

CHRIST⁺ CITY CHURCH.



Marriage Enrichment Booklet

Introduction

Welcome to the Marriage Course with Christ City Church! We're delighted you want to spend time together thinking through how to make the most of your marriage. We hope the evenings will be fun and informative and that we'll deepen our relationships within our marriages and with each other.

Marriage has never been easy! We can often go into marriage with wrong expectations or find after a few years (or at the famous 7 year itch!) that the early joy of marriage has worn off. We need to work on our marriages if we're to see them become all that God intended.

As we'll reflect on in this series, marriage is like both a rock and a garden. A rock gives us a picture of something solid and reminds us that marriage is about faithfulness, endurance and upholding our vows through all seasons of life. During these four evenings we'll reflect on what it means to be faithful in our marriages. A garden gives us a picture of something that has the potential to flourish and become beautiful but it needs investment, careful attention and thought. We must not assume the garden will flourish if we ignore the planning, care and wisdom that it requires. So we will reflect over the four evenings on how to keep marriage tender and fun, how to keep the romance alive, how to prioritise one another as and when children come along and much more.

Each evening will start with some refreshments and getting to know one another. Then we'll reflect on some material together, giving you space to discuss topics separately as couples, before reflecting together as a group. You will never be asked to share beyond what you're comfortable with. There is plenty of room for questions throughout.

Additionally at some point during the course, if you would like to ask further questions or if there is a particular topic you'd like to discuss further then do ask your host couple. They'd be happy to grab a coffee with you or have you over for dinner.

If you're engaged to be married or considering engagement then we hope this will give you the right foundation and expectation as you prepare for marriage. Most of what we think about relationships, love and marriage comes from (a) our upbringing and (b) our friends and (c) Hollywood. It's good to reflect on marriage as the Bible defines it, and that is shaped according to the gospel.

Here is an overview to the course:

Session 1: Biblical foundations and a cross-shaped marriage
(Gen 1-2 & Eph 5)

Session 2: Communication and conflict (and love languages)

Session 3: Questionnaire review & discussion (please complete in advance)

Session 4: Sex, intimacy and romance

We are really looking forward to spending this time with you. Our sincere prayer is that through this we will develop stronger and deeper marriages that will glorify God and bless the church community as a whole.

God bless,
Steve & Leanne Vaughan

Session 1: Biblical Foundations: The Purpose of Marriage

Read Genesis 1:26-30, 2:18-25 & Ephesians 5:21-33

How do you build a marriage that flourishes and lasts 'til death do you part?

The Modern Context

We live in a culture where marriage is under pressure because divorce, cohabitation and sex outside of marriage are all seen as easy and viable options. In fact our culture is currently redefining marriage from the traditional view of one man and one woman.

Why is that? It's because we live in an individualistic consumerist culture where "I get what I want, when I want it, for as long as I want it" - personal fulfilment and personal freedom are the most important values.

The Bible

However, God's intention for marriage is very different and since marriage is God's invention (not man's), we should listen carefully. Humans invented schools and hospitals and cars, but God invented marriage. Genesis 2:24-25 tells us marriage involves 4 things:

- (1) Leaving (publicly, as part of a ceremony)
- (2) Cleaving (to make a vow/covenant before God and witnesses)
- (3) Becoming one flesh (through sexual intercourse)
- (4) Being naked and unashamed (complete transparency and vulnerability)

Marriage is the covenant sanctioned by God in which a man and a woman commit themselves unreservedly to each other to live a common life and to join in sexual union. Nakedness means not to be concealed from one another, but to be revealed and known without any cover. It is only within the context of commitment (the marriage vow) that this level of vulnerability is possible.

So we can summarise marriage as involving,

(1) Total commitment - there is no going back, it's lifelong. This clashes against the cultural idol of 'personal fulfilment'

(2) Total unity - everything I have is yours, I reserve no 'personal rights' and share everything. This clashes against the cultural idol of 'personal freedom'

(3) Total vulnerability - nothing is concealed or kept back. This clashes against the cultural idol of 'personal control'

This lifelong commitment, sharing and vulnerability must occur in every area of life - physically, emotionally, financially and spiritually. Many marriage problems come when there is a discrepancy in what these things mean for each person in the marriage, for example,

- One person is 'holding back' emotionally
- One person is finding greatest emotional support in their family, not their spouse
- One person feels the parents-in-law are not giving them the space they need
- One person feels the decisions made are not joint decisions, or one person is too passive in decision-making.

The True Spouse

When the disciples heard Jesus' teaching on marriage they concluded "if this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry" (Matthew 19:10). Who could be that kind of spouse? It's impossible! Well it is for us, but there was one man who loved his bride, the church, in this way.

On the cross, Jesus shows us what it takes to make marriage work...it is self-sacrificial love which requires total commitment and vulnerability and results in complete unity. It is only as you understand what it is to be married/united to him that you'll have the resources and power to be the kind of spouse God

wants you to be. As you experience all the benefits of being united with Christ, you have all the freedom, fulfilment and protection you could ever need and his self-sacrificial love melts you out of your selfishness.

Put differently, if you go into marriage looking to your spouse to give you ultimate identity, security, significance and companionship then you are looking for your marriage to give what only Jesus can ultimately give you. You will quickly run into difficulties in your marriage as you either expect too much from your spouse (which they will resent), or become hardened and embittered towards them (as they fail your expectations).

Marriage will create as many problems as it will solve so don't put a weight on your marriage that it cannot carry. Only Jesus can give you the validation, freedom and peace you're looking for. Jesus is the one who solves our problems!

With this in mind, the only way you'll "affair-proof" your marriage and build a marriage that flourishes and lasts 'till death do you part' is to reap all the benefits and experience all the power of being united with Christ. It has been said that "the greatest gift you can give your spouse is the quality of your relationship with Jesus." This is what Paul seems to be saying in Ephesians 5:21-32. The earthly marriage is temporary and is therefore to be patterned on and empowered by the heavenly and eternal marriage.

If you put Jesus at the centre of your marriage and look to him, not your spouse, to fulfil you, you'll find joy, peace, romance, security and belonging and a whole lot more thrown in for free!

Summary

So we see God's intention for marriage has 4 main principles:

- (1) Total commitment - not "personal fulfilment"
- (2) Total unity - not "personal freedom"
- (3) Total vulnerability - not "personal control"
- (4) Totally self-sacrificial love - not "selfish ambition"

With this biblical foundation and Christ-centred approach to marriage in place, we can come to practical details and rhythms. Without this, we lack the power which will enable us to build marriages that flourish and thrive through the different seasons of life and last till death do you part.

The Cross - Self-Sacrificial Love

Following the pattern of Ephesians 5:21-32, let's look at how the cross of Christ should shape our marriages. There are 3 things we can learn:

(1) **Your marriage is a visual aid (vs31-32).** Christ gave himself up for his spouse to save her, and so must we. Your sacrificial love each should display the cross to the watching world and is a daily reminder of the gospel to your own heart. There will be no human marriage in heaven (Matthew 22:30) because the earthly marriage will have done its job and will no longer be required - we'll be married to Jesus and finally complete. The visual aid will be redundant. One application of this is to see one another not just as lovers, but gospel partners - living your life and making decisions in such a way as to share the good news of Jesus with others.

(2) **Your marriage is a sanctification tool (vs26-27).** Jesus washes his bride with the word to make her holy and radiant. And so a vital purpose of our marriage is to make you more like Jesus. The commitment enables the vulnerability to change. The main problem in your marriage is your sin/selfishness (not your circumstances). Your marriage will knock many rough edges off you and reveal your idols and insecurities. A bit like a bridge that has some hairline fractures that no-one can see when cars are driven over it; when a ten-tonne lorry drives over the bridge, the cracks appear. So when you get married, the cracks will appear. Don't fear this, your partner has promised to love you unconditionally. All this is to be God's agent of change in your life.¹

(3) **Love is an action more than a feeling (v25).** In marriage you are committing to love someone in the future regardless of circumstances, feelings or their response. The feelings can come before or after the action, or it may never come. See John 15:13, Romans 5:8 and 1 Corinthians 13:4-6 to help

Song of Songs – Marriage as a Garden

Finally, it's important to see marriage not just as a rock (commitment) but as a garden (fruitfulness). A garden has functional elements (e.g. paths and fences) and beautiful (e.g. flowers and birds). For the flowers to grow there has to be some weeding; you have to remove the bad things, so you can plant good things.

When you see your marriage as a garden which you get to invest in, enjoy and cause to become beautiful and full of life it gives you a helpful long-term approach. As with a garden, you reap what you sow. There will be seasons of joy but there will also be seasons of toil. It's your job to invest in the garden through every season to ensure that in the end, the winters become springs and summers. It is the commitment that keeps you together and the romance needs to be rekindled year-on-year.

(4) **Love is fruitful.** As we consider our marriage like a garden, and consider the wonderful 'fruits' of the cross we can say that true love in marriage always bears fruit. Not only in our character but also in having children, which aligns with the first purpose God gave marriage in Genesis 1 - to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, to spread his image all over the world and cultivate the world according to God's heart.

Summary – What is the Purpose of Marriage?

So what is the purpose of marriage? Why did God give us marriage? It was to help show the world the true spouse Jesus and to help us become more like Jesus. It was to give us companionship but also to bless the community around us. It was to be the context for sex and raising children.²

¹Singleness also acts as a visual aid and sanctification tool. When single people look to Jesus Christ alone for their significance and security, they show the world that 'Jesus is enough.' As they navigate the ups and downs of being single, God will refine and mould their characters to be like Jesus. For married couples who become parents, children will create such pressure and intensity in your life, even more than your spouse, that that can become an even greater tool for sanctification, if you'll allow God to mould you.

²Suggested reading - The meaning of marriage by Tim & Kathy Keller

Application Questions

(1) Which of the 4 principles (commitment, unity, vulnerability & sacrificial love) sounds most challenging to you and why?

(2) Which of the 4 principles from a cross-shaped marriage (visual aid, sanctification tool, love as an action and love bearing fruit) most encourages and most challenges you? Why?

(3) How does seeing marriage as a garden help you take a long-term approach? What season are you in and what does it mean for you to avail of all the benefits of being united with Christ so you can invest in your marriage at this moment?

(4) What happens in your marriage if Jesus is not the ultimate source of your significance and security?

(5) Please write down three practical ways you can answer this question in the next month (whether in attitudes or actions - see the Love Languages on page 19):

- Wives (vs22-24): How can I take the initiative to put my husband before myself and respect him?

- Husbands (vs25-29): How can I take the initiative to give myself up for my wife and love her as I love myself?

Notes

SESSION 2: Communication and Conflict, Love Languages and Decision-Making

Read Ephesians 5:1-2.

The gospel shapes everything about us - our hearts, our minds, our identities and our behaviour. Jesus is to be our meaning and satisfaction in life, and therefore we can love each other as he has loved us. This is what a “cross-shaped marriage” looks like

- Husbands (vs25-29): How can I take the initiative to give myself up to serve my wife in order to make her radiant?
- Wives (vs22-24): How can I take the initiative to willingly and gladly put my husband first and respect him?

What Jesus has done for me, also affects our communication and handling of conflict. He did all that was required to have a relationship with me and deal with the enmity between us, and so empowered by his love I seek to do the same with my spouse.

4 Principles of communication

Read Ephesians 4:15-16, 4:25-5:2

1. **What we say (vs15 & 25 & 29)** - wholesome truth
2. **When we say it (vs26)** – be careful of your context and how anger that is not dealt with will affect you. Don't let things fester or let the devil get into your marriage. Some of us are rhinos (vs26a) and some of us are hedgehogs (vs26b) - both modes are self-protective rather than self-giving.
3. **How we say it (vs15 & 31)** – in love, with kindness, compassion & forgiveness
4. **The motive for saying it (vs29)** – helpful for building up, according to your spouse's needs (not yours!), that it may benefit them

Questions

(1) When and how do you currently communicate?

(2) What are the challenges in your communication at the moment?

(3) Are you a hedgehog or a rhino?

(4) When have you “done conflict” well? Why, what happened?

4 Practical Pointers

1. Listen before you speak (James 1:19) – make sure you have understood, summarised and empathised with the other person's position and feelings, even if you 100% disagree, before you speak (use the cushion if necessary!). Your goal is not to 'win' but to 'understand'. You are not wanting to 'debate' but to 'listen'. You are not waiting for your moment to speak, but looking to love your spouse. A helpful practical tool is that before you respond to your spouse, you first reflect back their thoughts and emotions (you said... you said this made you feel...) and then you share yours.

2. Beware of reacting sinfully when sinned against – we typically excuse sinful words and actions when we have been wronged. We somehow think we're justified and "they deserve it." This goes against the gospel of grace (Ephesians 4:30-5:2). When your spouse hurts you and sins against you (it will happen!) be careful not to respond in kind. Jesus says it is always our initiative to seek forgiveness and reconciliation. It is always for us to make the first move, whether we have been sinned against (Matthew 18:15-20) or we have sinned against another (Matthew 5:23-45).

3. Remember the power of forgiveness and saying sorry – watch all the knots and tension disappear by pausing, turning the volume down, taking a deep breath and saying "you're right...I was wrong...I shouldn't have done/said...I am sorry...I love you." Two things make forgiveness hard: our pride (we don't like to admit we're wrong) and the cost of forgiving (absorbing the pain and not retaliating costs us).

4. Know when to be honest and give feedback on the big issues

- When (not in the heat of the moment but not too far in the future. On a 'good' day away from the emotional intensity of a specific situation.)
- What (a pattern, not one-offs. Keep it proportional)
- How often (give your spouse time to change)
- The importance of accountability outside of marriage (having prayer and support without dishonouring your spouse)

If you put these four practical pointers into action in your marriage, empowered by the gospel, you will move from a weak and brittle marriage to a strong and secure one.

Questions

(1) Which of these 4 practical pointers most speaks to your marriage?

(2) What practical changes can you put in place to improve communication and conflict?

(3) How does knowing Jesus's compassion, love, forgiveness & justice help you put these 4 pointers into practice?

Notes

Session 3: Questionnaire - Reflections, Questions & Notes

Please complete before session 3. We ask that you initially complete the questionnaire on your own (without your partner being involved), and then review your answers with your partner and discuss the differences and/or surprises. Then think through 2 topics/questions you'd like to discuss in session 3 and come prepared to bring them to the group.

The topics in this questionnaire are as follows:

1. Communication
2. Resolving conflict
3. Commitment
4. Keeping love alive
5. Emotions
6. Finances
7. Roles
8. In-laws
9. Sex
10. Children
11. Work-life-church balance
12. Spiritual growth

However, you can bring any topic or question to the evening. There is a blank page at the end of the questionnaire to make any notes. As ever, please only share within your comfort zone and no question is too 'simple' nor too 'controversial' so ask away!

Communication:

1. My future partner and I seldom differ in our need to talk things through or keep things to ourselves.

(a) Agree (b) Disagree (c) Uncertain

2. Communication in marriage means to me:

3. List the things you find hard to discuss with your partner:

4. Circle the statements you agree with (any number):

- a. Disagreements should be avoided at all costs.
- b. We should keep nothing from one another.
- c. If my partner offends me they are not entitled to be forgiven unless they apologise.
- d. Conflict is inevitable in marriage.

5. **Do you tend towards being:**

- a. A hedgehog (close up and get prickly to avoid confrontation) or
- b. A rhino (confront disagreement head on and forcefully)?

6. **How do you think you should make decisions about the future?** Outline the steps you think you should take to make a good decision.

7. **If you cannot come to an agreement, how will you resolve the issue and make a decision?** (You can't say this won't come up!!)

Resolving Conflict:

1. How would you describe the way your parents (or other adults in your life) resolved conflict?
2. How do you feel about the way you resolve conflict with your partner?
3. I am hoping that during our marriage, my partner will change some of their behaviour?
(a) Agree (b) Disagree (c) Uncertain
4. Outline the ideal steps you should take to resolve a conflict in your opinion.
5. What will you do if your partner has hurt you? How will you go about forgiving them?

Commitment:

1. What do you think being faithful will mean in your marriage?
2. How do you feel about prioritising your partner above everyone else in life, other than God?
3. How do you feel about close friendships with people of the opposite sex?
4. How do you feel about setting aside daily/weekly time to spend with your spouse 1-2-1?
5. I sometimes feel that my partner may not be the right person for me to marry?
(a) Agree (b) Disagree (c) Uncertain

Keeping Love Alive:

The 5 love languages are (Gary Chapman)

- a. Physical touch (not sexual)
- b. Quality time
- c. Acts of service
- d. Words of affirmation
- e. Gifts

(Remember you naturally give what you want to receive!)

1. My idea of being loved by my partner is:

2. My partner has demonstrated their love for me recently by:

3. Put the 5 love languages in order of priority for yourself:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

4. Guess the order of the 5 love languages for your partner:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

5. List 4 things your partner could do to help you feel more loved:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Emotions:

1. We all have emotional needs that must be met if we are to function successfully as people. Circle the one below which you feel is most important to you.

- a. The need for security
- b. The need for self-worth
- c. The need for significance

2. How well has this been met up to now?

- a. Very well
- b. Well
- c. Just about
- d. Not too well
- e. Not at all

3. My partner has the responsibility to meet..

- a. All of my emotional needs
- b. Most of my emotional needs
- c. Some of my emotional needs
- d. None of my emotional needs

4. Tick the one(s) you agree with: If one of my emotional needs was not met I would;

- a. Ignore the fact
- b. Put my energy into something else
- c. Tell my partner
- d. Pray that my partner will change
- e. Spend time looking at my relationship with God
- f. Encourage my partner to change

Finances:

1. Who is responsible for the finances in your relationship?
2. Do you have any concerns over finances in your marriage?
3. Are you a 'spender' or a 'saver'?
4. Have you worked out a budget together?
5. Do you or your partner have a large debt? If so, how does this affect your relationship?
6. Do you currently give away a proportion of your income regularly?
7. What percentage of your income do you think you should give away when you're married? (and too what causes?)
8. How crucial do you feel money is for your future happiness?
(a) Very important (b) Important (c) Not important

Roles:

1. Are there different roles for a husband and wife in marriage?
2. If so,
 - a. What do you expect your role in marriage to be?
 - b. What do you expect your partner's role to be?
3. Circle the statements you agree with:
 - a. A husband is the head of the home
 - b. Husbands and wives share the same degree of responsibility and authority in the home

In-laws:

1. List 3 things about your in-laws that you like:
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
2. List 3 things about your in-laws that you find difficult:
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
3. How do you feel you would get on if your in-laws had to live with you?

Sex:

1. How important do you feel sex is in marriage?
2. How often do you think you should have sex?
3. If you had the opportunity to ask any question on sex, what would it be?
4. Circle the statements you agree with:
 - a. Sex is for procreation
 - b. Sex is for pleasure
 - c. Sex is for the promotion of marital happiness
 - d. Sex should always be initiated by the husband
 - e. It's okay not to want sex
5. Whose responsibility is it to initiate sex?
6. What are your thoughts on contraception?
7. What does the word 'intimacy' mean to you?
8. I am concerned that past sexual experience could affect our relationship in a negative way.
 - (a) Agree (b) Disagree (c) Uncertain
9. Have you considered the options (and potential moral implications) for contraception and family planning? Are you agreed upon a plan?³

³A separate email will be sent around before week 3 with some reading materials on contraception and having a kingdom mindset to family planning.

Children:

1. What are your ideas for family planning?
2. How many children do you think is ideal?
3. Do you feel your parent(s)/guardian(s) did a good job of raising you?
4. What changes would you make to how they did it?
5. Whose responsibility is it to discipline children?
6. How do you feel children should be disciplined?

Work-Church-Life Balance

1. Do you feel you have a particular calling or ministry (inside or outside the church)?
2. Do you feel your partner has?
3. How do you feel these might affect your marriage?
4. Number these items in order of priority:
 - a. Church commitments and responsibilities
 - b. My extended family
 - c. My health and wellbeing
 - d. Friendships
 - e. My relationship with God
 - f. My partner's health and wellbeing
 - g. My work
 - h. Our children

Spiritual Growth:

1. A Christian couple should have separate devotional times:
(a) Agree (b) Disagree (c) Uncertain
2. A Christian couple should have joint devotional times:
(a) Agree (b) Disagree (c) Uncertain
3. A Christian couple should pray together:
(a) Agree (b) Disagree (c) Uncertain
4. List 3 areas you feel you need to grow in spiritually?
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
5. List 3 areas you feel your partner needs to grow in spiritually?
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
6. Are you accountable with anyone? How important is this to you?
7. Are you participating regularly in Christian community? Will you attend a city group together?

Notes

SESSION 4: Sex, Intimacy & Romance

Introduction

We all come into marriage with a certain view on sex. Most of that view has been largely influenced by Hollywood. Some of us are excited by the prospect of sex, others of us nervous. Some have positive views of sex, others negative views. Our culture tells us that the only moral framework for sex is 'consent' - so sex should not necessarily involve commitment and self-giving. Typically today sex is viewed selfishly and for the sake of pleasure or power.

Let's read 5 passages of scripture to help us fit together a biblical view of sex. The Bible says sex is so precious and powerful that it must be kept within the guardrails of marriage so that it is not spoiled and the power doesn't become destructive. Like with fire, we must be careful, hence the friends in Song or Songs urging the couple to not arouse or awaken love until it so desires (2:7 or 3:5)

1. Genesis 1: 26-28 (sex for fruitfulness in child-bearing)
2. Genesis 2:20-25 (sex as a sign and a seal of the marriage union)
3. Proverbs 5:15-20 (sex as an antidote to adultery, to strengthen the union)
4. 1 Corinthians 7:3-5 (sex as protection against the devil, to strengthen the union)
5. Song of Songs 4:16-5:1 & 7:1-13 (sex as delight, companionship and comfort)

(1) Marriage as a Rock and a Garden (Song of Songs)

Song of Songs tells a wonderful story of a beloved and her lover and their marital love. It is a liberated and high view of sex in marriage. After much anticipation and desire, which the friends encourage to cool until the wedding day (4:16-5:1) there then follows both moments of great joy and passion, as well as tension and hurt. There are ups and downs, times of being apart and times of reconciliation. And at the end, there is counsel for others who want to pursue love.

The invitation of the Song of Songs is to be captivated and intoxicated with one another, to lose each other in sex, to wander and explore (7:1-3 & Proverbs 5:20). That requires not just foreplay but fore-speaking (see chapter 4). Wives are not

an object for sex, and emotional intimacy precedes physical intimacy. Sometimes the man is to initiate (4:8) and other times the woman (4:16). Conversation is vital, particularly from the woman who must help the man discover what works and what doesn't. Your words to one another when you're naked carry a particular power. Even if everyone else in the world puts you down, if your spouse builds you up you'll discover an inner confidence and freedom (but the opposite is also sadly true).

Ultimately the book points forward to a deep and ecstatic relationship we can know with Jesus, in part now, and one day fully. It helps us consider what it means to desire him above all else (knowing his desire is for us), and to cultivate our relationship with him.

As discussed in session 1, marriage is both a rock (the covenant promises) and a garden (a relationship that needs cultivating). Two flowers to tend in the garden are romance and sex. Otherwise, the little foxes can get in and ruin the vineyard that is in bloom (2:15). Small things can spoil marital love. It is also easy to cause damage to the garden by taking each other for granted or refusing romantic approaches - regret can follow (5:2-8). We'll even need friends and outside support and accountability to continue pursuing marital love through the seasons (e.g 5:9, 6:1 or 6:10).

Application - you will need to invest in your marriage year on year and rekindle the romance. It's important to talk about what stage you're currently in and how you can 'rekindle the romance' and 'cultivate the garden' and also talk about how the other person can serve you in sex.

(2) Sex as a sign and a seal of our oneness (Genesis 2)

Sex in Genesis 2 is a sign of our personal and legal agreement and also the means of accomplishing it. However, it is also the means for maintaining and deepening that union. In fact, just as with God and his people in the Old Testament, we should see sex as a "covenant renewal ceremony" with our covenant partner (Proverbs 2:17). Keller says:

Sex is perhaps the most powerful God-created way to help you give your entire self to another human being. Sex is God's appointed way for two people to reciprocally say to one another "I belong completely, permanently, and exclusively to you." You must not use sex to say anything less.

Application – sex needs to be regular, because it's the main way you maintain and deepen the union. You must talk about how to make sure sex happens regularly.

(3) Sex as service to the other (1 Corinthians 7)

Keller puts it like this:

"When I was doing research for this chapter, I found some old talks that Kathy and I did together. I had forgotten some of the struggles we had in our early days, and some of the notes reminded me that in those years we started to dread having sex. Kathy, in those remarks, said that if she didn't experience an orgasm during lovemaking we both felt like failures. If I asked her "how was that?" and she said "it just hurt" I felt devastated, and she did, too. We had a great deal of trouble until we started to see something. As Kathy said in her notes,

"We came to realise that orgasm is great, especially climaxing together. But the awe, the wonder, the safety and the joy of just being one is stirring and stunning even without that. And when we stopped trying to perform and just started trying to simply love one another in sex, things started to move ahead. We stopped worrying about our performance. And we stopped worrying about what we were getting and started to say, "Well, what can we do just to give something to the other?"

This concept also has implications for a typical problem that many couples experience in their marital relationship - namely, that one person wants sex more often than the other. If your main purpose in sex is giving pleasure, not getting pleasure, then a person who doesn't have as much of a sex drive physically can give to the other person as a gift.

This is a legitimate act of love, and it shouldn't be denigrated by saying "Oh, no, no. Unless you're going to be passionate, don't do it." Do it as a gift.

Related to this are the differences that many spouses experience over what is the most satisfying context for sex. While I am not saying this is universal, I will share that, as a male, context means little to me. That means, to be blunt, pretty much anytime, anywhere. However, I came to see that that means I was being oblivious to something that was very important to my wife. Context. Oh, you mean candles or something? And, of course, Kathy, like so many women, did not mean "candles or something." She meant preparing for sex emotionally. She meant warmth and conversation and things like that. I learned this, but slowly. And so we learned to be very patient with each other when it came to sex. It took years for us to be good at sexually satisfying one another. But the patience paid off."

As the Kellers highlight, seeing sex as an act of service can mean having sex even when you don't feel like it. Conversely it can also mean not pushing for sex when the other doesn't want to, again as an act of service. This is how a cross-shaped marriage should look - we aim to put the other person's needs ahead of our own.

Application - as with all of marriage, sex is about self-giving, not what you can get, but what you can give. Find out how you can give to the other.

(4) Sex as a test

In Marriage Prep 1 we learned from Genesis 2 and Ephesians 5 that marriage has 4 components that challenge our characters and hearts.

- (1) Total commitment - not "personal fulfilment"
- (2) Total unity - not "personal freedom"
- (3) Total vulnerability - not "personal protection/control"
- (4) Totally self-sacrificial love - not "selfishness...the world should revolve around me"

We also learned that the only way we can love like this is to know the true spouse first. However, Keller has a helpful insight about the power of sex to

reveal the state of our relationship, character and heart.

'If sex is a sign and seal of our oneness with each other and with God, we should not, then, be surprised to discover that you may find problems "showing up in the bed," which, if it wasn't for sex, you might never have seen. There may be guilt, fear or anger over past relationships. There may be growing mistrust or disrespect, or unresolved differences in your present relationship. Sex is such a great and sensitive thing that you will not be able to sweep these problems under the rug.

Unless your marital relationship is in a good condition, sex doesn't work. So be very careful to look beneath the surface, a lack of "sexual compatibility" might not really be a lack of love-making skill at all. It may be a sign of deeper problems in the relationship. It is often the case that, if those problems are addressed, the sexual intimacy improves.

A fundamental rule of marriage is that time marches on and as Lewis Smedes said, you don't marry one woman or one man but many. Time, children, illness, and age all bring changes that may require creative disciplined responses to rebuild a sexual intimacy that was easier at an earlier stage. If you don't confront and adapt to these changes, they'll erode your sex life. Kathy and I often liken sex in a marriage to oil in an engine - without it, the friction between all the moving parts will burn out the motor. Without joyful, loving sex, the friction in a marriage will bring about anger, resentment, hardness, and disappointment. Rather than being the commitment glue that holds you together, it can become a force to divide you. Never give up working on your sex life.

Leanne and I have always talked about sex as "the tip of the iceberg" and so if we're not having sex or if we're having bad sex, it is normally because of relational discord which has come from either a lack of emotional connection (conversation and quality time) or worse, a hurt that remains undealt with and unforgiven.

Application – if you're not having sex or you're having bad sex, be brave enough to ask why and deal with it.

(5) Sex as a taste of glory

The Father, the Son and the Spirit have been serving and giving to the other to express their oneness, pleasure and joy eternally (John 17). Therefore, mutually serving and satisfying one another is maybe the closest we'll get to understanding the intimacy, pleasure and joy that will come when we meet God.

Application - remember to give thanks to God for good sex and remember "the best is yet to come."

Some personal sharing

MISTAKES to avoid

- Performance failure (e.g expectations on night 1 or around orgasms)
- Careless words (the potential for deep hurt in vulnerable moments)
- Accepting our nakedness - and our desire to cover up (trusting the other)
- Succumbing to the devil's tactics to cause shame, regret and embarrassment

POSTURES to adopt

- Don't be paranoid (you're not a sex expert). Enjoy it and work at it. Don't take yourself too seriously
- Accept the 2 types of sex - sex that is quick and one partner is predominantly giving to the other vs sex that has a long build up and does create that moment of 'great wonder' for both people.
- Gas & Hob - often one person can be 'turned on' immediately whilst the other needs 'warming up'. Serving each other the key
- Keep learning - the dominant voice in the Song of Songs is the woman...she needs to tell the man what to do (women can be mysterious)!

Application Questions in Pairs (engaged couples)

- (1) How do you feel about having sex?
- (2) What has spoken to you from the different Bible passages and the material?
- (3) How often would you like to have sex?
- (4) How can you help each other restrain until the right moment?
- (5) What do you think of the idea of "making love as a gift" even when you don't feel like it? Do you need to do this more?
- (6) What do you think of the idea of 'serving' the other, so not pushing for sex when the other isn't in the mood?
- (7) What questions do you have for us or feedback for the group?

Application Questions in Pairs (married couples)

- (1) How often would you like to have sex?
- (2) What helps you prepare for sex (i.e. context)?
- (3) What do you like to do when making love (i.e. your preferences)?
- (4) How can you serve the other one better? Ask them. Be specific.
- (5) What do you think of the idea of "making love as a gift" even when you don't feel like it? Do you need to do this more?
- (6) Where and when have you seen sex as a test of a deeper emotional/relational issue? How have you worked this through?
- (7) What questions do you have for us or feedback for the group?

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