

INTRODUCTION: THE HIGH CALLING OF MARRIAGE

Most of my life I grew up thinking of what I might gain (or lose) in a commitment of marriage. This line of thinking led me to evaluate marriage and women in terms of what I could get from such a relationship. I would always ask the question, “What’s in it for me?” As long as I focused on what I was gaining from a relationship, I had a hard time finding satisfaction. When I was the focus of a relationship, I always had more to pursue because I was never satisfied. Satisfaction cannot be found in a self-centered life or a self-centered relationship. When I finally began to look at marriage from God’s perspective, I saw it as a calling to a God-centered and other-centered life.

My attitude toward women also changed as I began to view marriage as a calling. My focus shifted from finding the right person to *becoming* the right person. I began to consider what God required of me as a husband instead of what I required of a woman before I would want her to be my wife.

The first question I ask a couple when they are considering marriage is this: “*Where are you in your relationship with God?*” I ask this question first because I am convinced that a person can only love to the extent he or she has experienced love. Love does not originate within us. We respond to the love we receive from others. In regard to love, we are more like the moon than the sun. We reflect the love we have received.

If the only love a person has experienced is from a human source, as good as that love may have been, that is the best love he or she will be able to reflect to another. The Scripture says “We love Him because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). If I have received, responded, and submitted to God’s costly love extended to me in Christ Jesus, then the Spirit works to build this love in me (Gal. 5:22–23). As I receive from God I can extend to others. The first other in this world for a married couple is his or her spouse! As I draw near to God and receive from him through the Son and the Spirit I can then extend to others. By the way, forgiveness is treated the same way in the Bible!

The second question I ask the couple contemplating marriage is: “*What convinces you that God is calling you together as husband and wife?*” Most people expect the question to be, “Why do you want to get married?” This latter question is often the question they answer when I ask the second question. I usually have to reiterate the idea of being called together rather than merely wanting to be married. Whether I believe the couple should marry

is not the point. What is important is that the couple be convinced God is calling them together as husband and wife! The man needs to be convinced God is calling him to be the husband of the woman. The woman needs to be convinced God is calling her to be the wife of the man.

I do not know what marriage will hold for the couple. They do not know what marriage will hold for them either. I will not be present in their marriage. If God is calling them together, he will be with them and will remain sovereign in their married life. They may have surprises in their marriage. These surprises, however, are not surprises to God! He will always remain with the couple in the marriage relationship. In Ecclesiastes 4:12 we read, “A threefold cord is not quickly broken.” With the Lord, a marriage between a man and woman can be that “threefold cord.”

How do you know if God is calling you to marry someone? I knew that God was calling me to marriage when I experienced the love he gave me for the woman I was dating. He gave me the desire to meet her needs at the expense of my own. I wanted to be her husband and care for her as my wife. I have not perfectly loved my wife in our marriage! But, I know that the desire to love her came from God and did not come from within me. This desire gave me confidence to know that God was involved and calling me to this marriage. It gave me the energy to move into the commitment of marriage. I was convinced God was working within me and calling us together. This conviction was confirmed when this precious woman responded to my invitation to be my wife. She, too, was convinced that God was calling us together. **It has been good to look back on what brought us together when we have struggles with one another.** It is good to remember that God has called us to be husband and wife. I come as a package deal, with strengths and weaknesses. So does my wife. It is a joy and challenge to move toward oneness in our marriage.

Why go through premarital counseling? There is a danger in becoming overwhelmed with the decisions a wedding brings. The wedding itself can steal precious time and energy from preparing for your marriage. **You need to take time to nurture your relationship as a couple during the engagement.** I am often challenged with the statement, “If you are in love you should not have to work at your relationship.” In fact, the exact opposite is true. It is precisely because something is important to you that you work to better understand and appreciate it!

Marriage takes two people willing to engage in the relationship and work toward oneness. It is important to consider your marriage before the wedding rather than after it. Here are some reasons why premarital counseling is valuable:

1. It will help you prepare for your *marriage*—not just your wedding. A great wedding will not hold a marriage together.
2. It will enable you to discuss issues that need to be addressed, and are easier to address, before you commit your lives together at your wedding.
3. It will help you come to a common goal of oneness to work toward in marriage.
4. It will give you tools to create an environment where oneness can flourish.
5. It will help you see things from your spouse's perspective. Anticipating your marriage together will help you grow in this skill.
6. It will help you prepare for, if not avoid, the common pitfalls many couples experience in marriage.

Preparation can only help. The more you put into preparing for your marriage the more you will get out of it!

It is most helpful to go through These lessons separately. Think through the Scriptures and questions individually and then come together to discuss your thoughts. This is why having individual books will be helpful. It is most important to discuss these issues together. I recommend meeting with someone you respect who can help you prepare for marriage by walking you through your premarital counseling, such as a pastor or counselor. If those options are not accessible, you might ask a couple with a solid marriage relationship to help you go through the workbook and prepare for your life together.

Each session of this workbook will cover a particular area of marriage. Within each session you will find introductory remarks, Scriptural references, potential trouble spots, references to concepts and books by others, and discussion questions. These are all intended to prepare you for the issues you will face in marriage and to equip you with tools to handle these issues when they arise.

What about the physical aspect of your relationship? Many couples struggle with physical intimacy during dating and the engagement period. God created sexual intimacy for our good and for the safety and security of marriage. His instruction concerning this matter is for our benefit! God has our best inter-

est in mind. You may be tempted to become sexually intimate, rationalize, and give in to the temptation because you are planning to marry. However, sexual intimacy outside of the covenant of marriage will confuse your relationship. It will often cause more confusion for the woman. Physical intimacy can actually prevent you from working to build an emotional oneness in your relationship because it creates a lack of trust!

In the Song of Solomon 8:4 we read, “O daughters of Jerusalem, that ye stir not up, nor awake my love [physical intimacy] until he please [the covenant of marriage].” As your emotional and spiritual oneness grows, your desire to express that oneness physically will likely increase. You need a plan to handle that temptation. Boundaries are helpful (i.e., avoid unstructured time alone in the late evening; avoid arousing sexual desires; avoid lying down together).

Session 1

THE *BIBLICAL* PERSPECTIVE OF *MARRIAGE*

The reason for discussing the purpose of marriage is to anticipate the commitment you will be making in marriage. Your perspective of what marriage is and of what a husband and wife should be comes from your parents, family, other relationships you have seen, and perhaps, what you have read in God's Word. You and your fiancé have had different experiences. Hopefully your separate perspectives on marriage will overlap a great deal. You need to look at your different perspectives and place them through the grid of God's Word to filter out wrong attitudes and ideas and to embrace appropriate attitudes. A common standard from which you are both working is essential. Hopefully it will be consistent with God's Word. The following questions will help you reach this common understanding from which you will build your marriage.

1. Briefly describe a healthy marriage.
2. List three key elements of a good marriage.
3. What is the primary purpose of marriage?
4. Is marriage a contract? Why or why not?
5. What commitment will you make when you take marriage vows?
6. When and where did the institution of marriage originate?

Vows

To keep a vow does not mean to keep from breaking it. If that were the case, marriage vows would be broken the day they were made. This is where a vow differs from a mere promise or resolution. A resolution, once broken, must either be forgotten or made again. But a vow retains its power and validity irrespective of conduct. It is not like the signing of a legal contract and not like any other form of human promise. A person cannot promise to love another person; he can only vow to do so. A vow is, per se, a confession of inadequacy and an automatic calling upon the only adequacy there is, which is the mercy and power of God. From *The*

Mystery of Marriage by Mike Mason ([Sisters: Multnomah, 1985], 115–16).

SCRIPTURAL REFERENCE

Genesis 2:15–25

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think God created us male and female?
2. God instituted marriage in one sentence! What are the three key elements? (Gen. 2:24).
3. What ways should you both “leave” father and mother? Why is this important?
4. When will you have difficulty seeing yourself first as a husband or wife?
5. What does it mean for a man and woman to “be united” in marriage?
6. List some things you can do as a couple to create an environment for this union in your marriage.
7. What does “for two, saith he, shall be one flesh” mean? (see 1 Cor. 6:16).

SCRIPTURAL REFERENCE

Genesis 3:1–21

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Eve's sin appears to be that she doubted God's veracity, that he was honorable, good, and trustworthy. She believed the lie of the serpent (Satan) rather than God. How does this same sin affect you in your relationship with God and others?
2. Adam's sin appears to be one of pride. He did what he wanted rather than obey his Creator. How does pride impact your relationship with God and others?
3. How did this first couple's fall into rebellion against God change their relationship with God and with one another?
4. **What other aspects of the Fall and God's subsequent curse will cause tension and ambiguity in your marriage relationship?**

SCRIPTURAL REFERENCES

The apostle Paul was writing to Christians in the following two passages. He addressed the implications of being loved by God and the results of the Holy Spirit's working in the life of the believer.

Colossians 3:12–17

Galatians 5:22–23

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you see in these two passages?
2. **How is love central to the work of God in the heart of the believer? Where does this love come from?**
3. What virtues from these two passages do you see in your fiancé?

YOUR SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

List some of your similarities and differences below. Consider various areas such as personality, hobbies, interests, strengths, family background, church background, priorities, personal habits, decision making, neatness, need for closure, promptness, drive, education, flexibility, etc.

Similarities	Differences

- 1. Which of these similarities and differences will be the most difficult to deal with in your marriage?**
- 2. What is communicated if you try to change your spouse?**
- 3. Affirmation is the foundation for change. How can you affirm one another in your differences?**
4. How does change occur in your life?