Sessions to be covered today

**Session 1:** The Nature and Purpose of Marriage: One Flesh Union (Destination)

Session 2: Methodology (Map) ............ Page 8

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Session 1: The Nature of Marriage: One Flesh Union (Destination)

“24 Therefore, a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.” (Gen. 2:24)

1st Implication

- My spouse, has a profound impact in my life—who I am, and how I see myself.

- Marriage as the “vortex” of a person’s life
  - A wife’s words and moods and view of her husband, are powerful.
  - A husband’s tender care for, love, and protection of his wife mean everything to his wife.
  - Question - How do we access these tender, but powerful desires and realities and how do we access them right in conflict in a way that leads to a deeper, healing conversation rather than a destructive quarrel or fight?

2nd Implication

- One flesh union a REMARKABLE GIFT from God.
- “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)
  - 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 deep desire for each other.
Example
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.”

No matter how distressed my marriage is:

• **One flesh.**
  • We impact one another on the deepest level.
  • We long after our spouse, our identity is connected to each other, and we yearn for mutual care.

We have to trust that God doesn’t lie…that your marriage isn’t the exception.

• **Question:**
  ➢ How do we uncover and blow on the embers of this one flesh union in a way that fans into flames a couples “affection and sympathy” (Phil. 2:1) for each other?

3\textsuperscript{rd} Implication

• When God says that they become one flesh, it’s not just a **convenient metaphor or illustration**

• God desires that 2 actually grow into a new way of being human—truly human.

• By the time a couple comes in for marriage counseling they’re likely already resisting the very thing God is doing with this new one flesh.

• Habits of love should feel compelling, attractive, and true.

• Drawing people into this vision of what God has created them to be.
Assign 1 person in the group to: a) read the introduction, b) read for Bill, and c) read for the counselor. Do your best to make it as realistic as possible.

Couple enters counseling today:
There were frustrations last week that they each felt b/n them. Sarah feared Bill’s judgment that she was not as productive as she should be at home b/c of the fearful depression that was triggered in her conversation with her sister that morning. She was honestly struggling (the similarities of her sister’s despair triggered her own doubts, fears, and unbelief) but was fearful to reach out with much transparency and vulnerability. Bill listened when she shared about her conversation with her sister, but was hesitant to say a much. He felt Sarah’s guardedness and even some prickly vibes that came from Sarah’s preempting Bill’s judging her.

(Bill starts)
“Sometimes, it’s that I just want Sarah to be okay. We started to make our way out of a bad place this last month (crippling depression) and now we’re here again. I think I’m being selfish here…but I feel lost in being able to care for Sarah. I can’t help her and don’t know how to help her and it gets even harder when I feel her anger. She’s frustrated with me and feels that I’m judging her and dismissing her feelings or the seriousness of her sister’s situation. When I walk in the door from work I can already feel her anger towards me.”

(Counselor)
After reflecting Bill’s sense of defeat and helplessness to connect with and care for his wife, I ask if I could speak for him. I say:
“Sarah, I really want to, desire to care for you and comfort you. But sometimes I feel so helpless and defeated when I try to care for you…but it’s not that your such a ‘hard case’ that I feel lost…it’s that you’re so sure that I’m going to judge you or criticize you. I feel your anger with me and it makes it so hard for me not to give up and just avoid these conversations. But this isn’t what I want.”

Here’s what I’m trying to uncover & fan into flame:
- The deep longing Bill has to care for Sarah,
- Knowing Sarah’s fear that she is too burdensome and too broken, I added the “hard case” reassurance.
- Some acknowledgement (confession) of fear and avoidance of engaging Sarah. Her anger and prickly approach when he gets home really gets in.

(Bill)
“I resonate with that.”

(Counselor)
“Well what didn’t quite fit? I’m sure I missed something.”

(Bill)
“Nothing. I really resonate with what you said.”

(Counselor)
“Bill, would you speak this to Sarah directly. Use your own words.”
Bill takes my speaking for him even deeper and leaves what I say in the dust. He even added a piece that left me thinking, “Why didn’t I add that!?”

(Bill)
“Sarah, I know when you’re struggling with fear and doubt…depression if I could say that without sounding accusatory…when I try to care and comfort you, I feel deficient in your eyes like you wish I were different—someone else. It’s like what I’m offering you is not going to be enough…and I feel your anger. That’s the hardest thing for me. It’s NOT your pain or struggle with depression. It’s that I’m afraid that you’re unhappy with me…that you think that I’m going to make things worse, not better. I want to stand beside you and really care…. (pause) I want to be your hero.”

At this point, Bill & Sarah are facing one another and holding hands. Sarah whispers something (that I can’t hear) to Bill with a smile on her face and he smiles back. I end the conversation here by asking them to keep talking. I’m going to bow out at this point (I’m 15-minutes over time by now).
One Flesh Union that reflects Union with Christ

“\textquotesingle 31 Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and is united \textquotesingle or is joined\textquotesingle to his wife, and the two become one flesh." (Eph. 5:31)

\textit{This is a profound mystery}"

\textit{I am talking about Christ and the church.}

Jesus joyfully sings, \textit{This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!}"

\begin{itemize}
\item Imitates and reflects,
\item Embodies and witnesses,
\item Demonstrates and declares, and
\item It’s a \textit{parable} and an \textit{evangelistic} of Christ’s love for his Bride.
\end{itemize}

\textbf{Marriage as a parable!}

…our one flesh union with one another …
compelling glimpse of another union …
\textit{Eternal union Christ forged with us, his bride.}
Why is seeing our marriage as a parable as marriage to Christ as his bride so important?

- Reconciliation model?
- Problem-solving & communication skills model?  OR
- A new story of who we are as a couple
- A new set of glasses

Union with Christ Defined

Not an abstract theological idea. …heart of the good news of the gospel is that God does more. He saves us for communion, relationship, and intimacy with himself. Our identity is wrapped up w/ Christ. And His identity is wrapped up in us.

- Problem is that we often do not experience this intimacy with God.
- Union with Christ is the Secret AND the Means to Communion/Intimacy with God.
  - Union with Christ is fixed „,doesn’t ebb and flow based on our faithfulness.
  - Communion constantly changes and varies.
- Our one-flesh union is the Secret AND the Means to Communion/Intimacy with one another.
- Uncovering and helping the couple to share these deep one-flesh desires is what moves a couple into greater communion/intimacy with one another.

Overarching Task in Marriage Counseling

- The goal in marriage counseling is to foster and cultivate marital intimacy/communion.

How do we accomplish this?

- “I am the true vine…and my father is the gardener.” (John 15:1)
Abiding: Dependence, Reliance, & Intimacy

“Abide in me, and I will abide in you! The branch can’t bear fruit by itself, but only if it remains in the vine... without me, you see, you can’t do anything.” (John 15:4-5)

This is the work of marriage counseling—it’s helping a couple to abide in one another. It’s the bread and butter—the substance of what we’re doing together with the couple. Facilitating a couple’s abiding in one another is the basic need and movement in marriage counseling. It’s what Paul means in Ephesians 5:21 when he speaks to wives AND husbands (more than reconciliation, problem solving & communication skills). Before he says anything else, he says to both of them, “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Or as the NIV reads, “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

The Danger of Distance and Cut-off

“If people don’t abide in me, they are thrown out, like a branch, and they wither. People collect the branches and put them on the fire, and they are burned.” (John 15:6)
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Session 2: Methodology (Map)

Where do we start?

Prayer

Paul’s prayers at the start of his letters do 3 things:

- Bring people directly to Christ
- Give thanks specifically
- Interceding specifically

The Importance of Note-Taking for Opening Prayers
Brief Table Discussion

Read the following session note (out loud together) and answer the question:

Session Note

Mary feels lonely, in part b/c Paul doesn’t share his heart with her. Paul feels criticized...and he’s extremely withdrawn and quiet. This may relate to feeling criticized and hopeless that things would improve—that Mary would be able to hear him. When I hinted at this, Mary said, “No. He’s never talked much. That’s just who he is.”

I think Mary may feel lonely also b/c when she notices something is off with Paul, she is always the one reaching out. And he often says things like, “It’s just been a hard day. I’ll feel better tomorrow.” She reaches but does so decreasingly now b/c of the history of rejection. When he responds, it can be pretty harsh and disparaging. She seems deeply discouraged and experiences a marital despair—she’s lost hope that Paul would open up to her...be pleased with her.

Paul does feel criticized and emasculated. But there is also a deep dissatisfaction with Mary...but I sense he’s given up hope of sharing his frustrations with her. Although he hasn’t made mention of this, I wonder if there isn’t a deep sense of his own failure as well. He rarely speaks specifically in session and assumes Mary will not be able to hear him if he tries. They both are avoiding conflict at all cost.

Mary and Paul are dangerously disconnected. If I cannot intensify their interactions—if I cannot facilitate deeper, concrete conversations where they are sharing their more delicate emotions and desires (sadness, defeat, longings, fears, etc.) and caring for each other, the clock is ticking. They’re dangerously close to accepting an empty and hollow marriage where there is little conflict but also little affection and compassion. But I see them starting to take small risks. I see Mary wanting to please Paul and be open to him. She has a humble flexibility that is really special. Paul is honest. I know where he stands at all times. He seems on the cusp of opening up more even though he’s pretty hopeless. We ended our time in John 13 looking at abiding in Christ and his abiding with us...how this leads to the desire and ability for us to open our hearts to one another in humble, loving intimacy.

Question: If you were praying these 3 things (bringing them to Christ, thanksgiving, & something at the heart of what they need), how would you pray for Mary & Paul?
Cultivating Unity (A Methodology)

• Cultivating unity

• Faction: *a state of strife within one organization/organism* where each person is opposing the other’s ideas and desires and fighting for their own.

• **1st Corinthians**
  ➢ Principles patterned after Jesus (not rules, tools, or steps to unity)

  ➢ Fundamental pattern of extroversion/extrospection
    • Directing my interests/consideration outside of *my* thoughts, interests, & feelings.
    • Concerning myself with another’s sensibilities.
    • Prioritizing how my behavior affects (lands on) my spouse.

  ➢ Redemptive extroversion/extrospection
    • Being close enough to see, value, and take on as his/her own the spouse’s needs, problems, and burdens.

  ➢ Contrast ➡️ *The Great Divorce* by C.S. Lewis
    • a place he calls *grey town*
Looking for Hints at A Methodology

- 1st Corinthians 11:1 where Paul repeats for the 2nd time,
  
  “Imitate me as I imitate Christ.”

- “Watch me, listen to me, remember and follow my example” type of counseling approach

Table Discussion

1. If one of our primary methods in marriage counseling is to model a redemptive, extroverted love, what forms might this take as we work with a couple?

   - 
   - 
   - 
   - (kneeling…session 5)

1st Corinthians 8-10 (Food Sacrificed to Idols)

- Knowledge group

- Weaker group

- Conflict

- How does Paul move into and transform this conflict?
• Off **accusation/defensiveness** plane and goes deeper

• **Very personal knowledge** that leads to love

• Marital **Counseling Insights**
  - What I do or don’t do has an impact on my spouse.
  - When a couple is locked in an adversarial state, one movement that transforms the conflict into an intimate conversation is to move deeper into how my behavior is touching my spouse on a more tender level (sensibilities, conscience, heart).
  - Helping a couple to know and understand each other on this level is a two-way street. The questions in marriage counseling are bi-directional:
    - “How am I to know/understand/love my wife?”
    - “How am I to let myself be known/reveal/be loved (in a humble, vulnerable manner)?”
    - But one common problem is that spouses are often not aware of let alone able to share their hearts on this level.

• **Philippians 1:9** “And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more **in knowledge and depth of insight.**” This is exactly what Paul is helping them to do in Corinth—to deepen their knowledge and insight of one another in a way that leads to redemptive love.

• **Philippians 2:3-5** “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.”
  - Paul works with the Corinthians in such a way that grows an extraversion that sees outside themselves (their own rights and knowledge) and sees their brother’s heart in a way that leads to knowing, caring for, and pleasing and building up their brothers/sisters.

**Insight:** As a marriage counselor, we are constantly trying to uncover and help a couple put into words their sensibilities and deeper desires/fears in a way that undercuts conflict and grows an understanding, knowledgeable love.
Analyzing the Paul & Barnabas Conflict (Acts 15)

- Context

- Observations

Table Discussion

Read Acts 15: 36-40 along with the accompanying contextual details (at bottom). Look at how Luke depicts this heated argument between Paul and Barnabas and distill out of it Luke’s movement of what’s important. It’s fascinating what Luke leaves out of the story and what he wants to focus our eyes on.

1. What does Luke leave out of the story (an idolatry of the heart lens) and what does he emphasize (looking to interests/desires/fears)? How does this echo Paul’s methodology?

2. What might be the desires/fears that are underneath the conflict that would be helpful for each to humbly share…in a way that would transform the argument into a more intimate conversation that could lead to creative solutions?

3. How might you access these more tender experiences?

“Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, ‘Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.’ 37 Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, 38 but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. 39 They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, 40 but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord. 41 He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.”

(continued next page)
Table Discussion (continued)

Contextual Details: (The counselor would attempt to unearth these hypothetical deeper desires, fears, and interests in an attempt to help Paul & Barnabas work through this conflict in unity.)

Paul:
  • Paul painfully remembers what happened during the 1st missionary tour where a younger John Mark abandoned him early in the trip when it started to get difficult. Paul must be able to rely on John Mark—that he will persevere—when things get difficult…and they inevitably will. Trust has been broken for Paul.
  • From Paul’s eyes, the memory of Galatians 2 (circumcised believing Jews refusing to eat with uncircumcised Gentile believers) casts a dark cloud over Paul’s mind in this present conflict. (Most marriage conflicts are versions of previous conflicts and bring baggage with them.) You can feel his disappointment and sorrow (indignation too?) when Paul writes, “Even Barnabas was carried along by their hypocrisy.” They clearly made up after this conflict, but…

Barnabas (John Mark’s cousin):
  • Barnabas went out on a limb for Paul (Acts 9) when all of the believers in Jerusalem were afraid of him and didn’t believe that he was a disciple. Those Jerusalem believers didn’t trust Paul as far as they could throw him, and Barnabas was the one who convinced everyone that Paul was trustworthy—a true disciple of Jesus Christ. From Barnabas’ perspective, how can Paul not give John Mark a 2nd chance when Barnabas was the one who stood up for Paul and gave him a chance?!
  • Barnabas is the “son of encouragement.” True to form, Barnabas is willing to give an older (more mature now) John Mark a 2nd chance. He knows what happened when John Mark panicked and returned to Jerusalem. But he has reason to believe that John Mark is in a different place, that he’s matured, and that he just needs another opportunity to prove himself.
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Session 3: The Diagnostic/Analytic
(The Forces Against Us in Conflict)

Table Discussion

Before we delve too deeply into methodology, we have to ask:

- What forces are at play that drive us into and maintain fighting in marriage?

- In other words, why do we do what we do when we fight?

- Another way to ask the same question: When we get into conflicts, why is it so hard to keep our bearings and not slip into sinful patterns (in contrast with an extraverted, redemptive pattern)?

- It’s not just our wrong actions/bad behavior, it’s our attitudes, words, thoughts and emotions. Where do they come from? They do not arise in a vacuum.

Discuss these questions together.

- Web of powerful forces, 3 powerful enemies (Eph. 2:1-3).
  - **Personal dimension** (the flesh/heart).

  - **Interpersonal/situational dimension** (the world).

  - **False lord/father dimension** (the devil).
Here’s what’s at stake:

- Risk:

- Higher risk:

- IF we analyze the problem wrongly, then this is going to throw off our methodology

The Devil (False lord Dimension)

14 But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth.15 Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but (listen now) is earthly, unspiritual, demonic (of the devil). 16 For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. (James 3:14-16)

Therefore: counseling Methodology must emphasize/include (at the center):

- Ministry of prayer

- Repentance

The Flesh (Personal Dimension)

- Pursue lusts/cravings,

- We believe lies, and

- We flee from our fears.

14 but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. 15 Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. (James 3)
Conflict Progression

“What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from the desires that battle within you? You want something but you don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight.” (James 4:1-2)

Fast-Moving Escalator (Moving Stairway) of Desires & Fears that lead to Fighting:

- **Desire/Fear:** “I really would like to have, or I really am afraid of and avoid…” (Psalm 37:4)

- **Demand/Need:** “I need…; I’m entitled to …; I don’t deserve …”

- **Irritation/Frustration/Disappointment:** “You didn’t give me what I wanted …” (Gen. 4:6)

  1st Key to understanding my heart/flesh in conflict: I am not getting what I want and am willing to go to the mat for it.

- **Attack & Criticize/Withdraw & Defend:** (Rom. 12:19) we strike back by either attacking or withdrawing.

- **Stand In Judgment/Play God:** (James 4:11-12)

  2nd Key to understanding my heart/flesh in conflict: vain conceit “I am standing in judgment.”

- **Makes resolving conflict nearly impossible to resolve**

  Personal dimension of fighting happens so quickly and so often

  Withdrawing or blaming before we even know it

  And this leads right into the interpersonal dimension of conflict.
Table Discussion

Whenever a couple starts to engage in an adversarial discussion (quarrel) in front of you, take them in a different direction. Reverse the lens of their conversation from selfish/ruling desires and vain conceit (looking down in contempt and accusation) to humbly sharing their desires, fears, and doubts. Help the other to look away from themselves and concentrate on their spouse’s interests. Add a confession if appropriate. This is a Philippians 2:1-4 movement/intervention. If we allow them to continue down this path, they will invariably escalate into a more destructive conversation. Intervene early. Intervene gently. Read through this transcript at your table:

Kellie (to Aaron): You were home a ½ hour late yesterday…once again!
Aaron: Something always comes up just as I’m try to leave the office.
Kellie: Does something always have to come up?
Aaron: My manager asked me to deal with an unhappy customer.

Counselor to himself: Kellie is bitterly frustrated with Aaron. She’s not in a frame of mind to have a more collaborative, gracious conversation…let’s see how this goes.

Kellie: I don’t think you have any idea what it’s like to make dinner, get the house picked up, and try to keep all chaos from breaking out. The kids are tired and hungry, the baby is screaming, and Mick is provoking his brothers. I don’t think you can even understand what it’s like.
Aaron: Yeah, but working with angry customers isn’t real fun either. You don’t think my job’s hard?
Kellie: Yeah, but you get a quiet lunch, a quite office without interruptions, no kids pulling on you, no fights breaking out…I long for a job likes yours. Sometimes I feel like a single parent especially when you’re gone for 12-hours a day.
Aaron: I don’t think you have any idea how hard my work is.

Counselor to himself: If I let this continue much longer, it will not go well. I’m sure they’ve had a variation of this conversation many time before. They are locked in comparing their lives—whose job is harder—and both feel hurt, misunderstood, and devalued. Kellie is more attacking and Aaron more defensive. Let me see if I can reverse their lenses/direction.

Counselor (moving close to Aaron after asking for permission to help by speaking for him): You’re right. I was late last night. I felt bad about and was anxious the entire drive home…hoping that maybe it wasn’t such a rough afternoon for you. But I don’t want to do that to you. You’ve been with the kids all day, and I know that’s the hardest part of the day. I’m sorry you feel like a single parent. I feel good when I can come home early and help when I get home.

Counselor: (turning to Aaron) I know I’m making all this up, but what fit and what didn’t fit for you.
Aaron: No…that’s it. It’s all right…I wish I could say that.

Kellie to the counselor. (The counselor could see her glancing back and forth b/n the counselor and her husband while the counselor spoke…as if to say, “Really? You don’t feel this way, so you?”): That’s not true. He doesn’t feel that way.

Counselor (to Aaron): This is really important for Kellie to understand…but you must be honest. Can you speak from this part of your heart to Kellie? (Aaron softens and speaks, in his own words, essentially the same things but even more powerfully…Kellie can hear this and it takes the conversation in a constructive and collaborative and intimate direction.)
Questions to discuss:
1. How did the counselor reverse directions or reverse the lens and take Aaron and Kellie in a different direction? (from selfish ambition and vain conceit to humbly sharing and seeing the other’s desires and experience/interests)

2. It’s a judgment call in the moment as to which spouse to speak as...would’ve you chosen to speak as Kellie? If so, how would you have reversed the lens for her?

The World (Interpersonal Dimension)

- **Same script** every time
- **Triggered** by the same kind of things and they play out the...
- **Same themes** over and over again.
- Don’t **deemphasize** the **interpersonal temptations of a marriage**...the interpersonal **triggers**. Why?
  - Understanding how we are **drawn/pull one another into fighting** helps us to respond:
    - Intelligently
    - As a **team**
    - Mercifuly & **Courageously**

Situational Temptations (the World):

- Extended family expectations/involvement/attempts to control
- Physical suffering (illness, chronic pain, being tired, etc.)
- Poverty
- Racial Prejudice
- Living as a minority
From a room of mirrors to a room of windows (redemptive extroversion)

- Identifying my desires/fears
- Understanding our conflict pattern
- How we hook each other

3-movements or 3-directions in marriage counseling

- Upward (prayer & confession)
- Inward (desires, fears, & interests)
- Between (interpersonal triggers)

(We are moving in one of these 3-directions at all time in marriage counseling.)
Table Discussion

Read the following 3 counseling conversations. Identify the direction the counselor is moving in each situation—Upward (prayer & confession), Inward (desires, fears, & interests), or in Between (interpersonal triggers)

1. (Carol & Rich)
   Carol says to Rich sharply, “It’s always about you. You’re so selfish. You never consider Janice or me (their autistic 11-year old)…only yourself. You never think about me anymore.”

   (Rich backpedals from starting the conversation and shifts his posture away from Carol saying): “Okay. Okay. It’s really not that important. I get it.”

   (Speaking to Rich, the counselor lowers her voice, slows her pace, and asks): “Rich, when Carol said, ‘It’s always about you. You’re so selfish…’ you said, ‘Okay. Okay. It’s really not that important. I get it.’ You got really quiet and then withdrew what you’d brought up with Carol. What happened for you when you heard Carol raise her voice and say, ‘It’s always about you. You’re so selfish?’”

   (or the Counselor could say)

   (Speaking to Rich, the counselor says in a soft voice): “With how challenging Janice (11-year old) can be, Rich, you deal with her tantrums by getting quiet, which leaves Carol feeling alone and panicky. She deals with your quietness by getting angry which then leaves you feeling hurt and rejected. The quieter you become, the louder Carol gets. Even as she says in an angry tone, “It’s all about you… you become quiet and withdrawn. Do you see this?…”

2. (Bob & Marilyn)
   (Marilyn): “What happened to us? We used to have so much fun…unlike now.”

   (Bob): “Don’t go there.”

   (Marilyn): “I live here.”

   (Bob): “I can see that. You’re always complaining. We have kids, careers. We have to live in reality.”

   (Marilyn): “Oh, give me a break. The Smiths are always going on dates and have 4 young kids. How did we get so boring? You take life way too seriously.”

   (Counselor to Marilyn): “Marilyn, let me imagine what you’re feeling, but I’m going to do it a little different. I’m going to turn your criticisms back into desires and add a little acknowledgement. May I speak as you?...If I were you, I’d say, ‘Bob, I miss you. I long for the days when we used to go on daytrips and fun dates…and I get upset when I compare those days to where we are now in life. I know that our children take a lot of our time. And we work two full-time jobs. It’s not the same. And I know that my anger and complaining is wrong. I know I do this sometimes. But I miss you…do you feel the same way?’ Now I’m making all this up. But what fit for you, Marilyn?”
Table Discussion (continued)

3. (Bill and Karen)

(Counselor): “Guys, let’s end our time having maybe the most important conversation we’ve had all hour. Let’s go to our heavenly Father in prayer. Remember, we can’t do this without his help. Bill, would you pray for Karen? She shared how incredibly tempting it is for her to ‘knife’ you when she’s scared that you’re going to leave her. She’s learning that this just pushes you away and hurts you in the most tender place. Would you pray for her to turn in gentleness and humility when she’s scared and trying to get your attention?

And Karen, would you pray for Bill. He shared that when he feels unwanted and rejected, like “the only Black man in a white town,” would you pray that he would flee the temptation to abandon you and the kids? Would you pray that he wouldn’t give way to that familiar temptation to survive and to survive by going it alone, on his own?

And please make sure to give thanks for one another. You have so much to be thankful to the Lord for just from what each of you have shared this past hour. Bill, you’re becoming more committed, and Karen, you’re become more gentle.

Bill, would you start us off. I’ll finish praying after Karen.”
Sessions to be covered today

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Session 4: Fight Patterns & Styles
(Moving Between - Interpersonal temptations)

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Session 4: Fight Patterns & Styles
(Moving Between-Interpersonal Temptations)

Insight

- Good marriages require **productive conflicts** in order to grow.
- But conflict, for couples that enter marriage counseling, **has not been productive**...over many years.

Predictable patterns of conflict

- **Natural Pursuers:** Are sensitive to and fighting for connection and closeness and purity in the relationship.
  - Attuned to problems and sensitive issues under the surface of a relationship and have the courage to address them and move towards others.
  - Downside: moving towards can quickly morph into moving against or attacking as well.
  - Provokes the other person and triggers more defensiveness and almost guaranteeing his withdrawing: the exact opposite of what she desires.
  - Moving against can take the shape of:
    - Complaining
    - Demanding
    - Criticizing/Blaming/Attacking
    - Raging
    - Despising/Contending

- **Natural Withdrawers:** Are sensitive to and fighting to protect the relationship and maintain safety (loving kindness) in the marriage.
  - Trying to minimize conflict and restore peace and wellbeing to the marriage. They’re cued into harshness, hostility, and any lack of reassurance. Creating space and suppressing thoughts/emotions are ways they deal with feeling overwhelmed, criticized, inadequate, or out-of-control emotionally.
  - Downside: moving away from danger can quickly morph into disengaging and avoiding.
  - Provokes the other person and triggers more fear and desperation almost guaranteeing criticism and anger with his wife: the exact opposite of what he desires.
Can take the shape of:
- Disengaging/Becoming Quiet/Pulling Inside
- Placating/Appeasing
- Defending/Justifying
- Distancing/Disconnecting/Disappearing/Stonewalling

**Insight: One Cues the Other**

- Pursuing - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - Withdrawling
- Complaining - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - Placating/Appeasing
- Attacking/Criticizing/Blaming - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - Defending/Justifying
- Demanding - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - Avoiding/Deflecting

**Pursuing/Attacking (Proverbs 14:1)**

“As for the wise among women, each builds her house, but a foolish woman with her own hands tears it down.”

- The problem is that many pursuers minimize the impact of their words and moods.

**John & Julie Gottman** study marital conflict looking at certain characteristics that either predict a happy marriage or one that ends in divorce. They say:

“The most obvious indicator that this discussion (and this marriage) is not going to go well is the way it begins. [The wife] immediately becomes negative and accusatory...[she may have legitimate reasons to feel deep frustration toward her husband. But the way she expresses herself will be a major roadblock to resolving their differences...96 percent of the time you can predict the outcome of a conversation based on the first three minutes of the fifteen-minute interaction! A harsh start-up simply dooms you to failure.” (the Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work, 31-32)

- Growth happens when the pursuing spouses starts to see and take seriously their anger and destructive words/moods & approaches the other in humble, gentle, vulnerability.
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Withdrawing/Distancing (Proverbs 18:1)

“The one who separates himself seeks his own desire (LXX makes “excuses”); against all sound judgment (LXX “at all times”) he starts a quarrel (lit. bares his teeth).”

• The problem is that this is a major part of the conflict.
  ➢ Make no mistake; it is aggressive and threatening.
  ➢ Growth happens when a withdrawer sees this selfish ambition in withdrawing and moves towards and engages and reconnects with his wife when tempted to pull in/away.

Parable of a Man Who Had 2 Sons (Luke 15) Example
Table Discussion

Which direction do you typically move in conflict (toward/against or away)? Answer the following questions to get a bead on your instinctive direction:

When my husband/wife and I are arguing:

• I often react by (list some of your actions):

• My husband/wife often responds to me by (list some of their actions):

• When my husband/wife responds to me in this way, underneath the anger and frustration, I often feel:

• When I’m in this place, I see myself as:

• When I’m seeing myself in this light, I long for him/her to:

• When I respond the way I normally do in conflict, underneath the anger and frustration, my husband/wife probably feels:

• When I act the way I normally do in conflict, I would imagine that my husband/wife sees him/herself as:

• When he/she is seeing him/herself in this light, he/she longs for me to:
3 Conflict Patterns/Roles

1) **Pursue – Withdraw** (most common and most ensnaring)

2) **Attack – (Counter) Attack** This is where a couple gets hooked into mutual blaming. There’s blaming and blame shifting. Typically this happens when the more withdrawing partner gets his/herself backed into a corner.

3) **Withdraw – Withdraw** (pursuer is giving up in defeat/discouragement and may even be grieving the relationship) This is the most dangerous b/c it indicates that the marriage is on the ropes and divorce is nearby.

But what happens in a **MORE DISTRESSED MARRIAGE** is that these patterns become habitual, ingrained, and permanent ways of relating to one another. And the couple starts to live in alienation, anger, distance, and distrust.
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Session 5: Kneeling (Moving Inward)

In the last Table Discussion, I asked you to think not only about your and your spouse’s movements in conflict but also your experience, emotions, and longings underneath the frustration inherent to conflict.

**Question:** Why would I ask you to take a look into your hearts…into a place more delicate, humble, and vulnerable?

**Answer:** Because changing our patterns in conflict requires us not only to look and move between/interpersonally but also within—inwardly.

Remember: our one flesh marital union is a reflection of our union with Christ—it’s something deep and mysterious, unchanging.

- Who we are is wrapped up in who Christ is.
- He is in us and we are in him.
- How we feel about ourselves is deeply affected by how he thinks about us.

In the same way, when God joins a husband and wife together in one flesh union through marriage:

- Who he is, is now wrapped up in who she is.
- How she feels about herself is deeply impacted by how he feels about her.

**Problem:** When a couple engages in sinful and destructive conflict patterns of attacking and withdrawing, they are no longer abiding in Christ or one another. Their conflict tears the vine from the branch and makes dependence, reliance, and intimacy—everything necessary for communion—both with God and each other—impossible.

**The work of counseling** is to take a couple from being high up on the Escalator of Desire/Fear (which is a place of distance and alienation) down into a humbler place of desire and candor and connection/abiding with each other. This is where we move in an inward direction.

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**Proverbs 20:5**

“The counsel in a person’s heart is deep waters, but an understanding person draws it out.”

- “Deep waters” in a Jewish context, were waters of the sea…something they were unfamiliar and uncomfortable with.
Major Insight: But the truth is that accessing and sharing this “deep water” in our heart can be a key to transforming a quarrel/fight into a conflict that leads to understanding, intimacy, and redemptive love.

Table Discussion

Read the following common experiences for pursuers and withdrawers. As a group, uncover 1 or 2 deeper desires/longings that each has corresponding to these painful emotions in conflict/marriage.

What **pursuers** often share when you draw out their deep waters:
- Feel alone/lonely/isolated
- Fear being abandoned
- Feel unwanted/unvalued/unimportant/unappreciated/unlovable
- Desperate and fearful

What **withdrawers** often share when you draw out their deep waters:
- Fear of failure—not measuring up
- Feeling rejected/unwanted
- They feel inadequate—providing, parenting, communicating
- Feel like a disappointment…can never please or satisfy
- Overwhelmed and numb

Application:
To access deeper waters—to get to the heart of desire, ask:
- “What was the lowest point for you in the conflict?”
- “What was the worst moment, the worst feeling for you in this conflict?”
- “What was the deepest emotion/pain you felt in the conflict?”

Country Drive Metaphor

- Marriage counseling can be like **Kneeling** at important intersections, bends in the road, and dead ends and giving a couple a signpost which points them in the right direction. As couples start to become more familiar with the countryside, they start to navigate their conflicts differently—much more lovingly, selflessly, and knowledgeably. Instead of fighting, they start to have productive and intimate conversations that can be very fruitful.

Many of us are familiar with **Reflective Listening** and **Paraphrasing** where a counselor listens actively and reflects or paraphrases back to the counselee in an intentional way so that the person feels that they’ve really been heard AND that the counselor is thinking and steering the conversation wisely. (We don’t just parrot back words. We take what they’re communicating and move it in certain, intentional directions.)
Well, what would it look like not just to speak reflectively back to a couple but to actively speak for the couple? Instead of saying, “You feel like…” you’d speak as that person by saying, “I feel like…”

Kneeling

- At important junctures in the counseling hour, when they start to struggle or lose traction, I’ll get out of my chair, ask for permission to speak as the husband or wife, and then physically kneel down beside the person…putting my arm right on their armrest.

- I tell them exactly what I’m doing and why. There’s no mystery. I’m going to move in one or more of the three directions for them. (instructional)

- Looking directly at the other spouse, I change the tone/voice to be gentle and slow. (Conflict speeds up…and we’re going to slow things down significantly.)

Point in 3-Directions

- Inward to Outward (confiding in)
- Upward (confessing/acknowledging)
- Between (seeing & hearing & prioritizing the other’s interests)

Reverse the instinctive (sinful/adversarial) direction

- Against (accusing/blaming)
- Away (defensive/justifying)(erecting a wall not opening a door)
- Selfish Ambition (blind to you & obsessed with me)

Tell them what you’re about to do so that they can learn to do this themselves

- “I’m going to get a little more personal and share more vulnerable fears. If I were speaking as you, I might say…”
- “Let me recast your criticism into a desire. How about…”
- “I’m afraid that if you speak this way, your wife will not be able to hear you. And I think you have something far too important…that she must know about you…but don’t make it impossible for her to hear you. I’d say…”
- “I’m going to speak as you, but I’ll start with acknowledging…which always does something essential in conflict.”
If the tension is high between the couple, we need to **interrupt** the conflict. I typically start with **confession** by acknowledging something the spouse (I’m speaking for) has done that was wrong, hurtful, or offensive. The reason I start with confession is b/c both have their walls up and the only way to a constructive conversation is by opening a door. Confession lifts the bolt on the door and disarms the other spouse by acknowledging that which was personally hurtful or offensive.

> “An offended brother is like a strong city (picture an ancient walled city), and conflicts are like the bolt of a citadel.” (only can be opened from the inside)  
> Proverbs 18:19

Confession/acknowledgment is the **antidote** to a destructive/escalating conflict. When you observe a quarrel/fight, **confession is completely absent**. Both are blaming the other and defending/justifying their point of view. Confession is often the “healing/gentle” word that turns away wrath and soothes or comforts the listener (Pro 15:1). It restores the offended spouse to a good sense/temper.

- In the very same talk-turn, I **confide** something intimate (desire, fear, insecurity, “deep waters”) which is (hopefully) deeply satisfying to the person I’m speaking for. So I not only unbolt the door but invite the other spouse inside. (I confess/acknowledge 1st and confide/share intimately 2nd.)

- If a couple is **NOT HEATED** and tensions are **NOT HIGH** but the conversation is heading towards criticizing, blaming, and attacking (**moving upward on the desire escalator**), I reverse the direction of the escalator and replace the demands, complaints, and accusations **with self-revealing desires, fears, and doubts.** (confiding humbly and vulnerably)
Table Discussion

1. Act out (choose two willing actors) the following transcript and notice how the counselor moves to turn a set of complaints and criticisms into a more fruitful engagement. (Read explanation below transcript.)

2. Next, one person volunteer to “kneel” next to Bob and speak as him (but move in a different direction than this counselor did).

3. Afterward, have “Bob” discuss what it felt like to have the counselor speak for him (both in the transcript and when the volunteer improvised).

Bob (to Rosie): I’m still angry with you about this morning. I got up early and rushed about the house getting ready for church, walked the dog, and did up the dishes…all so we could get to church a little early…and then I had to wait and wait and wait for you to get yourself ready. I don’t know why we don’t just take separate cars to church, and you can just walk in whenever you get there.

Rosie: My goodness! We were barely 5-minutes late! Give me a break! it’s Sunday!

Bob: You’ve got to be joking. Get a better watch! While your at it, start thinking about other people, not just yourself. You’re so irresponsible.

Counselor (moving to kneel next to Bob to speak as him): Rosie, you can see I’m pretty angry…but if I’m a bit more vulnerable I’d say…I kinda take it personally when we’re late. I don’t feel very important or special to you when you’re delayed. I was really trying to serve you this morning…and when you were late, it felt like you didn’t notice or care…My dad almost always came late to my soccer games as a kid…I always felt like it was a drag for him to come watch me play…maybe this is why being on time is so important to me…even as I say this, it seems a little silly to mention.

Explanation
Whenever you hear a demand, criticism, or accusatory statement, assume that there is an underlying desire or fear or insecurity further down the escalator. Knowing this person (what they’ve already shared with you) and your own imagination (knowing how deep and powerful one flesh union is) ad lib for them. If you come anywhere close to what’s really there, the spouse will correct you and take over in the same manner. If you completely miss the mark, they’ll take you in a different direction that is almost always fruitful.
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• As you do it for them, next to them, close to them, it’s easy to convince them that this is the way to connect in the middle of conflict. They both experience it en vivo (live).

• It’s an intimate experience for the person you’re speaking as.
  ➢ You’re so close to them.
  ➢ You understand and inhabit their desires, fears, and insecurities.
  ➢ You gently touch or open up parts of their heart in a kind way.
  ➢ If a person is really upset, I’ll often tenderly/briefly touch their knee as a reassurance.
  ➢ It’s amazing what drawing alongside, getting lower than him/her, and trying to inhabit their world does to YOU as a counselor. It creates a bond and depth of empathy that is hard to replicate. Now I really get this person’s struggle.

• It’s compelling. It’s attractive. It’s satisfying when they hear you say what they can’t say…yet. They don’t even have a vision or words for confiding, confessing, and listening to each other on this level.

• Modeling by speaking as them is a powerful way for them to start to catch the vision of what redemptive, extraverted love is…without feeling confronted or embarrassed.

• As you improvise for a person, not only are you giving them words to express their hearts in a loving manner, but the other person is listening and learning. The other spouse is starting to see what the other’s sensibilities are, what their deep longings are, and what they do that deeply impacts the other.

• Sometime a couple is in no mood to be speak in a humble and peace-loving manner. They may not exit their adversarial and angry quarrel. But this does not mean that they have not been moved by your attempts to help them. When they are unwilling to soften in counseling, they may do so outside of the session. When you meet with them again, you come to find that what you attempted to do bore fruit outside of the session after they calmed down.

• Always check with them to see where you’re on and where you’re off.
  ➢ “Of course, I’m just making this up as I go. But where am I right and where am I wrong?”
  ➢ “Am I even in the right ballpark? Something feels a bit off…I just can’t quite get there.”
  ➢ “I’m speculating here, but am I on to something?”
Table Discussion

Read through session 13 before play-acting session 14. Then discuss the final questions.

Previous Session (#13) Ending:

The previous session ended in a difficult place. Andrea went ended in a place of “All I’m asking for is…” and “You never accept me. I can never please you. You should’ve married someone else.” Joe responded by attacking her for not having any aspirations and saying that they would go nowhere in life if he did what Andrea wanted.

I intervened quickly and spoke as Joe by saying something like, “Joe, I’m afraid if you approach Andrea like this she won’t be able to hear you. All you’ll do is hurt her. And maybe you’re so angry right now you don’t care.” I knelt next to Joe and re-crafted his accusation into a desire/fears and invitation to Andrea.

But Andrea wouldn’t have any of it. She was hurt and angry and ignored (I thought) how I spoke for Joe. She went right back into, “I can’t please you…it’s never good enough…etc.” So I acknowledged that she couldn’t hear this right now b/c she was so hurt by, upset, and stuck on what Joe had said.

So I knelt next to her and simply spoke as her saying something like, “I’m really angry at you right now, Joe. You hurt me. But when I calm down a bit, I might be able to hear how much you want me to dream with you and work towards life goals.”

We prayed together and ended the session (in a rough place).

Start of Session (#14):

(Andrea): she’s the 1st to talk and reports that she has been thinking since our last appointment about Joe’s dreams and aspirations. She says, “I don’t want to hold you back from pursuing your dreams. I want to dream with you and go there with you.” (Remarkable to me, Andrea has spent a lot of time thinking about how I reframed Joe’s angry attack.)

(Joe): Joe immediately changes the climate/tone of the conversation that Andrea started and responds with some resentment: “Wait. I don’t get it. What you’re saying is totally different than what you said last week. Last week you said, “I can never please you. You’re always angry with me. You never accept me for who I am. I am who I am, and you can take me or leave me as is.” (Joe communicates distrust and a “You’re changing the story!” confusion that shows he’s still angry.)
Table Discussion (continued)

(Counselor): I step in to reframe Andrea’s change in stance, b/c clearly she’s shifted from hurt, bitter, and self-justifying anger to seeing and joining Joe in his dreams and aspirations. I kneel next to Joe and say: “It’s disorienting, isn’t it, Joe. Andrea really heard you and has been thinking all week about YOUR dreams, YOUR desires. And now she’s coming to you saying, ‘I want this too. I want to dream with you and go somewhere with you together.’ It’s remarkable that even though you were harsh with her, she still heard you. Joe the way you spoke to Andrea last week was very painful. Your words were really biting. Do you remember that?” (My attempt is to reframe Andrea’s shift in a Phil 2:1-4 movement, to praise her indirectly, and to send a clear message that this is a very gracious thing, not something to distrust. I move straight into what’s been on my mind all week from last session.)

(Joe): “Yeah. It’s not just Andrea. It’s a bigger problem. I can be really blunt and to the point. I’ve always been this way.”

(Counselor): I want to keep the focus here, turn the heat up, and not gloss over his sharp criticism from last week. “Joe being blunt and candid is good, but you went beyond blunt to being hurtful. You said, ‘If I took up your desires, we’ll go nowhere. You don’t have any more dreams. All you want to do is sit on the couch and do nothing.’ That’s more than candid. It’s mean.”

(Joe): “Yeah. I don’t know how to do it right. I try to get a response and so I take out a jackhammer. I don’t know how to get a response without a jack hammer.”

(Counselor): I smile and laugh, “That’s sure a funny way to get Andrea to hear and respond to you. ‘Here, Andrea. Let me hammer you and I can’t understand why you put up a shield. I stick you with sword thrusts hoping you’ll put your shield down and respond to me. (Lowering my voice and leaning in towards Joe) You so want Andrea to hear you and open up to you…so you stick her with words that cut?’”

(Joe): Joe laughs and made a joke communicating he saw the absurdity in his harsh approach. This seems to penetrate.

(Counselor): I ask if I could speak as Joe (even though I’ve been on my knees the entire time) and what I was going to add was a bit of acknowledgement and vulnerability. “Andrea, I see now what I’m doing. I want so badly for you to see me and for you to open your heart to me…but I do it so painfully to you. I can see why you’d want to keep your shield up. I’m really sorry. I hurt you last week. What I heard was you saying that you didn’t care about me, about going somewhere together. All I heard was, ‘Take me or leave me! I don’t care about loving or pleasing you or doing anything together.’” (I move from desire to confession to explaining his anger in a way that invites Andrea into the discussion rather than blaming her and pushing away with accusation.)

(Joe): All of Joe’s frustration is gone…this was very satisfying and true It’s what he wants to say but can’t yet with this level of humility, openness, and courage. I’ve sown in peace in 3 directions. I finish the interaction by ask him to speak to Andrea from this part of his heart but in his own way (which he does.)

(Andrea): Andrea responds to Joe’s humble tone and follows suit, “You’re not entirely wrong, Joe. I do put my shield up. I feel like such a failure, like I always mess up and disappoint you. And it’s not just you. I feel like this a lot of time. I am so sensitive to criticism. I wish I weren’t. I need you to praise me more to tell me when you’re happy with me. But all I get from you…”

(Counselor): At this point I jumped in…I don’t HAVE to…but since Andrea is drifting towards making a demand and criticizing…I’m going to bump her a bit. I say, “Andrea, let me turn your demand into a humble desire and drop the plow just a few inches. Can I do that?”

(Andrea): Andrea smiles knowingly and agrees. She instantly realizes she’s heading up the escalator from desire into need and demand and criticism.
Table Discussion (continued)

(Counselor): speaking for Andrea, “Joe, I don’t know why I need your praise and to please you so much... but it means everything to me when you’re happy with me. I’m so sensitive to your disappointment. And sometimes I can put up my shield and stay behind my shield... but please don’t misread the shield. I’m afraid you’re going to hurt me. Your criticisms, even constructive criticisms. It must feel like I really don’t care and am going to do whatever I want to do regardless of what you think... that stubbornness you sense is not just stubborn independence. It’s fear. I’m protecting myself because I long to be pleasing to you. Please understand this. I’m not trying to hold you away with my shield.”

(I do a lot here... maybe too much. My goal is to change her criticism into a desire/request, to vulnerably share how much his pleasure means to her, and give him and her insight into the shield dynamic.)

Andrea affirmed that everything I just said was spot on and jokes that she wants to rewind and hit the play button.

Discussion Questions

• Where do we see Andrea and Joe personally suffering? What does each do that actually prevents (or at least makes it extremely difficult for) the other person from seeing, understanding, and taking up that suffering as her/his own and caring for the other right there in that tender, delicate place?

• Does this de-escalation seem too easy to you? What do you think made it possible?
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Session 6: Prayer with Couples in Marriage Counseling (Moving Up)
Session 6: “Prayer with Couples in Marriage Counseling” (Moving Up)

One of the most conflicted couples I have ever worked with taught me a valuable lesson about prayer during a counseling session. The couple, married for nearly forty years, spent the majority of their marriage in chronic and unyielding conflict, accompanying depression, and without any significant periods of peace. Their descriptions of life together made my stomach churn.

In an early session, the wife said she had only seen her husband cry once. She felt nearly no emotional connection with or closeness to him. After working together for six months, I remember being amazed by the husband’s stubborn defensiveness. I could work with him over and over and still he’d come back to, “All I said was…! I don’t understand why she gets so hurt over…! I’m not as bad as…” He couldn’t let her in or hear her appeals no matter how she approached him. His heart seemed numb and impenetrable to her desperation, tears, and pleas. He experienced her sadness and hurt as rejection and accusation. Every session was exhausting. It was slow, hard work that would, at any moment, lead to volatility if I let my foot off the brake even for a second.

In one difficult session where we had already gone over time, I asked them to pray together, to pray for each other. I acknowledged it would be hard. But, of all times to pray, this was the time to seek God’s mercies, and to genuinely give thanks for each other. We would do this together. I gave them clear direction about specific ways to pray for the other, which I took from what they had shared earlier. I gave them as much support and scaffolding as I could. I reminded them, “Remember, never pray for your spouse without giving sincere thanks to God for something genuine in your spouse. That’s the rule.” (I get this from Philippians 1:3–4, 4:4–8.) I expected them to protest, but they both wearily bowed their heads.

I had the husband pray first because he was the more criticized, quiet, and withdrawn spouse. His wife doubted the genuineness of his faith. Having her pray first would be a mistake, I believed, because it might intimidate and paralyze him. And she might be tempted to use prayer to wound rather than bless him.

As he began to pray, it seemed physically challenging for him. The words and will were there, but as his words came out it sounded like a noose was tightening around his neck. Tearfully he choked out a halting prayer, giving thanks for and praising his wife in an area of real sensitivity to him and of giftedness to his wife. Instead of retorting, “All I said was…” he vulnerably acknowledged to God what she’d been pleading with him to hear.

I couldn’t believe my ears! He begged God to help him convince his wife that he deeply loved her and show real, honest sympathy for her. He asked God to help him understand and grow in an area where his wife was stronger and more gifted. (This was the issue that
had led to the previous day’s argument.) He asked God to help him learn from her. It wasn’t a long prayer. But it was the most powerful moment of our time together.

I didn’t look, but I imagined his wife’s mouth was wide open. In a matter of seconds, his impenetrable emotional wall crumbled as he and his wife went before their Father in prayer. For the first time all hour he showed his wife that he had let her in and understood. In a very simple but sincere way, he confessed his failure and weakness.

The Lord used this man’s sixty-second prayer. His wife saw she had penetrated his heart. He had heard her. He was moved by her before God.

What would his wife now pray? I’m quite certain she scrapped what she had in mind before he prayed. Immediately the animosity and pressure drained from her voice as she earnestly gave thanks that God had given her a husband who took this tender issue so seriously and wanted to grow. She pleaded with God to help her husband in this weakness.

Instead of leaving angry and entrenched, this couple left humbly and compassionately. They were no longer fighting against each other. They were fighting for the good of one another. God covered in grace what had shaped up to be a hard end to our session.

This isn’t an isolated experience. Honestly.

It’s taken me many years of doing marriage counseling to reach one simple conclusion. It seems so obvious now, so basic. Yet no one ever told me that helping couples pray with and for each other could be far more powerful and helpful than praying for them.

Don’t misunderstand: praying for those we counsel (in their presence and absence) is an essential part of a biblical counseling ministry. In every session, I start and end with earnest and specific prayer for these dear couples. If counseling is going to be Christian, than we must, in prayer, acknowledge that our power and ability to change is impotent apart from Christ’s help and Spirit (John 15:5).

But we cannot miss the importance of empowering couples to pray with and for each other. We should not underestimate their own prayers for each other or acquiesce to the false belief that couples in conflict cannot or will not pray with and for each other.

As I make it an in-session priority for a couple to pray with and for each other, the deep desire that they’ve all but given up on—to go to the Lord together as husband and wife—starts to become a reality. Many enter counseling with deep discouragement following years of spiritual independence from one another. They have not found a way to care for each other in this area and feel defeated. Teaching them to pray together for each other changes that.

And yet it’s hard to do. Why is that?
Recently, a friend catalyzed my thoughts about prayer. He said prayer is the “test of all biblical counseling. It is the definition of biblical counseling. We are connecting the promises of Christ to this person and to the difficulties in their life.” As a marriage counselor I began to wonder if prayer might be the test of Christian marriage counseling as well. My friend’s observation caused me to ponder the implications of helping couples to pray with and for each other right in the counseling room. I wondered what would happen in their relationship if one persistent goal for each session was to help a couple learn to pray together. What would happen if I helped them understand that sharing their hearts and listening well to each other are valuable not just for living in harmony but, more importantly, for shaping their prayers for each other?

In 1 Peter 3:7, God opens his heart to reveal a central aim and intention for Christian couples—to pray together and to do so effectively. “Husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way…so that your prayers may not be hindered.” God’s desire for marriage is for it to be a place of powerful prayer. But praying together can feel like an imposition, a burden, or an afterthought. Counselors, and those in counseling alike, struggle to pray with their spouses. None of us is exempt from the obstacles to prayer. But God means marital prayer to be a delightful and effective joint project.

If God’s aim for marriage is not simply for a husband and wife to get along happily, but to pray effectively together, how do we help couples take responsibility for this project? How do we transfer this responsibility and movement to the couple? The answer is not by doing it for them but by doing it with them. We do them a disservice when we’re the only ones praying when we’re together. It makes more sense for us to help them intercede with and for each other—bearing each other’s burdens, cares, and distress and taking them to our Lord together. (I’ll end with practical suggestions in the conclusion.)

When a husband and wife take on this work, and most do when we make the case for prayer from the first time we meet, then how they relate starts to change. We enable a couple to do what God has designed and destined them to do together. Instead of pointing to and encouraging prayer (i.e., assigning them the homework of praying together outside of session), help them to go to the Lord right now, before they leave our presence.

Without being prompted, one husband mused at the start of our session, “Praying for each other at the end of each conversation seems so much more natural. It’s not really an assignment or homework but something that comes organically after we’ve shared our hearts with each other. Now I know my wife well enough to pray much more compassionately for her.” This man is experiencing prayer as more of a consummation of intimacy than as a burdensome task or duty. Prayer completes an intimate exchange. As we help a couple submit to each other—opening their hearts and beholding what is revealed—we lead them right into caring for each other through prayer. It’s a natural movement from sharing with and hearing one another to crystallizing our need and desire as we approach our heavenly Father. We end the conversation seeking his mercies.
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Here is where it gets really sweet. As we help a couple do this, we equip them to take up and experience an often neglected and powerful means of grace. God gives us prayer as a gift to strengthen us in faith and love. It strengthens our will to rely upon Christ’s mercies, to forsake selfish ambition and vain conceit, and to grow in loving as we are loved. It establishes communion with God and deepens intimacy with one another. What a joy to help a couple deepen their shared belonging and submission to Christ. What a delight to witness a couple simultaneously strengthen their own union and their union with Christ!

Indeed, helping a struggling couple to pray for each other is powerful. Recently, I asked a wife why this was true for her. She said, “When we pray together, we cannot fake it. We cannot come with ulterior, selfish motives. God knows what’s in our hearts, and it’s humbling to go into his presence together.” Going before a holy and mighty God cleanses our thoughts and humbles our hearts. Prayer is the context for marital essentials—humbly and honest confession.

Another wife of thirty-four years had intentionally avoided praying with her husband for their entire marriage because she didn’t trust him. Prayer is intimate and vulnerable. Praying in counseling was uncomfortable for her, although it was getting easier. Exploring her discomfort, she said, “When I pray with my husband, I can’t harbor bitterness and resentment at the same time. This is why it had always been awkward and something I wanted to avoid.” Coming into the Lord’s presence with her husband opened her eyes to see, confess, and deal with her grudge against him. She paused reflectively and recognized, “Maybe I haven’t forgiven him.” Prayer is its own confrontation. The Holy Spirit speaks when we turn to him together.

Make no mistake. Facilitating a couple’s prayers is not a gimmick; it’s not a ploy. Seeing prayer as a counseling “tool” cheapens the reality of what couple praying is about. It’s a means of grace that God gives counselors and couples alike, but one that we so often miss, if not overlook altogether, when we pray for but not with the couples we counsel.

I’ll close by providing guidelines for a couple’s prayer. Depending upon the couple, consider how active you need to be in framing and orchestrating their prayer.

1. Early in counseling, caution a couple from misusing prayer. Prayer should never be a tool to have the final word of a conflict. In the same way, they should not see prayer as a way to speak indirectly to the other person. These tactics will undermine intimacy and erode trust. Prayer is speaking to the almighty, holy God.
2. Establish this rule of thumb (and antidote to conflict) that the apostle Paul provides: always genuinely give thanks for the other person for a specific quality. It’s preferable to focus on something from that very counseling conversation (Phil 1:3–4, 4:6).
3. Briefly give guidance about what to pray for. They don’t need to pray about all four areas in one prayer. Have them focus on one of the following:
   a. Acknowledge and confess failure, sin, and flaws.
   b. Pray for yourself to grow in specific forms of love for your spouse.
c. Intercede compassionately for something tender and delicate that your spouse has just humbly shared.

d. Pray for something you both need for your marriage.

4. Consider directing the quieter, more intimidated spouse to pray first.

5. If it is appropriate, give them permission to hold hands as they pray. I’m always moved when I open my eyes after the “Amen” and see them spontaneously holding hands.

6. Model the type of praying you are encouraging them to do at the start and conclusion of your time together (Phil 4:9). Always ask God for help with specific requests. Remember, the couple is listening (John 11:41–42)! They need a vision for what their marriage is to become.

   a. Pray for God to transform their union so that they increasingly imitate and reflect Christ’s union with his bride (Eph 5:32).

   b. Ask that this couple’s marriage would be a place where others (children, neighbors, the church) would see God revealed in their self-giving love for each other (1 John 4:11–12).

   c. Consistently pray that their love and thoughtful care would be the soil for the other’s growth in holiness and where the other meets Christ (Eph 5:26–27).

   d. Pray pointedly about where this couple is challenged and growing.

   e. Use prayer to give thanks for ways you see Christ-likeliness reflected in and through them.