

Lesson 2

Strong Marriage. Strong Family.

Faithfulness to the marriage covenant means everything

As one woman reflected on her marriage and current life she was overheard saying: "When I got married I was looking for an ideal, but marriage has become such an ordeal that I want a new deal."¹⁷ Unhappy marriages seem to be everywhere... in the church and in the world. Instead of being characterized by unselfish and sacrificial love, negative and selfish attitudes in the marriage can produce a toxic level of tension inside the home. For some, the only way to find relief is to terminate the marriage in divorce.

In the beginning when two young people fall in love, the relationship ever ending is impossible to imagine. They can't see enough of each other. Every thought revolves around how to make each other happy and fulfilled. The relationship grows. Moved by emotion and infatuation, they get engaged and soon after a wedding follows. The honeymoon is amazing. Then slowly over time things begin to change. How do things deteriorate from the euphoria of wedded bliss to a love that grows cold – symptomized by conflict, abuse, and dysfunction? It could be that one or both partners failed to understand God's design for marriage. Many enter it simply not knowing what it means to be married.

A healthy functioning marriage characterized by love for God and each other through mutual sacrifice is central to the overall success of the family. An imploding marriage will not produce the kind of family that has the staying power to endure the trials of our modern world. When children grow up in homes that have become void of love, they miss out on learning the critical lessons that will help them become emotionally secure and give them the know-how to build strong marriages for themselves in the future. Today modern society is coping with the critical problem of young people who have never seen an intact marriage, an involved father, or the family functioning together as it should. Because of what they have seen, they are afraid of commitment, emotionally insecure, and even believe that the traditional family is unnecessary or harmful to raising a child.

One of the key components in turning around our society's grave problems is restoring the family back to God's design. If the marriage is not on solid ground, then the family *and the church* will never be able to do its job effectively. So, as the title of this lesson so adeptly summarizes,... a strong marriage equals a strong family.

Where Must We Begin?

Understanding you and your marriage have been created for the glory of God.

Self-help books, website articles, and informative podcasts abound on what it takes to have a strong marriage. One can easily find tips on the dynamics of relationships, i.e., for improved communication, making time for one another, how to have a great sex life in marriage, performing

acts of service, and setting priorities. In and of themselves, these are good things that we should take notice of and put into practice where applicable. However, the solution we are looking for is much deeper. For lasting success, we need to go to the source of all things – one's relationship with God, our Eternal Father.

How does each marriage partner see Him?

Is He recognized for who He is? Do both partners share the conclusion that they exist to magnify the truth, worth, beauty, and greatness of God? Each spouse must come to realize he or she has been created to display the glory of God. Both Isaiah and Paul related this fact. We need to be reminded of it. Pay special attention to what has been bolded and italicized in these passages for emphasis:

Bring my sons from far away, and my daughters from the ends of the earth—***everyone who bears my name and is created for my glory***. I have formed them; indeed, I have made them, Isaiah 43.6-7.

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen, Romans 11.36

For everything was created by him, in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—***all things have been created through him and for him***, Colossians 1.16.

We each have been created for the display of God's glory – a masterpiece of grace – as Paul describes in Ephesians 2.10. God is the ultimate reality. He is the primary concern. Everything else is secondary. Everything else is from Him and through Him and for Him. Your marriage is a gift from Him to enjoy while on earth. It is finite. Your eternity is infinite. This is really where we need to begin if we are going to build strong marriages. If a man and woman get this right, everything else will fall into place. If they get this wrong, everything else will go wrong. You have been created by God to display truth, righteousness, grace, and salvation. Equally true, your marriage has been designed by God to be a living testimony to His wisdom, worth, goodness, beauty, and greatness. In other words, your marriage is not as much about you and your spouse as it is about you and God. He has designed marriage to make you both happy *and* holy.

Both marriage partners need to be growing in their appreciation for who He is, what He is like, and how He acts. God is a God of knowledge, wisdom, authority, providence, power, purity, trustworthiness, justice, patience, grace, and love. Both husband and wife need to learn how to cherish and hold these things dear to their hearts... to the point to where these things impact and transform who they are *individually*.

For many, the thought of God as being involved in the marriage is something understood on a superficial basis. Yes, His name was invoked in the marriage vows, but the day-to-day practice of cherishing and valuing the glory of God above all, including one's spouse, is often neglected.

God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him. Here is a key that unlocks a thousand doors. Superior satisfaction in God above all earthly things, including your spouse and your health and your own life (Psalm 63.3, *your steadfast love is better than life*.) is the source of great

long-suffering without which husbands cannot love like Christ, and wives cannot follow like the bride of Christ, the church.¹⁸

In his writing, Piper goes on to teach how husbands have been called to follow Christ's example of love and leadership, while wives follow Christ's example of submission and love from devotion of the church for who He died. Both of these actions of love are unsustainable without proper understanding and devotion to God. Until this happens, both will be unable to fulfill their god-given roles – the man as a leader like Jesus, the wife as an advocate and follower of that leadership. When they each commit to these roles, God's love, glory, and wisdom will be on display for the world. Both spouses need to be able to say with Paul:

More than that, I also consider everything to be a loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. Because of him I have suffered the loss of all things and consider them as dung, so that I may gain Christ, Philippians 3.8.

Covenant Marriage

God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it. Rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and every creature that crawls on the earth, Genesis 1.28.

This passage, along with Genesis 2.18-25 sheds light on the establishment of the family. We must not lightly pass over the statement that begins in Genesis 1.28: *God blessed them*. What this means is that God gave them the ability to experience, enjoy, and extend His goodness in their life.

A blessing is never just about you – while it may include you – it is also intended to extend through you to someone else. Too many Christians today want God to bless them without being willing for God to bless others through them.¹⁹

With the blessing came responsibility. Adam and Eve were both stewards of what God had provided them. They were now in partnership – charged with living out God's intended purposes for their lives. Marriage is not solely about your personal experience of finding love, happiness, and fulfillment. These are actually the products of what is most important – seeking satisfaction in God and embracing life from His perspective. *Marriage is a covenantal union designed by God in order to strengthen the capability of each partner to carry out His plan in their lives.*

Marriage is so much more than a simple contract between a husband and wife. It is, as Malachi 2.14 says, *a covenant*. In Scripture, marriage is presented as a covenant between God, husband, and wife. A covenant comprises certain agreements, conditions, benefits, and effects. We see them throughout the Bible. For example, God made covenants with Abraham, Moses, the people of Israel, David, and others. He has also given us the New Covenant through the shed blood of Christ. Likewise, marriage is another example of a covenant given by God. He is to be included in the marriage so that it can grow to its highest potential – where He is brought into every aspect of the relationship – so that it can accomplish His purposes.

The marriage covenant involves three interrelated concepts: permanence, unconditional love, and

the involvement of God. A marriage will only be strong when both partners understand that God is in charge. What He expects is first and what really matters.

But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you, Matthew 6.33.

Only until we embrace God's perspective will we experience the productive, purposeful, and peaceful relationship He designed. Only until we get God right will we experience true love, happiness, and fulfillment. The connection to the spiritual must be made.

The importance of making that connection is understood when we remember that from the moment we say "I do," Satan begins his work of trying to destroy the marriage. His influence and our weak flesh can be a deadly combination. When conflicts arise in marriage, Satan often seeks to convince us the problem is the other person. And the other person may well have some problems. But Satan often uses the problems of our spouse as a diversion. He knows if we focus on the other person we will be less inclined to address ourselves. And if we are honest, many of the things that generate conflict are more about our own spiritual weakness brought on by the flesh or outright rebellion against God. Conflict and marital dysfunction do arise from the consequences of our own choices.

Many of the things couples experience difficulty over are symptoms of more fundamental problems. Sometimes the real problems mask themselves in the little things that build up to break the marriage apart. At the heart of the matter is disobedience to God and the covenant made between one's spouse. If a marriage is to experience true success, both marriage partners must make the spiritual connection to everything that happens in the relationship. Both must continually keep themselves in alignment with the covenant they made.

Your Marriage Serves as the Foundation for the Family

God designed your marriage to be the foundation for a strong and successful family. Therefore the priority must be on the health of that relationship – more so than the time spent meeting the demands of a schedule or the needs of children. While that statement may surprise you, remember your children are only as safe and nurtured as your marriage. They'll be most content when the relationship between you and your spouse is solid. Marriage first, then kids. This is the way things have been designed. One day your children will grow up, move out, and begin families of their own. Your marriage, the Lord willing, will continue to go on for several more decades... even longer than the time your children were at home. It is essential you nurture that relationship, modeling God's design which brings Him glory, provides stability for your children, and leads to your happiness and fulfillment. The stronger your marriage is... the stronger your family will be.

For Discussion

1. For what has marriage been created?
2. Who is at the center of your marriage and what position is He to occupy?
3. What is often the root cause of problems in marriage?
4. What three things are involved in the marriage covenant?
5. What is the difference between a covenant and a contract?
6. Why is it necessary to draw a spiritual connection back to everything that happens in a marriage?
7. What do you think about the statement: "marriage first, then kids."?
8. How are you currently demonstrating your commitment to a strong marriage?

¹⁷ Evans, Tony. *One Family Under God: Preserving the Home As God Intended*. Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2013.

¹⁸ Piper, John. "The Surpassing Goal: Marriage Lived for the Glory of God." See Rainey, Dennis, ed. *Building Strong Families*. Foundations for the Family Series. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002, p. 95.

¹⁹ Evans, *One Family Under God...*