

Marriage Foundations Manual

Freedom Christian Fellowship

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Foundations

Marriage was created by God as a beautiful thing. Most likely, you are reading this guide because you are interested in starting or developing your marriage. Some of us have romantic images of marriage with princes and princesses riding off in to the sunset, while others of us have horrible images from the past which make it almost impossible to think rightly about marriage. Regardless of which, few people enter into marriage with their eyes really opened to understand what they are undertaking. This brief guide is written to provide the essential things that a person should understand before joining their lives together permanently with someone else. While we want you to enjoy your courtship, this guide takes a no nonsense approach designed to help you identify problem areas and either fix or end relationships that may be headed for trouble.

Marriage is a good thing. The Bible teaches us that marriage is something to be desired. “He who finds a wife, finds a good thing.” God placed within each of us a strong desire for a mate. If you find the right mate and work at your relationship, it can be a lifelong blessing to you and to those around you.

Marriage is for life. Marriage is until “death do us part.” If you enter into with any other expectation, you haven’t fully entered into marriage. The foundation of the deep relationship you can have with your spouse is that no one is leaving. The most important growth moments in your marriage will only happen when you take away the out clause and commit to fight through regardless. This does not mean that there are not Biblical situations where a divorce is warranted, it simply means that a healthy couple never considers this option.

Marriage is work While both partners are seeking companionship, neither fully appreciates that sacrifices they will make and changes they will undergo in order to have a successful relationship. You will gain a companion, but you will each lose some of your freedom. The person you marry will be around you

almost continuously for the rest of your life. Those who enter marriage thinking mostly about their own needs will eventually reach a crisis point. Whatever your starting point, to get from where you are to having a love relationship for life will require change and sacrifice.

Men and women are different We live in a generation that is recovering from a powerful myth: that men and women are basically the same. In reality, we are different in important ways: physically, emotionally and spiritually. These differences are not just the result of our upbringing, they are the result of our God given design. It important that we recognize and value our innate differences. They are the reason we were attracted to another in the first place! Marriage is about a man and a woman coming together and becoming a single unit together. This is a beautiful process of leaving some things behind and gaining others.

Marriage is supposed to bless others. Marriage is not just about our needs, but it is ultimately about meeting the needs of others. This is first serving and caring about your spouse, and it is the two of you serving and blessing the outside world. The two of you will go on the mission of life together and fulfill the mission of God together. The health you develop in a lifelong relationship with another person also becomes a ministry to others who need to see and learn relational health.

The natural expression of marriage is having children. When God created us, he said “be fruitful and multiply.” Furthermore, he designed it so that when a man and woman are together, they naturally have children. Marriage is not just about having a friend and partner, it is about raising and caring for the next generation.

Qualifications for Marriage

Although anyone over 18 can legally enter into a marriage, that does not mean that everyone is really ready for the responsibilities it entails. You must be able to run your own life successfully before you can hope to also have another person in the mix. These basic qualifications are indicators of whether you are ready to take the step.

You must be a disciple. When you are becoming established with the Lord, it is a time to give Him full attention until the major character issues in your life are resolved and your faith is firmly established. This does not mean that you need to be perfect or super holy in order to get married. It simply means that you need a track record of putting God first, and a clear understanding of what it means to follow Jesus.

You must be responsible. If you cannot manage your own life, you are not ready to manage a family. Do you have a car? Do you know how to find work and hold a job? Do you keep your room or apartment neat and in order? How is your general financial picture? If you are living from paycheck to paycheck with creditors chasing you down, adding another person into the picture is a recipe for disaster. What about the other aspects of your life?

You must have healthy relationships with others. Look around yourself. Do you have healthy relationships with friends, family and others? Would they agree? Have you learned to live successfully with a roommate? Your marriage will stretch your relationship skills to the max. When the pressure is on in a relationship, do you have the skills to work through the problem or do you just bail out of the relationship. Or worse, do you attack them either behind their backs or to their face. If you cannot conduct successful relationships with friends, you will not be able to have a successful relationship with your wife. Think about the longest relationships you've had with friends and how those have gone. How did they end and why?

Although you are having magic feelings about that special someone, you must realize that those will eventually wear off and that it is actually harder to communicate with someone of the opposite sex who has expectations and can't be sent away. What about previous relationships with the opposite sex? How did they end? Do you accept responsibility for your part why they ended that way? Have you changed in those areas? If you could not conduct a healthy relationship with one person, you are likely to fail in conducting a healthy relationship with the next person.

You will have to have the skill to work through the issues that arise in marriage. The first and most important skill is taking responsibility for your own faults and being willing to change. If you are not willing to change, you aren't ready to get married. You will ruin someone else's life, and probably your own in the process.

You must be ready for absolute commitment. In God's eyes marriage is an absolute commitment for life. Are you up to this commitment, or are you holding on to the "I can back out" card in the back of your mind. Until you are ready to say "til' death do us part" and mean it, you are not ready for marriage. You must be ready to turn aside from past relationships and anything else that stands in the way of making your marriage work, and you must be ready to fight through the challenging years that will come after the excitement wears off.

Finding a Mate

There are a lot of teachings out there about how to find a mate, each variation claiming Biblical support. The Bible presents a number of examples of marriage: Isaac and Rebecca, Boaz and Ruth, Jacob and Rachel, Jacob and Leah, Moses and Zipporah are just a few. Each of these stories is unique. The story of how you find your mate and your marriage will be unique too. What is important is that in the midst of it that you honor God. There are three principles which are central to any approach which honors God.

Dating relationships must be entered into with a mind toward marriage. When a man pursues a woman, he must pursue her with the intent of marrying her. The process is about two people getting to know one another better until they know for certain that they do or do not want to be married. If they discover that they are not compatible for marriage, they should break the relationship immediately.

Physical Contact should be limited. It goes without saying that all kinds of sex acts are not appropriate until after the wedding ceremony. However, many Christians who otherwise are pursuing God and believe in abstinence feel that it is OK to make out, as long as they can control themselves. In reality, most people find it very difficult to control themselves once the kissing starts. More fundamentally, however, the problem is not what making out leads to, but for the fact that *it is itself a highly sexually charged activity*—exactly the kind of activity that God reserves for a married couple. If you found someone making out with your spouse, would you consider it OK? God establishes this principle for your own good. The kinds of physical contact you have before marriage are not actually good for the long term health of your relationship. In addition, they hide your faults under a sea of emotion. Instead of seeing your situation clearly, your hormones take over and cloud out your judgment. The act of denying your fleshly desires is part of making a healthy decision.

A couple must be married by their own choice. Just as it is each person's choice to follow Christ, both the man and the woman must make their own decision to enter into the relationship. It is only a man and a woman that stand at the altar and make promises before God for life. Family, friends, and pastors are important guides in helping the man and the woman to make the right choice, but a successful marriage is based on the two of them choosing together to enter into the marriage covenant and everything that it means. Ultimately we must make a choice to marry or not to marry. If we feel coerced, this can lead to disaster. Making the choice to be together in the first place is the first pillar of making the choice to stay together every day for the rest of your life.

Christians are often confused by “words” and “confirmations from God,” leadings and other spiritual indicators about their marriage. Marriage is such a big decision that we want it to be divinely sanctioned. The reality about all of these kinds of indicators is that they are highly subject to your feelings for the other person, and by the spiritual environment you are in. I never consider it enough to have a divine indicator of a marriage. In fact, this is often a red flag because it is often used as cover for a more fundamental problem. It is much more important that you have made a sober assessment of your compatibility with the other person and what a life together would look like.

While God will help us make the right choice, the most healthy way to look at marriage is as a choice you are making. If you choose the wrong person, you will have much difficulty, and if you choose the right person, things will be much better.

Pitfalls

If you follow the fundamental principles outlined above for finding a mate, you will avoid a wide variety of issues, such as mistaking lust for love, men who will not commit, and loveless marriages. There are other common “pitfalls” to be aware of as well.

Being over-eager. Either because of emotional or physical needs, some people are so eager to be married that basically everyone they see is a potential spouse. The dangers for this person are the possibility of marrying basically anyone that shows interest, or the probability of a large number of heart-breaking relationships. If you are super eager, you should listen carefully to those who love you about who you are with. In addition, you should consider giving God a time in your life where you are only pursuing Him before you start to pursue a spouse.

Not taking any initiative. On the other end of the spectrum are those who are not proactive enough in the process. This is reinforced by some teachings popular today emphasize that “God will bring” our spouse. This leaves people waiting for a spouse to parachute in out of nowhere and God to speak. The fact is that in order to get married, someone is going to take initiative. It will either be you, your potential spouse, or an older figure that is trying to get you married. If you want to be married, you need to take action.

Women “waiting” to get married. The popular teaching given especially to women today is that they should build up their career, be sufficient and experience the world before marriage. What is never pointed out is that this choice to build up your own independent life is just that – a choice to build up a life by yourself that is hard for a man to walk into. Many women find themselves at 40, willing to marry almost anyone because they passed up the golden opportunity to be married in their 20s in order to build their own life.

Strong willed people seeking out weak willed people. Those who dominate others will look for someone they can easily dominate. This can be a man who is domineering looking for a woman who will not challenge him. Harder to spot is the woman who has a strong will. She is seeking out a man whom she feels is safe and will not assert himself over her, sometimes while proclaiming that he is the leader. Both of these are dangerous situations.

Things You Must Resolve

Before you take a vow before God, there are important issues you need to resolve. By resolving them up front, no one feels misled later when disagreements arise. At the risk of sounding too much like a business, this mutual understanding is like the terms of the marriage “contract.” Resolving these up front can save great heartache later.

Your understanding of following Jesus. The only marriage that pleases God is one where Jesus is first. This means that both people must be fully committed to following Him in whatever way he would lead them. There cannot be anything that is “off the table” in advance. If this means being a missionary, a church planter, a minister, or anything else, both parties need to be ready to say “yes” to God.

Of course on the surface it’s easy for Christians to agree with this. Beneath the surface, however, each of you have an understanding of what it means to follow God. What kinds of church are you assuming you will attend? What is your understanding of the Holy Spirit? Do you think successful Christians are missionaries or business executives? Are you waiting for the rapture, or trying to take over the government? First you need to confirm that you are both willing to “do anything” for God and talk through the areas where that would be hard for you, but secondly, you should talk through your understanding of what it actually means to follow God.

Leadership in the home. Family leadership is one of the most challenging issues to work through. On the one hand, we recognize that the Bible teaches that a man is head of the house. On the other hand we live in a culture that teaches us that men and women are the same. What does it mean when the Bible tells the woman to “submit” to her husband?

In contemporary terms, it is important that before any couple enter into marriage, a woman be willing to follow her husband’s lead. If

you do not want to follow the man you want to marry, you either did not find the right man, or you are not ready for marriage. He should be someone you respect, and whose counsel you want to hear.

On the other end of the spectrum, it is easy to end up with a false or outward submission. In this case, the woman has no real say in the direction of the marriage, and simply obeys whatever her husband says on every issue. She serves constantly and may even learn to never express an opinion.. This is not healthy for either the man or the woman, and is not what God had in mind. Real leadership is by consent. The man needs to solicit and welcome the input of his wife. He needs to talk to her about her perspective, be willing to hear and to change his opinion, before taking the couple in a new direction. Agreement needs to be on a heart level, not just an agreement that one person has no opinion.

Third Parties. Your marriage is between you and your spouse. When one of you is holding onto someone else, it creates a “third party” in the relationship. There are several common ways for this to happen.

First, you may have had close friends of the opposite sex or “old flames.” These people can no longer have access to the intimate places of your life, or they will form a threat to your marriage. It is important that the skeletons all come out of the closet in the dating relationship. Everything needs to be on the table. Do you have children? An STD? Someone who wants to kill you? Anything that can enter into your relationship together needs to be put right up front. If you have a lot in your past, you need to work through that together and be sure that you are ready to enter into the future.

Second, are outside allegiances. If you have an unbreakable allegiance with anything other than Jesus and your spouse, it is a threat to your marriage. If the church or church movement you are a part of is more important than your spouse, your marriage will be threatened. Jesus makes clear that this is even true of your family. He says “a man shall leave his father and mother and

cleave to his wife.” Both man and woman must separate from their parent’s leadership, and take a new direction with each other. You cannot allow your parent, friends, or counselors ideas or presence to interfere with the sacred space you are building together.

Finally, children can actually become third parties in your relationship. If your love relationship with your spouse is not addressing your fundamental needs, you may turn to children to meet these needs. This will create a wedge in the relationship which will damage everyone involved.

Money. Money one of the most challenging issues for couples to deal with. Otherwise great relationships can be destroyed by issues around money. The goal is that you that you hold your possessions in common. There will not be two separate bank accounts, and two separate debt structures. If you are in debt, your spouse is too. If you are rich, your spouse is too. If one person is particularly irresponsible with money, it may not make sense to hold you money in common at first, but it needs to be a priority and goal to work toward. Secondly, you need to live on a budget of some kind. This means that you need to understand how much money you have to live on, and how much each of you can expect to spend in certain areas.

Career. If you both have a career, one of you almost certainly going to end up making sacrifices for the other. Or else you will find yourselves going in different directions. Regardless of whose career is first, the marriage itself must be in front of all. Whose career is going to win? Is the wife going to quit her job and stay home? Or maybe one of you has a very important career in something like government. Are both of you willing to follow that career around to support it?

Home Environment. The Home Environment tends to be a very important area for women. Everything from where you live to the things that make you feel comfortable, to garden and the drapes. The amount of mess you tolerate, and your sleeping and eating

habits. Although these are usually things that can be worked through after marriage, it is important that you have a general conversation to make sure that your attitudes are compatible. If one person hates the cold, and the other hates the warm, if one hates the city, and the other hates the country, it can create friction. In addition, you should discuss how much say you each have in how the home actually feels. Husbands, if your wife chooses to be a “homemaker” she deserves deference in “making the home.”

Parents. Although you must form your own house outside of your parents roof and leadership, both of you are still in an important sense marrying each other’s family. Women, you will marry your mother-in-law and her expectation for her grandchildren. Men, you will marry your wife’s family and her sense of obligation to them. As long as you have resolved to be “your own” family, these things can be managed. Before you jump in, however, be sure to look across the aisle.

Children. How many children do you expect to have? Do you expect to use birth control? What kind? Do you plan on starting to have children right away or waiting? These are very important questions. If one of you is expecting a large family and does not get it, this could be devastating. If one of you is expecting a small family and end up with more, you may feel embittered. Resolve up front that you have compatible attitudes about children. Closely related to this are your attitudes about schooling. Do you believe that homeschooling is the only Biblical option? What about private school? Public school?

Growing in Marriage

Understanding and appreciating differences is the beginning of marriage, not the end. Your marriage will move through a growth process.

In the Beginning

When you are first married, you normally begin with a great deal of passion toward one another. With time, this passion tends to wane as you get more familiar with one another. You become family. Romance often involves mystery and masks, marriage removes that mystery and mask and we see each other as we truly are. As part of this you will encounter things about each other that you find frustrating. How you respond to these things you discover leads into the next phase of your marriage.

Challenge

Some of the things you find frustrating about your spouse are things that you must learn to accept as being part of “who they are.” Some things between you are areas where you will each have to make small accommodations for one another in order to show love and respect. Some areas are places where one of you will need major growth to take place in order to be healthy. Both of you will be challenged by the process of communicating about these things, and you may also be challenged to by the giving you will need to do in order to make it work.

The idea that you should not “try to change” your spouse is sometimes misused. While you must appreciate them for who they are, and not try to literally make them into (the person of your preferences) a different person, the process of being married can and should be one of both of you changing and influencing one another toward God and toward one another. Therefore, in a way, marriage itself is a process of changing the other person. This doesn't happen by constantly correcting them or pressuring them, however. It happens by honest communication and patience. (It happens by your partner's response to your communication, out of love for you). It is an art to learn to talk about what you need, and

how the other person affects that, without blaming them. It is also an art to learn to listen to the other person when they share what they need. In ability to take responsibility for your own actions, to change and to listen to the other person are usually at the core of all marriage problems. This is why you are much better off if you can learn to do this with friends before trying to do it with someone of the opposite sex who is always there.

Many couples fail in this stage. Once they find out “what is wrong” with the other person they lose their attraction to their mate, and begin to seek someone else. The problem is that half of “what is wrong” is you! If you run to someone else, you will simply find yourself repeating the same cycle with them. Your very best option is to work through things with your spouse, so you can both grow and be changed.

Work

Once everything comes out on the table and you both commit to working it out, you will go through a process of working on things. During this time you will have ups and downs as you develop resolutions to conflicts, and grow personally. You will have to learn how to handle arguments successfully and grow from the results. For some couples this phase is harder and longer than for others, but if you are completely honest with one another, it will usually take years, not months as God grows you together. In this stage, many couples simply decide that rather than change, they will agree to disagree. Rather than grow together they develop an agreement to be apart at some distance. These couples can often have long marriages but they miss the best part because they were unwilling to embrace the process to get there. When the marriage itself is not fulfilling its proper function, the spouse will usually develop “alternatives.” This may be another person of either gender, or an activity.

Maturity

Those couples that learn to listen and change in response to their spouse will find themselves deeply enriched in every way. Men develop more “feminine” strengths such as nurture and stability,

and women develop more “masculine” strengths such as firmness and adventure. Moreover, each will shed their rough edges because your spouse will confront them and you will change in response. As your marriage reaches maturity, arguments will be much less frequent and much less severe. You begin to reap the fruit of all the hard work you put in and you may experience something like a second “honeymoon” phase, where you fall in love all over again with your spouse. This is because over time you have removed all of the barriers that were between you, you have centered on life’s goals together, and you are genuinely meeting one another’s needs on a regular basis. In addition, you experience a deep and abiding sense of friendship and bond because you have gone through many of life’s struggles together. This kind of mutual support makes you closer. This is the part of marriage that most people are dreaming of when they start, yet many never make it here because of the effort involved.

Understanding Differences

During your courtship, you will often feel like you are so compatible and that you are totally the same in all of the important ways. This may be because you have found someone who shares important values with you that others in the past have not. It may also be because you are afraid of breaking the spell by emphasizing those areas where you are different.

Men and Women. As we said at the beginning, men and women are different. Although our culture treats us the same in almost all respects, our natural thinking and communication patterns are fundamentally different. While, there are no labels that can be successfully applied to all men, or all women, there are many generalizations that help us understand one another. In our culture, it is considered almost taboo to discuss these differences, but it is essential that we do so in order to fully understand one another. There are several good books on this subject:

Personality Differences. In addition, to gender related differences, we of course all have different personalities. Some people thrive on interaction with others. Others need time to themselves. Some wear their emotions on their sleeve, while others keep them inside. You will need to learn to understand how you are different from one another. Ironically, understanding and appreciating one another's differences will actually lead you in the long run to becoming more like one another! Gary Chapman has a couple of good books related to this topic.

Cultural Expectations. In addition, you and your spouse come from a different culture. Each of you were taught different things about everything from how to put the toilet paper on, to what kind of church is good. You should recognize that for all of the hard work you may do up front, you each have different hidden expectations about life. This is normal. Men have a tendency to see things in black and white, while women are often more comfortable with gray areas. Men, it is important that you not define everything in terms of "God's way" vs. "her way." Women,

it is important that you not judge your husband for thinking things should be a certain way. You need to both look at it as finding the will of God together on the big things, and finding ways that work on the small things. Afford your spouse enough respect that he or she is also seeking God for right way to do things. Marriage is full of moments where you find yourself surprised that “anyone” could do things as differently as your spouse.

Conflict

When you are in the romantic phase of your relationship it is sometimes easy to believe that you will never argue. In reality, every healthy couple will argue. Some people never witnessed their parents arguing, but there can be many reasons for this. Some parents make a choice not to argue in front of the children, sometimes one person was too passive, and sometimes the couple had already work through major conflicts before the children were old enough to appreciate it. If you do not embrace conflict as a healthy part of your marriage, you will stunt the growth of your marriage, and at least one person will end up suffering while the other gets their way.

Commitment to Speak. This means that the first principle of conflict is simply an agreement to be honest. We both have to agree not to “stuff” our opinions and feelings. This is not a form of giving. Giving takes place when we express our opinions and feelings the other person understands them, and one or both of us agree to change accommodate those feelings.

Commitment to Resolve. Whatever conflict arises, you must be committed from the outset that it is not a threat to your marriage itself. Threatening or even thinking about divorce is destructive. This is the “nuclear option” that must be avoided. Conflict is about removing obstacles that keep you apart so you can come back together, not about going apart. Refusing to threaten divorce promotes security and safety in your marriage.

This commitment to resolve is important in the short run too. The Bible teaches us to not to “let the sun go down on our anger.” This is a very wise principle to apply in your marriage. When you allow your anger and separation to continue for long periods of time you are hurting each other as well as yourself. In the early phases of your marriage, not going to be on your anger may keep you up late at night, but it means you will start the next day together and not apart. This simple principle closes the door on the enemy.

Exaggeration. During an argument couples are tempted to say things like “you always” and “you never.” Such statements are not only not helpful and accusatory, they are rarely if ever true. Stop yourself or your partner if one of you makes a categorical statement like this. Be accurate. Something like, “You did this yesterday, and the day before” is usually more realistic.

In addition, in the midst of an argument, it is easy to skew the story to make your side seem more reasonable. Instead of saying “I am upset because I had to wait 15 extra minutes” it is common to say “I’ve been waiting here half an hour!” Your partner might then say “It’s only been 10 minutes!” Instead of dealing with the facts, you are both distorting them to make your argument seem stronger. The more accurate you can be, the less serious your argument will be.

Responsibility and Forgiveness. Ultimately the resolution to an argument happens when one or more people take responsibility for what they did to cause it. If your marriage is healthy this should not always be the same person. In reality, if you had an argument, you were both at fault. Jesus would not have gotten in the flesh and yelled back at your spouse, so you do not have an excuse to either. You will both need to learn to take responsibility for everything you did wrong from beginning to end and to apologize for it. Apology is often difficult because you can’t get over the other person’s sin, and you do not want to face your own. And you do not want to give in and be vulnerable. Until you both learn to take responsibility for what you did wrong, and apologize your arguments will continue. When your spouse does apologize, you should be quick to receive this apology and offer one yourself. This does not mean that you should not talk more about the issue, but it means that you have to stop being angry with the other person about it.

Judgments and Change. Every troubled marriage that I have encountered follows the same pattern – two people think that the other person is the problem with the marriage. They are able to list

all of the faults of the other person, but have done little in the way of real change themselves. They have begun to think that maybe they “married the wrong person” and that what they really need is someone else. Your posture in the marriage has to be one of continual service and blessing. Only when you both have the desire to serve and bless the other person can you experience long term happiness.

Usually when one person is willing to adapt and change the marriage will continue but only one person will be happy. Marriage is a relationship between two people and so the problems in the marriage always involve mutual responsibility. Nothing gives your spouse the excuse to cheat, for example, but you can make it easier or harder for them based on how you treat them. Many times the situations are very interconnected. For example, you think your spouse is too cautious, they think you are too impulsive. The more impulsive you are, the more cautious they become, and vice versa. Only when one of you changes can the cycle which is pushing you apart change.

Therefore pointing the finger at your spouse in a marriage usually only serves to demonstrate that you do not understand the first principle of marriage which is “learn how to change yourself.” The more you become like God, the better your marriage will be. This doesn’t mean become an abused doormat. It means being willing to hear God about your role in changing any conflict. In every conflict you must ask yourself, “what did I do to contribute to this situation,” and “what do I need to do to change this.”

Loving One Another

Marriage is amazing because God created the man and woman differently, but yet differently in a way that was designed to deeply fulfill the other person. Being different is what can make the marriage frustrating, but it is also what can make it wonderful.

At the fundamental level being different is not about which way you like the toilet paper on the roll, it is about what you think life is all about, and how you give and receive love.

Why You Give Love

Whether we realize it or not, most of us give love expecting love in return. While it is easy to dismiss this as selfish, God designed it such that when someone shows you love you want to love them in return. Therefore, in the positive and healthy relationships in your life you experience a two way flow of giving and receiving of love.

The problem is that if you *only* give when you receive, you will suck the other person dry. Eventually your expressions of “love” no longer feel loving your spouse they feel selfish, because they are in fact selfish. In addition, when your spouse is unkind to you will not have any ability to respond with love back to them. Since you only give in order to receive, when you are not receiving, you are unable to give. Such relationships will continue for a while until one partner is no longer feeling loved, at which point neither one will be able to give love.

Some people never give emotionally in relationship at all, or give very little. They are simply content to receive all the time. In fact it is very common for one person who gives a lot to marry someone who receives a lot. While this fit will last for a while, eventually the person who is doing all of the giving will feel empty inside from never receiving, they will stop giving, and the two will become alienated.

The beginning of marital love is giving is when you both desire to give for the other person’s benefit. You desire to give to your

husband or wife what he or she needs and wants most. While there will definitely be some learning and death to self involved, marriage is not designed to be about martyrdom. Giving the person what they want should not be so miserable that you loathe to do it, an overwhelming sacrifice. If you are experiencing this, something is wrong in the marriage. Of course one thing that could be wrong is that your spouse is too demanding and only takes, but that is not the most common situation. The more common situation is that you have both not developed “the cycle of love.”

Biblical Love

As Christians we know that true love gives expecting nothing in return. Yet we sometimes confuse this as the ideal. The Bible also says that “we love because he first loved us.” The nature of love is that it is designed to be given and received in a cycle. The ideal is not for us to give and give and give, but never get anything back. That doesn’t make for any kind of good relationship, much less a good marriage. Getting nothing in return when we give is what happens when the other person is unable or unwilling reciprocate. When both people are fulfilling every part of the Cycle of love, then a cycle of increasing giving and receiving ensues. When one partner fails, then the other continues to give love and the cycle is not broken. When we talk about being “in love” with someone, this is simply a way of describing the way we feel when someone has given to us in such deep and significant ways that our emotions are captivated. People think that not being “in love” is just a factor of time or boredom, but in reality, if your partner does not seem “in love” with you any more, it is because there is a breakdown in either your giving or their receiving of love. Someone who is “in love” is willing to do radical acts of devotion for the other person because their needs have been met. In other words, ministering to your partner’s deepest needs gives them the inner resources to show you love even when great sacrifice is required.

The Cycle

The Cycle of Love is when both people are giving what the other person wants, and both are also acknowledging the gift in a way

that makes the other feel loved in return. It is difficult to develop this cycle because it can break at four different points – both people must be able to give and receive love in a way that promotes more love. This tends to occur naturally in the romance phase of a relationship, and then break down as you enter the challenge phase, as you reach maturity you should be able to maintain a continuous flow of love between you. The steps to building this cycle must happen on both ends of the relationship.

Step 1. Both of you must learn what the other person needs.

We naturally give what we want to receive, not what the other person wants to receive. You have to learn and become sensitive to what the other person likes and understands to be loving before you do anything. Giving them lots of what you want from them will ultimately frustrate and push them away. This is what the 5 Love languages book is all about.

Step 2. Both of you must be giving in the relationship.

Some people are too self centered to give to the other person. Some people are not willing to take the risk to give to the other person and others still are unaware of how little they are actually giving. Receiving a lot from the other person has a way of you feel like you are giving something when you really aren't. The key step in having a love cycle is to actually give to the person, and to do it frequently.

Step 3. Both of you must learn to receive what the other person naturally gives.

Most discussions of this topic stop at giving, but in reality receiving is the most crucial step of all. When the other person is doing something motivated by their love for or attraction to you, you have to receive it. It is surprisingly easy to ignore when someone has given you something. This may happen because it was not exactly what you wanted. It may happen because it came at a time that you didn't really want it. It may happen because you have negative thoughts in your head which cancel it out. All of these things prevent you from receiving love that was actually given to you. You must learn the discipline of receiving love in

the spirit in which it was given. If your spouse interrupts you with kisses, stop the train and receive the love they are giving you and the message that goes with it.

Step 4. Both of you must learn to reinforce each other.

The natural joy of giving comes from the response of the other person. If you want them to give more, you need to not only receive it, but you need to tell them that you appreciated what they gave. In fact, you must also learn to reinforce their reinforcement! What I mean is that sometimes you need to say “Thank you for thanking me.” This tells the person that their reception of your gift made you a happy giver, and teaches them to receive in a good way again next time. This step is the one that assures that your cycle of love will be complete because both the giver and the receiver were reinforced in their behavior.

You Must Communicate

All of these principles are based on the fact that “you teach people how to treat you.” Another way of thinking about it is, “You are what you say.” People will see you not as the things you think and feel inside your heart, they will see you as the things you actually communicate. God gave us communication in order to give other people a correct understanding of who we are and to bless others. Failure to communicate leaves people to guess based on past experience with you or with others, and such guesses are often wrong, or only half-true. If you have deep and moving feelings about your spouse but never communicate them, your spouse will feel unloved! And in fact they might even develop a perception of you as an unloving person. What you communicate tells other people who you are and what you are thinking.

Another common variation of limited communication is people who only communicate when something is wrong. They do not communicate when something is right, or communicate when something is mostly right and just needs small course correction. They wait until things are bad and then get annoyed or angry. By communicating in this way your partner will develop a very negative perception, since they can not see your positive thoughts,

just your negative ones. It is very important that you encourage them when they do right, not just correct them when they do wrong.

Security

Many women identify one of their primary needs in a marriage as “security.” This is the desire to be safe in all areas – physically, financially, and emotionally. Often times this is an orienting factor around a woman’s decision process, especially as motherhood begins. What will make me feel safe and stable? What will make my family safe and stable?

Men are uniquely designed to provide security and this is part of what attracts a woman. Your marriage is strengthened when the woman learns to draw her needs for security from the man. This pattern may take time to develop, however. If you feel like your husband does not understand your needs, or is not competent in an area, it will make you feel either insecure or that you have to take over yourself. As a man, you must take the time to understand and demonstrate competency in the important areas of the marriage. A husband providing security to his wife is one of the most reinforcing patterns in marriage. It is a progressive trust walk as the wife releases the need to try to keep herself secure apart from her husband, and as he steps in to provide that security.

One challenge in this area is a desire for “false security.” Being secure is not about feeling good while a wolf is at the door, it is about killing the wolf at the door. Do not expect your husband to just gloss over real problems to make you feel better, let him deal with the real problems. Men need to understand that your mission is not just to make your wife actually secure, but to make her *feel* secure as well. If you kill the wolf at the door, but she is traumatized by it, it is not much of a step forward.

Sex

Sex is not just an act off in a corner on the side of your marriage. It is the sacrament which consummates your marriage. In order for your marriage to remain healthy you need to have sex on a regular basis, and it needs to be a positive experience for both of you. When your sex is healthy, it will promote bonding and intimacy between the two of you.

Your Past

People who have had many partners and sexual experiences think that they know a lot about sex and that sex in marriage will be no problem. This is a myth. In fact, all of the sexual experiences you have outside of marriage are subconsciously teaching you to think and feel things about your sexual relationship that impair a lifelong marital sex relationship. Sex in the world is built on being false, having pleasure, and meeting your own needs – even if that is under the guise of meeting the other person’s needs.

Sex and Your Relationship

Many men complain that they do not have enough sex with their wives, while wives feel overwhelmed trying to meet their husband’s demands. Over time this tends to create a situation where sex is sectioned off into a side corner of the relationship. We have a friendship most of the time, and every once in a while it is interrupted by having sex.

This is unhealthy for both partners. For women, this reinforces the idea that sex is an interruption of what she most wants – relationship. And for men, this can communicate the idea that he is not wanted, leading to an even greater desire for sex, or a focus on other women. Sex and love go together. Where a man feels sexually accepted is where his love will naturally be directed. Women are often counseled to address this by giving their husbands more sex, but that doesn’t address the love need which underlies the man’s desire for sex. In reality, the man is craving acceptance through sex.

The best way to resolve the tension is by connecting sex and your relationship together. When you are making love, you must be in relationship, and when you are in the rest of your relationship, you should welcome sexual overtones. After all, you and your spouse, are not just friends, you are lovers. Friends reject sexual overtones in their relationship, lovers welcome them.

Romance, when properly understood, is really the process of creating and expressing emotional and physical desire for one another. This process of romance naturally culminates in the bedroom. Shutting sexual desire out of your marriage shuts out the romance. The relationship and the sex will suffer.

Wives, instead of shutting down your husband's sexual desire, or simply increasing the frequency, you should encourage and reward his sexual advances in small ways until they can ultimately be fulfilled in the bedroom. You will be stunned at what a romantic this will bring out in your husband, and what attention he will lavish on you. Men on the other hand, should embrace the process of wooing instead of pressuring your wife for sex at any moment.

Pleasure versus Bonding

It is often said that God made sex to be pleasurable and that that this is one of the main purposes of sex. This view is misleading, however. Although sex is obviously pleasurable, the measure of a great married sex life is not how much pleasure you experience, but how much bonding results. God gave sex as the glue which keeps and draws you together. The pleasure you experience is designed to promote bonding, but if your hearts are not in the right place, it will actually leave you feeling farther apart! Sex is not about "special techniques." After a while every technique becomes boring. What makes sex unique and special among married couples is the deeper and deeper realms of love you can go to as you give to one another.

Intimacy

Sexual intimacy is about the thoughts you are both thinking during sex. You both need to be receiving a message of love from one

another during sex in order to fulfill its purpose. If you are not feeling loved or connected it is most likely because you have wrong expectations and ideas about sex. These will need to be removed in a healing process between the two of you in order for sex fulfill its purpose in your marriage. If you are thinking nervous, self conscious, lonely or rejecting thoughts during sex, no matter what happens, you will feel empty at the end. This will result in you either craving more sex to try to get this need met, rejecting sex as a way of meeting your needs, or seeking to meet this need through an illegitimate source like pornography or adultery.

Recommended Reading

Reading books that help you develop an understanding of other people, especially of the opposite sex is a very healthy thing to do before you are married and a necessary thing to do once you have been married. Here are some I recommend.

1. Emerson, Dr. **Love & Respect**. City: Integrity Publishers, 2004.
2. Farrel, Bill and Pam Farrel. **Men Are like Waffles, Women Are like Spaghetti**. Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 2001.
3. Gray, John. **Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus**. New York: Perennial, 2004.
4. Chapman, Gary and Jennifer Thomas. **The Five Languages of Apology**. City: Northfield Publishing, 2008.
5. Chapman, Gary. **The Five Love Languages**. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1996.