelong, unending, faithful stipulations in a marriage relationship portray who God is. Of course this is to be so since God created marriage to display His marvelous glory and His relational supremacy.

Second, marriage is about the GOSPEL.

The very first institution that God ever made was marriage. Before work came about, before money, finances, sex, communication, friendships, prestige and prominence, or any other organization or mission, God created and instituted and designed marriage. Marriage, by God's definition, consists of one man leaving his father and his mother and clinging to one woman and they, thus, cleave to one another and become one flesh (cf. Genesis 2:24). The language contained in this account implies covenantal overtones. After all, God does declare in the Bible that marriage, by definition, is a covenant (Malachi 2:14; Proverbs 2:17). Later on in biblical revelation, the Spirit guided the Apostle Paul to write that earthly marriage is a "mystery" — but this mystery is fully revealed in the relationship between Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:31-32). These clear statements in Ephesians reveal that, since the very beginning of time (before the first marriage was even ratified), every marriage has served to represent and display the heavenly marriage of Christ and His bride, the Church. Thus, earthly marriages point to the divine marriage. The way a husband loves his wife must point to the way that Christ has loved the Church. The love that Christ displayed for His elect bride must serve as the model for how every Christian man must sacrificially love his precious wife. And the way a wife submits to her husband must point to the way that the Church submits to Jesus Christ — in everything. Jesus, as the Creator of the Church is in fact the very Head of the Church (that is, Christ is her authority). The joyful and heartfelt submission and obedience that true believers render to Jesus

Christ should serve as the model for every wife to humbly, heartfully, and worshipfully submit to her own husband in everything. After all, God created marriage to present the gospel visibly. In God's mind, marriage exists as the visible theater upon which the glorious gospel of redemption is seen by all onlookers.

Third, marriage is about GRACE.

God lavishes grace upon His people (Ephesians 1:7-8). So it must be in the spiritual realm as well. Every Christian must willingly and lavishly and unreservedly pour out grace to others. The gospel that saves is a gospel of grace (Ephesians 2:8-9). No person in the world can get to heaven without divine grace (2 Timothy 1:9). Since earthly marriage pictures the heavenly marriage, and since the heavenly marriage is glittered brilliantly with grace, so every marriage must also manifest a lavish outflow of grace. A marriage between a man and a woman without grace defiles and poisons the picture of the gospel. The saving relationship between Christ and His bride not only began with grace (Ephesians 2:5) but the believer lives sustained by God's grace (2 Timothy 2:1) and the believer's life will culminate in eternal glory all as a result of God's grace (1 Peter 5:10). Marriage partners, then, should constantly grant grace to one another. Grace is needed because humans sin. That which makes the gospel overwhelmingly delightful is that it is built on God's wondrous grace. And so it should be in every marriage. What makes every marriage attractive — and what makes every husband extremely attractive to his wife and that which makes the wife supremely glorious to her husband — is the full, lavish, free, and unrestrained outflow of grace to each other. This wonderfully depicts the gospel. Thus, we could say that marriage is about grace since the gospel is about grace.

Fourth, marriage is about GLORY.

When Moses constructed the Tabernacle, that earthly tent where Yahweh dwelt among His people, the glory of the LORD filled it so completely that Moses could not even enter the building (Exodus 40:35). If the glory of the Lord filled an earthly building, how much more does the glory of the Lord fill His specially elect people who have the Spirit of glory dwelling within them (1 Peter 4:14; 1 Corinthians 3:16). God dwells in each of His children (Ephesians 1:13-14) and he guarantees their eternal glory (2 Timothy 2:10). And if the divine relationship between God and His people is like this, how much more ought the marriage relationship (which God created to point to this heavenly relationship) point to this glory. For the Christian, glory is promised to yet come (Romans 8:17-21). For every marriage relationship, the husband and the wife should strive to love one another and to sanctify one another with aggressive passion, with Spirit-endowed grace, and with exuberant delight until that final day when we stand before God in glory (Ephesians 5:26-27). God's gospel results in His glory (Romans 11:36). And so it is with marriage, it serves to radiate the glory of God (Song of Solomon 7:6; Colossians 1:16).

It should be said, in conclusion, that the meaning of marriage is the glory of God, resulting from the grace of God, striving to represent the gospel of God. Only to the degree that God's people enjoy Him and savor Him can they enjoy and savor the real meaning of marriage. This must drive us daily and constantly to the Word of God. Let God's Word fill and saturate our hearts, our minds, and our lives.

A Word-filled marriage is a small snapshot of the delights of Heaven—a living portrait of the perfect love of Jesus (John Barnett).

Part 2: the husband leads with love

The Bible clearly presents the function and duties of a biblical husband. They do not come naturally and easily to man battling the sins of the flesh. The natural, unsaved, man cannot perform these tasks. To the unrepentant man, these qualities seem foolish, outdated, and outright ludicrous. But to the man of God, these not only are glorious and radical charges, they are personally experienced since every child of God has received this kind of love from Jesus Christ, the delightful Husband.

In what follows, *I want to speak of some ways that a husband must lead with love.*

1. He must have a SPECIAL LOVE.

A Godly husband has a special, particular, definite and exclusive love for only his wife. Just as Christ has one Bride who receives His love, protection, care, and leadership, so a godly husband has only one wife who receives his love, protection, care, and leadership. This means that the husband has an eye, a heart, a body, and affections only for her. She delights him. Her body enthralls him. Her love excites him. Her character gladdens him. This man has a very special, particular love for his wife. Just as Jesus specially died *only* for His elect, so also the husband has a special love *only* for his chosen bride.

2. He must have a SACRIFICIAL LOVE.

Jesus died on the cross to take away the sins of His people. He suffered, was forsaken, was abandoned, became a divine-curse, received the wrath of God, appeased God's judgment toward sinners and died at Calvary. The love of Jesus is a sacrificial love. Christ loved the church and gave *His life* up for her (Ephesians 5:25). Christ has loved His people and gave Himself up for us, an offering and *a sacrifice to God* (Ephesians 5:2). True love sacrifices. The perfect demonstration of this love finds expression in the self-giving of Jesus on behalf of His bride, the Church. In the same way, every husband must have a sacrificial, self-giving, self-emptying love for his wife.

3. He must have a SEEKING LOVE.

To love is to seek. To love is to pursue. To love is to have longings for something accompanied with action. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10). Jesus fulfilled the God-given mission for Him to take on human flesh and atone for people's sins. Jesus sought sinners. Jesus pursued rebels. So it must be with a husband toward his wife. He must seek his wife and pursue her. Without the pursuing love of Jesus, no person would ever receive the gift of salvation. Husbands must initiate love toward the wives and they must pursue them lovingly, tenderly, graciously, winsomely, and consistently.

4. He must have a STEADFAST LOVE.

The love of Jesus never wanes. It never fades. It cannot grow dull, dim; nor can it decay. His love endures through the ages. Great is God's steadfast love (Psalm 103:11). The love of a husband toward his wife must endure, it must continue on, it must live on consistently. The husband's love should not wane after time, it should not grow dull after a season, the fire should not die out after a brief period. No! The love of Jesus remains flaming hot with zealous love for His people.

In the same way, every husband should steadfastly love his bride. To love this way means the husband should find strength every day from the great giver of strength, joy, and grace — God Himself. The biblical husband must come before the Lord perpetually in prayer asking for His enabling grace and gracious power to love his wife persistently, steadfastly, and unendingly.

5. He must have a *SANCTIFYING LOVE*.

The passionate pursuit of Jesus Christ is to make His church look dazzlingly gorgeous. Every Christian husband must have one primary ambition in this world that must trump every other desire, goal, achievement, hobby, and time-consuming event, namely, to make his wife the most spiritually beautiful woman that she can possibly be. Jesus gave Himself up for the church so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the Word (Ephesians 5:26). Jesus cleanses believers through the Word and sanctifies her through being in the Word of God. Jesus prayed that God would sanctify believer in the truth; God's Word is truth (John 17:17). No Christian husband can lead at home and sanctify his wife if he does not open the Bible, read the Bible to, and lovingly instruct his wife/family in the truth of God, the ways of God, and in the glory of God. In other words, for a man of God to live like Christ in the marriage relationship, he must have one preeminent goal that far exceeds all other ambitions: he must read the Bible with his wife, he must pray with (and for) his wife, he must teach/instruct her, he must humbly repent of his sin to her and model Christlikeness for her. He must sanctify his wife.

6. He must have a *SPIRIT-ENDOWED LOVE*.

No Christian can live the Christian life apart from the Spirit of God's enabling grace. When Jesus walked the earth, he relied fully on the power of the Spirit. He was led by the Spirit, filled with the Spirit, rejoiced in the Spirit, and empowered by the Spirit. So it must be with every Christian man in the home. He must live by the power of the Spirit. And the Word of God wonderfully reminds that believers must "be filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18). In the very next paragraph after describing what this filling — or, controlling — of the Spirit looks like, Paul launches into the roles of the wife and husband in the home. The husband cannot love biblically on his own. The man cannot serve in his own strength. He cannot live selflessly and sacrificially in his own resources and energy. He needs the Spirit to endow him with grace, power, patience, humility, and love. This must drive every Christian man to his knees every morning so as to beg from the Lord, the gracious giver of all things, to impart spiritual power and grace so that he may love his wife in a way that exemplifies the relationship of Christ to the Church faithfully.

Thus, the man of God who has received the outpouring of God's love in Christ should make it his pursuit to love his wife similarly. He has received love from Christ, so he must impart love to his wife. He has been granted forgiveness in Christ, so he must give (and ask for) forgiveness. He has received abundant pardon, so he must pardon his wife when she humbly confesses and repents of her sin. He has received the sacrificial gift of Christ's atoning work in salvation, so the husband must sacrifice himself for his wife. He meets with the Lord in daily communion in the prayer and the Word, and so the husband must daily sanctify his wife in both prayer and in the Word. May husbands continually see how Christ has loved them so as to then learn how to love their wives.

Part 3: the wife submits with delight

The all-wise God fashioned and designed the marriage covenant to manifest His glory in the best possible way. In the Bible, God commands all wives to submit to their husbands (Colossians 3:18). Since God created marriage, He has all the rights to define marriage and to state how the people in the marriage covenant should act. God created man first in the Garden of Eden and then, from the man, God created woman. The headship of man over a woman is a creation ordinance and is not, therefore, a result of the fall. God's glorious design in marriage is to reflect the relationship even within the Trinity. The Father has all authority and the Son willingly subjected Himself under the Father's authority and made it His ambition while on earth to do precisely what the Father had appointed Him to do. This in no way suggests that the Father is more important than the Son or that the Son is inferior to the Father. Similarly, the headship of a man and the submission of a wife in the marriage relationship in no way points to the importance of men and women or their equality before God. Rather, it is entirely connected to their particular roles and specific functions within the marriage just as God has designed and revealed them in Scripture.

Thus, according to the Bible a Godly wife is a gentle, respectful helpmate who worshipfully submits to her husband in all things. I hope to elaborate a bit more fully on this definition in the brief essay that follows so that Godly wives will understand what submission is, why God has called them to submit, and how to submit to their husbands.

1. Wives must submit AS AN ACT OF WORSHIP.

God desires loyalty rather than sacrifice; the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings (Hosea 6:6). In other words, God is not so much interested in mere outward 'religiosity' as much as he is in heart-felt, inward genuineness in worship. A heart that rightly loves God will express itself in Godly actions. So it is for the woman in the marriage relationship. God calls all wives to submit to their husbands. To submit is a word that can refer to placing oneself under the authority of another. All Christians must submit to government (1 Peter 2:13) and every Christian must also submit to God (James 4:7). It must be, then, that submission is not inherently evil, bad, sinful, or corrupt. Submission is a God-given gift whereby those who are called to submit must joyfully follow the Lord in obeying His decree while trusting in His wise and sovereign goodness. Ephesians 5:22 calls wives to be subject to their husbands *as to the Lord*. As a wife submits herself to the Lord in a heartfelt, worshipful, honest, sincere way, so ought she to submit to her husband in a heartfelt, honest, sincere, and God-honoring way. She must submit with an attitude of worship.

2. Wives must submit WITHOUT RESTRAINT.

"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart as working for the Lord not for men" (Colossians 3:23). This applies to all of Christian living, including the specific role of being a godly wife. God continues to tell wives that as the church submits to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything (Ephesians 5:24). This little phrase, "in everything" includes no exceptions. Putting all Scripture together, the only reason a wife must not submit to her husband is if he commands her to sin in any way (cf. Acts 5:29: we must obey God rather than men). Otherwise, the wife must submit to her husband in everything. Why must her

submission be without restraint or contingent upon the husband's actions? Because the church must submit to her Lord in all things. As the church submits to Christ, her Head, so also a wife must submit to her husband, her head. When a wife refuses to submit, she essentially refuses God. When a wife decides to pick and choose what areas of the husband's leadership she will submit to, it suggests that the submission of the Church to the Lord Jesus Christ is optional. So then, let it be said again, God commands all wives to submit to their own husbands in everything just as the Church submits to Jesus Christ.

3. Wives must submit AS AN ILLUSTRATION.

A marriage relationship is the theater by which many spectators watch the drama of the gospel lived out. As friends, acquaintances, co-workers, fellow members at church observe your marriage, what does this illustrate about the gospel of Jesus Christ? A wife is called to submit to her husband in the same way that the church submits to her Lord Jesus Christ. A husband is called to love and sacrifice for his wife in the same way that Jesus Christ loved and sacrificed Himself for His chosen bride. Thus, marriage is an illustration. It is a picture. It demonstrates something. It is the canvas through which the gospel of Jesus Christ is painted. Paul quotes Genesis 2:24 and reminds husbands and wives that a man must leave father and mother and he must cling to his wife, and they will become one flesh (Ephesians 5:31). The next verse cannot be omitted in this discussion. Paul continues by saying that this is a mystery and it refers to Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:32). Thus, Paul reveals that marriage has been a mystery: something that was once hidden but now is fully known/manifest. Marriage has always been, in the mind of God, a glorious picture — a walking, breathing illustration — of the gospel between Jesus Christ and His Church. For marriage to properly illustrate the gospel in this specific regard, a wife must submit to her husband in everything since that is the God-created, God-designed, and God-given and God-graced privilege and role for her. To refuse this role is to distort the gospel picture.

4. Wives must submit WITH RESPECT.

A man loves respect. God commands wives to see that they respect their husbands (Ephesians 5:33). The idea of respect is that of holy reverence, holy fear, Godly honor. Whether a man reciprocates the love, responds with selfless sacrifices, expresses gratitude for all the wife's labor and work, the godly wife still must respect her husband. Again, the parallel to Christ and the Church is paramount. The Church has a holy reverence for Jesus Christ. The Church has a holy fear of Jesus Christ. The Church has a Godly honor for Christ the Lord. Similarly, every wife must respect her husband, her divinely-appointed and sovereignly granted head.

5. Wives must submit WITH DELIGHT.

The God of all wisdom has designed the marriage relationship to suit His own purposes and to promote His magnificent glory. The godly wife must fulfill her God-given role with delight and joy. She must serve the Lord with gladness (Psalm 100:2). To serve the Lord is to do His will (Psalm 103:21). A wife who willingly and worshipfully comes under the headship of her husband with an attitude of delight is a woman of God who fears the Lord and practices biblical submission.

With this kind of submissive wife, only the Lord has a higher place for her. No house, no job, no child, no ministry can hold her; she wants to please and honor the man God made for her. This is her calling and role given by the Lord Himself (John Barnett).

Part 4: the couple communicates openly, honestly & frequently

The model for communication stems from the Triune God and then from how God has communicated with His people. The community with the Trinity is perfect, eternally wonderful & gloriously open. Each member of the Trinity enjoys perfect fellowship with the other two members of the Trinity. And they always exist in perfect unity, harmony, peace, and gladness. Even still, there is only one God! The communication from the Father to the Son is clear, open, honest and specific. The Father had given the Son a mission to accomplish (John 20:21). Jesus came to accomplish the work of His Father (John 5:36). The Father sent the Spirit into His New Covenant believers (John 14:26) as well as the Son (John 15:26). Thus there is complete agreement, total openness, and glorious communication within each of the members of the Triune Godhead. This serves as a model for marital communication.

I want to provide six brief helps so that marital communication can thrive.

1. Pursue Communication

Humans are selfish. By nature, we as people want to protect ourselves, put up the good-face and appear as though everything is okay. Left to ourselves and our sinful flesh, we live by ourselves, for ourselves, with ourselves, and are happy in ourselves. Sinful human nature is a killer to open, honest, genuine, Christlike communication. Paul tells Christians to put off falsehood and he commands them to 'speak truth' with his neighbor (Ephesians 4:25). He gives this command to every Christian. Dear husband and wife, consider how God has communicated with you! Left to yourself you would never know about God, you would never know about Christ, you would never know the Gospel, nor would you ever come to Jesus Christ in saving faith! Yet God has initiated communication with you! He has revealed Himself gloriously and powerfully in creation and most fully and savingly in the Lord Jesus Christ! God has pursued communication with you. So you must, dear spouse, pursue communication in a like manner with your spouse.

2. Be Frequent in Communication

True believers long for fellowship with God. Man lives not by bread alone but by every word that comes out of God's mouth (Matthew 4:4). Believers find sustenance, strength, and communion with God as they diligently read and study the Word. In this very act, God communicates with His people. Just as God frequently meets with you and you meet with Him through the time in His Word, so you must frequently meet with and spent time communicating with your spouse. Wherever marital conflict arises, a breakdown in communication has happened somewhere. Communication is not merely helpful for a good marriage. Frequent communication is utterly necessary for a healthy, strong, and God-glorifying marriage.

3. Invest in Communication

To communicate involves time. You need to invest time, effort, diligence, and passion in the duty of marital communication. Without investing yourself in communication, conflicts will arise, selfishness will play out, and anger will fester. Deep oneness only can occur when the husband and the wife both communicate. The importance of deep, intimate, and honest communication cannot be overemphasized since God intends that the marriage relationship be the closest and

most intimate of all earthly relationships. The husband and his wife have both left their parents, they have joined to each other in a lifelong marriage covenant, and they are now and forever one flesh (Genesis 2:24). It may be that the health of a couple's communication will largely determine the oneness and loving intimacy that the husband and the wife enjoy.

4. Work at Communication

As a man thinks in his heart, so is he (Proverbs 23:7). Communication — real communication — is hard work. Couples must constantly be working toward marital harmony and open communication in their relationship. You, O spouse, need to ask yourself frequently questions such as: 'Do I really have all the facts?' 'Is what I would like to say profitable or edifying?' 'Is it the proper time for me to say this statement or would it be better, more appropriate or better received, at a later time?' 'Am I saying this out of anger, reacting to something that happened?' Pouting, moping, manipulation, emotionally charged words (you *always*; or, you *never*, etc.), or deceptive tears have no positive contribution to deep, honest marital communication. Rather than assuming and expecting how someone will react or answer, Godly spouses need to be honest and work themselves at biblical communication. Rather than assuming you know what someone is thinking or telling yourself that you know the motive of someone's actions, words, or deeds, you must work at humbly, patiently, and gently communicating with them. Thus, judgmental, demanding, demeaning, bitter attitudes and spirits must be put off, confessed and replaced with a tender, patient, forgiving, and loving spirit toward the other person — always.

5. Have Vulnerability in Communication

Jesus spent time with twelve men and disciplined them. He made Himself vulnerable with them as they saw him in his weakest moments, in his tired hours, amidst the crowded masses, and tirelessly speaking to his enemies. He loved His disciples and spent much time communicating with them and training them. Even though Jesus knew that one of His disciples would fall away and betray Him, Jesus still was vulnerable with all of His disciples!

6. Evidence Trust in Communication

To communicate well not only involves speaking 'edifyingly' but it also includes good listening. Communication is a two-way street. Just as when believers commune with the Lord through prayer (talking to God) and Bible-reading (hearing from God), so also must it be in the marriage relationship. There must be a time for talking and a time for listening. Without both of these elements, good communication is impossible. It is folly and shame to answer before you hear the matter (Proverbs 18:13). Every person must be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger (James 1:19). Thus, when hearing the other person's heart, especially within the context of marriage, the spouse must guard those statements and ensure that trust will never be betrayed. A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city, and contentions are like the bars of a citadel (Proverbs 18:19).

"The heart of marriage is its communications system. ... It can be said that the success and happiness of any married pair is measurable in terms of the deepening dialogue which characterizes their union" (Dwight Hervey Small).

"Christian communication is 'the basic skill needed to establish and maintain sound relationships. A sound husband and wife relationship is impossible apart from good communication'" (Jay Adams).

Part 5: the goal of marriage: the exaltation of God & the pursuit of your spouse's Christlikeness

Marriage exists for and points to one ultimate end, the glory of God and the exaltation of Christ. As is the case for everything in the universe, the end of all things culminates in the preeminence of the Lord Jesus Christ. He rules as King over all things. He upholds all things. He created all things and all things exist through Him and for Him.

One misses the real meaning of marriage if one neglects to understand that God created marriage to manifest His glory. So, then, I want to spell out the preeminent goal (end, purpose, reason) for marriage in one glorious thought encapsulating two inseparable features: *the magnificence of God* and *the resemblance to Christ*.

1. The goal of marriage is the *MAGNIFICENCE OF GOD*.

As a child would put a magnifying glass up to an insect to make it larger so the wonder of marriage is to make the glory of God larger and sweeter. To rightly understand marriage is to rightly dwell on God's glory. To understand the covenantal bond of marriage properly demands that one will savor the sweetness, delightfulness, and blessedness of the heavenly Bridegroom, Jesus Christ. To miss this connection is to misunderstand the meaning and goal of marriage.

The Christian marriage serves to broadcast the greatness of God so as to result in His glory. The glory of God is the greatest good. The glory of God is the loftiest goal. The Christian can have no greater ambition than to glorify God. This is the chief end of man and the preeminent boast of every Christian.

The marriage should magnify God for His delight. To bring joy to God should be the Christian's preoccupation. The child of God always strives to delight his heavenly Father. And so, every Christian marriage should radiate the glorious beams of God's majesty so as to delight God.

A godly marriage should magnify God for His praise. To praise God is the highest good. Everything everywhere should praise God. Indeed, everything that has breath is to praise the Lord (Psalm 150:6).

2. The goal of marriage is the *Christian's RESEMBLANCE TO CHRIST*.

As the moon shines the light of the sun so is the great beauty of Christians when they shine the light of Christ in and through them. Every Christian has Christ dwelling within him (Colossians 1:27; Romans 8:10). The greatest goal and chief end of all things is ultimate resemblance to Christ. Christlikeness consists of the goal of the Christian life (1 John 3:2).

When two sinners come together in the covenant-bond and lifelong-commitment of marriage, the grace of God in humility, in grace, and in forgiveness must be demonstrated daily. Every Christian spouse must remember that he is God's primary tool for sanctifying the spouse. Again, you, O Christian husband/wife, are God's tool for sanctification in the life of your

precious spouse. Just as when welding two metals together, fire and sparks fly up, so it is when two Christians come together in the life-commitment of marriage, the sparks of conflict will inevitably arise. But Christian couples must remember that heat and pressure and time results in the inseparable molding of those metals together. And so it must be in the godly marriage. Marriages grow as Christians live humbly, serve sacrificially, think selflessly, labor relentlessly, and serve one another with Christ's attitude and love.

The tool of sanctification will teach you the necessity of selflessness. You will learn the demand for humility, confessing sin, repentance, and asking for forgiveness. You will learn the glory of giving forgiveness and granting a free and full pardon thus promising to never bring that offense up to the person again so as to hold it against them (nor will you dwell on it yourself or announce that person's offense to other people). You will love unconditionally even when you don't feel like *giving* of yourself to the other person for their benefit and welfare. You will commit yourself to them even in the hard, crushing, lonely, and stormy seasons of life. You will quickly learn to rely on prayer, fervent prayer, believing prayer, persistent prayer, prostrate prayer, intercessory prayer. You will have the importance of the local church and regular, active, personal, deliberate involvement (and sacrificial service) affirmed in your own heart and in your family's calendar.

The Spirit of God ultimately brings about sanctification (2 Corinthians 7:1; Romans 15:15-16) but He uses means by which He accomplishes His work of grace in believers. One of the means that the Spirit uses in the process of sanctification is the relationship of marriage. The husband is not the ultimate agent of sanctification but he works mightily, striving with the enabling grace and transforming power of the Spirit, to help his wife grow in her walk with Christ.

Thus, the husband wants to sanctify his wife and make her more like Christ. He takes the responsibility to do whatever is necessary to make her more Christlike. He will wean her from worldly distractions. He will protect the door of his home from worldliness zealously. He will utilize daily circumstances to teach extraordinary truths about God to his wife and family. He makes it his primary ambition in his life on earth to make his wife pure, clean, spotless, and dazzlingly gorgeous in holiness. One day standing before the throne in heavenly, the husband can present his wife forward before the Lamb so that He will be pleased and glorified with her spiritual growth.

All of this demands that the Christian husband and wife will carefully and deliberately guard what the other person sees, what they hear, what they watch, where they go, how they act, who they spend time with, how they spend time meeting and communing with God, their frequency and commitment to private and family prayer and worship. Every Christian has blind spots. Pride blinds us to our own sins, faults, shortcomings, and areas of growth. How important it is, then, for Christian spouses to love each other enough and to live with an eternal focus so as to shun worldliness and encourage whatever would promote godliness.

"Love wants only the best for the one it loves, and it cannot bear for a loved one to be corrupted or misled by anything evil or harmful. When a husband's love for his wife is like Christ's love for His church, he will continually seek to help purify her from any sort of defilement. He will seek to protect her from the world's contamination and protect her holiness, virtue, and purity in every way. He will never induce her to do that which is wrong or unwise or expose her to that which is less than good" (John MacArthur).

Part 6: the mystery, meaning & magnificence of real forgiveness

Forgive! That concept perhaps seems foreign to many people. Undoubtedly many misunderstand what forgiveness is because they've never received Christ's forgiveness and are ignorant of its glory and importance.

In this brief essay, I want to uncover the tremendous riches of forgiveness. I want to describe the mystery, meaning, and magnificence of forgiveness by asking some diagnostic questions and then providing helpful, clear and understandable answers.

1. WHY: why is forgiveness needed?

Every needs forgiveness because of one reality — sin. Sin has so infected and corrupted every person in the universe that no person exists who lives without the need for forgiveness. Forgiveness is needed because of sin. This means, ultimately and preeminently, forgiveness must first be given by God to a repentant sinner. All humans have sinned against the Righteous God (Jeremiah 12:1; Romans 3:23) and are dead in sin (Ephesians 2:1-3) and desperately need God's forgiveness (Luke 18:13). It is no different in the marriage relationship. Because two sinners have come together to form a new relationship, in a lifelong commitment, as sinners by nature, sin will occur. And where sin occurs, forgiveness must be granted by a believer when the other person asks for it.

2. WHO: who do I forgive?

Christ gloriously forgives all who come to Him in repentance and confession (1 John 1:9). He willingly receives sinners (Luke 15:2) and saves even the worst of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). He pardons all who repent and believe in the gospel (Mark 1:15). All who repent will be saved (Luke 13:3). He does not forgive anyone and everyone if they do not ask for it (Acts 13:38-39). God forgives anyone and everyone who genuinely confesses and forsakes his sin. Every sinner who genuinely repents of sin and comes to Christ for forgiveness finds Him gloriously merciful and everlastingly forgiving (Psalm 130:4; Ephesians 1:7). When a brother repents, a believer is obligated to forgive (Matthew 6:14). True forgiveness can only occur when a person asks for forgiveness (Luke 17:3). A believer, then, must forgive just as Christ has forgiven him (Ephesians 4:32). Christ forgives lavishly, abundantly, perpetually, willingly (Hebrews 10:17-18). Thus, in following the pattern of Christ's forgiveness of sinners, a Christian must be willing to forgive anyone and everyone who comes to him asking for forgiveness (Ephesians 4:32).

3. WHAT: what is required in biblical forgiveness?

Biblical forgiveness includes a promise. Forgiveness is a promise of pardon. In biblical forgiveness, which is supremely demonstrated in God's forgiveness of sinners in Christ, a promise of pardon occurs.

Thus, biblical forgiveness requires three crucial elements.

First, I promise to not bring up the sin to MYSELF

True love keeps no record of wrongs (1 Corinthians 13:5). Just as God promises that He will remember the sins of His people no more (Hebrews 10:17), so the people of God must

promise to not remember and dwell upon the sins of others. When someone humbly confesses his sin and asks for forgiveness, the Christian is obligated to forgive that sin and to refuse to add that offense to the list of wrongs. He actively chooses to not dwell on those wrongdoings.

Second, I promise to not bring up the sin TO OTHERS

A true Christian forgives like Jesus does. To speak of the wrongdoings of one person to others is slander. A godly person does not slander with his tongue (Psalm 15:3). Indeed, he who spreads slander is a fool (Proverbs 10:18). True believers are trustworthy and when they forgive an offense, they actively choose to not speak of that sin to others.

Third, I promise to not bring up the sin TO YOU

When a person repents and the other party forgives him, the one who granted forgiveness must not ever bring up that offense again to the offender. If it is forgiven, it cannot be brought up again as ammunition for the future. It cannot be kept as a bomb of power ready to detonate whenever it's needed. How grateful the child of God is that God does not constantly remind him of his offenses against God. When God forgives, He removes the transgressions as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12).

To sum up, biblical forgiveness is a promise of pardon. It is not a feeling. It is not an apology. It is not a mere forgetting of something that happened. It is a transaction that happens when one party humbly repents of that sin, asks for forgiveness, and then the offended party willingly and generously lavishes forgiveness. All of this is patterned after the full and free forgiveness that Christ grants to sinners who humbly come to Him in repentance and faith. This is the kind of forgiveness that Christian couples must regularly practice. Forgiveness is vital for a healthy marriage.

4. HOW: how has Christ forgiven me?

Christ forgives graciously (Ephesians 1:7). God forgives all the sins of His people (Psalm 25:18). Indeed, God is good and is always ready to forgive (Psalm 86:5). The way that the people of God have received forgiveness from Christ should directly influence the willing, free, lavish, and unrestrained forgiveness offered to others *regardless* of the enormity of the offense. After all, no offense between two sinners on earth can equal the massive forgiveness that the repentant sinner has received from God Almighty! Indeed, God forgives us our sins and cleanses us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). In the marriage relationship, when a spouse sins — whatever that sin may be — and they confess that sin, humbly acknowledge it, and ask for forgiveness, the Christian spouse is obligated to forgive that spouse since Christ has forgiven his eternal debt of sin. As Jesus said, if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions (Matthew 6:15).

“Obviously the Omniscient God who created and sustains the universe does not forget, but He can ‘not remember.’ You see, forgetting is passive and is something that we human beings, not being Omniscient, do. ‘Not remembering’ is active; it is a promise whereby one person determines not to remember the sins of another *against him*. To ‘not remember’ is simply a graphic way of saying, ‘I will not bring up these matters to you or others in the future. I will bury them and not exhume the bones to beat you over the head with them. I will never use these sins against you’” (Jay Adams).

“Isn’t it great that God never emphasizes our failures! He emphasizes His forgiveness so that He gets the praise, honor & glory” (John Barnett)!

Part 7: your personal pursuit in marriage: for **YOU** to change; **NOT** for you to change your spouse & conform them into your liking

A Christian wants to please the Lord in all things. A genuinely converted Christian hates his sin, quickly confesses it, endeavors to turn from it, and strives by God's enabling and empowering grace to walk in holiness. A great problem arises in many marriages when couples want change — and they want it *fast*. And usually the change must begin with *the other* person. How easy it is for us as sinners to be blinded to our own sin. How easy it is to see ten faults in others that so blinds us to even one glaring fault in ourselves. O the deceptiveness of sin, pride, and selfishness. The personal pursuit in the Christian marriage must be for *godly, genuine, consistent change* in you — not for you to change your spouse. Dear Christian spouse, if your marriage is going to change, it begins with *you*.

In this brief article, I will present five simple helps to aid the Christian in his Godly pursuit of biblical change so as to become the spouse that God wants him to be.

1. Your goal: strive to honor Christ!

All those who love God's salvation say continually: 'Let God be magnified' (Psalm 70:4). The Lord is worthy to receive honor (Revelation 4:11). God's people are called upon to worship the Lord with trembling (Psalm 2:11). All the earth is beckoned to worship the Lord and tremble before Him (Psalm 96:9). Like the Apostle Paul, a believer makes it his ambition to be pleasing to the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:9). That must be the ongoing goal, pursuit, end, and motive in life. The goal for every Christian is to please the Lord. This radically — *drastically!* — affects a marriage relationship. The goal of marriage is *not* simply for a better, happier, easier, more comfortable marriage relationship, or even a better and more enjoyable spouse. No! The supreme goal of marriage is found when the believer commits himself to honor Christ no matter what the cost, what the trial, what the hardship, and what the consequences may be. The personal pursuit in marriage must *not* be to change the spouse, to see *them* grow in Christlikeness merely. The personal pursuit is for *you* to strive, excel, work, be diligent, and discipline yourself to honor Christ *irregardless* of how things change on the parts of other people involved in the home.

2. Your mission: strive to emulate Christ!

God commands all believers to be transformed by the renewing of the mind (Romans 12:2). This necessitates that the Christian not be conformed to this world (Romans 12:1). Every Christian must follow in Christ's footsteps since He left the example for us (1 Peter 2:21). The Christian wants to emulate Christ, to follow Him, to be like Him (Philippians 3:10). In the specific context of the marriage relationship, the Christian husband or wife must make it their magnificent mission to strive with all the Spirit-endowed strength to emulate Christ. Even if the spouse refuses to reciprocate, *you must emulate Christ*. Even if the spouse responds with anger and bitterness, *you must emulate Christ*. Even if the burning coals on the head of your spouse only enflames their rage, *you must emulate Christ*. Even if the spouse does not even recognize the love and labor of compassion on your part, *you must emulate Christ*. The mission is for *you* to emulate Christ. Note, the mandate from God is not for believers to ensure that their spouse emulates

Christ. *Your* duty is to follow Him! Again, it must be repeated, the mission of the believer is to follow Christ and emulate Christ irregardless of the response that he receives.

3. Your humbling: strive to serve like Christ!

The night before Jesus died, He sat in the upper room with His disciples for the last Passover feast before He would die. At this celebration, Jesus got up and took the role of the lowliest servant and washed the feet of all twelve of His disciples (John 13:1-12). Jesus came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28). Even in the heavenly banquet, the Scriptures reveal that Jesus will gird Himself to serve His people (Luke 12:37). Jesus served His enemies in that He even washed Judas's feet before Judas left that room to get the Roman soldiers to arrest Jesus. Jesus served those who took Him for granted in His earthly ministry. So it must be in the marriage relationship. Every Christian spouse must humbly serve as Christ served. If Jesus Christ, the Eternal God, humbled Himself to wash the dirty, dusty, muddy feet of His disciples, how much more must we humbly serve others. Dear Christian spouse, your humble resolution must be to serve your spouse constantly. Serve them to the max! Love them to the uttermost! Strive to be useful and helpful to them in their growth. Again, this is not pending upon their reception of your endeavors and how they accept, acknowledge, and affirm your acts of service! No! You serve your spouse *to the uttermost* (without limits) like Christ served *you*. He loved you! He died for you! He bore your wrath! He became your curse! He drank the cup of divine punishment down to the dregs for you! He came to serve you! So you must strive to serve your spouse with that same kind of humility.

4. Your joy: strive to unconditionally love like Christ!

Paul worked with the Corinthian believers for their joy (2 Corinthians 1:24). He made it his joy in serving them and seeing them joyfully know the Lord more. Believers must serve one another through love (Galatians 5:13). God is love (1 John 4:8) and He first loved wayward sinners since He sent His Son to be the propitiation for sin (1 John 4:10). God did not wait for us to respond to sent Christ to die. No! He initiated this supreme act of divine love by sending Christ to die for sinners (Romans 5:8). The joy of a Christian abounds when he unconditionally loves like His Savior loves. After all, a Christian has received the ultimate display of love. Moreover, the Christian is the most unworthiest person to receive that love! So he must strive to love his spouse with that same kind of *unconditional* love. Fervently love one another! Christians must fervently love one another from the heart (1 Peter 1:22).

5. Your perspective: strive to remember the coming judgment seat of Christ!

The Christian does well to daily remember that he will stand before the judgment seat of Christ so that each one may be recompensed for deeds in the body, according to what he has done (2 Corinthians 5:10). This will not be a judgment seat that determines salvation; that has already been secured at the moment of justification by faith alone. This future judgment seat of Christ is not a judgment determining *salvation* but a judgment dispensing *rewards* for faithful service. Every Christian will be at this judgment. Paul says it again that all believers will stand before the judgment seat of God (Romans 14:10). Therefore, O Christian spouse, love your spouse with such a perspective that you will stand before the Lord Jesus and give an account for *every single* word spoken, *every single* deed done, *every single* way you responded, and *every single* thought you had toward your spouse. Live with this eternal mindset and let that guide, guard, and govern how you think, talk, and live today.

Conclusion

No relationship on the earth matters more than marriage. No earthly relationship is closer and more intimate than the marriage covenant. The most important relationship in a married person's life is the covenant with their spouse. When two sinners enjoin themselves together in a lifelong commitment, undoubtedly obstacles will arise. Certainly hardships will ensue and trials will blossom. Yet the Godly husband and the Godly wife must each know how to live so that they will honor Christ themselves and be the very best husband or wife that God has called them to be — for *His* glory and their joy.

In these preceding essays, various topics have been discussed regarding marriage. They are crucial issues. They are not peripheral issues or secondary. They are biblical issues and they demand that believers strive by God's power, with God's strength, through diligent prayer, and through unending effort to follow them completely.

The meaning of marriage is about God. The gospel is gloriously displayed in the marriage covenant as a husband is called to lead with love and sacrifice himself for his wife's benefit just as Jesus Christ, the heavenly Bridegroom leads His Church with love and gave Himself up for her at Calvary. Moreover, the wife must submit to her husband with a sincere, honest, and worshipful heart just as the church gladly, willingly, reverently, and unreservedly submits to her glorious Head, Jesus Christ.

Every healthy marriage demands open and ongoing communication. A healthy marriage will demonstrate frequent communication. Wherever conflict occurs, a breakdown in communication has happened at some point along the way. Communication is vital for a Godly, healthy, and joyous marriage relationship.

Marriage serves to magnify God. The husband and the wife must diligently and daily and determinatively take their eyes off of themselves and place their eyes on the beauty and majesty of Christ. Marriage is to make the greatness and sweetness of Christ known!

Yet when couples sin and fail each other. When expectations (whether right or wrong) are unmet, communication must be open and forgiveness must be readily available. Couples must actively and frequently ask for forgiveness. This demands humility and lowliness. But when a spouse recognizes that he has sinned and then asks for forgiveness, the other Christian spouse must willingly, lavishly, graciously, and unhesitatingly forgive *all* of that offense (with no reservations!).

So then, we could sum it all up by saying this: if your marriage is going to change, dear spouse, it all begins with *you*. Don't point the finger at your spouse. Don't expect them to change. Don't wait for them to initiate. *You* change. Marriage is about changing *you* so that you are conformed more into the image of Christ rather than you attempting to change your spouse to conform them to your liking.

There is nothing that so beautifully and dazzlingly shows the gospel of saving grace than a healthy and holy marriage.