

Prelude: In this talk, I am aiming at the center—toward the vast majority of marriages. However, it is important to note that I would alter my counsel significantly with individuals experiencing abuse (both physical and emotional), intentional manipulation, and serious oppression. There are also marriages afflicted by severe substance abuse/addiction or a real disregard for commitment/covenant (among other things) where intimacy and vulnerability would open up a person for further abuse and oppression. If you believe your marriage falls into one of these categories, please seek counsel from a wise pastor, elder, or friend.

Introduction:

Today we're talking about marriage—and the problem is you're already saturated with marriage information. You've heard probably more sermons on marriage than any other topic, and there's a lot to be said.

But what I'm going after this morning is the essence of marriage. How do we understand marriage at its core or its root?

Because if we get this wrong, if we miss this, it's like trying to get somewhere without a map. We've all been there. Marriage & marriage ministry are too challenging without the map.

Marriage has the potential for deep joy and belly laughter. But it also can bring us to a place of insanity or our knees in sorrow like nothing else. It has the ability stir up and evoke intense emotions that we didn't know we were capable of. Why? Why does it have the power to be so distressing and take us to places we may not want to go?

And why is marriage ministry so challenging? When we try to help we can feel like an overwhelmed child—just as lost, helpless, and defeated—as if we were watching our own parents quarrel and fight, like watching 2 trains about to collide and powerless to stop them.

You see, Emotions in marriage are powerful...they have the potential to push away, separate, and tear apart (or) they have the potential to draw together, to invite compassion, and to create intimacy.

But the power and intensity of marital emotion is what leads many of us to think twice before jumping into the fray of marriage ministry. We say either:

- “I'm not gifted enough,”
- “I don't have the training,” or,
- “I'd have to be half-crazy to do this more than I absolutely have to.”

But here's where getting to the heart & soul of marriage is so important: If we get it wrong, all we'll see is conflicts: conflicts about money, about parenting, sex, and communication, and we'll spend all our energy on negotiating, problem-solving, and in conflict resolution. But there's something deeper, something more profound that God desires for your marriage.

And if there's anything I've learned it's that it's far more important to get to the deeper questions—the questions that too often remain unspoken but that undergird the relationship...here's a few I hear:

- Are you there for me...can I reach you when I'm weak and scared? And are you moved to compassion & care for me?
- Do I really matter to you...Am I important to you? (In other words) is it a concern to you about me?
- With all my flaws & failures, you of all people know me and could reject me, will you be merciful and still love me and want to be with me knowing me?

You see, if we miss the essence of marriage, we'll ask the wrong questions, and we'll be limited and largely ineffective in helping others as well.

So, here's what we'll address today:

1. What is the Foundational Image that Scripture gives us of marriage? (This is the essence, and it's wonderfully surprising.)
2. What remarkable gift does God give us to cultivate and grow a Christ-honoring marriage?...which by the way, happens to be the very same gift that he gives to those who need to rebuild when they've all but destroyed their marriage.
3. And finally, how do we put legs on or make it a take-out order so that you and I and the couples we minister to can actually take and do this out there?

Essence of Marriage: Clinging & Becoming One Flesh

There's something so fundamental about marriage in Scripture that often gets overlooked. It starts in Genesis 2 and runs all the way through the New Testament. It's something that nearly every reference of marriage in Scripture builds on. Listen again to the story...

God takes a rib right from Adam's side, something attached to him, to create Eve. He doesn't create Eve out of the dust of the ground. He takes a part of Adam—a part of his very own body. He takes something that is attached to and bound up with Adam and makes Eve before bringing her back to him to become one again. They start out as one flesh and they end up as one flesh. So God describes marriage with a story of 2 souls bound up with one another.

And then comes the climax or the point of the whole story: *“a man shall leave his father and his mother and cling (or) cleave closely (or) hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”*

God tells us this story in Genesis 2 and then quote it nearly every time he speaks about marriage in the Bible. So this is it. This is the essence of marriage—a husband and wife clinging to each other and becoming one flesh.

Now, to me this isn't the first image that comes to my mind when I think of marriage. But I'm starting to love it. Picture this: 2 people holding & gripping tightly and sticking to one another emotionally, spiritually, and physically. If you actually allow our mind to slow this verse down long enough to picture clinging. It's a powerful and vivid metaphor.

We don't cling to something we don't need and we don't cling unless we're in need, in trouble, or scared. Picture a koala bear clinging to its mother or a man lost at sea clinging to a piece of driftwood. What do we cling to? We cling to what we see as good, what we treasure, what we delight in and do not wish to live without.

Think of the Old Testament, where God repeatedly calls us to cling to him, cling to his word, his commands, and to hold fast to his covenant. In life and in Scripture, clinging is a very positive and vivid metaphor. We cling b/c we need and we cling to what we do not want live without. Now, to be sure, there's a difference between clinging in a God-honoring manner and being clingy, between holding fast to your spouse and suffocating/strangling them. God is capturing something here that is worth slowing down.

When you take this verse in the context of Eve coming out of Adam and being reunited to him, and as you see how it's used throughout Scripture, the primary thrust is towards an emotional and spiritual closeness and communion. This is the essence of marriage—a husband and wife clinging to one another.

So the question is:

- Are you clinging to your spouse? Or let me put it this way,
- Wives, would your husband say that you need him...not just for his paycheck, but for his care, his compassion, and wisdom? (and)
- Husbands, would your wife say you know in the core of your being that you need and deeply appreciate her?

This summer, my wife, Kellie, and I were talking about how much longer we'd be able BOTH go to this conference...b/c it's hard...we have young children...and it's hard to leave them for 4-5 days. And I said, "Well you probably won't be able to go next year." And you know what she said? She said, "No way. This is the one time of year when I know that you need me. I wouldn't miss being there to help you."

Do you see what she's putting her finger on? There's something right and good when we need one another and we know it and reach for each other. We're all poor and needy whether or not we admit it...and it's here in a setting like this when I cannot deny it. And there's something powerful that glues us together when we know that we're both needy and both needed.

So, God describes marriage as a husband and wife clinging to one another...and a marriage in trouble (or) heading for trouble is a marriage with two people who no longer actively cling to one another, there's distance, independence, and detachment. They're living the "*not good*" aloneness even though they're married. And what's tragic is that the way they're dealing with this lonely isolation is actually pushing them further apart.

Clinging is God's design, and on any given day, we're either clinging closely together, holding fast or disconnecting, detaching, and living in independence.

Picture this, there are really only three options:

1. You have two people physically clinging together and embracing one another, (or)
2. You have one/both with their arms at their sides...and that's never fun to hug a person whose arms are down, (or)
3. You're pushing away and reaching in the opposite direction.

See, the problem is, that you're probably just like me. I want to be independent and self-sufficient and strong in and of myself. But it's not who God created us to be in his image so he gives us a remarkable gift. He does something to help us here.

God says, "*and they shall become one flesh or one body.*" Now, what he doesn't say is that they will become like *one flesh/body* but they *shall become one flesh*. He's not saying, "Here's a really cool metaphor that captures what I'm trying to describe." No. When we marry, we actually become one flesh/one body—spiritually and emotionally.

God takes a man and a woman and welds their souls together. What does a welder do? He takes two pieces of metal and joins them together so that the joint is actually as strong as each separate piece of metal. In the end, the two pieces of metal are now one.

But God doesn't use a welding metaphor. He uses something organic. He says we are now one body. We belong to each other. My life is now wrapped up in and hidden in my wife. Our souls are inseparably connected. How she is doing is caught up in how I'm doing and vice versa. GOD CREATES a real "constructive dependency." It's not a fear of man or a placing my trust in a man.

It's a reality that we truly are one flesh/body and it's something we can nurture as we cling well together.

Now you're asking, why is this a Gift? Why is it so important that we understand marriage first and foremost as a husband and wife whose souls are intricately bound up with one another?

If I don't understand God's design for marriage, if I don't see God's design for me as a husband who is joined to my wife, then in my marriage and from the counseling chair it will be hard for me to see rightly: the conflicts and the selfishness and the anger and defensiveness will be all that I see.

If I see marriage as just 2 individuals who are just committed to each other and not 2 individuals who are now one flesh we will relate and fight more like a boxing match and less like an autoimmune disease. A boxing match is just 2 people slugging it out whereas an autoimmune disease is where one body is actually attacking its own good tissue and joints.

It's the difference b/n getting the end of our lives and saying, "We made it! We survived marriage!" and getting to the end of life and saying, "I love you...we have clung well to one another."

Let me flesh out 3 implications of becoming one flesh:

[1st Implication]: Doing marriage ministry is like working in the E.R. If a husband and wife are now one body, then when we are fighting, ignoring, and contemptuous with one another, it's a body that's tearing apart. This explains why marital distress is so painful and disorienting and all-consuming.

Brain studies are now finding that when a husband and wife are fighting and accusing and blaming each other, their brains actually process this distress in the same part of the brain and in the same way as if they were stepping on a nail. So when a wife says, "You hurt me," it's not a metaphor. It's real.

I always pause when I read Job 2—where Satan says, you may've taken everything away from Job, but you still haven't afflicted his body yet. If you strike his flesh and bones, he will curse you to your face. (Job 2:5) Satan knows that there's something about bodily suffering that demands my attention and afflicts me in a uniquely painful way.

Well in the same way, marital pain--because we're one flesh, one body, commandeers our attention and hurts really badly. That's why I say it's Emergency Room counseling--b/c you're working with a body—and bodily pain is intense.

I think that's is why marriage ministry is so intimidating. It's easier to stand up here and talk about marriage than it is to roll up my sleeves and try to help a couple. Witnessing and experiencing intense pain is daunting. I do a lot of marriage counseling, and the truth is that I still get nervous before some marriage sessions b/c of the intensity.

So the level of pain and anguish we experience when there's distance and detachment makes sense if we're actually a body that is tearing apart. I hope this reality give us compassion for my wife as well as compassion for the couples I get to encourage?

[2nd Implication]: If this one flesh union is at the heart of marriage, it's there b/c it's God's design and it's God's doing. It's a REMARKABLE GIFT from him. It doesn't just magically happen. It's not a result of an evolutionary process of survival. The world doesn't know this.

A leading marital therapist, who's spent decades trying to understand and help couples-- Listen to what she says as she tries to put into words what it's like when she witnesses and experiences the power of the one flesh union. She says,

“After studying marriage for [more than 30]-years, I have more respect for the magic of love. (Now, when she says the “magic of love, she’s not talking about the infatuation or romance. Listen again...she says) When I watch a distressed couple who’s been fighting for 20-years...the megawatt emotions, the pain and the longing...and I watch them...change...[and grow]... When I watch them do THAT and figure out how to help them do THAT, it’s still magic, it’s still magic...and it’s still more powerful.” (YouTube, Sue Johnson: The Science of Love, published on August 22, 2014, The Agenda with Steve Paikin)

Do you see what she's trying to communicate? That after a career of studying and helping couples, she still can't get over the “magic” when she witnesses the power of being one flesh even through years of distance and painful isolation. It's actually what's captivated and held her attention for an entire career. It's what's kept her writing book after book and doing one research study after another.

The world cannot understand this powerful and mysterious gift. But we would say, it's not magic. It's divine. It's not an evolutionary process. It's God's doing. Jesus makes it clear when he says, "*What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.*"

This joining creates a deep bond, a deep dependency, and a desire for each other. We're emotionally attached in a profound way. Even in the most difficult marriage. Of course, we bury this one flesh union in the thick darkness of destructive conflict, but even then, the desire and longing for one another is not extinguished b/c God joined our souls.

Often when I help a person put this into words—they're at a loss:

I'll say, "*Mary, forgive me for this simple question...but I think this is really important for Bill to understand...*" See he's sitting right there and he needs to hear this.

"Mary, why do you long for Bill to treasure you and for you to be his special one?"

She chuckles uncomfortably...and says, "*Oh, now you're really pulling it out of me.*"
"*Well, because he's...my...my husband. I don't care what others think as much...he's...he's my husband.*"

But what Mary's struggling to put into words something very deep, something fundamental where words escape us. Even after we've been married for years, and those years may have been difficult...as they've been for Mary & Bill, the desire and longing for one another remains...and therefore we still hurt can hurt each other.

No matter how distressed my marriage is, we are one flesh. We impact one another on the deepest level. I long after her, my identity is connected to hers, and I yearn for her care.

You may be thinking, "Yeah, but I've known couples where I didn't see this at all...just the opposite." Or you may be thinking, "I don't see this in my husband...it's not there for me."

Well, frankly I witness that it's still active/present as a counselor almost on a daily basis. But more importantly, I see it in God's word. We have to trust that God doesn't lie...that your marriage isn't the exception. If God is the one who creates this one flesh—it's there by his design, and it's there to give us hope. If you don't see any evidence of this one flesh in your spouse—or even in yourself—pray that God would blow on the embers of your heart b/c it is there.

One of my favorite movies was *A Walk In The Clouds* with Keanu Reeves. It came out back in 1995. The movie takes place on this beautiful family vineyard in California wine country. The vineyard has been in the family for generations. At the climax of the story, Keanu Reeves gets into an argument with his drunk future father-in-law. His father-in-

law stumbles out into the vineyard with a kerosene lantern, falls, and lights the entire vineyard on fire. They try to do what they can, but it's disastrous and the entire vineyard is burned to the ground. It's just smoldering. Everyone is in despair. There's no hope the future of their farm.

But Keanu takes off running and goes to the original plant, the vine that was first planted and that they used to grow the entire vineyard. He pulls out the root and brings it back to his future father-in-law who takes out a knife and cuts it. He says in amazement, "It's still alive. It's still alive. This is the root of your life...this is the root of your family." They can replant. All is not lost.

And in the same way, when God joins us together in marriage, the one flesh union is the root from which our marriage grows and is rebuilt even if we've burnt it to the ground.

[3rd Implication]: The reality that a husband and wife are one flesh is absolutely vital as I work with couples who are really in trouble and conflicted. I have to trust that when God says their souls are attached, there's more underneath the surface to this couple than the anger and defensiveness that I see. There's more than meets the eye. Even if they don't know it b/c they're one flesh—this isn't a boxing match.

Remember, being one flesh means that our souls are now joined; our identities—who we are is now connected.

So when I work with a husband who's withdrawing, who's doing everything to avoid his wife's disapproval, and who's responding in a defensive way, maybe even stonewalling her, I know there's more going on for him than just selfishness or disinterest or being antisocial. If he's really one flesh with her, than he's more than avoidant. He may feel like an utter failure in his marriage, as a man in his wife's eyes.

Under the silence and withdrawing, he probably feels inadequate and incapable to please his wife, like he doesn't measure up. And there may be an overwhelming and fearful devastation in his heart and soul as a husband and as a man.

Listen in over my shoulder on a conversation I had recently. This is not an unusual conversation. This couple's been married for 30-years, and they've been on the brink of divorce several times. I've been meeting with them for about 3-months now.

When we started the session the wife was really angry—actually hammering him. At this point in the session, I'm speaking to the husband.

"So Juan, when Abi poked her head into your garage and said, 'We need to talk about this,' you said, 'Not now. I DON'T want to talk about it.' What was going on for you?"

“I was mad...I was so upset...just 15-minutes after counseling she calls me a liar! I wasn't in any mood to talk about it.”

“Right! Juan, this is really important for me to understand. Put yourself back there...back in the kitchen when Abi said to you, ‘You lied in counseling. You lied to Aaron.’ Before the anger, what did you feel? Before the indignation and defiance set in. Slow it down...now...what did you feel before you got angry?”

“I don't know...it really hurt. I'm there sharing my feelings, and she comes home and tells me I'm lying...that I'm a liar. That hurt.”

“Ah...that's right...she really hurt you...but why, why did it hurt so badly?”

“Hm...this seems silly, but it feels like she's judging me...judging my character.”

“Who you are as a man.”

“Yeah...my very own wife...doesn't trust me...as a man...as her husband. That really hurt.”

Now, at this point Abi jumps in, she's so interested in what her husband is saying that she can't contain herself. And normally I'd intervene just to go a little deeper, but her question was actually good, it was the same question on my mind and that I thought she was probably wondering. She simply asked with a stunned look on her face,

“But why...why did my saying, ‘You lied to Aaron,’ hurt you that bad?” (She had no idea...it wasn't even on her radar.)

And he says back to her with a sad look on his face, “Because I care what you think. You're my wife.”

And she responds, “I didn't know...I didn't know I even could hurt you...it's hard for me to believe that you even CARE what I think about you...It's hard for me to trust this.”

Now at that point we're having a very different conversation. Just minutes before the wife was lambasting her husband for running to his man cave again and not caring enough to reconcile with her after a pretty nasty fight, but NOW we're having intimate conversation of a husband's humble desire for his wife to esteem him...of who he is as a man—his integrity—and of a wife's longing to know that her opinion, her words, and what she thinks actually matters to him, gets in, and moves him.

You see...typically all Abi sees is a husband pulling away and withdrawing from her, again. She's certain Juan is just disgusted with her and really doesn't care for her. She has

no idea that there's more going on under the surface. But as Christians armed with God's word, we do.

In our own marriages and when we help others in theirs, the real issue is, will we explore and engage on this level of humility and honesty?

All I was doing was slowing down the conflict and inviting Juan to dive beneath the turbulent surface waters of conflict. As a counselor, I'm trusting that Abi's view of her husband and her words to him, deeply impact him and vice versa.

When we engage on this level, believe me, it's a game-changer. These are some of the most moving moments in marriage and in counseling.

So, if we're tracking together, you're saying with me, "I want to cling to my husband to my wife. And God's given us a powerful gift in marriage because he knows we need help. It's the one flesh union, but we still haven't talked much about how to cling, how to hold fast to each other.

Both Naked & Not Ashamed

In Genesis 2, right after God says, "and they shall become one flesh," God says something very interesting that I think we tend to gloss over pretty quickly but that what I think is actually the key to clinging. It's the glue that bonds us together.

God says, "*The man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.*" Now we've all read this verse and thought, "Well yeah, Adam and Eve hadn't sinned yet. They had no guilt, no shame, and no fear. They had no reason to cover up." And we're like, "Isn't that nice. Wouldn't that be nice! But that's not where I live. We don't live in the Garden anymore."

But I think we're missing the point that being "naked and not ashamed" is also the way we cling to one another—the way we strengthen and deepen our union.

It's fascinating to me that Scripture first paints nakedness in a positive light. It's something wholesome. Most theologians say it's not primarily about sex. It's an image that vividly captures an emotional and spiritual openness & trust. It's inviting and allowing my wife to see me and to know me. It's an openheartedness and transparency.

Yet, when God uses the word, "naked," it perfectly nails our experience of being emotionally vulnerable--just how hard and scary it is. Even if my wife is the safest person on the planet, I'm going to be afraid. It's still naked and no one likes to be naked. But it's what makes cleaving possible

Now we all know that God sees it all. Hebrews 4:13 says, *“No creature is hidden from his sight; but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give an account.”* So God sees and knows us, but it’s another thing altogether to invite and allow my wife to see my heart, my fears, my insecurities, my desires, and my longings—the very things that are harder to perceive and share—the very things I don’t even want think about or acknowledge in myself. But these softer, humbler, more tender emotions are essential to clinging and cleaving.

My wife Kellie and I were up late into the night and I was talking through something that was troubling me. I just couldn’t find a way through this particular struggle. But she was really taking my concern seriously and encouraging me. And then there was a pause. She says,

“Aaron? I could use a little affirmation right now.” I was like, “What?!” Now this is all happening in my mind in a matter of seconds. But I’m thinking, “Oh, man, I’ve been so selfish. I’m here just dominating this conversation with all my insecurities and fears. And she’s over here thinking, ‘Hey, there’s two of us in this relationship. Can we talk about me sometime before dawn?’”

And then I start thinking, “Oh, man. I haven’t been affirming Kellie much this week. She’s probably angry and feeling like I’m neglecting her. Oh, here we go again. Why? I was just trying to share my heart.” So you can see I’m already going defensive—like Kellie’s unhappy with me, and now she’s criticizing me for being so selfish and inadequate as an encouraging husband.

Like I said, this all happened in a matter of a few quiet seconds as I’m trying to get my bearings. And by God’s grace, I simply asked,

“Kellie, why do you say that? Why do you need affirmation right now?”

And you know what she said? She said, “Well, I’ve been listening to you and trying to encourage you, but I’m not the counselor. I don’t feel like I’m very good at it. You’re the counselor. I feel a little insecure, but I want to help you.”

“Oh my goodness! I had no idea. I thought she was criticizing me for being selfish and stingy with praise. I really thought we’re about to get into a conflict. But when she vulnerably shared her insecurity and desire to care for me...everything changed. I was drawn to her. I was compelled to care for her, to affirm her, to say, “I love talking to you. I love your thoughts. I am so grateful for you. You encourage me more than anyone in this world.”

Do you see what she did? She acted out “naked and not ashamed.” She could’ve kept these tender feelings to herself or said a lot of things that would’ve been safer and less

vulnerable. And she could've said it in ways that poked and pushed me. But she didn't. And I couldn't help express how thankful I was for her and how much I need and value her.

You see it's here where our one flesh grows and strengthens. Sharing and opening our vulnerable emotions and desires and fears that's the seedbed out of which intimacy grows and clinging happens. It's sharing honestly in a way that pulls close and draws. This is how we cleave and hold fast to one another. It's the glue.

But so often, we're more like two closed hard-covered books. When there's a conflict we beat against one another. We simply quarrel. But books...are meant to be opened, to be read. But we just bang each other and stay safely closed. Neither stop to understand what's going on by opening the book and both stay self-protected, guarded within the covers of the book, and so nothing changes. Our conflicts never change.

Now, as a marriage counselor, I'm not trying to avoid the hardcovers—the intense emotions in conflict, I'm trying to lean into them, to explore or unfold them, to unpack them, and to find out what's underneath and inside. I'm trying to go deeper into a person's emotions, to make sense of it, and find aspects of their emotional experience that they're not paying attention to. To help them open their books to each other.

Almost always, the anger and defensiveness are actually accompanied by emotions that are much more tender and meek...like fear, shame, inadequacy, or loneliness. It's reaching for each other from these vulnerable and softer emotions that tend to disarm and pull for compassion and care and that bonds our souls together.

When share from this part of our heart, it's such a compelling new experience—our souls can actually now cleave together. But we have to take a risk—to be naked and share beyond the frustration, anger, and defensiveness into disclosing the tender emotions and experiences that are real but often hidden. This is a real antidote that counteracts and neutralizes the damage done the destructive conflicts

See, the problem is, we as a couple stop communing. We disconnect and no longer empathize with each other. We're not reaching for one another in a humble and vulnerable way. We're still one flesh but it's like we're a body that's disconnected-like someone with a leprosy.

Remember what leprosy is—it's a long-term infection that slowly erodes a person's ability to feel pain. You actually start to lose parts of your body b/c of repeated injuries. You don't feel pain—and so you keep on injuring yourself.

Paul Brand, the famous neurosurgeon who spent a life-time treating leprosy said that many of his patients would conceal their “*injuries, and they found it shameful to acknowledge their wounds so openly...*” Dr. Brand says:

“My leprosy patients no longer felt their hands and feet as part of self...They lacked the basic instinct of self-protection that pain normally provides.

One of [my patients] said to me, ‘My hands and feet don’t feel part of me. They are like tools I can use. But they aren’t really me. I can see them, but in my mind they are dead.’ ‘I heard similar comments often, underscoring the crucial role pain plays in unifying the human body.’ (The Gift of Pain, 126)

Did you hear what he said?! In our physical bodies, it’s communicating and sensing pain--that unifies our body in to caring for itself.

It’s the same thing in marriage! If we’re one flesh, we unify as we share our weaker, more painful emotions and longings and fears—the softer and more tender feelings. It’s courageously and humbly reaching from this place that galvanizes a husband and wife into caring for each other.

But our problem is that (b/c of the Fall, because of sin) we all have this life-long infection. Your marriage and my marriage suffer from leprosy to one extent or another--we are bent to treat our very own body, our spouse, like a tool, a co-parent, a wage earner, a homemaker (everything but our very own body).

So, a distressed marriage really is a leprous marriage that has become inexpressive and insensitive to the very emotions (the weak and painful ones) that bond us together and catalyze us to love and care for each other.

Let’s not give up! We must be diligent. As long as it’s called today to be naked and not ashamed before one another. It’s how we cling.

So, my goal as a counselor is to help a couple to open the pages of their heart, to pull back the fig leaves and to come out of hiding. This is often where hope starts to grow.

It was early in counseling with Gary & Brenda, and they were at the end of their rope. I was actually wondering if I’d ever see them again b/c they were so hurt, angry, & defeated. They had just gotten back from a Christian conference like this, and it had not gone well. Both said things that were bitter and devastating.

Gary was probably angrier of the 2 and in our session said, “I am done! I will not do this anymore,” and it wasn’t just an expression of frustration. He was giving up and turning a corner. He was all but unreachable and unyielding to me.

So I spent some time challenging him and the Lord gave him some sincere conviction for saying he was going to divorce Brenda. He actually stood up and was walking out when he turns to Brenda and simply says,

“I was wrong. I shouldn’t have said that.” But I’m looking at him and there’s something in his face that’s different. Something was going on inside that I’d never seen, and his voice was a little lower. But I didn’t know what it was. So I said,

“Gary, can I stop you for a minute...what’s happening right now as your voice gets a little deeper? What are you feeling?”

He said, *“I don’t know...I don’t know what I’m feeling.”* But I could see there was something there.

It’s in these moments where you have go deeper. If you don’t, you miss a real opportunity to help them do something very different. So I asked,

“Gary, have you ever felt this before?” And he says,

“Yeah...I felt this way at my grandfather’s funeral.”

“Oh...Gary can you sit down?...You’re feeling sad...grief—is that right?”

“I think so. But more than anything, I feel weak and small...I feel so small...like I just don’t have it figured out.”

Now, I have to tell you...Gary’s a successful businessman...and he’s a confident and competent guy. So he’s really opening up. So, I say,

“Right...like you don’t know what to do...so helpless and sad.” I’ve never seen Gary cry...but he’s crying and choking on his words,

“I feel destroyed when Brenda says things like, ‘Living with you is Hell...marrying you was the biggest mistake of my life.’ She hurts me and I feel so unable to please her...like I’m always a failure.”

“But what she doesn’t know is that I lie awake at night...not justifying myself like when I was younger...but praying for forgiveness...that God would change me as a husband.”

So I say, *“Gary, would you reach out to Brenda right now...would you actually hold her hand and tell her DIRECTLY how badly it hurts when she sees you as a mistake and speaks*

such painful words?” But he can’t. Like physically he couldn’t move his hand toward Brenda. So he’s still angry and indignant b/c of what Brenda had said.

So I look at Brenda...and clearly she cannot believe her ears and eyes as she sees his tears. It’s so genuine and it’s what she’s been longing for. So I say,

“Brenda would YOU BE WILLING to hold Gary’s hand and let him know you’re here now... that’s you’re hearing him?” She doesn’t even hesitate. And I say,

“Gary, share with HER now.” Through tears, he says, *“Brenda, please don’t be my accuser...my judge. Would you trust that I’m trying to change...I know I’ve made lots of mistakes. But when you say these things, I feel like I’m defending my very life...my existence.”*

And she says back to him, *“I know...I don’t want to do this. I don’t want to hurt you like that. I’m afraid of being hurt, so I hurt you. I’m so wrecked. I’m broken, and so messed up. Please...please don’t leave me.”*

What happened here? It was Gary’s tone of voice and facial expression that was the first sign that there was more than indignation and anger and defeat? Simply slowing the conflict down—right there in the moment—not moving on without helping Gary to make sense of his sadness led to his sharing vulnerably and humbly?

Up until that point, it was all anger and rage. But then, by God’s grace, he was able to drop deeper into more painful and vulnerable emotions.

And using touch at a very tender moment can be helpful in helping them cling to each other? It was all there, but Gary needed a little help to acknowledge and explore what he was feeling but didn’t understand and to allow his wife to hear and see his pain and to hear him say, *“Please don’t do this...I’m fighting for my life.”* And do you see how when Gary became vulnerable, it invited Brenda to acknowledge her own brokenness and to tell Gary that she’s scared to death that he’d abandon her some day?

Gary’s vulnerability elicited Brenda’s empathy and her own transparency. By God’s grace they clung to each other. They were naked and not ashamed. And this became one of many doorways into a new relationship.

Conclusion (Ephesians 5:31-32)

Let’s pause to review:

- God’s design for marriage is a husband and wife actively clinging together and growing in the one flesh union that he so graciously created.

- When we understand what this one flesh union is, it gives us real help and focus in our marriage and in the marriages we're ministering to.
- And yet it's still hard to cling—to be naked and not ashamed before one another in a way that transforms our conflicts and fosters deep communion.

But there's still one question that may be bothering you...that you might be asking. And that is: Are we simply recovering or returning to Eden? Are we trying to get back to the way it was in the Garden? Is this the ultimate goal in marriage? No, b/c when God wrote these words in Genesis 2, he always had Someone Else in mind.

In Ephesians 5 Paul quotes Genesis 2 saying, *"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and cling to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."* And then he says something absolutely fascinating. He says, *"This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church."* Can you believe this?! Genesis 2 was always about Jesus and his bride. No one could've have imagined that when God said a husband and wife would cling and become one flesh that it was more than about Adam & Eve.

The Father was all along pointing us to his Son who would leave his home, leave his Father, and cling to his bride, the church. Jesus clings to his treasure, what he values and loves. He's the one who says to us, *"it IS a concern to me about you. I know your flaws and failures, and I love you. I will never leave you."* Jesus is the one who epitomizes being naked and unashamed who shares with us his heart, his mind, and makes himself vulnerable by becoming a man. He's the one who holds us fast.

And it's Jesus who became one flesh with us in such a way that (like John Calvin says) he actually considers himself incomplete and reckons himself imperfect until we are reunited with him in glory. Imagine that! It's not that he's lacking or deficient in and of himself. It's that in love he has become one flesh with us and now, his identity is so wrapped up in us—his bride that he considers himself complete until we dine with him together at the wedding feast. (Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians by John Calvin)

So, What is our ultimate goal in marriage? It's to reflect or to be a parable of Christ's love for his Bride. Imagine that! Your marriage is a parable! As we grow to cling to one another in a Christ-reflecting way, the one flesh union we have deepens and grows stronger and points us and others to and gives us and others a compelling glimpse of another union—the eternal union Christ forged with us, his bride.

Imagine, he clings to us...he holds us fast.