COUPLES ENCOURAGEMENT: A Gospel Shaped Marriage

Showing and Telling God's Story of Redemption and Restoration in Jesus

The PREMISE: **Marriage is to be primarily seen as "gospel enactment."** It's a relationship in which a husband and wife love, cleanse, wash, feed, care and prepare one another for glory, all in response to how Jesus loves and cares for us in the gospel. Jesus is committed to making all things new, including us. Marriage is designed by God to tell *this* story.

The PROBLEM: **Every spouse brings "stains, wrinkles and blemishes" into the marriage.** Some of us are toting more Samsonite than others, but we **all** bring baggage into marriage. How we deal with our own, and one another's "baggage" largely determines the health, beauty and integrity of our marriages. **We bring**… sin… beauty… darkness… secrets… wounds… different ways of seeing, feeling and doing things… different languages, stories and longings.

The PROMISE: We are dearly loved by Jesus, the perfect Spouse. Therefore we live with hope. **Colossians 3:12-14 –**Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.



CREATION FALL REDEMPTION COMPLETION

According to God's Story, we were made for…

1. **Knowing, glorifying and enjoying God forever:** Living as grateful stewards before the loving gaze of God in a perfect world
2. **Personal wholeness:** Every part of our being… healthy, vitalized and engaged—our thinking, feeling, choosing, physicality… everything as God meant it to be.
3. **Shame-free intimacy:** Face-to-face connection and communion with God and a spouse. "The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame." **Genesis 2:25**
4. **Fruitful partnership:** Side-by-side mission, adventure and fruitfulness with God and a spouse.

BROKEN: But is all got broken; yet God promised to redeem and restore Genesis 3

QUOTE: Most unmarried people, (and those already married), have no idea what it takes to make a marriage work**;** they grossly underestimate the price people have to pay to build long-term, mutually satisfying relationships. And they fail to understand that the only people with the strength to pay that price are those who have plumbed the depths of their relationship with God, and have dealt with their own brokenness. *(From the book, "Fit to be Tied" by Bill and Lynne Hybels)*

Jesus emerges as the one who perfectly fulfills all the promises God has made to reconcile his people and restore his creation. This is what Ephesians 5:21-33 is all about.

KEY: Christian Marriage presupposes one perfect spouse (Jesus) and two broken spouses. Let's walk through this foundational text together:

Ephesians 5:21- Submit to one another **out of reverence for Christ**. (Everything hinges on this phrase. To understand "reverence for Christ" you must understand what's been going on in Ephesians 1-3! Ephesians 1-3 describes the outrageous dimensions of the love God has for us in Jesus. We will revere Jesus to the extent we "get" the gospel)



All of life is about "reverence"—that is, worshipping and adoring something or someone as my ultimate good and god. A gospel-centered spouse = treasuring Jesus as my greatest delight, joy and passion; then purposing to be a spouse to his glory and honor, irrespective of what I get in return from my earthly spouse.

Circle of Intimacy: Think of your heart like a bull's eye, with a center and concentric circles emanating outwardly. Each circle represents a part of your chosen circle of intimacy. God, alone, deserves the centermost place; secondly, your spouse, then your children, friends, etc. The healthiest marriages are cultivated when a husband and wife ***both*** share a radical commitment to keep Jesus in the centermost circle; then their spouse in the second circle; kids, etc. To put your spouse in the center circle is to commit marital idolatry.

OUR IDENTITY IN JESUS: So just how good IS the gospel?

We are Image Bearers of God—Wonderfully Made
"I am fearfully and wonderfully made." - Psalm 139:14

Completely and Exhaustively Forgiven
"He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed." - 1 Peter 2:24

Washed Clean and Guilt Free
"Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool." - Isaiah 1:18

There is now, therefore, **NO** condemnation for those who are in Christ. Rom. 8:1

Declared to Be Legally and Completely Righteous in Christ
"For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." - 2 Corinthians 5:21

Beloved Child of God—Loved by the Father Just as Much as He Loves Jesus
"I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness." - Jeremiah 31:3

"I in them and you in me--so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and **have loved them even as you have loved me**. John 17:23

"See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" - 1 John 3:1

Delighted in and Enjoyed by God, and There's Nothing We Can Do about It
"The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing." - Zephaniah 3:17

Free from All the Demands and Judgment of the Law
"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery." - Galatians 5:1

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. 1 Jn 4:18

Sealed and Indwelt by God's Spirit
And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit. Eph. 1:13

"Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?" - 1 Corinthians 6:19

Adopted by God—Given All the Legal Rights and Personal Delights of God's Children
"The Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.'" - Romans 8:15

Bold, not Fearful, before God
"Since we have such a hope, we are very bold." - 2 Corinthians 3:12

Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. Heb 4:6

Free from Performance-based living. Free to delight in, not despise our Brokenness
But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. 2 Cor. 4:7

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. 2 Cor. 12:9

New in Christ, and a Participants in the New Creation Order
"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation: The old has gone, the new has come!" - 2 Corinthians 5:17

Co-Heir with Christ of the New Heaven and New Earth
"Now if we are children, then we are heirs — heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ." - Romans 8:17

Saints—Set Apart to Live as a Character in and Carrier of God's Story
"You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." - 1 Corinthians 6:11

"You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession." - 1 Peter 2:9

Ambassadors of Christ—God's Co-Laborers
"We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us." - 2 Corinthians 5:20

"For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building." - 1 Corinthians 3:9

Never Alone
"The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you." - Deuteronomy 31:8

A Master-Piece
"For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago." - Ephesians 2:10

Owning a Secure and Glorious Future
"For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." - Jeremiah 29:11

Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. Phil 1:6

Whole in Christ
"In Christ you have been brought to fullness." - Colossians 2:10

KEY GOSPEL AFFIRMATIONS

Justification – As soon as you put your trust in Jesus, God not only forgave all of your sins (past, present and future—all sins of word, thought and deed), he also declared you to be righteous in his sight. God didn't instantaneously make you into a righteous person (perfect you) when you trusted Jesus as your Savior. Rather, he put the perfect righteousness of Jesus into your account; because Jesus didn't primarily come to be your model, but your substitute. Jesus is the Second Adam, not your second chance. God imputed Christ's righteousness to you—securing you in the legal status of a perfectly righteous person. Therefore, God cannot possibly love you more than he does right now and he will never love you less. In fact, he loves you just as much as he loves Jesus, and there's nothing you can do about it!

Propitiation – Even as Jesus' righteousness has been legally declared yours, so all of your sins have been legally declared to belong to Jesus. They were imputed to Jesus upon the cross. This means that when Jesus died on the cross, God exhausted his judgment against you and your sins. The cross was your Judgment Day. God will never deal with you according to your sins again, because he dealt with Jesus according to your sins; he will never again relate to you as a judge. He will discipline you in love as a Father, but he will never punish you as a judge.

Adoption – As soon as you put your trust in Jesus, you were legally adopted into God's family and were given all the rights and delights of being a beloved child of God. You can never lose this status and standing. God even placed his Holy Spirit in your heart to seal you as his daughter and to constantly whisper (sometimes shout!) that you are no longer an orphan or a slave, but a passionately loved and treasured daughter. You cannot intensify nor diminish God's Fatherly affection for you. God loves all of his sons and daughters the same.

Sanctification – Sanctification is the life long process of becoming more and more like Jesus. And like your justification, sanctification is entirely a work of grace—thus growing up in Jesus is called "growth in grace." There is no room for earning or meriting anything in your sanctification. Don't be surprised or discouraged; a sign that you are being sanctified is that you see more of your sin and brokenness, but even more of Jesus' beauty and righteousness. God is going to show you what is repent-able and what is repairable in your life—for we are all agents and victims of sin. This journey will continue throughout your life and will only be completed at the second coming of Jesus. God doesn't love you right now to the degree you are like Jesus, but to the degree you are in Jesus—which is totally!

Glorification – Glorification is the magnificent completion of your salvation which God has promised and which God will provide. One Day, you will be as lovely as and as loving as Jesus. You cannot become "un-born-again." You are destined to live as a beautiful you, with our beautiful God, in a beautiful world (the new heaven and new earth), with beautiful relationships, beautiful culture, beautiful society, beautiful everything, forever!!!

A KEY TEXT WITH GLORIOUS IMPLICATIONS – Ephesians 5:22-32

[22] Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. [23] For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, **of which he is the Savior** (**HUGE word**…Jesus is the deliver we all need). [24] Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

[25] Husbands, love your wives, just as **Christ loved the church** and **gave himself up for her** [26] to make her holy, **cleansing** her by the **washing** with water through the word, [27] and to **present her to himself** as a radiant church, **without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish**, but **holy and blameless**.

[28] In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. [29] After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he **feeds** and **cares** for it, just as Christ does the church— [30] for we are members of his body. [31] "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and **the two will become one flesh**." [32] **This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church**. [33] However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

Summary: First, Christian Marriage is the story and journey of coming alive to the only love that meets the deepest longings/needs of our hearts—the great love Jesus has for his Bride. Secondly, Christian Marriage is growing in and showing this love to our spouse.

- Marriage exists ***primarily*** as a gospel re-enactment. How can a husband and wife demonstrate the great love story between Jesus and his Bride, the church? Sometimes only one spouse is willing to sign on for this holy calling—Hosea. Thus, all of us must learn how to love our spouses, "as unto the Lord."

- Every Christian is called to a life of servanthood (submission) in whatever relationship God has placed us. Jesus told us and showed us, "I am among you as one who serves." As those in union with Jesus, we aren't to be above our Master, rather, we are gladly to take the posture of servant lovers, for this is the way he loves us. You have never been served the way Jesus serves you.

- The motivation and power for living as a servant lover is reverence (awe, adoration, deep gratitude) for Jesus. We love because he first loved us and gave himself as a sacrifice for our sins. The more my heart finds Jesus worthy of my adoration, the more I will trust him and engage with his will for my life, including his will for me as a spouse.

Scotty and Darlene's Story – Our marriage is a story of how Jesus meets us in our individual brokenness en route to greater freedom and wholeness in our couple-ship.

Luke 4:14-22 - Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. [15]He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. [16]He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. [17]The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: [18]"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach **good news to the poor**. He has sent me to proclaim **freedom for the prisoners** and recovery of **sight for the blind**, to **release the oppressed**,[19]to proclaim **the year of the Lord's favor**." [20]Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, [21]and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." [22]All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips

Here's a brief history of how our relationship began …

- We met in a house church near Elon College, NC in 1970.
- I was a junior at UNC. Darlene was a brand new Christian, studying in Atlanta.
- First night I met her, I thought I would marry her. Didn't ask her out until over a year later. Wrote letters, but I was so insecure and filled with self-protection I needed to make sure she was "available."

- Courtship was mostly wrapped around "spiritual" stuff. That was all I knew and all I felt I had to offer.
- Asked her to marry me on our 2nd date, or so! Married 3 months later, not really sure what my vocation was going to be.

Married May 5, 1972: There were so **many things** about which I was clueless when it came to being a man and a husband. **But clueless does not mean harmless.**

The first crisis and exposing event in our marriage – The birth of our first child, Kristin, and the death of Darlene's father in 1976, within 4 weeks. My response to Darlene's grief and spiritual crisis was a telling moment in our relationship.

Moved to Nashville in 1979 when Darlene was 7 months pregnant with Scott… into a house I bought without her seeing it.

Darlene began some of her most important growth in the gospel in the early 80's – Family of origin issues, deep wounds from the past and our grace-less spiritual heritage. Darlene set the pace in our marriage for growth in grace and the healing journey. I remember her telling me, "I want to get healthy with you, but I am determined to get healthy with you or without you."

Right after turning 50, Jesus began to thaw my selfish, wounded, frozen heart in a pretty significant way. Here are a few things I needed to discover about how I related to my Darlene.

- **I was emotionally inaccessible to Darlene** – For well over twenty-five years of marriage, she never ***really*** knew what I was feeling. Though I really didn't know what I was feeling ***either***, none-the-less, it took a huge toll on our relationship.

- **I didn't engage well with *Darlene's* emotions** – My response to her world of "messy feelings" was usually…

  Busy avoidance
  Fearful withdrawal
  Spiritual criticism

- **I didn't create an environment of trust in our relationship** – In Afrikaans (South Africa), "I love you," means "I have your heart." Could Darlene count on me to be on time and pay the bills. Yes. Could she count on me always to be a safe place for her heart? Not always, indeed.

A bound man with a frozen heart coming alive and beginning to get free
One of the great things about growing in God's grace is that you get freedom to see and to grieve how **your** own brokenness and sin affects **other people**. I needed to see the ways I was both missing and harming Darlene's heart.

This has required/requires my dealing with two big heart wounds that put **shame and fear** at the core of my being.

- Sexual abuse when I was 8
- Death of my mom when I was 11

The intersection of our sinful nature and our heart wounds doesn't excuse our sin, but it helps to explain…

- Why we choose certain idols in life. My biggest and most stubborn idols have been **Control** and a **Pain Free Heart**
- How our most broken and unhelpful relational patterns emerge
- How desperate we are for the healing, liberating and transforming power of the gospel.

Hard and Heart Work in Our Marriage – Counseling & the Grand Canyon

What are some of the main gains the gospel has been bringing to our nearly 41 year-old marriage?

1. **Individuation & Differentiation**
   - We needed to see and learn how to deal with ***our own*** stories and stuff—to get disentangled and to stop holding one another emotionally hostage for our own brokenness.

   - We needed to learn and honor each other's story and stuff.

   - We needed to see and deal with the abandonment and devaluation dance in our marriage. We were sabotaging intimacy quite unintentionally.

2. **Communication** – "Going to the Mats"

   - We needed to learn how to speak for ourselves—with words, emotions, and longings

   - We needed to learn how do listen before launching

3. **Replacing "blame and shame" with redemptive conflict and encouragement**

   - We needed a "pronoun adjustment." Instead of saying, "**You** make me feel crazy…or so mad, or sad…or, "**You** make me want to throw up, etc.", we learned to say, "I'm feeling crazy right now." "I'm feeling angry" I feel like throwing up."

   - Much important sharing is sabotaged by unnecessary attack and defend mode.

4. **Preparing one another for glory—living with the hope of eternity in our hearts**

Ephesians 5:25-27 - Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her [26] to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, [27] and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

- Ponder the significance of your marriage being for this life only. One of you will probably bury the other. Do you ever think about this?
- Ask Jesus to show you what he sees in your spouse, as they are now and will be one Day.
- Prayerfully ponder what your spouse will look like, free at last and whole. Trade irritation for intrigue.

- How can you be a means by which Jesus washes, cherishes, nurtures and prepares your spouse for himself?
- Develop a godly jealousy for your spouse, instead of a selfish one. (2 Cor. 11:1-3)
- What is really worth fighting over? Life is really not that very long. Better to recognize your regrets on this side of the grave.

Commitment, Grace and Acceptance: 3 Biggies

Three Elements for Building, Renewing and Resurrecting a Marriage

Quote: "You know this person better than you have ever known anyone, yet often you wonder if you know them at all. The sense of strangeness increases, almost, with the depth of and security of the love one's embrace. What is this alien, unknowable place at the very heart of the one we love? Probably it is the place of our own familiarity with God. For one of the most profound ways in which the Lord touches us and teaches us about Himself and His Own essential otherness is through the very limits He has placed upon our relationships with one another. It is an enormous source of human frustration that our need for intimacy far outstrips its capacity to be met in other people. Primarily what keeps us separate is our sin, but there is also another factor, and that is that in each one of us the holiest and neediest and most sensitive place of all has been made and is reserved for God alone, so that only He can enter there. No one else can love us as He does, and no one can be the sort of Friend to us that He is." Mike Mason, "The Mystery of Marriage"

1. COMMITMENT – Leaving and Cleaving

Eph. 5:31 - "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united (***cleave***) to his wife, and the two will become one flesh."

1. Covenant Cleaving: Long before sin entered the first marriage, God defined marriage as a covenant relationship. This is what it means to **cleave** to a spouse. To be married is to make a **permanent** and **exclusive** commitment to your spouse. Marriage is not a 50/50 contract. It is a covenant relationship based upon God's covenant relationship with his people—most profoundly celebrated in Jesus' covenant relationship with His Bride.

Vows, not Aspirations - This is why we exchange vows and rings in a Christian marriage. We are knowingly entering into a permanent and exclusive relationship with another, pledging our fidelity—realizing that, at times, the **only** thing which will keep us together is the covenant commitment.

I, Scotty, take you, Darlene, to have and to hold from this day forward; for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part.

2. Familial Leaving – Just as few of us realize the profound implications of covenant commitment, we don't take seriously enough the **priority** of marriage. To leave one's father and mother is to affirm: This new relationship takes priority over every other human relationship of which I am a part.

There are two ways we can refuse to "leave" our family of origin when we get married:

- First of all, each of us, knowingly or unknowingly, brings the patterns, presence, problems and priorities of our family of origin into marriage. Learn to recognize these things. Some of the first and fiercest fights couples have are over these issues. A husband and wife are to leave, cleave and weave a new story based on the best of what you cherish about your family of origin. But your marriage is the most important human relationship in the world.

- Secondly, we can hate our family of origin so much that we are unwittingly controlled by unresolved conflicts, dysfunction and unprocessed stories.

2. GRACE – Cleansing, Washing, Feeding, Caring and Preparing for Glory

Jesus is the tender pursuing Spouse: Each of these kind and sacrificial expressions of love is how Jesus demonstrates his marriage to us. We love much because we have been forgiven much. Jesus didn't choose us to be his bride because we are loveable, but to make us loveable.

Ordinary Practices of Extraordinary Grace

- Take care of **yourself**: Preach the gospel to yourself daily, exercise, eat well, and sleep deep. Dazzle your heart with Jesus. There is nothing more important for your marriage than for YOU to be growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus.
- Learn to love your spouse "as unto the Lord". That is, don't love your spouse as your spouse loves you, but as your Spouse loves you. We are to do all things to the glory of God, including loving our spouse.
- Pray your spouse to the throne of grace daily; and if possible, pray **with** your spouse. It's hard to commit heart murder towards someone you are consistently bringing to Jesus.
- Catch each other "doing it right", not just "doing it wrong". Encouragement is a discipline before it's a feeling.
- Identify the names and labels with which you've tattooed each other. Only the gospel is powerful enough to erase those tattoos. Compare what Jesus says about your spouse with what you say.
- Recognize the roaches and robbers—the destructive patterns and grace robbers you've let into your marriage. Poor conflict styles; no dating or romancing; the barrenness of busyness; putting the kids before your relationships, etc.
- Spend more time telling others what you like about your spouse than what you don't. This isn't "no talk rules", but "no trash rules." Gossip is marital homicide, and planting seed for an affair.
- Proactively, invest emotional cash in the relationship so when withdrawals are made, there's actually a balance to draw on. What does non-expensive fun look like in your relationship?
- Overlook as much as you can, without falling into denial or reinforcing foolishness.
- Take the trash out often. Resist the temptation to stockpile rotting garbage so you'll have a lot of salvo to import into a fresh conflict. Forgive, forgive, and forgive. Keep as short of accounts as possible. "Don't let the sun go down on your anger" is a principle, not a law.
- Be the first person in your marriage to repent and work for re-connecting. Outdo one another in kindness, creative encouragement, and little ways of demonstrating you're thinking about and care for each other.
- Remind yourself (often) that Satan hates Jesus, you, your spouse and your marriage. If you are a Christian, he has lost you for eternity, so he will do everything in his power to make life miserable for you and rob Jesus of honor.
- If you need help (and who doesn't?), get it! God gives grace to the humble, but resists the proud.

Forgiveness: The Always Issue

WHAT *IS* FORGIVENESS?

- Forgiveness is our commitment to live as ambassadors of reconciliation and as peacemakers in a broken world inhabited only by other broken people... including the broken people in our families.
- Forgiveness is one of the sure and shocking marks of the kingdom Jesus has come to establish.
- Forgiveness is God's outrageous generosity to us manifest in his canceling the entire debt of our sin. Forgiveness comes freely to us because Jesus willingly took our place as "the wicked servant" and paid the entire debt of our sin, not in prison, but on the cross.
- Forgiveness is what the gospel increasingly produces in our hearts as we remember and relish how God has forgiven us from *His* heart.

WHAT FORGIVENESS IS *NOT*

- Forgiveness is not denial or glossing over wrongs. "Forgiveness is taking seriously the awfulness of what has happened when you are treated unfairly. Forgiveness is not pretending that things are other than the way they are." Desmond Tutu
- Forgiveness is not amnesia… it is not forgetting. The offense will still be part of your history but it does not have to dominate your life.
- Forgiveness is not condoning or excusing the offense. Forgiveness does not eliminate all consequences.
- Forgiveness does not always include reconciliation. Forgiveness is not the same thing as trust.
- Forgiveness is not avoidance. To have a forgiving heart is to long and hope for justice and peace while revoking all sense of entitlement and relishing of revenge.

3.ACCEPTANCE - "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God." **Rom 15:7**

Every spouse brings "stains, wrinkles and blemishes" into the marriage. Some of us are toting more Samsonite than others, but we **all** bring baggage into marriage. How we deal with our own, and one another's "baggage" largely determines the health and happiness of our marriages. **We bring**… Sin… Beauty… Darkness… Secrets… Wounds… Different ways of seeing, feeling and doing… Different languages… Stories and Longings. How we deal with our own, and one another's "baggage" largely determines the health and happiness of our marriages.

- Acceptance is not acquiescence to destructive behavior or evil, yours or anyone else's.
- Acceptance is learning to extend the welcoming heart of God to one another in marriage
- **Acceptance is brave-heartedness**—the courage to enter the chaos of brokenness
- **Acceptance is kind-heartedness**—the resolve to love another broken sinner as Jesus is meeting you in your brokenness

- **Acceptance is big-heartedness**—the growing capacity to understand differences and enjoy the diversity between spouses

- **Acceptance is wise-heartedness**—Strength to confront difficult situations with firmness and hope

LEARNING TO CONFLICT REDEMPTIVELY

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. **Matt. 5:9**

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. **John 14:27**

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. **Rom. 12:18**

Peacemakers who sow in peace with raise a harvest of righteousness. **James 3:18**

THREE ENTIRELY INEFFECTIVE WAYS OF HANDLING CONFLICT

FIGHT: Losing sight of the issue (or never really defining the issue), taking off the gloves, and having at it. "Fight mode" usually involves **launching, defending and winning**, as opposed to **listening, engaging, and resolving.**

SPITE: Spite is a clear indication of the fact that hurting people hurt other people. Expressions of spite involve sarcasm and exaggeration; body language and voice tone meant to inflict pain, or pay back pain for pain; button pushing and triggering your "opponent's" vulnerable spots; stockpiling data from the past and importing into a present situation; multiple use of words like "always" and "never".

FLIGHT: Flight isn't a responsible disengagement from an unhealthy conflict. We call that "time out". Rather, flight looks like slamming doors or leaving the physical space in a dramatic way, as a way of saying "In your face"; Throwing a big grenade of judgment, threat or anger, and then exiting the conflict, either physically or emotionally; shutting down and refusing to engage, as a way of punishing, controlling or simply getting the last painful shot in.

FAR MORE HELPFUL WAYS TO DEAL WITH CONFLICT!

Peacemakers Pledge (An overview of the seminal work of Ken Sande)

As people reconciled to God by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we believe that we are called to respond to conflict in a way that is remarkably different from the way the world deals with conflict.1 We also believe that conflict provides opportunities to glorify God, serve other people, and grow to be like Christ.2 Therefore, in response to God's love and in reliance on his grace, we commit ourselves to respond to conflict according to the following principles: **The Four G's**

Glorify God — Instead of focusing on our own desires or dwelling on what others may do, we will rejoice in the Lord and bring him praise by depending on his forgiveness, wisdom, power, and love, as we seek to faithfully obey his commands and maintain a loving, merciful, and forgiving attitude.3

Get the Log out of Your Eye — Instead of blaming others for a conflict or resisting correction, we will trust in God's mercy and take responsibility for our own contribution to conflicts—confessing our sins to those we have wronged, asking God to help us change any attitudes and habits that lead to conflict, and seeking to repair any harm we have caused.4

Gently Restore — Instead of pretending that conflict doesn't exist or talking about others behind their backs, we will overlook minor offenses or we will talk personally and graciously with those whose offenses seem too serious to overlook, seeking to restore them rather than condemn them. When a conflict with a Christian brother or sister cannot be resolved in private, we will ask others in the body of Christ to help us settle the matter in a biblical manner.5

Go and be reconciled — Instead of accepting premature compromise or allowing relationships to wither, we will actively pursue genuine peace and reconciliation—forgiving others as God, for Christ's sake, has forgiven us, and seeking just and mutually beneficial solutions to our differences.6

By God's grace, we will apply these principles as a matter of stewardship, realizing that conflict is an assignment, not an accident. We will remember that success in God's eyes is not a matter of specific results, but of faithful, dependent obedience. And we will pray that our service as peacemakers will bring praise to our Lord and lead others to know His infinite love.7

1 Matt. 5:9; Luke 6:27-36; Gal. 5:19-26.
2 Rom. 8:28-29; 1 Cor. 10:31-11:1; James 1:2-4.
3 Ps. 37:1-6; Mark 11:25; John 14:15; Rom. 12:17-21; 1 Cor. 10:31; Phil. 4:2-9; Col. 3:1-4; James 3:17-18; 4:1-3; 1 Peter 2:12.
4 Prov. 28:13; Matt. 7:3-5; Luke 19:8; Col. 3:5-14; 1 John 1:8-9.
5 Prov. 19:11; Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 6:1-8; Gal. 6:1-2; Eph. 4:29; 2 Tim. 2:24-26; James 5:9.
6 Matt. 5:23-24; 6:12; 7:12; Eph. 4:1-3, 32; Phil. 2:3-4.
7 Matt. 25:14-21; John 13:34-35; Rom. 12:18; 1 Peter 2:19; 4:19.

PEACE-MAKING (as opposed to PEACE-FAKING AND PEACE-BREAKING

The Gospel Is the Key to Peace. A true peacemaker is guided, motivated, and empowered by the gospel, the good news that God has forgiven all our sins and made peace with us through the death and resurrection of his Son (Col. 1:19-20). Through Christ he has also enabled us to break the habit of escaping from conflict or attacking others, and he has empowered us to become peacemakers who can promote genuine justice and reconciliation (Col. 3:12-14). The six responses found on the top portion of the slippery slope are directed at finding a just and mutually agreeable solution to a conflict. These responses may be divided into two categories: personal peacemaking responses and assisted responses: Personal peacemaking responses are carried out in private between the parties themselves. Although it is appropriate for one or

both parties to seek advice on how to implement these responses, they should normally try to resolve their differences one-on-one before asking others to intervene in the dispute.

Overlook an offense—Many disputes are so insignificant that they should be resolved by quietly and deliberately overlooking an offense. "A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense" (Prov. 19:11). Overlooking an offense is a form of forgiveness, and involves a deliberate decision not to talk about it, dwell on it, or let it grow into pent-up bitterness or anger.

Reconciliation—If an offense is too serious to overlook or has damaged our relationship, we need to resolve personal or relational issues through confession, loving correction, and forgiveness. "[If] your brother has something against you ... go and be reconciled" (Matt. 5:23-24). "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently" (Gal. 6:1; see Matt. 18:15). "Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Col. 3:13).

Negotiation—Even if we successfully resolve relational issues, we may still need to work through material issues related to money, property, or other rights. This should be done through a cooperative bargaining process in which you and the other person seek to reach a settlement that satisfies the legitimate needs of each side. "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Phil. 2:4).

Mediation—If two people cannot reach peace in private, they should ask one or more objective outside people to meet with them to help them communicate more effectively and explore possible solutions. "If he will not listen [to you], take one or two others along" (Matt. 18:16). These mediators may ask questions and give advice, but they have no authority to force you to accept a particular solution.

Arbitration—When you and an opponent cannot come to a voluntary agreement on a material issue, you may appoint one or more arbitrators to listen to your arguments and render a binding decision to settle the issue. "If you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church" (1 Cor. 6:4).

Accountability—If a person who professes to be a Christian refuses to be reconciled and do what is right, Jesus commands his or her church leaders to formally intervene to hold him or her accountable to Scripture and to promote repentance, justice, and forgiveness: "If he refuses to listen [to others], tell it to the church" (Matt. 18:17).