



# **Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage (Part II of V)**

## **“Communication” (Listening Guide)**

*Presentation By:*

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# “Communication”

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**NOTE:** Many people have asked how they can get a copy of the full seminar notebook (a.k.a. mentoring guide or study guide) referenced in this presentation. Summit members can pick up a copy of the notebook in the church office. For those outside the Summit family, you can request a PDF copy from Amy LaBarr (alabarr@summitrdu.com), office administrator over counseling.

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## What Can I Hope to Get From this Seminar?

Whether you are here due to personal need, the needs of others, or for a general interest in the topic, we hope this seminar will benefit you. If we do our job well, parts of this seminar will speak to you personally. There will also be parts that speak to aspects of this subject that are different from your own experience. What follows are **six unavoidable facts** that should help you profit from all of the material you hear (bold faced text taken from Paul Tripp and Tim Lane *How People Change*):

**1. Someone in your life had a problem this week.** That person may be you. Even if you are here for yourself, chances are you know or will know others who struggle in this area. Because we live in a fallen world and have a sin nature, we can be certain that we will battle with sin and suffering in our lives. Because we love people, we can be certain we will be called on to love and assist others in their battle with sin and suffering.

**2. We have everything we need in the Gospel to help that person (2 Peter 1:3).** God has given us Himself, the Gospel, the Bible, and the church and promised they are effective for all things that pertain to life and godliness. Our task as Christians is to grow in our understanding of and ability to skillfully apply these resources to our struggles. These resources are the essence and source of “good advice,” and we hope to play a role in your efforts to apply and disseminate this “good advice.” We do not aim to present new material, but new ways of applying the timeless, eternal truths of the Gospel found in Scripture.

**3. That person will seek help from friends, family members, or pastors before seeking professionals.** Counseling (broadly defined as seeking to offer hope and direction through relationship) happens all the time. We talk with friends over the phone, crying children in their rooms, spouses in the kitchen, fellow church members between services, and have endless conversations with ourselves. We listen to struggles, seek to understand, offer perspective, give advice, and follow up later. This is what the New Testament calls “one-anothering” and something we are all called to do.

**4. That person either got no help, bad help, or biblical, gospel-centered help.** Not all counseling is good counseling. Not all advice that we receive from a Christian (even a Christian counselor) is Christian advice. Too often we are advised to look within for the answers to our problems or told that we are good enough, strong enough, or smart enough in ourselves to overcome. Hopefully you will see today how the Bible calls us to something (rather Someone) better, bigger, and more effective than these messages.

**5. If they did not get meaningful help, they will go elsewhere.** When we do not receive good advice (pointing us to enduring life transformation), we keep looking. We need answers to our struggles. This means that as people find unfulfilling answers they will eventually (by God’s grace) come to a Christian for advice. When they eventually come to you, we hope you will be more prepared because of our time together today.

**6. Whatever help they received, they will use to help others!** We become evangelists for the things that make life better (this is why the Gospel is simply called “Good News”). We quite naturally share the things that we find to be effective. Our prayer for you today is that you will find the material presented effective for your struggles and that you will be so comforted and encouraged by it that it will enable you to be a more passionate and effective ambassador of the Gospel in the midst of “normal” daily conversations.

## Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage Mentoring Series

This seminar is one piece of a five part series of seminars designed to facilitate mentoring relationships for married or engaged couples (one-on-one or in a group setting). Our goal in these seminars is to cover the key subjects that often hinder, but could greatly enhance, a couple's ability to experience all that God intended marriage to be.

We believe that change that lasts happens in relationship. Private change tends to be short-lived change. Living things exposed to light grow. Living things kept in the dark wither. This is why we designed this series to encourage you to give your marriage the light of Christian community by studying these materials with others.

These materials are built upon a central premise – God gave us marriage so that we would know the gospel more clearly and more personally. It is the gospel that gives us joy. Marriage is meant to be a living picture of the gospel-relationship between God and His bride, the church. For this reason, we have two goals for you as you go through this study:

1. That you would get to know and enjoy your spouse in exciting, new, and profoundly deeper ways, so that...
2. ... you would get to know and enjoy God in exciting, new, and profoundly deeper ways.

This series of seminars is arranged around five topics that represent the most common challenges that face a marriage. While the challenges of each area are acknowledged, the tone of these seminars is optimistic. We believe that those things that cause the greatest pain when done wrongly bring the fullest joy when done according to God's design.

These seminars are both sequential and interdependent. Each seminar is meant to build upon the ones before it and lead into the ones after it. If you are going through these materials for general marital enrichment or pre-marital counseling, it is best to complete them in order. However, if you are looking for guidance in a particular area of need, it is possible to start with the subject of greatest urgency in your marriage.

**1. Foundations:** Why is marriage hard? Why do so many marriages that begin in sincere love end in divorce? What are the essential things a couple should focus on to have a marriage that flourishes? What is a covenant and why is marriage a covenant? Why do we have a marriage ceremony? What are the roles for a Christian husband and wife? What if I don't "fit" or like the masculine-feminine stereotypes or don't have the personality to match a "traditional" husband/wife?

**2. Communication:** What does a couple talk about over a life time? What if I'm not good with words or listening? How do we maintain friendship when we're having to keep up with so many logistics? How do we disagree and protect our marriage without losing what's important to each of us individually? Why do words matter so much and why can they hurt so badly? How do we make things right after they go wrong and not let negative momentum build?

**3. Finances:** Why are money problems the number one cause of divorce? How do we maintain reasonable expectations for money in a debt-sick culture? How do two people manage their money together when it is hard enough to manage as a single person? Who should administrate the finances and how involved should the other person be? How do we learn self-control and contentment as a couple? How can "budget" become an exciting or, at least, pleasant word?

**4. Decision Making:** How do we manage our time? How do we navigate situations where we each want good things that cannot both happen? How do we determine God's will for our personal and marital lives? How do we functionally express the biblical roles of headship and submission? How do we ensure that life's tough decisions draw us closer to God and each other instead of creating distance? How do we respond when bad things happen to a good marriage or our plans?

**5. Intimacy:** How do you maintain the "spark" of marriage over a lifetime? How do you continue learning each other without feeling like you know all there is to know? How do we protect our expectations from highly romanticized cultural ideals? How many ways are there to express love and why are they all necessary? How do we enjoy a balance of both intimacy and intercourse? How do we grow as lovers throughout our marriage?

## Evaluation:

### Listening

**Note:** Each major section of the Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage series will have a brief evaluation tool to help you assess your marital strengths and weaknesses. Complete the evaluation before reading the material, then review the assessment again after completing each section to learn the accuracy of your initial self-assessment.

**Instructions:** Read the following descriptive statements. Consider how well they describe your experience or perspective on your marriage. If you are engaged, consider how well they describe your courtship experience or your beliefs about what you think your coming marriage should be. Mark the answer that best fits how you respond:

(CD) Completely Disagree, (SD) Somewhat Disagree, (NS) Not Sure, (SA) Somewhat Agree, or (CA) Completely Agree

1. I enjoying listening to my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
2. My spouse enjoys listening to me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
3. My spouse can tell that I am interested in what he/she says.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
4. I can tell that my spouse is interested in what I say.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
5. I value the things my spouse tells me enough to remember them.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
6. My spouse values the things I share with him/her enough to remember them.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
7. My spouse trusts that I appropriately value his/her thoughts and opinions.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
8. I believe my thoughts and opinions are appropriately valued by my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
9. My spouse usually feels understood when he/she talks to me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
10. I usually feel understood when I talk to my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
11. I lovingly listen when my spouse wants to talk even if I'm tired.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
12. My spouse lovingly listens when I want to talk even if he/she is tired.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
13. I can allow my spouse time to process without getting insecure or upset.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
14. My spouse allows me time to process without getting insecure or upset.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
15. My spouse feels safe to express his/her thoughts and opinions with me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
16. I feel safe to express my thoughts and opinions with my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
17. I frequently ask questions to draw out more of what my spouse is thinking.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
18. My spouse frequently asks questions to draw out more of what I'm thinking.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
19. I resist the temptation to read into what my spouse means in conversation.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
20. My spouse resists temptation to read into what I mean in conversation.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
21. I resist the urge to interrupt my spouse when he/she is talking.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
22. My spouse resists the urge to interrupt me while I'm talking.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
23. I resist the urge to be impatient if my spouse's words are not interesting to me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
24. My spouse resists the urge to be impatient with me if my words are not interesting.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
25. I begin my turn in conversation by building upon or referencing what my spouse said.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
26. My spouse begins his/her turn in conversation by building upon or referencing what I said.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
27. I give non-verbal gestures to indicate I'm listening and affirm my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
28. My spouse gives non-verbal gestures to indicate he/she is listening and affirm me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
29. I maintain good eye contact when talking to my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
30. My spouse maintains good eye contact when talking with me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
31. I am patient and wait till the end of a conversation to make a judgment.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
32. My spouse is patient and waits till the end of a conversation to make a judgment.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA

**Key to Survey Scoring:** For each set of questions tabulate your score using the following numerical values. The scoring is weighted with the “neutral” NS answer being a negative score, because if you have not defined or pursued important aspects of your marriage relationship it will negatively impact the marriage.

CD	–	Negative 3 points	SA	–	Positive 1 points
SD	–	Negative 2 points	CA	–	Positive 2 points
NS	–	Negative 1 point			

If your total score...

- ...**matches or exceeds the total number of questions**, then this area of marriage is an area of strength.
- ...**is less than the total number of questions**, then this area of marriage could use attention or refinement.
- ...**is a negative number**, then this area of marriage should be given immediate and concentrated attention.

➤ Questions 1-10: ( Total: \_\_\_\_\_ in 10 questions)

This set of questions examines the “**the atmosphere of listening**” necessary for a gospel-centered marriage. Listening is a skill that can be learned but not one that can be coerced. Listening is a form of honor and humility that reveals how much we value and appreciate the other person.

Recommended Resources: You won’t learn to listen from a book. Repent for not creating an atmosphere of listening (honor) in your marriage. Pray to God for the desire to listen well. Commit to your spouse to value his/her words.

➤ Questions 11-16: ( Total: \_\_\_\_\_ in 6 questions)

This set of questions examines the “**the obstacles of listening**” that we must avoid in a gospel-centered marriage. Listening is a skill that is most necessary when it is most difficult. When listening is most necessary we are most prone to make excuses for not fairly representing the other person. We must realize the value of listening if we are going to persevere in listening when it is most needed.

Recommended Resources: *Strengthening Your Marriage* by Wayne Mack (Unit 4)

➤ Questions 17-32: ( Total: \_\_\_\_\_ in 16 questions)

This set of questions examines the “**the skills of listening**” aspect of healthy marital communication. Listening is not a personality trait (i.e., either you have it or you don’t), but an aptitude (i.e., can be developed if it is a weakness). The items you did not mark as “agree” need to be major points of intentional personal growth and accountability. Not listening is a form of dishonor.

Recommended Resources: *Preparing for Marriage* by Dennis Rainey (chapter 5)

Sometimes within a marriage the problem is not one specific area or issue but an overall imbalance in the effort, skill, thoughtfulness, and awareness being put into the marriage. Below is a list of questions that reveal your perspective on your effort and your spouse’s effort in the marriage. Use the same numerical scoring system as you used above. In this case, the closer your scores are to another, the more mutual (and typically healthy) the marriage.

\_\_\_\_\_ **My Score** – Using the same scoring system as above add together the score for odd numbered questions.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Spouse’s Score** – Using the same scoring system as above add together the score for even numbered questions.

## Chapter I

# What We Have Here Is a Failure to Communicate: The Obvious and Not-So-Obvious Things That Disrupt Communication

**Plumb Lines:** These are the “sticky” statements that capture the core messages of this chapter.

- The vast majority of communication problems are listening problems, not expressing problems.
- If you don’t know what to say, ask more questions.
- Healthy communication is a disposition of grace and humility before it is a skill.
- What we hear often says as much about us as the person speaking.

**Memorize:** James 3:2-5 (ESV), “For we all stumble in many in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle his whole body. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. Look at the ships also: though they are so large and driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.” As you memorize this passage reflect upon these key points:

- “We all stumble” – James is not making an excuse for sin, but putting an end to denial and blame-shifting.
- “Perfect” – If our words reveal our hearts (Luke 6:45), then pure words would reveal a pure heart.
- “Whole body” – Words mediate life. Learning healthy communication will bless your entire marriage.
- “Bit... rudder” – Our words will determine the direction of our lives.
- “Small... great” – James is drawing our attention to how we tend to ignore the things of greatest significance.

### Presentation Notes

Who doesn’t want to improve their ability to communicate? The few people who don’t believe they need to grow in this area have spouses who wish they would. Beyond the normal challenges of communication, the closeness and longevity of a marriage relationship introduces new challenges.

We’ll begin our journey into understanding gospel-centered communication with a quick primer on the three basic parts of communication. Most of us have a truncated view of communication. We want to learn how to become more convincing at getting people to “buy in” to our points. We want a course on argumentation or advertising more than communication.

1. **Sender** – This is the person who “sends” a message (verbal or nonverbal). You and your spouse will alternate in this role (hopefully not talking over one another). We are “flawed senders” who must remain humble about whether we communicated as clearly as we think we did. We are also “senders with a history” who’s past message sending efforts impact how our current message sending is received and interpreted.
2. **Message** – This is the “content” that the sender wants to be understood, accepted, or responded to. The meaning of any message resides in what the author intended. Recipients are not free to assign *meaning* to the words of others based upon their own experience. However, the *significance* of a message will likely be impacted by the recipients experience and the sender should seek to understand how this impacts his/her message.
3. **Recipient** – This is the person who “receives” the message. We must also realize that we are “flawed receivers” who hear things through the filter of our fears, preferences, dreams, and expectations. The more emotionally close a recipient is with a sender/message, the greater influence these filters will have upon how the message is heard (for better or worse).

The art of communication is (a) having two mature people who (b) patiently strive to understand the objective message being sent, and (c) appreciate the subjective experience that shapes how the message is received.

In *Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage: Communication*, our goal will be to learn how to pass messages back and forth in a way that is (a) free from the distorting influence of overgrown good desires – sin, (b) honors painful experiences that shape the significance of a message – suffering, and (c) nourishes the quality of the marriage relationship – unity.

This will not be accomplished by mastering a system, but by surrendering to and emulating our Savior. Communication is a relationship, not a recipe; more a function of character than ability.

“With this admission we confess that our communication struggle is not primarily a struggle of technique, but a struggle of the heart. Our war of words is not with other people; it is a battle within (p. 30)... We are the common element in all of our communication problems (p. 40).” Paul David Tripp in *War of Words*

Ultimately, good communication is an act of faith in God’s surpassing value to such a degree that we are willing to risk not having our preferences met in order to “love your neighbor as yourself (Matt. 22:39).”

## 20 Things that Make Communication Hard

“Authentic communication is much more than just talking. It is understanding and being understood (p. 148).” Dennis Rainey (editor) in *Preparing for Marriage*

1. There are so many types of communication.
2. We likely think and process information differently.

“Words do not primarily express our culture or family upbringing or biochemistry, but our souls. When our words are unkind and ungrateful, no one else is to blame. Such words come from inside us (p. 137).” John Henderson in *Catching Foxes*

“If you minimize the heart struggle that both of you have carried into your marriage, here’s what will happen: you will tend to turn moments of ministry into moments of anger... This leads to the second thing that happens: the reason we turn moments of ministry into moments of anger is that we tend to personalize what is not personal (p. 24).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

3. Honoring people in a conflict feels like we’re saying they’re right.
4. Communicating forces us to face things about ourselves we don’t like.

“We are tempted to recast both Jesus and love in the image of our personal desires (p. 40)...I began to meditate on this paradox: Jesus loves people, and yet they’re disappointed in him (p. 42)... My duty is to love her, not to be perfect. In fact, sometimes loving her may well disappoint her... Sometimes we suffer in our marriages because we labor under false understandings of love built upon the foundations of our own desires and fears (p. 45).” Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*

5. In marriage “pet peeves” begin to feel morally significant.
6. The impersonal becomes personal.



“The attitude of earning love is disastrous in marriages and leads to anger and insecurity. Spouses who believe they’ve earned or deserve love angrily demand it or toil anxiously to avoid using it (p. 48)... The principle captured in the phrase ‘knowledge puffs up, but love builds up’ (1 Corinthians 8:1b) tells us that in a conflict, being right and doing right aren’t always the same thing (p. 158).” Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*

7. The emotional momentum of life shapes our hearing and speaking.
8. Good communication requires healthy humility.

#### **Other Challenges in the Larger Notebook**

9. We learn to communicate before we know we’re learning.
10. Communication won’t play by “rules.”
11. “Understand what I meant...” (grace) “But that’s not what you said...” (literalism).
12. It is hard to think and listen at the same time.
13. Martial communication requires us to show interest in things that do not naturally excite us.
14. Forgiveness is not fair.
15. It is often hard to determine what is significant in a disagreement.
16. We call self-control problems “communication” problems.
17. Communication takes time and energy.
18. Busy lives mean we cram big topics into small spaces.
19. The more we know each other the less it can feel like we have to say.
20. Marriage is a lifelong conversation building on itself.

“In all healthy relationships the well-being of the other person is important to us even when we’re mad, tired, or busy.” Leslie Vernick in *The Emotionally Destructive Relationship*

## Chapter 2

### Listening

# The Neglected Key to a Marital Communication

**Plumb Lines:** These are the “sticky” statements that capture the core messages of this chapter.

- Be a servant-listener: seek to understand before being understood.
- The vast majority of communication problems would be resolved with better listening.
- Good listening is simply living incarnationally.
- Listening is a skill that is most necessary when it is most difficult.
- The word listen contains the same letters as the word silent.

**Memorize:** James 1:19-21 (ESV), “Know this, my beloved brothers, let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.” As you memorize this passage reflect upon these key points:

- “Know this” – Humorously, James assumes we would be prone to skip over his instructions on listening.
- “Quick to hear” – We will be quick at one and slow at the other; we choose – listening or speaking.
- “Slow to speak... anger” – Being quick to speak has emotional consequences; we need to see the cause and effect.
- “Produce... put away” – The choice to listen well is a choice to pursue godly character and relational unity.
- “Receive... implanted word” – Salvation began with listening. Marriage also moves from death to life by listening.

#### Presentation Notes

We often miss the power of common things. Being at a little league game doesn’t seem like a big deal until you hear an adult lament, “My father never came to any of my games.” We often only fully appreciate the significance of small things our spouse does after they pass away and “life feels so empty now.” When we look back at the people who most shaped our lives, it usually because of their presence and care in ordinary moments rather than great actions or profound words.

Because all we get to do as infants and children (or so it seemed at the time) is “listen to big people,” we tend to view speaking as the mature, powerful, and significant part of communication. We think listening is for the weak or immature person who lacks influence of the ability to contribute. If we applied this same logic to nutrition we would think that eating fruits and vegetables was a sign of weakness.

“If you want to develop an intimate marriage relationship, you would be wise to speak less and listen more. The person who speaks less is more willing to set his own self-centeredness aside and build oneness in marriage. He is better able to understand another viewpoint. And he is willing to seek the best for his mate (p. 154).” Dennis Rainey (editor) in *Preparing for Marriage*

“Of all the principles involved in effective communication, none is more important than good listening (p. 68).” Wayne Mack in *Strengthening Your Marriage*

#### How Not to Listen

Not all silence is listening. Not all questions invite, or even want, an answer. There is such a thing as bad listening. The way we listen can both negatively influence what is being said and distort what we hear. We need to be aware of how our listening effects communication or we will self-righteously accuse our spouse at times when our poor listening set them up.

1. Interrupting:
2. Premature Advice:

3. Intellectualizing:
4. Minimizing:
5. Free Association:
6. Fear Filtering:

“The idols that you worship erect a filter that screens out information that doesn’t match up with expectations. Idols also amplify other messages that you’re sensitive to. Approach every topic with humility—a willingness to learn something new and correct faulty understandings. Communicate a humility that allows room for more information or a different perspective (p. 109).” Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*

7. Bad Questions:
8. Emotionally Dominating:

“There’s no point moving on to the next idea or responding to what you heard if your spouse doesn’t believe you understand what’s been said (p. 133)... How does your spouse typically feel misunderstood by you? If you don’t know, then ask (p. 135).” Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*

### Types of Listening

“Are you a good listener?” is a question like, “Are you a good student?” The answer is usually, “It depends?” In school it often depends on the subject. With listening it depends on the type of listening required. Some careers allow us to specialize in one or two forms of listening and excel with those skills. Marriage, however, is a relationship that requires the willingness to engage in all types of listening for the relationship to flourish.

1. **Comprehend** – *What is being said?* This is the do-not-pass-go question of listening.
2. **Appreciate** – *What is good about the speaker or message?* This is what fuels the patience of listening.
3. **Empathize** – *What is the emotion in the speaker or message?* This is the most bonding aspect of listening.
4. **Discern** – *What is accurate or most important in what is being said?* This form of listening emotionally steps away from the speaker and message in order to gain a more objective perspective.
5. **Evaluate** – *What is the appropriate response to the speaker or message?* This type of listening is focused upon action more than understanding. This kind of listening often gets a bad rap because of husbands who are prone to exclusively use this “fix it” mentality when listening.

“Rarely will we agree on all the topics of marriage. Rarely will we agree on the exact proper use of money, or the exact proper amount of sexual intimacy, or the exact proper way to handle the children. God did not design everyone to agree exactly on all these matters. Rather, God redeems and enables husbands and wives to reflect Christ and the Church amidst their disagreements, and to grow in love for one another under every circumstance. This love tends to be expressed through gracious speech, humble listening, eagerness to serve, and longing for Christ to be magnified in our marriages (p. 164).” John Henderson in *Catching Foxes*

### How to Listen

No instruction can create or replace desire. The main skill in being a good listener is wanting to be a good listener. The core of listening is placing enough value on the other person and what he/she is saying that you quit playing your thoughts (mentally or verbally) over theirs. When you begin to do this you will find that your responses and body language almost always draw out the other person. The skills below are merely examples of things that value other people.

1. Show and Maintain Interest:
2. Honor through Body Language:
3. Glean Purpose before Content:
4. Be Aware of Filters:
5. Clarify Confusing Points:
6. Summarize Information:
7. Listen to Affirm / Honor:
8. Postpone Evaluations:
9. Listen Like You're Taking a Prayer Request:
10. If You Don't Know What to Say, Ask More Questions:

### Conclusion

Listening goes on the list of things that aren't complicated, but it are hard. Most of the things on this list share one thing in common – they require dying to self in order to love God and love others well.

Chances are you were not blown away by any of the practical advice in this chapter. That should be both encouraging and discouraging. It is encouraging to know that the most relationally inept person can listen well and, thereby, bless every relationship he/she is in. It is discouraging to realize that most often the only excuse for not listening well is pure neglect of social basics.

This should call our attention again to our need for the gospel in order to have a satisfying marriage. Our marriages deteriorate not because marriage is complex, but because we are selfish and self-centered. Even when we want to be selfless to love well those we care about, we fall short.

In order to listen well we need something that can motivate us to die to ourselves without simultaneously causing us to cave back in on ourselves through self-pity or martyrdom. There is only one person (Jesus Christ) with one message (the gospel) who can accomplish these twin tasks. The more we rely on what Christ did for us and treasure the gospel until we emulate it, the more naturally we will treat others as God has treated us.

## Evaluation: Day-to-Day Communication

**Note:** Each major section of the Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage series will have a brief evaluation tool to help you assess your marital strengths and weaknesses. Complete the evaluation before reading the material, then review the assessment again after completing each section to learn the accuracy of your initial self-assessment.

**Instructions:** Read the following descriptive statements. Consider how well they describe your experience or perspective on your marriage. If you are engaged, consider how well they describe your courtship experience or your beliefs about what you think your coming marriage should be. Mark the answer that best fits how you respond:

(CD) Completely Disagree, (SD) Somewhat Disagree, (NS) Not Sure, (SA) Somewhat Agree, or (CA) Completely Agree

1. I regularly share my thoughts, plans, dreams, and fears with my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
2. My spouse regularly shares his/her thoughts, plans, dreams, and fears with me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
3. I engage in topics of conversation even if they are only important to my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
4. My spouse engages in topics of conversation even if they are only important to me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
5. I think about what I want to talk about with my spouse when I see him/her next.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
6. My spouse thinks about what he/she wants to talk about when he/she sees me next.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
7. My sense of humor does not put my spouse down or highlight his/her weaknesses.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
8. My spouse's humor does not put me down or highlight my weaknesses.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
9. I honor things that have sentimental value to my spouse even if I don't understand.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
10. My spouse honors things with sentimental value to me even if he/she doesn't understand.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
11. I cannot think of a subject or event I would hesitate to share with my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
12. I do not know of subjects or events my spouse would hesitate to share with me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
13. I do not have secrets that I am resisting telling my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
14. I do not wonder if my spouse is being honest with me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
15. My spouse does not doubt if I am being honest with him/her.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
16. We find it easy to have things to talk about when we are together.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
17. We enjoy spending time together.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
18. We laugh frequently when we are together.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
19. As a couple we are able to enjoy and discuss our differences.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
20. Our conversations result in us being growing people growing closer together.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA

**Key to Survey Scoring:** For each set of questions tabulate your score using the following numerical values. The scoring is weighted with the “neutral” NS answer being a negative score, because if you have not defined or pursued important aspects of your marriage relationship it will negatively impact the marriage.

CD	–	Negative 3 points	SA	–	Positive 1 points
SD	–	Negative 2 points	CA	–	Positive 2 points
NS	–	Negative 1 point			

If your total score...

- ...matches or exceeds the total number of questions, then this area of marriage is an area of strength.
- ...is less than the total number of questions, then this area of marriage could use attention or refinement.
- ...is a negative number, then this area of marriage should be given immediate and concentrated attention.

➤ Questions 1-20: ( Total: \_\_\_\_\_ in 20 questions)

This set of questions examines the features of “**day-to-day communication**” present in a gospel-centered marriage. Day-to-day communication is the breathing of marriage – we rarely pay attention to it until it stops happening, and then it's a crisis. Good daily communication is what keeps planning (mundane) and conflict (unpleasant) communication from removing the desire for romantic communication.

Recommended Resources: *Love Talk Starters: 275 Questions to Get Your Conversations Going* by Les and Leslie Parrott

Sometimes within a marriage the problem is not one specific area or issue but an overall imbalance in the effort, skill, thoughtfulness, and awareness being put into the marriage. Below is a list of questions that reveal your perspective on your effort and your spouse's effort in the marriage. Use the same numerical scoring system as you used above. In this case, the closer your scores are to another, the more mutual (and typically healthy) the marriage.

\_\_\_\_\_ **My Score** – Using the same scoring system as above add together the score for odd numbered questions through 14.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Spouse's Score** – Using the same scoring system add together the score for even numbered questions through 14.

## Chapter 3

# Day-to-Day Communication

## The Oil in the Machine of Marriage

**Plumb Lines:** These are the “sticky” statements that capture the core messages of this chapter.

- Our regular, day-to-day communication is what determines how we “normally” communicate.
- Good day-to-day communication is both preventative and a buffer for conflict.
- Enjoying and cultivating common conversation is the life blood of a lifelong relationship.
- Building a conversationally full marriage can be a key step towards a conversationally full prayer life.

**Memorize:** Ephesians 4:29-30 (ESV), “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.” As you memorize this passage reflect upon these key points:

- “No corrupting talk” – God created words to serve the purpose of building up our spouse.
- “Fits the occasion” – Ask yourself, “How would God want me to engage or affirm my spouse in this moment?”
- “Gives grace” – Christian lives are a “journey of grace.” Your words should move your spouse forward on this journey.
- “Do not grieve” – When our words compete against God’s purposes in/for our spouse, God is grieved.
- “For the day of redemption” – In heaven you will see the spouse God has been allowing your words to help shape.

### Presentation Notes

What is the least obvious and most important part of a fish tank? The water. Water is essential for the life of the fish and plants. Water upholds and sways the decorations. Water is what reflects the light in “aquatic” ways and captures our attention. Yet no one ever looks at a fish tank and says, “Wow! You’ve got great water.” If the tank is algae-ridden, then people may say, “Yuck! You need to clean your water.”

Water in a fish tank shares a roll similar to day-to-day communication in a marriage. It is essential for the vitality of the marriage, surrounds all the special and significant moments, and it captures all the “relational” qualities of a marriage that we were made to enjoy. But day-to-day is too often ignored or neglected unless it reaches a point that it is noticeably unhealthy.

“Because they were not talking these things through with one another, they began to develop individual thoughts about them (p. 103)... So the character and quality of the friendship between a husband and wife always functions as an accurate measure of the health of their marriage (p. 145-146).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

Often communication books will provide a ratio of how many positive comments are needed to cancel out a negative one. If we actually try to keep up with the math, it tends to become laborious, disingenuous, or legalistic. But if we see the picture behind the numbers it can provide the benefit without the bondage.

There are many difficult and negative things that couples will have to discuss. Avoiding budget cuts, child discipline, or life disappointments is not “being positive,” it is living in denial.

The solution to maintaining marital equilibrium is not eliminating all unpleasant conversations. It must be accomplished by engaging in enough satisfying, enjoyable, meaningful conversations that the home remains a life-giving environment.

A “State of the Union Address” is simply a regularly set time when a couple looks at one another and asks, “How are we doing? Have I begun to neglect anything that is important to you? Have I missed any changes in your life that make you feel less cared for by me? Have I started doing anything that is a concern for you?” Giving up one evening of television or activities per month (or even once per quarter) for this kind of conversation would revolutionize most marriages.

“Because of sin and shame we often hide our thoughts and feelings from ourselves and our spouses (p. 93)... Honesty isn’t just communication free of lies (p. 95).” Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*

When you finish reading this section you should *never* again be able to say, “What is there for us to talk about?”

In this section, we list 270 conversation topics in ten categories. The goal is to provide a variety in the type of conversation, multiple topics within each type, and an understanding of how each type of conversation contributes to the quality and closeness of your marriage. As you read, don’t become overwhelmed. We’ll discuss how to assimilate “all there is to talk about” within your marriage at the end of this section. That will involve a tissue box, but not for the reason you think.

### **Daily Review Topics**

In marriage it is important to know what is going on in the life of your spouse; not as a parent, spectator, or news reporter, but as a prayer partner, encourager, friend, and lover. Showing interest in the incremental changes of your spouse’s life is a way to show your love. This perpetual honor-of-interest is a great way to affirm your spouse and counter the drift-of-indifference that erodes many marriages.

### **Reflective Topics**

There is a level of intimacy that comes from considering challenging, personal questions together. One measure of closeness is the kinds of questions you’re willing to engage with another person. Your spouse should be the person with whom you have the most and best of these conversations. This is one of the key ways to make sure that nobody else becomes more of an “insider” in your life than your spouse.

### **Romantic Topics**

Married couples should flirt and have intimate conversations. You stoke the fire of your interest about anything (i.e., job, hobby, faith, politics, etc...) by talking about it with those who share your passion.

Often when we talk about other interests we are not learning new information; we are merely rehearsing what we enjoy again (often in the same words we’ve used many times). Why would we be hesitant to do this with our marriages? Too often we only rehearse our disappointments with one another.

### **Planning Topics**

Thinking about and preparing for a shared future is a way that we demonstrate commitment to and enthusiasm about our marriage. Too often the word “planning” is heard with a sterile, business meeting connotation. Think about how someone plans for a vacation, business venture, retirement, or having children. That planning is not laborious or tedious.

### **Evaluative Topics**

Enhancing something is a form of love. Men who love their cars are constantly tinkering with them. Women who love their homes are perpetually updating the decorations. The fact that they find something to improve is not an indication that they are dissatisfied with their car or home; actually it reveals the opposite – they delight in them. Similarly, if we love our spouse and marriage, we will engage in conversations about how to best steward this God’s blessing.

### **Confessional Topics**

Confession of sin, weakness, and shortcomings is a significant way that we display how much we value our spouse and marriage. When we confess, we show that we value our spouse and marriage more than our pride. When faced with a choice of whether to protect/defend ourselves or honor the marriage, confession proves we choose the latter.

### **General Interest Topics**

What do you enjoy simply because your spouse enjoys it? What do you know a good deal about merely because it is important to your spouse? The longer we are married the longer and deeper these lists should become. A couple doesn’t have to enjoy the same things in order to enjoy one another – this is one of the most destructive myths that discouraged couples begin to believe.

## Spiritual Growth Topics

A Gospel-Centered Marriage has one ultimate purpose: Christ-likeness. Both husband and wife are striving to be more like Christ in order to (a) find personal satisfaction, (b) bless one another, and (c) reach the world. If that is the shared mission of husband and wife, then there is plenty to talk about

## Social Topics

We were created to live in community. Our spouse should be our best friend, but not our only friend. We should have friends who are mentoring us, friends we are mentoring, friends we just “do life with,” and friends we are seeking to win for Christ. There are sides of your spouse’s character that you will only get to see and enjoy when he/she interacts with people who are different from you. One of the primary ways that a husband and wife encourage each other to live in healthy Christian community is to talk about friends.

## Popcorn Topics

Random conversations can be a fun, light-hearted way to enjoy your spouse. Doubtless many rabbits will be chased in the conversations listed above, but below are some questions just meant to generate fun conversation. As with all the other categories, be creative and add to the list. These lists are not meant to be exhaustive (or exhausting), but merely to get you thinking about the possibilities.

“If suffering alone taught, all the world would be wise, since everyone suffers. To suffering must be added mourning, understanding, patience, love, openness, and the willingness to remain vulnerable (p. 143)... Communication is thus the blood of marriage that carries vital oxygen into the heart of our romance (p. 158)... Marriage provides the small experimental laboratory whereby we can learn to engage in spiritual fellowship. Everything that happens broadly in social contexts has a mirror in marriage—disagreements, wounding words, conflict of interests, and competing dreams (p. 162).” Gary Thomas in *Sacred Marriage*

The question now shifts from, “What is there to talk about?” to “How are we going to have all of these conversations?”

First, rank your areas of strength and weakness.

### Daily Review

Husband’s Comfort/Skill Level: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10  
 Wife’s Comfort/Skill Level: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

### Reflective

Husband’s Comfort/Skill Level: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10  
 Wife’s Comfort/Skill Level: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

### Romantic

Husband’s Comfort/Skill Level: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10  
 Wife’s Comfort/Skill Level: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

### Planning

Husband’s Comfort/Skill Level: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10  
 Wife’s Comfort/Skill Level: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

### Evaluative

Husband’s Comfort/Skill Level: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10  
 Wife’s Comfort/Skill Level: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

### Confessional

Husband’s Comfort/Skill Level: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10  
 Wife’s Comfort/Skill Level: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



**General Interest**

Husband's Comfort/Skill Level:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Wife's Comfort/Skill Level:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

**Spiritual**

Husband's Comfort/Skill Level:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Wife's Comfort/Skill Level:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

**Social**

Husband's Comfort/Skill Level:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Wife's Comfort/Skill Level:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

**Popcorn**

Husband's Comfort/Skill Level:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Wife's Comfort/Skill Level:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

You can put your favorite conversations from this list (along with your preferred additions) on slips of paper into an empty tissue box and have a raffle whenever there is a free moment for conversation. This brings a playful element to these conversations which is important (we continue to do things that are fun). In this version you can also add slips of paper with compliments and words of encouragement to one another to be drawn out and echoed during these conversation times.

**Conclusion**

After a commitment to listen well, the next most important communication commitment you can make is to talk about life. If Christ wants his bride to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thes. 5:17) and husbands are to "love their wife as Christ loves the church" (Eph. 5:25), then a gospel-centered marriage should be filled with conversations.

Despite the modern American proverb, quality time does not replace an adequate quantity of time. In the absence of a significant amount of pleasant conversation (those not built around a conflict, disagreement, or problem solving), then a normal amount of "hard conversations" will begin to make a good marriage feel like a bad marriage.

The call of this chapter is simply to enter each other's worlds by having frequent conversations. Ask good questions, listen well, and share your thoughts. Don't allow silence to atrophy your awareness of the person God wants you to most know and bless over the course of your lifetime.

## Evaluation: Conflict Resolution

**Note:** Each major section of the Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage series will have a brief evaluation tool to help you assess your marital strengths and weaknesses. Complete the evaluation before reading the material, then review the assessment again after completing each section to learn the accuracy of your initial self-assessment.

**Instructions:** Read the following descriptive statements. Consider how well they describe your experience or perspective on your marriage. If you are engaged, consider how well they describe your courtship experience or your beliefs about what you think your coming marriage should be. Mark the answer that best fits how you respond:

(CD) Completely Disagree, (SD) Somewhat Disagree, (NS) Not Sure, (SA) Somewhat Agree, or (CA) Completely Agree

1. We recognize that conflict done well is part of a healthy relationship.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
2. We do a good job of selecting wise times to have difficult or in-depth conversations.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
3. We agree on the type or level of offenses that need to be discussed.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
4. We are able to enter a difficult conversation with hope because of our pattern of conflict.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
5. We do not have the same disagreements over and over and over again.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
6. We are usually able to find solutions to issues that are mutually satisfying.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
7. We have a healthy and God-honoring pattern of resolving conflict.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
8. We do not allow an area of a disagreement to seem more important than our marriage.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
9. We listen to each other well and represent each other fairly even when we disagree.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
10. We resolve conflicts in a timely manner and do not let them linger for days.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
11. I accept my spouses' level/lack of desire for organization and order.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
12. My spouse accepts my level/lack of desire for organization and order.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
13. I accept my spouses' level/lack of desire for peace and harmony.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
14. My spouse accepts my level/lack of desire for peace and harmony.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
15. I accept my spouses' level/lack of desire for social interaction.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
16. My spouse accepts my level/lack of desire for social interaction.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
17. I accept my spouses' level/lack of desire to make decisions and be in charge.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
18. My spouse accepts my level/lack of desire to make decisions and be in charge.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
19. I do not allow my personal goals/preferences to take precedent over the marriage.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
20. My spouse does not allow personal goals/preferences to take precedent over the marriage.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
21. I do not allow hurts or concerns to accumulate before addressing them.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
22. My spouse does not allow hurts or concerns to accumulate before addressing them.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
23. I am able to lovingly overlook annoying things my spouse does.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
24. My spouse is able to lovingly overlook annoying things I do.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
25. I have good judgment about when something changes from annoying to offensive.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
26. My spouse has good judgment about when something moves from annoying to offensive.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
27. I maintain honor towards my spouse even when we disagree or argue.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
28. My spouse maintains honor towards me even when we disagree or argue.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
29. I resist the temptation to “clam up” or “shut down” when saying something difficult.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
30. My spouse resists the temptation to “clam up” or “shut down.”	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
31. I do not use “being honest” as an excuse to be harsh or dogmatic.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
32. My spouse does not use “being honest” as an excuse for being harsh or dogmatic.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
33. I do not use the silent treatment as a way to punish my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
34. My spouse does not use the silent treatment as a way to punish me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
35. I do not resort to insults or demeaning comments during an argument.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
36. My spouse does not resort to insults or demeaning comments during an argument.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
37. My spouse feels safe when I express my anger or hurt.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
38. I feel safe when my spouse expresses his/her anger or hurt.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
39. I am able to deal with change without it disrupting the marriage.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
40. My spouse is able to deal with change without it disrupting the marriage.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
41. I am willing to be interrupted to hear what my spouse has to say.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
42. My spouse is willing to be interrupted to hear what I have to say.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
43. During a disagreement I resist the temptation to be stubborn or inflexible.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
44. During a disagreement my spouse resists the temptation to be stubborn or inflexible.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
45. I resist the temptation to always have to win an argument.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
46. My spouse resists the temptation to always have to win an argument.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA

47. I am able to identify and willing to admit the desires that lead me to sinful conflict.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
48. My spouse is able to identify and willing to admit the desires that lead to sinful conflict.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
49. Going into a disagreement I am on guard for how my desires would tempt me to sin.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
50. Going into a disagreement my spouse is on guard for how his/her desires tempt to sin.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
51. Either of us will punish the others by restricting access to money.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
52. Either of us will pressure others to give up things important to them.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
53. Either of us will refuse to take a break or give space in an argument.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
54. Either of us have broken or thrown things in an argument.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
55. Either of us have used physical posturing to intimidate another person.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
56. Either of us will restrict others from leaving a room when I'm upset.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
57. Either of us have hit, slapped, or squeezed during an argument.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
58. Either of us have mentioned or held a weapon during an argument.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
59. Either of us have made verbal allusions to physical harm during an argument.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
60. Either of us have threatened to harm myself during an argument.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
61. When repenting we address everyone involved in or exposed to the sin.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
62. When repenting we avoid words like if, but and maybe.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
63. When repenting we admit specifically what our faults were instead of generalizing.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
64. When repenting we give thought to and verbalize how our sin hurt the other person.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
65. When repenting we accept the consequences for our actions.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
66. When repenting we offer a tangible, realistic plan for how we plan to change.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
67. When repenting we make a clear request for forgiveness.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
68. When repenting we are patient and allow time for forgiveness to be granted.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
69. I regularly repent (as defined in items 61-68) and ask my spouse for forgiveness.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
70. My spouse regularly repents (as defined in items 61-68) and seeks my forgiveness.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
71. When forgiving we remember how much Christ has personally forgiven us.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
72. When forgiving we remember that the penalty for sin was absorbed by Christ.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
73. When forgiving we make a commitment not to dwell on this sin.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
74. When forgiving we make a commitment not use this sin against our spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
75. When forgiving we make a commitment not to bring this sin up to other people.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
76. When forgiving we make a commitment to give our spouse the benefit of the doubt again.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
77. When forgiving we give evidence (word, emotion, posture) that the relationship is restored.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
78. I am able to effectively forgive and not keep a record of wrongs.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
79. My spouse is able to effectively forgive and not keep a record of wrongs.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
80. Our times of forgiveness contribute to our marriage growing closer and more intimate.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA

**Key to Survey Scoring:** For each set of questions tabulate your score using the following numerical values. The scoring is weighted with the “neutral” NS answer being a negative score, because if you have not defined or pursued important aspects of your marriage relationship it will negatively impact the marriage.

CD	–	Negative 3 points	SA	–	Positive 1 points
SD	–	Negative 2 points	CA	–	Positive 2 points
NS	–	Negative 1 point			

If your total score...

- ...**matches or exceeds the total number of questions**, then this area of marriage is an area of strength.
- ...**is less than the total number of questions**, then this area of marriage could use attention or refinement.
- ...**is a negative number**, then this area of marriage should be given immediate and concentrated attention.

➤ Questions 1-10: ( Total: \_\_\_\_\_ in 10 questions)

This set of questions examines the “**foundations of healthy conflict**” aspect of gospel-centered conflict resolution. What we believe about conflict matters. If we believe it is inherently bad, we will avoid it. If we believe there will always be a loser, we will chose between the roles of victor or martyr. Conflict also has momentum. How we handle past conflicts shapes our expectations and practices for future conflict. Only gospel-centered humility and wisdom can turn this momentum into healthy momentum instead.

Recommended Resources: *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande and Tom Raabe (particularly Chapter One and Appendix A) and *War of Words* by Paul David Tripp

➤ Questions 11-20: ( Total: \_\_\_\_\_ in 10 questions)

This set of questions examines the “**honoring differences in conflict**” aspect of gospel-centered conflict resolution. Conflict cannot be reduced to mere subjects and options. It also includes people with personalities, preferences, and values. These people talk about subjects and decide between options. Often we inadvertently dehumanize the other person by focusing exclusively upon the policy.

Recommended Resources: Review the “Celebrating Our Non-Moral Differences” exercise in chapter two of *Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage: Foundations*.

➤ Questions 21-50: ( Total: \_\_\_\_\_ in 30 questions)

This set of questions examines the “**healthy practices of conflict**” aspect of gospel-centered conflict resolution. Conflict is something we do. We either do it well (meaning, in a way that builds unity) or poorly (in a way that detracts from marital unity). Because of our sin nature our “natural” approaches to conflict (both instinctual and learned behaviors) do not contribute to unity. The humility, patience, and other-mindedness necessary for constructive conflict come through living out the core truths of the gospel.

Recommended Resources: *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande and Tom Raabe (particularly Chapters Two, Three, and Appendix F) and *Pursuing Peace* by Robert Jones.

➤ Questions 51-60: ( Total: \_\_\_\_\_ in 10 questions)

This set of questions examines the “**red flags in conflict**” aspect of gospel-centered conflict resolution. Not all conflict is dangerous, but the actions and attitudes described in these items are reasons for significant concern. If these behaviors (even just a few) are occurring in your marriage, they need to be taken seriously. It is recommended that you pursue marriage counseling and not try to rectify these concerns privately.

Recommended Resources: *Marriage Counseling. The Emotionally Destructive Relationship* by Leslie Vernick and *Mending the Soul* by Steven Tracy.

➤ Questions 61-70: ( Total: \_\_\_\_\_ in 10 questions)

This set of questions examines the “**robust repentance**” aspect of gospel-centered conflict resolution. Repentance is much more than saying “I’m sorry,” yet too few couples even formally apologize for their wrongs against one another. Neglecting repentance in marriage is like neglecting oil changes in your car. It may not be noticeable at first, but when the damage does come to light it will be costly.

Recommended Resources: *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande and Tom Raabe (particularly Chapter Four).

➤ Questions 71-80: ( Total: \_\_\_\_\_ in 10 questions)

This set of questions examines the “**full forgiveness**” aspect of gospel-centered conflict resolution. In a marriage between two sinners (which is every marriage) there is not a more important skill to learn than forgiveness (although repentance is equally important). The mark of a lifelong healthy marriage is not the absence of offenses, but the willingness to view offenses in light of our forgiveness from God and, therefore, being willing to forgive.

Recommended Resources: *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande and Tom Raabe (particularly Chapter Five); *Unpacking Forgiveness* by Chris Brauns; and *Choosing Forgiveness* by Nancy Leigh DeMoss

Sometimes within a marriage the problem is not one specific area or issue but an overall imbalance in the effort, skill, thoughtfulness, and awareness being put into the marriage. Below is a list of questions that reveal your perspective on your effort and your spouse’s effort in the marriage. Use the same numerical scoring system as you used above. In this case, the closer your scores are to another, the more mutual (and typically healthy) the marriage.

\_\_\_\_\_ **My Score** – Using the same scoring system as above add together the score for odd numbered questions in 11-50, and questions 69 and 78.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Spouse’s Score** – Using the same scoring system add together the score for even numbered questions in 11-50, and questions 70 and 79.

## Chapter 4

# Conflict Resolution

## Navigating Differences without Dividing

**Plumb Lines:** These are the “sticky” statements that capture the core messages of this chapter.

- Conflict done well can be the best friend of your marriage.
- The best outcome for marital conflict is neither avoidance nor victory, but honor and unity.
- The biggest battle in every conflict is with yourself not your spouse.
- The surest evidence of idolatry is an over-reaction; be sure not to misname it a need.

**Memorize:** James 4:1-2a, 6 (ESV), “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel... But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’” As you memorize this passage reflect upon these key points:

- “Causes” – We often become so consumed with “what” we think is wrong that we fail to ask “why?”
- “You” – Read James 1:1 and realize the original readers were people willing to face persecution for their faith.
- “Passions... desire” – Conflict done wrong ultimately stems from wanting something bad enough to sin to get it.
- “War within you” – Our desires are not passive. They fight for fulfillment even at the expense of our loved ones.
- “Proud... humble” – The key to conflict done well is not a strategy or skill but humility.

### Presentation Notes

Conflict done well can be the best friend of your marriage. This is not a nicer recasting of the mantra “fight hard; make up hard.” It is a reality rooted in the “two sides of the same coin” relationship between love and anger.

The best outcome for marital conflict is neither avoidance nor victory, but honor and unity. We must realize how much the mindset we take into conflict determines the outcome of our disagreements.

Many of us feel like conflict is inherently wrong and, therefore, whenever it occurs, feel defeated. Others of us are competitive and when conflict arises have an instinctual “game on” response that generates a “refuse to lose” mindset.

When we get angry or experience love we are saying that something matters a lot. When we get sinfully angry we are saying that this “something” matters more than our spouse (at least in that moment). When we express self-control we are saying that our spouse matters more than this “something.”

This is why conflict done well is romantic – it affirms the value of the marriage over life’s circumstances or people’s failures and creates an atmosphere of safety.

“The Bible nowhere calls us to grin and bear it for the sake of the relationship. In fact, I am persuaded that our silence in the face of wrong is not motivated by a desire to love the other well but by not wanting to hassle through the difficult process of kind and loving confrontation. We are silent not because we love our spouse but because we love ourselves, and we do not want to put ourselves through something uncomfortable (p. 93).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

### To Speak or Not to Speak?

The first question in every conflict is whether it is worth addressing. Many unnecessary fights are engaged and many beneficial conversations are avoided in every marriage. The first part of wisdom is not knowing what to say, but discerning whether to speak.

Consider the following modes of interaction advocated by Scripture. All are “legitimate” responses to some conflicts or disappointments, because they are biblical. The responses are listed in a progressive order – the early ones for milder concerns and latter for severe concerns.

**Give Grace / Overlook:** (Matthew 7:1-2 and Proverbs 19:11) This is what allows a home to be a warm place where both people feel safe to be themselves and make mistakes. This “atmosphere of grace” should be a trademark of a gospel-centered marriage that lays a foundation of trust for the remaining responses to our differences.

**Confess as You Address:** (Matthew 7:3-5) The key principle in this arena of conflict is to model the response to your sin that you desire from your spouse; model the response to your spouse’s preferences that you want for your own. When we neglect this principle, we begin to focus most on what we can control least; which is a recipe to exacerbate anger, anxiety, or despair.

**Seek Counsel:** (Proverbs 11:14 and Galatians 6:2) Just as no person is good at everything, no couple will resolve every challenge on their own. The humility initially expressed in “confess as you address” should continue as the couple reaches out to trusted advisors (i.e., small group leaders, mentors, pastors, or counselor).

**Confront and Call to Change:** (Colossians 3:16) The issues that fit in this category and beyond should all be moral offenses; not merely violations of preference. Your spouse should not be surprised by what you are saying, or else you have neglected the prior stages of conflict.

**Be Longsuffering:** (Romans 12:14-21) You should not race through these stages of conflict. There is definitely no “prize” at the end. Being longsuffering is not condoning the offensive behavior, but choosing to allow God to be the agent of conviction after confrontation was not received.

**Confront and Involve Others:** (Matthew 18:16) If things reach this stage in the confrontation process, then the “others” involved would be spiritual authorities over your marriage (i.e., small group leader, elders, or pastors) When getting ready to make this level of confrontation, the confronting spouse should be receiving personal counsel and guidance.

**Distance Yourself for Safety:** (Matthew 7:6, 18:17 and Romans 13:1-7) Distance is never recommended as a threat to coerce change; that either produces short-term change or an escalation of conflict and only makes the unhealthy situation more destructive. (more resources for chronic neglect or abuse are available at [bradhambrick.com/selfcenteredspouse](http://bradhambrick.com/selfcenteredspouse)).

### What Are We Fighting About?

The first question is, “What is the nature of our disagreement?” Frequently couples are having two different conversations about the same subject. When this happens, it is usually not long before they are talking about two different subjects and can’t remember what started the now argument in the first place.

There are four types of disagreements that a couple can have. We will discuss them in the order from most to least difficult to resolve. This will help us answer our second question, “How significant is our disagreement?”

1. **Factual Differences:** When a couple does not agree on the facts related to their disagreement, an argument has degenerated to a point that trust has likely been compromised and neither person views the other as “being reasonable.”

Facts are not something a couple can “agree to disagree on.” Couples can disagree on definitions, values, and policies. But disagreeing on facts is an implicit accusation that your spouse is either lying or crazy.

2. **Differences in Definitions:** “Was what I said really disrespectful?... Did that action really communicate that I don’t love you?... When I did that I wasn’t trying to tell you we couldn’t have sex.” These kinds of statements reveal a difference of definition.

It shouldn’t be surprising that two people can interpret the same event/statement differently. But too often in marriage we are surprised (then offended) when our spouse doesn’t think like we do. We turn a moment of learning and honor into a moment of indignation and condemnation.

3. **Differences in Values:** “Is A worth B? Is this amount of time worth that benefit? Is this level of sacrifice worth that outcome? Is this fun activity worth that cost?”

These kinds of decisions often have significantly different implications for each spouse. That is why it is best to start these conversations with the question, “If we did A, how would B effect you?”

4. **Policy Differences:** Most disagreements end with an answer to the question, “What are we going to do?” or “How should we respond to having hurt one another?” It is important to see that these kinds of questions can only be effectively answered when there is agreement on facts, definitions, and values.

On differences of policy a couple will compromise (find a middle/third way), delay the decision (not always possible), or choose between available options. Navigating these moments will be dealt with more thoroughly in “Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage: Decision Making.”

A quick word on how to use these categories, don’t get too tedious. If you do, then marital conversations will begin to feel like business meetings. When you feel that you and your spouse are “not on the same page” work from the foundation (agreement on facts) to the top (agreement on policy). Identify the level where you do agree and then work toward the actual decision (i.e., policy).

#### Case Study:

“The nature of sin, you see, is war. Sin creates war—war with God, war with others, and war within yourself (p. 46)... Mercy doesn’t change the need to speak truth. It transforms our motivation (p. 82)... One thing I’ve learned, if I can avert a two-hour argument with two minutes of mercy, that’s a win for everybody involved (p. 87).” Dave Harvey in *When Sinners Say “I Do”*

#### How Should We Disagree?

So you’ve decided whether the issue should be addressed, what type of issue it is, and how significant the issue is... now what? In most cases it is fine to just have the conversation. But if you anticipate the conflict to be difficult to do well, it is important to think through how, when, and where to introduce the conversation.

We have developed a “Conversation Log” to help you think through how to have an effective conflict. While it is unlikely that you will use this document frequently, it helpful to have a visual for how to arrange the pieces of an effective conflict. It can serve as a checklist or protocol as you seek to implement what you’re learning.



### CONVERSATION LOG

Date: \_\_\_ / \_\_\_ / \_\_\_ Su M T W R F Sa Place: \_\_\_\_\_ Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Topic:

Difference in \_\_\_ Facts \_\_\_ Definitions \_\_\_ Values \_\_\_ Policy

Discussion Notes:

**Guidelines for Conversation:**

1. Pray before starting
2. Honor one another by fairly representing tone and content
3. Remain seated
4. Avoid body language that communicates anger or withdrawal
5. If you are at a loss for words simply say “thank you.”

**Progression of an Idol:**

I Desire: \_\_\_\_\_



I Demand By: \_\_\_\_\_



I Judge By: \_\_\_\_\_



I Punish By: \_\_\_\_\_

**Future Topics:**

Notes Continue on Back

Action Steps / Decisions:



### What Do We Need to Guard Against?

“Buried expectations can poison a relationship. Unresolved expectations often lead to demands, and demands lead to manipulation. One person maneuvers the other to meet the expectation, while the other tries to avoid it. Inevitably, this leads to isolation in marriage, with two people playing absurd but dangerous games in an attempt to establish control (p. 38-39).”  
Dennis Rainey (editor) in *Preparing for Marriage*

At the end of this examination we still have not answered the main question, one posed very well in James 4:1a, “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?” If we love each other, why do we argue? If we are willing to sacrifice for one another, why do little things come between us? Why do we need to be reminded of such common sense principles of communication, shouldn’t genuine love propel us naturally towards healthy communication?

The bold text outline (i.e., desire, demand, judge, punish) is adapted from Ken Sande’s book *Peacemaking for Families*.

**I Desire:** James 4:1b-2a provides the answer to these questions, “Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.” Simply put we engage in unhealthy communication because we do not get what we want and we listen to our desires more than we trust God or honor our spouse.

We cannot simply rephrase the question, “How can I communicate in such a way to ensure I get what I want?” That still centers our life on our desires (idolatry) and is a form of manipulation (sin).

Unless the question is, “How can I trust God and honor my spouse as I am honest about my desires?” then our desires (even the good ones) will be a destructive force in our marriage.

It is important to note that the Greek word for “desire” in James 4 does not carry the connotation of evil, sinful, or bad. It is a neutral term. The majority of unhealthy marital conflict occurs when we want good things too much. So the most important step in doing conflict well is identifying which desires most commonly “war within you.”

Power	Approval	Comfort	Image	Control	Dependence
Independence	Inclusion	Achievement	Prosperity	Work	Religion
Irreligion	Race / culture	A person	Family	Helping	Suffering
Privacy	Schedule	Job	Education	Fairness	A dream
Other: _____			Other: _____		

“Notice that the things that control your life may not be the things that you pursue but the things you avoid. For instance, rejection can be an idol in the same way as approval (p. 30).” Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*

**I Demand:** With the desire-need change in mindset it is easy to see how we justify our demanding behaviors.

What we often miss in this transition is the way that demanding a desire destroys our ability to enjoy it when/if we receive it.

**I Judge:** Once our desires take on the significance of a demand they begin to define the kinds of things that only God should define – right and wrong, worth my time and not worth my time, friend and foe, etc...

“Trait names and exaggerations work the same way and have a similar effect... Both, in effect, reduce a spouse’s identity to his or her sinful behavior. Trait names and exaggeration communicate, ‘You’re no more and no better than what you’ve just done’ (p. 125)... To sin is to treat people as objects (p. 98).” Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*

**I Punish:** What started so reasonable (legitimate desires grown too large) now becomes destructive (actions and words that harm the marriage) and embarrassing (words and actions we minimize because they're uncomfortable to admit).

We will look at ten ways that couples commonly punish during conflict. Each of these tactics (yes, we are implying that these are done for strategic benefit even when we do them instinctually) has varying degrees of intensity and multiple forms of expression. However, you should be able to use this list to capture a clear understanding of how you punish during conflict.

1. Exaggeration:
2. Misdirection:
3. Mind Reading:
4. Trait Names:
5. Shaming:
6. Defensiveness:
7. Double Bind:
8. Appeasement:
9. Physical or Emotional Distance:
10. Unhealthy Attachments:

### Closing

The great danger of this chapter is that you will merely “try harder” to implement “better teaching” as if the reason that you’ve managed conflict poorly in the past has been an information deficiency. We tend to love the kinds of lists and processes found in this chapter because we want to believe that these things will help us tame our tongues and lives.

“We never have followed the advice of the great teachers. Why are we likely to begin now? Why are we more likely to follow Christ than any of the others? Because He is the best moral teacher? But that makes it even less likely that we shall follow Him. If we cannot take the elementary lessons, is it likely we are going to take the most advanced ones? If Christianity only means one more bit of good advice, then Christianity is of no importance. There has been no lack of good advice for the last four thousand years. A bit more will make no difference. (p. 156).” *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis

**Read James 3:2-12.** Notice that our words do influence every area of our lives (v. 2). If it were possible to do conflict perfectly by following the guidelines of this chapter (or better writing) it would give us a perfect life. But after two images of how the tongue influences our lives (v. 3-6), James points out that our words are merely an expression of our hearts (v. 7-12). You cannot change the way someone does conflict without changing the core of their being. That is why the gospel is necessary for implementing what is taught in this chapter.

In the next two chapters we will consider the two key responses which show we are living a gospel-centered life and are vital to the health of every marriage: repentance and forgiveness.

## Chapter 5

# Repenting with Excellence

## Changing the Momentum of Your Marriage

**Plumb Lines:** These are the “sticky” statements that capture the core messages of this chapter.

- Repentance and forgiveness are the life sustaining inhale, exhale of a healthy marriage.
- Repentance says, “I value our marriage more than my pride.”
- “I’m sorry,” is for mistakes. “Will you forgive me,” is for sin.
- True repentance is followed by change or it is mere remorse.

**Memorize:** Matthew 7:3-5 (ESV), “Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.” As you memorize this passage reflect upon these key points:

- “Speck” – When we’re upset we suffer from “moral vision impairment” – other’s offenses appear larger than ours.
- “Log” – Jesus’ comparing log and speck isn’t meant to measure offenses but correct our disproportionate vision.
- “Hypocrite” – The failure to repent results in a second sin, one of character rather than action, hypocrisy.
- “First” – We repent by faith; our repentance is not guaranteed to be met with forgiveness or confession.
- “Then” – In a gospel-centered marriage our faith creates an environment in which confession is safe and natural.

### Presentation Notes

If we want a healthy marriage, we must begin to view repentance as a skill to master rather than inconvenience to avoid. Any marriage material that does not teach on repentance as a vital part of maintaining unity is dangerously naïve about the human condition.

You need to be able to read this introduction without a sense of dread. Repentance done well is incredibly romantic because it says, “I value our marriage more than my pride.” Moments of sacrifice are always powerfully bonding. When we sacrifice our pride through repentance it bonds us with the one to whom we are repenting. Of all the investments you can make in your marriage, this will likely be the most impactful.

“Self-centeredness by its very character makes you blind to your own [sin] while being hypersensitive, offended, and angered by that of others. The result is always a downward spiral into self-pity, anger, and despair, as the relationship gets eaten away to nothing (p. 57)... Only if we are very good at forgiving and very good at repenting can truth and love be kept together (p. 163).” Tim Keller in *The Meaning of Marriage*

“I have a theory: Behind virtually every case of marital dissatisfaction lies unrepented sin. Couples don’t fall out of love so much as they fall out of repentance (p. 96).” Gary Thomas in *Sacred Marriage*

### What is Repentance?

1. Address Everyone Involved.
2. Avoid If, But, and Maybe.
3. Admit Specifically.
4. Apologize (Acknowledge the Hurt).
5. Accept the Consequence.
6. Alter Your Behavior.
7. Ask for Forgiveness & Allow Time.

## A Case Study

For the purpose of illustration, let's give two examples of repentance. We will use the common example of being late for an event, in this case church. For this illustration assume the couple has children who see and experience the impatience and rudeness of the spouse for whom being on time was very important.

Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

[Spoken privately to other spouse] “I'm sorry if I lost my cool. I didn't mean to raise my voice. But I don't know what else to do when you guys make us late. I'll try to do better.”

Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

[Spoken to spouse and children] “It was wrong for me to raise my voice, call you guys lazy, question your commitment to God, and ask a bunch of rhetorical questions that couldn't be answered just to make you feel bad about being late.

Being on time is important to me and in this case too important. I care about what people think of me and was more concerned about walking into church late than loving my family well. I need to be careful not to judge and punish you guys based upon what is important to me.

I can see how my impatience can make going to church a stressful time and harder to focus on God.

I'd like for us to talk later about how we can manage our time getting ready for church better, but right now I would ask for your forgiveness. I want to show you that being on time is not more important than my family so we can have conversations about getting ready for church without a sense of fear or tension.”

“If you aren't really taking responsibility for what you did, then you aren't confessing sin (p. 176)... When you are able to describe yourself that accurately then you're going to be more successful at changing and your spouse is going to find it easier to forgive (p. 177)... Confessing sin is a proclamation of the gospel: a proclamation that there's a way back from failure, that there's rescue and healing from brokenness. We don't have to hide our sin from each other. The reverse is also true. Refusal to confess and forgive is a proclamation of hopelessness and despair. It proclaims that the only hope of overcoming sin is covering it in the same pointless way that Adam and Eve tried (p. 189).” Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*

## What Are the Marks of Genuine Repentance?

1. Decrease in Frequency of Sin:
2. Repenting More Quickly: A gospel-centered marriage will be marked by an ever decreasing interval between sin and repentance (first to God; then spouse).
3. A Change in Battleground: True repentance means that we are no longer battling our spouse, but our sin.
4. Having a Greater Sense of Need for Christ's Mercy and Grace:
5. Increase accountability and honesty: Repentance means that you do not need a “reason” to be honest and things do not have to be “that bad” in order for you to have accountability.
6. Not Responding to Difficulty by Indulging in Sin:
7. Learning to Love and Consider the Interest of Real People: Our repentance forces our expectations of others to become more realistic. As our expectations become more realistic we get to know our spouse for who God made them to be instead of who we'd like them to be.

## Chapter 6

### Uncomfortable Forgiveness

## Absorbing the Cost of Their Sin for His Glory and Our Good

**Plumb Lines:** These are the “sticky” statements that capture the core messages of this chapter.

- We never forgive more than we’ve been forgiven.
- Unforgiveness is the choice to define your spouse by his/her faults.
- Forgiveness is not a method to be learned as much as a truth to be lived.
- The possibility of a lasting, happy marriage can be measured by a couple’s willingness to forgive.

**Memorize:** Ephesians 4:31-32 (ESV), “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” As you memorize this passage reflect upon these key points:

- “Let” – We do have control over whether we choose to forgive; we can’t control the consequences of our choice.
- “All” – God’s will is that we free ourselves from bitterness by Christ’s payment for our sin and the sin against us.
- “Put away” – A difficult commitment of forgiveness is to quit entertaining ourselves with painful memories.
- “Be kind” – We often get caught trying to force the fruit (forgiveness) instead of planting the seed (kindness).
- “As God in Christ” – We are following in Christ’s footsteps of forgiveness not pioneering new territory.

#### Presentation Notes

C.S. Lewis hit the nail on the head when he wrote, “Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive (p.115; *Mere Christianity*).” We instinctively realize there are few gifts that we can give or receive which are more precious and costly than forgiveness.

While it may not be the most popular topic on the marriage seminar tours, there are few skills that predict the longevity and quality of a marriage like the ability of each partner to forgive.

Yet misconceptions and fears about forgiveness cause many people to be cynical about this essential part of a healthy marriage. Often those who struggle to forgive significantly misconstrue what it means to forgive.

“Counseling techniques cannot help people forgive any more than a physician can heal a person’s body. Counseling techniques, like a physician’s tool, are merely structures through which God sometimes sovereignly acts (p. 120).” Everett Worthington in “Helping People Forgive” in *Caring for People God’s Way*

#### What You Don’t Need to Forgive

Not everything that bothers or annoys us needs to be forgiven. Forgiveness is only for moral offenses. When we try to use forgiveness as the method to resolve relational irritants that are not moral in nature several bad things happen.

- We establish our preferences as the moral standard for our spouse – pride.
- We begin to feel as if we forgive more than we are forgiven – self-righteousness.
- We gain an increasingly negative view of our spouse – judgmental.
- Our marriage begins to be built around an elaborate number of rules – performance-based acceptance.
- We begin to feel as if God were asking too much of us – God-fatigue.

“We need to forgive sin and forbear strangeness, and sometimes you won’t even agree on which is which (p. 53).” John Piper in *This Momentary Marriage*

1. **Human Weakness:** Being clumsy, having struggles with a particular subject / aptitude, experiencing the limitation of a physical illness / injury, succumbing to the degenerative influence of aging, and similar experiences can negatively impact a marriage. These things can be annoying, fear-provoking, or upsetting, but they are not moral and, therefore, do not need to be forgiven.

The appropriate response to human weakness is compassion, patience, and assistance. A couple should be able to discuss the impact that each other’s weaknesses has on the other. Taking these conversations out of the “moral sphere” decreases the sense of shame commonly associated with our weaknesses. One of the most bonding aspects of marriage is creating a safe environment to acknowledge our weakness and be loved anyway.

2. **Differences in Personality or Perspective:** Being extroverted vs. introverted, optimistic vs. pessimistic, cautious vs. adventurous, concrete vs. abstract, and organized vs. fluid are all examples of difference in personality or perspective. These differences impact marriages in many ways, but they are not moral, and, therefore, do not need to be forgiven.

The appropriate response to differences in personality or perspective is appreciation, learning, and cooperation. Well-managed and humbly-discussed differences will be what provides a lifetime of enjoyment to your marriage. Pridefully condemning or demanding conformity will leave the two of you feeling defeated and rejected.

3. **Attempting to Do Something and Failing:** As a couple gets to know each other’s weaknesses, personality, and perspectives, they will (or, at least, should) begin to attempt ways of “doing life together” that challenge and stretch both of them. Frequently these love-motivated efforts will fail (or, at least, not achieve the desired result). These moments may elicit a sense of disappointment or shame, but they are not moral, and, therefore, do not need to be forgiven.

Responding to these moments with an appreciation that borders on celebration is an essential part of creating a marital culture where both spouses feel free to take healthy relational risks (i.e., flirting in new ways, repenting, willingness to try things your spouse enjoys, etc...). When we allow these moments to get caught up in the moral language of forgiveness we stifle the relational freedom we should be fanning into flames.

### Options Besides Forgiveness

**1. Approve/Affirm:** If we become a moral relativist and say, “Who am I to judge? I’m sure they had good intentions,” then the problem of forgiveness is solved. But with this alternative we begin to experience progressively destructive consequences for doing the “right” thing in response to our spouse’s sin.

**2. Ignore/Denial:** If we are unwilling to call wrong “right,” then we can just not call it anything and try to ignore that it exists. Our life motto becomes, “If I can’t change it, what good does it do to think about it?” We begin to realize that the first step in forgiveness is paying attention to what is wrong and giving sin the moral assessment it deserves (i.e., controlled anger).

**3. Avoid:** Denial-on-steroids is avoidance. We begin to surrender larger and larger pockets of our life (i.e., not going in the room where sin is committed, becoming ignorant of the family finances, failing to ask questions about important areas of life).

**4. Anger/Bitterness:** Actually this bad response is the closest to a good response. We rally ourselves to say, “I refuse to let evil win. I will conquer it or out last it.” Usually this has an initial positive response; enough that we convince ourselves that it “worked.” But then we get carried away by the power it took to correct the wrong (sinful anger or bitterness) or we realize our ability to prevent another’s sin by the force of our own will is too limited (cynicism).

“Christianity does not want us to reduce by one atom the hatred we feel for cruelty and treachery. We ought to hate them. Not one word of what we have said about them needs to be unsaid. But it does want us to hate them in the same way in which we hate things in ourselves: being sorry the man should have done such things, and hoping, if it is anyway possible, that somehow, sometime, somewhere, he can be cured and made human again (p. 106).” C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*

### What Forgiveness Is Not

Many points of resistance about forgiveness prove to be more myth or hyperbole than reality. While the reality of forgiveness is never easy, forgiveness is not as foolish or outlandish as our fears make it out to be. In this section we will look at five common misconceptions about what forgiveness is.

- Forgiveness is not containing hurt. Forgiveness is what allows us to express hurt as hurt rather than hurt as anger.
- Forgiveness is not letting someone off the hook.
- Forgiveness is not an excuse.
- Forgiveness is not forgetting or sentimental amnesia.
- Forgiveness is not necessarily restoration.

### What Is Forgiveness?

Forgiveness is the choice to no longer require someone to receive the punishment that their sin deserves. Forgiveness is an act of faith that the penalty for sin was sufficiently paid by Christ on the cross or will be paid by the sinner in Hell. Forgiveness is a willingness to treat the offender as gracious wisdom would allow given the offender’s response to their sin.

1. I will not think about this incident.
2. I will not bring up this incident again and use it against you.
3. I will not talk to others about this incident.
4. With the appropriate precautions in place, I will give you the benefit of the doubt again.

“You see, God never intended our bodies to hold up under the weight of unresolved conflict and bitterness (p. 67).... Forgiveness is not so much about us as it is about Him. Every opportunity you encounter to practice forgiveness is an opportunity to draw attention to the God who so delights to show mercy and to pardon sinners that He gave His only Son to make it possible (p. 214).” Nancy Leigh DeMoss in *Choosing Forgiveness*

### Emotions and Forgiveness

So what does forgiveness mean you are committing to do with your hurt, fears, other emotions and imagination? The last section covered the interpersonal commitments of forgiveness and explains how forgiveness was designed to restore relationships after moral offenses. But what about the personal well-being and peace of mind of the forgiver, doesn’t forgiveness have benefits for the forgiver as well?

Yes, it does. No, it's not necessarily selfish to ask. However, if we demand the benefits of forgiveness before we take the risk of forgiveness, we become trapped at the crucial point. In effect, we would be demanding to see the fireworks before we light the fuse.

In the section below we will trace the seven phase journey of forgiveness that is traveled by the one forgiving.

**1. The context of forgiveness is always hurt.** Forgiveness never begins as a pleasant experience. The emotions of pre-forgiveness are always raw. We never think this is a “good time” for us to need to forgive. The person we need to forgive is always the person who just sinned against us. We should never minimize the painful context in which forgiveness is granted.

**2. Hurt is an experience that does not remove itself.** Time does not heal moral offenses. If time heals an offense, then it was likely not one that merited forgiveness. We begin to feel trapped in the emotional bind; either we will forgive (which is “not fair”) or we will continually carry the weight of bitterness and mistrust. It feels like life is taking the side of our offender.

**3. Justice does not erase history (or emotion).** Neither consequences nor punishment provide the relief that we hope they would. Our offender loses the benefit of his/her offense and may learn valuable lessons, but these do not provide restitution to us. Even if we are rightfully given something as compensation for the offense, its value either seems to trifle the offense or come across as penance. Justice doesn't satisfy.

**4. Repentance does not erase history (some emotion).** Repentance is much better than justice at resolving the emotional pain of an offense. It now feels like apples are being traded for apples; prideful, self-centered response of sin for humbled, other-minded response of confession. But there is no sense of guarantee or control that would provide assurance that future pain could be avoided, so some emotional turmoil remains.

**5. Forgiveness means something must die.** We begin to realize exactly how devastating sin really is. Nothing short of death will stop it. Without being overly dramatic, we clearly see that something will die—love, trust, hope, a dream, dignity, respect... or Christ in their/our place. The only way to escape this maze of moral offense without losing someone or something we love is with a substitute.

**6. We chose who/what to send to the cross.** We begin to realize that the words “I forgive you” can be translated, “I apply Christ to your account. His death satisfies what your offense deserves in a way nothing else can... even my anger or revenge. I see in our relationship a picture of my attempt to be reconciled to God. My actions created a hopeless situation until Christ took my place so in our relationship I will allow Him to take your place.”

**7. We are reminded of peace greater than our pain.** In this memory, we find that forgiveness is not an action or a choice, but a dramatization or re-enactment of the gospel. As we experience the gospel in the emotional freshness (bad and good) of this experience, we are reminded of our journey from death to life (Eph. 2:1-10). We get another taste of hopelessness turned to victory and we remember (because life had distracted us) that our ultimate security and emotional safety is in Christ, not circumstances. This fresh realization places the offense back in its appropriate perspective; without minimizing the offense, it is swallowed up in the greatness of the gospel.

“For a long time I used to think this a silly, straw-splitting distinction: how could you hate what a man did and not hate the man? But years later it occurred to me that there was one man to whom I had been doing this all my life—namely myself. However much I might dislike my own cowardice or conceit or greed, I went on loving myself. There had never been the slightest difficulty about it. In fact the very reason why I hated these things was that I loved the man. Just because I loved myself, I was sorry to find that I was the sort of man who did those things (p. 117).” *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis



## Appendix A

### Dates from the Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage “Communication” Seminar

You will remember what you rehearse. You will rehearse what you enjoy. Marriage is meant to be enjoyed but requires rehearsing (i.e., remembering) the things that are most important. For this reason, each seminar in this series will provide a collection of dates that are designed to allow couples to review what they’ve learned. Two things you should note:

1. Each date can be taken multiple times. You and your spouse will change over time. Because you change, the same date, with the same person becomes a new experience. Marriage resists becoming stale when we enjoy anticipating and learning what God is doing in our spouse’s life and marriage next.
2. Create the habit of reinforcing key marriage lessons with playfulness and romance. Learn from the content and pattern of these dates. Pick a section of this seminar that was useful to your marriage and create a date that allows you to review those truths in an enjoyable way.

#### Listening Date

**Preparation:** Pick the type of listening from chapter two you most need to improve. Think about the recent examples where this type of listening would have blessed your marriage. Try to gain a better understanding of why this type of listening is hard or unnatural for you. Before the date tell your spouse the type of listening you want to grow in and ask them to think of conversations that would allow you to practice.

**Activity:** Do anything that is mutually enjoyable that isn’t mutually distracting (i.e., watching a movie together). While on your date ask your spouse what he/she wanted to talk about that would allow you to grow in your desired area of listening. As you are together use the “how to listen” skills from chapter two to engage in the conversation.

**Ending:** Verbally commit to continued growth as a listener in order to be a good student of your spouse and to enter his/her world as Christ loved us (Eph. 5:25) and entered our (i.e., the incarnation).

**Follow Up:** Mark your calendar for one month later. Better yet, ask your spouse to mark his/her calendar for one month later. After a month, discuss instances where intentional effort at this type of listening blessed the marriage.

**Goal for Date:** To view the significant part of dates as time spent together instead of merely an excuse for recreation or a meal where no one has to do the dishes. To practice and commit to the kind of conversational-engagement that will make your non-date interactions more fulfilling and a greater enhancement of your marriage.

#### Questions Date

**Preparation:** Make a list of the top 3 to 5 conversations that you and your spouse should have at least monthly. Make sure there is balance in your list (serious and playful; functional and dreaming). Chapter three can help you think of topics.

**Activity:** Create a fun way for each of you to reveal your “Top 5” list. Perhaps you could reveal one question each during each course of the meal. If there is an activity that can be connected with the conversation do that. For example, if one conversation is the spiritual health of your children, then you might go buy a family devotions book as you reveal that topic.

**Ending:** Decide how you will ensure these conversations are had regularly. You might use the “Tissue Box” idea from chapter three or create something that works better for your family.

**Follow Up:** Combine your two lists and post them in places you frequently see (i.e., bathroom mirror or car dash). As the “major questions” of life change, this is a good indicator that you are headed into a new season of life. Having these questions posted is not just a good reminder system; it also draws these season of life changes into conversation.

**Goal for Date:** To make “meaningful conversation” less intimidating and overwhelming. While there are so many things that you could talk about, it is important to narrow the number of things that are essential to talk about.

### Conflicted Date

**Preparation:** Have the courage to put “conflict done right is highly romantic” to the test. Use the material from chapter four to identify a conflict where it was clear you acted/responded poorly. Use the material from chapter five to help you talk about your shortcomings in a healthy way.

**Activity:** Before the date read Acts 3:19-20 together, then each of you confess to the other how your sin impacted the other, and ask for forgiveness (if you have not already). After forgiving each other, pray together and thank God for a marriage where these conversations can be had (preventing a marriage of denial or bitterness). Use the date to celebrate the gift of marriage and the goodness of God in providing the gospel to protect His good gift.

**Ending:** Remind each other of the good things in/about your marriage that are worth protecting by doing conflict with honor. Allow this to remind you that “honor in conflict” is about more than “not being bad;” it is about protecting something that is precious and valuable.

**Follow Up:** In the coming days and weeks point out when your spouse does a good job at the things he/she confessed before the date. It is a great habit to begin catching each other doing things right and growing instead of just getting things wrong and slipping into old habits.

**Goal for Date:** To learn that there is a third way of conflict besides avoidance or conquering. There is honor, and honor in conflict can do more good than dishonor in conflict does harm. This is an essential conviction for a couple to hold if they are going to consistently pursue the “marital win” over the “personal win.”

## Appendix B

### Small Group Accountability Questions From the “Communication” Seminar

How do small marital problems become big marital problems? There are two primary ways: (1) they get ignored, and (2) they are dealt with alone. Ask yourself these questions about any case of divorce or chronic marital unhappiness you know:

If that couple had addressed their struggle early on with the love and perspective of fellow Christians, how different would their life be now? How many generations would be blessed? How much pain and suffering would have been alleviated? How much sin and destruction would have been averted?

The condition of Christian marriage is a church problem. When the church does not fulfill the one another commands of the New Testament, every marriage in that church suffers (even the good ones). Excellent, crisis-based pastoral counseling (no matter how effective) will not have near the impact as small groups regularly asking one another simple, fundamental questions about “Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage.”

For this reason, every seminar in this series will contain a series of accountability questions to be used in the small group life of our church. It is suggested that at least once per month any small group with married couples divide men and women for the prayer time and ask one of the questions below. These questions are written in the first person plural (i.e., we, us, our) to imply that every person in the room should have an answer.

#### Chapter 1

- Have you taken the time to get to know and appreciate how your spouse communicates?
- How well do you honor your spouse in the midst of a conflict?

#### Chapter 2

- Do you value listening by putting intentional effort in enhancing this skill?
- What are the greatest challenges / temptations you face in listening well to your spouse?

#### Chapter 3

- Are you reserving time for a healthy amount of day-to-day communication in your marriage?
- Do you have conversations in the variety of areas discussed in this chapter? Which do you tend to neglect?

#### Chapter 4

- Do you show wisdom in discerning what subjects to address and when to address them?
- What are the driving desires that most commonly lead you to communicate sinfully in your marriage?

#### Chapter 5

- Are there things for which you need to repent, but are resisting doing so?
- Which of the seven elements of repentance do you tend to neglect when you acknowledge a fault?
- Which of the marks of genuine repentance do you tend to neglect after you have repented?

#### Chapter 6

- Are there things you need to forgive, but are resisting doing so?
- What misconception of forgiveness do you hold on to as a reason not to have to forgive?
- Which of the four promises of forgiveness is most difficult for you to keep?

**Rebuttal:** Wow! That seems really personal for a small group discussion.

**Response One:** It is not more personal than a divorce is public. And, it is not more personal than the Bible calls for us to be transparent about our sin.

**Response Two:** Once you have done this for three months and seen the benefits to your marriages, you will laugh at the defensive rebuttal. Accountability is only scary like swimming lessons are scary for a child. Putting your face in the water is only intimidating until you do it. Then you realize a whole new world of freedom and fun awaits.

## Appendix C

### What Do I Do Now?

A plumb line of the Summit counseling ministry is, “We don’t do events; we create resources.” That means you should be asking yourself, “What can or should I do with this information now?”

We have created a series of brief videos that answer that what-now question from several different perspectives. Each of these can be found at:

**[www.bradhambrick.com/whatnow](http://www.bradhambrick.com/whatnow)**  
**[www.bradhambrick.com/GCMcommunication](http://www.bradhambrick.com/GCMcommunication)**

#### Personal Study or Small Group

Question: I’ve been to several of the Summit counseling seminars and notice there appears to be a couple of different kinds. You frequently recommend studying them as a small group or with a friend. That seems like a great idea, but since I haven’t done that before I’m not quite sure how to start something like that. Do you mind giving me guidance?

#### Pursue Personal Counseling

Question: After attending this seminar I realized I would like to pursue counseling to help me grow in this area. It sounded like there are several different options available. Would you mind explaining to me what those are and how I could connect with the one that best serves me need?

#### Leveraging My Workplace

Question: I’ve heard rumors that I’m supposed to be able to use the Summit counseling seminars to leverage my workplace for gospel influence. My first impression is that it sounds awkward and intrusive; like I’m telling people they’ve “got issues” or “need help.” But I’m also worried about putting up Christian material that might be offensive to some people who visit my workplace. But I would at least like to hear what you’ve got to say. How would this work?

#### As a Professional Counselor

Question: I’m a licensed counselor (LPC) and came across the Summit counseling seminars. I’m excited to see the church addressing these kinds of subjects, and I’m curious how you might see someone in my position (or a LCSW or LMFT) using the materials. I can see recommending them to my clients who are open to an overtly Christian aspect to their counseling, but it seems like there could be more uses than just counseling homework. Could you share your thoughts on how those in private practice might use these resources?

Our goal in Summit counseling is to (1) equip the church to care for one another and our community with excellence; (2) provide quality counseling services that allow our people to get involved in the lives of others with confidence – knowing additional, experienced care is available to come alongside them if needed; and (3) create ways for our members and other Christians in our community to leverage their workplace and careers for greater gospel impact in their spheres of influence.

We hope this seminar and these videos give you a vision for how this can happen and stirs a passion in you to be a part of God’s work of redeeming and restoring hurting individuals and families.